Decomposing the Spanish Causative Reflexive Passive

Introduction  Spanish has a passive construction formed using the reflexive clitic se — (1a). Our topic is the puzzle posed by examples such as (1b), where se attaches to a causative verb whose complement appears to receive a passive interpretation. We term this construction the Causative Reflexive Passive (CRP). Labelle (2008) offers an analysis of French CRPs according to which se plays a dual role as both a passivizer and a reflexivizer. The clitic absorbs the accusative Case of the embedded verb and also identifies the agents of the matrix and embedded predicates. In §1-§4 we note four properties of Spanish CRPs that are incompatible with Labelle’s Dual Role Analysis (DRA). We propose instead that the derivation of CRPs decomposes into two separate operations: (i) External Argument Reduction (EAR) and (ii) anticausative formation. EAR in causative complements is found in a number of Romance languages and is not predicated on the presence of se. We assume, following Folli & Harley (2007:208), that causative verbs are able to select agentless nominal VP_{nom} complements. EAR is therefore distinct from passivization — since the external argument is absent ab initio — and comparable to the lack of any obligatory expression of the external argument in nominalizations. The role of se in CRPs is restricted to the matrix, where it derives an anticausative form of the matrix predicate. In analyzing the matrix predicate as an anticausative we follow Pitteroff & Alexiadou’s (2012) analysis of the German sich-lassen construction. We depart from P&A in denying that the embedded infinitival is a true verbal passive.

(1) a. esta idea se rechazó por el comité  b. una explosión se dejó oír por todo el país
   this idea SE rejected by the committee  an explosion SE let hear-INF by the whole country
   ‘This idea was rejected by the committee.’ ‘An explosion got heard by the whole country.’

1 Thematic properties of CRPs  The DRA incorrectly predicts that the matrix verb dejar in (1b) should assign an external theta role to its subject. In other words, (1b) is predicted to have the same thematic structure as the infelicitous English (2). This thematic structure is incompatible with interpretation assigned to (1b), which simply states that the explosion was heard.

(2) #An explosion let itself be heard by the whole country.

2 CRPs in the 1st/2nd person  Spanish has no distinct 1st/2nd-person reflexive clitic, but ordinary 1st/2nd-person object clitics can be used to express reflexive readings. In contrast, the reflexive passive can be formed only in the 3rd person. For example, (3a) is ambiguous between a reflexive and passive reading, whereas (3b) has only a reflexive reading. On the DRA we would expect CRPs to be restricted to the 3rd person, but they are not, as shown in (4).

(3) a. Juan se castigó
   John SE punished
   ✔John punished himself.  ✔John was punished.
   (yo) me castigué
   I  me punished
   (yo) me dejé arrastrar por el viento
   I  me let-PAST sweep-away-INF by the wind
   ‘I got swept away by the wind.’

(4) (yo) me dejé arrastrar por el viento
   I  me let-PAST sweep-away-INF by the wind
   ‘I got swept away by the wind.’

3 Restriction of CRPs to causatives  CRPs can be formed only with the causative verbs dejar (‘let’) and hacer (‘make/do’) (García-Miguel 2007). In French, this restriction might be taken to follow from the restriction of clitic climbing to causatives. (I.e., it may be that matrix se can passivize an embedded clause only in structures that are transparent for clitic climbing.) In Spanish, however, both reflexive and non-reflexive clitics can climb when embedded under a wide variety of non-causative verbs. Thus, The DRA fails to account for the restriction of CRPs to causative matrix verbs.

4 Thematic restrictions on the ‘by’ phrase in CRPs  The ‘by’ phrase in a simple reflexive passive such as (1a) may bear whatever external θ-role the embedded verb assigns. In contrast, the ‘by’ phrase in CRPs is restricted to Agent/External Cause:

(5) a. el jarrón se dañó por una caída
   the vase SE damaged by a fall
   ‘The vase was damaged by a fall.’

   b. #el jarrón se dejó dañar por una caída
   the vase SE let-PAST damage-INF by a fall
5 Analysis An analysis of CRPs must account for (i) EAR in the causative complement and (ii) the role of se in the matrix. Comparative data suggest that (i) and (ii) are largely independent. In faire-par causatives, found in e.g. French and Southern Cone Spanish (Kayne 1975, Torrego 1998:88), the agent of the causative complement is absent and optionally expressed in a ‘by’ phrase:

(6) el arquitecto hizo destruir el edificio por el ayudante (Southern Cone Spanish only)

The architect made destroy the building by the assistant

‘The architect had the assistant destroy the building.’

According to Folli & Harley, the absence of the embedded external argument in (6) is a consequence of the causative selecting a bare VPnom complement; the ‘by’ phrase is of the type found in nominals. The se clitic in CRPs therefore has no role to play within the embedded clause. Its sole function is to derive an anticausative form of the matrix predicate. A CRP is derived by taking the structure which underlies (6) and anticausativizing the matrix predicate via the addition of se:

(7) el edificio se hizo destruir por el ayudante

the building made destroy-INF by the assistant

‘The building got destroyed by the assistant.’

The derivation of (7) on Folli & Harley’s analysis is shown in (8). The se clitic absorbs the external θ-role of the matrix verb. The matrix subject originates as the internal argument of the embedded VPnom:

(8) [TP [el edificio] θext se θint hizo [VPnom destruir i por el ayudante]]

Let us consider how this analysis accounts for the data in §1–§4. 1 • The matrix predicate is an anticausative with a derived subject, so the matrix subject will not be interpreted as its external argument. 2 • It is no surprise that CRPs can be formed in the 1st/2nd person, since anticausatives in Spanish have this property (e.g. yo me hundí = ‘I sunk’). 3 • The restriction of CRPs to causative matrix verbs follows trivially, given that EAR is tied to the causative construction. Finally, 4 • the thematic restrictions on the ‘by’ phrase are accounted for, since the ‘by’ phrase is attached to a VPnom and the restrictions in question are those that typically apply to ‘by’ phrases in nominalizations.

A final puzzle is posed by the apparent connection between matrix se and EAR in non-Southern-Cone dialects of Spanish (where (7) is possible but (6) is not). We suspect that variation in the Case-licensing properties of VPnom gives rise to the illusion that EAR is licensed by se in these dialects. If verbs which can assign accusative must do so, then such verbs will only be able to take VPnom complements if VPnom complements can bear Case. If VPnom complements cannot bear Case, then only verbs which cannot assign accusative — such as anticausatives — will be able to take these complements. This hypothesis is consistent with Torrego’s (1998:88) claim that causative verbs in Southern Cone dialects uniquely cannot Case-mark DPs inside the causative complement of faire-par causatives. This may follow if VPnom itself requires Case.

Conclusion The derivation of the Spanish Causative Reflexive Passive involves neither reflexivization nor passivization. This conclusion is likely to generalize to French and possibly to German, depending on the properties of the ‘by’ phrase in the construction investigated by Pitteroff & Alexiadou. The present analysis removes one of the main obstacles to a unified analysis of Romance SE as an absorber of accusative Case (Reinhart & Siloni 2006). Labelle argues against this analysis on the grounds that it cannot account for SE’s ability to passivize the embedded clause in CRPs. However, on the present analysis, SE can be taken to absorb the accusative Case of the matrix anticausative verb.