

The Syntactic Operator *se* in Spanish¹

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1. Introduction

The analysis of the Romance clitic *se*² has been a persistent problem in Linguistics. The challenge consists in explaining the fact that *se* appears in a variety of constructions that at first sight do not seem to be related. Those constructions include reflexive, reciprocal, impersonal, passive, and middle constructions, and an array of aspectually nuanced sentences, examples of all of which will be given below. Moreover, *se* appears also as an allophone of the third person dative clitic, *le(s)*, when it co-occurs with an accusative clitic.³

I here present an account of all these constructions in which I suggest that some new ideas in the recent literature can prove useful in describing the *se* phenomena. Focusing on both the effect that *se* has over the syntactic realization of the verbal arguments, on the one hand, and on the agreement and case patterns of *se* constructions, I propose that, syntactically, there is one single lexical item *se*, and that is an operator that has two very defined functions. The first one is to block the realization of the external argument of the verb, and the second one is to block certain features of the Agreement nodes of the sentence. I show that operator *se* is uniformly generated in head position of the functional node that would otherwise obligatorily introduce the external argument of the predicate. As a clitic, it adjoins to the verb and undergoes head movement through all the functional nodes of the sentence. As it moves, it interacts with the Agreement nodes of the sentence; more specifically, it selectively inhibits the activation of the features [case], [person] and [number] for further checking purposes. It is also claimed that *se* acts within the limits set by morphology; this means that *se* itself operates randomly, subject to no restriction, but only those sentences that conform to the restrictions of morphology will survive the

¹² Cognates of this clitic, inherited from the Latin reflexive pronoun, exist in all Romance languages (*si* in Italian, *se* in Spanish, Portuguese and French, *es* or *se* in Catalan, etc). While there are some differences in the distribution of *se* within those languages, a satisfactory analysis does not exist for any of them. In this paper I will be focused on the syntactic properties of Spanish *se*, with the hope that the analysis presented here can be exported across (and beyond) Romance.

³ For a diachronic explanation, see, for example, Lapesa (19xx: 209), who, in a nutshell, gives the following evolution from Latin *illi illum* to Spanish *se lo*: *illi illum* > [*eljelō] > [*ezelo] > [zelo] > [se lo]. See also Schmidely, Jack (1978): De “ge lo” a “se lo”. *Cahiers de Linguistique Hispanique Medievale*, 4, 63-70. The synchronic coincidence of a dative clitic with *se* follows principles that are independent of the rest of cases, as shown by Grimshaw (1998). I will thus ignore dative *se* in this paper.

derivation, which explains why we have the constructions that we do and no others. Under the view presented in this paper, the different constructions with *se* have in common a property that I will identify as being syntactic unaccusatives, and that consists in not having an external argument; they differ in the composition of their agreement nodes, as determined by *se*.

Previous accounts of *se* fall into two groups: (a) those that distinguish the different functions of *se* on the basis of inherent properties of several homonymous morphemes *se* (Kayne (1975), Grimshaw (1982), Belletti (1982), Zubizarreta (1982, 1987), Burzio (1986), Cinque (1988), or Dobrovie-Sorin (1994, 1998); and (b) those that argue that the surface similarities between these constructions are not accidental, and hence give a unified account of all instances of *se* (Manzini (1986), Wehrli (1986), Postma (1993), Everett (1996), Bruhn de Garavito (1999)). In section §4 we will make a brief review of work done in both groups. There has been work in both groups trying to explain the properties of the different constructions using existent mechanisms, such as theta and case theory (for example, differentiating between instances in which *se* receives nominative or accusative case, or a theta role, and instances in which it doesn't). The account presented in this paper follows the unified aim of the second group. It however looks at the problem from a slightly different point of view. By claiming that *se* is uniformly generated as the head in complementary distribution with the element that would otherwise introduce the external argument of the verb, it separated theta theory from syntactic realization of arguments. The case effects are related to the rest of agreement effects, and explained by the compositional possibilities of the syntactic features of the Agr nodes of the sentence, as dictated by morphology.

2. The Data

The clitic *se* in Spanish is used in a variety of constructions. Despite the huge literature on the topic, there is not total agreement in the number and classification of the different constructions. Here I am mainly following the traditional classification found, for example, in Alcina and Blecaua (1980); I differ from this source when I present what I call

middle construction, which does not receive a separate treatment in traditional grammars, but is normally resumed under the reflexive passive. The reason for considering the middle a separate construction corresponds to a desire to relate it construction with the similar one found in other languages, such as English. However, the traditional grammars are right in grouping both constructions together, since they are syntactically very similar, as will be apparent in our treatment of them below.

Here I present examples of each construction, with the corresponding English glosses. I then include a short description of the properties that are going to be crucial in my analysis, mainly, those concerning the status of the external argument and the composition of the agreement nodes. As for this latter factor, I adopt the minimalist convention (see, for example, Chomsky 1993, 1995) that each of the agreement nodes of the Spanish sentence (AgrS and AgrO) contains a [case] feature (nominative or accusative, respectively); I will further assume that in Spanish AgrS has the phi-features [person] and [number], since subjects agree in those features with the verb. There is no evidence to conclude that in Spanish AgrO contains such phi-features, since objects never show any kind of agreement with the verb.⁴

Now, it appears from the data that the features of the Agr nodes of the sentence that would otherwise be active can under certain circumstances appear to be inactive; for example, in a typical sentence, the feature [person] would be active in AgrS, forcing the subject DP and the verb to agree in grammatical person when these two elements check their [person] feature against the [person] feature of AgrS. In the case just described, I say that [person] in AgrS is active, and for the present purposes signal this fact by claiming that AgrS is [+ person]. Now, when agreement in grammatical person between the verb and the DP does not occur, I will assume that the features [person] is somehow inactive for checking purposes, and signal such status by claiming that AgrS is [- person]. Following this convention, the data shows the paradigm summarized in the table below:

⁴ Chomsky (1993) claims that the composition of the agreement nodes of the sentence should be the same, to facilitate acquisition of the language. However, it seems to me that this theory-driven assumption is not sufficiently founded, and hence I will adopt a more conservative position and refrain from adopting such idea.

Construction	External argument	AgrS nom case	AgrS Person	AgrS Number	AgrO acc case
Impersonal	-	-	-	-	+
Reflex Pass	-	+	-	+	-
Middle	-	+	-	+	-
Refl/Recipr	-	+	+	+	-

The last clarification in the description of the data that follows concerns the so-called “strength” of the Agreement nodes. Here I again follow minimalist assumptions in considering that a functional node is “strong” when its features have to be checked overtly (that is, by the time the sentence is pronounced), since they are not interpretable and would cause the derivations to crash if present in the LF representation. The way to eliminate features is to move a proper “checker” to the specifier (for XPs) or by head-adjunction (for X) of the functional node in question. On the other hand, “weak” nodes have features that, since they are interpretable, can survive through LF, and therefore the movement of the checker element can be procrastinated until after the spell-out point. The goal of the system is mainly to provide a formal code for the different positions that the elements occupy in the tree. If an element is moved from the position which it is claimed to have been originated in, the relevant functional node that shows an agreement relation with it is said to be “strong”; otherwise, it is “weak”. We are now in a position to examine in detail each construction and motivate the systematic description summarized in the table above.

a) Impersonal

Referred to as such in virtually all the works on se, the impersonal construction is the most widely known. In Spanish, it appears both with intransitive (1a) and transitive (1b) verbs:

- 1a. Aquí **se** vive bien
 Here se lives well
 "One lives well here"

- b. En esta granja **se** mata a seis mil pollos cada día
 in this farm se kill.3s to six thousand chickens every day
 "In this farm they kill six thousand chicken a day"⁵

In both (1a) and (1b), the external argument of the verb, which would canonically occupy the subject position of the sentence, is not realized. This is apparent in (1a), where there is no DP that would qualify for the subject position. That the post-verbal DP in (1b) is not the subject of the sentence becomes clear when we substitute a clitic for it, which has to be in accusative case:

- 1c. Se **los** mata
 se **cl.acc** kill.3s
 "They kill them"

Since the subject is absent,⁶ the verb, which would normally agree with the subject, is here showing a default third person singular morphology. This situation is only possible if we assume that the features in AgrS are not active, and therefore, do not need to be checked. The composition of AgrS is then the following: [- (nominative) case], [- person], [- number].⁷ Moreover, from the data we can conclude that AgrO is [+ (accusative) case].⁸

⁵ Note that the equivalent translations of the transitive and intransitive variant into English make use necessary use of different impersonal pronouns: 'one' in the case of intransitives, and 'they' in the case of transitives. It is not clear to me the extent to which this fact might be relevant. One possibility is that the difference is a point of view phenomenon, i.e., a matter of whether the speaker/hearer is to be included. For a distinction between two kinds of impersonal constructions with Italian *si* (the Italian counterpart of the Spanish *se* dealt with in this paper), see Cinque (1988). This author makes the case for *argumental si* (in tensed and nontensed sentences of transitive and unergative verbs), and *non-argumental si* (only in nontensed sentences, with unaccusative verbs and other verbs that lack an external theta-role). Since the arguments for this distinction presented in Cinque's analysis do not transpose to Spanish counterparts of the Italian sentences (see Zubizarreta 1982, 1987 for a published proof of it), I will not adopt Cinque's distinction in my treatment of Spanish *se*.

⁶ This claim is at odds with proposals such as the one by Mendikoetxea (1996), in which PRO is claimed to be the subject of the sentence.

⁷ Notice that nothing is said about the relative strength of the functional nodes of the sentence; since the verb moves through all functional positions in the sentence, there is no reliable way to know whether the object has moved, and hence whether AgrO is strong or weak. We can assume that the strength of AgrO is irrelevant for the analysis, as will become obvious later on.

⁸ Notice that this state of affairs is a counter-example to Burzio's generalization (BG). Recall that BG states that a verb that does not have an external theta role cannot assign (in Burzio's terminology) accusative case. Here, the sentence does not have an external theta role, but it has an accusative DP.

b) Reflexive Passive

This construction receives other names throughout the literature: passive (Belletti (1982), Zubizarreta (1987), Everett (1995) etc.), middle (Manzini 1983), impersonal reflexive (Bruhn de Garavito (1999)). Here I name it after its traditional terminology (Alcina and Blecaua's (1980) *pasiva refleja*). In the reflexive passive, as in the impersonal, the external argument of the verb is not realized. It differs from the impersonal construction in that the verb shows some agreement with the post-verbal DP, which is allegedly in nominative case (as its ungrammatical substitution by an accusative clitic shows in (2b):

2a. **Se necesitan** buenas ideas
se need.3pl good ideas
"Good ideas are needed"

2b. ***Se las** necesitan
se acc.cl need.3pl
"They are needed"

The fact that an accusative clitic is not possible indicates that AgrO is [- (accusative) case]. The post-verbal DP is therefore marked with nominative case, and hence AgrS should be [+ (nominative) case]; since the DP remains in post-verbal position, we should assume that AgrS is weak. As for verbal agreement, it is clear that the verb agrees in number with the post-verbal DP, as a change in the number of the DP obligatorily triggers a change in the verb (compare (2a) with (2c) below):

2c. **Se necesita/*n** una buena idea⁹
se need.3sg/*pl a good idea
"A good idea is needed"

Now, to test for person agreement, we can change the person (but not number) of the nominative, post-verbal DP, and observe whether such operation triggers a change in verbal person. As (2d) shows, changing the person of the verb along with that of the DP (in this case a second person pronoun) results in ungrammaticality:

- 2d. *Se necesitáis **vosotros**
se need.2pl **you.nom.2pl** need.2pl
Intended: “you are needed”¹⁰

From (2d), we can safely conclude that AgrS is [- person], [+ number].

c) Middle

Zubizarreta (1987) and Burzio (1986) call this construction ergative, and Everett (1996) follows them in this terminology. Postma (1995) gives the alternative terms inchoative, ergative and anticausative to this group of constructions. Frequently claimed to be idiosyncratic in its distribution, it is widely ignored in most of the treatments of *se*. I here deny that this construction be lexically determined; in part, my choice of the term “middle” is intended to relate this construction to the tradition of studies about the middle construction in English (see, for example Hale and Keyser (1987, 1993)).

⁹ Notice that sentence (2c) could equally be analyzed as an impersonal construction; this is so because the morphology of the verb coincides with the default third person singular of impersonals; to avoid this ambiguity, in the future I’ll use the marked plural when I am referring to passive reflexives.

¹⁰ The grammatical way to express the intended meaning is with the impersonal in (i), in which the verb presents no agreement with the accusative clitic

- i. Se os necesita
Se you.pl need.3s
“You are needed”

It is not clear to me why one cannot construct a Reflexive Passive with a non-third person plural DP (in nominative) and allow the verb to agree in number, with the default third person morphology:

- ii. * Se necesitan a vosotros
se need.3pl to you.2pl

Further research must show whether the ungrammaticality of (ii) is due to factors of the distribution of strong and weak pronouns in Spanish.

The middle construction is identical to the reflexive passive, except that AgrS is strong, since the DP is preverbal. Hence, the external argument is not realized, AgrO is [- (accusative) case] (as shown by (3b)), and AgrS is [+ (nominative) case], [+ number] (shown by (3a)) and [- person]¹¹ (shown by (3c)):

3a. Las puertas se han cerrado de golpe
 The doors se have.3pl closed with sudden
 "The doors suddenly closed"

3b. * Se las cerraron de golpe
 se acc.cl closed.3pl with sudden
 "Them suddenly closed"

3c. *Vosotros se necesitáis
 you.nom.2pl se need.2pl
 Intended: "you are needed"

d) Reflexive and Reciprocal

Spanish reflexive sentences with a third person are constructed with *se* and the verb agreeing in person and number with the DP of the sentence:

¹¹ There is a construction that is very similar to the middle (actually I am not sure it is different from it). It arises when the DP is not in third person; then, we have a first or second person pronoun, a first or second person oblique clitic, and the verb agreeing in person and number with both:

i. Yo me cerré en banda
 I obl.cl closed.1s in line
 "I closed up" (*"I closed myself")

I discard this case as a counterexample to my analysis of inert AgrO for several reasons: (1) all the instances of non-third persons I could find are idiomatic, i.e., they are highly crystallized in the language, and as such might not be analyzable in the same way as their creative counterparts; (2) it is not clear to me which case the clitic in these constructions has, since the forms are homophonous for both dative and accusative in all cases; (3) the translation of these sentences into English requires the use of a particle construction, unlike the *true* middle construction, suggesting that we are dealing with two different constructions.

- 4a. Marta **se** está limpiando
 Marta se is.3s cleaning
 "Marta is cleaning herself"

Reflexive constructions with plural subjects are ambiguous between a reflexive and a reciprocal reading, a circumstance that should not concern us here.¹²

- 4b. Lidia y Barry **se** aman con locura
 Lidia and Barry se love.3pl with madness
 "Lidia and Barry are mad about each other/themselves"

Spanish reflexive constructions have been sometimes (e.g., Zubizarreta (1987)) analyzed as containing a nominative DP acting as the subject of the sentence and the clitic *se* associated with the object of the sentence, much like their English counterparts. Here however I will adopt an alternative view first presented in Marantz (1984), and developed in Pesetsky (1995:103ff), who cites lectures by Kayne as his source and extends his analysis to Russian reflexive constructions. In this view, the DP appearing in reflexive constructions is originated as the underlying object of the verb, and the reflexive is in place of the external argument.¹³ The DP then moves from object position to AgrS in order to check nominative case, and controls the reflexive clitic from this new position.

5. Juan_i [VP se_i ama t_i]
 Juan se loves.3s
 "Juan loves himself"

According to this analysis, the reflexive construction is similar to an unaccusative construction, in which the underlying object becomes the sentential subject, and no external

¹² See Heim, Lasnik and May (1990) for an interesting analysis of reciprocals, including differences between clitic and non-clitic reciprocal constructions.

¹³ One advantage of considering the reflexive element in place of the external argument of the verb, pointed out by Pesetsky (1995), who follows a suggestion by Kayne, is that it explains why reflexive clitics are incompatible with clauses whose main verb lacks an external argument, a fact discussed by Rizzi (1986). Such clauses include passives and unergatives.

argument is present. Control of *se* produces the same semantic effect as a reflexive pronoun in English (Pesetsky (1995)).

In reflexive and reciprocal constructions then, as in the former *se* constructions, the external argument of the verb is not realized as the subject of the sentence (recall that the DP that appears in these constructions is in fact the internal argument of the verb). The surface subject DP is marked with nominative case; there is no accusative case in the sentence. According to our usual convention, this facts correspond to AgrS being [+ (nominative) case], and AgrO [- (accusative) case]. As for number and person agreement, the following tests are run: in (6a), changing the number (but not the person) of the subject causes the number agreement of the verb to change; in (6b), changing the person (but not the number) of the subject triggers a change in the verb as well (and, incidentally, due perhaps to a control requirement, in the operator *se*, which then becomes an oblique clitic):¹⁴

6a. Ellos se estan limpiando
they se are.3pl cleaning
“They are cleaning themselves”

6b. Yo me estoy limpiando
I obl.cl am.1s cleaning
“I am cleaning myself”

The data in (6) indicate that AgrS is [+ person], [+ number].¹⁵

¹⁴ The fact that *se* cannot be used in other than third person could be explained by, with Everett (1996), assuming that *se* is not specified with person and number (and case) features, and hence it constitutes the elsewhere morpheme, which is referentially inadequate. When control by the subject is forced over *se*, the result is spelled out as the oblique clitic, which is specific for number and person, but not for case. See Bonet (1991) and Grimshaw (1999) for similar questions about the distribution of clitics in Romance.

¹⁵ There is still another construction that grammars call indirect reflexive. In it, a verb appears with *se*, a pre-verbal DP and a post-verbal DP:

- i. Carmen se lava las manos
Carmen se wash.3s the hands
“Carmen is washing her hands”

e) Aspectual

Finally, there is a use of *se* that has been called inchoative (Postma 1995), or ergative (Zubizarreta 1987), and I will here refer to as aspectual *se*. It is not clear that this use of *se* be a separate category. I have however isolated it from the others, because it is the only case in which the external argument of the verb is realized as the subject of the sentence, its canonical realization. With intransitive verbs, aspectual *se* gives the sentence an inchoative interpretation (cf. the *se*-less version in (7a), and (7b) with *se*):

7a. Los estudiantes están durmiendo en la clase
the students are.3pl sleeping in the class
“The students are sleeping in class”

7b. Los estudiantes *se* están durmiendo en la clase
the students *se* are.3pl sleeping in the class
“The students are falling asleep in class”

With transitive verbs, the sentence with *se* receives a telic interpretation, proved here by the licensing of the definite article (cf. Tenny 1995):

These constructions pose a potential problem for the analysis developed in this paper. However, I will adopt an analysis in which these constructions are plain transitive constructions, and the *se* that appears in them belongs to the dative variant category. Even though I will not argue for such analysis here, I assume it in light of sentences of the following type:

- ii. Carmen le lava las manos a su hija
Carmen dat.cl wash.3s the hands to her daughter
“Carmen is washing her daughter’s hands”

In (ii), *Carmen* is the subject, *las manos* is the object, and *le* is a dative clitic, here reduplicating the IO *a su hija*. I assume that (i) has a parallel analysis to (ii), with the dative clitic *le* surfacing as *se* for mysterious reasons, most likely having to do with binding (see Grimshaw (1999)). Since the dative *se*, as we pointed out in the introduction, is not a case of the operator *se*, these sentences fall outside of the scope of this paper.

8a. José comió (?el) pastel
José ate.3s (the) cake
“José ate cake”

8b. José **se** comió *(el) pastel
José se ate.3s *(the) cake
“José ate the cake up”

It is unclear to me whether we are here facing another instance of the same element that we have listed so far (what we will call the syntactic operator *se*), or rather these examples should be analyzed from a different perspective altogether. In fact, the uses pointed out above are not the only instances in which a sentence with *se* presents interesting aspectual properties. The middle construction (9a) can have a habitual aspect (helped here by the present tense of the verb) that is lacking, for example, in the reflexive passive or the impersonal (9b, the first one showing agreement, the second one lacking it):

9a. Las gambas se comen con los dedos
the shrimp se eat.3pl with the fingers
“Shrimp are eaten with one’s fingers”

9b. * No se cierra/n nunca estas puertas
not se close.3s/pl never these doors
“They never close those doors”

The question of what determines the aspectual interpretation of a sentence lies outside of the scope of this paper, perhaps falling on the grounds of semantics more than on syntactic ones. I will not attempt a detailed explanation of this use of *se* here. For our consideration of *se* as a syntactic operator, it suffices to say that in these cases the occurrence of *se* seems to have *some* effect on the aspectual node of the sentence (if any), but the constitution of agreement nodes is as predicted by the main verb.

6. Analysis

The following table offers a summary of the crucial features of the constructions presented in §2 that are arguably instances of what we will call the syntactic operator *se*.

Construction	External argument	AgrS nom case	AgrS Person	AgrS Number	AgrO acc case
Impersonal	-	-	-	-	+
Reflex Pass	-	+	-	+	-
Middle	-	+	-	+	-
Refl/Recipr	-	+	+	+	-

It is the hypothesis of this paper that *se* is responsible for the particular properties that the constructions described above show. In light of these data, I propose that *se* is a syntactic operator with the following functions:

- a) blocking the canonical syntactic realization of the external argument of the verb
- b) selectively blocking the features [case], [number] and [person] of Agr

The property in a) is what all uses of *se* have in common, and it is due to the generation site of *se*, which is the same across the board. The property in b) yields the different feature compositions that each of the constructions present, and is tightly related to morphology. I will below say more about each of these two characteristics of *se*.

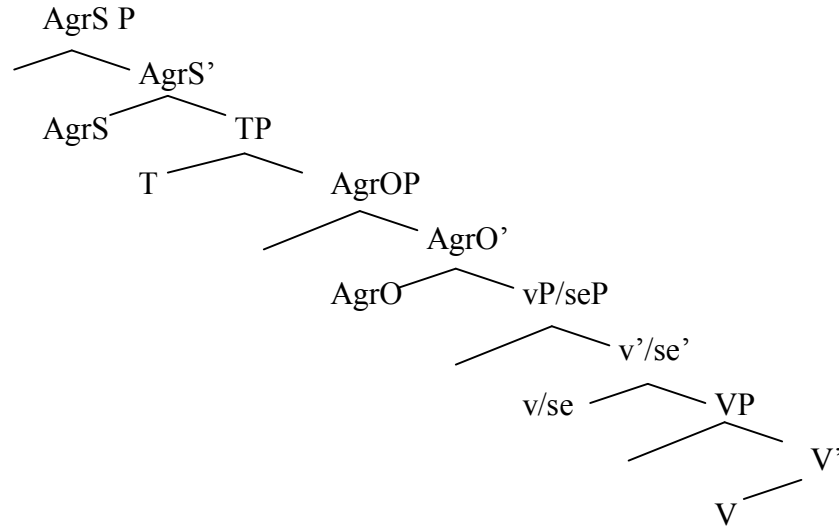
My claim is that *se* can in principle block any combination of these features, and constraints on the geometry of Agr features yield all and only the attested combinations.

Throughout the analysis I will be assuming that *se* is a clitic head.¹⁶ It cliticizes onto the verb via head movement, overtly, through all the functional nodes of the sentence. I

¹⁶ Marantz (1984) uses morphological criteria to establish the clitic nature of *se*: basically, it appears “outside of derivational and inflectional morphology”. Notice that the claim that *se* is a head is not compatible with the analysis that assign a theta role or case to it, since those are properties of maximal projections, not heads.

assume that *se* is uniformly generated in head position of the functional node that would otherwise introduce the external argument of the verb. It blocks the projection of the structural configuration that would produce a causative construction (Pesetsky 1995), and therefore blocks the external thematic role of the subject from being assigned:

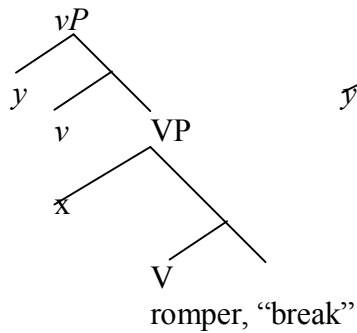
10.



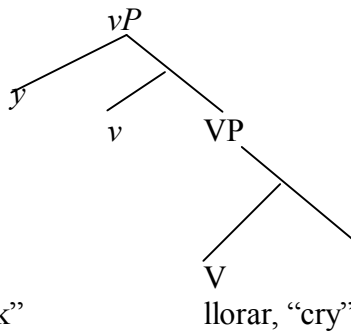
6.1. About the external argument

The operator *se* blocks the canonic realization of the external theta role in the constructions under discussion: impersonals, reflexive passives, middles, reflexives and reciprocals. Following a widely accepted practice, e.g. Kratzer (1996), Hale and Keyser (1993), Koizumi (1995), Pesetsky (1995) etc., I here assume that the external argument of the verb (the argument that ends up as subject in active sentences) is neither part of the maximal projection of the verb, nor lexically provided, but added by syntax by means of an independent functional head (little *v* or *caus*) selected by transitive and unergative verbs. Accordingly, I assume that the canonical representations of transitive and unergative verbs are as in (11), with elements in italics representing the syntactically added material, *x* and *y* the variables where the arguments are inserted, and bar-levels ignored:

11a. transitive verb

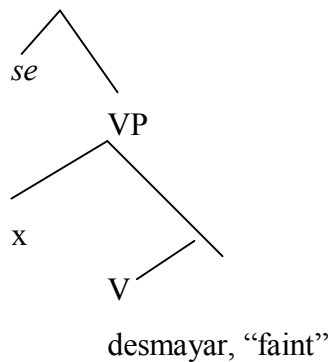


b. unergative verb



I also assume that unaccusatives are intransitives with a single internal argument (and no external one), which becomes a derived sentential subject in active sentences (see Burzio (1986), Levin and Rappaport (1995), Torrego (1988)). Roughly, the structure of unaccusatives looks like (12), where again the elements introduced syntactically are in italics, and *se* is in place of the head that would otherwise introduce the external argument of the verb:

12. unaccusative verb



Since unaccusatives are intransitives that do not allow an external argument, I propose that unaccusatives do not select for (i.e., are incompatible with) the functional projection that would otherwise introduce an external argument (little *v* above), as opposed to both transitives and unergatives, which always do.¹⁷ Moreover, I propose that, in Spanish,

¹⁷ Notice that this claim predicts that *se* will not be possible with unaccusatives if it is not blocking the external argument of these verbs. Since the only case in which *se* is not blocking the external theta role is in the Aspectual construction, it is predicted that this construction is ungrammatical with unaccusatives. This prediction turns out to be correct.

selection of little *v* (and hence an external argument) is obligatory, unless it is blocked. And the way to block it is by means of the operator *se*.

I therefore propose that *se* is uniformly generated in head position of the functional node that would otherwise introduce the external argument. It is hence in complementary distribution with Koizumi's (1995) little *v*, and appears with verbs that do not have an external argument, or in constructions in which such an argument is not canonically realized. Below we will see in detail the structures that result with both transitive and intransitive (including unaccusative and unergative) verbs.

Blocking the canonical realization of an argument means that the argument cannot be syntactically realized in the way that a *se*-less version of the verb would predict (according to its lexical properties), that is, assigned to an argument. However, since the arguments of the verb are detailed in the conceptual structure of the verb in form of thematic roles, they can still be present in the conceptual representation of the verb, even though they cannot be syntactically realized as arguments. After all, it is the verb, and not *little v* (or *se*) who determines the existence and nature of the theta roles in its argument structure. This is the reason why a purpose clause, or an adjunct, can be controlled by the Agent argument in constructions that do not present an external argument, as we will see in detail below.

3.1.1. *Se* with transitive verbs

Let's take as an example the transitive verb *romper*, "break". It is a transitive verb with an internal argument (a Theme) and an external argument (an Agent), the first one being the internal argument of the verb in the lexical entry (i), and the object in the sentence (ii):

- i. Break: Agent(x), Theme (y); [V y] (lexical structure)
- ii. x v break y (syntactic structure)

As (ii) shows, the syntactic canonical realization of the two arguments of *break* consists in the internal argument (y) getting realized as the object, and receiving the Theme theta role, and the external argument (introduced by v) as the subject, receiving the Agent theta role.

When we have *se* blocking the external argument, no variable is introduced in the sentence for the external theta role to be assigned to. It is as if the verb had become an unaccusative, for all *syntactic* purposes:

- iii. Break: Agent(x), Theme (y); [V y] (lexical structure)
- iv. se break y (syntactic structure)

The internal argument is always conceptually the Theme of the verb. Syntactically, though, it has two options: it can retain its object-like properties¹⁸; or else it can abandon them and, by means of being the only argument of the construction, adopt subject-like properties (much like lexical unaccusatives and passives). The first option corresponds to reflexive passives and middles. The second option produces impersonals and reflexives.

The external argument remains the conceptual Agent in the transitive verbs like *break* above. Even though syntactically it cannot be realized as the subject of the sentence (its canonical realization), the fact that it is present in the conceptual structure of the verb allows for it to be realized non-canonically, or to act as a controller of a purpose clause. To understand this situation, it is helpful to recall what happens in passive constructions. It is claimed by Baker, Johnson, and Roberts (1989) that passive morphology, in addition to blocking accusative case, absorbs the external theta role. This role cannot function as the subject of the passive construction (its canonic syntactic realization); however, it has not completely vanished, and proof of its conceptual existence is that it can be expressed with an adjunct by-phrase in the sentence (13), or control a purpose clause (14):

13. The clown was booed by the children

14. The documents were uncovered to expose the truth

¹⁸ See Bruhn de Garavito (1999) for object/subject tests of these constructions.

Now, when *se* blocks the canonic syntactic realization of the external theta role, the ways in which this role can be syntactically realized vary. While a by-phrase is ruled out in all cases, reflexives, impersonals and reflexives passives tolerate agent-oriented clauses more easily than middles:

15. Se cerró las puertas para evitar el gentío (Impersonal)
 se close.3s the doors to avoid the crowd
 “The doors were closed to avoid the crowd”
16. Se cerraron las puertas intencionalmente (Reflexive Passive)
 se closed.3pl the doors on purpose
 “They closed the doors on purpose”
17. */? Las puertas se cerraron intencionalmente/para ahorrar (Middle)
 The doors se closed.3pl on purpose /to save
 “The doors closed on purpose/for economy”
18. José se lavó para estar presentable (Reflexive)
 José se washed.3s to be presentable
 “José washed himself to be presentable”

It is not the purpose of this paper to elicit the circumstances that allow for control in some constructions and do not tolerate it in others. However, this fact just noticed should eventually receive an explanation.

3.1.2. Se with intransitives: unergatives and unaccusatives

When *se* appears with unergatives, it is blocking the only argument of the verb, which is normally introduced by little *v* in the syntax (recall the structure in (11b)). Proof of it is that a further DP in the sentence is impossible, since it would be competing for the external argument slot with *se*:

19a. En el campo se vive bien
In the country se live.3s well
“One lives well in the country”

19b. * En el campo la gente se vive bien
in the country the people se live.3s well

However, like with transitives, syntactic suppression of the external argument of unergatives does not prevent the non-canonical realization of such argument. In the grammatical sentences, where the unergative is constructed with *se* and the external argument of the verb has been suppressed, the theta role lexically provided by the verb remains implicit, as showed by a purpose clause:

20. Al campo se va para aliviar las penas
to.the country se go.3s to alleviate the grieves
“One goes to the country to alleviate one’s grieves”

As for unaccusatives, the reasoning presented so far predicts that *se* be obligatory with lexical unaccusatives (recall the structure in (12)), co-occurring with the internal argument of the verb (the surface subject). This is so because *se* has to be blocking the selection of *v*, or else an external argument would be introduced:

21. Mi hermana *(se) desmaya a menudo
My sister se faint.3s often
“My sister often faints”

Moreover, this analysis makes the prediction that with unaccusative verbs, contrary to ergatives, a DP should appear in the sentence. This is so because unaccusatives select an internal argument, and the presence of *se* does not have any impact on this circumstance. The example in (22) illustrates the impossibility of an unaccusative without its argument:

22. * Se desmalla a menudo
se faint.3s often
(intended: “One faints often”)

Some unaccusatives (23) have transitive counterparts (24), in which two arguments appear (and no *se*) (examples based on the Italian ones in Zubizarreta (1987), following Burzio (1981)):

23. Las nubes se disiparon
The clouds se dissipated.3pl
“The clouds dissipate”
24. El viento (*se) disipa las nubes
The wind dissipate.3s the clouds
“The wind dissipates the clouds”

In these cases, it is clear that in the unaccusative version, the external argument (*el viento* in (24)) is not present, and the internal argument (*las nubes* above) becomes the sentential subject.¹⁹

In sum, one interesting consequence of my analysis is that *se* is a diagnostic for unaccusative constructions in Spanish.²⁰ Notice that by unaccusative verbs here I mean those intransitives whose unique argument is an internal argument. The ability to assign

¹⁹ These considerations lead Pesetsky (1995:99) to conclude that the direction of derivation for pairs like these ones proceeds from the *se* form to the *se*-less form.

²⁰ Cf. Zubizarreta (1987), who considers this kind of *se* an *ergative* (i.e., unaccusative) verb marking, although unfortunately she does not offer any formal explanation and qualifies the distribution of such *se* as a “lexical idiosyncrasy”, hence lacking any predictive power. If this is true, the constructions that are labeled as unaccusative by this diagnostic should also be predicted to be unaccusative by any other diagnostic available. The only such diagnostic that I am aware of in Spanish is the one in Torrego (1988). A perfect match in predictions does not exist, which is a problem to either one of the analyses. See also Alsina (1996) for a discussion.

accusative case is not automatically suppressed in those verbs, as the impersonal construction, with its only argument bearing accusative case, attests (see (1) above).²¹

3.1.3. Operator *se* and passive construction

It has been pointed out above that the operator *se* has very similar properties to the passive morphology, at least concerning its ability to block the canonical realization of an external argument. Given these similarities, the prediction is that passive morphology and *se* cannot co-occur, in any of the values of *se*. Such seems to be the case:

25. * Los invitados *se han* sido presentados²²
the guests *se have.3pl* been introduced

But if passive morphology and *se* have overlapping functions,²³ the licit question arises of why Spanish would keep using the passive morphology at all, when it could be exclusively using *se* to create passive constructions. Passive sentences are indeed rare in Spanish, and the preference is to use a *se* construction instead; however, in some cases the *se* version is ambiguous in ways that the passive construction is not, and hence the survival of the passive. Such cases are clearest when the DP is plural, as in the sentences below. In (26), all passive, reflexive and reciprocal readings are possible, while the equivalent passive version in (27) is unambiguous:

26. Los prisioneros *se liberaron*

The prisoners *se liberate.3pl*

“The prisoners were liberated”, or

“The prisoners liberated themselves”, or

²¹ There is a rather solid tendency to eliminate the impersonal construction in favor of the reflexive passive in most dialects of Spanish. This fact might be due to generalizing the inability to assign accusative case to all unaccusatives, since, as the reader might recall, the DP that appear in the reflexive passive is in nominative case.

²² Cf. Zubizarreta’s (1982) French example, cited in Everett (1995):

Les enfants *se sont presentes* (per la diretrice)

The children *se are introduced* (by the director)

²³ Properly speaking, the functions of passive morphology are a subset of the functions of *se*.

“The prisoners liberated each other”

27. Los prisioneros fueron liberados

The prisoners were.3pl liberated

“The prisoners were liberated”

Surely things are more complicated, however, because an unambiguous version of *se* is possible using the impersonal, in which the DP is unambiguously marked with accusative case:

28. Se liberó a los prisioneros

Se liberate.3s to the prisoners

“They liberated the prisoners”

However, such disambiguation only works with animate objects, which are the only ones that are marked with the preposition *a* in Spanish. When the DP is inanimate, the ambiguity reappears:

29. Se movieron las mesas

Se moved.3pl the tables

“The tables were moved”, or

“the tables moved (because of an earthquake)”

In a rather speculative form, these facts could partly explain the survival of two constructions with overlapping functions.

3.2 About feature blocking

We have just seen that in all the constructions, *se* blocks the external argument. Differences arise due to different transitivity values. However, we still have not accounted for the different agreement patterns in which the verb and the argumental DPs appear. In a default

Spanish sentence, the verb agrees in person and number with the argument DP in nominative case, and if there is a further argument, clitic substitution shows that it has accusative case. *Se* constructions are interesting because they present unexpected agreement patterns. Recall that in *se* constructions the argumental DP can some times be nominative (reflexive passive, middle and reflexive), as one would expect in a regular intransitive sentence, but appears in accusative case in impersonal constructions, which is unexpected. Moreover, the normal agreement pattern between the verb and the nominative argument appears only in reflexives; in reflexive passives and middles, the verb agrees in number, but not person, with its nominative subject. An explanation of these facts is presented in this section.

The reader may recall that the second function that *se* is claimed to perform is the selective blocking of syntactic features in the agreement nodes of the sentence. By blocking a feature, here I mean that the relevant feature is inactive for the purposes of checking, and that *se* is responsible for such circumstance. For example, in a regular sentence, the feature [person] would be active in AgrS, forcing the subject DP and the verb to agree in grammatical person. I here follow usual assumptions in the Minimalist Program, in which such agreement is accomplished by virtue of checking the relevant feature. In the case just described, I say that [person] in AgrS is active, and signal this fact by claiming that AgrS is [+ person]. Now, when agreement in grammatical person does not occur, I will assume that the feature [person] was somehow inactive for checking purposes, and signal such status by claiming that AgrS is [- person]. It is the hypothesis of this paper that in constructions containing *se*, it is *se* itself that is responsible for the inactivation of an otherwise active feature.

In the table presented in §3, repeated below for convenience, we summarized the feature combinations that resulted in the different constructions.

Construction	External argument	AgrS nom case	AgrS Person	AgrS Number	AgrO acc case
Impersonal	-	-	-	-	+
Reflex Pass	-	+	-	+	-
Middle	-	+	-	+	-
Refl/Recipr	-	+	+	+	-

Now, it is apparent that the existent combinations are a subset of the logically possible ones. One might then ask why those and only those combinations of features result in existent structures in Spanish. In this section I address this question. I claim that *se* has no selective power, its only function being the random inactivation of syntactic features. However, only the combinations allowed by the morphological feature geometry (in the sense of, for example, Harley (1994)) of the syntactic node Agr survive, giving rise to the existent constructions. In other words, it is because of morphological constraints, and not because of any special ability on the part of *se* to discover the legal combinations of features, that the peculiar typology of constructions is what it is.

In this section I first (§3.2.1.) consider some observations about the feature geometry of the agreement nodes (especially AgrS). I then (§3.2.2.) develop in some more detail the relationship between the morphological and syntactic properties of Agr nodes. Finally, some more fine-grained predictions about the distribution of *se* are considered in §3.3.3., and it is shown that the analysis provided in this paper is able to account for them.

3.2.1 The feature geometry of Agreement nodes

Of the two sentential agreement nodes, AgrS is the most interesting for our purposes, since, according to the table in §3, it is the one that presents the most variability in feature composition. This is no surprise, since it is the one that contains the most features. For this reason, AgrS is the most discussed functional node in this section. As for AgrO, the picture is rather simple: in Spanish, AgrO is composed only by an accusative case feature, and no phi-features. *Se* can either block it or leave it unchanged. If it does not

block accusative case, only the impersonal construction can arise, because the single argument in the construction will receive accusative case. Given that a single argument can only have one case (the essence of the Case Filter), any such sentence in which AgrS is active will crash. If *se* blocks accusative case, any of the other constructions are in principle possible.

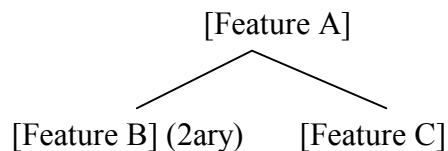
AgrS, however, presents a more complicated picture. In principle, any of the features that it contains ([nominative case], [person] and [number]) could potentially be blocked by *se*, in any combination. However, as pointed out above, we only find four of the possible combinations. The hypothesis put forward in this paper is that the combinations of features that we find in the constructions with *se* are determined by the feature geometry of the node in question. Only derivations that obey morphological constraints will be interpretable by the semantic component.

3.2.1.1. Feature Geometry Trees

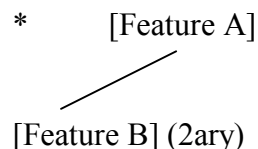
Phonological feature geometries were first proposed by Clements (1985) and Sagey (1986), as a kind of formal objects that reflect the systematic and hierarchical organization of the highly constrained set of features provided by UG. Their (sub)tree representations accomplish three goals (Noyer 1992): a) they define natural classes of features for phonological rules; b) (some) nodes in a feature tree correspond to the anatomy of the vocal tract; and c) the dependency relation encodes contrastiveness. Harley (1994) pursued the idea that a morphological feature geometry with analogous properties to its phonological counterpart could account for certain feature hierarchies proposed in the literature (such as Noyer's (1992) Universal Feature Hierarchy, that includes person > number > gender > class). Furthermore, Harley and Ritter (199x) propose the feature geometry for cross-linguistic pronoun and agreement systems. I here propose that the paradigm of Spanish *se*-constructions is also determined in part by the morphological feature geometric composition of the syntactic Agr nodes of the sentence in which *se* appears.

The feature geometric trees presented in this section have the properties listed below. Properties (1) and (2) are taken from Harley (1994) and Harley and Ritter (1998), and constitute standard properties of feature-geometric trees; property (3) is adapted from that same work, and is intended to capture relationships between sister nodes, in addition to the standard dominance relations that exist between mother and daughter nodes; property (4) is proposed here.

1. Features are monovalent, i.e., if they are active, they have a positive value (for example, [+ number]). If they are not active, they are just not there. A feature [- number] is impossible.
2. In a given language, a subset of the possible features can be active.
3. Some features have primary status, while others are secondary. A secondary feature may be present only in the context of a primary feature, to which it stays in a sister relationship. For example, in the following hypothetical sub-tree,

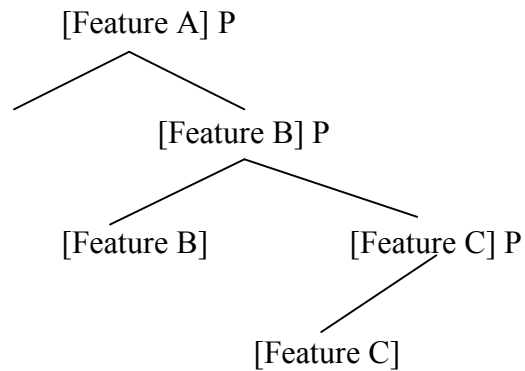


[Feature B] is marked as secondary (hence the (2ary) specification attached to it). This means that [Feature B] can only appear in the tree if [Feature C] is also present. Hence, a sub-tree such as the following one, based on the former, is impossible:



4. A feature marked as secondary in morphology is higher in the syntactic tree than the primary feature it depends upon. This means that upper nodes in the syntactic trees

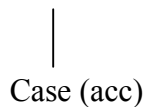
are not possible unless lower nodes are present. Hence, the syntactic realization (or “translation”) of the hypothetical tree presented above is as follows:



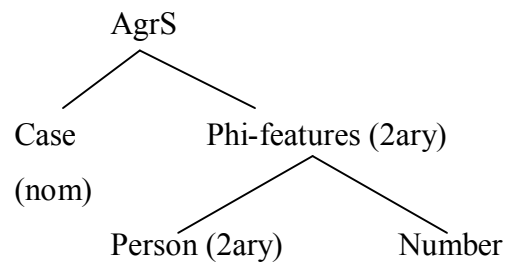
The relevance of this latter property belongs to the morphology-syntax interface, and will be addressed in §3.2.2.

Given the properties above, and based on the Spanish *se* constructions reviewed before, I propose the following feature geometry for the morphological composition of the Agr nodes in Spanish:

30. a. AgrO

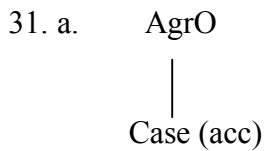


b.



I claim that subtrees of the general trees in (30a,b) (plus the considerations about the external argument presented in the previous section) account for the formal properties of Spanish *se* constructions. Moreover, I claim that the relevant subtrees are possible thanks to the feature-blocking ability of the operator *se*.

Before we go into understanding how the feature-geometric trees presented in (30a-b) account for *se* constructions, we should first have a complete understanding of what such trees encode. In (30a), repeated here as (31a), the only property encoded is that AgrO contains a [case] feature. If this feature is present, accusative case will be active for checking. If this feature is absent (as in the tree (31b)), no accusative case will be available.



b. AgrO

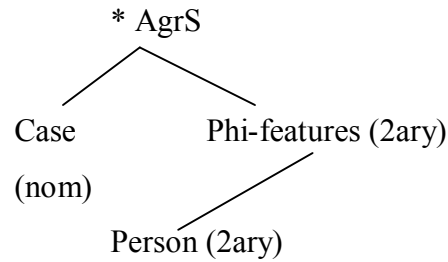
The tree corresponding to AgrS is a little more complex, reflecting the more complex nature of the AgrS node in Spanish. As (30b) showed, the node AgrS is composed of a [case] feature, that hosts nominative case, and a complex [Phi-features] node, which itself is composed of the features [person] and [number]. Now, the features in (30b) do not all have the same status. The node [Phi-features] is claimed to be secondary to the node [case]. What this means is that [Phi-features] can only be present in the context of [case]. In other words, the tree in (32), conceived as a subtree of (31) is not possible in Spanish:



In practice, (32) means that a verb cannot show agreement with a DP that is not marked with nominative case in Spanish. This is generally correct.

The other secondary feature in our trees is [person], which is dependent on the presence of [number]. This means that the following tree is predicted to be impossible in Spanish:

33.



That is, in Spanish a verb cannot agree in person but not number with its nominative subject. To my knowledge, this fact holds too.²⁴

In the remaining of this section I will show that the feature geometry in (30) explains the agreement patterns that we found in *se* constructions.

3.2.1.2. Feature geometry of Spanish *se*-constructions

Let's assume that the feature geometry of (30) is the default Agr composition of a Spanish sentence with active both AgrS and AgrO. Let's now assume that the operator *se* has the ability to syntactically block a random set of features from the feature geometry of (30), changing the composition of these nodes in certain occasions. The resulting feature-geometric derivations after the application of *se*, however, should be allowed by the feature geometry of (30).

Let's recall once more the table in which a summary of the properties in each of the constructions is given:

Construction	External argument	AgrS Nom case	AgrS Person	AgrS Number	AgrO acc case
Impersonal	-	-	-	-	+

²⁴ The cross-linguistic implications of my analysis is a question open for further research. In principle, nothing prevents a language from having a different distribution of primary and secondary features, or a different feature composition of its agreement nodes (having, for example, phi-features in AgrO). For each language, therefore, its feature composition should be determined, which hopefully will explain the agreement patterns found in that language. As for Spanish, the predictions are: nominative case will not be assigned to a DP which does not show number agreement with the verb, and person agreement will never show up without number agreement. I have not found counterexamples to these generalizations.

however, due to the geometry of the tree, it is only blocking [case], since the elimination of the node [phi-features] is explained by its secondary nature to the node [case]. This gives as a result a default third person singular morphology on the verb. In the case that there is a further argumental DP in the sentence, AgrO becomes available. The sentence is morphologically well-formed, and receives an impersonal interpretation in the semantics component. The tree in (34b) corresponds to the passive reflexive and the middle constructions, which are identical in the composition of their Agr nodes. In it, *se* is blocking all of AgrO, preventing accusative case from being assigned, and the [person] feature of AgrS, preventing person agreement on the verb. This results in nominative case being assigned, and the verb agreeing in number, but not in person, with the argumental DP. Recall that the only difference between reflexive passive and middle is that in the first one AgrS is strong, while in the second it is weak. This circumstance is not reflected in the morphological feature geometry, and hence both kinds of constructions have the same feature composition. Finally, the tree in (34c), corresponding to the reflexive/reciprocal construction, is the complement of (34a), the impersonal construction. In it, *se* blocks the realization of AgrO, while AgrS is active in all its possible features (i.e., [case] is not blocked, and none of the [Phi-features]). The result is that accusative case is not available, and the verb agrees in person and number with a nominative-marked argumental DP.

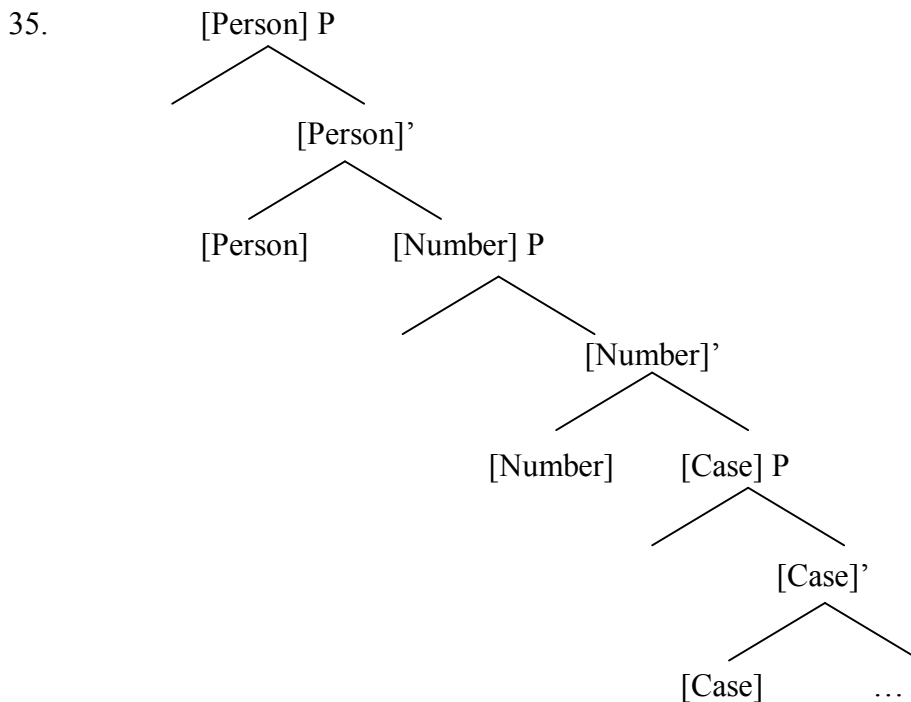
3.2.1.3 At the interface: syntax and morphology limiting each other

Now, the trees presented above are morphological trees. We still have to explain how the morphological information translates into syntactic trees. I here follow a widespread idea²⁵ according to which the relationships between levels of representations are due to conditions on the interface of such levels. What this means is that the formal objects that are useful to represent say, morphological properties, might differ from the formal objects that are used to represent syntactic properties of the same object, provided that there is a clear “translation key” between modules. For example, ternary trees are used in feature

²⁵ See, for example, the notion of “rebracketing”, in Roeper (1999). Also an implementation of a related idea within syntactic structures is found in Pesetsky (1995).

geometric trees, which belong to morphology, while syntax allows only for binary structures. Since both structures are characterizing the same object,²⁶ ideally there should be an identifiable mechanism connecting them. Such mechanism is what I call an “interface condition” here.

The reader may recall the last of the properties that we listed in the introduction to this section, where it was claimed that a feature marked as secondary in a morphological tree is represented as a dominant feature in the syntactic tree, i.e., it is higher in the syntactic tree than the primary feature it depends upon. Let’s assume that this interface condition is necessary in order to interpret the ternary trees of morphology in syntactic terms, given that syntax only allows binary trees. What this means for our system is that the syntactic projection of [case] will license the projection of the secondary features contained under [phi-features] in morphology; among them, [number] will license [person]. Syntactically, [person] will be the higher node, since it is doubly secondary, [number being its complement, and [case] being the lowest node of AgrS in Spanish. Following traditional X-bar theoretic conventions, the syntactic projection of AgrS will be as follows:



²⁶ A question unclear to me is whether the nodes presented in (35) should be dominated by a “label” nodule (say, AgrS), or the decomposition makes such a node superfluous.

Below the [Number] node, there is Tense P, Aspect P and again the node [Case] P, which corresponds to [accusative case], the only node AgrO is made of in Spanish. The clitic *se* is then projected in place of the external argument of the verb, which is at the bottom of the derivation. When *se* is cliticized onto the verb, it travels with it, blocking features in its way, which then will not be available for otherwise mandatory checking by the verb or the argumental DP (if any). Those derivations that can be interpreted by morphology (i.e., that conform to the configurations in (34)) will give rise to the different Spanish *se* constructions. Those that don't conform to the well-formedness conditions of (30), will crash at the morphology-syntax interface level.

In summary, all that was needed for this analysis of *se* constructions was: a) the hierarchical ordering of morphological features in the Agr nodes which give rise to well-formed combinations (those in (30)); and b) an interface condition on the morphology-syntax interface, which filters out illegal combinations of features resulting from automatic blocking by *se*.

We have now constructed a model of *se* constructions in Spanish, including the gaps in the paradigm, by using three possible feature-geometric trees to explain the logical possibilities. We have also provided a syntactic model to account for such constructions. While the feature composition of Agr nodes proposed in this paper is intended to have universal value, it is expected that a language with a different distribution of primary and secondary features would present a different typology of constructions in which Agr features have been manipulated to change their default configuration and their possible combinations. In the remaining space of this section I now test some predictions that such a model makes about the distribution of *se*.

3.3 Other gaps in the paradigm: as predicted

If the function of the operator *se* is to act over the features of Agr nodes, *se* will only be possible in sentences that contain the relevant agreement nodes that *se* interacts with. I will here present evidence in support of this prediction.

As we saw, impersonal *se* blocks case, person and number features of AgrS, while it does not act over AgrO. This situation explains why impersonal *se* is not possible in infinitival clauses, which lack AgrS, as pointed out by Zubizarreta (1982):²⁷

36. * [parece [trabajarse mucho]]

seem.3s work.se lots

“One seems to work hard”

37. * [Juan cree [trabajarse mucho]]

Juan believe.3s work.se lots

“Juan believes that one works hard”

The sentences in (36) and (37) above contrast with reflexive and reciprocal constructions, in which *se* does not interact with AgrS, but is only blocking accusative case from AgrO, which is present in infinitival constructions:

38. Mis hermanos solían ducharse cada mes

My brothers used.3pl to.shower se each month

“My brothers used to take a shower every month”

39. Oscar y Julia creen amarse con locura

Oscar and Julia believe.3pl to.love se with madness

“Oscar and Julia believe to love each other madly”

²⁷ This fact leads Zubizarreta (1982) to conclude that *se* needs case, a claim also sustained by Belletti (1982), among others.

Similar sentences in Italian are grammatical, according to Burzio (1984):

i. [ti sembrava [ti mangiarsii molto bene
seem.3s eat se very well
“One seemed to eat very well”

In the case of reflexive passive and middles, *se* should be ungrammatical in infinitival clauses, since AgrS plays a role. This is shown in (40) and (41) respectively:

40. * Pedro cree publicarse muchos artículos mediocres
 Pedro believes.3s to.publish se many articles mediocre
 “Pedro believes that many mediocre articles are published”

41. * Pareció las puertas cerrarse de golpe
 Seemed.3s the doors to.close se of sudden
 “It seemed the doors to close suddenly”

There is a set of counterexamples, in which infinitives with *se* are possible with a reflexive passive/middle interpretation, as seen below:

42. Las películas de Buñuel tienen que verse
 The films of Buñuel have.3pl that to.see se
 “Buñuel’s films should be seen”

43. Las puertas parecieron cerrarse de golpe
 The doors seemed.3pl to.close se of sudden
 “The doors seemed to close suddenly”

The existence of (42) should be straightforward if we consider the main verb and the infinitival to form a modal verbal periphrasis, *tienen que ver*, “ought to see”, in which there is only one verb, *ver*, “see”, and somehow *tienen-que* “ought-to” is an auxiliary. In this case, *se* should be able to interact with the single set of Agr nodes of the construction, and (42) is grammatical. This contrasts with a case in which the periphrasis solution is not an option, like in the raising construction in (44):

44. * Las películas de Buñuel sería interesante verse
the films of Buñuel would.be.3s interesting to.see se
“It would be interesting to see Buñuel’s films”
(cf. Las películas de Buñuel serían interesantes de ver,
cf. Sería interesante ver las películas de Buñuel)

More problematic is the analysis of the raising construction in (43) as a periphrasis. However, for reasons unclear to me, such reanalysis is possible, and *se* is able to interact with the matrix Agreement nodes, as the validity of (43) shows.

3.3. Summary

In the analysis presented above we studied the properties and scope of what was called the syntactic operator *se* in Spanish. We explained the role that such element plays in producing impersonal, reflexive passive, middle, reflexive and reciprocal constructions. Basically, it was claimed that *se* had the following functions:

- a) blocking the canonic syntactic realization of the external theta role
- b) blocking the features [case], [person] and [number] of Agr selectively

The property (a) is common to all constructions, and derives from *se*'s uniform generation in head position of the functional node that would otherwise introduce the external argument of the verb. It was claimed that *se* can be used as a diagnostic for unaccusativity in Spanish.

The property (b) belongs to the syntax/morphology interface. The basic idea is that *se* has the ability to randomly block features in Agr, rendering them inaccessible for further checking (i.e., inactive); however, only the derivations that conform to morphological constraints surface. Such constraints derive from the feature geometry of the Agr nodes in Spanish. It was noted that cross-linguistic variation resides in this point, in ways still to be determined by future research.

26. Previous accounts

There is an abundant literature dedicated to the Romance clitic *se*. As briefly noted in the introduction, previous accounts of *se* fall into two groups: (a) those that distinguish the different functions of *se* on the basis of inherent properties of several homonymous morphemes *se*; and (b) those that argue that the surface similarities between these constructions are not accidental, and hence give a unified account of all instances of *se*. The main criticism to be made to the first group, is that they fail to express what is common to all the *se* constructions, rendering the occurrence of *se* in different constructions as largely accidental, a simple case of homonymy. The challenge of the second group, on the other hand, is to explain how a simple morpheme can give rise to a number of (seemingly unrelated) constructions, and how this number is restricted.

In this chapter I will illustrate the controversy with the detailed review of one account of each group, as well as comparing those accounts to the one put forward in the present paper. First, I briefly review Dobrovie-Sorin (1994), and compare her homonym approach to the unified one presented here. Since my account is clearly more sympathetic to the unified aim, more attention is paid to the second of the groups. I review Manzini (1986) in detail, and Wehrli (1986) partially, as representatives of the unified effort, and compare some of the ideas already present in those papers to the ones outlined in the preceding part of this paper.

4.1. The homonymic *se* approach

The first approach includes work by, among others, Kayne (1975), Grimshaw (1982), Belletti (1982), Zubizarreta (1982, 1987), Manzini (1983), Burzio (1981, 1986), Otero (1986), Cinque (1988), De Miguel (1990), and Dobrovie-Sorin (1994). These papers are mostly based on Italian examples, although Spanish and French are also (marginally) considered. Despite the abundance of papers arguing for this idea, one cannot say that there is a unified account of multiple *se*'s. Part of the problem is that the work cited

above is typically not based on the same values of *se*.²⁸ In fact, it should be noted that few of these papers, if any, address the full range of functions that *se* displays. As an illustration, I will here examine the most recent of these proposals, found in Dobrovie-Sorin (1994).

4.1.1. Dobrovie-Sorin (1994)

In her (1994) paper, Dobrovie-Sorin considers the readings of reflexive, middle/passive, and impersonal *se* in Romanian, French and Italian. Her account presents evidence of a distinction between nominative and accusative *se*. Furthermore, she argues that nominative *se* exists in Italian and Spanish due to a diachronic reanalysis (Naro 1976), which didn't occur in French and Romanian. As a consequence, Italian and Spanish have both nominative and accusative *se*, while French and Romanian only have accusative *se*.

Dobrovie-Sorin's analysis starts with a consideration of the so-called impersonal *se*. She observes that this kind of *se* is grammatical in Italian (45) and all pro-drop Romance languages (including Romanian (46), while it is ungrammatical in the only non-pro-drop Romance language, French (47-48):

45. Si canta/si dorme/si lavora/si mangia

Se sings/se sleeps/se works/se eats

“one sings/sleeps/works/eats”

²⁸ For example, while Belletti (1982) considers data from impersonal and passive constructions (reaching the conclusion that there are two *se*'s: one that is marked with nominative case and absorbs the external theta role, and one that absorbs accusative case, respectively), Zubizarreta (1982, 1987) adds reflexive/reciprocal *se* and ergative *se* to the passive *se*. On the other hand, Cinque (1988), considering impersonal constructions alone, postulates two *se*'s: argumental *se* (which appears in finite contexts with verbs with an external theta role) and non-argumental *se* (with verbs that lack an external theta role in finite contexts). Manzini (1983) tries to derive reflexive, impersonal and passive *se* from one single lexical item; however, she relies in notions that have a dubious status in contemporary linguistic theory, such as co-superscripting vs. co-subscripting of arguments, to differentiate among them. Burzio (1981, 1986) groups passive and impersonal *se* (which require theta role and nominative case) from ergative, inherent and reflexive *se* (which is lexically idiosyncratic and a mere morphological reflex or the “loss” of the subject theta role. Finally, Dobrovie-Sorin (1994), introducing Romanian into the discussion, distinguishes between nominative *se* (basically, impersonal constructions), and accusative *se* (in middles and passives).

46. Se cânta/ se doarme/ se munceste/ se manînca

Se sings/ se sleeps/ se works/ se eats

“one sings/sleeps/works/eats”

47. ? Il se parlera de vous la semaine prochaine

[“one will talk about you next week”]

48. * Il se procédera a una enquête

[“one will proceed to make a survey”]

Given the general behavior of pro-drop languages in respect to this construction, the *se* that appears in sentences above has been called nominative *se* (Naro (1976), Rizzi (1976), Belletti (1982), etc), since it is understood as a nominative clitic, which is impossible in French but allowed in Romance pro-drop languages.²⁹

Dobrovie-Sorin then points out that nominative *se* has been claimed to also appear in the copula construction in Italian:

49. Non si è mai contenti

Not si is ever satisfied

“One is never satisfied”

However, the Romanian counterpart of (49) is ungrammatical:

50. * Nu se este niciodatâ multumit

This pattern repeats itself in other constructions (passives, lack of agreement between the post-verbal NP and the verb, co-occurrence of *si* and accusative clitics, co-occurrence of *si* and prepositional objects), setting Romanian apart from other pro-drop languages, in

which all these elements hold for pro-drop languages in Romance, but are ungrammatical in Romanian. This fact indicates that the *se* in these constructions, normally subsumed under nominative *se*, is a different morpheme homonymic with the one in (46)-(48).

Dobrovie-Sorin proposes that the *se* in those constructions is accusative *se*, the same one that appears in middle/passive constructions. The ungrammaticality of constructions in Romanian is explained by the fact that Romanian does not have accusative *se*, while the other pro-drop Romance languages do.

In her analysis, this middle/passive accusative *se* is a clitic binding a trace in object position. The problem then arises in trying to explain the use of this *se* with intransitive verbs. To avoid this potential problem, Dobrovie-Sorin has to assume that (null) cognate objects are present in the lexical structure of intransitives. Normally, these cognate objects are saturated in the lexicon, and hence not projected into syntax. However, the syntactic projection of the null cognate object of intransitive verbs can be forced by middle/passive *se*.

In sum, Dobrovie-Sorin's analysis motivates the existence of two different morphemes *se*, one related to a subject position, and the other related to an object position. While the analysis presented in this paper assumes that *se* can be related to either nominative or accusative case (by blocking the [case] feature of the Agr node it interacts with), the crucial difference is that in my analysis *se* is uniformly generated as an operator that blocks the realization of the external argument, and hence one single morpheme is postulated, and its properties unified. Since there is no need to postulate multiple homonymic morphemes, an analysis that does so becomes a less desirable one, and other things being equal, should be dispreferred.

²⁹ Although the author does not give reasons for this claim, to my understanding she is assuming that a null element is present in subject position in the languages that allow it, which are precisely the pro-drop

4.2. The unified approaches

There are a few (generally more recent) proposals for a unified account in the literature. Among them, Manzini (1983, 1986), Wehrli (1986), Postma (1993), Everett (1996), and Bruhn de Garavito (1999). I here review the latter two, for considering that some of the ideas developed in my proposal relate to the ones put forward in these papers.³⁰

4.2.1. Manzini (1986)

Manzini (1986) is an attempt to give a unified account of Italian *si*. She proposes that there is one single lexical item *si* in Italian, from which four different types of *si* can be obtained: impersonal, reflexive, middle, and middle reflexive (our reflexive-passive).

Impersonal *si* is made equivalent to Pro_{arb}, and hence given the interpretation of a free variable, denoting a non-definite referential entity:

51. *si* lava volentieri I bambini [her (1)]
 one gladly washes the children

Manzini claims that impersonal *si* is associated with a third person feature and an unspecified number (and gender) feature. For this reason, impersonal *si* agrees with a

languages.

³⁰ It should be noted however that Postma (1993) is also a clear antecedent to my approach: he considers reflexive, reciprocal, passive, impersonal, ergative and middle constructions. He claims that *se* constructions always encompass what he calls a *passive geometry*, which consists of the raising of the internal argument of the verb and an anaphoric binding of *se* by I; for him, *se* is coindexed with a pro argument of V; the reflexive/non reflexive readings depend on the instantiation of PERSON agreement in IP. While most of the elements of my analysis, including the basic intuition, can be found in germ in Postma's treatment, he doesn't offer any explicit formal analysis of the constructions, which I hope to be providing. Everett (1996) also tries to unify all values of *se*, and works with a list that is very similar to mine. For him, *se* is the elsewhere morpheme in terms of its Case-related distribution, and is referentially inadequate. *Se* can be freely generated in any position of the tree, and its different properties are determined by the position it is associated with. Everett's analysis works well in his feature-based system, but it is not clear to me how generating *se* in different positions is faithful to the spirit of a unified account. Finally, Bruhn de Garavito (1999) also generates *se* as the head of different functional categories, rendering them strong. Even though she only considers a subset of values for *se* (impersonal, passive and inchoative), I include her account into the unification group, because the role of *se* is uniform; however, as in Everett, it is not clear that plurality of generation sites is any different from plurality of *se*'s. Moreover, it is not obvious how her account exports to the rest of values for *se*.

tensed verb in third person, unspecified (default) number, and with an adjective in unspecified number, unspecified gender (which in Italian happens to be masculine plural, while in Spanish it is masculine singular):

52. *Si e' facilmente nerviosi* [her (3)]

One is easily nervous (pl masc)

For the author, Impersonal *si* is an argument, and as such it is subject to the Theta Criterion. This fact explains why impersonal *si* can be associated [sic] with the object Theta position in the passive (53) [her (4)] and the unaccusative (54) [her (5)] below:

53. *Si e' invitati volentieri*

One is gladly invited

54. *Si va volentieri*

One gladly goes

Next, Manzini claims that impersonal *si* has categorial features N, hence, as lexical nominal, it is subject to the case filter. This fact explains the ungrammaticality of (55) [her (6)] and (56) [her (7)] below:

55. * *E' bello lavarsi volentieri i bambini*

It is good [one to gladly wash the children]

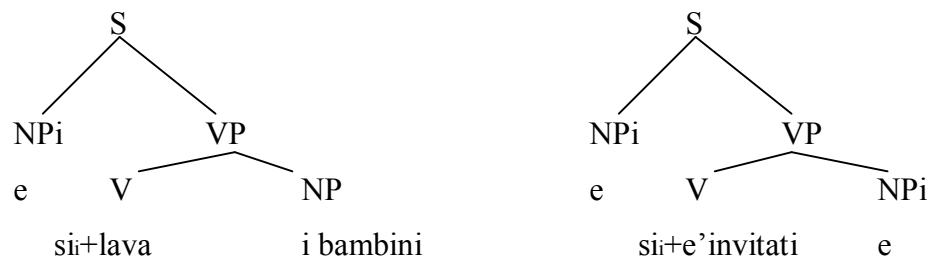
56. * *E' bello andarsi volentieri*

It is good [one to gladly go]

Finally, Manzini notes that impersonal *si* is associated with different theta positions (see her (1) versus her (4)), but with only one case, the nominative case. Attempts to associate impersonal *si* with other cases result in ungrammaticality:

57. a. * Si lavo volentieri [her (8)]
 I gladly wash one
- b. * Si vedo lavarsi volentieri i bambini
 see one gladly wash the children
- c. * Vedo lavarsi volentieri i bambini
 I see one gladly wash the children

In conclusion, Manzini assigns the following possible structures to impersonal *si*:



Reflexive *si*. First, Manzini notes that reflexive *si* and reciprocal *si* have the same range of interpretations in Italian, and hence, she assumes that there is a single element *si* which has the range of interpretation of anaphoric elements in general.

The first property that Manzini notes on reflexive *si* is that it is equivalent in its interpretation to control PRO; i.e., it is interpreted as a dependent variable, whose final interpretation is dependent on some antecedent:

58. I bambini_i si_i lavano
 The children wash themselves/each other

As for the syntactic properties, reflexive *si*, as an anaphor, should be subject to the Binding Condition A. as the ungrammaticality of (59) (*si* bound over the subject of a SC) and (60) (*si* in nominative position) [her (21) and (22), respectively] shows:

59. * I bambini mi videro lavarsi
 The children saw me wash themselves (each other)

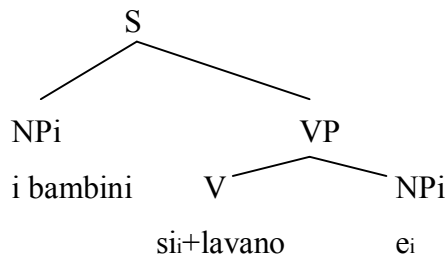
60. * Dicono che si lavano i bambini

They say that they-selves (each other) wash the children

Second, reflexive *si*, as impersonal *si*, is claimed to be an argument, and hence subject to the theta criterion. Reflexive *si* can be associated with the theta positions subcategorized by the verb, as can easily be tested with the previous examples.

Finally, as impersonal *si*, reflexive *si* is associated with the categorial feature N, and it is therefore subject to the case filter. Moreover, while impersonal *si* must be associated with nominative case, reflexive *si* can be associated with accusative and dative cases, but never with nominative. Manzini attributes the impossibility of nominative reflexive *si* to an incompatibility with the Binding Condition A, which prevents anaphors in subject position.

As for the agreement features of reflexive *si*, they are identical to those associated with the following:



Now, in unifying impersonal *si* and reflexive *si*, Manzini notes that impersonal *si*, always associated with nominative case, forms a chain with the subject. On the other hand, by virtue of being subject to Binding Condition A, reflexive *si* is necessarily bound by its subject. Hence, the lexical entry of Impersonal/reflexive *si* can be unified in the following form:

- Impersonal/reflexive *si*: - variable
- argument
- N

- 3rd person, unspecified number and gender
- clitic on a verb
- bound to its subject

With respect to the variable property, there are two options: dependent or free. As for the property of being bound to its subject, there are again two options: forming a chain and referential dependence. Depending on the choices among these possibilities, either impersonal *si* or reflexive *si* is obtained.

Middle *si*. Manzini claims that middle *si* has the same effect on the verb as a passive morphology element, inducing movement from the object into the subject position, and illustrates this idea with the example below [her (36)]:

61. I bambini si lavano volentieri

The children wash (middle) gladly

In (61), *I bambini* is in subject position, since it agrees with the verb and it can be substituted by a null subject. However, it is associated with the object theta-position.

The other properties of middle *si* seem to be identical to those of impersonal *si*. Manzini thus proposes to include an optional passivizer property into the generalized lexical entry for *si*, now including impersonal, middle and reflexive *si*:

- Si*:
- variable
 - argument
 - N
 - 3rd person, unspecified number and gender
 - clitic on a verb
 - bound to its subject
 - (passivizer)

As for the newly added property, impersonal and reflexive *si* are obtained when the passivizer property is not realized, and middle *si* when it is.

Middle-reflexive *si*. A fourth type of *si* is predicted to exist; mainly, one that, on the one hand, is a dependent variable and referentially dependent on its subject, like reflexive *si*; and on the other hand, it is a passivizer, as middle *si*. Manzini cites the following example from Burzio (1981), with an *en*-type participle and an interpretation as restricted relative:

62. Gli unici bambini lavatisi

The only children (who) washed themselves

This construction (which, by the way, does not exist in Spanish) is restricted to a limited class of verbs (passive participles and unaccusatives), and is impossible with others (transitives and unergatives). It therefore seems to be restricted to derived subjects, and hence indicating that the property [passivizer] has been activated, as in middles. As in reflexives, though, the *si* in (62) is interpreted as a dependent variable.

This same middle-reflexive *si* is found in post-verbal subject constructions, with *ne*-cliticization, which is associated with object positions:

63. Se ne lavano molti

Of them (“are washed”/“wash themselves”) many

Notice that this construction roughly corresponds to what we have been calling reflexive passive in the body of this paper.

As a summary, Manzini offers the following diagram:

	Free variable	Dependent variable
Nonpassivizer	Impersonal <i>si</i>	Reflexive <i>si</i>

Passivizer	Middle <i>si</i>	Middle-reflexive <i>si</i>
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Finally, Manzini recognizes that there is one type of *si* that she has disregarded in her analysis, what Burzio (1981) called ergative *si*:

64. a. Spensi la luce
 I turned off the light
 b. La luce *si* spense
 the light went off

Manzini claims that, while the *si*'s that she considered in her analysis are fully productive, ergative *si* is "semiproductive at best" (p. 260). She follows an idea in Borer (1984) in claiming that ergative *si* belongs to the type of affixes that are attached to the verb not in the syntax but in the lexicon, and therefore there is not a separate entry for ergative *si*.

Summarizing Manzini's analysis, there are four predicted uses of *si*, which are derived relying on a lexical entry for *si* that includes semantic specification (dependent/free variable), categorial information (N), phi-features (person and number), and syntactic properties (clitic on verb, bound to its subject, passivizer). Ergative *si* is not included in the account. Depending on the values assigned to some of the properties specified in the lexical entry, we found the four values of *si*. Manzini's account has some notions that are common to the present account, most importantly the passivization property of *si*. However, they differ in that in the present account this property is derived from the lexical operations that *se* forces on the verb, given a very specific theory of external argument introduction, instead of relying on a lexical stipulation, as in Manzini's account.. Since in my account *se* is blocking the external argument of the construction, but it is itself not an argument, there is no categorial information in its lexical entry. Moreover, the phi-features observed in *se*-constructions are related to the effect that the clitic has on the agreement nodes of the sentence, which vary according to morphology,

and not to the lexical specifications of the operator. Since my analysis derives most of the properties that Manzini stipulates, it is a more desirable account.

1.2.2. Wehrli (1986)

Wehrli (1986) considers the following cases of French *se* (after Ruwet 1972): reflexive/reciprocal, inherent (“lexicalized *se* or ergative *se*”), middle, and neuter (something like the aspectual *se* in this paper). French does not have impersonal *se* or reflexive passive *se* that could be differentiated from the middle *se*.

A unified account for the *se* constructions in French is proposed, according to which there is only one morpheme *se* triggering one basic rule”

65. *se* absorbs an argument

Wehrli understands absorption meaning that “at least from the syntactic point of view, the argument is suppressed” (p. 264). In other words, “*se* blocks the realization of an NP-argument (...) that might otherwise satisfy this slot in the argument structure of the verb” (p. 268).

The author then argues that the different roles of *se* follow: (a) from the nature of the argument which has been absorbed (i.e., internal versus external argument; in fact, he claims that *se* can absorb any NP-type argument, that is, subject (middle), direct or indirect object (reflexive/reciprocal), and extra dative (*se* inalienable possession³¹); and (b) whether or not the complex *se*+verb has been lexicalized (i.e., whether the cilit can be interpreted as an argument of the verb or not; lexicalized *se* are inherent and ergative,

³¹ For the “se-inalienable possession” type, Wehrli gives the following example, which he subsumes under the broader class of reflexive/reciprocal *se*:

[2c] Jean s’est cassé le bras

Jean to-himself has broken the arm

See my footnote 14 for this construction in Spanish, which I do not include in my account for reasons explained therein. It should be noted that Spanish and French differ in this construction in that, while Spanish allows alienable possessions to appear as the object of this construction, French doesn’t.

which are claimed to be idiosyncratic, which non-lexicalized *se* are reflexive/reciprocal, and middle, which are claimed to be productive and regular).

Wehrli gives interesting evidence for argument absorption, and the reader is referred to his paper (especially pages 270-274) for supporting evidence of this idea.

While the taxonomy of *se*-uses is necessarily different in Wehrli's paper and in mine, given the differences between French and Spanish, the idea of *se* uniformly blocking an argument presented in the present paper is highly similar to Wehrli's. Both analyses crucially differ, however, in which arguments can be blocked by *se*: while Wehrli, as has been pointed out, allows the absorption of any NP-type argument, in the account outlined in this paper only the external argument of the verb can be blocked; this further restriction is what gives rise to the analysis of *se* as an operator in complementary distributions with the head that introduces the external argument of the verb. To the extent that a more restrictive theory is understood as a more unified one, the analysis presented in this paper can be taken to represent a step further from Wehrli in desirable direction.

5. Conclusion: the present account

My account of *se* as a syntactic operator shows that some new ideas in the recent literature can prove useful in describing a very concrete aspect of the *se* phenomena, mainly, their argumental and formal properties. It shows that with respect to these properties, one can give a unified account of this clitic that appear in impersonal, passive, middle and reflexive/reciprocal constructions. My account is also explicit in the functions that *se* accomplishes, including its syntactic behavior and its interaction with the hierarchically organized nodes of syntax. It also predicts which verbs will never occur with *se*, by relating *se*'s function to the lexical structure of those verbs. Finally, it presents *se* as one instance of a familiar class of syntactic operators, of which the passive morphology is the clearest example, but not the only one.³²

³² See the analysis of Catalan locative operator *hi* in Rigau (1991).

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