

REVIEW OF *UNDERSTANDING AND TEACHING REFLEXIVE SENTENCES IN SPANISH* (ROUTLEDGE, 2022)

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The monograph *Understanding and Teaching reflexive sentences in Spanish*, by Luis H. González (2022) constitutes a proposal for an integral theory of se-constructions in Spanish to help L2 learners of Spanish understand the diversity of constructions. The core of the theory, which is strongly semantically oriented, proposes that se-structures always involve the substitution of the external argument –which is called 'verber' in the book–, not of the internal argument. As such, the proposal sets itself apart from the vast majority of theories about SE structures, and has non trivial similarities with the proposal in Oca (1914), which has been adapted in recent times by Ormazabal & Romero (2019, 2021). In what follows, I will first review the core assumptions of this proposal (§1), then I will move to how this proposal reassesses the types of se-constructions described in the usual grammars (§2); §3 presents some discussion about the core ideas in this theory, and §4 concludes with comments about other aspects of the book.

1. The core proposal

González' (2022) theory contains two main claims:

- (1) a. Se-structures invariably involve substitution of a verber by the reflexive.
b. In the absence of a verber, another argument of the verb (verbed or verbee) gets promoted to the subject position.

Let us start by clarifying what notion is interpreted as 'verber' in this terminology. The term 'verber' is presumably adopted in the monograph as a way to plainly present the broad notion of external causer or proto-agent (as proposed in Dowty 1991), as the entity that initiates the eventuality. It is a notion that, therefore, picks the argument structure of a predicate and not the syntactic functions that the argument participants can perform in the event. Verber contrasts with verbed, protopatients as entities undergoing a situation (proto-patients in Dowty 1991), and verbee, which stands for goals or receptors of a transfer event (cf. *grantee* as the person that gets a grant).

In this proposal, then, se-structures involve substitution of the verber by the reflexive pronoun.

- (2) Juan vive con poco dinero en Madrid.
Juan lives with little money in Madrid
- (3) Se vive con poco dinero en Madrid.
SE lives with little money in Madrid
'One lives with little money in Madrid'



The initial plausibility of the proposal is mainly based on three empirical facts: the existence of impersonal SE constructions, where the patient can be present even as a direct object –thus, SE cannot substitute it– (4), the formal parallelism between passive SE structures and impersonal SE structures, which sometimes produces ambiguities only resolvable by agreement (5) and the absence of a semantic equivalence between pairs of sentences like (6).

- (4) Se arrestó a los culpables.
SE arrested A the guilty.ones
'Someone arrested the guilty ones'
- (5) Se vende un piso.
SE sells an apartment
'An apartment is for sale' or 'Someone sells an apartment'
- (6) a. Blum Construction remodeló este edificio.
Blum Construction remodeled this building
b. *Blum Construction se remodeló.
Blum Construction SE remodeled
Intended: 'Building Construction remodeled something'

The case in (6) deserves more attention: González' (2022) point is that if *se* was literally introduced instead of the patient, (6b) should be interpretable as 'Blum Construction remodeled something'. One may answer that the reason that this interpretation is wrong is that the pronoun is reflexive and therefore must be coreferential to the only remaining overt argument in the sentence (by virtue of Principle A of the Binding theory, Chomsky 1981). However, there are two initial problems for this explanation: one is theoretical, in the sense that if one accepts that *se* replaces the agent, one does not need to add, in addition to replacement, a semantic condition on the interpretation, and the other is empirical: in (6b), the grammatical interpretation interprets the subject as a patient.

The second part of the proposal is quite standard in lexical theoretical studies: once the verber is substituted by SE, another argument can be promoted to the subject position. In the case in (6), that argument is the verbed (patient), but the verbee (goal) can also be promoted (7).

- (7) a. María^{verber} puso desodorante a María^{verbee}
María put deodorant on María
b. María^{verbee} se^{verber} puso desodorante.
María SE got deodorant
'María put deodorant on'

(7) illustrates a claim that, in contrast with the promotion of patients, is less standard: a prepositionally-introduced argument (the goal) can be promoted to subject in the presence of a patient (*deodorant*, in this example).

The proposal blocks automatically that *se*-substitution can be applied more than once to the same sentence: SE targets verbers (proto-agents), not subjects, so when another argument is promoted to subject, SE cannot apply again because that argument does not become a verber by virtue of being a subject.

2. The reduction of types of SE in this approach

The main merit of González' (2022) proposal is that the procedure allows a second language teacher to simplify the explanation of *se*-structures in a way that the learner can understand the main contribution of *se* with minimal additional information and, crucially, without having to differentiate between the types of SE, that in the literature go up to 15 uses (see Fábregas 2021 for an overview). In essence, this means –necessarily– that the distinction between these uses are matters of interpretation, and that the distinction between types of SE is spurious, a matter of tradition that has confused interpretative specificities of the construction with taxonomic categories.

In this account, reflexives and reciprocals are straightforwardly derived, with reciprocals being interpretations of reflexives:

- (8) Los novios se abrazaron.
the fiances SE hugged

An interesting consequence of this proposal is that a symmetric predicate like (9) is not really a reciprocal use, because the arguments are patients (someone else marries them). The sentence is actually an intransitivised version of a causative verb (*El cura los casó* 'The priest married them'), after substitution of the verber and promotion of the verbed arguments to subject.

- (9) Los novios se casaron.
the fiances SE married

Se-constructions involving impersonals are also straightforwardly derived: they just involve structures where the verber is substituted by the reflexive and no other argument is promoted. *Se*-passive structures minimally differ from them in that –at least for the purposes of agreement– a verbed element gets promoted after *se* substitutes the proto-agent.

- (10) a. Se atacó a los soldados.
SE attacked A the soldiers
b. Se venden casas.
SE sell houses

Closely related to the passive is the interpretation of the reflexive as an intransitiviser (anticausative *se*), which forms a pair with a *se*-less construction without *se*. In this theory, the formal similarity between the two types of *se*-structure follows from the idea that in both cases the verber is replaced by the reflexive.

- (11) La puerta se abrió.
the door SE opened
'The door got opened'

Causative SE also follows naturally from this account. In the so-called causative construal, one interprets that the subject is not the entity that performs the event. That is, in this theory, because the proto-agent is substituted by the reflexive. From the perspective of this theory, (12) can be interpreted as a causative or a reflexive simply because in both cases the reflexive replaces the verber, and in both cases María is a verbee that receives the effect of the event.

- (11) María se cortó el pelo.
 María SE cut her hair
 'María got a haircut' (causative interpretation)
 'María cut her own hair' (reflexive interpretation)

The so-called unplanned or accidental use of SE (as a dative involuntary participant in the event) also follows naturally from this explanation, because the real agent has been replaced by the reflexive and neither the indirect object nor the overt subject can be interpreted as an agent. Thus, this use should not be taken, either, to be a distinct *se*-construction, contrary to what textbooks of Spanish as a second language do.

- (12) Se me rompieron las gafas.
 SE me broke the glasses
 'My glasses broke (accidentally)'

Textbooks also frequently include a reflexive SE involving emotional reaction, like in (13):

- (13) Se aburrieron de la tele.
 SE got.bored of the TV
 'They got bored from watching TV'

In this proposal, this is just another use of intransitivising SE that happens to involve verbs where a non-animate subject affects a human participant, and this is not a good enough reason to put the sentences in another category.

Inherent reflexive verbs like *arrepentirse* 'to repent', which must mandatorily be inflected with the reflexive, are treated simply as verbs whose meaning forces the verber argument to be substituted by *se* and the subject to be interpreted as a verbed.

- (14) Juan se suicidó.
 Juan SE committed-suicide
 'Juan committed suicide'

The class of predicates that triggers a richer interpretation of the substitution by *se* is the so-called aspectual *se* (called 'meaning-changing or inchoative' in this monograph). The challenge for the proposal is that apparently this SE does not remove the verber.

- (15) Ella se bebió el café.
 she SE drank the coffee
 'She drank up the coffee'

Gonzalez' (2022) strategy is to treat the subject here as a verbee (goal argument). Relating the presence of SE with a dative argument is the strategy also used by Rigau (1994) and MacDonald (2017): as in a sentence like (16a), (15) involves verber substitution followed by promotion to subject of a beneficiary –therefore, there is no need to appeal to emphasis to explain this type of *se*, contra most textbooks of Spanish–.

- (16) a. María^{verbee} se puso el desodorante.
 María SE put the deodorant
 b. María^{verbee} se tomó un café.
 María SE took a coffee

What makes this construction special is that the promotion is associated with an aspectual interpretation as an accomplishment, but again this does not change the core idea, which is that SE marks that the verb lacks a verber argument.

Finally, there are several cases of lexical SE which, from a foreign language learner's perspective, build 'a different verb' that requires a different translation, such as *ir* 'go' vs. *irse* 'leave, go away', and here the reflexive pronoun simply marks that the only argument that the verb has is a verbed one. This explains the contrast in (17), where the se-less structure is not grammatical.

- (17) a. María se fue.
 María SE went.
 'María left'
 b. #María fue.
 María went
 Intended: 'María went somewhere'

3. Discussion

The core observation in this monograph is that *se* always has the same function: to mark that the verber is excluded from the structure of the predicate. The distinction between the types of *se* that multiply in textbooks for second language students is spurious and refers to different interpretations that, depending on the verb, can occur when one suppresses the verber: a distinction between purely reflexive structures and those that lack coreference does not take us very far, as the function of *se* is the same in all these cases and has nothing to do with reflexivity.

As an explanation aimed at simplifying the learner's burden, I find it difficult to imagine a different approach that leads to such an extensive empirical coverage without losing much grammatical information. Of course, the source of the interpretative differences –such as the aspectual information, the source of the lexical meaning differences or the conditions under which the verbee is promoted over the verbed– remains to be discussed, but the author is perfectly conscious of this and mentions it explicitly (2022: §4.1.):

There might be, of course, a few details to work out, but the learning burden on students of Spanish (second language learners and even native speakers) can be reduced by at least 80%.

Along the same lines, the author provides a set of cases (chapter 4, example 14) which have not been discussed in the monograph and therefore whose meaning difference is left for further research (or researchers). Interestingly, these cases refer almost always to situations where the reflexive combines with verbs that already have non-agentive subjects, which is, of course, the biggest challenge to a theory where *se* replaces the verber. I take this fact to mean, perhaps, that once a verb does not have an agent as a subject, the presence of *se* simply marks explicitly information that is already contained implicitly in the verbal predicate, and this is precisely the

type of situation where we expect *se* to be 'optional' and therefore to trigger different interpretations at a level that is not argument structure.

- (18) a. Todos los invitados (*se*) entraron cuando empezó a llover.
 all the guests SE came.in when started to rain
 'All of the guests went inside when it began to rain'
- b. Ningún invitado (*se*) quedó en el patio.
 no guest SE stayed in the patio
 'None of the guests stayed in the patio'
- c. No se me sale la baba por Taylor Swift.
 not SE me leave the saliva for Taylor Swift
 'I do not drool for Taylor Swift'
- d. Se me vinieron las lágrimas cuando leí sobre la muerte de Ivan Sag.
 SE me came the tears when read about the death of Ivan Sag
 'Tears came to my eyes when I read that Ivan Sag had passed'
- e. Se nos olvidó el chimichurri en la casa de la abuela.
 SE us forgot the chimichurri in the house of the grandma
 'We forgot our chimichurri at Grandma's house'

Another merit of this approach –even admitting that some semantic nuances have to be treated as 'added' and are not directly explained by the substitution– is that it allows recasting of some classic problems of Spanish as a second language in novel terms. For one, the approach helps understand why it is idiomatically preferred in Spanish to use a passive structure with SE over a periphrastic one. The existence of SE passives follows directly from the core proposal, and given the extension of SE across grammatical structures it makes sense that speakers resort to this element as the first option, all else being equal. Moreover, because *se*-forms substitute the verber, structures with *se* do not require the verb to be more or less dynamic, which explains why some verbs that reject the periphrastic passive as they are low on dynamicity accept SE provided that they contain a protoagent in their structure (19). Because *se*-substitution does not force a promotion to preverbal subject position, a broader set of nominal expressions –such as bare nouns, (20)– are allowed by this structure.

- (19) a. Se oyó un ruido.
 SE heard a noise
- b. *Un ruido fue oído.
 a noise was heard
- (20) a. Se venden casas.
 SE sell houses
- b. *Casas fueron vendidas.
 houses were sold

4. Other properties of the monograph

This book is not just a theory about *se*, but a learner's *orientes* guide to *se*-structures. Its didactic nature is manifested also in three more relevant properties.

First of all, the structure of the monograph is reader-friendly, terminology is kept to a minimum, and each term is clarified, step by step. Chapter 1 introduces terminological distinctions, and it is

clear that the author tries to make these terms transparent to any reader (cf. verber, verbed and verbee). The focus of the chapter is in showing the reader how these notions contrast with each other and with the more traditional syntactic functions that textbooks tend to confuse in the statements about the rules that they introduce. Chapter 2, using the terminology presented in the previous chapter, shows the initial arguments of why *se*-substitution is best interpreted as replacing a proto-agent rather than as a proto-patient. Relevant examples are offered in all these cases. Chapter 3 addresses cases where the interpretation is less straightforward, such as aspectual SE structures. Chapter 4 delves into more details about those cases where the presence of the reflexive pronoun has an effect on the translation. The problem of how to find the equivalence of some expressions with *se* is central, obviously, in any type of approach aimed at second language learners. Finally, chapter 5 summarises the core proposal and makes an explicit comparison with a good number of languages, which makes the proposal usable for second language learners of languages other than English.

The second relevant property of the book, from the perspective of its applied nature, is the presence of exercises and solutions at the end of the central chapters. The level of these exercises can be adapted according to the target group of students, and the author provides guidelines for how to do this –for example, through modification of the tense involved–. The difficulty of the exercises increases as the book progresses, and as such, chapter 2 concentrates mainly on building sentences with some templates provided, chapter 3 involves practising the intransitivising effects of *se*-substitution, and chapter 4 makes the reader reflect on the conditions where sentences need *se* or cannot allow it.

Finally, the book provides a large number of examples to illustrate the proposal, and these examples frequently involve comparing vis-à-vis sentences that in a traditional theory belong to different types of *se*-structures, to show the parallelisms, which are highlighted over the differences.

5. Conclusion

The abundance of types of *se* in traditional studies has always been a problem, both from a theoretical perspective and from a didactic perspective. Any attempt at simplifying this picture is welcome, and in particular this monograph presents a simple theory that covers a broad variety of cases. While many of the explanations could be developed in more detail –something impossible given that the book makes a point of being short enough to allow the reader to cover it in a short time–, this book is detailed enough to benefit students and teachers preparing their classes on this topic. It is, moreover, original in being the first monograph, to my knowledge, that presents a theory of *se*-structures that tries to unify them within the context of teaching and learning.

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