

## Agentivity (and lack thereof) in Ibero-Romance middles: evidence for *i*\*

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Middle constructions in Ibero-Romance are characterized by the presence of the reflexive clitic *se*, imperfective tenses, agreement between the verb and the preverbal definite DP theme, and the impossibility of introducing an agent by means of a *by*-phrase. Moreover, these sentences denote the participation of a generic external argument in the event crosslinguistically (Ackema & Schoorlemmer 2006, *inter alia*). Interestingly, descriptive work on Asturian (ALLA 2001) notes that the reflexive appears to be optional in middles (1a), unlike in Spanish (1b) or Catalan (1c).

- (1) a. Les fueyes mueyen/muéyense col orbayu (\*por Xuan). (Asturian)  
the leaves wet wet.REFL with.the light rain by Xuan  
b. Las hojas \*(se) mojan con la lluvia ligera (\*por Juan). (Spanish)  
the leaves REFL wet with the rain light by Juan  
c. Les fulles \*(es) mullen amb la pluja lleugera (\*per Joan). (Catalan)  
the leaves REFL wet with the rain light by Joan  
'Leaves get wet/are wetted with the light rain.'

However, such alleged optionality in Asturian is only possible with verbs denoting a change of state/location entering the causative alternation; predicates denoting activities or accomplishments necessarily require the reflexive (2).

- (2) a. Les noveles de misteriu lléen\*(se) con facilidad. (Asturian)  
the novels of mystery read.REFL with ease  
b. Las novelas de misterio \*(se) leen con facilidad. (Spanish)  
the novels of mystery REFL read with ease  
'Mystery novels read easily.'

Additionally, the reflexive clitic, although optional, is occasionally required with certain unaccusative verbs in languages like Spanish to denote telicity (Cuervo 2014); in Asturian, nonetheless, it is banned.

- (3) a. Los guajes cayen(\*se) fácil cuando entamen a andar. (Asturian)  
the kids fall.REFL easy when begin.1PL to walk  
b. Los niños (se) caen fácilmente cuando comienzan a caminar. (Spanish)  
the kids REFL fall easily when begin.1PL to walk  
'Kids fall down easily when they start walking.'

Here, I propose that the presence of the reflexive in middle constructions in these languages is associated with the projection of a passive Voice head encoding the participation of a generic external argument in the event (Kratzer 1996; Schäfer 2008). In fact, this argument can control into purpose clauses, which is taken as evidence for the presence of an implicit agent (Bhatt & Pancheva 2006), so long as the reflexive clitic is present, as shown in (4).

- (4) a. Esti material rúempe\*(se) fácil *pa* reciclalo *afechiscamente*. (Asturian)  
this material breaks.REFL easy for recycle-it.ACC adequately  
b. Este material \*(se) rompe fácilmente *para* reciclarlo *adecuadamente*. (Spanish)  
this material REFL breaks easily for recycle.it.ACC adequately  
Intended: 'This material is easy to break in order to recycle it adequately.'

These sentences also allow a non-agentive reading, which can be enhanced by means of the insertion of a PP like *por sí mismo/mesmu* ('by itself'). Crucially, such PP in Asturian can only be licensed in the absence of the reflexive clitic.

- (5) a. Esti material ruempe\*(se) fácil *por sí mesmo*. (Asturian)  
this material breaks.REFL easy by itself  
b. Este material \*(se) rompe fácilmente *por sí mismo*. (Spanish)

this material REFL breaks easily by itself  
 ‘This material breaks easily by itself.’

Thus, I claim that two possible configurations can yield middle sentences containing change-of-state predicates: (i) a generic *se*-passive (4) containing a passive Voice head and a bieventive structure comprising an activity subevent and a stative one ( $\nu_{DO} + \nu_{BE}$ ) (Cuervo 2003); and (ii) a generic inchoative, without Voice, and composed by a subevent of change and a stative one ( $\nu_{GO} + \nu_{BE}$ ). While the reflexive clitic in (4) is the spell-out form of the passivized Voice head, in (5b) it spells out the subevent of change ( $\nu_{GO}$ ); the difference between Spanish –as well as other Ibero-Romance languages, such as Catalan– and Asturian, is the fact that  $\nu_{GO}$  in the latter does not have a phonetic form.

Moreover, middle contexts containing change of state verbs allow the insertion of an affected applicative head (Cuervo 2003; Suárez-Palma 2020) introducing a non-core dative argument, which can be interpreted either as affected by the theme’s resulting state if merged below the first subevent (either  $\nu_{DO}$  or  $\nu_{GO}$ ), or as unintentional causer of the event if merged on top. Crucially, the later interpretation is only available in the generic inchoative variant (6a), where the position above  $\nu_{GO}$  is not filled by Voice, i.e. in the generic *se*-passive counterpart (6b).

(6) *Generic inchoative*

- a. A Xuan,<sub>i</sub> esti material ruémpe-y<sub>i</sub> fácil. (Asturian)  
 to Xuan.DAT this material breaks-3SG.DAT easy  
 i. ‘Xuan accidentally causes this material to break easily.’  
 ii. ‘This material breaks easily, and Xuan is affected by it.’  
 iii. ~~‘It is easy to break Xuan’s material, and he is affected by it.’~~

*Generic se-passive*

- b. A Xuan,<sub>i</sub> esti material ruémpe-se-y<sub>i</sub> fácil. (Asturian)  
 to Xuan.DAT this material breaks.REFL-3SG.DAT easy  
 i. ~~‘Xuan accidentally causes this material to break easily.’~~  
 ii. ~~‘This material breaks easily, and Xuan is affected by it.’~~  
 iii. ‘It is easy to break Xuan’s material, and he is affected by it.’

These data suggest there exists a competition between Appl and Voice for the position atop the first subevent. I propose that such phenomenon can be explained by adding to Wood and Marantz’ (2017) notion of *i\**, i.e. an argument-introducing functional head whose spell-out form varies depending on its surrounding environment; thus, *i\** would be realized as Voice in the context of  $\nu_{DO}$  and as Appl when its complement is  $\nu_{GO}$ . The derivations for (6) are shown in (7).

(7) *Applicative as unintentional causer (no Voice)*

- a. [<sub>AppIP</sub> [<sub>DP</sub> **a Xuan**]<sub>i</sub>] [<sub>Appl</sub> -y<sub>i</sub>] [<sub>ν</sub>PGO [<sub>ν</sub>GO [<sub>ν</sub>PBE [<sub>DP</sub> *esti material*] [<sub>ν</sub>BE [<sub>√</sub> *romp*-]]]]]]]  
*Applicative as affected by an event (with or without Voice)*  
 b. ([<sub>VoiceP</sub> [<sub>Voice</sub> **se**] [<sub>ν</sub>PDO/GO [<sub>ν</sub>DO/GO [<sub>AppIP</sub> [<sub>DP</sub> **a Xuan**]<sub>i</sub>] [<sub>Appl</sub> -y [<sub>ν</sub>PBE [<sub>DP</sub> *esti material*] [<sub>ν</sub>BE [<sub>√</sub> *romp*-]]]]]]]]]

In sum, this proposal demonstrates that a generic passive and a generic inchoative can underlie middle constructions containing a change of state predicate in Ibero-Romance, giving rise to syntactic ambiguity in those languages where *se* spells out both Voice and  $\nu_{GO}$ ; additionally, it shows that the presence of the reflexive in Asturian middle sentences is exclusive to those predicates obligatorily subcategorizing for an external argument; finally, the three different interpretations dative arguments can have in these contexts supports Wood & Marantz’s *i\** hypothesis.

**References:**

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