On (un)grammatical clitic sequences in Spanish impersonal se constructions

**Introduction:** In this talk, we discuss the (un)grammatical sequence of clitics in impersonal *se* (Imp_{se}) constructions in Spanish, illustrated in (1a) from Honduran Spanish.

(1) a. Se \{le/*lo\} ve por aquí mucho.  
   imp_{se} him sees by here much  
   “He is seen around here a lot.”

b. \{Lo/*le\} veo por aquí mucho.  
   Him see by here much  
   “I see him around here a lot.”

Restricting the discussion to masculine animate direct objects, this pattern is particularly striking since in all other environments, *lo* is used in this dialect while *le* is not available, as illustrated in (1b), Honduran Spanish not being a leísta dialect. We offer an account in terms of syntactic domains and intervention, where *lo*, specified as definite (i.e. *lo_{[+D]}*), moves into the domain of the verb made impersonal by *se*, and blocks Agree with *T* by the implicit *indefinite* argument *pro_{[D]}* in *Spec,Voice* introduced in these impersonal *se* constructions.

**Novel data:** Consider impersonal *se* constructions in clitic climbing environments in (4), data which have not be previously discussed, but which are telling. Assume *lo* = Santa Claus.

(4) a. En Navidad, se suele poder abrazar\{lo/*le\}.
   In Christmas, Imp_{se} tends can hug him
   “In Christmas, one tends to be able to hug him.”

b. En Navidad, se suele poder \{lo/*le\} abrazar.

c. En Navidad, se \{*lo/le\} suele poder abrazar

(4a) illustrates that accusative case is available thanks to *abrazar* “hug” indicated by the appearance of enclitic *lo*. Moreover, on standard assumptions, neither *soler* “tend” nor *poder* “can” have accusative case to value a DP. Thus, the clitic carries accusative case with it when it moves, since when enclitic on *poder*, *lo* surfaces (4b). As (4c) illustrates, it is only when the clitic is within the domain of the matrix verb made impersonal by *se* that *lo* no longer surfaces; *le* must. These data are key: only when *lo* is in the domain with impersonal *se* is *lo* ungrammatical.

**Previous accounts:** As far as we know, there are only two other generative accounts of the patterns in (1). Mendikoetxea & Battye (1990) argue that the order of clitics is relevant in understanding the (un)grammatical sequences in impersonal *se* constructions; As (1) illustrates, however, this cannot be the case, since both ungrammatical *se lo* and grammatical *se le* have the same clitic orders. A more recent account (Ordóñez & Treviño to appear) claims that accusative case with verbs made impersonal by *se* is not available, thus ruling out accusative *lo*; *le* surfaces, they claim, because only inherent case is available. As the patterns in (4) illustrate, *lo* gets accusative from *abrazar* “hug”, thus the lack of accusative from *soler* “used to” cannot explain why *lo* is ungrammatical, since accusative is still available with *abrazar* “hug”.

**The specific proposal:** Following previous authors (see Mendikoetxea 2008, Ordóñez & Treviño 2011) we assume that an important ingredient of the non-referential *indefinite* interpretation of the implicit external argument in these *se* constructions results from the presence of an indefinite *pro_{[D]}* in *Spec,Voice*. We also assume *se* itself heads *Voice* (see Folli & Harely 2005, Armstrong 2011, Ordóñez & Treviño 2011 for related proposals). Adopting the analysis of Holmberg (2005, 2010) (see also Roberts 2010) for consistent null subject languages, we assume that *T* has an uninterpretable D feature (i.e. *T_{[uD]}*), which is typically valued definite by definite referential *pro* in *Spec,Voice*, unless special morphology arises, such as impersonal *se*. Specifically, we claims that *pro_{[D]}* in *Spec,Voice* in impersonal *se* constructions values *T_{[uD]}* as indefinite, which is critical for the non-referential *indefinite* interpretation of the implicit external argument. As we argue below, we claim that *lo* is specified as definite (i.e. *lo_{[+D]}*) and intervenes between indefinite *pro_{[D]}* in *Spec,Voice* and *T_{[uD]}*. The result is that *pro_{[D]}* cannot value *T_{[uD]}* and an indefinite interpretation does not arise. *Le* in contrast, although in the same
structural configuration does not block valuation of $T_{[uD]}$ by indefinite $prot_{[D]}$, because $le$ is underspecified for definiteness, as argued below; it lacks a definiteness feature altogether (i.e. $le$). We assume that the clitic, whether it moves as a head (Matushansky 2006) or a phrase moves through Spec,Voice, to escape the phase. In Spec,Voice $lo$ intervenes, as in (5a) which illustrates a non-clitic climbing context. This contrasts with grammatical $se$ $le$ in (5b); angled brackets indicate copies and two-way arrows indicate Agree.

(5)  

a.  \[ [TP \ T_{[uD]} \ [VoiceP \ lo_{[+D]} \ [VoiceP \ prot_{[D]} \ Voice \ [VP \ V <lo_{[+D]}>] ]] ] \]

b.  \[ [TP \ T_{[uD]} \ [VoiceP \ le \ [VoiceP \ prot_{[D]} \ Voice \ [VP \ V <le>] ]] ] \]

This also explains the clitic climbing patterns in (4), since the clitic only intervenes once it moves into the matrix Spec,Voice, into the domain of impersonal $se$.

**Indefiniteness:** We take the available semantic class of doubles of a clitic as an indication of the features that the clitic itself bears, following Suñer (1988), Ormazabal & Romero (2013) among others. As in (6), indirect object $le$ in all varieties can double a definite or an indefinite.

(6)  

Le mandamos un regalo a la/una niña pobre.  
Him send a gift to the/a girl poor  
“We sent the/a poor girl a gift.”

We assume that the ability to double both definite and indefinite DPs entails that the dative is underspecified for definiteness, and therefore lacks a definite feature altogether (see Nevins 2007 for animacy). As expected, indirect object $le$ is grammatical in impersonal $se$ constructions, as illustrated in (7) in a clitic climbing environment, where $le = Santa Claus$.

(7)  

En Navidad, se le suele mandar una carta  
In Christmas, Imp $se$ him tends send a letter  
“In Christmas, one tends to send him a letter.”

In contrast, in Honduran Spanish (and many dialects), direct object clitic doubling is limited to strong pronouns, which are definite, as in (8); indefinites cannot be clitic doubled, as in (9).

(8)  

a. Lo vi a él.  
him saw to him  
“I saw him.”

b. *Lo vi a un niño.  
him saw to a boy  
“I saw a boy.”

(9)  

a. *Lo vi a un niño.  
him saw to a boy  
“I saw a boy.”

b. La vi a ella.  
her saw to girl  
“I saw her.”

Interestingly, in contrast to Honduran Spanish, as reported in Suñer (1988), in Rioplatense Spanish, both a definite and an indefinite direct object can be doubled, as in (10), which entails that $lo$ in Rioplatense Spanish is underspecified for definiteness.

(10)  

a. La oían a la niña.  
her heard to the girl  
“They heard the girl.”

b. Diariamente, la escuchaba a una mujer que cantaba tangos.  
Daily, her listened to a woman that sang tangos  
“Daily, I listened to a woman that sang tangos.”

This, we claim, explains why $lo$ is ungrammatical in impersonal $se$ constructions, as in (11).

(11)  

Se lo escuchó (al niño)  
Imp $se$ him listened to the boy  
“One listened to him (the boy).”

**Conclusion:** In this talk, we argue that ungrammatical clitic sequences in impersonal $se$ constructions arises when a clitic specified as definite enters the domain of impersonal $se$, thereby giving rise an intervention effect.