

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

Background. “Se”, in the Czech language, is a 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 unaccusativity or impersonal voice.

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

Intransitives. “Se” occurs in both unaccusative and unergative constructions (1, 2). **For typically unaccusative verbs**, “se” may function as (a) an unaccusative marker, or (b) an impersonal passive. Phrases in (a) will typically display an explicit agent which triggers morphological agreement on the verb (3) and reject both *by*-phrases (4) and agent-oriented adverbs (5). Instead of an explicit agent, phrases in (b) display an impersonal pronoun “ono” (Engl. “it”). Even though the pronoun is conventionally dropped, the verb still morphologically agrees with an abstract 3SG.NEUT. Just like in unaccusatives, *by*-phrases appear to be ungrammatical (6) in spite of causers being legal (7). However, the fact that this construction accepts agent-oriented adverbs (8) as well as additional rationale (9) reveals that “se” does not mark unaccusative. Similarly, adding “by itself” results in ungrammatical sentences (10). Non-human constructions are generally not allowed (11) (with the exception of humanised animal behaviour (12)) and adverbs, while not *required*, the grammatical status of the clause (1, 13, 14). This combined evidence suggests that this “se” is distinct from the previously mentioned unaccusative marker and operates as an impersonal marker. **For typically unergative verbs**, “se” may occur as (a) a reflexive marker or (b) an impersonal marker. Phrases in (a) look dangerously close to phrases with unaccusative markers (15), except that they do not have unaccusative properties (e.g. they very much allow agent-oriented adverbs (16) and they do not make grammatical past participles (17)). Phrases in (b) behave the same as impersonal passives of unaccusative verbs (18). Other attempts to use “se” on unergatives are ungrammatical.

Transitives. The analysis of “se” becomes more nuanced with transitive verbs, as semantics steps in. In intransitive verbs, “se” occurs in (a) reflexive, (b) passive, and (c) impersonal constructions. The evidence for the (a) function of “se” comes from tests on inherently (mandatorily) reflexive verbs. For naturally (typically) reflexive verbs (19), “se” is replaced by an appropriate pronoun if the speaker opts to direct the action onto a receiver which is different from the agent. However, any attempts to perform the same change on inherently reflexive verbs yields ungrammatical results (20). However, reflexive “se” does not suffice to explain *all* common transitive constructions. For some naturally reflexive verbs (such that combine with “se”), up to three interpretations are recognised (21): (i1) “se” functions as an unaccusative marker (i.e. the verb, although it shares the same surface form with the upcoming transitive interpretations, is actually intransitive), (i2) “se” implies the same thematic agent and patient, (by the tests in the previous section) and works as a reflexive marker, and (i3) “se” depersonalises the clause but leaves space for an implicit agent. The construction’s seemingly active morphology does not give out the exact role of “se” in (i3) as easily. Unlike (i2), (i3) now allows *by*-phrases (22), which suggests that this construction is an alternative to canonical passive (a legal and more preferable construction in Czech). Moreover, the construction may also apply to non-human predicates (22), which differentiates it from impersonal passives. One might expect that “se” would not adjoin to transitive verbs which have semantically no potential for reflexivity. However, a subset of these verbs may indeed occur beside “se” (23). This construction only applies to human predicates (24) and it may not take on a *by*-phrase (25), which suggests that this construction is indeed impersonal. Furthermore, it also allows the generic reading that the action is performed universally by ‘people’, ‘a group of people’, or, more generally, ‘together’ which is a common trait of impersonals overall. Note that the morphology of the verb in this construction also agrees with an unspecified 3SG.NEUT, just like in impersonal intransitives.

Questions. In multiple examples from this paper, “se” had a significant impact on the word order of sentences (compared to their active counterparts), which deserves further attention. The fact that grammaticality of some sentences also depends on aspect, which Czech marks by affixes, may also need further thought.

Extension. Czech “se”, in addition to marking reflexives, serves as an unaccusative marker in intransitive phrases. When agreeing with a neutral abstract agent, it provides an alternative to impersonal (in both intransitive and transitive constructions) and passive voice (in intransitive phrases only).

- (1) Často se tam padalo.
Often **se** there fall.PAST.3SG.NEUT
'It was often fallen over there.'
- (2) 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.'
- (3) Loď se potopila.
Boat **se** sink.PAST.3SG.FEM
'The boat sank.'
- (4) *Loď se potopila
Boat **se** sink.PAST.3SG.FEM
námorníky.
mariners.INS
'The boat sank.'
- (5) *Loď se potopila schválně.
Boat **se** sink.PAST.3SG.FEM on purpose

'The boat sank.'
- (6) *Padalo se tam cyklistami.
fall.PAST.3SG.NEUT **se** there cyclists.INS

'It was fallen there by cyclists.'
- (7) Padalo se tam kvůli
fall.PAST.3SG.NEUT **se** there due to
bahnu.
mud.DAT
'It was fallen there due to mud.'
- (8) Padalo se tam schválně.
fall.PAST.3SG.NEUT **se** there on purpose

'It was fallen there on purpose.'
- (9) Padalo se tam, aby se
fall.PAST.3SG.NEUT **se** there to se
natáhl čas.
prolong.3SG.PAST.MASC time
'It was fallen there in order to buy more time.'
- (10) *Padalo se tam samo.
fall.PAST.3SG.NEUT **se** there by itself
'It was fallen there by itself.'
- (11) *Hořelo se.
burn.PAST.3SG.NEUT **se**
'It was burnt.'
- (12) ??Štěkalo se.
bark.PAST.3SG.NEUT **se**
'It was burnt.'
- (13) ?Padalo se tam.
fall.PAST.3SG.NEUT **se** there
'It was being fallen over there.'
- (14) ??Padalo se.
fall.PAST.3SG.NEUT **se**
'It was being fallen.'
- (15) Petr se smál.
Petr **se** laugh.PAST.3SG.MASC
'Petr laughed.'
- (16) Petr se smál
Petr **se** laugh.PAST.3SG.MASC
schválně.
on purpose
'Petr laughed on purpose.'
- (17) 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
- (18) Skákalo se tam od
jump.PAST.3SG.NEUT **se** there out of
radosti.
joy
'It was being jumped out of joy there.'
- (19) Klára se/tě/ho
Klára REFL/you.ACC/he.ACC
koupala.
bath.PAST.3SG.FEM
'Klára bathed herself/you/him.'
- (20) Klára se(*tě/ho)
Klára REFL(*you.ACC/he.ACC)
hanbila.
shame.PAST.3SG.FEM
'Klára was ashamed.'
- (21) Dveře se otevřely.
Door.PL **se** open.PAST.3SG.PL
i1: 'The door opened by itself.'
i2: 'The door got opened.'
i3: 'The door opened itself.'
- (22) Dveře se otevřely
Door.PL **se** open.PAST.3SG.PL
vrátníkem ve tři.
porter.INS at three
'The door got opened by the porter at three o'clock.'
- (23) Klára se líbala.
Klára **se** kiss.PAST.3SG.FEM
'Klára has the experience of kissing.'
- (24) Klára se líbala s
Klára **se** kiss.PAST.3SG.FEM with
Petrem.
Petr
'Klára kissed with Petr.'
- (25) Rodilo se doma.
(give birth).PAST.3SG.FEM **se** home
'Birth was (normally) given at home.'