On impersonal se and null subjects in Romance

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Introduction: This paper discusses the significance of being a consistent null subject language (CNL) and the availability of impersonal se (Imp_se) in Romance. An example of Imp_se, where the verb does not agree with the overt theme DP is in (1a), which contrasts with passive se (Pass_se) in (1b), where the verb does agree with the overt theme DP, from European Portuguese (EP).

(1)a. Vende-se estas casas.  b. Vendem-se estas casas.
sell.3sg.-se these houses  sell.3pl.-se these houses
"They are selling these houses."
"They are selling these houses."

We claim that Imp_se spells out T (in the spirit of Belletti 1982, Otero 1986, Cinque 1988, and Mendikoetxea 2008) with a valued version of Holmberg's (2005 et seq.) [uD]-feature that T bears in CNLs. We thus link Imp_se to being a CNL: no [uD] in T, no Imp_se. By assuming this connection, we claim, we can explain how Puerto Rican Spanish (PRS), in contrast to Peninsular Spanish, is losing Imp_se: it is losing [uD] in T, as argued independently by Ticio (2018).

The syntax of Imp_se: We take se in Imp_se to spell-out T with a valued version of [uD] à la Holmberg (2005, 2010). On this account, the [uD] must be valued by an A-topic, (see Frascarelli 2007), thus, the null external argument of a verb in 3rd sg. will be referential. Holmberg argues that this explains why in non-CNLs, like Brazilian Portuguese (BP), the null subject of a verb in 3rd sg. can receive a non-referential interpretation as in (2a), while the null subject of a verb in 3rd sg. in a CNL only receives a referential interpretation as in Peninsular Spanish in (2b).

(2) a. No Sul come churrasco.  b. En el sur, come carne.
in the south eat.3.sg. barbecue.  in the south, eat.3.sg. meat
‘In the south one eats barbecue.’  "In the south, s/he eats meat."

Nevertheless, when there is some special morphology on the verb, like Imp_se, a non-referential interpretation of the null external argument can arise. We propose that se in Imp_se spells out T with a valued [D] feature. Consequently, no A-topic can value [D] in T, since it is already valued; this precludes a referential interpretation of the null subject (cf. Sigurðsson 2011). As expected, Imp_se cannot introduce a discourse referent for later reference (Maddox 2018), illustrated in (3a) (in contrast to indefinite uno in 3b), and it cannot refer to an antecedent previously introduced in the discourse either, illustrated in (3b), from Peninsular Spanish.

(3)a. Si se gan-a mucho dinero, #compr-a muchas cosas inútiles.
   If Imp_se earn-3SG much money, #buy-3SG many things useless
b. Si uno gan-a mucho dinero, (*se) compr-a muchas cosas inútiles.
   If one earn-3SG much money (*Imp_se) buy-3SG many things useless
   "If one earns a lot of money, one buys many useless things."

Imp_se vs. Pass_se: Consider an implication of this analysis of Imp_se in the context of an approach to Pass_se, which takes Pass_se to spells out Voice (MacDonald 2017, MacDonald & Maddox 2018), which minimally lacks accusative case. In Pass_se, the theme DP controls verbal agreement and surfaces in nominative as illustrated in (4a), but not in with Imp_se in (4b), from Italian (D’Alessandro 2004:59). (See also 1 above).

(4) a. In Italia essi /*li si mangiano [Pass_se]
in Italy they.Nom.3pl/*them.Acc.3pl si eat.3pl
   "In Italy, people eat them."
b. In Italia *essi /li si mangia [Imp_se]
in Italy *they.Nom.3pl/them.Acc.3pl si eat.3sg
   "In Italy, people eat them."
Since se is within the verb phrase in Pass$_se$, it can affect the argument structure properties of the predicate, while in Imp$_se$, se is outside the verb phrase (in T), and does not affect the argument structure properties of the predicate. Consider Romanian, argued to lack Imp$_se$ (Dobrovie-Sorin 1992), where only an agreeing DP is grammatical, patterning with Pass$_se$, as in (5a). Moreover, in contrast to Peninsular Spanish (Italian and EP), se cannot appear in copula or analytical passive constructions, in (5b) and (5c) respectively in Romanian.

(5) a. Se construiesc//construieste locuinţe noi
SE.3 built.3pl / buil.3sg. houses.nom new.nom.pl
“New houses are built.

b. *Adesea se este trădat de prieteni falsi.
"One is frequently betrayed by false friends."

c. *Nu se este niciodata mulțumi.
"One is never satisfied."

Additionally, although Romanian has a differential object marker, se cannot appear with it, again, in contrast to Peninsular Spanish, as illustrated in (6a) and (6b) respectively.

(6) a. *In şcoala asta se pedepseşte pe elevi.
b. Se lăsamă a los bomberos.
"In school they punish DOM students.the. Imp$_se$ called DOM the firefighters"

CNLs and Imp$_se$: Our analysis links Imp$_se$ directly to a property of CNLs – the [uD] feature in T à la Holmberg (2005, 2010). This is a positive result, since, as far as we are aware, only CNLs have developed Imp$_se$ constructions. Spanish, Italian, EP and Brazilian Portuguese have Imp$_se$, but French does not. In this light, note Caribbean varieties of Spanish, observed to be drifting away from being CNLs (Camacho 2013). Consider Puerto Rican Spanish (PRS). A variety of syntactic patterns suggest that it is losing its CNL property (see Ticio 2018 a.o.). Consider just one property here: the use of overt pronouns has increased, importantly, without a contrastive meaning or a change in topic (Navarro 1948, Morales 1986, Toribio 2000), typical of CNLs, as illustrated in the discourse in (7), from Ticio (2018:92).

(7) Yo no pude estar allí, yo oí la gritería, pero yo estaba en mi oficina en una reunión
"I not could be there, I heard the yelling, but I was in my office in a meeting"

In fact, Ticio (2018) claims explicitly that these (and many other patterns) can be explained by the loss of [uD] in T in PRS. We claim that this has affected the grammatical status of Imp$_se$ in PRS. Most of our PRS speakers do not like Imp$_se$ with DOM (6b), in copula constructions (8a) nor in the periphrastic passive (8b), in contrast to Peninsular Spanish.

(8) a.(*En este país se es perseguido por la policia. b.(*Aqui se está bien.
"In this country Imp$_se$ is pursued by the police. Here Imp$_se$ is good"

Importantly, there are some PRS speakers that do like Imp$_se$ with DOM (6b), in copula constructions (8a) and in the periphrastic passive (8b). Interestingly, moreover, 3rd sg. still appears only to have a referential interpretation in PRS, as in illustrated in (2b) above for Peninsular Spanish. We take these patterns to indicate that there is a change in progress: PRS is losing its status as a CNL: it is losing [uD] on T with the consequent effect of losing Imp$_se$. That PRS is losing Imp$_se$ is further corroborated by data from the Corpus del Español:NOW. A search for Imp$_se$ with adjectives showed this pattern to be much more frequent in Peninsular Spanish than in PRS. For example, with ‘se está pendiente/one is on the look out for’ we found 310 tokens in Peninsular and only one in PRS. For Imp$_se$ with periphrastic passive, we found 109 tokens in Peninsular Spanish and only 16 in PRS in the Corpus del Española:Web/Dialects.