

The Development of the Passive and Impersonal in Romance: Passive-to-Impersonal or Impersonal-to-Passive?

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Sohn, Joong-Sun. 1999. The Development of the Passive and Impersonal in Romance: Passive-to-Impersonal or Impersonal-to-Passive?. *Linguistics* 7-2, 303-314. The main purpose of this paper is to criticize the hypotheses that the so-called reflexive-impersonal has been developed via reanalysis of the reflexive-passive, and show that actually the reflexive-passive has developed later than the reflexive-impersonal. Apparently, the former is attested earlier than the latter in the literature. However, the apparent chronological precedence of the passive can be attributed to some linguists' definition of certain reflexive-marked clauses as passive, and to the fact that the impersonal requires more radical morphosyntactic changes than the passive, and thus a longer period of time. (Yeungnam University)

1. Introduction

All Romance languages have constructions with a marking whose original function is to mark reflexivity. These reflexive-marked constructions are used for several purposes in current Romance languages. The following examples represent some of the uses of the reflexive mark in five Romance languages:

- (1) a. Juan se vió en el espejo. (Spanish) (Reflexive)
'John saw himself in the mirror'
b. Ils se sont rencontrés. (French) (Reciprocal)
'They met each other'

- c. As janelas quebraram-se. (Portuguese) (Inchoative)
 'The windows broke'
- d. I libri si bruciavano per distruggere l'evidenza.
 (Italian) (Passive)
 'The books were burned to destroy the evidence.'
- e. Se bea mult whisky aici. (Romanian) (Impersonal)
 'One drinks much whisky here'

In this paper I will focus on two uses of the reflexive-marked construction whose developmental order has been controversial: reflexive-passive and reflexive-impersonal. I will examine the hypothesis that the reflexive-impersonal has developed via reanalysis of the reflexive-passive, and suggest that the interpretation of the reflexive-marked construction with an agentive verb was ambiguous between passive and impersonal from the initial stage. The apparent chronological precedence of the passive can be attributed to some linguists' definition of certain reflexive-marked construction as passive, and to the fact that the passive can be verified simply by the occurrence with e.g., an agent-oriented adverbial, whereas the impersonal requires radical morphosyntactic changes such as subject-verb inversion, derivation from intransitive verbs, and violation of subject-verb agreement. These morphosyntactic changes by nature would take a longer period of time than the simple addition of an agent-oriented phrase.

2. The passive-to-impersonal hypothesis

Naro (1976:802-3) has claimed that in Portuguese the reflexive-impersonal developed from the passive *se* via reanalysis of it as referring to a non-specified human, i.e., an impersonal active subject. Vincent (1988:302-3) and Maiden (1995:164-5) advance a similar claim for Italian. It is true that rather clear examples of the impersonal such as those in (2) (e.g., *SE*-clauses with an invariant third person singular

verb) are attested later than those of the passive in most Romance languages.¹⁾

While intransitive *SE*-impersonals are standardized in all Romance languages (except French), non-agreeing transitive impersonals have not been completely standardized in most Romance languages. They are, however, common in the colloquial speech forms.²⁾

- (2) a. Si compra due penne. (Italian)
'One buys two pens' (Lepschy 1986:146)
- b. Se alquila los apartamentos. (Spanish)
'One rents the **apartments**' (Otero 1972:237)
- c. Matou-se os escravos. (Portuguese)
'One killed the **slaves**' (Azevedo 1980:73)
- d. Se citește multe cărți azi (Romanian)
'One reads many books these days'

Posner (1996:270-1) observes that in Spanish, Portuguese, and Italian a sporadic use of (rather clearly) impersonal constructions is attested from the fourteenth century, but that only in the sixteenth century the consistent use of them began to abound.³⁾

1) Throughout this paper, italicized and capitalized *SE* is used to represent Romance reflexive markings. Regular forms are used in specific languages.

2) Unlike these Romance languages, French has not developed this type of *se*-impersonal. It does not have intransitive *se*-impersonals at all. It has transitive *se*-impersonals but they are different from those in other Romance languages, in that the expletive pronominal *il* is employed for the subject position in these clauses:

- (i) a. Il se trouve que nous **sommes** né(e) dans la même ville.
'We happen to have **been** born in the same city'
(lit. 'One finds that...') (Lang and Perez 1996:135)
- b. Il se pense plus de **choses** qu'il ne s'en dit.
'One thinks more than one says' (Posner 1996:269)

3) On the contrary, Kemmer (1993:178-9) claims that the reflexive-passive developed from the reflexive-impersonal, and quotes the following examples from

This chronological gap, however, may not be sufficient to prove the impersonal-from-passive hypothesis. First, this hypothesis is based on their definition of the subject-initial *SE*-construction as passive. For instance, Stefanini (1982:97), who states that both passive and impersonal had already appeared at the beginning of the thirteenth century when continuous written documentation began, sees verb-initial word order as a property of the impersonal. Thus, he considers (3a) a passive, and (3b) an impersonal:

- (3) a. La colonia si chiamò Forum Julii. (Passive)
 'The colony was called Forum Julii'
 b. Si chiamò subito il guardiano. (Impersonal)
 'The warden was called immediately' (Stefanini 1982:103)

Regarding the distinction of the passive and impersonal, Lepschy's (1986:144) following statements about the Italian *si*-construction are suggestive:

Florentine (*ia*) and modern Italian (*ib*):

- (i) a. Qui è si legge troppi libri. (Florentine)
 'One reads many books here'
 b. Qui si leggono troppi libri. (Italian)
 'Many books are read here'

In the Florentine clause the verb does not agree with the postverbal object and is singular, while the verb in the standard Italian clause does, and is thus plural. Kemmer holds that Italian evolved out of the fourteenth century literary Florentine, and created a subject out of the former object of the impersonal verb. Posner (p.c.) sees this view as too simplistic. She states that very little about modern Italian can be deduced from the state of modern Florentine dialects. It is true that in many Florentine dialects verb agreement was often (but not always) not made with a postverbal noun phrase. But this does not mean that the impersonal historically preceded the passive involving the verb agreement, which is found earlier in texts and probably developed from the true reflexive form.

If I were asked: 'How do you know that (18) [*a Roma il vino si beveva spesso annacquato* 'in Rome wine was often drunk watered down'] is a passive, and that (22) [*si compra una penna* 'one buys a pen'] has an ordinary impersonal interpretation, but could also be read as a passive?', I would have to answer: 'Because that is what my knowledge of Italian tells me'. In the first place, I would appeal to the meaning of the sentence: I can paraphrase *si beveva* as *era bevuto* ['was drunk'], not as *uno beveva* ['one drank'] ... in (18), and *si compra* in (22) either *è comprata* [is bought] or as *uno compra* [one buys], depending on the circumstances, but the two paraphrases are not interchangeable. ... On the other hand, in *non si è visto per niente Mario quest'anno, e per questo è molto criticato*, in spite of the position of *Mario* after *si è visto*, the most natural interpretation is a passive and not an impersonal one (Mario has not been seen at all this year, and because of this he is much criticized).

Lepschy holds that word order is not a crucial factor, but that the distinction heavily depends on intuition, in other words, on semantics, not syntax. Paradoxically, his statements suggest how hard the intuitive decision between the passive and impersonal is. As he claimed, the word order may not be a crucial factor. But at the same time, the semantic difference between the passive and impersonal interpretation of a *se*-construction cannot be equated with the semantic difference between the periphrastic passive and the *uno*-impersonal. Even with the impersonal interpretation, grammatically the subject is still the logical object, not the *se*, because the verb agrees with the logical object NP, not with *se*. Furthermore, since the agent normally cannot be expressed in the passive use, the distinction becomes more tricky. Due to the subtle semantic difference between the passive and impersonal, sometimes the distinction itself becomes meaningless. Posner (1996:271), who holds the impersonal-from-passive view, adds a disclaimer:

It can be suggested that the impersonal *SE* construction results from a re-interpretation of an inverted (*SE VS*) construction as non-inverted (*SVO*). The difference in semantics between an agentless passive and an indefinite agent construction is often so slight that one merges into the other. Whether indeed a new construction arose at the beginning of the modern era, or merely that the semantic range of the old construction widened, is a matter of debate.

I assume that the interpretation of a *SE*-clause with an agentive verb was ambiguous from the initial stage of its evolution: one interpretation focuses on passivity, and the other focuses on impersonality. More specifically, I assume that the considering *SE*-construction was impersonal with a potential secondary passive reading. The primary use of the *SE* has always been the reflexive throughout the history of Romance, and its major pragmatic function is exclusion of the external agent. Thus, even in the reflexive 'passive', when the agent phrase is absent, the implied agent is generally understood as indefinite or non-specific, blurring the sharp distinction between the impersonal and passive. The impersonality of the *SE*-construction in the earlier stage is directly supported by the constraint that the Romance *SE*-construction is normally not allowed to have specific agents implied, as shown in (4):

- (4) a. *Le finestre si sono rotte da Giovanni. (Italian)
 b. *Las ventanas se rompieron por Juan. (Spanish)
 c. *As janelas quebraram-se por João. (Portuguese)
 d. *Ferestrele s-au spart de Ion (Romanian)
 e. *Les fenêtres se sont cassées par Jean. (French)
 'The windows were broken by John'

It is also indirectly supported by the ambiguous taxonomy of the *SE*-construction. Butt & Benjamin (1988:303-4), for example, translate

all Spanish *se*-clauses, subject-initial or verb-initial, with English passives and call them impersonal, as in (5):

- (5) a. Se discutieron varios problemas.
 'Several problems were discussed' (p. 303)
- b. Los cangrejos se cuecen en vino blanco.
 '(The) crabs are cooked in white wine' (p. 304)

Napoli (1976) uses the term 'indefinite *si*' for the Italian *si*-construction. Schrotten (1976) call the Portuguese *se*-construction passive-reflexive or pseudo-reflexive, and glosses all relevant clauses with English impersonal *one*-clauses. Mallinson (1986, 1988) use the term 'impersonal passive' for the Romanian *se*-construction.

I hypothesize, therefore, that the passive and impersonal developed in principle simultaneously via an ambiguous interpretation of the *SE*-construction with an agentive verb. The *SE*-impersonal was already adumbrated from the early stage of the *SE*-construction. The verb-initial *SE*-clause (ultimately with an invariant singular verb), is a morphosyntactic actualization of the impersonal interpretation, not a reanalysis of the passive.⁴⁾ This actualization is still in progress. For instance, the transitive impersonal *SE*-construction is increasingly being used in most Romance languages, but has not completely been standardized yet.

It can be suggested that the chronological discrepancy between the passive and (rather clear cases of) impersonal is a secondary result of the fact that the impersonal interpretation of the *SE*-clause is by nature harder to actualize syntactically than the passive interpretation, because it requires more radical syntactic changes than the passive. Addition of an apparently agentive phrase that is oblique constitutes sufficient evidence for a *SE*-clause to be interpreted 'clearly' as a passive. A

4) A verb-initial *SE*-clause is in the form of '*SE*-Verb(-*SE*) + Subject NP', and a subject-initial clause is in the form of 'Subject NP + *SE*-Verb(-*SE*)'.

SE-clause must undergo radical changes to become a (clear case of) impersonal. These radical changes are related to the process by which the reflexive *SE* eventually occupies the subject position from which it can control verbal agreement. This subjectivizing process includes subject-verb inversion, (i.e., $S SE V \rightarrow SE V S$), and reinterpretation of the inverted *SE* as a subject, which eventually brings about loss of subject-verb agreement (i.e., the verb becomes singular invariably). This process can also involve introduction of the 'prepositional accusative' *a* as in Spanish. The clause in (6a), which lacks the prepositional accusative, is ambiguous between reflexive and impersonal interpretation. Whereas, (6b), which has a singular verb with *a*, only renders an impersonal interpretation (Posner 1996:271):⁵

- (6) a. Se mataron los cristianos.
 'The Christians killed themselves', or
 'The Christians were killed (by unspecified persons)'
 b. Se mató a los cristianos.
 'The Christians were killed (by unspecified persons)'

It is not surprising that the morphosyntactic changes mentioned so far would take a longer period of time to grammatically actualize than the simple addition of an agent-licensing adverbial to a reflexive clause to be actualized as a passive.

5) The 'prepositional accusative' is also called a 'personal accusative' since it refers to only human objects. See Posner (1996:121-2) for a brief history of prepositional accusatives in Romance languages. Also see Green (1988:106-7) and Penny (1991:102-3) for the Spanish prepositional accusative *a*, and Mallinson (1988:409) for the Romanian counterpart *pe* (<*per* 'through'). The following is a Romanian example in which the prepositional accusative *pe* occurs.

- (i) Ion s-a splat pe mini.
 'John washed his hands'

According to Posner (p.c.), however, no case is found in Romanian like the Spanish one in (6b), although there can be some exceptions in colloquialism.

Given that the verb-initial word order is one sign of impersonalness, there is another reason that the passive apparently tends chronologically to precede the impersonal in the evolution of the *SE*-construction. The Romance reflexive *SE* has been extended to the passive and impersonal through the intermediate stage of inchoative (Haspelmath 1990:45-6; Givón 1990:638-9). The inchoative, which was widespread in early Romance, has subject-initial word order. When *SE* was extended to agentive verbs, the most common word order would probably still have been subject-initial. Naro (1968:143) observes, for instance, that in Portuguese the reflexive-passive is subject-initial in the early medieval period, but it tends to be verb-initial in later periods. This historical precedence of the subject-initial *se*-clause, however, should not be interpreted as evidence for the passive as the source of the impersonal. As mentioned above, *SE*-clauses (more specifically *SE*-clauses with agentive verbs) were ambiguous from the outset between passive and impersonal, and the emergence of the impersonal clause can be interpreted as a morphosyntactic actualization of the impersonal interpretation, not as a reanalysis of the passive.

The reflexive-impersonal from intransitive verbs has become standardized in most Romance languages, but the reflexive-impersonal from transitive verbs has not yet (see Sohn 1998:49-50). However, this should not be taken to imply that the reflexive extended to intransitive verbs earlier than to transitive verbs. It only means that reflexive *SE* has taken a shorter period of time to syntactically occupy the subject position in intransitive clauses than in transitive clauses. It is natural that the reflexive marking extend to transitive verbs first, since the reflexive *per se* is syntactically transitive, subcategorizing two arguments. In Spanish, for example, extension of the reflexive to intransitive verbs is attested in the sixteenth century. Whereas, reflexive-impersonals from transitive verbs are attested from the fourteenth century (Posner 1996:271).⁶⁾

6) Likewise, based on his observations on Russian, Mayo (1983:333) suggests

Once again, the reason for the earlier standardization of the intransitive reflexive-passive seems to be related to the subjectivization process of the reflexive discussed above. In intransitive reflexive clauses, the verb has no non-reflexive NP to agree with grammatically (particularly for number). In this situation, *SE* can be rather easily reanalyzed as occupying the subject position, with which the verb agrees and occurs in singular form. Whereas there is a non-reflexive NP in transitive clauses. If the verb does not agree with the NP, it will occur in singular form; if it does agree with the NP, the verb will be singular or plural according the number of the NP. In addition, the status of the grammatical role of *SE* and the NP depends on the agreement. Most Romance languages are in such an ambivalent situation, as recapitulated by the Spanish examples in (7). These are from Otero (1972:237) who calls the non-agreeing reflexive clause (7a) 'agrammatical' (i.e., ungrammatical but acceptable).

- (7) a. Se alquila (sg.) los apartamentos. (Non-Agreeing)
 'One rents the apartments'
 b. Se alquilan (pl.) los apartamentos. (Agreeing)

That is to say, the conflict in grammatical agreement and the accompanying conflict in grammatical role of *SE* and NP cause the reflexive to take a relatively long period of time to become a bona fide subject in transitive clauses, while it takes less time to become a subject in intransitive clauses without such an agreement conflict.

3. Conclusion

I have suggested that the interpretation of the *SE*-construction with

that intransitive reflexive verbs have developed by analogy with the function of the reflexive marking in transitive verbs, i.e., intransitivization. That is, the reflexive extends to intransitive verbs later than transitive verbs.

an agentive verb was ambiguous between passive and impersonal from the initial stage, and that the impersonal *SE*-clause, which occurs in verb-initial word order and ultimately an invariant singular verb, is a morphosyntactic actualization of the impersonal interpretation. This actualization of the impersonal is still in progress in all Romance languages except French.

The apparent chronological precedence of the passive can be attributed to certain linguists' definition of the subject-initial *SE*-construction as passive, and to the fact that the passive can be verified simply by the occurrence with an agent-oriented adverbial, whereas the impersonal requires radical morphosyntactic changes such as subject-verb inversion, derivation from intransitive verbs, and violation of subject-verb agreement. These morphosyntactic changes by nature would take a longer period of time than the simple addition of an oblique agent phrase.

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