

Reflexive and reciprocal interpretations of *se*-clauses in Brazilian Portuguese

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We focus on two properties of reflexive constructions in Brazilian Portuguese (BP): (I) the possibility of a restricted set of verbs to express reflexivity in their intransitive entry without the clitic *se*, which we propose to be a manifestation of lexical reflexivity; (II) the possibility of *se*-clauses with a plural subject to convey both reflexivity (REFL) and reciprocity (REC), which raises questions regarding the underspecified or ambiguous nature of this construction.

We address these phenomena and we show that they are empirically related. We identify a semantic characterization of lexical reflexive verbs in BP, and we propose that it acts as a confound for tests that have been claimed to show that *se* is an unambiguous item, underspecified with respect to REFL/REC. Having removed this confound, we instead provide evidence for *se*-clauses to be ambiguous between these two interpretations. Our proposal is supported by data from a questionnaire on 154 native speakers of BP, which are remarkably parallel to results on Italian [1].

I. Lexical reflexivity – In BP finite clauses, some verbs can express REFL without the clitic *se* (1). This configuration is not productive, but restricted to a limited set of predicates (2).

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| (1) A (se) depilou | (2) A *(se) puniu |
| A se epilated | A se punished |
| 'A epilated (herself)' | 'A punished herself' |

The grammaticality of (1) is a standout case among Romance languages, which are assumed to generally require *se* for expressing REFL with transitive verbs [2]. We suggest that the possible omission of *se* indicates the presence of a lexical reflexive entry (parallel to English cases like *Jim shaved/washed*), which is discernible not only in the morpho-syntactic realization, but also at the semantic level. Indeed, while in (2) A is necessarily the agent and the patient of the punishing event, in (1) there is no obligatory co-reference between subject, agent and patient, as proposed by [3,1,4] for other languages. (1) may be true if A was epilated by someone else, as long as she showed volitional participation in the act (i.e., the sentence would not hold true if A underwent the action against her will). This interpretation is labelled Passive-Collaborative (PCo) in [1]. We provide empirical evidence for the PCo reading to be systematically accessible with all BP verbs that can express REFL without *se*, as in (1).

II. Ambiguity of *se*-clauses – BP *se*-clauses with a plural subject may express both REFL and REC. The ability of one construction to convey both meanings is attested in several unrelated languages [5]. To account for this pattern, it has been proposed that REF/REC constructions are ambiguous [5,10]. This proposal was disputed by semantic works [6,7,8,9] proposing that forms expressing both REFL and REC are underspecified between the two interpretations, which are analyzed as two instances of one and the same meaning. In support of this underspecification analysis, [6] claimed that Cheyenne clauses with the REFL/REC morpheme *-ahte* allow a so-called 'mixed' interpretation: partially REFL and partially REC (3iii).

- (3) Ka'ěškóne-ho é-axeen-áhtse-o'o
child-PL.AN 3-scratch.AN-ahte-3PL.AN
i. 'Some children scratched themselves'; ii. 'Some children scratched each other';
iii. 'Some children scratched each other and some children scratched themselves'

The availability of mixed readings has been proposed to constitute a potential universal for all languages where REFL and REC share the same form. This possibility has been challenged with respect to Italian: [1] showed that Italian *si*-clauses do not support mixed readings, and developed semantically [5,10]'s ambiguity analysis. We suggest that the same analysis is applicable for BP. We propose that mixed readings are not generally available in plural *se*-clauses, but that they only emerge with lexical reflexive verbs as a result of their intrinsic PCo meaning, which, as claimed above, semantically characterizes reflexive BP verbs that do not require *se*.

Let us illustrate this hypothesis with examples. In (4) below, the PCo interpretation that we outlined for (1) holds for each individual in the denotation of the subject: the sentence is consistent with any scenario in which A, B, C and D were epilated while being volitional, regardless of who the agent of the action was. The PCo interpretation subsumes the so-called ‘mixed’ reading, as (4) would hold true if A and B epilated themselves while C and D epilated each other. On the other hand, in *se*-clauses with verbs that require *se*, the only accessible REFL interpretation (available on top of the REC reading) is parallel to the one outlined in (2): in (5) each individual in the subject is required to perform the action necessarily on herself. Thus, we propose that ‘mixed’ readings should be taken as an indication of underspecification of *se*-clauses only if they emerge with transitive verbs, while we expect this interpretation to be systematically accessible with verbs that we propose to be lexical reflexives. We tested this hypothesis on a questionnaire.

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| <p>(4) A, B, C e D <i>se</i> depilaram
 A, B, C and D <i>se</i> epilated
 i. ‘A,B,C and D epilated themselves’
 ii. ‘A,B,C and D epilated each other’
 iii. ‘A,B,C and D epilated’</p> | <p>(5) A,B,C e D <i>se</i> puniram
 A,B,C and D <i>se</i> punished
 i. ‘A,B,C and D punished themselves’
 ii. ‘A,B,C and D punished each other’</p> |
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Questionnaire – We adopted the experimental setting of [1]. We selected 5 verbs where *se* is obligatory for a REFL reading (*admirar* ‘admire’, *criticar* ‘criticize’, *punir* ‘punish’, *premiar* ‘give a prize’, *escolher* ‘choose’) and 5 verbs where it is not (*depilar* ‘epilate’, *vestir* ‘dress up’, *maquiar* ‘apply make up’, *pentear* ‘comb’, *arrumar* ‘suit up’). Further, we tested the possibility of these verbs to describe PCo and ‘mixed’ scenarios in *se*-clauses. (i) *PCo scenario*: We provided short stories where B carried out an action on A, while A was collaborative. The stories were accompanied by the sentence ‘A ***se verb***’ to judge true or false. (ii) *‘Mixed’ scenario*: Short stories where A and B carried out the action on themselves while C and D carried out the action on each other. The stories were accompanied by the sentence ‘A, B, C and D ***se verb***’ to judge true or false. The questionnaire was run online. Each participant was exposed to five target items and ten fillers. 154 native speakers of BP participated. The results are summarized in Figure 1, which shows the acceptance rates of *se*-clauses with the tested verbs to describe PCo and ‘mixed’ scenarios (i.e., the percentage of participants that answered true to the target items). The data show a correspondence between the existence of a lexical reflexive entry and the availability of PCo and mixed readings. For transitive verbs that express REFL with *se*, the acceptance in mixed reading is marginal, therefore suggesting an ambiguity analysis of *se*-clauses. The results are further analyzed with a multilevel logistic regression.

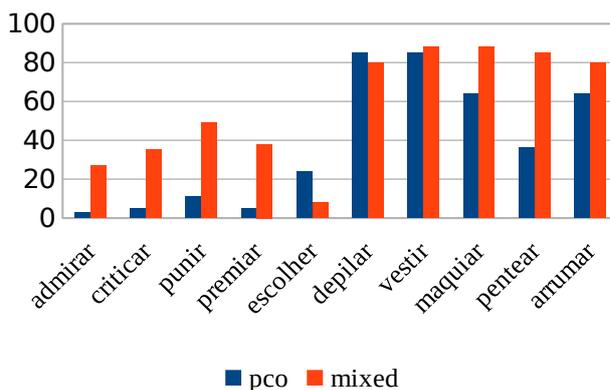


Figure 1. Acceptance rates of tested verbs (%).

Conclusions – We identified BP verbs that allow a REFL reading without *se* and we proposed that they are lexical reflexives: they allow a so-called PCo interpretation, where the subject does not necessarily coincide with both the agent and the patient of the action described by the verb. We suggested that PCo interpretations play a role in the availability of ‘mixed’ readings, considered in the literature as evidence for the underspecification of REFL/REC constructions. After removing this confound, our data point in favor of ambiguity of *se*-clauses in BP: ‘mixed’ readings are not systematically available with non-lexical reflexive verbs that do not allow a PCo interpretation. Our data are in line with previous results on Italian, showing a similar manifestation of lexical reflexive meanings, as well as ambiguity between REFL and REC in both languages. While cross-linguistic generalizations cannot yet be made on the basis of our results, they do provide an encouraging step towards a possible unified semantic analysis of *se* in Romance languages.

References

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