

“Se” in Czech: Multiple Functions Are Better Than One

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Background. “Se”, in the Czech language, is a clitic morpheme typically associated with reflexivity. However, canonical reflexive markers obligatorily take on the semantic meaning of an agent in a given clause—while Czech “se” also occurs in clauses that do not appear to have any agent to begin with. In order to explain other functions of this morpheme, one shall look into related languages, where morphemes identical to the reflexive morpheme mark also features such as reciprocity, unaccusativity, or impersonal voice.

Proposal. This analysis provides evidence that “se”, in Czech, may cover the marking of (a) reflexive, (b) reciprocal, (c) unaccusative, (d) impersonal passive, and, surprisingly enough, also (e) passive constructions.

Reflexives. “Se” occurs as a reflexive clitic in both (a) inherently (mandatorily) (1), and (b) naturally reflexive constructions (2). The evidence of its reflexive function comes from tests on inherently reflexive verbs. For naturally (typically) reflexive verbs, “se” is replaced by an appropriate pronoun if the speaker opts to direct the action onto a receiver which is different from the agent (2). However, any attempts to perform the same change on inherently reflexive verbs yields ungrammatical results (3). **Reciprocals.** Similarly to the previous case, “se” as a reciprocal is not usually disputed. These constructions may be redundantly complemented by a “each other” phrase referring to all involved parties (4,5,6). **Unaccusatives.** “Se” seems to appear in non-transitivisable unaccusative constructions (compare (7) and (8)). These constructions will typically display an explicit theme which triggers morphological agreement on the verb and reject both *by*-phrases (9) and agent-oriented adverbs (9). Just as expected in unaccusative constructions, adverbs describing the process are legal (10). Note that this construction seems similar to some reflexives. Unlike inherently reflexive verbs, though, unaccusatives can be consistently turned into past participles (11). **Impersonals.** Impersonal “se” is, in Czech, grammatical for both transitive and intransitive constructions—though there do remain differences between how these two types of phrases are constructed. In intransitive constructions, verbs complementing impersonal “se” agree with an impersonal pronoun “ono” (Engl. “it”). Even though the pronoun is conventionally dropped, the verb still morphologically agrees with an invisible 3SG.NEUT (12). This construction can be distinguished from unaccusatives by the fact that it accepts agent-oriented adverbs (13). Similarly, adding “by itself” results in ungrammatical sentences (14). This combined evidence suggests that this “se” is distinct from the previously mentioned unaccusative marker and operates as its own impersonal marker. For transitive verbs, the verb must agree with the patient from the active construction (15). For both cases, *by*-phrases appear to be ungrammatical (14, 15), although causers, just like one would expect with impersonal voice, are legal (13). Non-human constructions are generally not allowed (16) (with the exception of humanised animal behaviour (17)) and adverbs, while not *required*, improve the grammatical status of the clause (18, 19, 20). A crucial piece of evidence of these constructions being impersonal (rather than unaccusative or passive) is the availability of a “generic impersonal reading”, or the interpretation that the verb is implicitly done by/performed on everyone. There also exists evidence of explicit impersonal pronoun (“ono”). (Note that Czech is a fairly consistent pro-drop language, so the only surface evidence of its presence will be exceptionally stressed sentences (21).) **Passives.** Although Czech does indeed have widely recognised canonical passive, “se” may offer an alternative—and that despite its active-like morphology. These constructions may look similar to previously presented examples, except they may accept *by*-phrases (22), can apply to non-human constructions (22), and accept agent-oriented adverbs. (Note that with agent-oriented adverbs especially, complex clauses (23) are preferred to simple ones (22), though both are still more on the grammatical side.) Most phrases passive-looking phrases will have several available interpretations.

Questions. This analysis raises, amongst others, two bigger questions. (1) In multiple examples from this paper, “se” had a significant impact on the word order of sentences (compared to their active counterparts)—which has a potential to prove Czech to be a ‘clitic second’ language but needs further attention. (2) Grammaticality of some clauses also depends on aspect (marked by affixes in Czech). Aspect-sensitive impersonals appeared to be a thing in previously studied languages, and it is worth dissecting if this may be the case in Czech, too.

Conclusions. Czech “se”, has several other functions in addition to marking reflexives. This analyses provides evidence for the existence of reflexive, reciprocal, unaccusative, impersonal, and passive “se”. Future investigations on the definite number of classes of this clitic in the Czech language shall be conducted.

- (1) Petr se smál.
Petr **se** laugh.PAST.3SG.MASC
'Petr laughed.'
- (2) Klára se/tě/ho
Klára REFL/you.ACC/he.ACC
koupala.
bath.PAST.3SG.FEM
'Klára bathed herself/you/him.'
- (3) Klára se/*tě/*ho
Klára REFL*/you.ACC/*he.ACC
hanbila.
shame.PAST.3SG.FEM
'Klára was ashamed.'
- (4) Klára se (navzájem) líbala
Klára **se** (mutually) kiss.PAST.3SG.FEM
s Petrem.
with Petr.INS
'Klára kissed with Petr.'
- (5) Klára a Petr se
Klára.NOM and Petr.NOM **se**
(navzájem) líbali.
(mutually) kiss.PAST.3SG.FEM
'Klára and Petr kissed each other.'
- (6) Klára s Petrem se (navzájem)
Klára.NOM with Petr.INS **se** (mutually)
líbali.
kiss.PAST.3SG.FEM with Petr
'Klára kissed with Petr.'
- (7) Váza se rozbila.
Vase **se** break.PAST.3SG.FEM
'The vase broke.'
- (8) Led (*se) roztál.
Ice (***se**) melt.PAST.3SG.MASC
'The ice melted.'
- (9) Loď se potopila
Boat **se** sink.PAST.3SG.FEM
(*námorníky/*schválně).
(mariners.INS/on.purpose)
'The boat sank (by mariners/on purpose).'
- (10) Loď se potopila následkem
Boat **se** sink.PAST.3SG.FEM due.to
zásahu torpéd.
hit.GEN torpedo.PL.GEN
'The boat sank from torpedo hits.'
- (11) Loď se potopila. →
Boat **se** sink.PAST.3SG.FEM
potopená loď
sink.PP boat

Petr se smál. →
Petr **se** laugh.PAST.3SG.MASC
*zasmátý Petr
laugh.PP Petr
- (12) Tancovalo a
dance.PAST.3SG.NEUT and
zpívalo se do noci.
sing.PAST.3SG.NEUT **se** until night
- 'It was sung and danced until late at night.'
- (13) Padalo se tam
fall.PAST.3SG.NEUT **se** there
schválně/kvůli bahnu.
on.purpose/due.to mud
'It was fallen there on purpose.'
- (14) Padalo se tam
fall.PAST.3SG.NEUT **se** there
(*samo/*cyklistami).
(by.itself/cyclists.INS)
'It was fallen there on purpose.'
- (15) Pilo se víno,
drink.PAST.3SG.NEUT **se** wine.NOM,
ne-pila se voda
NEG-drink.PAST.3SG.FEM **se** water.NOM
(*účastníky).
(participants.INS)
'Wine was being drunk, water was not (by participants).'
- (16) *Hořelo se.
burn.PAST.3SG.NEUT **se**
'It was burnt.'
- (17) ??Štěkalo se.
bark.PAST.3SG.NEUT **se**
'It was barked.'
- (18) ??Padalo se.
fall.PAST.3SG.NEUT **se**
'It was being fallen.'
- (19) ?Padalo se tam.
fall.PAST.3SG.NEUT **se** there
'It was being fallen over there.'
- (20) Padalo se tam hodně.
fall.PAST.3SG.NEUT **se** there
'It was being fallen over there a lot.'
- (21) Ono se tam pilo spíše
It **se** there drink.3SG.PAST rather
víno.
wine
'There was wine drunk more preferably.'
- (22) ?Dveře se otevřely vrátným
Door.PL **se** open.3PL.PAST porter.INS
ve tři.
at three
'The door got opened by the porter at three o'clock.'
- (23) Když se ty dveře otevřou
When **se** DEF door.NOM open.3PL.FUT
opatrně, nebude nic
carefully, NEG-FUT.3SG.NEUT nothing
slyšet.
hear.INF
'If the door gets opened carefully, it will not be audible.'