

# **Oblique subjects and Nominative Objects: SE-constructions in the history of Portuguese revisited**

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It is well known in the Romance syntax literature that a certain use of the clitic SE resembles the passive construction, as illustrated in (1). This use attracts investigators because of its agreement behavior: it is a DP internal argument that agrees with the verb. This agreement pattern has been approached in two ways in GB and Minimalist analyses: on one hand, it is sometimes claimed that the DP is a subject that moves to the subject position when preposed, and is, when in situ, associated with an expletive in subject position (see a.o. Cinque, 1988; Dobrovie-Sorin, 1998); on the other hand, Raposo and Uriagereka (1996) claim that this DP is not a subject, nor is it associated with a subject position, but is an object that is marked with nominative Case, while the clitic SE is the subject.

In this paper, we propose, offering an alternative implementation of Raposo and Uriagereka's (1996) idea, that this construction, called the indefinite-SE construction, should be analyzed as an active construction where the subject is the clitic SE, marked with an oblique Case and carrying the external argument features [+human, +agent], and the DP internal argument is a nominative object, checking Case in a Probe-Goal relationship with T. This analysis is based on an empirical description of the construction in a large dataset extracted from the Tycho Brahe Parsed Corpus of Portuguese. The texts of the corpus were written by Portuguese writers born from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. We intend to: (a) describe the usage pattern of the indefinite-SE construction in comparison to the canonical passive and to other uses of SE, as illustrated in (2); (b) provide an analysis of the phenomenon both with respect to Case checking issues and in comparison with other languages, especially, Icelandic and Finnish (Maling, 2006; Sigurdsson, 2004, 2009; Holmberg and Nikanne, 2002); and (c) relate the behavior of the indefinite-SE construction to other changes that have occurred from the 18<sup>th</sup> century on, specially the change in subject position attested in the same corpus (see Galves and Paixão de Sousa, 2005).

We will compare the behavior of the DP argument in the indefinite-SE construction, in canonical passives and in other uses of SE with regard to its position relative to the inflected verb (preposed, postposed or null) in main clauses, as seen in (3). The position of this DP changes over time in a different way in the three cases. On one hand, the DP arguments of both canonical passives and other uses of SE show an increase in preposing over time, which accelerates from the 18<sup>th</sup> century on; in contrast, the position of the argument in the indefinite-SE construction remains stable, with a strong preference for postposition. With regard to the rate of null arguments, the frequency of null subjects in canonical passives and other uses of SE remains stable over time at a rate of 40%, whereas in the indefinite-SE construction, the frequency of null arguments is only 10%. This difference in frequency is evidence that we are not dealing with a subject in the indefinite-SE construction, whereas in the other two constructions the DP argument is a subject. This supports the evidence from the position of the argument DP mentioned above. In SE sentences not belonging to the indefinite SE construction, during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries the subject is preferably postposed, while from the 18<sup>th</sup> century on it is preferably preposed and this change occurs along with a decline in subject postposing in non-SE sentences.

The point of departure for our analysis is Raposo and Uriagereka's 1996 proposal but it is different in the way that the case of the DP is checked: for R&U, the DP object moves to the specifier of an FP position, responsible for topicalized elements, and in that position checks Nominative Case with F. This analysis, however, is not plausibly compatible with our frequency data (postposed arguments are more common than preposed arguments). Instead, we identify our construction with the nominative object in Icelandic, which occurs in sentences with oblique subjects, as shown in (4) (Sigurdsson, 2009). Therefore, we claim that in the history of Portuguese, a reanalysis occurred in the passive-SE construction, which initially could have a PP external argument, as shown in (5), that did not affect the Case checked by the object, which remained nominative, but instead changed the status of the clitic SE: from being a passive morpheme that absorbed the

external argument, just like the passive participle (Jaeggli, 1986), it became itself the external argument with the features [+human; -specific], just as in certain active impersonal constructions in non-Romance languages.

### Examples:

- (1) Alugam-se apartamentos para estudantes.  
rent-3PP-SE flats for students  
“They rent flats for students”
- (2) a. Pròximamente, no ano de mil seiscientos cincoenta e cinco, **se cativaram** no rio  
'Shortly, in-the year of thousand six-hundred fifty-five, [SE=capture-PST.3PL] in-the river  
das Amazonas dois mil índios (TBC, 17<sup>th</sup> century)  
of-the Amazons two thousand indians'  
b. Seu corpo **foi enterrado** o mais solemnemente que pôde ser, com grande dor, e  
sentimento de todos, de que era muito amado, como era razão o fosse um Rei, que tinha  
saído das trevas de sua cegueira, e entrado na luz da verdade do Evangelho. (TBC, 16<sup>th</sup>  
century)  
Your body was buried the most solemnly that it could be ...  
c. Os peregrinos em número de mais de mil **reuniram-se** na capela especial da Virgen  
del Pilar... (TBC, 19<sup>th</sup> century)  
The pilgrims at a number higher than one thousand gathered=SE at the chappel of the  
Virgin del Pilar
- (3) a. **Dois mil índios** captivaram-se no rio das Amazonas... (preposed argument)  
b. Foi enterrado **o seu corpo**. (postposed argument)  
c. Reuniram-se na capela especial os peregrinos.
- (4) Icelandic oblique subjects (Sigurdsson, 2009)
  - a. **Hana** vantaði peninga.  
her.ACC lacked money.ACC  
'She lacked money.'
  - b. **Henni** líkuðu hestarnir.  
her.DAT liked horses.the.NOM  
'She liked the horses.'
  - c. **Okkur** vantaði vinnu.  
us.ACC lacked job.ACC  
'We lacked/were in need of a job.'
- (5) *Como Josep se conheceu pelos irmãos.*  
how Josep SE knew-3SG by-the brothers  
“How Josep was recognized by his brothers” (Naro 1976: 789; 14<sup>th</sup> century)

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