

Se incompatible predicates in Spanish: a RRG explanation

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1. Introduction

In Spanish, there are some verbal predicates that apparently are incompatible with the morpheme *se*, as we can see in (1).

- (1) a. *Se llueve
REFL rain.3sg
do' (rain')
- b. *Se murió
REFL die.PAST.3sg
BECOME **dead'** (Ø)
- c. *Se hay nubes en el cielo
REFL there-is.3sg clouds in the sky
be-in' (cielo, nubes)
- d. *Se gusta el cine
REFL like.3sg the movies
like' (Ø, cine)

These are very different verbs. We have activities, as in (1a), states (1c and 1d), and accomplishments, as in (1b); some selects only one argument (1b), some two (1c and 1d), and one of them doesn't even select an argument at all (1a). If we look at these data, we can ask ourselves: What do these predicates have in common, and why are they incompatible with *se*? or, in other words, what is *se*? and why is this particle incompatible with those predicates?

I suggest that these data can be explained in a simple way within the framework of RRG, based on the properties of the Spanish morpheme *se*.

2. The nature of Spanish *se*

In González Vergara (2006, 2009), I propose that Spanish *se* is the morphological manifestation of a lexical phenomenon that modifies the logical structure of the sentence, diminishing the actor's importance and privileging the undergoer when it is present. In other words, this phenomenon intervenes in the logical structure with the purpose of not expressing syntactically the natural argument

hierarchy. This proposal is strongly based on the work of Centineo (1995), Van Valin and LaPolla (1997) and Bentley (2004).

According to this idea, I proposed a set of lexical rules for predicates of all types of aktionsart, as can be seen in (2).

- (2) Given any kind of logical structure, unspecify the argument x of the predicate.
- a. States: **pred'** (x, y) \leftrightarrow **pred'** (\emptyset , y)
 - b. Activities: **do'** (x, [**pred'** (x, (y))]) \leftrightarrow **do'** (\emptyset , [**pred'** (\emptyset , (y))])
 - c. Active accomplishments:
 - c'. **do'** (x, [pred1' (x, y)]) & INGR pred2' (y) \leftrightarrow **do'** (\emptyset , [pred1' (\emptyset , y)]) & INGR pred2' (y)
 - c''. **do'** (x, [**pred'** (x)]) & INGR be-LOC' (y, x) \leftrightarrow **do'** (\emptyset , [**pred'** (\emptyset)]) & INGR be-LOC' (y, \emptyset)
 - d. Accomplishments and achievements: BECOME/INGR **pred'** (x, y) \leftrightarrow BECOME/INGR **pred'** (\emptyset , y)
 - e. Semelfactives:
 - e'. SEML **pred'** (x, y) \leftrightarrow SEML **pred'** (\emptyset , y)
 - e''. SEML **do'** (x, [**pred'** (x, (y))]) \leftrightarrow SEML **do'** (\emptyset , [**pred'** (\emptyset , (y))])
 - f. Causatives:
 - f'. [**do'** (x, \emptyset)] CAUSE [(BECOME/INGR) **pred'** (y)] \leftrightarrow [**do'** (\emptyset , \emptyset)] CAUSE [(BECOME/INGR) **pred'** (y)]
 - f''. [**do'** (x, \emptyset)] CAUSE [**do'** (y, [**pred'** (y)))] \leftrightarrow [**do'** (\emptyset , \emptyset)] CAUSE [**do'** (y, [**pred'** (y)))]

I suggest that all the traditional Spanish non reflexive *se* sentences (passive reflexive sentences, impersonal reflexive sentences, interest *se* sentences, intrinsic *se* sentences and middle sentences) can be explained by the combination of these lexical rules with different morphological, semantic, syntactic and pragmatic properties, expressed in the form of constructions, that I named “non-PSA construction”, “undergoer PSA construction”, “middle construction” and “aspectual *se* construction”. In table 1 we can see the constructional schema for the Spanish middle sentence and in figure 1, how the properties in this schema influence the linking in a sentence as *la camisa se ensucia fácilmente*.

All these constructions, nevertheless, are based on the lexical phenomenon already described.

3. Some apparent exceptions

Let's return to our initial set of verbs. Apparently, some of them are compatible with the morpheme *se*, as we can see in (3):

- (3) a. El techo se llovió
the roof REFL rain.PAST.3sg
The roof was rained
- b. Pedro se murió
Pedro REFL die.PAST.3sg
Pedro died
- c. María se gusta
María REFL.like.PRES.3sg
María likes herself

Actually, these verbs are in fact compatible with *se*, but only when the sentence presents a privileged syntactic argument. (2a and 2b) belongs to the *undergoer PSA construction* and (2c) is a reflexive sentence. Nevertheless, these predicates cannot be expressed with *se* in the *non-PSA construction*; in other, words, they can only show *se* when their meaning is related to a PSA argument.

We can now refine our initial question, that can be reformulated as follows: Why do verbs as those listed in (1) and, in a more complete set, in (4) are not compatible with *se* in the non-PSA construction?

- (4) a. llover (to rain), nevar (to snow), garúar (to dizzle), temblar (to tremble)
- b. morir (to die), aparecer (to appear), crecer (to grow), envejecer (to get old), adelgazar (to slim)
- c. hay (there is)
- d. alcanzar (to have enough), apenar (to cause sorrow), convenir (to suit), costar (to take effort), doler (to feel hurt), extrañar (to feel the lack), faltar (to lack), gustar (to like), importar (to matter), interesar (to be interested), molestar (to be bothered), preocupar (to be worried), quedar (to have left), sobrar (to spare).
- e. dar pena/miedo/gusto (feel pity/fear/delight)

4. The proposal

If *se* is actually the morphological expression of a lexical phenomenon that privileges the undergoer argument, the incompatibility of the predicates in (3) can be explained easily. What all of them have in common is that their logical structures cannot privilege an undergoer argument, either because the undergoer is already the privileged argument or because their logical structures don't have arguments in the first place.

I propose four types of *se* incompatible verbs: *haber* type, *llover* type, *morir* type, and *gustar* type. Let's inspect in detail every kind of predicates.

4.1. The *llover* type

Verbs as *llover* (to rain), *nevar* (to snow) and *temblar* (to shake (the earth)), usually known as *weather verbs*, are activities that lack any kind of arguments in their logical structures, as can be seen in (5).

- (5) Ayer llovió / nevó / tembló
yesterday rain.PAST / snow.PAST / shake.PAST
yesterday' (do' (rain'/snow'/shake'))

As a consequence of its lack of arguments, these verbs don't have a privileged syntactic argument and the verb takes the defective form (third person singular). Therefore, there is not any argument that can take the undergoer macrorole and if there is not an undergoer argument, it cannot be privileged. Thus, these verbs are incompatible with *se*.

It has to be noted again that apparent exceptions as the ones in (6) are not really weather verbs, but predicates that have at least one semantic argument and a PSA, as can be noted by the agreement.

- (6) a. Las carpas se llovieron
the tents REFL rain.PAST.3pl
The tents were soaked in rain
b. Los patios se nevaron
the backyards REFL snow.PAST.3pl
The backyards got covered in snow

In (7a) we can see an interesting case. At first, it seems to be a case of "temblar" (to shake) that presents *se*, but does not show any argument. However, if we compare this sentence with (7b) we can see that the verb in (7a) is not a weather verb, but one derived from a verb with PSA, as it can be

inferred from the agreement. So, *se* appears here as a consequence of the application of the lexical rule in (2b).

- (7) a. Antiguamente, se temblaba de miedo con las películas de terror
Formerly, REFL tremble.PAST of fear with the films of horror
Formerly, one used to tremble out of fear with horror films
- b. Antiguamente, nosotros temblábamos de miedo con las películas de terror
Formerly, we tremble.PAST.1pl of fear with the films oh horror

4.2. The *morir* type

Verbs as *morir* (to die), *aparecer* (to appear), *crecer* (to grow), *envejecer* (to get old), or *adelgazar* (to slim) are all accomplishments, achievements or processes based on states logical structures that have only one argument.

Since the base predicate is a state, the only arguments in these verbs take the undergoer macrorrole, following the Default Macrorole Assignment Principles (Van Valin & LaPolla, 1997). Therefore, The argument selected as PSA is the undergoer. In this kind of verbs, thus, the lexical phenomenon of *se* cannot occur because the undergoer is already the privileged argument, as can be seen in (8).

- (8) a. *Se murió
BECOME **dead**' (∅)
- b. *Se creció
PROC **grown**' (∅)
- c. *Se envejeció
PROC **old**' (∅)
- d. *Se adelgazó
PROC **thin**' (∅)

Again, verbs of the type we can see in (9) can show *se*, but are not part of the *non-PSA construction*. They do have a PSA, as we can see by the agreement. These verbs have idiosyncratic meanings also related to the lexical phenomenon, as it is proposed in González Vergara (2006).

- (9) a. Tus mascotas se murieron
your pets REFL die.PAST.3pl
Your pets died

- b. El equipo se creció
The team REFL grow.PAST.3sg
The team grew stronger
- c. La actriz se envejeció
The actress REFL get-old.PAST.3sg
The actress got old
- d. El niño se adelgazó
The boy REFL slim.PAST.3sg
The boy slimmed

4.3. The *haber* type

Following the description of Fernández Soriano & Táboas (1999), *haber* is a state predicate that takes two arguments, one of them a locative. The locative argument, however, never appears as a central direct argument, but in a prepositional phrase. The second argument of this state predicate is always selected as PSA. Therefore, we can propose that, in terms of macroroles, this verb behaves as a state with only one argument and, thus, we stipulate this in the logical structure, as can be seen in (10).

- (10) Hay nubes en el cielo
be.PRES.3sg clouds in the sky
There are clouds in the sky
be-in' (sky, nubes) [MR1]

Since the “haber” logical structure is specified as [MR1] and it is a state, the argument takes the undergoer macrorole and it is selected as PSA. Once again, we can see that this logical structure is incompatible with *se* because the undergoer is already privileged.

4.4. The *gustar* type

Verbs like *gustar*, *faltar*, *importar* or *sobrar* have a strange syntactic behavior. *Gustar*, for instance, is semantically similar to the English verb *to like*, but their syntactic uses are different, as we can see in (11).

- (11) a. I like apples
b. (A mí) me gustan las manzanas
(to me) 1sgDAT like.PRES.3pl apples

Both sentences have apparently the same logical structure: **like'** (I, apples). However, in English, the first argument of the LS takes the actor macrorole, and the second argument the undergoer, and the actor is selected as PSA. In Spanish, on the other hand, we can see that the second argument of the logical structure is the one selected as PSA of the sentence.

I suggest that the difference between *to like* and *gustar* is similar to the difference between the English verbs *to own* and *to belong*, as it is proposed in Van Valin & LaPolla (1997). Therefore, I put forward that the logical structures of verbs of the Spanish *gustar* type take only one macrorrole [MR1]. Since they are states, the macrorrole assigned to the argument is the undergoer and this is the argument selected as PSA. The first argument, on the other hand, does not take a macrorrole and it is realized as a dative clitic and as an optional PP, as we can see in figure 2.

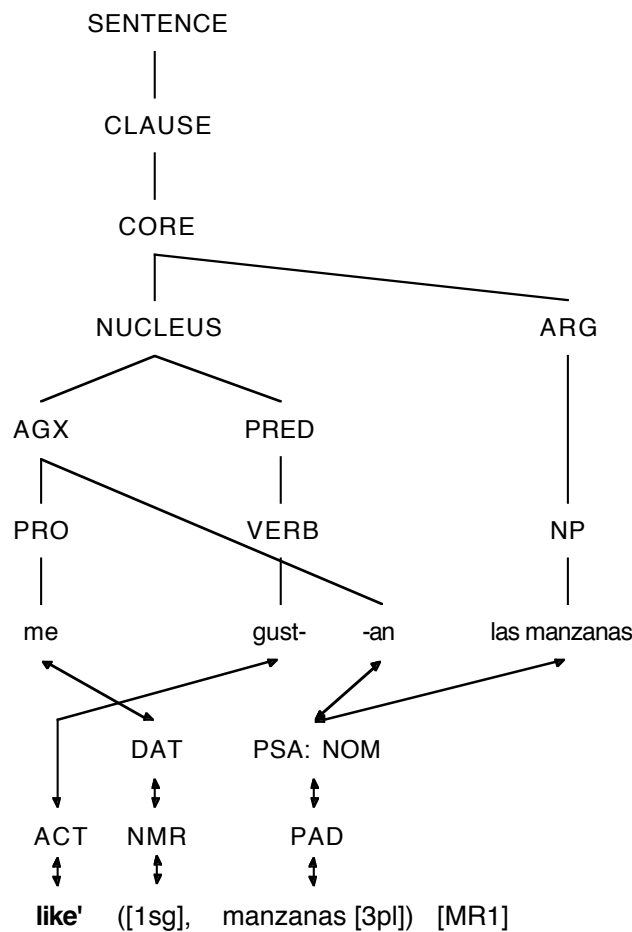


Figure 2. Linking in “*me gustan las manzanas*” (*gustar* type)

Therefore, as we can see, verbs like *gustar*, *faltar*, *importar* or *sobrar* are all states, that, in spite of having two semantic arguments, are M-intransitive. Since they are states, the macrorrole

assigned is the undergoer, and the undergoer argument is selected as PSA. Thus, in this kind of sentences the undergoer is already the privileged argument again and, as a consequence, they are incompatible with the lexical phenomenon of *se*.

A very similar case happens with complex verbs as *dar pena/miedo/gusto* (to feel sorrow/fear/delight). Its syntactic behavior is the same of the *gustar* type of verbs, as we can see in (12).

- (12) A mí me da miedo tu opinión
to me 1sgDAT give-fear your opinion
I am afraid of your opinion
feel.afraid' (1sg, tu opinión) [MR1]

5. Summary

As we have seen, all the kinds of verbs that are incompatible with *se* in the *non-PSA construction* have one thing in common: they cannot undergo a lexical phenomenon that seeks to privilege the undergoer, either because they don't have macrorole arguments (*haber* type) or because their undergoer argument is already privileged (*morir*, *haber* and *gustar* type). Therefore, they are incompatible with *se*.

These data support the proposal that Spanish *se* is the morphological manifestation of a lexical phenomenon that modifies the logical structure of the sentence, diminishing the actor's importance and privileging the undergoer when it is present (González Vergara 2006, 2009).

6. A real exception

In spite of this, verbs of the *morir* type are expressed sometimes with *se* in a *non-PSA construction*, as we can see in (13).

- (13) Se muere/moría bien cuando se muere/moría por un ideal
REFL die.PRES/IMPF well when REFL die.PRES/IMPF for an ideal
One dies/used to die well when one dies/used to die for an ideal

This is not a very frequent kind of sentence, but it is grammatical. However, a sentence like (14) seems to be impossible:

- (14) *Se murió en la guerra
REFL die.PAST in the war
One died in the war

Thus, it appears that the verb *morir* needs to have an imperfect aspect operator to appear with *se*. We also have to notice that the meaning of (13) is very similar to an attributive sentence like *la muerte puede ser buena cuando es por un ideal* (dying can be good when it happens for an ideal). These are the characteristic properties of the Spanish middle construction (Feliú, 2008; González Vergara, 2006, 2009).

Therefore, we can put forward that, under certain conditions, proper of the Spanish middle construction (imperfect aspect and possible modality operators, and attributive meaning) verbs of the “morir” type are actually compatible with *se*.

7. References

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