D feature and impersonal SE: A new perspective on Romance impersonal constructions

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The nature of the reflexive clitic se, used in Romance languages to express impersonality (1), remains the subject of a long-lasting controversy in the literature.

(1) a. Se come mucho aquí    b. Spesso si arriva in ritardo
   SE eat.3.SG.PRES much here often SE arrive.3.SG.PRES in late
   ‘One eats a lot here’ (Spanish)    ‘One often arrives late’ (Italian; D’Alessandro, 2007)

Previous proposals have generally treated this clitic as filling the role of an otherwise overt subject argument in null subject (NS) languages: it is analysed as either an argument clitic associated with the external θ-role (Kayne, 1986; Cinque, 1988) or the morphological exponent of a syntactic feature in NS languages (Belletti, 1982; Otero, 1986). Cross-linguistic variation of the impersonal reflexives reveals, however, that neither of these analyses is satisfactory, as they fail to explain the presence of an additional subject element in the same clause (2a) or that of the clitic se in a non-NS language such as French (2b).

(2) a. A gente chama-se rãs a isto
   PRON call.3.SG.PRES-SE rãs to that
   ‘We call these ones rãs (‘frogs’)’ (European Portuguese dialects; Martins, 2009)

b. Il se mange souvent des gâteaux ici
   EXP SE eat.3.SG.PRES often PART cake.PL here
   ‘One often eats cakes here’ (French; Cinque, 1988; Mendikoetxea, 2008)

As a solution to this problem, I present an alternative analysis of the impersonal se in which the clitic is considered as the morphological exponent of a specificity feature, [-specific], on D in T. I argue that the full specification of ϕ-features in T (cf. rich agreement morphology) in NS languages values the D feature as [+specific], and thus a [-specific] feature must be spelled out by se in order for the non-specific reading to be computed at LF. In non-NS languages such as English, on the other hand, an indefinite expression spells out this D feature in the spec-TP position, fulfilling the EPP (Chomsky, 1981). The D property of se also introduces a new insight to the theoretical investigation of the variation of impersonal reflexives such as in (2).

Many of the previous studies (Belletti, 1982; Rizzi, 1986; Borer, 1989; Mendikoetxea, 1992) attributed the cross-linguistic variation of Romance impersonal constructions to the NS property under the assumption that the nature of INF changes depending on this property. The increasing awareness of the more complex nature of null subjects (Barbosa, 2011), however, exhibits a great challenge for this line of analysis, as it assumes that the NS property is binary. Likewise, the rich diversity of impersonal constructions generally presents counter-evidence for a comprehensive generalisation such as Holmgren’s (2005), which associates the NS property of languages with the ways these languages syntactically convey impersonality.

The proposed D-feature analysis thus makes a novel theoretical claim with respect to this variation. Building on the proposed link between D and se, I argue that the interaction between the EPP and subject identification is what determines the distribution of the clitic, and more generally, how impersonality is expressed across languages. I develop the idea that the ways languages express impersonality (e.g., reflexive construction, generic null pronoun, overt subject pronoun) are directly constrained by the ways they identify the subject referent (e.g., verbal agreement, pronoun, discourse) and how it is morpho-syntactically realised in the inflectional domain. Therefore, this study contributes to the development of our understanding of both reflexive and non-reflexive impersonal constructions in Romance and beyond.
List of Abbreviations

SE – reflexive clitic  PRON – subject pronoun  EXP – expletive  PART – partitive (article)
PRES – present tense

References


