

# REVISITING ROMANCE SE\*

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## 1. Introduction

Transitive finite clauses with Spanish SE and its Romance equivalents in Catalan and Italian exhibit two well-known agreement patterns; they are illustrated in (1).<sup>1</sup> In the literature they are dubbed the agreeing SE structure, and the non-agreeing SE structure:

- (1) *Agreeing SE structure*  
a. Se ven las montañas desde aquí.  
Se see<sub>plural</sub> *the mountains from here*  
*Non-agreeing SE structure*  
b. Se ve las montañas desde aquí.  
Se see<sub>sing</sub> *the mountains from here*

Traditionally, the Case of the theme argument is assumed to be nominative, in the agreeing SE structure and, accusative in the non-agreeing SE structure (but see subsection 2.2).

There have been numerous attempts to account for the syntactic properties of (1a) and (1b). Some authors have argued that the agreeing SE structure is a sort of passive. Both traditional grammar and the early generative literature (Belletti 1982, Burzio 1986, Manzini 1986, Cinque 1988) treated the agreeing SE structure as parallel with 'be'-passives. In the eighties, morphological passive was argued to result from the interaction of Case and theta-role assignment. Jaeggli (1986), Baker (1988), and Baker, Johnson, Roberts (1989) treated the English passive suffix *-en* as an argument receiving the external theta-role and accusative Case, making it possible for the internal argument to receive nominative Case. In parallel with 'be'-passives, in the agreeing SE structure, it was argued that SE absorbs the subject theta-role and the accusative Case of the verb.<sup>2</sup>

In many other analyses, however, SE is considered to be either the external theta role argument itself or the licenser of a silent 'indefinite' subject (see Burzio 1986, Cinque 1988, Raposo and Uriagereka 1996, Rivero & Sheppard 2002, among others).

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\* It is a pleasure to dedicate this article to Patxi Goenaga, a pioneer in the fight for good grammatical causes.

<sup>1</sup> Here I will ignore anaphoric *se* entirely.

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed list of references, see Raposo and Uriagereka (1996).

While there is disagreement about many syntactic aspects of the structures involving Romance SE, virtually everyone agrees that SE is deficient in  $\phi$ -features (person, number, and gender features). The exact features of SE, however, and how they impact the syntactic derivation varies from author to author.

In this article I revisit the SE constructions in (1), and expose some of the problems posed by recent accounts of it, suggesting ways to improve them. I argue that the treatment of the agreeing SE should be fully integrated into the general theory of feature checking. In so doing, I suggest that SE should be viewed as an inflectional element pertaining to  $v$ , perhaps akin to the C-T relation recently advocated in some minimalist analyses, developing ideas of Chomsky (2001).

## 2. The Syntax of the agreeing SE structure

Let us start with the question of where SE merges. A common view since Burzio (1986), is that SE is a kind of Agreement-element, and as such is base-generated as part of Infl. Proponents of this view argue that SE binds a null subject (see Mendikoetxea 1992, 1999). More recent literature has abandoned this view, treating SE as an element merging in the  $vP$  internal subject position, either as an argument or as an expletive.<sup>3</sup> As we will see in the next subsection, a number of considerations support the old view.

### 2.1. Where Does SE Externally Merge?

A widely-held view of clause structure is that verbs have two layers, one headed by V and another headed by  $v$  (see Chomsky 1995, generalizing a proposal by Hale and Keyser 1993). Subjects externally merge in the specifier of the  $vP$  position.

It has been suggested in recent literature that SE enters the derivation by external merge in the specifier position of  $vP$ , the position of regular subjects (Raposo and Uriagereka 1996; Rezac 2002, López 2007, among others). This is illustrated in (2):

$$(2) \quad [{}_{vP} \text{SE } v [{}_{vP} \text{V IA}]]$$

In principle, the structure in (2) allows for the possibility that SE be a thematic subject or an expletive-like element. I will concentrate in what follows on Lopez's (2007) proposal, which is more revealing of the aspects of the structure I want to uncover than the others.

López (2007) proposes that SE is thematic in the non-agreeing construction, and an expletive-like element in the agreeing construction. In the agreeing SE structure, SE is an expletive with Case but no person and number features. SE's unvalued Case-feature probes the internal argument, resulting in Case-feature sharing (co-valuation). To deal with the difference in the thematic nature of SE in the two structures, López (2007) proposes that the  $v$  involved in the clausal structure of the agreeing SE structure is 'unaccusative'  $v$ , the type of  $v$  that does not assign an external theta-role and does not 'license' accusative Case. In the non-agreeing construction, however, the  $v$  of the structure is the regular transitive 'accusative'  $v$ .

<sup>3</sup> I am considerably simplifying important issues dealt with in detail in the literature of SE. The reader is referred to the cited literature to get the whole picture.

One obvious question raised by this approach is why SE is needed altogether in the structure of an unaccusative vP.<sup>4</sup> Although López (2007) invokes an EPP feature to justify the presence of SE on unaccusative *v*, clearly, the EPP solution does not get beyond the starter gate. In fact, in frameworks such as Chomsky (2001) the EPP feature on unaccusative *v* is altogether excluded, as Chomsky limits the EPP feature to functional elements equipped with a complete set of nominal features, which unaccusative *v* does not have.

## 2.2. Against SE externally merging with v

The nature of *v* is critical for cyclic domains. Chomsky (2001) identifies the small *v* of transitive accusative clauses as *v*<sup>\*</sup>, and its projection as a strong phase. *v*<sup>\*</sup> has a complete set of  $\phi$ -features (person/number/gender) features, nominal features). Strong phases are the units of the derivation that are interpreted at the interfaces. Unlike *v*<sup>\*</sup>, the *v* of unaccusatives and passives is in Chomsky's (2001) proposal  $\phi$ -incomplete, and therefore constitutes a weak phase. Weak phases are not units of the derivation that are interpreted at the interfaces.

If we look at the effects of Spanish and Catalan SE in the structure of unaccusatives and passives, as well as in transitive accusative verbs, a curious result obtains. Basically, the presence of Spanish SE in the clause amounts to having a *v* that is deficient in nominal features *always*. The empirical evidence relevant to this claim relates to Case, and comes from Mendikoetxea (1992).

Mendikoetxea (1992) shows that structures with SE in Spanish do not license morphological accusative Case, unlike Italian SI in some dialects. Ordóñez (2004) shows that Catalan patterns with Spanish in not allowing accusative Case in the non-agreeing SE structure. Thus whereas Italian permits the thematic argument of the non-agreeing SE structure to be realized as the accusative clitic *lo*, Spanish and Catalan do not; the following examples are from Ordóñez (2004):<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> In Raposo and Uriagereka's (1996) proposal, SE is thematic in both the agreeing and in the non-agreeing construction. López (2007) points out some unwanted predictions of their proposal for the agreeing SE structure.

<sup>5</sup> Ordóñez (2004) attributes the failure of accusative case in the non-agreeing SE construction in Spanish and Catalan to a well-documented difference between SE in Spanish and Catalan, on one hand, and Italian SI, on the other: the number feature. As has long been observed, Italian SI is inherently plural. Thus, it agrees in plural with the past participle (see 4a), which is not the case in Spanish and Catalan, as illustrated in (ib):

- (i) a. Si è puniti<sub>plural</sub> (Italian)                      b. \*Se es castigados<sub>plural</sub> / Se es castigado<sub>singular</sub> (Spanish)

Se is punished-Plural

Furthermore, the number feature of Italian SI must be interpretable.

This is suggested by the fact that the plural interpretation that obtains in Italian examples such as (ii) includes the speaker (Ordóñez's examples again):

- (ii) Si è mangiato il dolce (Italian)  
we ate the dessert

This interpretation is unavailable in Spanish and Catalan, as observed by Ordóñez (2004):

- (iii) \*Se comió el postre (Spanish)  
we ate the dessert

- (3) a. Il risotto, lo si mangia ogni domenica.  
The rice, se it eats every Sunday  
b. \*El arroz, se lo come cada domingo en este hostel (Spanish)  
c. \*L'arròs, se'l menja cada diumenge (Catalan)  
'One eats rice every Sunday'

If the Case of the object in the non-agreeing SE structure is not accusative, what Case is it? Mendikoetxea (1992) proposes that it is inherent Case, a view supported by a number of additional facts (see Mendikoetxea 1992 for details).

Furthermore, Ordóñez (2004) points out that in the non-agreeing SE structure, the Case of the *a*-animate object is dative rather than accusative. The examples below are, once again, from Ordóñez' (2004):

- (4) A Marisa se le ve acabada (Spanish).  
"Marisa, SE cl-her<sub>dat</sub> sees worn out"  
(One sees Marisa worn out)  
(5) Marisa, la si vede disfatta (Italian)  
"Marisa cl-her<sub>acc</sub> Se sees worn out"

As shown in example (4), the animate object in Spanish cliticizes as *le*, the dative, not as *la*, in the accusative, in all dialects of Spanish. Dative, of course, is inherent Case. Notice that the situation is different in Italian. In Italian, the direct object clitic shows morphological accusative, as shown in example (5).

Once again we see SE acting in close parallel to *v*. The point here is whether something other than SE can act as a licenser and make an object of the relevant verb accusative. Other than *V*, *v* is the right candidate. But if this is so, why not see SE as *v*? In other words, given these results we need to ask whether it would not make sense to attempt to unify SE and *v* in some manner. I argue that it does.

There are two logical possibilities to consider vis-a-vis the fact that the feature content of SE matches the feature content of *v*. One is to make SE come from *v*; the other is to make SE be *v*.

Let us look at in more detail at the conditions under which SE could merge with *v* within Chomsky's (2001) system. When *v* is deficient in  $\phi$ -features, *v* lacks an EPP feature. On the other hand, a *v* that contains a complete set of  $\phi$ -features, namely *v*<sup>\*</sup>, can have an EPP-feature.

Turning now to SE in the agreeing construction, Chomsky's approach would disallow merging of SE in the specifier of *v*P altogether, since a deficient *v* lacks an EPP feature. Yet, SE can appear with unaccusatives and *be*-passives, as has long observed in the literature (Cinque 1988, Mendikoetxea 1992, Dobrovie-Sorin 1998):

- (6) a. Se llega tarde.  
Se arrives late  
b. Se es castigado por gente sin escrúpulos.  
Se is punished by unscrupulous people

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One intriguing question raised by these data is the role of number in licensing accusative Case. Although Italian SI may bear interpretable number, unlike Spanish or Catalan SE, Italian SI is supposed to still be deficient in  $\phi$ -features, and as such unable to license accusative Case.

On the other hand, the picture is less clear in the non-agreeing SE structure, since we are now dealing with inherent Case on the object rather than structural Case. Inherent Case presumably involves V. Does it also involve *v*?

Before further discussing the Case of the object in the non-agreeing structure, let us consider what these results tell us about the association between SE and *v*. Basically, we see that it is problematic to externally merge SE and *v*. However, we may think of SE as *internally* merging with *v*. Internal merge of SE with *v* amounts to going back to earlier proposals about SE, and considering SE an inflectional element of sorts, as we will see next.

### 2.3. SE and *v*

The view I have suggested in the previous subsection is that SE may either come from *v* or be *v*. These two options are illustrated in (7):

- (7) a. [<sub>VP</sub> SE [<sub>v</sub>-SE] [<sub>VP</sub> V IA]]  
 b. [<sub>SEP</sub> SE [<sub>VP</sub> V IA]]

In the rest of this paper I will ignore the differences between these two implementations of the approach, focusing on another aspect of the structure.<sup>6</sup> In particular, I want to discuss the mechanism of agreement, further showing the similarities between Chomsky's (2001) analysis of Agree involving *v*, and the SE structures under consideration.<sup>7</sup> Let us now take a closer look at (8):

- (8) T [<sub>SEP</sub> SE [<sub>VP</sub> V IA]]

By assumption, SE is  $\phi$ -incomplete. This makes the vP/SEP structure either a weak phase or not a phase. Therefore, nothing has to happen within vP prior to T merging in the structure. When T merges in the structure, T probes and agrees with SE. Since SE is  $\phi$ -incomplete, T proceeds to agree with the IA. The result of this agreement process is that the  $\phi$ -features of T agree with IA and SE, without SE causing a Minimality violation. In all relevant respects, SE here behaves like an expletive in the feature-checking system of Chomsky (2001).

Let us now briefly discuss the Case facts of the non-agreeing SE structure. This is the structure in which the internal argument receives inherent Case in both Spanish and Catalan:

- (9) T [EA [<sub>SEP</sub> SE [<sub>VP</sub> V IA]]]

Under local Match, T probes and agrees with the null subject (EA), which has valued and interpretable  $\phi$ -features (the null subject is presumably formally licensed by SE<sup>8</sup>). On the other hand, SE can probe and agree with the IA. Assuming that V

<sup>6</sup> The differences between (7a) and (7b) bear on verb raising to T and other matters that I cannot address in this paper.

<sup>7</sup> I will not take up the formal analysis of agreement in any detail. For a critique of Chomsky's (2000, 2001) agreement system, see Pesetsky and Torrego (2007), written in 2004.

<sup>8</sup> The nature of this null subject is open to debate, and depends on whether we take SE to be third person or not. This is the position of Raposo and Uriagereka (1996) as well as López (2007). López defends the view that SE does not have a person feature, citing interesting facts by Taraldsen (1995) to defend it.

is responsible for the inherent Case of the IA, the Agree relation between SE and the IA will satisfy the Case-needs of SE, although not the Case-needs of the IA, along the lines of Chomsky's (2000, 2001) approach to Agree.

In sum, SE can do whatever *v* can do in the mechanism of agreement involving the agreeing SE structure, and the non-agreeing SE structure.<sup>9</sup> I will end this paper by making some remarks about one last structure involving SE: the true passive.

### 3. The agreeing SE structure with a 'by'-phrase

A neglected aspect of the Spanish agreeing SE structure is its overt passive behavior with some verbs in some Peninsular Spanish dialects. The literature has noted that the agreeing SE structure allows a *por*-phrase (*by*-phrase) with verbs such as *divulgar* 'report', *construir* 'build' and others, which I take to be causative verbs (Mendikoetxea 1992, 1999):

- (10) Agreeing SE structure with a *por*-phrase
- a. Se divulgaron las noticias por una popular emisora de radio.  
Se reported the news by a popular radio station
  - b. La pirámide se construyó por esclavos.  
The pyramid SE built by slaves

The analysis of 'be'-passives is fairly controversial, and I am not in a position to discuss the SE passive vis a vis the 'be'-passive. (See Collins 2005 for a specific proposal about passives within minimalist assumptions). However, the fact that SE allows a 'by'-phrase with a certain class of verbs in some dialects is fairly suggestive, and clearly should be taken into account when analyzing Romance SE.

Since even dialects that allow a *by*-phrase with SE do so only with a restricted class of transitive accusative verbs, one must ask what it is about 'true' accusative verbs that have this effect in combination with SE. There are two plausible avenues of exploration here. One concerns the feature-content of SE, and the other is the small *v* of 'true' causative verbs. I leave this exploration for future research.

At any rate, the fact that a SE structure allows a '*por*'-phrase with a certain class of verbs in some dialects of Spanish is an important clue that some of the old ideas about Romance SE may well be on the right track. I am advocating here to revisit them.

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<sup>9</sup> Here I ignore the issue of why in the non-agreeing SE structure the thematic subject of the clause has to be, first, phonologically null, and two, 'indefinite' or 'impersonal'.

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