

What kind of (non)person is *se*, and how might it be related to *-je* and *-mbo*?

Ljiljana Progovac (Wayne State University)

Slavic *se* (cf. also Romance *se*) presents several puzzles for linguistic analysis, including (i) that it has a wide and overlapping range of functions (1-5); (ii) that it cannot really be analyzed as a reflexive pronoun (2); and (iii) that it occasionally involves first person interpretations (1) (Kański 1986: 195; Rivero & Milojević-Sheppard 2003). Some previous proposals treat *se* in Serbian as a purely grammatical element, such as an expletive subject/object (e.g. Franks 1995; Progovac 2005). However, these analyses are incomplete. Here I present a unified account of *se* in its various manifestations in Serbian, including, but not limited to, passive-like, middle-like, reflexive-like, reciprocal (all of them referred to as “middles”). Next, I show how this radically different approach can shed new light on some loose ends in the analysis of portmanteau person patterns in Paraguayan Guaraní (PG) (Zubizarreta & Pancheva 2017).

The proposal is that middle *se* structures in Serbian are intransitive, with (at most) one *syntactic* (nominative) argument slot available, whether subject-like, or object-like, or both at the same time, giving rise to massive vagueness (2a; 3; 5). Syntactically, *se* can be analyzed as an expletive, dummy particle in VoiceP, blocking any further elaboration of argument structure, accusative case, or the active-passive differentiation. Semantically, these structures feature one unspecified thematic role of a proto-participant (4;6) (see e.g. Dowty 1991 for proto-roles). But the deeper questions certainly arise here: why and how would such structures arise? This type of grammar is arguably based on the absolutive foundation (Progovac 2015a,b), comparable to (7) from Tongan, an ergative language, also exhibiting theta vagueness. Tchekhoff (1973) expressly states that (7) is not ambiguous, but rather vague, involving one unspecified participant Mary in the event of Calling, consistent with the semantics in (8). In his characterization of ergativity, the absolutive is the first (or only) argument, and the ergative is the second (added) higher argument (9).

If so, *se* can be seen as flagging a different, parallel type of grammar in Serbian, suggesting that Serbian may be a split-accusative language, on analogy with split-ergative languages. In Nichols *et al.*'s (2004) typology, Serbian would be classified as a detransitivizing language, with *se* serving as a detransitivizer. While nom-acc patterns are certainly the dominant grammar in Serbian, (absolutive-based) *se* middles are fully productive and rather common, especially for expressing low-elaboration of events (e.g. low animacy; reflexivity; anti-causativity).¹ It is the vagueness of these *se* constructions that frees them to interplay with the point of view of the speaker, giving rise to first person interpretations. This approach reveals deep connections between erg-abs and nom-acc patterns, and considers syntax to be a patchwork quilt of various patterns accrued during language evolution (Progovac 2015a, 2018). Taking the intransitive absolutive to be the common denominator and the evolutionary foundation for building a variety of transitive types, this approach invokes both evolutionary tinkering (Jacob 1977), and Dependent Case Theory (Yip *et al.* 1987, Marantz 1991, Baker & Vinokurova 2010). With rare exceptions, transitive structures add just one extra piece to the foundational structure, whether on top (erg) (9), or the bottom (acc) (10), and serial verb patterns string together a limited number of intransitive clauses, often just two (11) (e.g. Aboh 2009). This is where formal, typological, and evolutionary considerations come together.

In their rich and insightful treatment of argument alignment in Paraguayan Guaraní, Zubizarreta & Pancheva (2017) leave a couple of loose ends which the above approach can shed new light on: the use of portmanteau morphemes for 1st/2nd person (12) and the lack of overt objects with such morphemes (12b vs. 13). It is helpful to observe that the illustrated patterns are intransitive by default, requiring a special transitive marker *-mbo* to yield transitivity. This is the opposite of what one finds with *se* in Serbian: while *se* detransitivizes, in order to circumvent the default accusative grammar, *-mbo* transitivizes, in order to circumvent the default intransitive grammar. If so, then these portmanteau morphemes may be remnants of an older strategy to fit two (participant) arguments into an intransitive frame (with just one argument slot, hence portmanteau), and this essentially intransitive grammar seems to be preserved even under the addition of *-mbo*. If this is indeed a fossilized, transitional strategy between intransitive and transitive patterns, then it is not surprising that it prohibits (overt) 2nd person objects.

¹ PG *-je* seems to be related to *se* in that it is also intransitive, as well as employed for reflexive, passive-like, and impersonal functions, sometimes involving theta vagueness.

- (1) (a) Nie pchaj się pan! (Polish) (b) Ne guraj se! (Serbian)
 not push SE man not push SE
 ‘Stop pushing me, man!’ ‘Don’t push me/us.’
- (2) (a) Pas se ujeta. (b) Pevalo se glasno. (Serbian)
 dog SE bites sung SE loudly
 ‘The dog bites (someone)/???itself.’ ‘It was sung loudly.’
- (3) Deca_{NOM} se udaraju/grle_{3PL}.
 children SE hit/hug
 ‘The children are hitting/hugging each other.’ ?‘The children are hitting/hugging themselves.’
 ‘The children are hitting/hugging somebody (else.)’ ‘One spanks/hugs children.’
- (4) $\exists e [H(e) \wedge \text{Participant (Children,e)}]$
- (5) \check{Z} ene se \check{c} uju.
 women_{NOM} SE hear_{3PL}
 ‘(The) women hear themselves.’ ‘(The) women hear each other.’ ‘One can hear (the) women.’
 ‘Women get heard.’ (e.g. because they are loud, persistent, etc.)
- (6) $\exists e [H(e) \wedge \text{Participant (Women,e)}]$
- (7) Oku ui ‘a Mele (Tongan; Tchekhoff 1973: 283)
 PRES call ABS Mary
 ‘Mary calls.’ / ‘Mary is called.’
- (8) $\exists e [C(e) \wedge \text{Participant (Mary,e)}]$
- (9) Oku ui ‘e Sione ‘a Mele.
 PRES call ERG John ABS Mary
 ‘John calls Mary.’
- (10) (a) Mary is bathing. (b) Mary is bathing them.
- (11) Àsíbá bé lèsi dù (Gungbe; Aboh 2009: 26)
 Asiba collect rice eat
 ‘Asiba ate a lot of rice.’
- (12) (a) (Che) a-jahu (b) (Che) ro-mbo-jahu
 (I) 1SG-bathe (I) PORT-TR-bathe
 ‘I bathe.’ ‘I bathe you.SG.’
- (13) (Che) a-mbo-jahu ichupe / Juan-pe ‘I bathe him/Juan.’ (Zubizarreta & Pancheva 2017)
 (I) 1SG-TR-bathe him / Juan-PE

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