Se incompatible predicates in Spanish: a RRG explanation
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1. Introduction
In Spanish, there are some verbal predicates that apparently are incompatible with the morpheme se, as we can see in (1).

(1)  a. *Se llueve
REFL rain.3sg
do' (rain')
b. *Se murió
REFL die.PAST.3sg
BECOME dead' (Ø)
c. *Se hay nubes en el cielo
REFL there-is.3sg clouds in the sky
be-in' (cielo, nubes)
d. *Se gusta el cine
REFL like.3sg the movies
like' (Ø, cine)

These are very different verbs. We have activities, as in (1a), states (1c and 1d), and accomplishments, as in (1b); some selects only one argument (1b), some two (1c and 1d), and one of them doesn't even select an argument at all (1a). If we look at these data, we can ask ourselves: What do these predicates have in common, and why are they incompatible with se? or, in other words, what is se? and why is this particle incompatible with those predicates?

I suggest that these data can be explained in a simple way within the framework of RRG, based on the properties of the Spanish morpheme se.

2. The nature of Spanish se
In González Vergara (2006, 2009), I propose that Spanish se is the morphological manifestation of a lexical phenomenon that modifies the logical structure of the sentence, diminishing the actor’s importance and privileging the undergoer when it is present. In other words, this phenomenon intervenes in the logical structure with the purpose of not expressing syntactically the natural argument...
hierarchy. This proposal is strongly based on the work of Centineo (1995), Van Valin and LaPolla (1997) and Bentley (2004).

According to this idea, I proposed a set of lexical rules for predicates of all types of aktionsart, as can be seen in (2).

(2) Given any kind of logical structure, unspecify the argument x of the predicate.

a. States: \( \text{pred}'(x, y) \leftrightarrow \text{pred}'(\emptyset, y) \)

b. Activities: \( \text{do}'(x, [\text{pred}'(x, (y))]) \leftrightarrow \text{do}'(\emptyset, [\text{pred}'(\emptyset, (y))]) \)

c. Active accomplishments:
  c'. \( \text{do}'(x, [\text{pred}1'(x, y)]) \) & \( \text{INGR pred}2'(y) \leftrightarrow \text{do}'(\emptyset, [\text{pred}1'(\emptyset, y)]) \) & \( \text{INGR pred}2'(y) \)
  c''. \( \text{do}'(x, [\text{pred}'(x)]) \) & \( \text{INGR be-LOC}'(y, x) \leftrightarrow \text{do}'(\emptyset, [\text{pred}'(\emptyset)]) \) & \( \text{INGR be-LOC}'(y, \emptyset) \)

d. Accomplishments and achievements: \( \text{BECOME}/\text{INGR pred}'(x, y) \leftrightarrow \text{BECOME}/\text{INGR pred}'(\emptyset, y) \)

e. Semelfactives:
  e'. \( \text{SEML pred}'(x, y) \leftrightarrow \text{SEML pred}'(\emptyset, y) \)
  e''. \( \text{SEML do}'(x, [\text{pred}'(x, (y))]) \leftrightarrow \text{SEML do}'(\emptyset, [\text{pred}'(\emptyset, (y))]) \)

f. Causatives:
  f'. \( [\text{do}'(x, \emptyset)] \text{CAUSE} [((\text{BECOME}/\text{INGR}) \text{pred}'(y)) \leftrightarrow [\text{do}'(\emptyset, \emptyset)] \text{CAUSE}
  [(\text{BECOME}/\text{INGR}) \text{pred}'(y))] \)
  f''. \( [\text{do}'(x, \emptyset)] \text{CAUSE} [\text{do}'(y, [\text{pred}'(y)])] \leftrightarrow [\text{do}'(\emptyset, \emptyset)] \text{CAUSE}
  [\text{do}'(y, [\text{pred}'(y)])] \)

I suggest that all the traditional Spanish non reflexive se sentences (passive reflexive sentences, impersonal reflexive sentences, interest se sentences, intrinsic se sentences and middle sentences) can be explained by the combination of these lexical rules with different morphological, semantic, syntactic and pragmatic properties, expressed in the form of constructions, that I named “non-PSA construction”, “undergoer PSA construction”, “middle construction” and “aspectual se construction”. In table 1 we can see the constructional schema for the Spanish middle sentence and in figure 1, how the properties in this schema influence the linking in a sentence as la camisa se ensucia fácilmente.
### CONSTRUCTION: SPANISH MIDDLE SENTENCE

#### SYNTAX
- **Template**: AGX in nucleus [1]
- **Argument modulation**: central positions are reduced in 1 [2]
- **PSA modulation**: variable [3]
  - Undergoer argument [-human]: the undergoer argument is selected as PSA
  - Undergoer argument [+human]: no argument is selected as PSA

#### MORPHOLOGY
- **Verb**: active voice [5], imperfect aspect [6]
- **Morpheme** `se` in AGX node [7]

#### SEMANTICS
- **Property interpretation**, related to the modality operator `POSSIBLE` [8]
- PSA is not the instigator of the state of affairs, but it is affected by it

#### PRAGMATICS
- **Focal structure**: predicate focus (default) [9]
- **Illocutionary force**: unspecified

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**Table 1. Constructional schema for Spanish middle sentences**

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**Figure 1. Properties of the Spanish middle construction and their influence in the linking**
All these constructions, nevertheless, are based on the lexical phenomenon already described.

3. Some apparent exceptions
Let's return to our initial set of verbs. Apparently, some of them are compatible with the morpheme se, as we can see in (3):

(3)  

(a) El techo se llovió
    the roof REFL rain.PAST.3sg
    The roof was rained

(b) Pedro se murió
    Pedro REFL die.PAST.3sg
    Pedro died

(c) María se gusta
    María REFL like.PRES.3sg
    María likes herself

Actually, these verbs are in fact compatible with se, but only when the sentence presents a privileged syntactic argument. (2a and 2b) belongs to the undergoer PSA construction and (2c) is a reflexive sentence. Nevertheless, these predicates cannot be expressed with se in the non-PSA construction; in other, words, they can only show se when their meaning is related to a PSA argument.

We can now refine our initial question, that can be reformulated as follows: Why do verbs as those listed in (1) and, in a more complete set, in (4) are not compatible with se in the non-PSA construction?

(4)  

(a) llover (to rain), nevar (to snow), garúar (to dizzle), temblar (to tremble)

(b) morir (to die), aparecer (to appear), crecer (to grow), envejecer (to get old), adelgazar (to slim)

(c) hay (there is)

(d) alcanzar (to have enough), apenar (to cause sorrow), convenir (to suit), costar (to take effort), doler (to feel hurt), extrañar (to feel the lack), faltar (to lack), gustar (to like), importar (to matter), interesar (to be interested), molestar (to be bothered), preocupar (to be worried), quedar (to have left), sobrar (to spare).

(e) dar pena/miedo/gusto (feel pity/fear/delight)
4. The proposal
If se is actually the morphological expression of a lexical phenomenon that privileges the undergoer argument, the incompatibility of the predicates in (3) can be explained easily. What all of them have in common is that their logical structures cannot privilege an undergoer argument, either because the undergoer is already the privileged argument or because their logical structures don’t have arguments in the first place.

I propose four types of se incompatible verbs: haber type, llover type, morir type, and gustar type. Let’s inspect in detail every kind of predicates.

4.1. The llover type
Verbs as llover (to rain), nevar (to snow) and temblar (to shake (the earth)), usually known as weather verbs, are activities that lack any kind of arguments in their logical structures, as can be seen in (5).

(5) Ayer llovió / nevó / tembló
yesterday rain.PAST / snow.PAST / shake.PAST

**yesterday’ (do’ (rain’/snow’/shake’))**

As a consequence of its lack of arguments, these verbs don’t have a privileged syntactic argument and the verb takes the defective form (third person singular). Therefore, there is not any argument that can take the undergoer macrorole and if there is not an undergoer argument, it cannot be privileged. Thus, these verbs are incompatible with se.

It has to be noted again that apparent exceptions as the ones in (6) are not really weather verbs, but predicates that have at least one semantic argument and a PSA, as can be noted by the agreement.

(6) a. Las carpas se llovieron
the tents REFL rain.PAST.3pl
The tents were soaked in rain
b. Los patios se nevaron
the backyards REFL snow.PAST.3pl
The backyards got covered in snow

In (7a) we can see an interesting case. At first, it seems to be a case of “temblar” (to shake) that presents se, but does not show any argument. However, if we compare this sentence with (7b) we can see that the verb in (7a) is not a weather verb, but one derived from a verb with PSA, as it can be
inferred from the agreement. So, *se* appears here as a consequence of the application of the lexical rule in (2b).

(7)  
   a.  Antiguamente, se temblaba de miedo con las películas de terror  
       Formerly, REFL tremble.PAST of fear with the films of horror  
       Formerly, one used to tremble out of fear with horror films  
   b.  Antiguamente, nosotros temblábamos de miedo con las películas de terror  
       Formerly, we tremble.PAST.1pl of fear with the films of horror

4.2. The *morir* type  
Verbs as *morir* (to die), *aparecer* (to appear), *crecer* (to grow), *envejecer* (to get old), or *adelgazar* (to slim) are all accomplishments, achievements or processes based on states logical structures that have only one argument.

Since the base predicate is a state, the only arguments in these verbs take the undergoer macrorole, following the Default Macrorole Assignment Principles (Van Valin & LaPolla, 1997). Therefore, the argument selected as PSA is the undergoer. In this kind of verbs, thus, the lexical phenomenon of *se* cannot occur because the undergoer is already the privileged argument, as can be seen in (8).

(8)  
   a.  *Se murió  
       BECOME dead* (Ø)  
   b.  *Se creció  
       PROC grown* (Ø)  
   c.  *Se envejeció  
       PROC old* (Ø)  
   d.  *Se adelgazó  
       PROC thin* (Ø)

Again, verbs of the type we can see in (9) can show *se*, but are not part of the *non-PSA construction*. They do have a PSA, as we can see by the agreement. These verbs have idiosyncratic meanings also related to the lexical phenomenon, as it is proposed in González Vergara (2006).

(9)  
   a.  Tus mascotas se murieron  
       your pets REFL die.PAST.3pl  
       Your pets died
b. El equipo se creció
   The team REFL grow. PAST.3sg
   The team grew stronger
c. La actriz se envejeció
   The actress REFL get-old. PAST.3sg
   The actress got old
d. El niño se adelgazó
   The boy REFL slim. PAST.3sg
   The boy slimmed

4.3. The *haber* type
Following the description of Fernández Soriano & Táboas (1999), *haber* is a state predicate that takes
two arguments, one of them a locative. The locative argument, however, never appears as a central
direct argument, but in a prepositional phrase. The second argument of this state predicate is always
selected as PSA. Therefore, we can propose that, in terms of macroroles, this verb behaves as a state
with only one argument and, thus, we stipulate this in the logical structure, as can be seen in (10).

(10) Hay nubes en el cielo
    be. PRES.3sg clouds in the sky
    There are clouds in the sky
    be-in' (sky, nubes) [MR1]

Since the “*haber*” logical structure is specified as [MR1] and it is a state, the argument takes
the undergoer macrorole and it is selected as PSA. Once again, we can see that this logical structure
is incompatible with se because the undergoer is already privileged.

4.4. The *gustar* type
Verbs like *gustar, faltar, importar* or *sobrar* have a strange syntactic behavior. *Gustar*, for instance, is
semantically similar to the English verb *to like*, but their syntactic uses are different, as we can see in
(11).

(11) a. I like apples
    b. (A mí) me gustan las manzanas
    (to me) 1sgDAT like. PRES.3pl apples
Both sentences have apparently the same logical structure: \textit{like}' (I, apples). However, in English, the first argument of the LS takes the actor macrorole, and the second argument the undergoer, and the actor is selected as PSA. In Spanish, on the other hand, we can see that the second argument of the logical structure is the one selected as PSA of the sentence.

I suggest that the difference between \textit{to like} and \textit{gustar} is similar to the difference between the English verbs \textit{to own} and \textit{to belong}, as it is proposed in Van Valin & LaPolla (1997). Therefore, I put forward that the logical structures of verbs of the Spanish \textit{gustar} type take only one macrorole [MR1]. Since they are states, the macrorole assigned to the argument is the undergoer and this is the argument selected as PSA. The first argument, on the other hand, does not take a macrorole and it is realized as a dative clitic and as an optional PP, as we can see in figure 2.

![Diagram of sentence structure]

\begin{center}
\textit{Figure 2. Linking in “me gustan las manzanas” (gustar type)}
\end{center}

Therefore, as we can see, verbs like \textit{gustar}, \textit{faltar}, \textit{importar} or \textit{sobrar} are all states, that, in spite of having two semantic arguments, are M-intransitive. Since they are states, the macrorole...
assigned is the undergoer, and the undergoer argument is selected as PSA. Thus, in this kind of sentences the undergoer is already the privileged argument again and, as a consequence, they are incompatible with the lexical phenomenon of se.

A very similar case happens with complex verbs as dar pena/miedo/gusto (to feel sorrow/fear/delight). Its syntactic behavior is the same of the gustar type of verbs, as we can see in (12).

(12) A mí me da miedo tu opinión
to me 1sgDAT give-fear your opinion
I am afraid of your opinion
feel.afraid' (1sg, tu opinión) [MR1]

5. Summary
As we have seen, all the kinds of verbs that are incompatible with se in the non-PSA construction have one thing in common: they cannot undergo a lexical phenomenon that seeks to privilege the undergoer, either because they don’t have macrorole arguments (haber type) or because their undergoer argument is already privileged (morir, haber and gustar type). Therefore, they are incompatible with se.

These data support the proposal that Spanish se is the morphological manifestation of a lexical phenomenon that modifies the logical structure of the sentence, diminishing the actor’s importance and privileging the undergoer when it is present (González Vergara 2006, 2009).

6. A real exception
In spite of this, verbs of the morir type are expressed sometimes with se in a non-PSA construction, as we can see in (13).

(13) Se muere/moria bien cuando se muere/moria por un ideal
REFL die.PRES/IMPF well when REFL die.PRES/IMPF for an ideal
One dies/used to die well when one dies/used to die for an ideal

This is not a very frequent kind of sentence, but it is grammatical. However, a sentence like (14) seems to be impossible:

(14) *Se murió en la guerra
REFL die.PAST in the war
One died in the war
Thus, it appears that the verb *morir* needs to have an imperfect aspect operator to appear with *se*. We also have to notice that the meaning of (13) is very similar to an attributive sentence like *la muerte puede ser buena cuando es por un ideal* (dying can be good when it happens for an ideal). These are the characteristic properties of the Spanish middle construction (Felíu, 2008; González Vergara, 2006, 2009).

Therefore, we can put forward that, under certain conditions, proper of the Spanish middle construction (imperfect aspect and possible modality operators, and attributive meaning) verbs of the “*morir*” type are actually compatible with *se*.

7. References


