

FRENCH AND SPANISH *SE*: UNDERSPECIFIED, NOT REFLEXIVE

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0. Introduction

The clitic *se* in the Romance languages has been and continues to be the object of debate among linguists because of its intriguing properties. Among the many questions which it provokes we may ask what its place in the pronoun system is, why it so easily appears in structures as varied as reflexives, impersonals and unaccusatives, and why its position and use may vary across languages and across dialects of the same language. Although the limitations of the present paper do not allow us to address these questions in depth, we would like to make a few suggestions about what may be the nature of this clitic, suggestions which we hope may lead to a better understanding of the greater picture. At the core of our proposal is the idea that *se* does not include the feature ‘reflexive’ (Reinhart and Reuland 1993) in spite of the fact that it typically appears with reflexive verbs. We will show that, if we interpret *se* as being underspecified, it is possible to account for many of the interpretations it receives in different structures, including ‘aspectual’ readings. Clearly, if *se* is not inherently reflexive, we must also show that the reflexive interpretation is derived from other factors.

The paper will be organized as follows. First, we will sketch a short description of the uses of *se* in Spanish and French. Then we will flesh out our proposal and apply the results to the interpretation of reflexive sentences. We will briefly touch on a possible feature geometry, following Heap (2000). Finally, we will show how some of the aspectual interpretations of *se* can be derived.

1. Multiple uses of *se* in Spanish and French

Although we refer to it as *se*, in many of the constructions we will be looking at the clitic changes according to the person of the antecedent. A summary of the forms in Spanish and French is given in Table 1.

Table 1

Spanish		French	
me	nos	me	nous
te	os	te	vous
se	se	se	se

In general, the uses of *se* are very similar in Spanish and in French, although there are some constructions that are only found in Spanish. We will briefly describe each of these.

The best known usage of *se* is with the so-called reflexive verbs, in which the antecedent for the clitic is the subject. It is usually assumed that somehow the action of the verb ‘falls’ on the subject. This is illustrated in (1a) for Spanish and (1b) for French.

- (1) a. Juan *se* afeita.
Juan *se* shaves.
b. Jean *se* rase.
‘John shaves (himself)’

There is a class of verbs that are inherently reflexive (often referred to as neuter *se*, see Ruwet 1972), as illustrated in (2a) for Spanish and (2b) for French. The clitic agrees with the subject as in the previous case. The reason these verbs are reflexive appears to be quite arbitrary, as in some cases a near synonym is not reflexive. However, we will show that they do have aspectual properties in common.

- (2) a. Juan *se* arrepintió de haberlo hecho.
John *se* repented having done it.
b. Jean s'est repenti de l'avoir fait.
‘John repented of having done it’

The third type of structure in which the clitic agrees with the subject is found mainly in Spanish (3). It has been referred to as aspectual *se* (Nishida 1994; Bonneau, Bruhn-Garavito and Libert 1995; Bruhn de Garavito 2000). Although the absence of the clitic does not render the sentence ungrammatical, its presence indicates that the direct object must be totally affected.

- (3) a. El niño *se* comió la manzana.
The child *se* ate the apple
‘The child ate the apple up.’
b. * El niño *se* comió manzanas.
the child *se* ate apples.
‘The child ate apples up.’

In the following constructions there is no apparent subject, therefore the clitic is invariable. The first of these is the inchoative *se* (Zribi-Hertz 1987; Labelle 1990; Zagona 1994; Bruhn de Garavito 2000). It is found in both Spanish (4a) and French (4b), although it is used more consistently in Spanish. In these sentences the agent has been suppressed and the theme appears in subject position. For this reason they are often interpreted as unaccusative (Montrul 1997)

- (4) a. El vaso se rompió.
The vase *se* broke.
- b. Le vase s'est brisé
'The vase broke.'

Middle constructions in Spanish (5a) and French (5b) are also marked by an invariable *se*. In Spanish, it is difficult to tell them apart from the impersonals (see below).

- (5) a. El té se toma con leche.
the tea *SE* drinks with milk.
- b. Le thé se boit avec du lait.
'Tea is drunk with milk'

The final construction we will touch on only exists in Spanish¹ (6). We refer to the impersonal passives, in which there is an underlying agent that cannot be expressed but which is interpreted as having the features of [+human] and [+indefinite]. The verb generally agrees with the theme, although in some dialects there is a version in which the verb appears in the third person singular form.

- (6) Se vendieron todos los chocolates.
se sold-pl all the chocolates
'All the chocolates were sold.'

2. Reflexivity without a reflexive specification

It is clear that *se* is part of a paradigm that includes the direct and indirect unstressed pronouns. Both the pronouns and the reflexives shown in Table 1 share the same forms for the first and second persons, singular and plural. However, in the third person it is necessary to distinguish between the object pronouns and the reflexive, as shown in (7) and (8). In (7a) for Spanish and (7b) for French we find the reflexive, while (8a) and (8b) illustrate the object pronoun (*l*-clitics).

- (7) a. Juan **se** afeita.
John *se* shaves
'John shaves.'
- b. Jean **se** rase
Johns *se* shaves
'John shaves.'

¹ We will have nothing to say about 'Spurious *se*', which appears when there are two third person clitic pronouns in the sentence, as shown in (i).

(i) Le di el libro ayer. Se lo di por la mañana.

To him gave-I the book yesterday. *SE* I gave-I in the morning.

'I gave her/him the book yesterday. I gave it to her/him in the morning.'

- (8) a. Juan lo afeitá.
 John him shaves
 ‘John_i shaves him_j.’
- b. Jean le rase.
 John him shaves
 ‘John_i shaves him_j.’

In order to distinguish between *se* and the *l*-clitics researchers have proposed that *se* has the feature [+reflexive] while the *l*-clitics are [-reflexive] (Grimshaw 1999). The *me/te* forms are unspecified for reflexivity under this account. This approach seems maximally redundant, in that the feature [reflexive] exists to describe exactly one ‘reflexive’ item, *se*. Furthermore, it is not clear how an analysis along these lines can account for non-reflexive uses of *se*, such as the inchoative or the impersonal passive. In other words, how do we get rid of the specification [+reflexive] in cases in which there is no antecedent?

The opposite problem is found if we assume that *se* is not reflexive. Among others, Reinhart and Reuland (1993) have argued that the Romance *se* does not include this feature as part of its specification. However, this is mainly a stipulation on their part. Furthermore, it is not clear how the distinction between *se* and the *l*-clitics can be accounted for. Nevertheless, we will adopt their proposal. Following Grimshaw (1997) we will argue that *se* is the ‘clitic with no properties’, that is, it lacks specification not only for person, gender and number but also for ‘reflexivity’. Adopting this position, we will attempt to account for the difference in interpretation between the *l*-clitics and *se* by making the ‘reflexive’ interpretation flow directly from the contrast with the other pronominals. In the next section we will tentatively explore a possible explanation to how the ‘reflexive’ interpretations of *se* can be accounted for without a ‘reflexive’ specification.

2.1. Hypothesis: reflexive interpretation without reflexive specification

Recall that the first and second persons of the paradigm that includes *se* cannot include the feature [reflexive] given that they can appear with both the anaphoric and the non-anaphoric reading, as (9) and (10) show. In (9a) and (9b) we see the non-anaphoric use of *me/te*, that is, the clitics do not refer back to the subject, rather they must find an antecedent in the discourse context. In (10a-d) we see these same forms with an anaphoric meaning, that is, the subject of the sentence functions as their antecedent. In other words, when the first or second person features coincide with those of the subject a reflexive reading obtains without any reflexive specification.

- (9) a. Juan **me/te** afeitado. b. Jean **me/te** rase. (non-reflexive)
 John me/you shaves
 ‘Juan shaves me/you.’ John me/you shaves
 ‘Juan shaves me/you.’
- (10) a. Yo **me** afeito. b. Je **me** rase. (reflexive)
 I me shave
 ‘I shave myself.’ I me shave
 ‘I shave myself.’
- c. Tú **te** afeitas. d. Tu **te** rases. (reflexive)
 you you shave
 ‘You shave yourself.’ you you shave
 ‘You shave yourself.’

Given that the reflexive specification is not necessary in the first and second persons, we can now extend this ‘no reflexive specification’ to *se* in order to account for the ‘reflexive’ reading.

- (11) a. Juan_i **se_i** afeitado. b. Jean_i **se_i** rase.
 ‘John shaves himself.’ ‘John shave himself.’
- (12) a. Juan_i **lo*_i** afeitado. b. Jean_i **le*_i** rase.
 ‘John shaves him.’ ‘John shave him.’

In (11) the third person subject *Juan/Jean* is compatible with the underspecified *se* and a reflexive reading is possible. In (12) the subject *Juan/Jean* and *le/lo* are somehow incompatible.

To make the parallel between *se* and the *l*-clitics work we need to distinguish between them by some means other than a feature [reflexive]. We must also exclude cases like (13), where *se* does not have a compatible antecedent.

- (13) a. *Yo_i **se_i** afeito. b. *Je_i **se_i** rase.
 *Tu_i **se_i** afeitas. *Tu_i **se_i** rases.

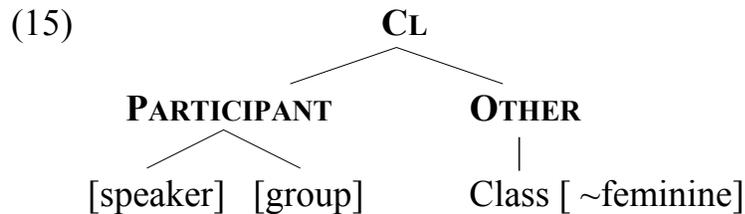
The correct interpretation of the clitic seems to flow from the following requirements:

- (14) a. *l*-clitics must target an antecedent which is not in a subject position.
 b. *se* must look for a compatible antecedent in subject position.

In order to understand how these requirements can be interpreted, we will briefly set out some ideas regarding the feature geometry of the different clitics.

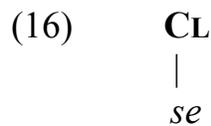
2.2 Proposed feature geometry

Following Bonet (Bonet 1991; Bonet 1995), Harley (Harley 1994; Harley and Ritter 1998, 2002), Béjar (Béjar 1999, 2000), among others, we assume the following Feature Geometry² for the Romance clitics.



Under this feature geometric account, the ‘third person’ *se* is the least-specified clitic, while 1st and 2nd person forms are specified **PARTICIPANT** and ‘true’ 3rd persons have the node **OTHER**.

How can this feature geometry allow us to explain the interpretation of the different Romance clitics? As we have suggested, the clitic *se* is underspecified, as shown in (16). It needs to find a reference, since its featural specification is so thin. In order to understand why it can only look to a subject for its reference, we are further going to assume that *se* is constrained by its semantic content to look for its antecedent within the immediate discourse. In some sense, it is ‘closer’ to the subject than the *l*-clitics, which are outside the domain of the immediate discourse. However, 1st and 2nd person subjects are incompatible with *se* because their features are too specific.

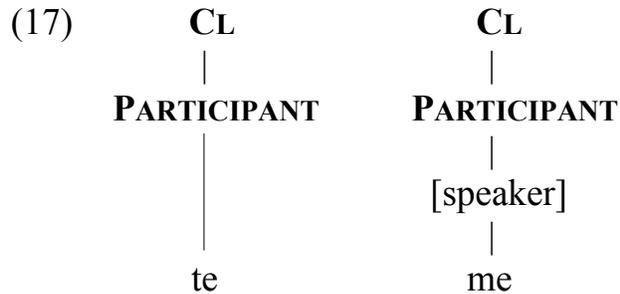


The 1st and 2nd person clitics, *me/te* (17) do not need to look for an antecedent because they have sufficient inherent featural specification. When their features

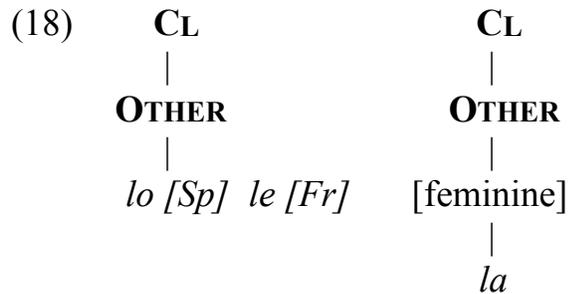
² Note on the interpretation of such a geometry: the terminal nodes in [brackets] are monovalent privative features; the nodes in **BOLD** are organisational Major Class nodes. Harley and Ritter's (1998:1) claims about this type of geometry are also applicable here, specifically:

- i. Cross-linguistic variation and paradigm-internal gaps and syncretisms are constrained by the hierarchical organization of features in the universal geometry.
- ii. The interpretation of sub-trees of the geometry may be relativized so that language-specific interpretation of a given feature will depend in part upon the contrasts available within the feature system of that language (Harley and Ritter (1998:1).

coincide with those of the subject, the result is a ‘reflexive’ reading. When they do not, they are interpreted as non-reflexive.



The **OTHER** node in (18) is only compatible with an antecedent that is not the subject of the clause. The *l*-clitics may have gender, case and (transparent) number inflection.



To summarize, we have suggested how it is possible to account for the ‘reflexive’ interpretation of *se* while maintaining that it is not specified as [reflexive]. The clitic *se* differs from the *l*-clitics in that it must look for an antecedent, and that the only antecedent available in the clause is the subject. In this respect it is in complementary distribution with the *l*-clitics, which must look for an antecedent which is not the subject.

The lack of feature specification of *se* helps to explain why it may appear in the great variety of constructions that we described in the first section of this paper. If *se* were [+reflexive] it would be difficult to explain how it may appear in inchoatives (4), middles (5) and impersonals. Recall that the inchoative and middle constructions are characterized by the absence of an agent and, in fact, it has been suggested that *se* is the realization of the suppressed external argument (Burzio 1986; Cinque 1988). Although, as we shall show below, it is probable that the role of the clitic in these constructions may be related to aspect, what is important to note is that in both these construction a theme or patient has moved to subject position. Because *se* is unspecified, it is not incompatible with these derived subjects.

The case of the impersonal passive is slightly more complex because this construction differs from the inchoatives in that the agent has not been suppressed, although in most dialects it cannot be overtly expressed either. However, there is a large body of evidence that shows that the covert agent has the feature [+human] (see Otero 1986; Mendikoetxea Pelayo 1992). The verb does not agree with the agent, but rather with the theme/object. Recent proposals claim that *se* is a multifunctional clitic that can appear as the head of different functional projections (Mendikoetxea Pelayo 1992; Bruhn de Garavito 2000). In the case of the impersonals, which are basically ergative constructions, *se* is associated with AgrO. The theme NP is therefore a subject although it retains many object-like properties. If this is correct, we would expect that only a minimally specified element could be multifunctional, filling different functions in the different constructions. Unlike other clitic pronouns, which are specified in order to refer in a given way, *se* has no fixed reference and therefore can behave in a chameleon-like manner.

Further evidence for the underspecified nature of *se* comes from Bonet's (1991) typology of reflexives, which shows that 'invariant' reflexives, i.e. those which do not have a specific form for each person/number (such as *se*), seem to begin in 'default' or 'elsewhere forms', that is, third persons and plurals, and spread to other more specific forms when contrasts are lost. This is illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2
Typology of invariant (IN) vs. specific (SP) 'reflexive forms (Bonet 1991: 28)

	Russian	Papago	Walpbiri	Standard Catalan	Piedmontese	?	Valencian
1 p.sg	IN	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP
1 p.pl	IN	SP	IN	SP	IN	SP	IN
2 p.sg	IN	IN	IN	SP	SP	SP	SP
2 p.pl	IN	IN	IN	SP	SP	IN	IN
3 p.sg	IN	IN	IN	IN	IN	IN	IN
3 p.pl	IN	IN	IN	IN	IN	IN	IN

Bonet notes (1991: 27) that "the sixth column represents a logical possibility, but I have not yet been able to find a language with those characteristics." It turns out that Murcial Spanish presents exactly the configuration in the sixth column, with the standard (peninsular) Spanish *os* being replaced by *se*:

- (19) Se laváis la ropa.
se wash-2pl the clothes 'You wash your clothes.'

The typology in Table 2 can be seen as an example of 'the emergence of the unmarked' effect, suggesting that clitics like *se* are the default or unmarked forms

in terms of their featural contrasts. Such a relationship is difficult to represent in traditional binary analyses, but flows naturally from a hierarchical representation.

For the final part of this paper, we will offer a brief discussion of how the constructions with *se* that have an aspectual meaning can be understood under the view presented here.

3. Aspectual readings with *se*

While *se* is maximally underspecified from a morphosyntactic point of view, it is not a clitic ‘without content’. We can assume following Roberge and Bibis (to appear) that a clitic is the association of morphosyntactic, semantic and phonological properties. Given that *se* has the bare minimum of morphosyntactic specification (i.e. it is specified just as **CL**, in contrast to all other clitics, which are more specific), it might appear that its semantic properties are also minimal. However, it seems that many of the constructions in which *se* is found are characterized by certain aspectual properties. For this reason, we would like to suggest that *se* introduces or picks out a ‘point in time’ (usually an end-point) in the event denoted by a verb (Labelle 1990; Nishida 1994; Bruhn de Garavito 2000)³.

Let us look first at transitive verbs, the clearest illustration of *se* as an aspectual marker (see Nishida, 1994).

(20) Juan comió (la) manzana, Felipe comió (el) chocolate.
‘Juan ate the apple, Felipe ate the chocolate.’

(21) Juan se comió *(la) manzana.
Juan *se* ate the apple ‘Juan ate the apple all up.’

In (20) we have a transitive verb. Because the verb carries the morphology of the simple past it is generally interpreted as a complete action. However, the fact that it is possible to drop the determiner shows that this is not the only interpretation. Without the determiner, it simply indicates that John ate some apple, not necessarily that he finished it. In contrast with *se*, (21) does not allow the omission of the determiner and, as the translation shows, it is necessarily interpreted as a completed action.

³ In this section we will concentrate on Spanish, which provides clearer evidence for the aspectual properties of *se*.

Consider next the intransitive verbs. As the contrast between (22) and (23) shows, *se* is also used to mark aspect in the intransitive class of unergatives, when the action denoted by the verb is measured out to its final point.

(22) Juan (**se*) caminó.
John *se* walked
'John walked.'

(23) Juan *(*se*) caminó la ciudad.
Juan *se* walked the city
'Juan walked from one end of the city to the other.'

Sentence (24) shows that the sentence with *se* is ungrammatical if the measuring out is somehow interrupted.

(24) *Lo atropellaron cuando *se* caminaba una milla.
'He was run over when he was walking a mile.'

The clitic *se* denotes aspect in transitives and unergatives. What about the so-called unaccusative constructions? It is well known that verbs that alternate between transitive and unaccusative uses are often accompanied by an obligatory *se* when they appear in the intransitive form. As we saw above, it has been suggested that *se* is often obligatory in these cases because it is the realization of the suppressed agent (Burzio 1986; Cinque 1988). However, it is well known that inchoatives are almost always change of state verbs (Levin and Rappaport-Hovav 1995) so it is difficult to tell whether *se* is related to the lack of agent or to the aspectual properties of these verbs. Given that *se* marks aspect in transitive and unergative verbs, it seems natural to assume that it also marks aspect when it appears in unaccusative constructions. In fact, it is possible to find a few examples that show that, indeed, there are unaccusative verbs that appear without *se*, but the *se* is obligatory if the action necessarily reaches an end point. Consider the sentences in (25) and (26). Sentence (25), without *se*, denotes an action that may continue. However, (26), with *se*, can only be interpreted as completed.

(25) El agua hirvió.
'The water boiled (but may continue boiling).'

(26) El agua *se* hirvió.
the water *se* boiled
'The water boiled down.'

There is some indication that *se* contributes some aspectual properties to regular reflexive verbs, although the presence of aspectual morphology often obscures it. Sentence (27) cannot mean that John shaves half his face, it is usually interpreted as meaning that the action is taken to its logical conclusion.

- (27) Juan *se* afeita todas las mañanas.
 ‘John shaves every morning.’

Finally, the same aspectual properties can be found in the inherent reflexives (28). Although we do not deny that the presence of *se* with these verbs is probably a lexical property⁴, the fact is that most of them denote accomplishments: to repent, to dare, to fall, etc. which seem inherently ‘completed’.

- (28) Laura *(*se*) arrepintió.
 ‘Laura repented.’

In short, we propose that *se* creates an imbalance in which the last time point of the event must be interpreted as completed. If the verb has no object, an object is added and measured (intransitives), if it has an object, *se* forces an interpretation which focuses on the end point (transitives and inchoatives).

4. Summary

In this paper we have suggested that *se* is unspecified, not only for person, number and gender, but also for ‘reflexivity’. Because of this lack of features, it must look for an antecedent within a certain domain, and the only available antecedent within that domain is the subject. In this respect it contrasts with *l*-clitics, which look for an antecedent outside the immediate discourse. In this way, the clitic *se* will be interpreted as reflexive, in spite of not having reflexivity specified as a feature.

Furthermore, because of the lack of specification, *se* is available to appear in many types of constructions, across languages and across dialects, without its presence leading to a clash of features.

Finally, although *se* is underspecified morphosyntactically, it does seem to have semantic content. Its presence often seems to contribute a perfective reading to the sentences in which it appears, although this contribution may be often

⁴ Compare, for example, the Spanish verbs *atreverse* and *osar*, both of which translate as ‘to dare’. The first of these is obligatorily reflexive, the other is ungrammatical if used reflexively.

obscured by other factors, such as the type of verb and the aspectual morphology on the verb.

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