

On the ambiguity between reflexivity and reciprocity in Spanish: an empirical study
Júlia Nieto i Bou & Giada Palmieri

Utrecht University

In Spanish, the clitic *se* expresses both reflexivity and reciprocity. Reflexivity systematically emerges with a singular subject (1), while both reflexivity and reciprocity can be conveyed when the subject is plural (2). In order to express reflexivity/reciprocity, *se* is obligatory in finite clauses with any transitive verb.

- | | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| (1) <i>Teo se afeita</i>
Teo SE shave-PRES-1SG
'Teo shaves (himself)' | (2) <i>Teo y Ana se afeitan</i>
Teo and Ana SE shave-PRES-3PL
'Teo and Ana shave (themselves/each other)' |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

This paper focuses on (i) the characterization of lexical reflexive predicates in Spanish and their semantic properties and (ii) the ambiguity between reflexivity and reciprocity in plural *se* clauses. In this research we will explore how these two phenomena are empirically related, proposing that lexical reflexivity may act as a confound for tests aimed at determining the vague or ambiguous nature of *se* clauses.

LEXICAL REFLEXIVITY - We rely on a semantic distinction between lexical and grammatical reflexivity. Grammatical reflexivity is available with transitive verbs and requires agent and patient to be co-referential (e.g. '*Susy admires herself*' in English). Lexical reflexivity is only available in the intransitive entry of a limited set of verbs and denotes an action where the subject and the agent do not need to be co-referential, as long as the subject is volitional (Doron & Rappaport-Hovav, 2009) (e.g. '*Peter shaved*' in English, which would hold true if Peter went to the barber): we will refer to this interpretation as *passive collaborative*. Spanish shows no overt distinction between these two strategies in finite clauses, since the clitic *se* is always obligatory, as in (1). We present novel data for the identification of lexical reflexives based on their morpho-syntactic realization. Absolute constructions and analytic causatives generally lead to passive interpretations with transitive verbs; however, with a restricted set of verbs, reflexive interpretations may emerge in these constructions, in absence of *se* (3)-(4). Moreover, the *ir sin* construction (literally: 'to go without') has an idiomatic meaning where the subject fails to perform an action on themselves: this interpretation holds for a restricted number of verbs (5) despite the absence of *se*. We argue that the possibility to express reflexivity without *se* in these constructions is an indication of a lexical reflexive entry.

- | | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| (3) <i>Afeitado Teo salió de casa</i>
shave-PRTC Teo left of house
'After shaving, Teo left the house' | (4) <i>Hice afeitar a Teo</i>
make-PAST-1SG shave-INF DOM Teo
'I caused Teo to shave' |
| (5) <i>Teo iba sin afeitar</i>
Teo go-PAST-3SG without shave-INF
'Teo did not shave' | |

AMBIGUITY OR VAGUENESS - The ability of one construction to convey both reflexivity and reciprocity has been observed in several unrelated languages (Heine & Miyashita, 2008). To account for this pattern, it has been proposed that constructions expressing both reflexivity and reciprocity are vague, and these interpretations are two instances of the same meaning. This proposal is supported by claims on the possibility of these constructions to allow 'mixed' interpretations, where reflexivity and reciprocity are concurrently available, e.g. in a scenario with three children, where two scratch each other and the other herself (Murray, 2008). Mixed readings have been proposed to emerge in Spanish *se* clauses (Cable, 2014), but this analysis has been questioned for other Romance languages: Palmieri (2020) argues that *si* clauses are ambiguous in Italian, providing empirical evidence that 'mixed' readings are not generally available in this language, but restricted to lexical reflexives as a result of their *passive collaborative* reading.

PROPOSAL - We propose that mixed readings are not generally available in Spanish *se* clauses unless the verb is a lexical reflexive: in this case a mixed reading might emerge as a result of the intrinsic *passive collaborative* interpretation that characterizes verbs with such an entry. Mixed readings should not be taken as an indicator of vagueness, unless they emerge with predicates that do not allow a *passive collaborative* interpretation.

QUESTIONNAIRE - To attest our proposal, we adapted Palmieri (2020)'s questionnaire for Spanish. We selected seven lexical reflexive and seven transitive verbs based on the possibility to express reflexivity without *se* in the constructions illustrated in (3)-(4)-(5) and we checked the availability of *passive collaborative* and mixed readings with each of them. Target items consisted of a short written story describing a *passive collaborative* scenario (where an individual A gets an action performed on themselves volitionally) or a mixed scenario (with four individuals A, B, C and D, where A and B performed an action on themselves and C and D on each other), followed by a *se* clause to be judged true or false ('A *se* VERB' or 'A,B,C and D *se* VERB', respectively).

We followed a between-subject design: each participant was exposed to five items and ten fillers. The questionnaire was distributed online and a total of 122 native speakers participated.

The acceptance rates (in %) for each of the target verbs in both scenarios are displayed in Figure 1. The sentences formed with lexical reflexive (L-ref) verbs show higher acceptance rates in both scenarios, whereas sentences with transitive (Trans) verbs display remarkably lower acceptance rates. The results show a correspondence between lexical reflexive entries and the emergence of *passive collaborative* (PCo) and mixed readings, providing evidence not only for the semantic characterization of this class of verbs, but also for their effect on the availability of mixed interpretation.

CONCLUSIONS - Our research sheds light on the existence of lexical reflexivity in Spanish: we propose novel constructions that allow the identification of verbs with lexical reflexive entries and we show that they allow a *passive collaborative* interpretation, where agent and patient are not necessarily co-referential. We show that lexical reflexivity acts as a confound on the acceptance of mixed readings, yielding a remarkably higher acceptance of such scenarios as compared to transitive verbs. The low acceptance rates of mixed readings with transitive verbs lend support to an analysis of Spanish *se* clauses being ambiguous between reflexivity and reciprocity. The emergence of the same pattern in both Spanish and Italian (Palmieri, 2020) suggests that this analysis might hold for other Romance languages; further cross-linguistic work may corroborate this assumption.

References:

- Cable, S. (2014). Reflexives, reciprocals and contrast. *Journal of Semantics*. 31(1), 1-41.
- Doron, E. & Rappaport-Hovav, M., (2009). A unified approach to reflexivization in Semitic and Romance. *Brill's J.o.A.L.L.*, 1(1), 75-105.
- Heine, B., & Miyashita, H. (2008). The intersection between reflexives and reciprocals: A grammaticalization perspective. *Reciprocals and reflexives: Theoretical and typological explorations*, 169-224.
- Murray, S. E. (2008). Reflexivity and reciprocity with (out) underspecification. In *Proceedings of Sinn und Bedeutung* (Vol. 12, pp. 455-469).
- Palmieri, G. (2020). On the ambiguity between reflexivity and reciprocity in Italian. In M. Asatryan, Y. Song & A. Whitma (Eds.). *Proceedings of NELS 50*. Vol. 2, 279-289. Amherst, MA: GLSA Publications.

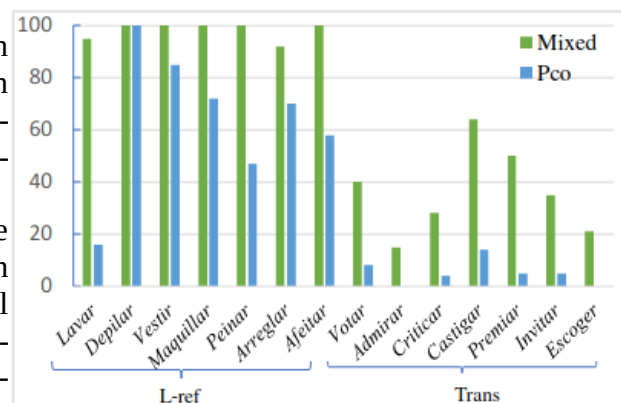


Figure 1: acceptance of target verbs per condition