

SE IN CZECH: MULTIPLE FUNCTIONS ARE BETTER THAN ONE

Abstract

For a long period of time, the Czech clitic verbal particle “se” has endured being unfairly labelled as merely the reflexive pronoun, despite its true essence evading recognition. This paper re-applies established tests from existing literature on related Indo-European languages to show the clitic’s diverse function. Namely, the particle demonstrates (i) reflexive, (ii) reciprocal, (iii) unaccusative, (iv) impersonal, and (v) passive traits. By subjecting the clitic to forced removal and substitution, the study confirms its reflexive identity for all (i) inherently reflexive, (ii) naturally reflexive, and (iii) naturally disjoint verbs. Complementing sentences containing this particle and a plural agent with the “each other” phrase, showed its reciprocal role. For ambitransitive verbs, the clitic may clarify the number of the verb’s expected arguments by working as an unaccusative marker, which the paper demonstrates by an unsuccessful search for both explicit and implicit agents. Furthermore, for both transitive and intransitive verbs, the particle can lend a generic reading to the sentences, demonstrating its impersonal function. Finally, certain phrases that typically denote events of existential, singular nature, show evidence of the existence of an implicit agent, revealing the particle’s passive-marking potential.

Key words: *clitic SE, reflexive SE, reciprocal SE, unaccusative SE, ambitransitivity, impersonal SE, generic reading, passive SE*

1 Introduction

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The Czech verbal clitic **SE** has long been a topic of debate amongst linguists and a matter of misconception amongst the general population, with its function frequently reduced to that of a reflexive pronoun. However, many syntactic studies on related Indo-European languages have also shown that this particle exhibits a multitude of functions extending far beyond the semantic scope of reflexives. For the so far poorly described nature of the Czech clitic, this paper looks into analyses of particles with similar syntactic significance from related languages and attempts to identify additional functions of this frequently used clitic.

1.1 Previous Literature

Czech. Though data on Czech formal syntax is generally rather scarce, some descriptive literature was written on the topic of **SE** (Kettnerová and Lopatková, 2014, 2019). Here the authors classify this particle as a reflexive or reciprocal marker. This analysis shows how **SE** may function as a short clitic form of a longer version of *sebe*, which is the accusative-marked personal pronoun (English *oneself*) and may replace the clitic if the reference occurs in a stressed or focused context:

- (1) Marie **SE** pořád jen lituje.
Marie.NOM **REFL** all.the.time just pity.3SG
‘Marie feels sorry for herself all the time.’
- (2) Marie pořád lituje jen **sebe**, ale nepřihlíží na ostatní.
Marie.NOM all.the.time pity.3SG just **herself**, but NEG-look.3SG at others.ACC
‘Marie feels sorry for herself all the time but doesn’t look at others.’

However, this analysis would have trouble explaining the role of **SE** in contexts that beg for a third-party agent (3, 5) or disallow any agentive argument whatsoever (7, 9). This data suggests that Czech **SE** may have well over one or two syntactic functions.

- (3) Hodně **SE** tam křičí.
A.lot **SE** there scream.3SG.NEUT
‘There is a lot of screaming.’
- (4) *Hodně tam křičí **sebe**.
A.lot there scream.3SG.NEUT **itself**
‘There is a lot of screaming.’
- (5) Zákusky **SE** snědly.
Cake.PL **SE** eat.PERF.3PL.PAST
‘The cakes got eaten.’
- (6) *Zákusky snědly **sebe**.
Cake.PL eat.PERF.3PL.PAST **themselves**
‘The cakes got eaten.’
- (7) Váza **SE** rozbila.
Vase.NOM **SE** break.3SG.FEM.PAST
‘The vase broke.’
- (8) *Váza rozbila **sebe**.
Vase.NOM break.3SG.FEM.PAST **herself**
‘The vase broke.’

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- (9) Dveře **SE** otevřely.
 Door.NOM.PL **SE** open.3PL.PAST
 ‘The door got opened.’
- (10) *Dveře otevřely **sebe**.
 Door.NOM.PL open.3PL.PAST
 ‘The door got opened **sebe**.’

Related languages. The idea that clitic particles similar to Czech *se* may have multiple functions occurred to linguists focusing on many other Indo-European languages. Analyses include but are not limited to: Spanish clitic *se*, Italian clitic *si*, Russian suffix *-sja*, French *se*, Polish *się* and other. In order to explore the true scope of Czech *se*’s functionality, this paper shall look into these analyses to explore possible uses of the particle that could be projected on Czech.

In Spanish, *se* was (amongst numerous other functions) identified as both a reflexive and reciprocal marker, where the distinction may depend on semantic elements of the (strictly plural) agent given by the context of a particular sentence (Fábregas, 2021). In some cases, the distinction may be drawn upon single non-agentive morphological differences which, if omitted, may result in the ambiguity between reflexive and reciprocal use of the clitic particle. This appears to be the case with the Czech *se* clitic as well (11, 12, 13).

- (11) Klára a Petr se nenávidí.
 Klára.NOM and Petr.NOM SE hate.PAST.3PL
 ‘Klára and Petr hate each other/both hate themselves.’
- (12) Klára a Petr se navzájem nenávidí.
 Klára.NOM and Petr.NOM SE mutually hate.PAST.3PL
 ‘Klára and Petr hate each other.’
- (13) Klára i Petr se každý nenávidí.
 Klára.NOM and Petr.NOM SE each hate.PAST.3PL
 ‘Klára and Petr both hate themselves.’

In Italian, studies identified clitic *si* may be, in addition to reflexives, also found in middle and impersonal voices (Cinque, 1996). The subsequent analysis of impersonal *si* suggested two distinct uses of the morpheme (argumental and non-argumental) which enabled it to occur in impersonal constructions of both transitive and intransitive verbs. This distinction may potentially account for the morphological variation observed in the Czech data (3, 5).

In Russian, *-sja* has been shown to mark antipassive (which do not appear to have an equivalent in Czech), anticausative,² and even a version of passive constructions (Guhl, 2010). These derivations show that, similar to Czech *se* derivations, Russian *-sja* constructions, while looking similar (if not identical) on the surface, respond differently to different types of agentive arguments. Several agent-oriented tests used in this paper come from the former analysis of Lithuanian passive and impersonal morphology (Šereikaitė, 2022).

1.2 Proposal

This paper argues that restricting the function of SE merely to marking reflexives is at best inaccurate and at worst flawed. Instead, we propose that Czech SE, similarly to other languages, may appear in (i) reflexive, (ii) reciprocal, (iii) unaccusative (anticausative), (iv) impersonal, and, curiously enough, also (v) alternative passive constructions. The distinction will mainly depend on the type of agent SE refers the verb to and tests shall be run to determine this. This list of functions is non-exhaustive.

² anticausatives = a subset of unaccusative verbs which, if left unmarked by an unaccusative, may alternatively serve and transitive verbs (compare the use of *break* in *the vase broke* and *Mary broke the vase*).

2 Canonical Definitions

For clarity, it is worth mentioning that this paper works with the following definitions of the above-mentioned concepts:

Reflexives. Reflexive construction (RELF) is typically used to describe a situation when the object of a verb refers to the same entity as its subject. In English, reflexives are usually marked by the -self/-selves morpheme on personal pronouns:

- (14) Arthur washed himself.
 Arthur.NOM wash.PAST REFL

Reciprocals. Reciprocal construction (RECP) is a construction such that each of its participants occupies both the role of agent and patient with respect to each other. In English, reciprocals are usually optionally marked by the “each other” or “one another” phrase:

- (15) Jonathan and Alice kissed each other.
 Jonathan.NOM and Alice.NOM kiss.PAST RECP

Unaccusatives. Unaccusative verbs are intransitive verbs which take on no agent argument (i.e. nobody and nothing can *accused* of taking agency over the process). Unaccusatives may only take on a theme argument:

- (16) Eden fell.
 Eden.NOM fall.PAST.

The ice melted.
 DEF ice melt.PAST.

Impersonals. The impersonal voice (IMPRS) is a syntactic construction which, instead of assigning agency to a particular subject, allows for a generic (“people in general”) or existential (“someone”) reading:

- (17) Man darf hier nicht rauchen.
 IMPRS may here NEG smoke.INF.
 ‘One shall not smoke here.’

Passives. In a passive voice construction (PASS), the recipient of an action becomes the subject of the clause:

- (18) The book was read.
 DEF book.NOM AUX read.PPP

2.1 Which One When

Each of the above constructions has its own canonical features, which could be loosely summarised by the following table:

	PASS	unaccusatives	IMPRS	REFL	RECP
agent	implicit	none	generic	yes	plural
non-human agent	yes	N/A	no	yes	yes
by-phrase	yes	no	no	no	no
agent-oriented adverbs	yes	no	yes	yes	yes

Table 1: Finding Agent

In order to prove the existence of SE in each of the five suggested roles, this paper shall run tests to verify or refute the grammaticality of each of the features listed in the leftmost column of the above table.

3 SE as a Reflexive Marker

Let us start with the uncontroversial opinion that Czech SE may work as a reflexive marker. Cross-linguistically, verbs tend to split into three major categories with regard to reflexivity: (i) inherently reflexive (mandatorily reflexive; e.g., Czech *stydět se* (English *to be ashamed of oneself*)), (ii) naturally reflexive (usually reflexive but may function as transitive instead; e.g., English *to shave, to wash*), and (iii) naturally disjoint (usually not reflexive but may function as reflexive if the context requires; e.g., English *to hit, to praise*) (Alexiadou and Schaefer, 2014).

3.1 Inherently Reflexive Verbs

Inherently reflexive verbs either cannot exist without a reflexive clitic at all or they do exist but have a different meaning, irrelevant for the purposes of this paper. The most obvious example of SE (19) working as a reflexive clitic for inherently reflexive verbs in Czech also comes from the former category:

- (19) Petr se stydí.
Petr SE shame.3SG
'Petr is ashamed of himself.'

In order to demonstrate that SE functions as a reflexive clitic marking an inherently reflexive verb, one should test the grammaticality of (i) a clause that omits this reflexive (20), and (ii) a clause that attempts to apply the verb on a recipient other than the agent (21). As expected, *stydět se* turns out to be ungrammatical for both of these tests:

- | | |
|---|--|
| <p>(20) *Petr stydí.
Petr shame.3SG
Intended: 'Petr is ashamed of himself.'</p> | <p>(21) *Petr tě stydí.
Petr you.ACC shame.3SG
Intended: 'Petr is ashamed of you.'</p> |
|---|--|

Given that both of these tests yield ungrammatical structures, it can be concluded that one of the functions of SE in Czech is marking inherently reflexive verbs.

3.2 Naturally Reflexive Verbs

Naturally reflexive verbs are such that they either direct the action back to the agent or they direct it to another recipient. Therefore, if SE functions as a reflexive marker in naturally reflexive verbs, it should be able to take the place that would otherwise be occupied by a DP and direct the action of a verb back to the agent. In either case, the object position must be obligatorily filled. In other words, these verbs may not be left with a single agent argument and no recipient. This argument may be filled by a DP (23, 24, 26, 27) or a reflexive clitic (22, 25):³

- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>(22) Dáša se myje.
Dáša SE wash.3SG
'Dáša is washing herself.'</p> | <p>(25) Petr se oblíká hezky.
Petr SE dress.3SG nicely
'Petr dresses (himself) nicely.'</p> |
| <p>(23) Dáša myje kočku.
Dáša wash.3SG cat.ACC
'Dáša is washing a cat.'</p> | <p>(26) Petr oblíká svou dceru hezky.
Petr dress.3SG his daughter nicely
'Petr dresses his daughter nicely'</p> |
| <p>(24) Dáša jí myje.
Dáša she.ACC wash.3SG
'Dáša is washing her.'</p> | <p>(27) Petr jí oblíká hezky.
Petr she.ACC dress.3SG nicely
'Petr dresses her nicely.'</p> |

Note that these same naturally reflexive verbs require the use of a recipient. In other words, if the argument remains unfilled, the construction will be ungrammatical:

³ Note that when explicitly marking an impersonal agent, the word order is impacted. This may be caused by Czech being a "clitics second" language, which is, however, outside the scope of this paper.

- | | |
|---|---|
| (28) *Dáša myje.
Dáša wash.3SG
Intended: ‘Dáša is washing.’ | (29) *Petr oblíká hezky.
Petr dress.3SG nicely
Intended: ‘Petr is dressing nicely.’ |
|---|---|

For verbs that require a second argument, SE may replace a DP argument and thus indicate that the action is being directed back to the agent. Therefore, it may be concluded that SE may function as a reflexive marker for naturally reflexive verbs.

3.3 Naturally Disjoint Verbs

Naturally disjoint verbs are normally not reflexive but may be shall the context require so. Tests similar to those for naturally reflexive verbs apply: if SE works as a reflexive marker in this verb category, it should understandably mark that the verb applies back onto its agent, all while taking the position of what would normally be a DP argument (30, 31). Concurrently, the construction will be deemed ungrammatical if it lacks a second argument (32):

- | | |
|---|---|
| (30) Míša se nenávidí.
Míša SE hate.3SG
‘Míša hates himself.’ | (31) Míša nenávidí Petra.
Petr hate.3SG Petr.ACC
‘Míša hates Petr.’ |
| (32) *Míša nenávidí.
Míša hate.3SG
‘Míša hates.’ | |

4 SE as a Reciprocal Marker

Likewise SE as a reciprocal marker is not a usually disputed position. In order for SE to work as a reciprocal marker, it should be an obligatory part of a phrase containing a plural agent and a verb that semantically directs the action from each agent to the other (which may be optionally complemented by the phrase “each other”).

In Czech reciprocals, this plural agent may be expressed by adding a nominative (33) or an instrumental adjunct (34) and yields more acceptable results than a singular agent (35). In all cases, the sentence may be complemented by a (slightly redundant) “each other” or “one another” phrase (which, in Czech, is expressed by an adverb *navzájem* (English *mutually*)). In all cases, the presence of SE is obligatory (36, 37, 38):

- | | |
|--|--|
| (33) Klára a Petr se (navzájem) líbali.
Klára.NOM and Petr.NOM SE (mutually) kiss.PAST.3PL
‘Klára and Petr kissed each other.’ | |
| (34) Klára s Petrem se (navzájem) líbali.
Klára.NOM with Petr.INS SE (mutually) kiss.PAST.3PL with Petr
‘Klára kissed with Petr.’ | |
| (35) Klára se (??navzájem) líbala s Petrem.
Klára SE (??mutually) kiss.PAST.3SG.FEM with Petr.INS
‘Klára kissed with Petr.’ | |
| (36) *Klára a Petr (navzájem) líbali.
Klára.NOM and Petr.NOM (mutually) kiss.PAST.3PL
Intended: ‘Klára and Petr kissed each other.’ | |
| (37) *Klára s Petrem (navzájem) líbali.
Klára.NOM with Petr.INS (mutually) kiss.PAST.3PL with Petr
Intended: ‘Klára kissed with Petr.’ | |
| (38) *Klára (navzájem) líbala s Petrem.
Klára (mutually) kiss.PAST.3SG.FEM with Petr.INS
Intended: ‘Klára kissed with Petr.’ | |

The obligatory presence of SE in reciprocal phrases clearly suggests that another function of this particle is that of a reciprocal marker.

5 SE as an Unaccusative Marker

Despite being popularly known as the ‘reflexive clitic’ which supposedly refers the verb back to its agent, SE appears in sentences that do not even have an agent (i.e., a ‘doer’ of an event) to begin with. In Czech, these single-argument agent-less verbs, unaccusatives, often occur complemented by SE. Examples of cross-linguistically typically unaccusative verbs that, in Czech, appear strictly accompanied by SE include:

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|--|--|
| <p>(39) Váza se rozbila.
Vase SE break.PAST.3SG.FEM
‘The vase broke.’</p> <p>(40) *Váza rozbila.
Vase break.PAST.3SG.FEM
Intended: ‘The vase broke.’</p> | <p>(41) Lod’ se potopila.
Boat SE sink.PAST.3SG.FEM
‘The boat sank.’</p> <p>(42) *Lod’ potopila.
Boat sink.PAST.3SG.FEM
Intended: ‘The boat sank.’</p> |
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If SE really is an unaccusative marker, it should necessarily occur with typically unaccusative verbs (e.g., *fall*, *sink*, *break*) and reject any kind of agent. In order to determine whether or not these constructions have an agent, one shall look back to Table 1. According to this information, one can run the tests on the presence of an agent of any kind: (i) applying *by*-phrases, and (ii) applying agent-oriented adverbs.

5.1 Argument 1: rejecting *by*-phrase

As previously stated, unaccusative constructions include no agent (explicit nor implicit) and should thus strictly reject *by*-phrases (which, in Czech, *by*-phrases are expressed as instrumentals). Czech unaccusatives indeed ban these:

- (43) *Lod’ se potopila námořníky.
Boat SE sink.PAST.3SG.FEM mariners.INS
‘The boat sank by the mariners.’
- (44) *Váza se rozbila dětmi.
Vase SE break.PAST.3SG.FEM child.PL.INS
‘The vase broke by the children.’

Note that *by*-phrases are not to be mistaken for causer phrases, which unaccusatives may allow. Causer phrases, unlike *by*-phrases, are, in Czech, expressed prepositionally and, in combination with these unaccusative verbs, yield generally grammatical results:

- (45) Lod’ se potopila následkem zásahu torpéd.
Boat SE sink.PAST.3SG.FEM due.to hit.GEN torpedo.PL.GEN
‘The boat sank from torpedo hits.’
- (46) Váza se rozbila následkem otřesů.
Vase SE break.PAST.3SG.FEM due.to shaking.GEN
‘The vase broke from shaking.’

Banning *by*-phrases is the first piece of evidence that there is no agent to these verbs. Therefore, if SE is a mandatory complement to these verbs, it would indeed need to be analysed as an unaccusative marker.

5.2 Argument 2: rejecting agent-oriented adverbs

Likewise, if there is no agent, there should be no way of incorporating an agent-oriented adverb (i.e., an adverb that describes an action being done deliberately and implies thus an agent). Czech unaccusatives unsurprisingly reject them, too:

- (47) *Lod' se dovedně potopila.
 Boat SE skillfully sink.PAST.3SG.FEM
 'The boat sank skillfully.'
- (48) *Váza se opatrně rozbila.
 Vase SE carefully break.PAST.3SG.FEM
 'The vase broke carefully.'

Again, note that adverbs describing the process per se (rather than the action of a potentially covert agent initiating this process) are perfectly grammatical:

- (49) Lod' se pomalu potopila.
 Boat SE slowly sink.PAST.3SG.FEM mariners.INS
 'The boat sank slowly.'
- (50) Váza se náhle rozbila.
 Vase SE suddenly break.PAST.3SG.FEM
 'The vase broke carefully.'

The ungrammaticality of agent-oriented adverbs (the role of which is to describe the manner of action of an action-initiating agent) suggests that these sentences are indeed unaccusative, leaving SE to be an unaccusative marker.

5.3 Argument 3: alternating ambitransitivity

Similar to English, some unaccusatives in Czech may be used as transitive verbs (e.g., *rozbít (se)* (to break), *potopit (se)* (to sink)) while others are strictly intransitive (e.g., *spadnout* (to fall), *uklouznout* (to slip)). In English, this distinction is implied by the number of arguments this ambitransitive verb (i.e., a verb with ambivalent transitivity) has.

- (51) The vase broke. (52) John broke Bob's nose.

For example, *broke* in (51) has clearly just a single argument, *the vase*, and so the listener may infer that it is intransitive. On the other hand, *broke* in (52) has two arguments, *John* and *Bob's nose*, and so it must be transitive. In Czech, however, the listener can foretell the distinction, because SE comes to the rescue and draws the distinction between the transitive versus intransitive use of a particular verb (53, 54):

- (53) Armáda potopila lod'.
 Army.NOM sink.PAST.FEM.PL ship.ACC
 'The army sank the ship.'
- (54) Lod' *(se) potopila.
 Boat.NOM *(SE) sink.PAST.3SG.FEM
 'The boat sank.'

Note, however, that SE does not inherently come with every unaccusative verb in the Czech (58, 59, 60). And it so happens that unaccusatives accompanied by SE are generally the same verbs that would otherwise be categorised as ambitransitive:

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|---|---|
| (55) Váza se rozbila.
Vase SE break.PAST.3SG.FEM
'The vase broke.' | (58) *Jablko se zhnílo.
Apple SE rot.PAST.3SG.NEUT
'The apple rotted.' |
| (56) Marie se třásla.
Marie SE shake.PAST.3SG.FEM
'Mary was shaking.' | (59) *Žákyně se spadla.
Pupil SE fall.PAST.3SG.FEM
'The (female) pupil fell.' |
| (57) Voda se vyvařila.
Water SE boil.PAST.3SG.FEM
'The water boiled.' | (60) *Martin se uklouzl.
Martin SE slip.PAST.3SG.MASC
'Martin slipped.' |

- | | |
|---|---|
| (61) Děti rozbily vázu.
Child.PL. break.PAST.3PL vase.ACC
‘Children broke the vase.’ | (64) *Petr zhníl jablko.
Petr rot.PAST.3SG.MASC apple.ACC
Intended: ‘Petr made the apple rot.’ |
| (62) Marie třásla láškou.
Marie shake.PAST.3SG.FEM flask.INS
‘Mary shook the flask.’ | (65) *Petr spadl Marii.
Petr fall.3SG.MASC Marie.ACC
Intended: ‘Petr made the classmate fall.’ |
| (63) Petr vyvařil vodu.
Petr boil.PAST.3SG.MASC water.ACC
‘Petr vyvařil vodu.’ | (66) *Led uklouzl Martina.
Ice.NOM slip.PAST.3SG Martin.ACC
Intended: ‘Martin slipped on ice.’ |

Verbs that may be potentially transitive but are used as unaccusatives must obligatorily come accompanied by SE (55, 56, 57). On the other hand, verbs that may only take on one non-agentive argument, no matter the context, do not need—and, in fact, may not adopt—a clarifying SE (58, 59, 60), because there is nothing to clarify in the sentence.

This, at the end of the day, makes perfect sense from the efficiency (minimalist) perspective: accusativity is marked if and only if it needs to be marked. Concurrently, the fact that SE is not only an unaccusative marker but *the* unaccusative marker in Czech concludes this paper’s argument that marking unaccusativity is one of its crucial functions.

6 SE as an Impersonal Marker

Impersonal voice is usually a construction that refers to a generic or an existential agent. In other words, speakers use impersonal voice to mark that an action was performed (or happened to) generally by everybody in the context of the clause or that there must exist someone abstract that the action was performed by (or happened to). In Czech, this semantic meaning can be created using particle SE.

To determine whether or not these constructions are truly impersonal, this analysis runs tests to search for an *impersonal* agent. By definition, an impersonal agent exists and is explicit but must refer to a general or existential entity (Legate et al., 2020). Since there is nothing preventing the impersonal voice from being applied to both intransitive and transitive verbs (Cinque, 1996), this paper runs a number of tests on both of these verb categories.

6.1 Intransitive impersonal

For intransitive verbs, which only take one argument, the Czech impersonal construction seems to consist of SE and an active-like verb form agreeing with an undefined third person, neutral. Although SE is more widely accepted to mark impersonals on unergative intransitives (67, 68), it may also appear on unaccusative intransitives (69, 70), shall the context require so:

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|--|
| (67) Tančilo a zpívalo se do noci.
dance.PAST.3SG.NEUT and sing.PAST.3SG.NEUT SE until night
‘It was sung and danced until late at night.’ |
| (68) Skákalo se tam od radosti.
jump.PAST.3SG.NEUT SE there out of joy
‘It was being jumped out of joy there.’ |
| (69) Padalo se tam.
fall.PAST.3SG.NEUT SE there
‘It was fallen there.’ |
| (70) Klouzalo se tam na celém úseku.
slip.PAST.3SG.NEUT SE there on entire.LOC section.LOC
‘The whole section (of a road) was slippery.’ |

6.1.1 Argument 1: the impersonal pronoun

Cross-linguistically, impersonal phrases tend to have an impersonal pronoun (English *one*, German *man*, Dutch *men* and the like). Mind that Czech is a pro-drop language and searching for any pronoun can pose a challenge, as it does not need to be as immediately obvious as in other languages. There is evidence of this pronoun’s existence, however, which can be found in stressed sentences (71, 72):

- (71) Ono se tam padalo tak moc, až to museli zavřít.
 It SE there fall.PAST.3SG.NEUT so much, that it must.3PL.PAST close
 ‘It was fallen there so much that they had to close it down.’
- (72) Ono se tam zpívalo tak hlasně, že sousedé museli
 It SE there sing.PAST.3SG.NEUT so loudly, that neighbours must.3PL.PAST
 zavolat policii.
 call police.ACC
 ‘It was sung there so loud that the neighbours had to call the police.’

Note that while the pronoun *ono* (English *it*) may function as an expletive (72):

- (73) Ono tam byly hlavně ženy.
 It there be.PAST.3PL.FEM mainly woman.PL
 ‘There were mainly women over there.’

Expletive *ono* is not to be mistaken for impersonal *ono*. The difference between these two uses of the word is also visible on the surface: in (72), the verbal morphology remains intact and displays agreement with the grammatical subject, *ženy*—in (71, 72), however, the verb agrees with the impersonal *ono*, displaying a third-person, neutral morphology.

Furthermore, impersonal constructions are famous for diminishing this generic ambiguity by restricting the generic omega of individuals a particular verb applies to by space- or time-oriented adverbs. (Note how the vast majority of previously mentioned examples contain *tam* (English *there*) to restrict this domain.) The following comparison thus supports the availability of mainly impersonal reading:

- (74) ??Padalo se.
 fall.PAST.3SG.NEUT SE
 ‘It was fallen.’
- (75) Padalo se tam hodně.
 fall.PAST.3SG.NEUT SE there a.lot
 ‘It was fallen there a lot.’

6.1.2 Argument 2: human-only constructions

Due to the existence of a generic agent (i.e., “everybody in the room” or “everybody available”), the impersonal voice tends to select human-only verbs. The fact that SE serves as an impersonal marker is also supported by the fact that the previously laid out type of constructions in Czech does not accept verbs that are usually not performed by humans (76, 77). Note that non-human constructions may be allowed if the supposed agent is animate and humanised by the context (78).

- (76) Padalo se tam hodně.
 fall.PAST.3SG.NEUT SE there a.lot
 ‘It was fallen there a lot.’
- (77) *Hořelo se tam hodně.
 burn.PAST.3SG.NEUT SE there a.lot
 ‘It was burnt there a lot.’
- (78) ??Štěkalo se tam.
 bark.PAST.3SG.NEUT SE there
 ‘It was barked there.’

6.1.3 Argument 3: rejecting *by*-phrase

Because impersonals are already established to be done generally by everybody available (i.e., the DP position has been filled by the explicit, though generic, agent), the constructions usually reject a *by*-phrase (the purpose of which is to explicitly specify a particular agent). Czech impersonals, constructed using the particle SE, indeed appear to reject *by*-phrases:

- (79) Tančilo se tam *účastníky.
dance.PAST.3SG.NEUT SE there participants.INS
'It was danced there by the participants.'
- (80) Spalo se tam na podlaze *lidmi.
sleep.PAST.3SG.NEUT SE there on floor.LOC people.INS
'It was slept there on the floor by people.'

6.1.4 Argument 4: agent-oriented adverbs

Even though *by*-phrases are not allowed to specify an agent, the fact that there exists an agent per se should make these constructions accept agent-oriented adverbs. This, again, also appears to be the case in Czech (81, 82). Given that out of all intransitive verbs, it is exclusively unergatives that have an agentic argument, testing for agent-oriented adverbs makes more sense with unergative constructions (81). However, if one attempts to adjoin an agent-oriented adverb to an unaccusative construction, it will as well yield grammatical results (82):

- (81) Tančilo se tam vášnivě.
dance.PAST.3SG.NEUT SE there passionately
'It was danced there passionately.'
- (82) Padalo se tam schválně.
fall.PAST.3SG.NEUT SE there on.purpose
'It was fallen there on purpose.'

6.1.5 Argument 5: sensitivity to aspect

Impersonal constructions are also known to select verbs with the imperfective aspect as opposed to those with the perfective one. This also appears to be the case in Czech:

- (83) Tancovalo se tam.
dance.PAST.3SG.NEUT SE there
'It was being danced there.'
- (84) ???Zatancovalo se tam.
IMPERF.dance.PAST.3SG.NEUT SE there
'It was danced there.'
- (85) Padalo se tam.
fall.PAST.3SG.NEUT SE there
'It was being fallen there.'
- (86) ???Spadlo se tam.
IMPERF.fall.PAST.3SG.NEUT SE there
'It was fallen there on purpose.'

This evidence concludes this paper's argument that SE also occurs as a marker of the impersonal voice in Czech intransitive verbs.

6.2 Transitive impersonal

While with intransitive impersonals, the verb appeared to agree with the impersonal pronoun *ono*, transitive impersonals seem to conform to a different pattern. On the surface, transitive verbs in impersonal structures constructed using the particle SE seem to agree with their object⁴ (87). Thus looking for an impersonal generic agent might be even more challenging.

⁴ Note that verb-object agreement is not the standard type of agreement in Czech.

- (87) Pilo se tam hlavně víno, voda se
 drink.PAST.3SG.NEUT SE there mainly wine.NOM, water.NOM SE
 ne-pila skoro vůbec.
 NEG-drink.PAST.3SG.FEM almost at.all
 ‘Mainly wine was drunk, almost no water was drunk.’

6.2.1 Argument 1: human-only constructions

Again, if SE in this type of construction has an impersonal meaning (and thus a generic impersonal agent, potentially explicitly or implicitly restricted by space- or time-related adverb), then the construction should exclusively select human verbs. Consider the following sentences (88, 89) and their impersonal counterparts (90, 91):

- (88) Hosté snědli všechny zákusky.
 Guest.PL.NOM eat.3PL.PAST all cake.PL.ACC
 ‘Guests ate all the cakes.’
- (89) Stromy zablokovaly cesty.
 Tree.PL.NOM block.3PL.PAST road.PL.ACC
 ‘Trees blocked the road.’
- (90) Zákusky se snědly.
 Cake.PL SE eat.PERF.3PL.PAST
 ‘The cakes got eaten (by people).’
- (91) Cesty se zablokovaly.
 Road.PL.NOM SE block.3PL.PAST
 ‘The road got blocked (by people).’

Note the difference between (88, 90) and (89, 91): (88) establishes a human agent and (90) follows the semantics, but even though (89) establishes a non-human agent, this semantic pattern does not roll over to (91). To force the previous interpretation, a *by*-phrase must be added to the sentence, which may, however, result in a passive construction (explored in section 7):

- (92) Cesty se zablokovaly padlými stromy.
 Road.PL.NOM SE block.3PL.PAST fallen.PL.INS tree.PL.INS
 ‘The road got blocked by fallen trees.’

As the only available reading for (91) is human, SE may be considered an impersonal marker for these transitive verbs.

6.2.2 Argument 2: rejecting *by*-phrase

Putting the issue of passives and passive *by*-phrases on hold for a while, impersonal SE should turn down *by*-phrases for the agent positions are already filled. As expected, this appears to be the case with impersonal SE in Czech as well:

- (93) *Pilo se víno návštěvníky.
 drink.PAST.3SG.NEUT SE wine.NOM visitor.PL.INS
 ‘Wine was being drunk by the visitors.’
- (94) *Jedli se zákusky všemi.
 eat.PAST.3PL SE cake.PL.NOM all.PL.INS
 ‘The cakes were being eaten by everybody.’

The unavailability of specifying the agent by a *by*-phrase supports the impersonal role of SE in these constructions.

6.2.3 Argument 3: agent-oriented adverbs

Given the presence of an agent in the construction, however, the transitive sentences, if truly impersonal, should accept agent-oriented adverbs with no problem. Transitive SE constructions seem to conform to this pattern, suggesting that SE is indeed an impersonal marker:

- (95) Sázký se uzavíraly jenom opatrně.
Bet.PL SE place.3PL.PAST only carefully
'Bets were placed only carefully.'
- (96) Program se rozvážně přehodnotil.
Programme SE responsibly review.3SG.3MASC.PAST
'Bets were placed only carefully.'

6.2.4 Argument 4: rejecting "by itself"

Even though these constructions are clearly not unaccusative (for once because unaccusatives may only have a single thematic argument while said transitive verbs need two by definition), it may still be worth testing that this supposedly impersonal construction really does reject "by itself" phrases that tend to distinguish impersonals from unaccusatives:

- (97) *Zákusky se jedly samy.
Cake.PL SE eat.3PL.PAST by.themselves
'The cakes got eaten by themselves.'
- (98) *Voda se pila sama.
Water SE drink.3PL.PAST by.itself
'The water got drunk by itself.'

Because the construction seems to offer exclusively human reading, provides evidence for an explicit agent, and conflicts with the unaccusative idea (both by definition and by failing unaccusative tests), SE is a plausible candidate for an impersonal marker, too.

7 SE as a Passive Marker

One last function of SE this analysis explores is that of passive voice marker. By definition, passive voice constructions include an implicit (rather than previously shown explicit or absent) agent. Thus, after peeking into canonical passive constructions present in the language, the paper will run tests for finding a strictly implicit agent.

7.1 Czech Canonical Passive

Before we look into constructions involving SE, it is important to point out that the Czech language already has a canonical way to form passives. Compare the following active sentence (99) and its (canonical) passive counterpart (100):

- (99) Daniel otevřel dveře.
Daniel.NOM open.3SG.MASC.PAST door.ACC
'Daniel opened the door.'
- (100) Dveře byly otevřené Danielem.
Door.PL be.3PL open.PP Daniel.INS
'The door was opened by Daniel.'

This construction has all the canonical passive properties: (i) the verb detransitivises, (ii) grammatical functions of the clause's constituents get realigned (i.e. the initial object turns into a subject and the initial subject turns into an instrumental-marked *by*-phrase), and (iii) the sentence contains a morpho-syntactic marker, an auxiliary *byly* (English *were*).

Therefore, the upcoming analysis of construction involving SE is not proposing to describe a unique way to form passive construction in Czech but merely an alternative to an already existing canonical passive construction. The message conveyed by (99, 100) expressed by the construction that this analysis looks at has the following structure:

- (101) Dveře se otevřely.
 Door.NOM SE open.3PL.PAST
 ‘The door got opened.’

7.2 Argument 1: agent-oriented adverbs

Before proceeding to confirm its implicit identity, it is important to make sure that the construction has an agent to speak of. This can be demonstrated by applying an agent-oriented adverb to the construction. Adjoining an agent-oriented adverb to this alternative SE-constructed passive in Czech yields grammatical results:

- (102) Dveře se otevřou opatrně.
 Door.NOM.PL SE open.3PL.FUT carefully
 ‘The door will get opened carefully.’
- (103) Když se ty dveře otevřou opatrně, nebude nic
 When SE DEF door.NOM open.3PL.FUT carefully, NEG-FUT.3SG.NEUT nothing
 slyšet.
 hear.INF
 ‘If the door gets opened carefully, nobody will hear anything.’

Note that the grammaticality judgement of these sentences may be more favourable if the context restricts the interpretation to a singular, existential event (103).

7.3 Argument 2: accepting *by*-phrases

As the reader may have noticed, the paper has previously shown that *by*-phrases in similarly looking SE constructions are not allowed. Consider the following constructions:

- (104) *Dveře se otevřely všemi.
 Door.PL SE open.3PL.PAST all.INS
 ‘The door got opened by all (by everybody).’
- (105) ??Dveře se otevřely vrátným.
 Door.PL SE open.3PL.PAST porter.INS
 ‘The door got opened by the porter.’
- (106) ?Dveře se otevřely vrátným ve tři.
 Door.PL SE open.3PL.PAST porter.INS at three
 ‘The door got opened by the porter at three o’clock.’
- (107) Dveře místního muzea se otevřely vrátným ve středu
 In Wednesday.LOC on right noon SE door.PL local.GEN
 na pravé poledne.
 museum.GEN open.3PL.PAST porter.INS
 ‘The door got opened by the porter at three o’clock.’

While the grammaticality of these sentences will highly vary by speaker, it is generally true that the more detailed the sentence, the more acceptable to the native-speaker ear. This suggests that even though generic-reading SE constructions (favourable by impersonals) reject *by*-phrases, these phrases might be acceptable for singular events (favourable by passives). Passive marking could thus very well be one of the functions of SE in Czech, too.

8 Conclusion

This paper was about looking for agentive arguments in a handful of constructions composed using the particle SE. In **reflexive SE** constructions, as suggested by previous literature (Kettnerová and Lopatková, 2019), SE required that the subject was semantically equal to the direct object of the construction. SE marked this attribute for all inherently reflexive, naturally reflexive, and naturally disjoint verbs.

In **reciprocal SE** constructions, the same feature as in reflexive SE was required, except this time a plural agent was much more preferable to a singular one. These constructions offered two available readings: a (i) reflexive reading (*Anna and Peter each washed*), and a (ii) reciprocal reading (*Anna and Peter washed each other*). Disambiguation of the meaning could be easily achieved by complementing the clause with a *each* or *each other* phrase.

In **unaccusative SE** constructions, it was required that there would be no agent at all. All examples strictly rejected *by*-phrases and agent-oriented adverbs, the purpose of which is to point out an existing agent. SE, however, only occurred with anticausatives (unaccusatives that participate in transitivity alternation), which definitely determined the transitivity of the verb (rather than leaving the listener to rely on the number of arguments used).

Both transitive and intransitive verbs could participate in **impersonal SE** constructions. While the possibility of human-oriented adverbs as well as a possible impersonal pronoun showed the presence of an agent, any specification of a concrete agent using a *by*-phrase failed, which suggested that this agent is necessarily generic/existential rather than implicit. These constructions turned out strictly human, even when applied in non-human situations.

Finally, while the grammaticality judgement on this highly varied, some speakers also allowed **passive SE** constructions. Examples allowed agent-oriented adverbs as well as *by*-phrases, which suggested the general presence of an implicit agent that could be further specified, shall the situation require so. These constructions also became significantly more acceptable in well-specified, singular existential events.

Examples in this paper showed that there is more to Czech SE than its reflexive and reciprocal purpose. It is important to point out that the list of functions of this particle (i.e., reflexive, reciprocal, unaccusative, impersonal, and passive), while including the most accessible options, may not be exhaustive. The findings of this paper shall serve as a basis for any research that wishes to search for more subtle uses of this lively particle in the language.

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