Impersonal and Passive SE Constructions

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The morpheme se is one of the most frequently used pronouns in the Spanish language. That it is so frequently used is due to the many functions it can perform both semantically and syntactically. Spanish language students of all levels often find themselves frustrated and confused by the many uses that se has. One of the most confusing areas is in the conflict between the passive se and the impersonal se constructions. Beginning and advanced students find it hard to distinguish between the two structures and wonder: a) if there really is a distinction, and b) if the distinction really matters. Grammarians and linguists—both native Spanish and second language speakers—also encounter this difficulty.

Because the constructions are so commonly used, they are presented in textbooks of all levels. There are numerous articles and even entire books that discuss the question. As I have researched the subject, I have found that each theory proposed to solve the question has been rejected at least in part by other authors. The question has still not been resolved and probably will not be fully resolved for some time, as speakers of Spanish do not agree even as to which forms are acceptable. Many say that se venden casas is not technically acceptable because there appears to be no agreement. Otero and Strozer (1973, p. 1052) say that se venden casas is "grammatical" because se represents an understood singular agent or subject and excludes any other specified subject.

This paper will attempt to explain the most prevalent theories and state objections found to each. It will also advance a theory to which there have not yet been any major objections.

The two constructions, the reflexive or se passive, e.g., se venden casas, and the impersonal se, e.g., se vive bien aquí are distinguishable. Molina Redondo (1974, pp. 20-21) says that the difference between the two structures is in form rather than in meaning. He feels that any transitive verb with a direct object can be understood as either impersonal and active or as passive and still convey the same meaning. According to him, both se vende casas and se venden casas are acceptable and have the same meaning. Knowles (1975, p. 9) disagrees. To him the sentence, "No se difundió las noticias, pero las noticias se difundieron" is a logical sentence. The Latin American students I talked with were in general at first confused by the sentence but after some thought decided that it makes sense; although they would probably not say it. They found it hard to express the difference in meaning. Several authors have outlined what they feel to be the differences between the two structures.

Miranda Podadera (1967, pp. 186-87) explains that when the impersonal se structure is used there is no expressed subject and the noun receiving the action is preceded by a preposition or deals with an atonic preposition in the accusative. Examples of the impersonal se would be: se ayuda a los heridos and se los ayuda. Gonzalez-Mena de Lo Coco (1976, pp. 888-90) adds that when the se + singular verb
+ a + plural [+animate] noun structure is used, there must also be a determiner in order to retain the impersonal meaning. For example, se vende a cabras has a different meaning than se vende a las cabras. The nature of the object and the verb makes the difference. If the object can perform the act, the se + singular verb + a + plural object form is used. If the object cannot perform the act itself, se + plural verb + plural object is used instead.

### Figure 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Underlying Subject</th>
<th>Object</th>
<th>Surface Form</th>
<th>Implication</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[+Animate]</td>
<td>[+Animate]</td>
<td>Event can't be performed by object</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
<td>Se venden cabras.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[-Animate]</td>
<td>[+Animate]</td>
<td>Event can be performed by object</td>
<td>Verb has singular form</td>
<td>Se ayuda a los heridos.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[-Animate]</td>
<td>[-Animate]</td>
<td>Verb agrees in no. with object</td>
<td>Speaker doesn't have responsibility for event</td>
<td>Se destruyeron las casas en el huracán.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(With [+Animate] [-Animate] verb may be singular in "Las casas se venden.")

Otero and Strozer (1973, p. 1053) simplify the use of the impersonal se. They say that only verbs with human subjects can use se as PRO, PRO being an unspecified, animate, causative agent. For example, in se secó las toallas, las toallas is the direct object and se indicates an impersonal, [+human] subject.

Lapesa (1959, p. 257) gives three basic elements of the impersonal se construction: 1) impersonality, 2) active voice, 3) se as the subject. His explanation is not quite adequate, as will be seen later in this paper. Molina Redondo's (1974, p. 16) description of the impersonal se constructions is somewhat more complete. He says that an impersonal sentence: a) deals with an action where a human agent is needed, b) has no subject, expressed or understood, and d) implies an undetermined event. He avoids the problem of calling se the subject by outlining five structures that use the impersonal se.
Figure 2

1. Transitive verb + inanimate direct object.
   e.g., Se compra pan.

2. Transitive verb + animate direct object.
   a. Se busca un representante. (Indefinite - no a)
   b. Se ayuda a los heridos. (Definite - uses a)

3. Transitive verb used absolutely.
   e.g. Se lee mucho en esta clase.

4. Transitive verb + subordinate sentence.
   a. Se espera que baje la inflación.
   b. Se ven arder unos árboles. (árboles - subject)
   c. Se ve comer a los animales. (animales - object)

5. Intransitive verb.
   e.g., Se trabaja poco en estos días.

Roldán (1971, pp. 24, 28, 29) gives three types of impersonal sentences: 1) impersonal se used with transitive verbs, non-human objects and a human or at least active subject not found in the lexical reading. He gives as an example of this type "Se compran botellas." 2) Impersonal se constructions with a human object, e.g. "Se saluda a los generales," and 3) Intransitive impersonal sentences, e.g. "Se come para vivir."

Each of the earlier-mentioned theories describes the use of the impersonal se construction. It can be seen that the different grammarians view the problem differently and are not always in agreement as to its solution. The problem is further compounded when the impersonal se is compared to the se passive.

The passive se is generally described by grammarians as a substitute for the true passive or ser + past participle in which the verb agrees in number with what would be the object in an active sentence. According to this and most other descriptions, what Roldán calls the impersonal se that uses a transitive verb with an inanimate object, e.g. "se compran botellas," would be considered passive. Knowles (1975, p. 11) says that sentences in passive or pseudo-passive se construction have these characteristics in common: 1) there is concordance, e.g. se venden libros, 2) not all sentences can be paraphrased using uno, e.g., uno baila toda la noche ≠ se baila toda la noche, 3) when the noun phrase that follows the verb is plural, por sí mismo can be often added, and 4) the personal a is not used.

It seems that the simple explanations cannot describe the structures fully and the more complex explanations are too unwieldy to be easily applied. These problems are in part due to the fact that the question of the origin of the two structures has not been answered.

Some authors have felt that se is merely a marker of impersonal and passive sentences that is derived in various ways. Contreras (1973, pp. 84, 85) feels that both Se alquilan los apartamentos and Se a quíla los apartamentos come from PRO alquila los apartamentos where PRO is an unspecified human agent. He traces the transformations as follows:

3.3
To get **Se alquila los apartamentos**, Verb Agreement and PRO Deletion are applied in reverse order and **se** becomes "subjectivalized." Contreras doesn't explain where the **se** of **Se Insertion** comes from.

Roldán (1971, p. 28) uses subject substitution to arrive at **Se compran botellas**.

He doesn't explain why he can substitute botellas for a [+human, +PRO] subject.

Knowles (1975, p. 12) gives two sources for the impersonal **se**:

For source A the rule is "insert **se** if the subject of the sentence is a noun phrase that is [+PRO, +Human, +3d person, +indefinite]."

For B it has to be assumed that "there is a set of transitive verbs generally subcategorized for human subjects that become intransitive with inanimate subjects provided that the clitic **se** is added."
Suñer (1974, p. 155) does not feel that the impersonal se can be generated by transformations because there would have to be a "powerful filtering device" in the surface structure to prohibit the generation of unacceptable structures. She feels that pronouns and clitics could be introduced in phrase structure rules and that there would then be a semantic rather than strictly syntactic interpretation of the impersonal and passive structures. In this article she does not give specific phrase structure rules.

Bull (1965, p. 124) and other authors have said that the impersonal se is reflexive. Although inanimate objects cannot really act upon themselves, a non-systemic use of the reflexive is employed to remove the responsibility for the action from the real agent. Other authors have given reasons that seem to show that the impersonal se cannot be reflexive. According to Lozano (1970, p. 455) it cannot be reflexive because the object cannot be the true deep structure subject. Gonzalez-Mena de lo Coco (1976, p. 888) says that it cannot be reflexive because the phrase a sí mismo cannot be added without changing the meaning. Otero and Strozer (1973, p. 1052) say it cannot be reflexive because it cannot be used paradigmatically. The sentence *Nos vivimos como nos podemos is not possible. Martin (1979, p. 125) states, "In syntactically reflexive sentences, semantic subject-object relations are determined by non-syntactic knowledge or (pre) suppositions."

He feels that our experience imposes limiting factors on whether we view things as reflexive or not. He gives as examples Los niños van a operarse, which would not be considered reflexive, and El médico va a operarse, which could possibly be reflexive.

Some have called se a subject because other impersonal pronouns like uno and alguien can be substituted for the se in many sentences, i.e. Se baila toda la noche and Uno baila toda la noche have similar meanings.

Lantolf (1976, p. 194) and Carrasco (1978, pp. 221-23) both say that se is not the equivalent of uno. When uno is used the speaker implies that either he or the listener is involved. Uno is less impersonal than se. Jordán (1973, pp. 597-603) concludes that se is the subject and that it can have a plural aspect. Luján (1975, pp. 336-338) refutes Jordán's article by showing that se cannot be the subject of both Se venden casas and Se vende casas because there are many sentences which cannot be expressed both ways. The difference is that in the impersonal sentence the subject is indefinite and [-specific]. In the passive the subject is determined. One of the most convincing arguments against se as a subject is the negative transformation. Normal negative word order is subject + no + verb. *Se no vende casas is not possible.

If se is not a mere marker of impersonal and passive sentences, not a reflexive direct object, and not the subject of the sentence, what is it? If, as Molina Redondo (1974, p. 16) writes, "Se indica la existencia de un agente humano subyacente que, caso de ser expresado en la oración, asumiría la función de sujeto," could se not be the reflexive indirect object pronoun indicating for whom, on whose behalf or by whom the action was generated? Prado (1975, p. 335) claims that se is a reflexive pronoun. He says,
A pronoun has to be defined by the rule itself. In order to derive se we should formulate a rule which causes the derived structure to meet the structural description of the ordinary reflexive rule. When there are several noun phrases within a sentence, one of which is the subject, the one which reflects the subject takes the form of a reflexive pronoun. Prado's article does not formulate a rule but it seems that such a rule is possible. The Spanish ablative as well as dative pronouns can be expressed by se. Thus a él, a ellos, a sí; para él, para ellos, para sí; por él, por ellos, por sí; entre ellos and entre sí can all be expressed by the pronoun se. In Spanish sentences there is a possibility of having four noun phrases. Phrase structure rules could be

\[ S = NP_1 + VP \]
\[ VP = V + (NP_2) + (NP_3) + (NP_4) \]

where NP₁ is the subject, NP₂ a direct object and NP₃ and NP₄ are indirect objects. A reflexive sentence is one in which NP₁ or the subject has the same referent as any other NP.

Given the sentence Se habla español, logical grammar has to assume an unspecified animate subject. This subject could be represented by PRO or by X yielding X habla español. By whom, on whose behalf or por quién is the action generated? The action is generated on one's own behalf or por sí. Demonstrated graphically,

\[ S \]
\[ NP \]
\[ \]
\[ X \]
\[ \]
\[ habla \]
\[ español \]
\[ por \]
\[ se \]

Se habla español

X is deleted and the pronoun se is moved to go before the finite verb yielding Se habla español. The sentence Se mató a los leones can be interpreted the same way.
The sentence **Se firmaron las paces** looks as though it would have to mean **Las paces firmaron las paces**; but it could also mean X (with a plural aspect) **firmaron las paces entre sí**.

It seems apparent by the confusion that exists about the passive **se** and the impersonal **se** constructions that the two have if not identical then very similar deep structures. The theory just presented may serve as a deep structure for the two surface structures. At least it is a theory to which there have not yet been major objections and one on which there can and should be more research done. Perhaps when the origin of **se** in impersonal and passive structures is finally known and understood, we will be able to find a sound way of teaching the constructions to students.
Sources


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