


## GRAMMATICAL CODING AND THE DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF PARTICIPANTS: SPANISH PASSIVES IN WRITTEN PRESS NEWS DISCOURSE

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### ABSTRACT

This paper presents a comparative analysis of two Spanish constructions that are usually characterised as passive, namely the periphrastic or attributive passive – formed with the verb *ser* ‘be’ plus a participle – and the reflexive passive – formed with third-person reflexive clitic *se*. An isomorphic functional approach is adopted whereby the inherent syntactic-semantic features of each construction are considered to be at the basis of their discourse-pragmatic uses. Using a corpus of local written news pieces from the Peninsular town of Salamanca, the grammatical expression of both the initiators and the endpoints of events in each construction is quantitatively and qualitatively analysed, paying special attention to their variable encoding and placement within the clause and the semantic correlates of formal variation. While attributive passives are used to predicate transitive events of topical endpoints, reflexive passives often conceptualise events as thematic, reducing transitivity and defocusing initiators. These meanings are projected onto the discourse-pragmatic domain by favouring different interpretations of the role of human participants, particularly with respect to their involvement in events amenable to negative judgements. This supports the hypothesis that the syntax and semantics of each grammatical construction are undetachable from its communicative potential in specific contexts.

Este artículo presenta un análisis comparativo de dos construcciones del español caracterizadas habitualmente como pasivas: la perifrástica o atributiva, formada con el verbo *ser* y un participio, y la reflexiva, formada con el clítico de tercera persona *se*. La investigación adopta un enfoque funcional isomórfico, por el cual se considera que los rasgos sintáctico-semánticos inherentes a una construcción constituyen la base de sus usos discursivo-pragmáticos. A partir de un corpus de noticias escritas de la ciudad peninsular de Salamanca, se analiza cuantitativa y cualitativamente la configuración gramatical tanto de los iniciadores como de los términos de los eventos, prestando especial atención a su formulación y su colocación en la cláusula y a los correlatos semánticos de estas. Mientras que las pasivas atributivas predicen eventos transitivos de términos topicales, las reflexivas suelen conceptualizar los eventos como técticos, reduciendo la transitividad y desfocalizando al iniciador. Estos significados se proyectan en el dominio discursivo-pragmático, favoreciendo distintas interpretaciones del papel de los participantes humanos, en particular en lo que se refiere a su implicación en eventos evaluados negativamente. Todo ello apoya la hipótesis de que la sintaxis y la semántica de cada construcción gramatical son inseparables de su potencial comunicativo en contextos específicos.

[Spanish]

1. INTRODUCTION: THE GENERAL FUNCTION OF PASSIVISATION<sup>1</sup>

In the prototypical active transitive clause, an agent encoded as a subject performs an action that causes a change of state in a patient encoded as an object (Thompson & Hopper 2001; Langacker 2008: 357). In turn, passivisation has been described – also in its prototypical instances – as the syntactic coding of the patient as subject, whereby this participant usually becomes topical or accessible. The agent, if formulated, will appear as an (often postverbal) adjunct (Shibatani 1985: 830, Maldonado Soto 1999: 306, Sansò 2006). The latter constructions are of great interest to functional and cognitive studies of grammar, since they entail an alteration in the conceptualization of a transitive event and in the relative status of its participants. In fact, as will be shown in this paper, they can hardly be viewed as mere ‘synonymous’ or ‘contextual’ alternatives to actives (Fernández 2007: 82); neither are they equivalent to other constructions grouped under the general label of *impersonals* (Siewierska 2008: 121–4, Siewierska & Papastathi 2011).

Following Kemmer (1993: 50), here the main participants will respectively be termed *initiator* and *endpoint*. These terms make it possible to accommodate a wider range of semantic roles than those of ‘agent’ and ‘patient’. There is in fact wide variability across the world’s languages with respect to the kinds of events and roles that can be constructed by means of passive clauses (Keenan & Dryer 2007, Zúñiga & Kittilä 2019: 96–98), often including psychological processes where transitivity is very low.

It has been extensively discussed whether the basic function of passives as opposed to actives is the promotion of the patient or rather the demotion of the agent. Shibatani’s (1985) analysis has been especially influential in favour of the latter hypothesis. However, it seems equally possible – and cross-linguistically safer – to argue that demotion is just one among several functional domains in which passives take part (Givón 1981: 168, Fried 2006) and that patient promotion can be equally relevant depending on the construction and the context where it is used (Ibáñez & Melis 2010). The frequent formal omission of the initiator raises further problems – we may wonder how a participant can be semantically construed when there are no traces of it within the clause or its surrounding context (Giacalone Ramat & Sansò 2011: 194–5, Delbecque 2014: 225). The explanation probably lies in the semantics of the verb or that of the predicate at large, as well as in lexical and grammatical aspect, the (in) animacy of the subject and other contextual features that can favour a particular interpretation of the event.

The purpose of this paper is to jointly analyse two constructions of Spanish that, even if often characterised as passive – or, more adequately, as allowing for passive interpretations in the relevant contexts – have been shown to be quite different in functional and semantic terms (e.g. Fernández 2003: 36–37, Sánchez López 2016). These are the *periphrastic* or *attributive* passive, formed with the verb *ser* ‘to be’, and the *reflexive* passive, whereby a third-person reflexive morpheme is adjoined to the verb. Examples (1) and (2) are respectively proposed as preliminary illustrations of the two constructions.<sup>2</sup>

(1) *El libro fue publicado*  
‘The book was published’

(2) *El libro se publicó*  
‘The book was published, lit. Published itself’

<sup>1</sup> This paper is part of the research project [...].

<sup>2</sup> In order to simplify the exposition, the constructed examples in Sections 1 and 2 as well as those extracted from the corpus in the subsequent ones will not be accompanied by word-by-word glosses; the translations and their discussion in the text should suffice to highlight the relevant grammatical and discursive features. Unless otherwise indicated, italics are ours.

We will try to elucidate how the main participants of the event are semantically conceptualised in each of them and explore some pragmatic projections of such conceptualization in the specific textual genre of written news pieces, where both constructions are often used for the narration of events.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. Section 2 presents and discusses the basic syntactic, semantic and pragmatic features of each construction as developed in the relevant literature. In Section 3, the research questions are formulated; the characteristics of the corpus and the kind of analysis to be carried out are subsequently detailed. In Section 4, the general distribution of attributive and reflexive passives across news pieces is presented and briefly discussed. Since the focus is on the conceptualization of endpoints and initiators, Sections 5 and 6 are respectively devoted to the analysis of each participant in each construction, showing how different syntactic-semantic configurations condition the discourse-pragmatic interpretation of the constructions in specific contexts. Finally, in Section 7, we will draw the main conclusions of the study and point out the most compelling questions for future research along the lines devised.

## 2. OVERVIEW OF ATTRIBUTIVE AND REFLEXIVE PASSIVES IN SPANISH

### 2.1. *Attributive passives*

The construction traditionally termed *periphrastic passive* (RAE 2009: §41.2–3) is formed with the verb *ser* ‘to be’ as a tensed auxiliary, followed by a main verb in the past participle that agrees in gender and number with the subject, such as *premiada* ‘rewarded’ in (3a). The construction is structurally analogous to an attributive copula construction such as (3b), where the adjective *brillante* ‘brilliant’ precludes the interpretation of an action performed on the subject.

- (3) a. *La alumna fue premiada por la escuela*  
 ‘The student was rewarded by the school.’  
 b. *La alumna fue brillante en su respuesta*  
 ‘The student was brilliant in her answer.’

Our choice of the term *attributive passive* is in line with a functional tradition that highlights its isomorphism with copula constructions at large (Alarcos Llorach 1994: §198, Gutiérrez Ordóñez 2001). The passive, i.e. transitive reading is triggered by the contextual presence of a participle denoting an action that in turn favours the inference of an external initiator. Unlike what was common in the medieval period (Elvira González 2001), contemporary Spanish does not use *ser* as an auxiliary with intransitive verbs such as displacement ones (*ha venido* ‘has come’, not *es venido* ‘is come’). Another factor that promotes the transitive interpretation is the use of perfective past tenses, as in the example. In contrast, the construction is often unnatural with the present simple, unless the event can be interpreted as iterative (example 4) (see Fernández 2007: 25–27 and similar considerations for Italian by Giacalone Ramat & Sansò 2011: 225).

- (4) *La puerta es abierta todos los días*  
 ‘The door is opened every day’

This is consistent with the fact that the construction is generally associated with telic events, seen from the viewpoint of their completion rather than that of their development. In Smith’s (2012: 22–35) oft-cited taxonomy, it is used to describe *accomplishments*, and sometimes also *achievements*. Most of its syntactic and semantic features are thus indexical of

high transitivity (Thompson & Hopper 2001: 28), but the coding of the endpoint as the subject, and that of the initiator as an adjunct – usually headed by *por* ‘by’ – suggest a significant departure from the prototypical transitive clause. The formal expression of the initiator is rarely required and is in fact the less frequent option, in Spanish as in other languages with analogous constructions (Keenan & Dryer 2007: 332). It has been noted that the use of *ser* passives has much to do with the arrangement of information within the clause and the contextual topicality or salience of the endpoint (Fernández 2007: 118–23; Belloro 2020: 112–4). The tendency of an endpoint subject to appear at the beginning of the clause usually correlates with the fact that it is the participant being talked about, while the rest of the clause – including the initiator if it appears – will be seen as the information that is predicated of it.

Finally, it must be pointed out that *ser* is not the only verb forming attributive or pseudo-attributive constructions that can be contextually interpreted as passive. *Estar* ‘be [transitory]’ plus a transitive participle conveys a resultative meaning as opposed to the dynamic one of *ser* (Conti Jiménez 2004):

- (5) *Las verduras ya están cocidas*  
 ‘The vegetables are already boiled’

Much the same can be said of transitive participles used as adjectives (Sánchez López 2016: §2.2). Also, verbs such as *resultar* ‘to result, to prove’ or *venir* ‘to come’ followed by participles are sometimes amenable to passive interpretations. However, the construction with *ser* is the most widely used construction for this pragmatic function. Following studies such as those by Fernández (2003, 2007), Sansò (2006) or Fábregas (2021: 152–7), the analysis will focus on it and compare its semantic and pragmatic values with those of a different construction that can also be contextually interpreted as passive, namely the reflexive passive.

## 2.2. Reflexive passives

This second construction has been termed *pasiva refleja* ‘reflexive passive’ (RAE 2009: §41.11–12) for good reason. It is in fact an instance of the wide array of clauses with third-person reflexive clitic *se* ‘him/her/itself, themselves’. It is widely accepted that reflexive passives constitute a particular medio-passive instantiation of the general reflexive construction, the basic function of *se* being the intransitivization of the clause by reducing the verbal valency (Mendikoetxea 1999: 1649–53, Fernández 2007: 93–96, Keenan & Dryer 2007: 334, Delbecque 2014: 243–8). García (2009: 147) describes *se* as a “focus absorber” that blocks the search for an external agent of the verb, causing the levelling of semantic roles and the location of the event within the subject. Depending on the (in)animacy of the subject, the meaning of the verb and other contextual factors, the prototypical interpretation of reflexive constructions – that is, that the initiator performs some action on him/herself – can be dispreferred as against middle readings, where the event is understood as happening naturally or spontaneously within the subject, or passive readings, where the existence of a non-coreferential initiator is inferred. In the following pair of examples, it is only the respective semantic features of *mantel* ‘tablecloth’ and *niño* ‘child (masc.)’ that favour the passive reading in (6a) and the reflexive one in (6b).

- (6) a. *El mantel se metió en la bañera*  
 ‘The tablecloth was plunged (lit. Plunged itself) into the bathtub.’  
 b. *El niño se metió en la bañera*  
 ‘The child plunged (lit. Plunged himself) into the bathtub.’

The grammaticalization of Latin *se* – originally a positionally free stressed pronoun – into a verbal affix was parallel to a succession of functional stages along which it spread from animate subjects to inanimate, non-volitional ones (Monge 2002, Sansò 2011: 221–3, Carranza 2019: 92–94). Passive readings are prompted by subjects of the latter kind as well as indefinite animate ones (Mendikoetxea 1999: 1668). Frequent failures in verbal agreement further led to the emergence of a syntactically impersonal construction, sometimes characterised as an ‘impersonal passive’. In such cases, the endpoint can be animate:

(7) *Se capturó a los fugitivos*

‘The fugitives were captured’ (‘There was capturing of the fugitives’)

In (7), *los fugitivos* is headed by the preposition *a*, typically marking animate, definite objects and blocking agreement with the verb. However, nonstandard agreement is frequent (Mendikoetxea 1999: 1689–90, Posio 2015: 379). There are also obvious semantic connections between reflexive passives and impersonals, even if the lack of an endpoint encoded as subject in the latter constructions must entail some difference in meaning.

In view of the above discussion, the passivisation of the clause in (6b) above is only feasible through the attributive construction:

(8) *El niño fue metido en la bañera*

‘The child was plunged into the bathtub’

In contrast, the use of *El niño se metió* would prompt the reflexive interpretation. Also, first or second person reflexive clauses can be interpreted either as reflexive proper (9a) or as middle (9b), but never as passive.

(9) a. *Me afeito todos los días*

‘I shave myself every day’

b. *Me preocupo todos los días*

‘I worry [myself] every day’

Together with animacy and definiteness, syntactic ordering is another factor that may influence the interpretation of reflexive clauses. It has been noted that the postverbal placement of the subject favours the passive reading (10a), while marking it as topical through preverbal placement makes it easier to understand the event as happening within the endpoint, that is as middle or antipassive (10b) (Fábregas 2021: 139).

(10) a. *Se rompió la ventana*

‘The window was broken’

b. *La ventana se rompió*

‘The window broke’

As regards the initiator, the reflexive construction appears to disfavour its encoding in the clause. Thus (11) is only marginally acceptable and causes ambiguity as to what the actual role of the cook should be – ‘agent’, ‘cause’, ‘beneficiary’ or others that can be associated with the semantically diffuse preposition *por* ‘by, for’.

(11) *?El mantel se metió en la bañera por el cocinero*

‘The tablecloth was plunged [lit. Plunged itself] into the bathtub by the cook’

This must be connected with the inherently reflexive nature of the construction, whereby the existence of two differentiated participants becomes blurred – as is characteristic of the middle voice at large, in what Kemmer (1993: 208) terms *low elaboration*. Therefore, the specification of an initiator would seem contradictory, and is indeed marked as ungrammatical in some formal descriptions (e.g. Ormazabal & Romero 2019: 65–66; see also Fried 2007:

729 for Czech). However, this is hardly a general rule (Keenan & Dryer 2007: 334). The analysis will reveal some alternative strategies for the referential demarcation of the initiator that elude the constraints on adjuncts headed by *por*.

### 2.3. *The constructions in contrast*

The preceding discussion suggests that the constructions under study differ significantly as to the degree of transitivity each of them confers to the conceptualization of the event. In fact, Delbecq (2014: 227–8) views the passive as a constructional template – characterised by focus on the affectedness of the core participant – that can pair with different syntactic forms; these, in turn, make the initiator be understood as more or less agentive, and the endpoint as more or less affected.

In spite of the restrictions it imposes on the semantic features of the endpoint and the encoding of the initiator, the reflexive passive is altogether much more frequent in Spanish than the attributive passive. This is mainly because it is not restricted to highly transitive contexts, but can also be used with verbs denoting processes or states, in both telic and atelic clauses (12).

- (12) *Se tenían dudas*  
‘Doubts were held’

In turn, the occurrence of the attributive passive is often viewed as an effect of constructional parallelism with English in domains where this language exerts a strong influence, such as science, technology and especially the press (Montes 2002–2003: 116–7, RAE 2009: §41.2), while it is rare in colloquial speech. In a quantitative study across written and oral genres, Levy (2000) found that 65% of the attributive passives occurred in written press discourse and just 3% in conversation. Even when encoding animate, definite endpoints as topical subjects, such as *el niño* in (6b) above, speakers will often opt for an active construction with a left-dislocated object headed by *a* and – provided the agent is unknown or irrelevant – a plural third-person verb (13) or maybe an impersonal *se* construction. The topical status of *al niño* in the example is underlined by its indexation in the verbal nucleus through an accusative clitic (*lo*) that would be much rarer with postverbal objects (Aijón Oliva 2019: 58–59).

- (13) *Al niño lo metieron en la bañera*  
‘The child, they plunged into the bathtub.’

Therefore, the attributive passive and the reflexive passive are syntactically and semantically differentiated constructions that appear to be unequally distributed across communicative situations and are in contrast not just with each other, but also with different syntactic configurations that can fulfil similar pragmatic functions. Most importantly, neither of them is inherently passive; this is only a particular interpretation that is prompted by certain contextual features.

From an isomorphic viewpoint as is favoured by functional and cognitive approaches to grammar, a construction should be understood as a prototype that goes beyond mere formal configuration; it is “a particular cluster of both formal and semantic or functional properties united in a conventionalized grammatical pattern” (Fried 2007: 726; see also Goldberg 2009: 99–100). The approach proposed here pursues an integrated view of the facts whereby the syntactic-semantic features of a construction can be systematically connected with its use as a discourse-pragmatic resource in specific social and communicative contexts (see Serrano & Aijón Oliva 2013; Serrano 2014, 2020; Aijón Oliva 2017, 2019, among others). Our basic hypothesis is that the grammatical encoding of the endpoint and the initiator with each

passive construction – each being connected to the broader constructional schemes of attribution and reflexivity, respectively – will influence their interpretation and that of the event as a whole. This, in turn, will cause speakers to choose one or the other passive depending on their communicative intentions in the context. If this is so, it will be possible to nuance the usual view of constructions as *conventional* with a model of meaning as composed of multiple interconnected layers and rooted in general cognitive mechanisms (Serrano 2020: 81–83).

The analysis will be primarily concerned with whether the participants are encoded in the clause and where they are placed. In the absence of marked intonation, preverbal subjects are characterised by topicality; if their reference is maintained across clauses, they can be considered contextually accessible (Ariel 2009: 11–14, Aijón Oliva 2019: 27–30). In the latter cases, their formal omission is generally allowed in Spanish, verbal endings and other deictic-anaphoric elements being sufficient to track their reference across discourse. Topicality and accessibility are partly different albeit related facets of the general dimension of salience, meaning the activation of a referent in the attention of speakers (Lambrecht 1994: 94, Croft & Cruse 2004: 49–50).

In Spanish, the (S)VO pattern has usually been considered the unmarked one in declarative clauses (Serrano & Aijón Oliva 2013: 275–7). However, this language – unlike English – tends to give primacy to the *pragmatic mode* over the *syntactic* one, as described by Givón (1979: 102). This means that the ordering of constituents is primarily determined by the semantic features of their referents and their discursive status rather than by syntactic function itself (Contreras 1976, Gutiérrez Bravo 2008, Belloro 2020). In this sense, preverbal vs. postverbal placement has been shown to correlate more closely with contextual accessibility than with syntactic function (e.g. Hidalgo Downing 2003: 299, Aijón Oliva 2017: 103–4).

This justifies the analysis of the encoding and placement of the participants as a starting point for the discourse-pragmatic analysis of the attributive and reflexive passives. As will be shown, they largely differ as to the respective tendency of the endpoint and the initiator to occupy preverbal vs. postverbal positions. This, in turn, can be related to other features of variation at the syntactic, semantic and discourse levels.

### 3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS. CORPUS AND METHODOLOGY

The study aims at answering the following questions:

- 1 What are the frequencies of each passive construction in written press news pieces? Is there a dominance of attributive ones, as could be inferred from previous assessments about the recurrence of this construction in journalistic discourse?
- 2 Are the frequencies of each construction in this textual genre analogous to those in other kinds of media discourse, including radio speech?
- 3 What are the quantitative patterns of the encoding and syntactic placement of the endpoint in each passive, and how do they relate to the discourse role of this participant in specific contexts?
- 4 What are the quantitative patterns of the encoding and syntactic placement of the initiator in each passive, and how do they relate to the discourse role of this participant in specific contexts?
- 5 All in all, can the respective syntactic and semantic features of attributive and reflexive passives be connected with their uses as discourse-pragmatic resources?

The texts to be analysed are part of the *Corpus de Lenguaje de los Medios de Comunicación de Salamanca* (MEDIASA), which includes samples of local press and radio discourse from the Peninsular Spanish town of Salamanca. Its 302,577 words are almost equally divided

between the written and spoken subcorpora.<sup>3</sup> The former was compiled by the author of this study with texts dating from the period 2003–2004 and published in the three local newspapers with the largest circulation, namely *La Gaceta*, *El Adelanto* and *Tribuna de Salamanca*, all of which also had their own websites where most texts in the printed version were also released. The delimitation of the textual genres included in the corpus – news pieces, stories, opinion pieces, etc. – was carried out through extended observation of the formal and conceptual features of the materials regularly published, which was complemented with personal interviews with the managing editors of the journals.

The section of written news pieces comprises a total 59,651 words distributed into 126 different texts, which amounts to an average 473.4 words. The texts are devoted to the transmission of informational contents – recent events of a local or at most regional scope – from a (supposedly) objective viewpoint. They were authored by journalists, that is, by people professionally trained in mass communication, in contrast to other media genres where people of different socio-professional characterizations – intellectuals, political representatives and so forth – are more often involved. The voices of speakers of the latter kinds can still leak into the text through literal quotations or indirect speech.

All attributive and reflexive clauses allowing for passive interpretations – due to the presence of a transitive participle/main verb and a subject that could be interpreted as the endpoint of an externally initiated event – were extracted manually from the corpus and annotated as to construction type, semantic features of each participant and their encoding and syntactic placement. Given the significant functional differences between the attributive and reflexive passives, the methodology cannot just be aimed at unveiling their respective distributions and correlations, as if they were syntactic ‘variants’ in a traditional sense (e.g. Tagliamonte 2007: 191–3), but rather needs to ascertain how each one is employed to express specific discursive strategies. Analyses of grammatical constructions as communicative choices can greatly benefit from the systematic combination of quantitative and qualitative data (Sansò 2006: 234–5, Schilling 2013: 149).

The quantitative facet of the analysis will address, first, the general frequencies of each passive in the texts analysed and compare it with the general ones in the corpus. It will subsequently go deeper into their respective behaviour regarding the encoding and syntactic placement of both the initiator and the endpoint, these being the factors that, according to previous studies, seem to give rise to the most obvious differences between both passives. The quantitative patterns will in turn be interpreted through the qualitative observation of how discourse-pragmatic meanings are developed in specific contexts, considering the encoding and placement of the participants in conjunction with other contextual features.

#### 4. GENERAL DISTRIBUTION OF THE PASSIVES IN WRITTEN PRESS NEWS

The texts contain a total 77 attributive passive tokens and 490 reflexive ones (see Table 1). Thus, even if the former construction is often viewed as a typical feature of journalistic informational discourse, as noted by some of the studies cited in Section 2, the latter one

Table 1. Distribution of the attributive and reflexive passives in written news pieces

Construction	Token number	Relative percentage	Frequency per 1,000 words
Attributive	77	13.6	1.3
Reflexive	490	86.4	8.2
Total	567	100	9.5

<sup>3</sup> The complete text of the corpus can be accessed at <https://gredos.usal.es/handle/10366/138326>.

turns out to be much more frequent, accounting for 86.4% of the total passives in news pieces. Of course, the low frequency of attributive passives in conversational speech is likely to make them a more conspicuous stylistic choice whenever they occur. Normalised frequencies according to word number can offer a more objective picture of their respective distribution. This is because, as noted above, both passives cannot be approached as the variants of a grammatical variable; neither are they the only options available in Spanish for the discursive promotion of a semantic patient and/or the demotion of an agent. The data in the far-right column of the table show that, while attributive passives occur 1.3 times per 1,000 words, reflexive ones do so 8.2 times.

Still, the commonplace association between the attributive construction and written journalism seems to hold when the frequencies are compared with those of the corpus at large (see Table 2). Across its 302,577 words there are 178 tokens of the attributive passive, which means that news items – accounting for some 20% of the total words – contain 43.3% of them. The normalised frequency of the construction in the whole corpus is just 0.6. Furthermore, only 42 tokens appear in its spoken half (23.6%), most of them amidst the reading of previously scripted texts, as is usual in radio news reports. It must be pointed out that reflexive passives are also more frequent in written news than in other media genres, their general frequency in the corpus being 4.7.

The combination of these facts suggests that passives in general are useful resources for written informational discourse, due to a variety of factors that need to be discussed in more depth, but that appear to be mainly related to the focusing of attention on the endpoint and/or the downplaying of the involvement of the initiator in the events described. It is now necessary to further discuss how each of the main participants is conceptualised through each construction and the main discourse-pragmatic repercussions of such conceptualizations in the texts analysed.

5. THE ENDPOINT IN PASSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS

As pointed out above, the quantitative analysis will focus on the variable encoding and syntactic placement of the participants in each construction. Given our observations on topicality and accessibility as facets of discursive salience, all subjects not appearing after the verb – whether they are formulated within the clause or had appeared in a previous one – are considered preverbal. Thus, in example (14) from the corpus, the subject of reflexive *se ubicará* ‘will be located [lit. will locate itself]’ is coreferential with the previously mentioned and accessible referent *la unidad* ‘the unit’. In between, the author has inserted a subordinate *se* clause with a different subject, namely *la culminación del proyecto no se retomará* ‘the final phase of the project will not be resumed’.

- (14) Precisamente ésta es *la unidad* que acumulará un mayor retraso, ya que la culminación del proyecto no se retomará hasta el próximo año, a pesar de que las obras para acondicionar la zona del Hospital de Los Montalvos en el que *se ubicará* ya han finalizado y existe dotación presupuestaria prevista, según ha afirmado el PSOE. <Not-Ad-031104-16b>

Table 2. Distribution of the attributive and reflexive passives in the MEDIASA corpus

Construction	Token number	Relative percentage	Frequency per 1,000 words
Attributive	178	11.1	0.6
Reflexive	1,422	88.9	4.7
Total	1,600	100	5.3

Table 3. Placement of the endpoint in attributive and reflexive passives

	Preverbal		Postverbal		Total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Attributive	73	94.8	4	5.2	77	13.6
Reflexive	238	48.6	252	51.4	490	86.4
Total	311	54.9	256	45.1	567	100

‘This is actually *the unit* that will accumulate the longest delay, since the final phase of the project will not be resumed until next year, even if the works for the refurbishment of the Los Montalvos hospital area where [it] *will be located* are already finished and there is a previously approved budget provision, according to the PSOE.’

Also, in many examples the subject of the clause is a relative head in coreference with a previous lexical NP, such as *que* ‘that’ in (15), which resumes the reference of the immediately preceding *los artículos* ‘the items’.

- (15) Antigüedades, libros, menaje de hogar, adornos navideños, productos de la tierra y ropa de bebé son algunos de *los artículos que se pueden adquirir* en el rastrillo, que también ofrece comidas y servicio de bar. <Not-Ad-121203-27>  
 ‘Antiques, books, household goods, Christmas decorations, local products and baby clothing are some of *the items that can be purchased* at the flea market, which also offers cooking and bar service.’

These are examples of accessible subjects that the writers have considered to be easily inferable from the previous context, as opposed to postverbal subjects, which are generally treated as new information. Table 3 shows the percentages of subject placement with each passive construction. The overwhelming preference for preverbal subjects with attributive passives (94.8%) contrasts with the choice of postposition in more than half of reflexive passives (51.4%). While it is the latter result that most clearly deviates from the prototypical pattern in transitive clauses, passives with *ser* have in fact been shown to have higher rates of preverbal subjects than active intransitive clauses (Belloro 2020: 123), which confirms the existence of wide differences between both constructions as regards syntactic configuration. The results need to be seen in relation to other contextual features in order to elucidate how the endpoint is semantically conceptualised and projected onto discourse with each of them.

### 5.1. The endpoint in attributive passives

The dominance of preverbal subjects in attributive constructions suggests their association with referents that are contextually salient, even if conceptualised as semantic patients and often as significantly affected ones. Referent animacy is likely to play some role in this. Human referents tend to be accorded the syntactic function of subject, the thematic roles of agent or experiencer – which they obviously cannot fulfil as passive subjects – and the clause-initial position (Aijón Oliva 2019: 23). 33 out of 77 passives (42.9%) have a human individual or group as subject, in contrast with the near-categoricity of inanimate referents in reflexive passives (for a diachronic comparison in this respect, see Cabañas Maya 2006). Thus in (16), taken from the caption of a photograph attached to a news piece, *es sometida* ‘is subjected’ can only be interpreted as a transitive event involving two participants – that is, someone else is performing blood extraction on this person – as against *se somete*, which would trigger the reflexive interpretation (‘subjects him/herself’). Similarly, in (17) *se trasladó* ‘took himself, travelled’ would block the intended passive reading.

- (16) Una persona *es sometida* a una extracción de sangre. <Not-Ad-171104-14a>  
‘A person *is subjected* to blood extraction.’
- (17) la calle Padre Ignacio Ellacuría fue el escenario de una colisión entre un turismo, conducido por M.C.B.S., y un ciclomotor, pilotado por O.S.G., que resultó herido grave y *fue trasladado* al Hospital Clínico. <Not-Ad-170504-13>  
‘Padre Ignacio Ellacuría Street was the setting of a collision between a passenger car, driven by M.C.B.S., and a motorbike ridden by O.S.G., who sustained serious injuries and *was taken* to the Clinical Hospital.’

As pointed out above, the use of a patient at the topical position without altering its functional coding as object and marking its salience through a coreferential verbal clitic (see (13) above) is a much more frequent strategy in conversational and scarcely pre-planned discourse where the OV pattern is not unusual (Fernández 2007: 137–9). Note that, in (18), left-dislocation occurs amidst the transcription of oral speech. Immediately afterwards, the referent introduced as a preverbal object becomes the omitted subject of an attributive active clause (*es una elección* ‘it is a personal choice’).

- (18) “Los cuadros forman una especie de serie de tres en la que aparecen figuras dentro de un espacio urbano abstracto. *El colour*, sin embargo, no *lo utilizo* como una carga simbólica, simplemente *es* una elección”. <Not-Tr-060804-64>  
‘The paintings form a sort of three-part series in which some figures appear within an abstract urban space. *Colour*, however, *I do not use* as a source of symbolism – *it is* just a personal choice.’

The function of subject is typically associated with referents that are easy to process in the context (Ariel 2009: 12). The subjects of attributive passives are usually taken as the basis for the subsequent progression of discourse. This is obviously well suited to the dynamics of written informational prose, which tends to be built on accessible referents of which new information is predicated. If the *ser* passive is not very frequent – not even in the kind of discourse where it seems to be much of a stylistic stereotype – it is because endpoints, in particular human ones, rarely achieve continuity across discourse while maintaining that semantic status. The case of (19) is somewhat atypical in that *el expárroco* ‘the former parish priest’ is the subject of three consecutive verbs – plus an infinitive in a temporal clause – of which two appear within attributive passives.

- (19) Por esta acusación, *el expárroco fue detenido* en su domicilio y *pasó* la noche en los calabozos. El viernes, tras *declarar* ante el juez, *fue puesto* en libertad con cargos. <Not-Ad-211204-16>  
‘Due to this accusation, *the former parish priest was arrested* at his home and *spent* the night in jail. On Friday, after *testifying* before the judge, he *was released* pending trial.’

In turn, the subject is postposed when it is highly informative, thus scarcely accessible from the preceding context, as happens in (20), where its placement at the clause-final position is also related to its length and structural complexity.

- (20) Delgado hizo estas declaraciones durante un encuentro con representantes del PSOE, al que también *habían sido invitados el alcalde de Salamanca y los procuradores del PP en las Cortes*. <Not-Ad-290104-16>  
‘Delgado made these statements in the course of a meeting with representatives of the PSOE, to which *the Salamanca mayor and the representatives of the PP at the regional parliament [postv.] had also been invited*.’

Much the same can be noted of (21), being the only example in the database where passive *ser* has an embedded clause as subject.

- (21) Por todos *es sabido que el club no atraviesa su mejor situación económica*, por lo que la llegada de este delantero serviría para dar por cerrada la plantilla del Salamanca para la próxima temporada. <Not-Ga-120804-57>  
 ‘By everyone [it] is known that the club is not in the best of financial situations, so the hiring of this striker should suffice to round off the Salamanca team for the upcoming season.’

*Es sabido* ‘[it] is known’ is largely lexicalized as an evidential marker (De Miguel Aparicio 1992: 212, RAE 2009: §41.3a); the use of a stative cognition verb and of the present tense are features clearly divergent from the high transitivity associated with *ser* passives. However, the latter constructional scheme is still reproduced, as shown by the encoding of the external participant in the prototypical fashion of agents (*por todos* ‘by everyone’).

Apart from cases of this sort, clausal subjects are rare or ungrammatical in attributive passives, as shown by the following constructed examples:

- (22) a. \**Es dicho que lloverá*  
 ‘[It] is said that it will rain’  
 b. *Se dice que lloverá*  
 ‘[It] is said that it will rain’
- (23) ??*Fue descubierto que habían huido*  
 ‘[It] was discovered that they had fled’

Examples (22a) and (23) would be fully acceptable with the reflexive construction, at least in postposition to the verb (22b). This is connected with the possible semantic features of subjects in each passive and their respective likelihood to become discursively salient.

### 5.2. The endpoint in reflexive passives

As shown in Table 3, 51.4% of *se* constructions have postverbal subjects that often constitute new or non-inferable information. This status correlates with formal features such as indefinite determiners, as in *un concurso de dibujos* ‘a drawing contest’ (24), or with the lack of determination, as in *flores blancas* ‘white flowers’ and *velas* ‘candles’ (25). However, the first excerpt contains another reflexive passive with a definite subject, namely *la exposición* ‘the exhibition’, which in spite of being the main topic of the text also appears at the postverbal position; this has probably been influenced by the placement of *el próximo miércoles* ‘next Wednesday’ before the verb.

- (24) El próximo miércoles *se realizará la exposición* en Béjar hasta el domingo. Además, *se ha organizado un concurso de dibujos* para niños de 8 a 12 años que hayan visitado la exposición y plasmado en él lo que han aprendido <Not-Ad-041104-17>  
 ‘The exhibition [postv.] will be held in Béjar from next Wednesday till Sunday. Besides, a drawing contest [postv.] has been arranged for children between 8 and 12 who have visited the exhibition, so that they can show what they have learnt.’
- (25) En estas reuniones, *se repartirán flores blancas y se pondrán velas del mismo colour* para concienciar a la población de la importancia de no sajar una vida humana <Not-Ad-171104-14b>

‘At these gatherings, *white flowers* [postv.] *will be distributed* and *candles of the same colour* [postv.] *will be lit* in order to raise awareness about the importance of not cutting off human lives.’

Thus, whereas the attributive construction is generally associated with preverbal or omitted referents, the reflexive one shows some preference for the placement of the subject after the verb, this being otherwise the prototypical position of objects (Serrano 2014: 140–2) as well as that of subjects with unaccusative verbs at large (Gutiérrez Bravo 2008: 372). In fact, many clauses with *se*, such as those in the preceding examples, constitutethetic utterances that lack a topic-comment structure and are wholly informative, as opposed to SV clauses – including most attributive passives – that predicate some fact of a pre-established referent (Sansò 2006: 249, Sasse 2006: 267–71, Fernández 2007: 150–2, Marten & Gibbon 2016: 568–9). Of course, the discursive status of a newly introduced participant can change across the subsequent clauses. (26) is an interesting example where *una enorme pancarta* ‘a huge banner’ is placed after a reflexive passive verb when it appears as new information, and then is anaphorically resumed as the subject of an attributive one. (27) shows an analogous switch, even if in this case the subject *el cese* ‘the dismissal’ was already topical from the beginning of the passage.

- (26) Poco después, con la presencia del presidente de la Junta, Juan Vicente Herrera, y otros altos cargos del Gobierno regional, *se desplegó una enorme pancarta* en el balcón del ayuntamiento, que *será retirada* el próximo sábado. <Not-Ad-031104-11>  
 ‘Shortly after, in the presence of the president of the Junta, Juan Vicente Herrera, and other senior members of the regional government, *a huge banner* [postv.] *was spread out* on the balcony of the town hall, which *will be withdrawn* next Saturday.’
- (27) *El cese de María Teresa de Felipe*, que no *se hizo oficial* hasta el día de ayer, ya *había sido comunicado* a la gerente y a su entorno cercano la semana pasada. <Not-Ga-121203-17>  
 ‘*The dismissal of María Teresa de Felipe*, which was not made official until yesterday, had already been communicated to the administrator and her closest associates last week.’

Postverbal placement of subjects in reflexive passive constructions is also consistent with the usual inanimacy of their referents. In the rare cases where they are animate, they are conceptualised as more of a continuous substance than an individual or a group, as suggested by the use of a numeral in (28) or by indeterminacy in (29).

- (28) estas cifras mejoran considerablemente las del año pasado, cuando en las mesas informativas instaladas por las diferentes agrupaciones *se consiguieron 230 donantes nuevos* < Not-Ad-031204-15>  
 ‘These figures substantially improve those of last year, when *230 new donors* [postv.] *were attained* at the information stands installed by the different associations.’
- (29) El director provincial [de educación] transmite “cierta tranquilidad” al colectivo de APA. No *se derivarán alumnos* si eso suprime unidades estatales. <Not-Ad-121203-12>  
 ‘The provincial [education] head has “relatively reassured” the parents’ associations. *No students* [postv.] *will be relocated* if this should mean closing public schools.’

In (29), preverbal placement is almost ungrammatical without a determiner – but then again, *los alumnos no se derivarán* ‘the students will not be relocated’ would promote a reflexive reading (‘will not relocate themselves’) over the passive one.

Furthermore, 43 reflexive passive subjects (17.1% of the total) are embedded clauses, in contrast with their rarity in attributive passives. Most of them are placed postverbally, in accordance with their high informativity and their structural complexity (but see below for

some apparently diverging examples). In (30), the two embedded clauses in coordination do not trigger plural agreement in the verbal ending (*??Se descubrieron...* ‘[They] were discovered’) as two coordinated NPs would regularly do. The first one, in turn, contains a reflexive passive with a postverbal indeterminate subject (*pueden encontrarse cardiomiocitos* ‘cardiomyocytes can be found’).

- (30) De este modo, una vez que *se descubrió que pueden encontrarse cardiomiocitos supervivientes en la zona próxima al infarto de un paciente y que éstos son capaces de multiplicarse*, surgió una nueva alternativa terapéutica. <Not-Ad-031104-16a>  
 ‘This way, once [it] *was discovered that surviving cardiomyocytes can be found in the area near a patient’s infarction and that they have the capacity to multiply*, a new therapeutic alternative emerged.’

In fact, it is possible to question whether embedded clauses following reflexive verbs are syntactically coded as subjects or rather as the objects of impersonal constructions, verbal agreement being of little use as a functional test since clauses always agree in the singular. This has been taken as an argument to support the formal analysis of the clitic *se* as the real syntactic subject or as bearing nominative case (Ormazabal & Romero 2019: 61). For our present purposes, it is sufficient to note that the distinction between passive and impersonal reflexives is hardly motivated when the purported subject cannot itself vary in number, which has led some authors to advocate their analysis as contextual variants of the same construction (Mendikoetxea 1999: 1687; Posio 2015: 379–380). As shown above, the endpoint in attributive passives is often animate and/or definite and is discursively salient; these are features that are not found with embedded clauses.

On the other hand, nearly half of the reflexive passives in the database have preverbal subjects. The most interesting fact about these cases is that they sometimes cause ambiguity as to whether they should be read as passive or middle. The placement of the subject at the position prototypically associated with semantic agency and discursive topicality in the active clause correlates with its interpretation as more autonomous, just as it blurs the perception of an external initiator. In (31), it is not evident whether *la oferta se completa* should be understood as ‘the offer is completed [by those responsible for it]’ or rather as ‘the offer comes to completion’. The passive reading is in turn easier in (32), where *se completa la lista* ‘the list [postv.] is completed’ suggests external intervention, perhaps that of the people subsequently mentioned, who are the ones *completing* the list even if not in an agentive sense. It should be noted that both *the offer* and *the list* are inferable from the preceding utterances. For the same reason, preverbal placement would have been at least equally natural in the second example.

- (31) *La oferta* [de empleo público] *se completa* con la única vacante asignada al personal laboral, que corresponde a un oficial albañil. <Not-Ad-131204-8>  
 ‘*The* [public employment] *offer is completed/comes to completion* with the only job vacancy assigned to non-career personnel, which corresponds to a building officer.’
- (32) Los integrantes de este tribunal son siete arquitectos, encabezados (en calidad de presidente del jurado) por Carlos Hernández Pezzi –presidente del Consejo Superior de Arquitectos de España– y Fernando de Andrés (decano del colegio de León, que actuará como vicepresidente). *Se completa la lista* con los nombres de Manuel de las Casas, Patxi Mangado [. . .] <Not-Ad-171104-58>  
 ‘The members of this panel are seven architects, headed – as the chairman of the jury – by Carlos Hernández Pezzi, president of the Senior Council of Architects of Spain, and by Fernando de Andrés, dean of the León College, who will serve as vice chairman. *The list* [postv.] *is completed* with the names of Manuel de las Casas, Patxi Mangado . . .’

The authors of these examples do not seem to have perceived a risk of ambiguity, which means that the discussion about passive vs. middle readings in contexts of this sort is itself scarcely fruitful. The basic meaning of the reflexive construction is always the same – the conceptualization of the event as taking place within the subject, whether the latter is or is not its semantic initiator and whether it is or is not discursively salient. For the same reasons, postverbal embedded clauses are not uncommon with reflexive passives, as exemplified in (30) above. There are five apparent exceptions to this pattern in the database; however, in none of them is the subject clause placed within the main one, but rather appears before it and is resumed through a relative (33) or a neuter pronoun that may even be elided (34). Resumption through anaphoric elements of this sort is itself an index of a rise in salience across discourse.

- (33) El Besiktas se había comprometido a responder el pasado miércoles, pero *esta noticia sigue sin llegar, lo cual podría entenderse* como una negativa. <Not-Ga-200804-36a>  
 ‘The Besiktas club had committed itself to giving an answer last Wednesday, but *the answer has not arrived yet, which could be interpreted* as a refusal.’
- (34) La otra novedad es que *los bocadillos ya no se repartirán* en el patio de los Jesuitas, sino que [*esto*] *se hará* en los Trinitarios, Agustinos y en el Campus Miguel de Unamuno. <Not-Ga-290104-14b>  
 ‘The other modification is that *sandwiches will no longer be distributed* at the Jesuitas playground; rather, [*this*] *will be done* at Trinitarios, Agustinos and the Miguel de Unamuno campus.’

In sum, as against subjects in attributive passives, those in reflexive passives often have non-salient referents that appear after the verb and are treated as new information. Rather than experiencing a change of state caused by a non-coreferential participant, they tend to be viewed as undergoing internal processes where external agency is downplayed. However, they can also be topical, and such cases may cause ambiguity between passive and middle readings. This suggests that the choice of the reflexive construction is not as much related to the discursive status of the endpoint but rather to that of the initiator, whose syntactic and discursive roles will be addressed in the following section.

## 6. THE INITIATOR IN PASSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS

The possibility to express the agent as an oblique is considered a feature of prototypical passives (Zúñiga & Kittilä 2019: 83–84). As noted by Delbecque (2014: 232), “[t]he oblique ensures the conceptual precedence of some causal factor without automatically assimilating it to the beginning point of the causal chain”, that is, the particular grammatical coding of the initiator aims at influencing how its role in the event is perceived. Spanish grammars have traditionally described the agent in passives as an (optional) adjunct headed by *por* ‘by’ or, more rarely, *de* ‘of, from’ (RAE 2009: §29.8q, §41.3p). Reflexive passives strongly disfavour the formulation of such an adjunct, in accordance with the conceptualization of the event as happening within the subject. Speakers can still offer cues as to the intended reference of the initiator through other formal means, and especially what can be termed *spatiotemporal arguments* (Fábregas 2014). These are elements appearing as locative or temporal adjuncts that can guide the referential interpretation of a given participant. In (35), *desde la Universidad* ‘from the University’ does not merely denote a ‘physical’ origin of the information, but also specifies the human institution providing it.

Table 4. Encoding and placement of the initiator in attributive and reflexive passives

	Omitted		Expressed, preverbal		Expressed, postverbal		Total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Attributive	54	70.1	1	1.3	22	28.6	77	13.6
Reflexive	447	91.2	18	3.7	25	5.1	490	86.4
Total	501	88.4	19	3.6	47	8.3	567	100

(35) Aun así, *desde la Universidad se asegura* que el edificio estará a disposición del Ayuntamiento con el tiempo suficiente para acometer la reforma proyectada. <Not-Ga-121203-9>

‘Still, *from the University [it] is stated* that the building will be available to the Town Council in time for the projected refurbishment to be undertaken.’

Given this situation, all elements in the database that promote the inference of some human referent involved in the event as an agent or experiencer, including those appearing under the form of spatial or temporal adjuncts, were coded as overt initiators. Table 4 shows the patterns of encoding and placement of this participant with each construction.

Even if omission is the preferred choice, the initiator is overtly expressed in some 30% of attributive passives, while only 8.8% of reflexive passives offer some specification of it, usually in the form of locatives like that in (23). The divergence between the constructions is again wider as regards syntactic placement. 22 of 23 initiators in attributive passives (95.7%) appear after the verb, practically mirroring the data obtained for preverbal endpoints; the options are more balanced with *se* clauses, with 25 postverbal initiators out of a total 43 (58.1%). Combining these facts with those discussed in Section 5.1, it seems easy to view the attributive passive as an inversion of the prototypical active construction, whereby the endpoint adopts the topical position while the initiator is formulated as new or non-inferable. However, both of them tend to stick to the SVO pattern in the absence of more specific motivations. The discursive status of reflexive constructions is more complex in this regard, given that both the endpoint and the initiator – when it is expressed – show some preference for postposition.

### 6.1. The initiator in attributive passives

As observed above, in some 70% of attributive passives the initiator is not mentioned or anaphorically indexed within the clause. Still, its reference can sometimes be recovered from the wider discourse context. In (36), while *será visitado* ‘will be visited’ lacks an overt agent, discourse coherence favours the attribution of this role to *los técnicos* ‘the technicians’, which appear as the subject of the previous clause.

(36) Así, aseguró que *los técnicos* todavía tienen que ver varios inmuebles pendientes, uno de los cuales *será visitado* la próxima semana. <Not-Ad-290104-16>

‘In this sense, he confirmed that *the technicians* still have several buildings awaiting inspection, one of which *will be visited* next week.’

It is the change in discourse topic that has motivated the formulation of a passive with *uno de los cuales* ‘one of which, i.e. the buildings’ as a subject.

The many passive clauses without an explicit initiator suggest a variety of possible pragmatic motivations. In (36), as in many other examples, the agentless passive depersonalises the event and thus lends the utterance a more official or institutional character, given

that *the technicians* are seen as employees of the local administration. In fact, the intended reference of the initiator is often an institutional or corporate one in connection with the kinds of issues usually dealt with in news discourse. This is a characteristic use of various impersonal constructions (Siewierska & Papastathi 2011: 582). The endpoint is seen as (positively or negatively) affected by the actions of an external group or institution that is socially endowed with the power to act in such a way. In example (37), the identity of the group can be inferred thanks to the specific semantics of the predicate *era condenada* ‘was sentenced’ – it is only courts of justice that have the power to sentence people in literal terms. In turn, the initiator in *era satisfecha* ‘was fulfilled’ is interpretable thanks to topic continuity – it is the people sentenced that should compensate the victims.

- (37) Hasta hace muy poco tiempo, cuando una persona *era condenada* por un delito generalmente la pena de cárcel llevaba unida una indemnización a las víctimas de sus acciones que rara vez *era satisfecha*. <Not-Ga-221203-15>  
 ‘Until quite recently, when someone *was sentenced* for a crime, the term of imprisonment usually went together with an obligation to compensate the victims that *was rarely fulfilled*.’

In other cases where the reference of the initiator is neither inferable from the meaning of the predicate nor recoverable from the wider context, it can be assumed that the writer lacks information about its specific identity or that he/she views such identity as informationally irrelevant. In (38), the viewpoint of car owners is metonymically adopted by coding *garages* and then *vehicles* as the most salient participant, while the people that might be responsible for acts of robbery are left out of the discussion.

- (38) Junto a los comercios, los garajes están siendo los auténticos protagonistas de los robos en este mes [...], en apenas diez días, alrededor de 30 vehículos *han sido dañados y forzados* en garajes de la capital salmantina. <Not-Ga-290104-66>  
 ‘Together with shops, garages are under the spotlight of robbery this month . . . in barely ten days, some 30 vehicles *have been damaged and forced open* in garages across Salamanca.’

Also, the establishment of the endpoint as the topic of discourse, together with the displacement of attention from the initiator, endow the construction with a potential to avoid the attribution of facts that could be regarded as negative or disputable to the latter participant. The excerpt in (39) deals with two political representatives that have been reincorporated into their leader’s team after *being sacrificed*.

- (39) *Recupera* también a Luis Heredero como secretario de Formación, Estudios y Programas y a Fernando Rodríguez como responsable de Comunicación. Los dos  *fueron sacrificados* hace cuatro años en aras de la renovación. <Not-Ga-201204-6/7>  
 ‘*He is also bringing back* Luis Heredero as the secretary for Training, Studies and Programs, and Fernando Rodríguez as the head of Communication. Both *were sacrificed* four years ago for the sake of renewal.’

The metaphorical sacrifice was of course carried out by the leader himself, who is first coded as the subject with the supposedly positive content, then erased from the clause with the negative one. Similarly, the slogan transcribed in (40) focuses on the neighbours that might suffer the annoyance of partying students (*a no ser molestados* ‘not to be bothered’) rather than on the intended audience, who might be held accountable for it (e.g. *a que no los molestes* ‘for you not to bother them’).

- (40) Colocaron en el exterior de los locales carteles con las siguientes leyendas: “Prohibido sacar bebidas a la calle” y “Tanto derecho tienes a divertirte como los vecinos a no *ser molestados*. Respétalos”. <Not-Ad-031204-10>  
 ‘On the outside walls of the establishments they placed signs that read, “It is prohibited to take drinks out on the street” and “Your right to have fun should not collide with the neighbours’ right *not to be bothered*. Respect them”.’

In turn, when the initiator does appear within the clause, in all examples but one – see (21) above – it is positioned after the verb and coded as a prepositional adjunct. Its functional features are thus associated with low discursive salience and high informativeness, as is typical of objects in active transitive clauses (Serrano 2014: 142–5) and of predicates in attributive clauses at large. Occasional inanimate initiators are metonymical of unmentioned human beings who handle them, as in (41), which suggests further possibilities for the defocusing of specific people involved in an event.

- (41) La víctima era un hombre de 73 años que *fue atropellado por un turismo* en la avenida Alfonso XIII. <Not-Ad-170504-13>  
 ‘The victim was a 73-year-old man who *was run over by a car* on Alfonso XIII Avenue.’

In this sense, there are also three examples where the initiator is coded as a spatiotemporal argument headed by prepositions other than *por* (*en* ‘in, at’; *desde* ‘from’), as can be observed in (42).

- (42) Salamanca no escapa a esta tendencia de endeudamiento que envuelve a la Sanidad regional y que *ha sido denunciada* en numerosas ocasiones *desde el Partido Socialista de la provincia*. <Not-Tr-060804-9>  
 ‘Salamanca is hardly spared from the rising debt that plagues the Public Health regional system, and that *has been repeatedly denounced from the provincial Socialist Party*.’

Therefore, attributive passives reproduce the prototypical SVO pattern of active transitive clauses, but with the semantic roles reversed. The initiator, provided it appears, will be treated as new or unexpected information. However, in the majority of cases it is elided and sometimes its reference cannot even be recovered from the wider context, either because it is unknown, is considered unimportant, or there is some pragmatic motivation to avoid stressing its involvement in the event. Strategies associated with the latter goal also include the metonymic substitution of the agent for an instrument, or its encoding as an origin or setting through prepositions other than *por*. Although this participant sometimes displays analogous features in *se* constructions, there are also important differences that need to be reviewed.

## 6.2. The initiator in reflexive passives

As observed in Table 4, and in accordance with standard grammatical descriptions, the inclusion of an adjunct identifying the initiator is rarer and often less acceptable with this construction (RAE 2009: §41.11, Delbecque 2014: 250), a fact which is related to the inherent syntactic-semantic features of reflexive constructions. The position of the adjunct in the clause is also more variable, but in 90% of the cases we have either the SVO pattern (22 cases, 51.2%) or the OVS one (17 cases, 39.5%). The latter figure shows that it is not uncommon for reflexive passives to adopt the *initiator – verb – endpoint* pattern characteristic of active transitive clauses, although in reflexive passives the syntactic functions are of course reversed, so that the initiator is coded as object, and the endpoint as subject. This order is in stark contrast to the near-categoricity of *endpoint – verb – initiator* in attributive passives.

This tendency for the initiator and the endpoint to adopt reverse positions according to the verb can be put in connection with findings made in quite different languages, such as Bantu ones, where Marten and Gibbon (2016: 596–598) note that the frequency and acceptability of inversion constructions is inversely proportional to the topic-worthiness of the preverbal participant. This way, locatives are the elements most easily preposed in constructions of this sort, while agents need to appear after the verb. The authors argue that this kind of analysis can be extended to passives.

In referential terms, overt initiators in reflexive passives are almost systematically human groups and institutions rather than specific individuals. This is consistent with Österreicher's (1992: 251–2) suggestion that the formulation of agents in these constructions is easier when such agents are scarcely prototypical, for example social groups, associations or unbounded masses. Besides, in the database there is only one example where it is headed by *por* (43).

- (43) No obstante, el fallo no trastoca los presupuestos de este año –que esta mañana *se aprobarán* definitivamente *por el pleno de la Corporación*–, ya que el consistorio no llegó a materializar la venta de esos terrenos (incluidos los de la Santísima Trinidad).  
<Not-Ad-290104-8>  
'Even so, the decision does not alter the budget for this year – which *will finally be approved* this morning *by the plenary session of the Town Council* – since the administration failed to close the sale of those land plots (including the Santísima Trinidad ones).'

Examples like this one suggest the parallelistic imitation of attributive passives (Mendikoetxea 1999: 1685). Note that *los presupuestos* 'the budget' is topical and the passive clause could also have been formulated as attributive. This constructional parallelism may also be partly responsible for the aforementioned 51.2% of SVO ordering, given that the postposition of the endpoint seems to be the less marked choice when the initiator is omitted. It could also be argued that, in examples like (43), the semantic role of the adjunct headed by *por* is interpreted as closer to those of 'cause', 'instrument' or 'manner' than 'agent' proper. This would be in line with the fact that similar adjuncts are less acceptable when they denote one or more specific individuals, e.g. *se aprobarán por los concejales* 'will be approved by the town councillors', where the participant would be necessarily interpreted as an agent.

An alternative possibility is to head the phrase with *por parte de* 'on the part of'. Sansò (2006: 271) points out that the corresponding Italian expression *da parte di* renders the expression of the agent more acceptable in constructions with reflexive *si*. This could be put in connection with the iconic principle of *distance*: the more abundant the linguistic material between a referent and some content, the less tight the relationship perceived between them (see e.g. García 1986, Fernández 2007: 71–72). While *por* 'by, through' explicitly signals a causal relation and is thus prototypically associated with the agent in passives, *por parte de* causes some distancing between the event and the initiator. However, no instances were found in the section of news pieces; the solution appears to be more frequent in oral discourse, as in (44), from a radio sports program.

- (44) después de la tempestad/SIEMpre viene la calma/e: de momento/parece ser que *se están dando* unos pasos *por parte de ciertos empresarios de Salamanca* < Dep-On-080104-15:20>  
'After the storm always comes the calm. As of yet, it appears that some steps [postv.] *are being taken on the part of certain Salamanca entrepreneurs.*'

While *por parte de* might introduce a referentially specific initiator or a relatively delimited human plurality, as in (44), occasional NPs headed by prepositions other than *por* are used for

the demarcation of human references through their metonymic association with places, activities or institutions (see also Delbecque 2014: 311, Fábregas 2021: 147). The literal spatial meaning of these expressions causes some (pragmatically advantageous) ambiguity as to whether they indicate a mere circumstance or rather are aimed at approximating the identity of an agent. In (45), the responsibility is transferred from the initial topical referent (the principal) to a less specific plurality (the governing board) that is not even constructed as the institution proper, but as an activity – a monthly meeting of its members – where the decision in question should be made.

- (45) El rector indicó que por el momento no puede ofrecer alternativas ya que es necesario esperar a la decisión que *se adopte en el Consejo de Gobierno del presente mes*. <Not-Tr-031204-10>

‘The principal pointed out that he cannot offer any alternative options at present, since it is necessary to wait for the decision that *should be made at this month’s meeting of the governing board*.’

In the corpus, *desde* ‘from’ is the most frequent preposition with strategies of this sort. Its use is a metaphorical extension of its literal meaning of starting point. At the same time, it reduces the involvement of the agent as against the active construction or even the attributive passive. In (46), the facts could have been exposed more straightforwardly through an active phrasing (*La Dirección General no ha confirmado* ‘The Directorate General has not yet confirmed’); however, this would also entail the explicit attribution of the action – or, more precisely, the lack of action – to the institution.

- (46) Y es que *desde la Dirección General no se ha confirmado* si esta medida será sólo hasta final de año o si en el próximo ejercicio se pagarán los conceptos de productividad con carácter retroactivo. <Not-Ad-221104-7>

‘And, in fact, *from the Directorate General [it] has not yet been confirmed* whether this measure will only apply until the end of this year or productivity fees will be retroactively paid during the next financial year.’

As was also patent in examples (35) and (42), the locative preposition helps construct this institution as more of a place from where unidentified people could be expected to provide information on the subject. There are still other prepositions that can generate particular pragmatic effects for the identification of the initiator based on their inherent meaning. In (47), a politician avoids explicitly blaming the citizenry by saying that his proposals have not been rightly understood *entre* ‘among’ them.

- (47) Está convencido de que “nuestro proyecto no *se ha entendido entre los salmantinos* o no lo hemos sabido explicar”. <Not-Ad-121203-8>

‘He is convinced that “Our project *has not been rightly understood among the Salamanca people*, or we have not adequately explained it”.’

Going back to syntactic ordering, (46) above is an example of the *initiator – verb – endpoint* pattern, in this case favoured by the fact that the subject is an embedded clause. In turn, (47) is coincident with the usual SVO ordering of attributive passives. All this characterises the *se* passive as a rather complex construction where the tension between syntactic, semantic and discursive factors results in a wide variety of communicative effects. There are also sporadic cases where both the endpoint and the initiator – coded as a spatiotemporal expression – appear after the verb, as in (48), this being another supposedly literal transcription of oral statements where both *muchas trabas* ‘many obstacles’ and *desde el Ministerio* ‘from the Ministry’ are treated as new information.

- (48) “Habr  medidas como sacrificar todos los toros que van a las plazas, que no est n en contacto con otros animales de otras zonas. Va a ser complicado, porque *se van a poner muchas trabas desde el Ministerio*”. <Not-Tr-241104-58>  
 “There will be measures like sacrificing all bulls destined to the bullrings, so they do not come into contact with animals from other areas. It’s going to be complicated, since *many obstacles [postv.] are going to be put up from the Ministry*”.

It is possible to conclude that the use of the reflexive construction in written news is connected with both the referential defocusing of the initiator – which is usually a group rather than an individual – and the downplaying of its involvement in the event, as evidenced by the strong dominance of clauses where no agent whatsoever is specified. Again, this may sometimes be due to lack of knowledge about its identity or to its consideration as irrelevant, but it can also reveal particular ideological or legal concerns. Even when the reference of the initiator is made explicit, writers tend to avoid highlighting its involvement in the transitive event, using spatial prepositions that, unlike *por* ‘by’, are not associated with the semantic role of agent. In these cases, the referent is constructed as the starting point of the event or as the setting where it takes place. Most interestingly, it is relatively frequent to find overt initiators in the preverbal position, generally resulting in an OVS pattern that, even if uncommon in written informational discourse, does reproduce the *initiator–verb–endpoint* semantic structure of the prototypical active clause. It is also consistent with the usual inanimacy, indefiniteness and lack of discursive salience of the subject.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS AND PROSPECTS

This study has analysed the syntactic-semantic configuration of event participants and its discourse-pragmatic function with two different constructions of Spanish, both of which are contextually interpreted as passive under certain contextual conditions. The analysis was conducted on a corpus of written press news. While attributive passives are often seen as a typical feature of journalistic discourse, the data show that reflexive passives are in fact much more frequent in this domain, in connection with their capacity to encode a wide variety of events other than highly transitive ones.

The attributive construction predicates some information of a topical or accessible referent that, unlike subjects in active transitive clauses, is understood as the endpoint of the event described. Even though the use of this construction in written journalism has traditionally been attributed to parallelism with English, it is actually well suited to the unmarked progression of information in press news, where the largely dominant (S)VO ordering reflects the establishment of topical referents as bases on which discourse is built. In turn, the initiator of the event is most often formally absent, due either to its lack of informational relevance or to specific pragmatic motivations to avoid stressing its involvement. When it appears, it does so as a postverbal prepositional adjunct and is treated as new or non-inferable information.

In constructions with third-person clitic *se*, the near-categoricity of inanimate or indefinite referents and their preference for postverbal placement are often associated with thethetic, wholly informative nature of the utterance. As in all reflexive constructions, events are conceptualised as properties or as processes occurring within the subject rather than as transitive events involving two clearly differentiated participants. In a similar way as pointed out by Fried (2006: 97, 2007: 723) for Czech, we could state that attributive passives are used for the profiling of patients, while reflexive ones deal with events as a whole. This has particularly interesting repercussions for the pragmatic construction of the initiator in discourse. Attributive constructions can only conceal its identity through its formal omission, while its role in the event

remains perceivable with respect to high transitivity and the perception of a change of state in the endpoint. In contrast, reflexive passives go farther by semantically downplaying its involvement. In the infrequent cases where the initiator is formally expressed, it is most often constructed as an origin or setting with locative prepositions rather than as an agent proper. Consistent with this, its referent is rarely a specific individual, but rather a human group, institution or community.

The hypothesis that the distribution in discourse and the pragmatic potential of each construction are directly related to its syntactic-semantic features – rather than stemming from mere convention or psychosocial evaluation – is supported by the interaction between the encoding of each participant, its semantic conceptualization as more or less animated, individuated and involved in the event, and its discursive construction as more or less contextually salient through its variable formulation and syntactic placement. In this sense, it is interesting to stress the considerable frequency of the OVS pattern with reflexive clauses, which reproduces the prototypical semantic structure of active clauses and the higher salience of the initiator as against the endpoint, while the attributive one shows an overwhelming dominance of SVO, in accordance with the discursive promotion of a definite and often animate endpoint.

This study has limited itself to the observation of two constructions that allow for passive interpretations in a language that lacks specifically passive structures, but resorts to isomorphism with certain constructional schemes to fulfil this function. It will be necessary to extend the model of analysis developed here to other ways of event conceptualization that differ from the prototypical active transitive clause, many of which have been grouped under scarcely specific labels such as *impersonal* or *defocusing*. These include, but are not limited to, passive constructions with *estar* ‘be [transitory]’ and other attributive and semi-attributive verbs, adjacent participles denoting a change of state in the noun, object topicalizations, generic uses of grammatical persons such as the plural first one and the plural third one, as well as impersonal reflexives. The complex intermingling of syntactic, semantic and pragmatic factors in their choice across discourse makes their study a challenging enterprise that entails delving into the most essential relationships between language use and cognition.

Also, the consideration of other textual types and communicative domains should make it possible to gain deeper knowledge of the pragmatic possibilities of grammatical resources such as the attributive and reflexive passives. The choice of each construction may have manifold motivations and effects depending on the context, but, as the present study has proposed, these can usually be explained as projections of their respective syntactic features and how the participants are semantically conceptualised through them. In the long run, this could facilitate the development of an integrated theoretical model of meaning at all possible intra- and extra-discursive levels.

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