

# Agency and Middles in Ibero-Romance: A Case for *i\**

Imanol Suárez-Palma

## 1. Introduction

Middle-passive constructions in Ibero-Romance show imperfective tenses, agreement between the verb and the preverbal theme DP, and the impossibility of introducing an agent by means of a *by*-phrase; however, these sentences denote the participation of a generic implicit agent/experiencer in the event.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, while the reflexive clitic pronoun *se* is an obligatory feature in these contexts in Ibero-Romance languages such as Spanish (1a) or Catalan (1b), it is said to be optional in Asturian<sup>2</sup> (1c) (ALLA 2001).

- (1) a. Este pan \*(se) desmiga fácilmente (\*por Juan). Spanish  
this bread RFL crumbles easily by Juan  
b. Aquest pa \*(s')esmolla facilment (\*per Joan). Catalan  
this bread RFL-crumbles easily by Joan  
c. Esti pan esmigáya(se) fácil (\*por Xuan). Asturian  
this bread crumbles-RFL easily by Xuan  
'This bread crumbles easily.'

Nonetheless, a closer examination of the data reveals that such alleged optionality abides by some sort of systematicity; thus, when these structures contain a verb denoting an activity or accomplishment that notionally requires the participation of an agent or experiencer in the event, such as *escribir* ('to write'), the reflexive becomes obligatory.

- (2) a. Les poemes d'amor escriben\*(se) con facilitá. Asturian  
the poems of-love write-RFL with ease  
b. Los poemas de amor se escriben con facilidad. Spanish  
the poems of love RFL write with ease  
'Love poems are easy to write.'

Here, I tie the presence of the reflexive in Ibero-Romance middle constructions to the interpretation of an implicit generic agent participating in the event, which may be rephrased as *anyone* (e.g. *anyone can write love poems easily*). I propose that *se* spells out a passive Voice head in the derivation in these languages (Marantz 1984; Kratzer 1996; Schäfer 2008; Suárez-Palma 2019; 2020; 2021), thus favoring the agentive reading and giving rise to a generic *se*-passive construction (3a). As for the non-reflexive counterparts of Asturian middles, I show they are indeed non-agentive; I propose these sentences are generic anticausative configurations, therefore lacking Voice and, as a result, *se* too (3b). I argue that what differentiates Asturian from other Ibero-Romance languages like Spanish or Catalan is the fact that, in the latter, the reflexive clitic spells out *v* in anticausative events that entail a resulting state ( $v_{GO}$ , in Cuervo's (2014) terms),<sup>3</sup> whereas in Asturian this verbalizing head does not have phonological content.

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<sup>1</sup> The question of whether this argument is syntactically realized (Roberts 1993; Stroik 1992, 1995, 1999) or just semantically (van Oosten 1986; Zribi-Hertz 1993; Ackema & Schoorlemmer 1995) has been a hot topic within the literature on middles, which has reached no consensus.

<sup>2</sup> Asturian is a minority Romance language spoken in the diglossic region of Asturias, in northern Spain.

<sup>3</sup> Certain Spanish inchoative contexts do not require the reflexive, such as *hirvió la leche*, 'the milk boiled,' or *reventó el globo*, 'the balloon burst.' See Vivanco Gefaell (2016) for an analysis of such sentences.

The ambivalence of the reflexive in languages other than Asturian is possibly due to its status as an Elsewhere Condition (Pescarini 2016).

- (3) a. *Generic se-passive*  
 Esti pan esmigáyase fácil.  
 [VoiceP *se* [VP V [VP *esmigayar* [DP *esti pan*]]]
- b. *Generic anticausative*  
 Esti pan esmigáya fácil.  
 [VP V [VP *esmigayar* [DP *esti pan*]]]

The paper is structured as follows: in Section 2, I analyze data supporting the idea that the reflexive is indeed related to agentivity in Asturian middle contexts, specifically, by looking at how these contexts (dis)allow purpose clauses; Section 3 provides further evidence for the hypothesis presented here, this time having to do with the interaction between the constructions under consideration and non-core dative arguments. Finally, Section 4 concludes the paper.

## 2. The analysis

The *Gramática de la llingua asturiana* ('Grammar of the Asturian Language') (ALLA 2001) –the main descriptive grammar of Asturian– offers a heterogeneous classification of structures that may convey the middle reading based on whether the reflexive pronoun *se* is present or not. When describing reflexively marked passives –and consequently middle-passive sentences like (1c)– the grammar explains that in these structures “*ye frecuente que l'usu del pronome reflexive resulte potestativu*” (ALLA 2001: 355) ['the use of the reflexive pronoun is frequently optional;’ translation my own]. Nonetheless, a thorough scrutiny of the data from Asturian middle-passives reveals that such optionality is rather systematic: it is only possible when a change of state/location predicate occurs in them, i.e. verbs entering the causative alternation (Schäfer 2009, *inter alia*) which can convey both an agentive and a non-agentive reading, like the ones in (4).

- (4) a. Los barcos de papel fúnden(se) rápido.  
 the boats of paper sink.RFL fast  
 Non-agentive: ‘Paper boats sink quickly.’  
 Agentive: ‘Paper boats are quick to sink.’
- b. Esti material ruémpe(se) fácil.  
 this material breaks.RFL easy  
 Non-agentive: ‘This material breaks easily.’  
 Agentive: ‘This material is easy to break.’

These constructions allow the insertion of the PP *por sí mesmu* ('by itself'), which enhances their non-agentive reading. Crucially, such PP is only possible if the reflexive pronoun is omitted, as in (5).

- (5) Esti material ruémpe(\*?se) fácil por sí mesmo.  
 this material breaks.RFL easy by itself.N  
 ‘This material breaks easily by itself.’

Control into purpose clauses has become a diagnostic for the presence of an implicit argument in passive constructions crosslinguistically (Bhatt & Panceva 2006); interestingly, Asturian middle-passive sentences only license these clauses if the reflexive pronoun is present (6).

- (6) Esti material ruémpe\*(se) fácil pa reciclalo afechiscamente.  
 this material breaks.RFL easy for recycle-it properly  
 ‘This material breaks easily so that it is recycled properly.’

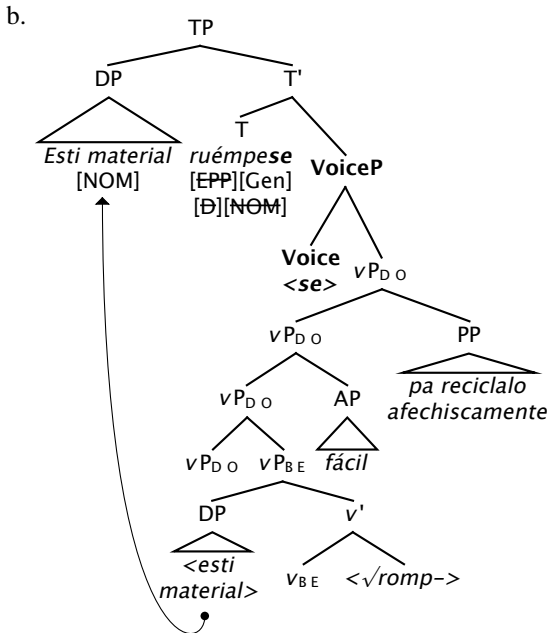
Additionally, verbs denoting activities or accomplishments that notionally imply the participation of an agent/experiencer in the event require the reflexive pronoun when they occur in Asturian middle

passives (7). As a result, these verbs only allow an agentive reading, and therefore the possibility of licensing the PP *por sí mesmu* ('by itself') is ruled out.

- (7) Les noveles d'amor lléen\*(se) con facilidá (\*por sí mesmes) / pa entretense.  
 the novels of-love read.RFL with ease by themselves.F for entertain.RFL  
 'Romantic novels read easily in order to keep oneself entertained.'

In light of these data, I propose that the presence of the reflexive pronoun in Asturian middle-passive constructions is not optional; instead, it is tied to the projection of a passive Voice head in the derivation, which is spelled out by *se* (Schäfer 2008; Suárez-Palma 2019, 2020, 2021), thus contributing to the agentive reading and giving rise to a generic *se*-passive configuration. Here, I assume Cuervo's (2003) typology of verbalizing heads, whereby activities (e.g. *lleer*, 'to read') are verbalized by  $v_{DO}$ , verbs of change/happening (e.g. *asoceder* 'to happen') by  $v_{GO}$ , and states and existentials (e.g. *tar triste*, 'to be sad') by  $v_{BE}$ . Moreover, these simple events may combine with each other, creating bieventive structures such as causatives (e.g. *Xose quemó les pataques*, 'Xose burnt the potatoes'), through the combination of an activity subevent and a stative one ( $v_{DO} + v_{BE}$ ), or anticausatives (e.g. *quemaron les pataques por sí mesmes*, 'the potatoes burned by themselves'), by means of embedding a stative subevent under one of change ( $v_{GO} + v_{BE}$ ). Thus, the derivation for the generic *se*-passive in (6) is shown in (8).

- (8) a. *Esti material ruémpese fácil pa reciclalo afechiscamente.*  
 'This material breaks easily so that it is recycled properly.'



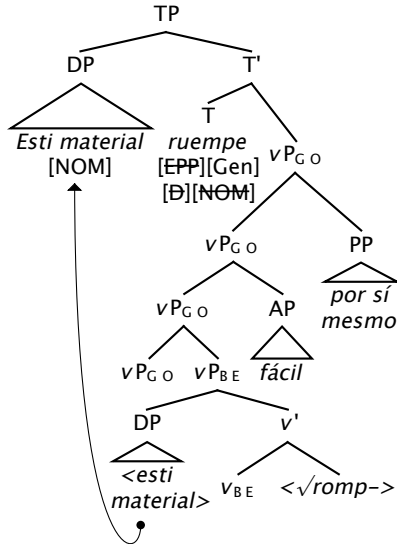
Since the example in (8a) conveys an externally caused change of state, the derivation in (8b) comprises an activity subevent ( $v_{DO}$ ) and a stative one ( $v_{BE}$ ), both of which generate a causative structure. The agentive reading stems from the Voice head merging atop  $v_{DO}$ , which would normally introduce an external argument, but here is rendered passive by the reflexive clitic pronoun *se* that spells it out. The root  $\sqrt{\text{romp}}$  merges  $v_{BE}$ 's complement position, and undergoes head movement until it reaches  $T^{\circ}$ , while incorporating the reflexive clitic as it passes through Voice $^{\circ}$ . The internal argument *esti material* sits in the specifier of  $v_{BE}$  and is probed to SpecTP to satisfy its EPP and [D] features. Following Suárez-Palma (2020), I suggest that the presence of a generic operator Gen in  $T^{\circ}$  favors the generic interpretation.

As for the non-agentive interpretation of (5), I propose that this sentence does not contain a Voice projection—hence the absence of *se*—since it is a generic anticausative structure. Thus, only verbs entering the causative alternation and certain unaccusative verbs of movement entailing a resulting state (e.g. *cayer*, 'to fall down') may occur in these contexts. In other words, the verb's particular argument and

event structures determine the presence or absence of *se* when occurring in Asturian middle contexts. The derivation for (5) is given in (9) below.

(9) a. *Esti material ruempe fácil por sí mesmo.*

b.



Another bieventive structure comprising a subevent of change ( $v_{GO}$ ) and a stative one ( $v_{BE}$ ) is shown in (9), this time without Voice, giving rise to an anticausative configuration. The root  $\sqrt{romp-}$  is verbalized on its way to  $T^{\circ}$ , while the internal argument *esti material* raises to preverbal subject position to check the EPP features in  $T^{\circ}$ .<sup>4</sup>

Here, I have shown that the agentive and the non-agentive interpretations available in middle-passive constructions containing change of state predicates in Ibero-Romance are tied to two different configurations: on the one hand, (i) a generic *se*-passive denoting an externally caused change of state and, on the other, (ii) a generic anticausative conveying an internally caused one. The distinction between these two structures is even more salient in Asturian, due to the presence versus absence of the reflexive clitic pronoun *se*, respectively. Thus, the generic *se*-passive counterpart is agentive because of the presence of a passive Voice head in the derivation, which is spelled out by *se* in Asturian, Spanish or Catalan. The generic anticausative, however, does not host a Voice projection, and is therefore non-agentive; this results in the lack of *se* in Asturian, although not in Spanish or Catalan, since the *se* can be also the spell-out form of the subevent of change in these two languages. In the next section, I provide more evidence supporting my claim coming from the interaction between middle contexts and non-core dative arguments in these languages.

### 3. More evidence: datives meet the middle

In Suárez-Palma (2020), I develop an analysis of middle constructions in Spanish that contain change of state predicates where I show that these structures can host an additional dative argument which may be interpreted in three different ways: (i) as an accidental causer of the change of state (10.i); as affected by an internally caused change of state (10.ii); and as affected by an externally caused one (10.iii).

<sup>4</sup> This derivation also accounts for the Spanish and Catalan generic anticausative structures in (1b.c), the difference being that the reflexive *se* is present in these contexts; following Cuervo (2003, 2014) and Suárez-Palma (2020), I propose that this is due to the fact that *se* may also be the spell-out form of  $v_{GO}$  in these languages, possibly due to its status as an Elsewhere Condition in Romance (Pescarini 2016), whereas  $v_{GO}$  in Asturian does not have phonological content.

(10) *Suárez-Palma (2020: 25)*(A Sandra<sub>i</sub>), la madera de roble se le<sub>i</sub> quema fácilmente.

Sandra.DAT the wood of oak RFL 3SG.DAT burns easily

- i. ‘Sandra unintentionally makes oak wood burn easily.’
- ii. ‘Oak wood burns easily, and Sandra is affected by it.’
- iii. ‘It is easy to burn Sandra’s oak wood, and she is affected by it.’

Crucially, when a purpose clause is inserted in these contexts in Spanish (11), the first two interpretations, i.e. unintentional causer (11.i) and affected by an internally caused event (11.ii), stop being available, and the only possible reading for the dative in that case is that of affected by an externally caused change of state (11.iii). The infinitive in the purpose clause can only be controlled by the implicit generic agent in the structure –realized as *se*– and not by the dative. I claim that it is precisely this agent’s participation in the event that rules out the interpretation of the change of state process as being internally caused.

(11) *Suárez-Palma (2020: 25)*(A Sandra<sub>i</sub>), la madera de roble se<sub>k</sub> le<sub>i</sub> quema fácilmente

Sandra.DAT the wood of oak RFL 3SG.DAT burns easily

para PRO<sub>k/\*i</sub> hacer carbón.

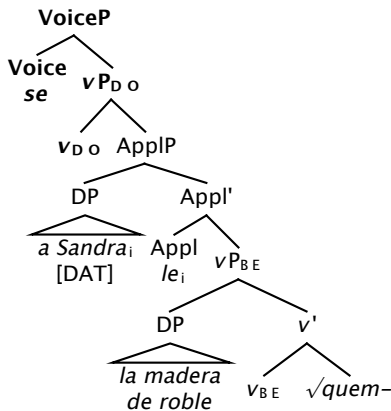
for make coal

- i. ~~‘When making coal, Sandra unintentionally makes oak wood burn easily.’~~
- ii. ~~‘When making coal, oak wood burns easily and Sandra is affected by it.’~~
- iii. ‘It is easy to burn Sandra’s oak wood in order to make coal, and she’s affected by it.’

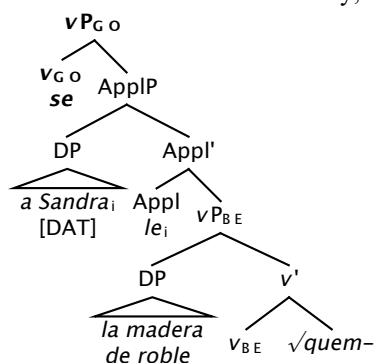
Assuming Cuervo’s (2003) notion of affected applicative, I explain that this functional head is in charge of introducing the dative argument in these contexts, whose interpretations are structurally determined by the position the applicative occupies in the derivation. Thus, the dative’s affected reading arises when Appl –which is spelled out as a dative clitic pronoun (*le* in this case)– merges below the first subevent and is therefore applied to the theme’s resulting state ( $vP_{BE}$ ). Depending on whether the first subevent is  $v_{DO}$  –in generic passive contexts (12a)– or  $v_{GO}$  –in generic anticausative configurations (12b)– the dative may be interpreted as affected by an externally or internally caused change of state, respectively.

(12) a. *Appl = affected by an externally caused change of state*(A Sandra<sub>i</sub>), la madera de roble se le<sub>i</sub> quema fácilmente.

‘It is easy to burn Sandra’s oak wood.’

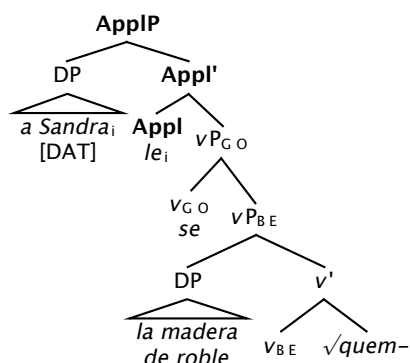


- b. *Appl* = affected by an internally caused change of state  
 (A Sandra<sub>i</sub>), la madera de roble se le<sub>i</sub> quema fácilmente.  
 ‘Susana’s oak wood burns easily, and Susana is affected by it.’



Alternatively, Cuervo (2003) explains that the accidental causer interpretation arises when the applicative head merges on top of the first subevent; in Suárez-Palma (2020), I show that this is only possible in the generic anticausative variant (13), i.e. when no Voice head fills the position above  $v_{GO}$ , which accounts for the data in (11).

- (13) *Appl* = accidental causer; no Voice  
 (A Sandra<sub>i</sub>), la madera de roble se le<sub>i</sub> quema fácilmente.  
 ‘Sandra unintentionally makes oak wood burn easily.’



The Asturian data in (14) show that the same phenomenon is also possible in this language; crucially, the accidental causer interpretation (14b.i) is only possible in the absence of *se*, i.e. in the Voice-less configuration.

- (14) *Generic se-passive*  
 a. (A Xuan<sub>i</sub>), la madera de carbayu quémase-y fácil.  
 Xuan.DAT the wood of oak burns.RFL-3SG.DAT easy  
 i. ‘When making coal, Xuan unintentionally makes oak wood burn easily.’  
 ii. ‘When making coal, oak wood burns easily, and Xuan is affected by it.’  
 iii. ‘It is easy to burn Xuan’s oak wood in order to make coal, and he’s affected by it.’

*Generic anticausative*

- b. (A Xuan<sub>i</sub>), la madera de carbayu quéma-y fácil.  
 Xuan.DAT the wood of oak burns-3SG.DAT easy  
 i. ‘When making coal, Xuan unintentionally makes oak wood burn easily.’  
 ii. ‘When making coal, oak wood burns easily, and Xuan is affected by it.’  
 iii. ‘It is easy to burn Xuan’s oak wood in order to make coal, and he’s affected by it.’

The examples in (14) show that the two Asturian middle configurations, i.e. the generic passive and the generic inchoative, may host an affected applicative, spelled out as the third person dative clitic pronoun *-y* in this case, and optionally doubled by a dative DP (*a Xuan*). This argument can only receive one interpretation in the generic *se*-passive structure, i.e. when *se* is present, which is that of affected by an externally caused change of state (14a.iii). On the other hand, the generic anticausative, i.e. the *se*-less variant, allows two readings for the dative argument: accidental causer (14b.i), and affected by an internally caused change of state (14b.ii), but rules out that of affected by an externally caused one (14b.iii). These data further demonstrate that the presence of the reflexive clitic pronoun *se* in Ibero-Romance middle contexts is tied to the projection of a passive Voice head encoding the participation of an implicit external argument in the event. Since Voice fills the position above  $vP_{DO}$ , Appl can only merge below it, therefore conveying the affected reading, but never the unintentional causer one. In the *se*-less variant the lack of Voice allows the applicative to either merge above or below  $vP_{GO}$ , which accounts for the two possible readings in (14b).

Considering all the above, I conclude that there exists a structural competition between Appl and Voice for the position on top of the first  $vP$ . I propose that this phenomenon may be accounted for by resorting to Wood and Marantz's (2017) notion of  $i^*$ , i.e. an argument-introducing functional head whose realization is contingent on its surrounding environment. Thus,  $i^*$  would be realized as Voice –either active or passive– when its complement is  $v_{DO}$  (15a), and as Appl when it is  $v_{GO}$  (15b). The causative instances containing Voice –active or passive– and an affected applicative simply start with two  $i^*$  in the Numeration (15c); the one merging before is realized as Appl and the last one to merge is Voice.

- (15) a.  $[i^*P i^* [vP v_{DO}]] \rightarrow [VoiceP Voice [vP v_{DO} [VP \dots]]]$   
 b.  $[i^*P i^* [vP v_{GO}]] \rightarrow [AppIP Appl [vP v_{GO} [VP \dots]]]$   
 c.  $[i^*P i^* [vP v_{DO} [i^*P i^*]]] \rightarrow [VoiceP Voice [vP v_{DO} [AppIP Appl [VP \dots]]]]$

#### 4. Conclusions

In this paper, I have provided data from middle contexts containing change of state predicates in several Ibero-Romance languages and I addressed the alleged optionality of the reflexive clitic *se* in these contexts in Asturian. I have shown that the presence of the reflexive is linked to a passive Voice projection in these sentences, whose function is to encode the participation of an implicit external argument in the event, therefore allowing control into a purpose clause; this configuration gives rise to a generic *se*-passive in these languages. On the contrary, the *se*-less counterpart in Asturian lacks Voice, i.e. it is a generic anticausative construction, hence its non-agentive reading and the possibility of licensing a *by itself* PP. The difference between Asturian and other closely related languages such as Spanish or Catalan is that, in the latter, *se* may also spell out the subevent of change  $v_{GO}$ , possibly due to its status as an Elsewhere Condition in Romance.

Additionally, I examined the interaction between these structures and non-core dative arguments; I argued that these are instances of affected applicatives, following Cuervo (2003), whose interpretation ranges from unintentional causer of the change of state to affected by the theme's resulting state. These different readings are structurally determined by the position Appl occupies in the derivation; thus, the unintentional causer reading arises when the applicative head merges above  $vP$ , and the affected one when Appl merges below it. Interestingly, the unintentional causer interpretation only becomes available in the absence of the reflexive in Asturian, i.e. in the generic anticausative configuration, when no Voice fills the position atop  $vP$ . Without Voice, the applicative head is free to merge either on top of below  $vP$ , contingent on the desired interpretation to be conveyed, i.e. accidental causer, or affected by an anticausative event, respectfully. Nonetheless, should a Voice head be present in the Numeration, it will sit on top of  $vP$  leaving no other choice for Appl but to merge below it, and therefore its only possible reading will be that of affected by an externally caused event.

Finally, these data support Suárez-Palma's (2020) claim that there exists a mutual incompatibility between Voice and a high applicative head –both different realizations of  $i^*$  (Wood & Marantz 2017)–, which compete for the position atop the first  $vP$  in generic *se*-passives.

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