

Spanish Reflexive Pronouns: a Null Preposition Hypothesis

Jonathan E. MacDonald

Stony Brook University

1. Introduction

This paper discusses two types of reflexive pronouns in Spanish. The first is the so-called aspectual reflexive, argued to possess inherent aspectual properties (Sanz 2000). An example is given in (1a). The second is the so-called dative of possession. The denotation of this reflexive is interpreted as the possessor of the direct object. An example is given in (1b):

- (1) a. **Me** comí la paella.
myself ate-I the paella
'I ate the paella.'
- b. **Me** lavé el coche.
myself washed-I the car
'I washed my car.'

In this paper, I argue that these reflexive pronouns are the same reflexive pronoun. It is introduced as the complement of a null locative preposition, which is ultimately responsible for any attested aspectual properties. Positing the presence of this null preposition allows for a straightforward account of a restricted range of interpretations available in the presence of the reflexive; it also transparently explains behavior shared by these reflexive pronoun constructions and constructions with overt goal prepositional phrases.

* I would like to thank Daniel Finer and Edith Aldridge for helping me develop work that led to the current paper. Thanks also to Paula Kempchinsky for extensive and insightful comments on an earlier version of the present paper. I give special thanks to Francisco Ordoñez who guided my initial steps and dedicated much of his time throughout the development of this work. Special thanks also to Susana Huidobro who endured my incessant data mining with a smile. Finally, a very special thanks to Jessica Serrano without whom there would be no paper. All errors of course are my own.

2. Aspectual properties of reflexives

2.1. The so-called aspectual reflexive

The so-called aspectual reflexive has been argued to be a marker of delimited events (Nishida 1994, Zagana 1994). Delimited events are incompatible with durative phrases, but compatible with punctual phrases. When the reflexive pronoun is present in the utterance, the durative phrase is incompatible (2a) while the punctual phrase is compatible (2b):

- (2) a. **Me** comí la paella *durante media hora.
myself ate-I the paella *for half hour
 ‘I ate the paella for half an hour.’
- b. **Me** comí la paella en media hora.
myself ate-I the paella in half hour
 ‘I ate the paella in half an hour.’

Delimited events are also incompatible with bare plural nouns. The reflexive pronoun cannot be present when there is a bare plural noun in the utterance (3):

- (3) (***Me**) comí paellas.
myself ate-I paellas
 ‘I ate paellas.’

From data of the sort in (2-3) several authors have concluded that this so-called aspectual reflexive is a marker of delimited events (Nishida 1994, Zagana 1994). In particular, Sanz (2000) has argued that the reflexive has a +telic feature and is introduced into the head of an event phrase that takes TP as a complement.¹ Throughout the paper, I refer to this account as the aspectual analysis.

2.2. The so-called dative of possession reflexive

The so-called dative of possession reflexive shows the same aspectual pattern as the so-called aspectual reflexive. It is incompatible with durative phrases (4a), compatible with punctual phrases (4b), and incompatible with bare plural nouns (4c):

1. Sanz (2000) also argues that the reflexive has phi-features and receives no theta-role. For the present paper, it is only relevant that the reflexive has a +telic feature and is introduced into a phrase above TP.

- (4) a. **Me** lavé el coche *durante media hora.
myself washed-I the car *for half hour.
 ‘I washed my car for half an hour.’
- b. **Me** lavé el coche en media hora.
myself washed-I the car in half hour.
 ‘I washed my car in half an hour.’
- c. ***Me** lavé coches.
myself washed-I cars
 ‘I washed cars.’

The so-called dative of possession patterns aspectually with the so-called aspectual reflexive. I conclude from this that they are the same reflexive pronoun.

Following the reasoning of the aspectual analysis, we might conclude that the reflexive pronoun in (4) is introduced into the head of a phrase above TP and has only a +telic feature (see Sanz 2000 & footnote 1). However tempting this conclusion may be, the data presented in the next section suggest that there is more to this reflexive than just telicity.

3. Inalienable possession licenses the reflexive pronoun

The data in this section suggest that the reflexive pronoun in the so-called dative of possession construction is licensed by an inalienable possession relationship between the subject and the direct object (see also Dumitrescu 1990 and Kliffer 1983 for a similar conclusion regarding the dative of possession).

Canonical inalienable nouns are body parts (see Chappell & McGregor 1996 and references therein). The reflexive pronoun is obligatory when a body part is the direct object (5):²

- (5) ***(Me)** lavé el pelo.
myself washed-I the hair.
 ‘I washed my hair.’

Temporary possession is not associated with inalienable possession (see Chappell & McGregor 1996 and references therein). If possession is temporary, there is no inalienable possession. In a car-wash scenario in which a car-washer is temporarily assigned cars to wash, the car-washer

2. The reflexive is obligatory for the interpretation that *the hair* is part of the subject’s body. Without the reflexive, *the hair* is interpreted as some object that is not the subject’s body part.

cannot utter sentence (6) to express that he has washed his assigned car; he cannot use the reflexive pronoun in this case.³

- (6) **(*Me)** lavé el coche.
myself washed-I the car
 ‘I washed my car.’

Within the literature on inalienable possession, it is observed that there is some variation among speakers of even the same dialect as to whether an object is considered inalienable or not (see Chappell & McGregor 1996 and references therein). In Spanish, this type of variation is found with an object like dog. The speakers who tend to treat dog as an inalienable object are typically dog-owners and allow the presence of the reflexive, while those who do not treat it as an inalienable object do not allow the presence of the reflexive. The percent sign in (7) is intended to express this variation among speakers:

- (7)%**Me** lavé el perro.
myself washed-I the dog
 ‘I washed my dog.’

Finally, there are often objects within a language that are typically not treated as inalienable (see Chappell & McGregor 1996 and references therein). In Spanish, it seems that one’s boss is not treated as an inalienable object and, as such, the reflexive pronoun is not possible when *el jefe* is the direct object (8):

- (8) **(*Me)** lavé el jefe.
myself washed-I the boss
 ‘I washed my boss.’

Based on the data in (5-8), I conclude that the reflexive pronoun in these constructions is licensed by inalienable possession. If this conclusion is motivated, then clearly there is more to these reflexives than just telicity.

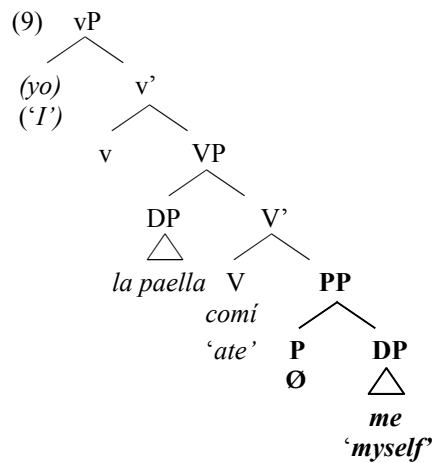
3. Note that when the car belongs to the subject, sentence (6) can be uttered with the reflexive pronoun, as in (1b) from above. It is not uncommon for languages to treat a certain class of ‘culturally basic possessed items’ as inalienable (Chappell & McGregor 1996). Vergnaud & Zubizarreta 1992 observe that in French *car* and *computer* (among others) are treated grammatically as inalienable nouns. They refer to this class of nouns as ‘extended inalienables’. In Spanish, *car* is a noun of this class. These all seem to be objects that typically fall within the possessor’s ‘personal sphere’ (Bally 1996).

If there is more to these reflexives than just telicity, it is not clear how the aspectual analysis can account for these data.

4. The proposal: The null preposition hypothesis

4.1. The machinery

I argue that the reflexive pronoun is introduced as the complement of a null locative preposition. The verb merges with this prepositional phrase, then the direct object enters the derivation, resulting in a VP shell. The derivation proceeds normally and the clitic undergoes clitic movement. A partial derivation of (1a) is given in (9):



4.2. The nature of the null preposition

The null preposition is essentially a locative preposition, expressing that the direct object is in the same location as the denotation of the reflexive; the direct object is *with/on* the denotation of the reflexive. Given that the direct object is *with/on* the denotation of the reflexive, and that the reflexive is coindexed with the subject, the direct object is interpreted as *with/on* the subject. Moreover, given that the action expressed by the verb takes place on the direct object and the direct object is *with/on* the subject, the action expressed by the verb takes place in the location of the subject. Therefore, when the reflexive pronoun is present in an utterance, we expect that the location of the event expressed by the verb is restricted to the location of the subject. The data in (10-11) support this conclusion.

In (10a) there is a reflexive pronoun present and the shirt is interpreted as necessarily on the subject at the time of the buttoning event. The shirt

cannot be on a hanger when the subject utters (10a). Compare (10a) to (10b) in which there is no reflexive present. The shirt in (10b) is NOT necessarily interpreted as on the subject, the shirt could be on a hanger during the buttoning event. Consequently, in the presence of the reflexive, the buttoning event takes place on the shirt and the shirt is on the subject, therefore, the event is restricted to the location of the subject:

- (10)a. **Me** abroché la camisa. → **NECESSARILY** on subject
myself buttoned-I the shirt
 ‘I buttoned my shirt.’
- b. Abroché la camisa. → **NOT** necessarily on subject
 buttoned-I the shirt
 ‘I buttoned the shirt.’

Let us look at another example. In (11a) there is a reflexive present in the utterance and the subject is interpreted as necessarily carrying out the washing himself. Compare (11a) to (11b) in which there is no reflexive present; the subject is NOT interpreted as necessarily carrying out the washing himself. He could have dropped the car off at the car wash and let some other individual wash it for him. Consequently, in the presence of the reflexive, the washing event takes place at the car and the subject is interpreted as doing the washing; therefore, in as much as the subject must be washing the car himself, the event is restricted to the location of the subject.

- (11)a. **Me** lavé el coche. → **NECESSARILY** the subject
myself washed-I the car
 ‘I washed my car.’
- b. Lavé el coche. → **NOT** necessarily the subject
 washed-I the car
 ‘I washed the car.’ (cf. ‘I got the car washed.’)

In the presence of the reflexive, the event expressed by the verb is restricted to the location of the subject. Once we posit a null locative preposition with the appropriate semantics, this interpretation falls out naturally.

4.3. Accounting for inalienable possession

The null preposition hypothesis can straightforwardly account for the inalienable possession restriction discussed in section 3. Intuitively, only objects that are located *with/on* the denotation of the reflexive (and via

coindexation *with/on* the denotation of the subject) are compatible with the reflexive. Only objects that are inalienably possessed are *with/on* the denotation of the reflexive. More formally, we can assume that the restriction to inalienable nouns in direct object position is controlled by theta-role assignment. In particular, I assume that the verb in combination with the prepositional phrase that houses the reflexive assigns a compositional theta-role to the direct object (see Larson 1988). The prepositional phrase-reflexive construct restricts the theta-role to those objects that can be *with/on* the denotation of the reflexive, i.e. those objects inalienably possessed. Consequently, as the denotation of the reflexive varies, so does the range of objects that are treated as inalienable.⁴ This handles quite straightforwardly the noted variation with respect to the objects treated as inalienable among speakers of the same dialect (see section 3).⁵

It is worth taking the time to return briefly to the original case of the so-called aspectual reflexive. I repeat example (1a) as (12) below:

(12) **Me** comí la paella.
myself ate-I the paella
 'I ate the paella.'

(12) is a classic example of the class of so-called aspectual reflexives because it expresses that some object is ingested.⁶ Given that the direct object comes to be ingested, the direct object comes to be *with/on* the

4. With examples such as i) *Beethoven gave the 5th symphony to the world.* and ii) *Beethoven gave the 5th symphony to his parent.*, Larson (1988: p.340) shows that the theta-role assigned to the direct object varies with the complement of the goal prepositional phrase. Thus, in i) *the 5th symphony* is understood as an abstract entity because of the effect that *the world* in combination with the preposition has on the theta-role assigned to it; and in ii) *the 5th symphony* is understood as a stack of pages because of the effect that *his parents* in combination with the preposition has on the theta-role assigned to it. Likewise, the theta-role assigned to the direct object in the constructions under discussion varies as an effect of the denotation of the reflexive in combination with the null preposition.

5. Also note that under this strategy there is no proliferation of lexical items, as there is no need to posit two entries for each lexical item: i.e. one as alienable and a second as inalienable (cf. Vergnaud & Zubizarreta 1992 who take such a position).

6. Other examples of classic cases of so-called aspectual reflexives include *beberse* 'drink', *fumarse* 'smoke', and *tomarse* 'have' (as in *have something to drink/eat*). Each of these requires a direct object and expresses that the direct object is ingested.

denotation of the reflexive (and the subject).⁷ Quite naturally then, the original cases of the so-called aspectual reflexive can be characterized by the present conception of inalienable possession.

4.4. Accounting for delimited events

The null preposition hypothesis can straightforwardly account for the aspectual effects that result from the presence of the reflexive. It is well known that goal prepositional phrases can delimit an event, turning an activity into an accomplishment (see Dowty 1979, Pustejovsky 1991, Tenny 1994 among others). An example is given in (13). In (13a) there is no prepositional phrase and the durative phrase is compatible, while the punctual phrase is incompatible, typical of non-delimited events. In (13b) when a goal prepositional phrase is added, the event becomes delimited and, as a consequence, the durative phrase becomes incompatible while the punctual phrase becomes compatible:

- (13) a. I pushed the cart for an hour/*in an hour.
 b. I pushed the cart **to the store** *for an hour/ in an hour.

In the same way that an overt goal prepositional phrase delimits the event—turning an activity into an accomplishment—the null prepositional phrase that takes the reflexive as a complement also delimits the event and turns an activity into an accomplishment. Let us now turn to two other ways in which the null prepositional phrase proposed here patterns with overt goal prepositional phrases.

5. Parallel behavior between the null P° and overt goal PPs

5.1. Scopal ambiguity of *casi* ‘almost’

It is well observed that *almost* is unambiguous with activities and ambiguous with accomplishments (see Dowty 1979, Pustejovsky 1991 among others). Thus, in (14a) below in which no prepositional phrase is present, *almost* has only a counterfactual interpretation⁸ in which I had the intention of pushing, but never actually pushed the cart. Compare (14a) to (14b) in which there is a goal prepositional phrase present. *Almost* is ambiguous in the presence of the goal prepositional phrase. It still retains

7. Zagona (1994: p.288) notes that Zubizarreta’s (1987) analysis of reflexive *se* involves the interpretation that ‘the object is ‘at’ the subject, for verbs of consumption...’. This is similar to the present understanding of examples like (12).

8. The term *counterfactual* used for this interpretation is adopted from Rapp & von Stechow (1999).

the counterfactual interpretation, but it also receives another interpretation in which the pushing of the cart to the store began, but the cart never reached the store. I refer to this interpretation as the incomplete interpretation.

- (14)a. I *almost* pushed the cart.
→ COUNTERFACTUAL
- b. I *almost* pushed the cart **to the store**.
→ COUNTERFACTUAL & INCOMPLETE

We find the same pattern of interpretation in the reflexive pronoun constructions under discussion. When no reflexive pronoun is present (15), *casi* ‘almost’ is unambiguous, with only the counterfactual interpretation in which I had the intention, but did not start to eat the paella (15a), and in which I had the intention, but did not start to wash the cars (15b). When the reflexive is present in the utterance (16), *casi* is ambiguous. The counterfactual interpretation is still available, but there is also an incomplete interpretation in which I started to eat the paella, but did not finish (16a), and in which I started to wash the cars, but did not finish washing them all (16b):

- (15)a. *Casi* comí la paella.
almost ate-I the paella
‘I almost ate the paella.’
→ COUNTERFACTUAL
- b. *Casi* lavé los coches.
almost washed-I the cars
‘I almost washed my cars.’
→ COUNTERFACTUAL
- (16)a. *Casi* **me** comí la paella.
almost myself ate-I the paella
‘I almost ate the paella.’
→ COUNTERFACTUAL & INCOMPLETE
- b. *Casi* **me** lavé los coches.
almost myself washed-I the cars
‘I almost washed my cars.’
→ COUNTERFACTUAL & INCOMPLETE

To accommodate these facts, let us assume that accomplishments are composed of an initial process and a final state (Pustejovsky 1991) and that *casi/almost* is scopal (see Rapp & von Stechow 1999). As *casi/almost* is

scopal, it can scope over the initial process or the final state (Pustejovsky 1991). When *casi/almost* has scope over the initial process the result is the counterfactual interpretation and when *casi/almost* has scope over the final state, the result is the incomplete interpretation. Given that the incomplete interpretation is only available in the presence of the null/goal prepositional phrase, it is reasonable to conclude that the null/goal preposition introduces the final state. Support for the conclusion that the preposition introduces the final state over which *almost* takes scope for an incomplete interpretation comes from the data in (17) in which *almost* follows the direct object. Notice that there is no prepositional phrase in (17a) and the sentence is ungrammatical with *almost* in that position. When the goal prepositional phrase is added (17b), *almost* can remain in that position. It receives only the incomplete interpretation:

- (17) a. *I pushed the cart *almost*.
 b. I pushed the cart *almost to the store*.
 → INCOMPLETE ONLY

Under the null preposition hypothesis, we predict the same pattern for these reflexive pronoun constructions. The data in (18-19) show that the prediction is born out. In (18), in which no reflexive is present and *casi* intervenes between the verb and the direct object, the sentences are ungrammatical. When the reflexive is added (19), *casi* can remain in that position. It receives only the incomplete interpretation:

- (18) a. *Comí *casi* la paella.
 ate-I *almost* the paella
 ‘I almost ate the paella.’
 b. *Lavé *casi* los coches.
 washed-I *almost* the cars
 ‘I almost washed the cars.’
- (19) a. **Me** comí *casi* la paella.
myself ate-I *almost* the paella
 ‘I almost ate the paella.’
 → INCOMPLETE ONLY
 b. **Me** lavé *casi* los coches.
myself washed-I *almost* the cars
 ‘I almost washed the cars.’
 → INCOMPLETE ONLY

The adverb placement and corresponding interpretation facts in (18-19) can be accounted for straightforwardly under the null preposition

hypothesis. In the same way that the overt goal preposition introduces a final state over which *casi/almost* can scope, the null preposition also introduces a final state. In this way, the null preposition patterns with the overt goal preposition. Let us turn to another way in which the null preposition patterns with the overt goal preposition.

5.2. Idiom deformation

Goal prepositional phrases are able to deform idiomatic interpretation (20), while location prepositional phrases are not (21):

- (20) a. #John kicked the bucket **to the barn**.
 b. #John spilled the beans **into the sink**.
- (21) a. John kicked the bucket **on the sofa**.
 b. John spilled the beans **in the kitchen**.

Let us assume that idiom deformation arises from a disruption of a local idiom environment. A structural difference exists between goal and location prepositional phrases that can potentially explain the difference in their respective idiom deformation abilities (see 20-21). Evidence from *do-so* constructions suggests that goal prepositional phrases are complements of the verb⁹ and that location prepositional phrases are adjoined to vP. In *do-so* constructions goal prepositional phrases are odd at best (22a), while location prepositional phrases are perfectly fine (22b):

- (22) a. ??John pushed the cart **to the school**
 and Frank did so **to the church**.
- b. John played soccer **at the school**
 and Frank did so **at the church**.

Given that goal prepositional phrases are complements of the verb, they are in an appropriate configurational relationship with the local idiom environment such that they can disrupt the idiomatic interpretation. Given that location prepositional phrases are outside of the local idiom environment (as they are adjoined to vP) they are not in an appropriate configurational relationship with the local idiom environment and cannot deform idiomatic interpretation. These facts, in combination with the null preposition hypothesis, predict that the presence of the reflexive pronoun in Spanish should deform idiomatic interpretation. This prediction holds, as

9. Larson (1988) makes this claim as well.

the data in (23-24) show.¹⁰ In (23a) the idiomatic interpretation is that Juan is a sponger. When the reflexive pronoun is added (23b), the idiomatic interpretation is lost. In (24a) the idiomatic interpretation is that Jose broke up with Ana. When the reflexive is added (24b), the idiomatic interpretation is lost:

- (23) a. Juan come la sopa boba.
 Juan eats the soup stupid
 ‘Juan is a sponger’
 b. #Juan **se** come la sopa boba.
- (24) a. Jose cortó los lazos con Ana.
 Jose cut the ties with Ana
 ‘Jose broke up with Ana.’
 b. #Jose **se** cortó los lazos con Ana.

Given the null preposition hypothesis these data are straightforwardly handled; the null prepositional phrase is in the same structural configuration as the overt goal prepositional phrase. Thus, being a complement of the verb, the null prepositional phrase is in the appropriate structural configuration to be able to deform idioms.¹¹

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that the so-called aspectual reflexive and the so-called dative of possession are the same reflexive pronoun and that they are introduced as the complement of a null locative preposition. By positing the presence of this null preposition, parallel behavior between the presence of the reflexive pronoun and overt goal prepositional phrases can be accounted for straightforwardly, as well as a restricted range of interpretations available in the presence of the reflexive pronoun.

10. De Miguel & Fernández Lagunilla (2000) observe that the (so-called aspectual) reflexive deforms idiomatic interpretation. The examples in (23-24) above are not from de Miguel & Fernández Lagunilla (2000).

11. It is worth noting that these idiom facts pose a very particular difficulty for the aspectual analysis. As stated, the aspectual analysis argues that the reflexive is introduced into the head of a phrase that is above TP. Given that location prepositional phrases are analyzed as adjoined to vP and that they do not disrupt idiomatic interpretation, the aspectual analysis actually makes the prediction that the reflexive pronoun should not deform idiomatic interpretations at all. This predicts the opposite of what the facts are.

References

- Bally, Charles 1996. The expression of concepts of the personal domain and indivisibility in Indo-European languages. In H. Chappell & W. McGregor (eds.) *The Grammar of Inalienability: A Typological Perspective on Body Part Terms and the Part-Whole Relation*. Mouton de Gruyter: Berlin/New York: 31-61.
- Chappell, Hilary & William McGregor (eds.) 1996. *The Grammar of Inalienability: A Typological Perspective on Body Part Terms and the Part-Whole Relation*. Mouton de Gruyter: Berlin/New York.
- Dowty, David R. 1979. *Word Meaning and Montague Grammar*. D. Reidel Publishing: Dordrecht/Holland/Boston
- De Miguel, Elena & Marina Fernández Lagunilla. 2000. El operador aspectual *se*. *Revista Española de Lingüística* 30, no.1: 13-43
- Dumitrescu, Domnita. 1990. El Dativo Posesivo en Español y en Rumano. *Revista Española de Linguística* 20, no.2: 403-429.
- Kliffner, Michael D. 1983. Beyond syntax: Spanish inalienable possession. *Linguistics* 21:759-794
- Larson, Richard K. 1988. On the Double Object Construction. *Linguistic Inquiry* 19, no.3: 335-391.
- Nishida, Chiyo. 1994. The Spanish reflexive clitic *se* as an aspectual class marker. *Linguistics* 32: 425-458.
- Pustejovsky, James. 1991. The syntax of event structure. *Cognition*, 41: 47-81.
- Rapp, Irene & von Stechow, Arnim. 1999. Fast 'Almost' and the Visibility Parameter for Functional Adverbs. *Journal of Semantics* 16: 149-204
- Sanz, Montserrat. 2000. *Events and Predication: A New Approach to Syntactic Processing in English and Spanish*. John Benjamins Publishing: Amsterdam/Philadelphia
- Tenny, Carol. 1994. *Aspectual Roles and the syntax-semantics interface*. Kluwer: Dordrecht/Boston/London
- Vergnaud, Jean Roger & Maria Luisa Zubizarreta 1992. The Definite Determiner and the Inalienable Constructions in French and English. *Linguistic Inquiry* 23: 595-652
- Zagona, Karen. 1994. Compositionality of Aspect: Evidence from Spanish Aspectual *Se*. In C. Parodi, C. Quicoli, M. Saltarelli, and M.L. Zubizarreta (eds.) *Aspects of Romance Linguistics*. Georgetown UP: Washington DC: 475-488
- Zubizarreta, Maria Luisa 1987. Representaciones léxicas y estructura sintáctica. In V. Demonte and M. Fernández Lagunilla (eds.) *Sintaxis de las lenguas románicas*. Madrid: Ediciones El Aquero: 31-59