

"Reflexive" verbs, "no-fault *se*" and other myths about the pronoun *se* in Spanish

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Aims of the present talk:

This presentation will discuss the many uses of *se* and will debunk two myths about Spanish grammar: that there exist as separate entities (1) "reflexive" verbs and (2) an "accidental/unplanned-occurrence/no-fault" *se*. Instead, we will see that these "constructions" are merely labels, useful perhaps, but ultimately misleading and in impediment to a fuller, richer and more holistic grasp of Spanish grammar.

0. Organization of talk:

1. Background

- Pronouns and Clitics
 - i. What's a pronoun? (Trick question.)
 - ii. What's a clitic? (A *what*?)
 - iii. What is the difference between a clitic and a "real" pronoun?
 - iv. How many kinds of indirect objects are there?
 - v. What does all this have to do with "reflexive" verbs and "no-fault *se*"?

2. Myths about Spanish grammar to be debunked today

- a. That there are "reflexive" verbs
- b. That there is a "no-fault" *se*
- c. (That we use *se lo (la, los, las)* "because you can't say "le lo (etc.)")

3. Other types/uses of *se* (If time.)

I. Pronouns vs. Clitics

A. What's a pronoun?

(1) A form that stands in for a noun is called a pronoun;

- "pronoun" = "pro" (in place of, standing in for) + "noun"
 - *Johan, he; Merideth, she; My parents David and Carolyn, they;* etc.
 - *Juan, él; Maribel, ella; mis tíos Ellen y Ladd, ellos,* etc.

Are there forms that stand in for *other* parts of speech? Yes.

- There are also:
 - pro-verbs (*I believe it, do you?*) (*do* = 'believe')
 - pro-adverbs/prepositional phrases (*I can't see anything on the hill / there; No se ve nada en el monte / allí.)* (*there* = 'on the hill'; *allí* = 'en el monte')
 - pro-adjectives (*¿Contenta? Sí lo es.*) (*lo* = 'content(ed)')

Thus, we can speak of "pro-forms" more generally.

- We can distinguish *clitics* from "strong" ("regular") pronouns.

B. What's a clitic? (From a Greek word that means "to hang from, depend on")(2) Clitics are unstressed or "weak" pronouns (*clíticos, pronombres átonos, "débiles"*)

- Clitics are **not** pronouns!

What does this *mean*?

- They don't behave grammatically like the other pronouns.

Table 1: The pronouns of Spanish

de sujeto	de preposición	
<i>yo</i>	<i>mí</i>	(But, <i>según yo; entre tú y yo; excepto tú</i>)
<i>tú</i>	<i>ti</i>	
<i>él, ella, Ud.</i>	<i>él, ella, Ud.</i>	
<i>nosotros/as</i>	<i>nosotros/as</i>	
<i>vosotros/as</i>	<i>vosotros/as</i>	
<i>ellos/as, Uds.</i>	<i>ellos/as, Uds.</i>	

Table 2: The clitics of Spanish

de sujeto (we'll come back to these)	de complemento		
	directo	indirecto	
<i>me</i>	<i>me</i>	<i>me</i>	
<i>te</i>	<i>te</i>	<i>te</i>	
<i>se</i>	<i>lo, (le), la</i>	<i>le</i>	(<u>se</u> espúreo, "falso")
<i>nos</i>	<i>nos</i>	<i>nos</i>	
<i>os</i>	<i>os</i>	<i>os</i>	
<i>se</i>	<i>los, (les), las</i>	<i>les</i>	(<u>se</u> espúreo, "falso")

C. Differences between clitics and pronouns

(3) Tests of "cliticity/cliticness":

- a. Clitics can't be **separated** from the verb; pronouns can:

*¿Quién habla ruso? — Yo.**¿A quién viste? — *Lo. (A él.)* (The * indicates that this is an ungrammatical form.)*¿A quién mandaste la carta? — *Le. (A ella.)*(Compare this with French too: *Moi aussi (*Je.)* vs. *Yo también.*)

- b. Pronouns can be **coordinated**; clitics can't:

*Él y ella salieron.** *Lo y la conozco.* (Cf. *I know him and her;* (strong) pronouns in English.)* *Te y le mandé la carta.* (Cf. *I sent it to you and him.*)

- c. Pronouns may appear in any **order** with respect to one another; clitics have a set order:

El y ella / Ella y él trabajan.

*Se lo doy. *Lo se doy.*

Rule: *se* II I III (Perlmutter 1971:45, Surface-Structure Constraint, SSC)

Te lo doy. (II III)

No te me vayas. (II I)

No te me los comas. (II I III)

Que no se me los coma. (*se* I III)

Order of direct and indirect objects: Cl_{IO} Cl_{DO} Verb DO IO

- d. **Negation:** Clitics occur after it (can't be separated from verb)

Ella no vio al hombre.

(*Ella*) *No lo* vio.

- (4) **Direct object clitics:** (*me, te, lo, la, nos, os, los, las*) replace the direct object

Veo a María → *La* veo. (**La veo a María.*)

- (5) **Indirect object clitics:** (*me, te, le (se), nos, os, les (se)*) normally replace indirect object

¿Escribiste a María? — *Sí, le escribí una carta ayer.*

Se la escribí.

- *se* here is spurious, "false";
 - that is, it's not a "real" *se*
 - This *se* and *le* are actually cognates: they come from the same word in Latin:

History:

Latin *ille* (from ILLE ILLO 'to him it')

> želo (spelled *gelo*; [ž] is the sound in the middle of *azure*; or of *ll* in *calle* for some Argentines)

> šelo ([š] is the first sound of *shoe*; or of *ll* in *calle* for some Argentines)

> *selo*

First myth debunked! (2.c. from section 0 above.)

D. How many types/kinds/uses of an indirect object are there?

- (6) There are actually several types of indirect object:

- a. Use of the clitic is optional when IO is RECIPIENT (not necessary to use it since the verb, a verb of transfer, already indicates function of IO)

Yo (le) envié una carta a María.

(Some other verbs of transfer: *dar, entregar, regalar, ofrecer, prestar, enviar, recomendar, enseñar, (d)escribir, etc.*)

- The IO clitic is **obligatory** in all other cases:

- b. the IO can be POSSESSOR:

Kathy's husband kissed her hand. *Su marido le besó la mano a Kathy.*

(part of body; inseparable; "inalienable possession")

(*Me lavé los dientes* is really the same kind of thing: "reflexive" because IO = subject)

Les corté el pelo a los niños.

- c. the IO can be BENEFACTIVE:

I translated the sentence for Karen.

Yo le traduje la oración a Karen.

... *Mi mamá me leyó una historia.*

... *Regina le puso los libros en la mesa al profe.*

- d. the IO can indicate SEPARATION:

I took the toy (away) from the child.

Yo le quité el juguete al niño.

Le escondiste los libros al profe.

- This can lead to multiply ambiguous sentences sometimes, depending on the interpretation of the semantic role or function of the IO:

(7) *Le vendí el libro a Pedro.*

to Pedro	RECEPTOR
for P	BENEFACTIVO
P's book	POSEEDOR
out from under P	SEPARACIÓN

- Finally, the IO can also indicate EXPERIENCE / PARTICIPATION:

Le es fácil hablar español.

Te es urgente estudiar los verbos.

Me fue bien.

Nos es difícil levantarnos a las seis.

Os va a ser imposible llegar a tiempo.

Les salió de maravilla.

- For these multiple possibilities, Bull (1965:258) prefers to use the term "**involved entity**" when talking about the IO (Whitley 137).

E. What does this all have to do with the myths of "reflexive" verbs and "no-fault *se*"?

i. More on subject clitics:

They always agree with the subject:

(8) *Yo me quejo* *Nosotros nos quejamos*

Tú te quejas *Vosotros os quejáis*

Él se queja *Ellos se quejan*

- Sole function: relate to/mark the subject.
- **Reflexive** = I do and I receive action of the verb
 - action leaves from and lands at same entity, so to speak

Actions in (a.) above are not reflexive!

- Instead, we may call verbs of this type PRONOMINAL verbs.
 - That is, the clitic pronouns are simply part of the verb.

(Other verbs of this type that are always like this: *atreverse a*, *arrepentirse de*, *abstenerse de*, *acordarse de*, *empeñarse en*, *cerciorarse de* (make certain), *darse cuenta de*, *jactarse de*, *vanagloriarse de*, *fugarse de*, *comportarse de*, *burlarse de*, *obstinarse en*, *empecinarse en* (insist upon), *dignarse a*, *preciarse de*.)

(9) Pronominal vs. nonpronominal verbs:

nonpronominal	pronominal (V ___se) (verb ends in <i>se</i>)
<i>sentir</i> (percepción externa)	<i>sentirse</i> (percepción interna— <i>me siento triste</i>)
<i>sentar</i> (a alguien; to seat)	<i>sentarse</i> (sit)
<i>parecer</i> (seem)	<i>parecerse</i> (to look like)
<i>sonar</i> (sound)	<i>sonarse</i> (blow your nose)
<i>llevar</i> (carry)	<i>llevarse</i> (to get along; to steal)
<i>ir</i> (go; in the direction)	<i>irse</i> (leave)

- meaning is different; really two different (though obviously related) verbs.
 - In a sense, SE creates a new verb.

(10) RECIPROCAL constructions ("Reciprocal **SE**" for Whitley)

Ellos se aman (*el uno al otro*) VERB = *amar* (= direct object; *a* = "personal" *a*)

- The subject gives action, also receives it, but from other source

FUNCTION of SE:

- relate back to the subject
- relate back to direct or indirect object
- really, serves as a **bridge** between subject and object, connecting them both

Ellos se escriben cartas el uno al otro. (a = preposition of indirect object)

Juan y Margarita se enamoraron uno del otro.

Las hermanas se compraban ropa la una para la otra.

Gore y Bush se lanzan insultos el uno contra el otro.

Etc.

- These are cases of reciprocals with indirect object;
 - **Note that preposition is determined by the verb**
 - That is, "el uno al otro" ≠ "reciprocal" per se; it's just one case. (Well, two, really: *a* of specified human direct object, and preposition *a* of indirect object.)
 - By the way, why do we have to say "(el/los) uno(s)...(el/los) otro(s), (la/s) una(s)...(la/s) otra(s)"? That is, why is there always agreement?
 - Because the clitic in the reciprocal construction refers to the subject as a unit, and whenever there's a mix of genders that form the subject, the "default" forms, the masculine, are used;
 - only when the subject is exclusively feminine do we use *la una a la otra, las unas de las otras, unas para otras*, etc.

ii. Back to "reflexive" verbs:

(11) REFLEXIVE CONSTRUCTION —NOT "verbo reflexivo".

("True reflexive **SE**" for Whitley)

(hacer para sí mismo, y recibe de sí mismo)

Juan se afeita (A SÍ MISMO)

Juan se escribe cartas (A SÍ MISMO)

AFEITARSE = verbo pronominal → to have it done

Juan se afeita en la peluquería.

El bebé se baña a sí mismo (bañar)

El bebé se baña en la pila (bañarse) = he gets a bath.

Myth 2 debunked! Two down, one more to go...

iii. Back to "no-fault se":

- **Is there really such a thing as SE** of "unplanned/accidental occurrence"? No.

In fact, traditional grammars written for native Spanish speakers don't make mention of such a construction.

Q: Why not?

A: Because it's really derivative of what we've just seen:

- i. use of a verb with **se** (pronominal, passive, etc.)
- ii. use of indirect object clitic of "involved entity" of some sort

Examples:

(12) **Se me va** el santo al cielo fácilmente **Se nos armó** un lío (un escándalo).
(I lose my train of thought easily.)

Se te olvidará la respuesta.

Se os escapaban los secretos.

Se le cayó el peine.

Que a Pepa **se le pierdan** las llaves (es raro).
etc.

- The subjects of the verbs here aren't performing a "reflexive" action;
- Rather, *se* indicates a particular meaning of the verb (in the case of pronominals) or gives us grammatical information about the participants (in the case of the passive);
- The IO clitic indicates that some entity is affected ("involved") in some way.

Myth 3 debunked!

F. Conclusions:

While we might talk about "reflexive" verbs and an "accidental/unplanned-occurrence/no-fault" *se*, these aren't really "constructions", but merely labels, perhaps useful, but ultimately misleading and in impediment to the fuller, richer and more holistic grasp of Spanish grammar presented here.

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- (Other) types of **SE**:
 1. **SE** espúreo
Se lo di. (se = le)
 2. **SE** impersonal ACTIVO (= "uno")
Se habla español "One speaks Spanish here." (ACTIVA)
Se vende libros.
 - siempre es ACTIVO
 - siempre es 3a SINGULAR
 - NO SE USA EN EL PRETÉRITO
 - Bloquea la impersonalidad
 - Ej.: *Tú cortas la carne, luego la echas al fuego, ...*
 - pero, *Cortaste la carne...* (ya no es impersonal)
 - (*Se bailó en la fiesta* = pasiva; = "There was dancing at the party." Véase abajo.
 3. **SE** PASIVO
 - a. *José publicó la novela.*
 - b. *La novela fue publicada. (ser+ p.p.)*
 - c. *La novela se publicó. (se marca que es pasiva)*
 - Concuenda: *Las novelas se publicaron.* ("The novels were published.")

Resumen: *Se publica las novelas.* (impersonal activo)
 Se publican las novelas. (pasivo)
 Se publicó las novelas. (impersonal pasivo; "There were novels published.")

4. **SE** impersonal PASIVO

Se publicó las novelas. (impersonal pasivo; "There were novels published.")

Se bailó. ("There was dancing.")

Se bailó en la fiesta.

- There is dancing. (impersonal pasivo)

- One dances. (impersonal activo)

Se puede usar el pretérito

No hay concordancia (siempre III sg.)

5. **SE** pronominal ("Lexical or inherent **SE**" for Whitley)

Juan se duchó, se bañó, se cortó el pelo en la peluquería.

- (For Whitley: "Lexical or inherent **SE**", "Meaning-changing and/or inchoative **SE**", "Intransitive or decausative **SE**", "Reflexive **SE** of emotional reaction", "Causative **SE**".)

6. **SE** recíproco

Ellos se aman el uno al otro. (la preposición varía según el verbo)

7. **SE** de construcción reflexiva

Juana se vistió a sí misma.

8. **SE** medio ("middle" *se*) (ni activo, ni pasivo)

El caviar se come con vino. ("Caviar is eaten/should be eaten with wine." Not *by anyone* in particular, so not passive)

El barro se modela fácilmente.

Es como una pasiva, pero es genérico; mezcla de activo y pasivo.

Típicamente requiere de un adverbio.

Ese libro se vende bien. ("That book sells well." But the book doesn't sell anything.)

That doesn't compute. The book sells/reads well. Etc.

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