

A smuggling approach to impersonal *se* constructions in Spanish

John David Storment & Francisco Ordóñez
Stony Brook University

Romance Linguistics Circle (RoLinC)
8 May 2026

Introduction

- Spanish marks both reflexive and impersonal constructions with the clitic pronoun *se*.
- Why is this pronominal element involved in two seemingly disparate constructions?
- Our answer:
 - ✓ In both cases, *se* is a pronominal clitic that doubles a deficient thematic argument for the sake of licensing.

Introduction

- Impersonal *se* clauses are further characterized by the movement of the internal argument via *smuggling* ([Collins 2005](#)).
- *Smuggling*: the movement of a constituent within a larger constituent

Status of the implicit argument

- Impersonal *se* clauses are (mostly) characterized by the lack of an overt external argument.

(1) (#Alguién) se escribió una carta.
(#someone) SE write.3SG.PAST a letter
#‘A letter was written by someone.’

- Researchers question the syntactic status of this understood external argument ([MacDonald 2015](#); [Saab 2020](#); [Russo Cardona 2022](#), a.o.).
- Tests from Collins ([2024](#)), Storment ([2025](#)), Ordóñez ([2021](#)).

Binding of elements that require antecedent

- (2) a. Se baila borrachos. (secondary predicates)
SE dance.3SG drunk.M.PL
'It is danced drunk.'
- b. Se juega descalzas.
SE play.3SG barefoot.F.PL
'It is played barefoot.'

Binding of elements that require antecedent

- (3) a. Se cocina para alimentar=se. (reflexive anaphors)
SE cook.3SG for feed.INF =REFL
'One cooks to feed oneself.'
- b. Se lee para sentir =nos sabios.
SE read.3SG for feel.INF=REFL.1PL wise.M.PL
'One(+1PL) reads to feel wise.'

Binding of elements that require antecedent

- (4) Se hundió el barco para PRO cobrar el seguro.
SE sink.3SG.PAST the boat for PRO cover.INF the insurance
‘The boat was sunk to collect the insurance.’

- *Not* arbitrary control or S-control.
 - The interpretation of the controlled element (SDP, anaphor, PRO) unambiguously corresponds to the understood agent of the matrix impersonal *se* clause (e.g., the collector of the insurance in (4) corresponds to the sinker of the boat).
 - External argument syntactically projected in impersonal *se* clauses.

Intervention for agreement

- Impersonal *se* clauses show optional subject-verb agreement with certain 3PL theme arguments ([Ormazabal & Romero 2024](#); [Gallego 2025](#), a.o.).

- (5) a. Se censuró los documentos. (O&R 2024:445-6)
SE censor.3SG.PAST the documents
- b. Se censuraron los documentos.
SE censor.3PL.PAST the documents
'The documents were censored.'

Intervention for agreement

- Agreement with a first- or second-person theme impossible.

(6) Se me {ve/ *veo} a mí.
 SE me.ACC {see.3SG/*see.1SG} to me
 ‘I am seen’

Intervention for agreement

- Blocking of 1/2p agreement unrelated to DOM or cliticization.

- (7) a. Se censuró a los oponentes políticos. (O&R 2024:451)
SE censor.3SG.PAST to the oponents political
- b. % Se censuraron a los oponentes políticos.
SE censor.3PL.PAST to the oponents political
'The political opponents were censored.'

- See '%%*Se los censuraron*' as well (for Italian, see [Lepschy & Lepschy 1977](#); [Cinque 1988](#)).

Intervention for agreement

- The effect is also seen with non-pronominal themes.

- (8) a. Se nos censuró a los estudiantes. (O&R 2024:451)
SE us.ACC censor.3SG.PAST to the students
- b. *Se nos censuramos a los estudiantes.
SE us.ACC censor.1PL.PAST to the estudiantes
'We the students were censored.'

Intervention for agreement

- (5)-(8) show that there is an intervener for agreement between Infl and the theme: optionally for number and obligatorily for person ([Storment 2025](#)).
- That intervener? The impersonal external argument that *se* doubles.

Case restriction

- Impersonal *se* only possible with nominative external arguments ([Ordóñez 2021](#)).

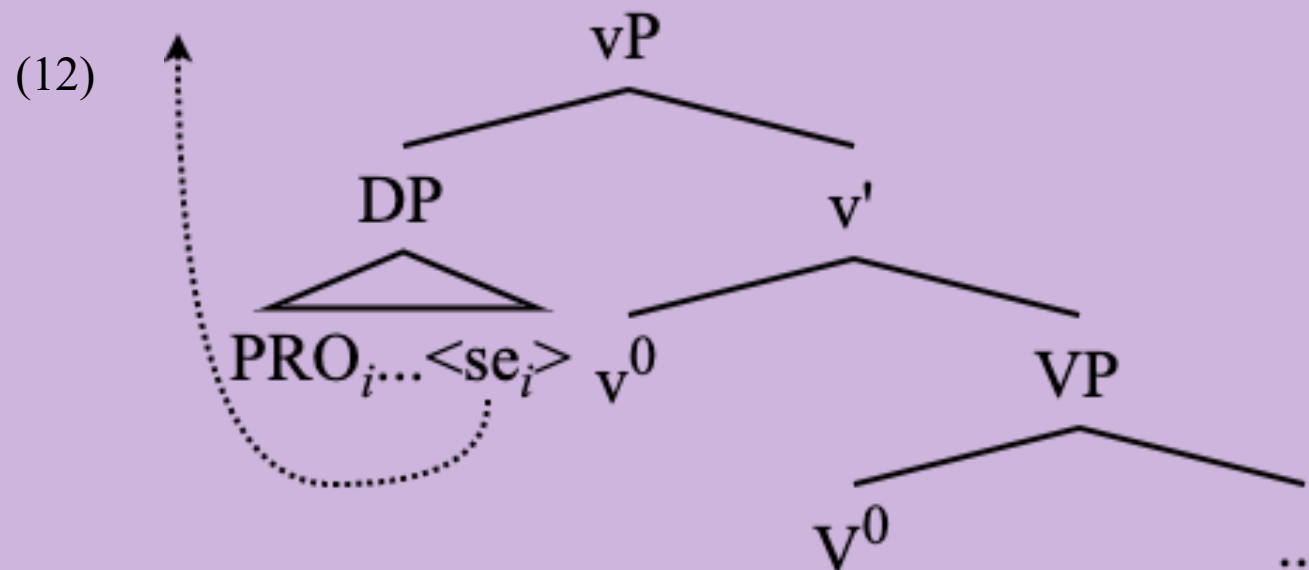
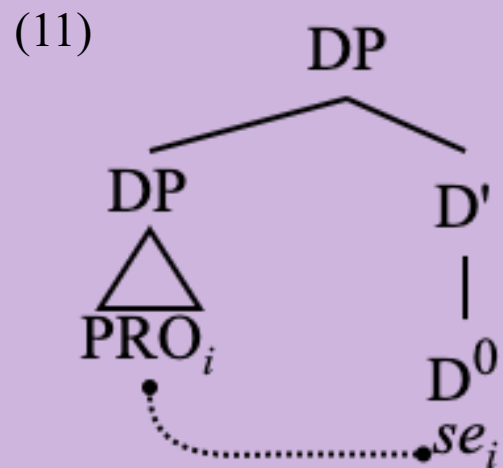
(9) *Se aborrece el pecado.*
SE abhor.3SG the sin
'Sin is abhorred.'

(10) **Se disgusta el pecado.*
SE dislike.3SG the sin
int: 'Sin is disliked.'



Describing the implicit argument

- We take the implicit argument to be a null deficient argument PRO which is necessarily doubled by the clitic *se* ([Uriagereka 1995](#)).
- Given the inability of PRO to receive Case, this argument is licensed via the doubling with the clitic *se* and the movement of the clitic to the Infl domain.



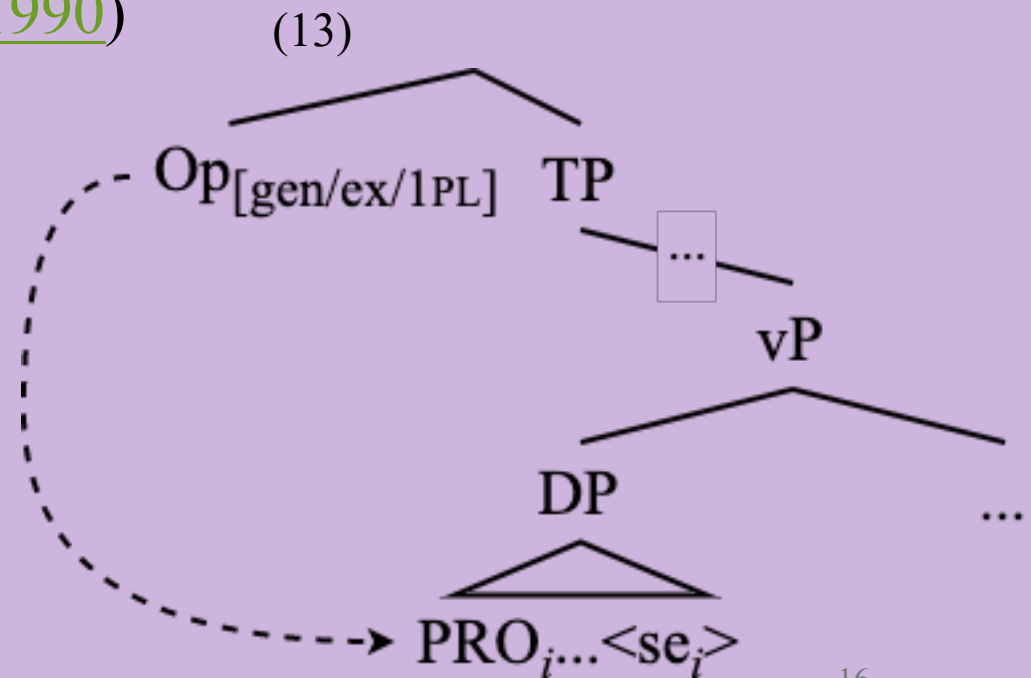
Interpreting the implicit argument

- There are a number of restrictions on the implicit external argument of impersonal *se* clauses:
 - Existential
 - Generic
 - 1PL (not consistent across Romance)
 - Certain indefinites (stay tuned)

Interpreting the implicit argument

- These interpretive options are represented in the syntax as operators that control PRO.

- Generic operator in generic contexts ([Suñer 1990](#))
- Existential operator in episodic contexts
 - Connection with v^0
- 1PL operator ([D'Alessandro 2007](#))



Interpreting the implicit argument

- (14) Aquí se es inteligente. (generic)
 here SE is intelligent
 ‘Around here, people are intelligent.’
- (15) *Aquí se fue inteligente.
 here SE was intelligent
 int: ‘Here, people were intelligent.’ (past=episodic)

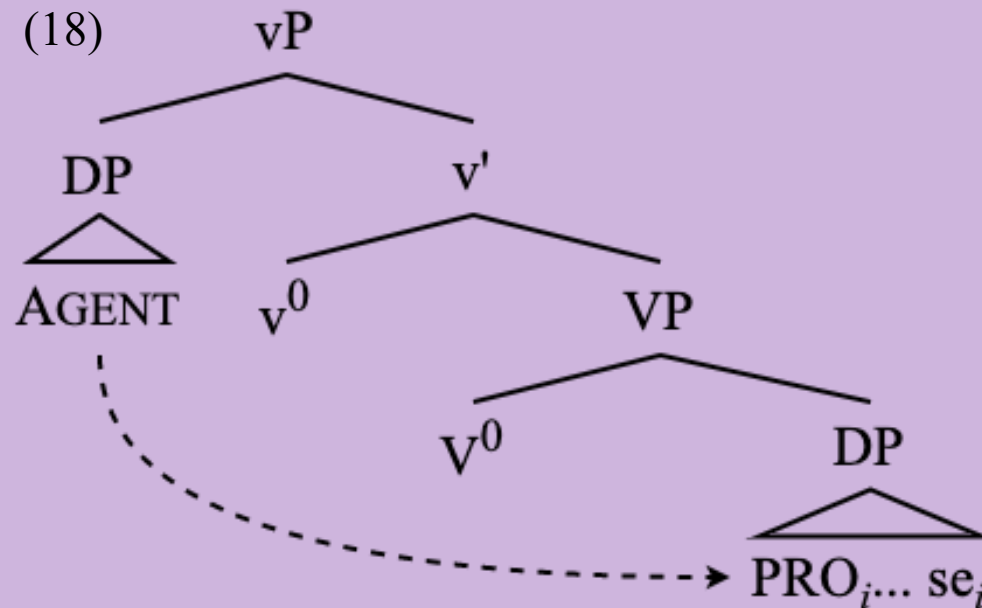
Interpreting the implicit argument

(16) Noi, si è stati invitati. (Ital., [D'Aless. 2007](#))
we, SE was.3SG been.PL invited.PL
'We have been invited.'

(17) *Nosotros, se ha sido invitados. (Spanish)
we, SE have.3SG been invited.PL
int: 'We have been invited.'

Reflexive licensing

- The implicit argument PRO must be doubled with *se* and its interpretation is entirely parasitic on an element that binds it.
- Where else do we see such a thing? Reflexives!
- Pronominal Agreement Condition ([Collins & Postal 2012:16](#))



the nature of
reflexive predicates...

Reflexive licensing

- Locality effects: Agent > Goal > Theme hierarchy

(19) Me {lo/ *le} présenté.
me.REFL {him.ACC/*him.DAT} present.1SG.PAST
lit: 'I introduced myself him.'

- Maybe English too?

(20) a. Give yourself to me.
b. ??? Give me yourself.
c. **Give you to me.
d. ?Give me you.

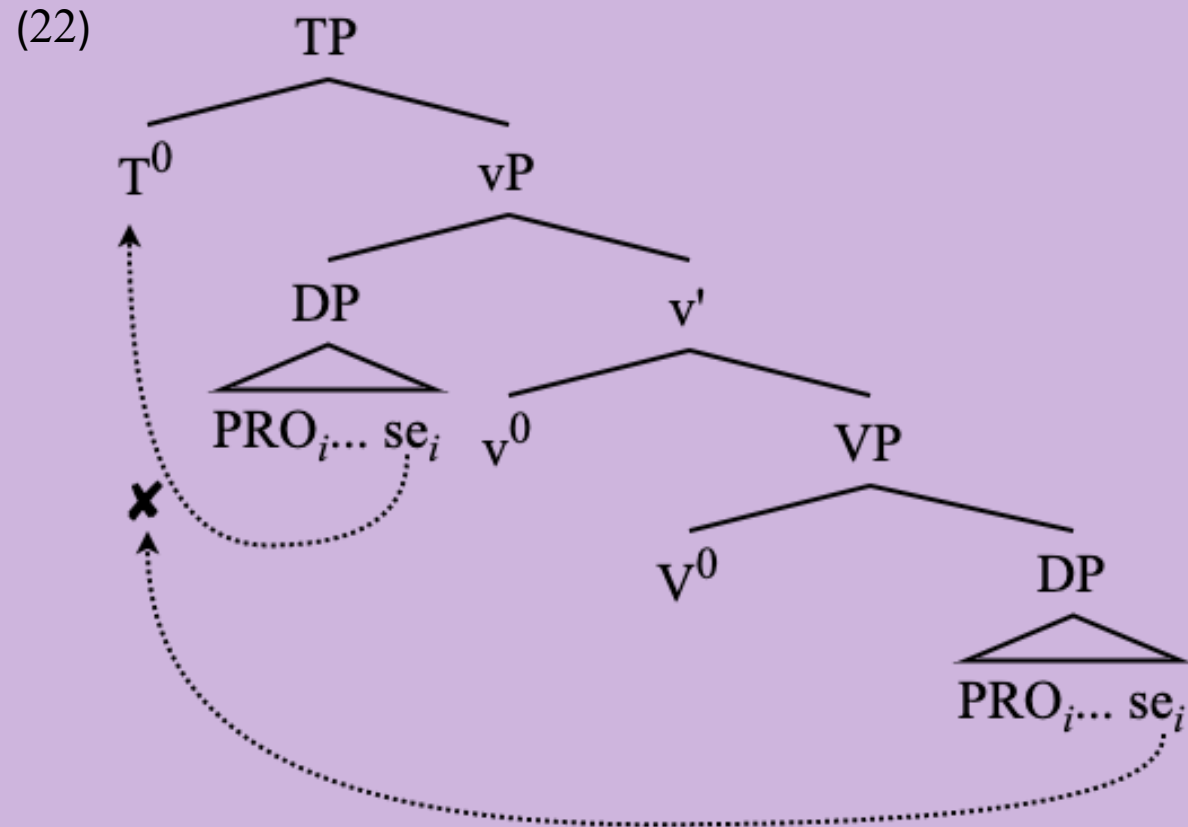
Reflexive licensing

- Reflexive + impersonal incompatible.

(21) Se (*se) lava las manos por aquí.
 SE (*SE) wash.3SG the hands for here
 ‘He/she washes his/her hands around here.’
 *‘One washes one's hands around here.’

Reflexive licensing

- Two PROs: Only one licensing position.

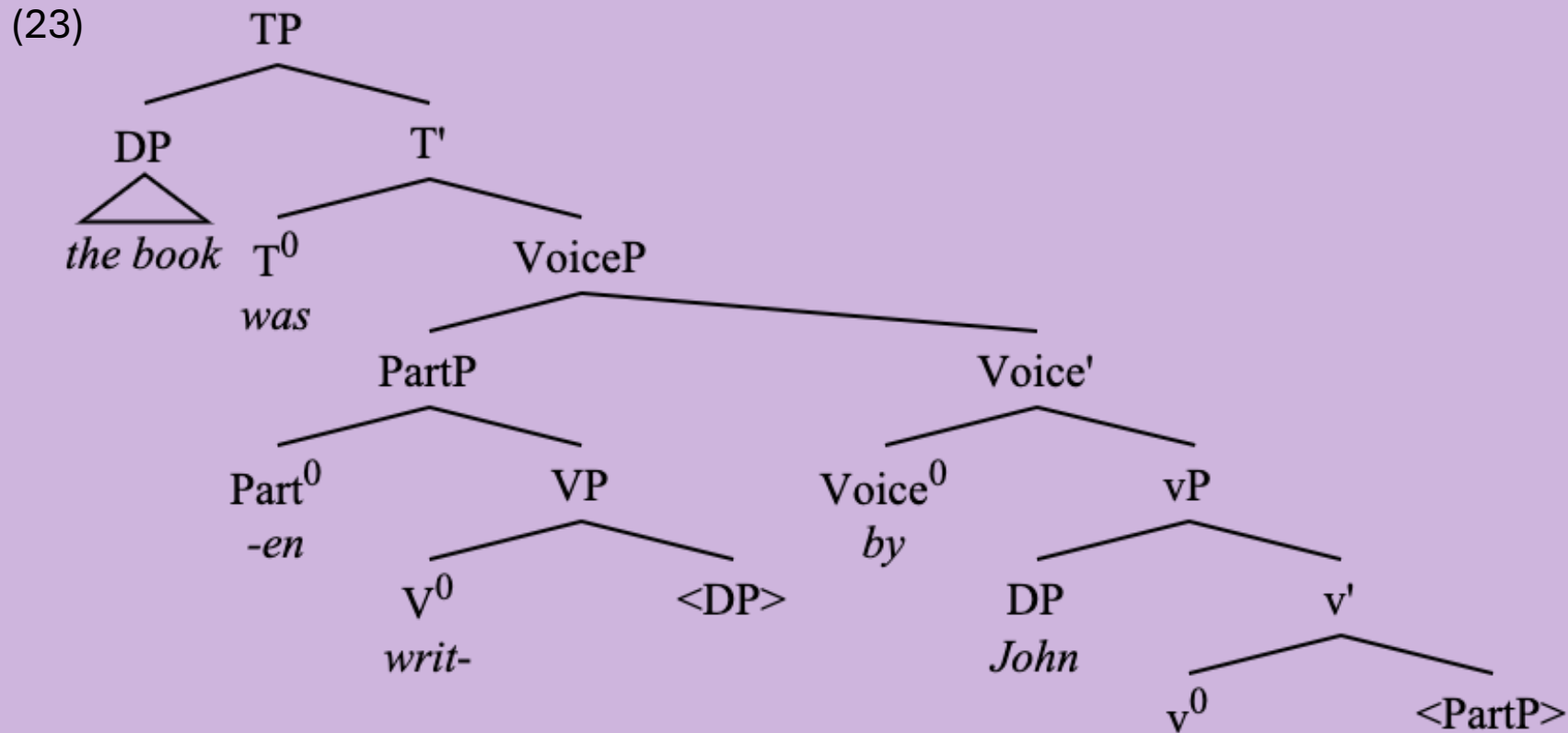


Impersonal *se* and smuggling

- With reflexive predicates, the internal argument clitic *se* moves directly to Infl over the external argument agent.
- It is also the case that the doubled *se* of the external argument with impersonals moves over a higher argument.
 - The internal argument of the impersonal *se* clause moves to a position over the external argument agent (doubled with *se*).
 - Internal argument movement via smuggling (grammatical voice) ([Collins 2005](#); [2024](#); [Storment 2025](#); [2026](#)).

Impersonal *se* and smuggling

- Smuggling crash course: Passives – ‘The book was written by John’

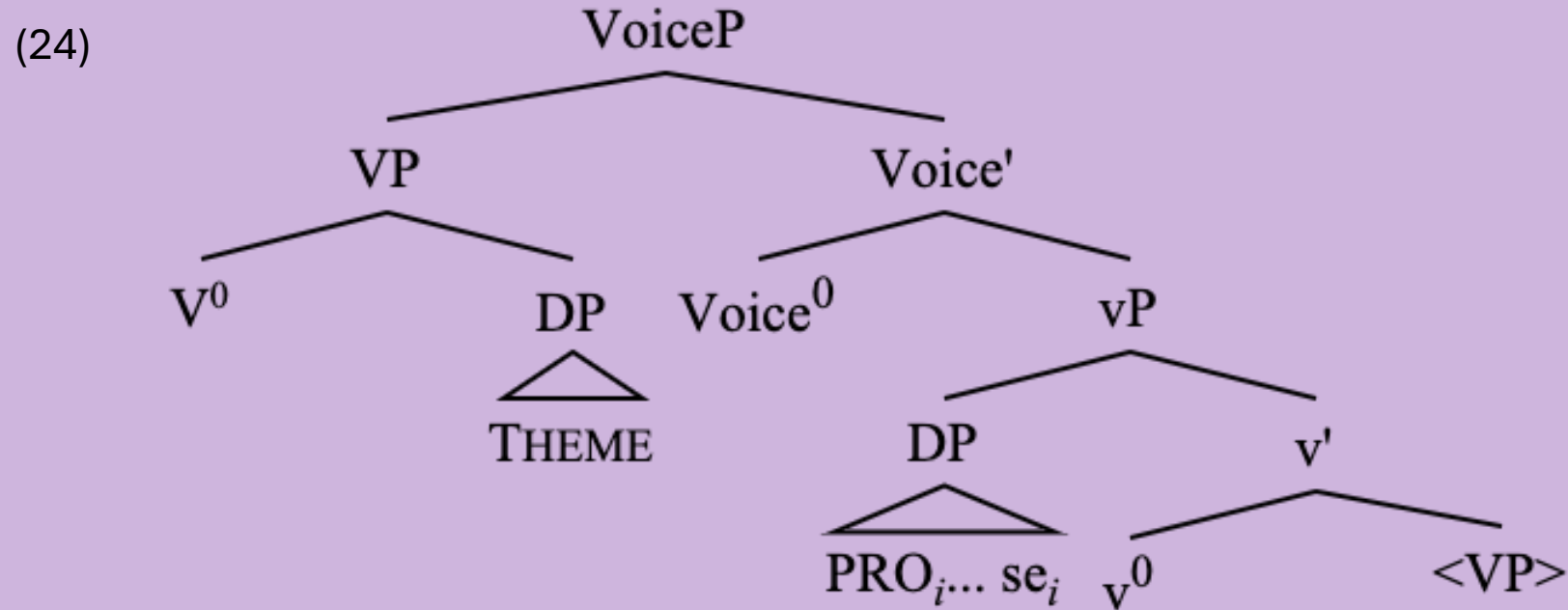


Impersonal *se* and smuggling



- The internal argument theme of an impersonal *se* clause is (conditionally) accessible for subject-verb agreement.
 - This is normally impossible without some kind of voice alternation (e.g., passivization).
 - Phase boundary between Infl and internal argument (VoiceP) ([Sheehan & Cyrino 2024](#)).
 - Internal argument moves within the VP to the phase edge, where it is accessible for subject-verb agreement.

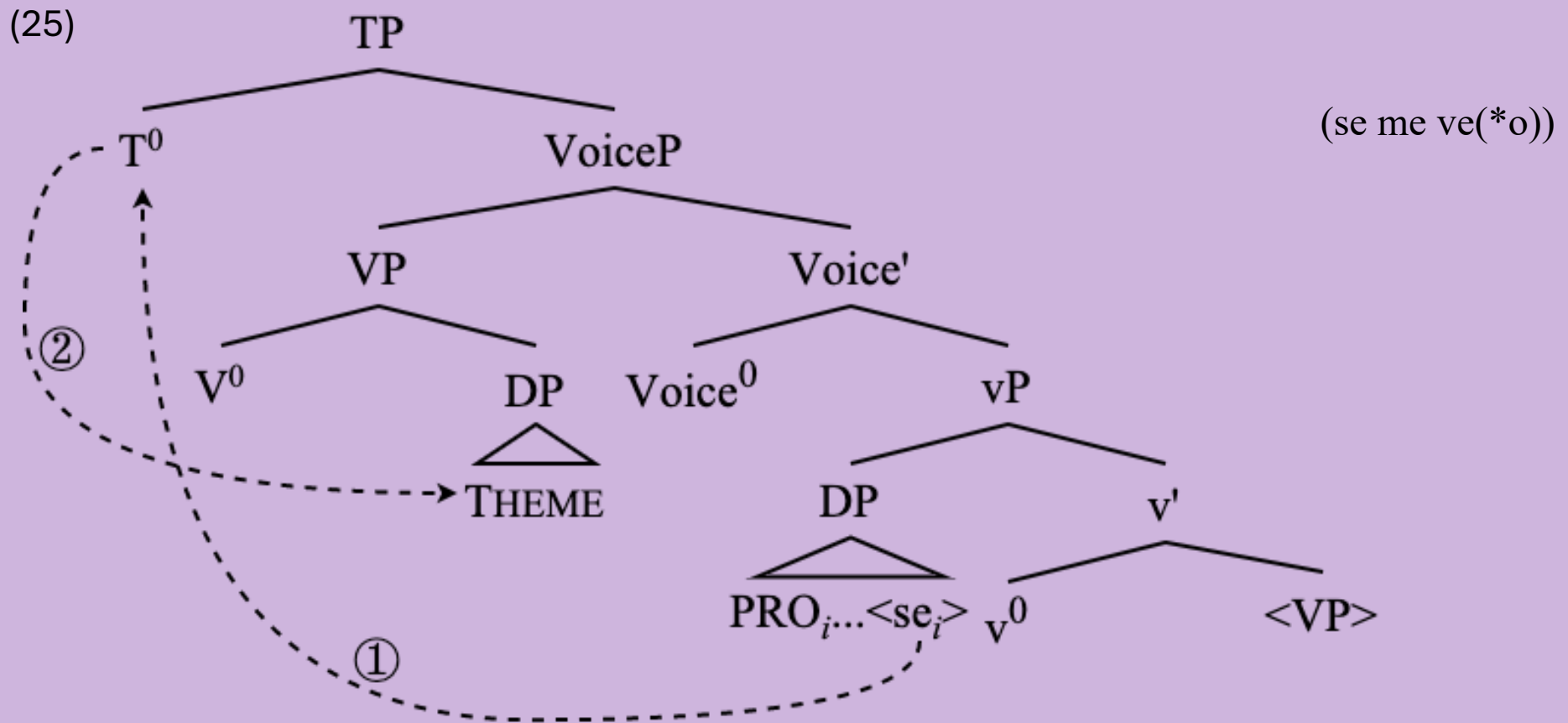
Impersonal *se* and smuggling



Impersonal *se* and smuggling

- It must be the case that *se* moves to Infl before subject-verb agreement is attempted with the internal argument
 - Earliness Principle ([Pesetsky 1989](#)).
 - *Se* has to be licensed as soon as possible.
 - Head movement vs. A-movement vs. agreement.

Impersonal *se* and smuggling



Impersonal *se* and smuggling

- How else do we know that there is smuggling?

- *By*-phrases ([Sánchez-López 2002](#); [MacDonald 2017](#)).
- Note the definiteness restriction on the doubled DP.



- (26) a. Esta obra se escribió *(por) un autor totalmente desconocido.
 this work SE wrote.3SG *(by) an author totally unknown
 ‘This work was written by a totally unknown author.’
- b. *Esta obra se escribió por Cervantes.
 this work SE wrote.3SG by Cervantes
int: ‘This work was written by Cervantes.’

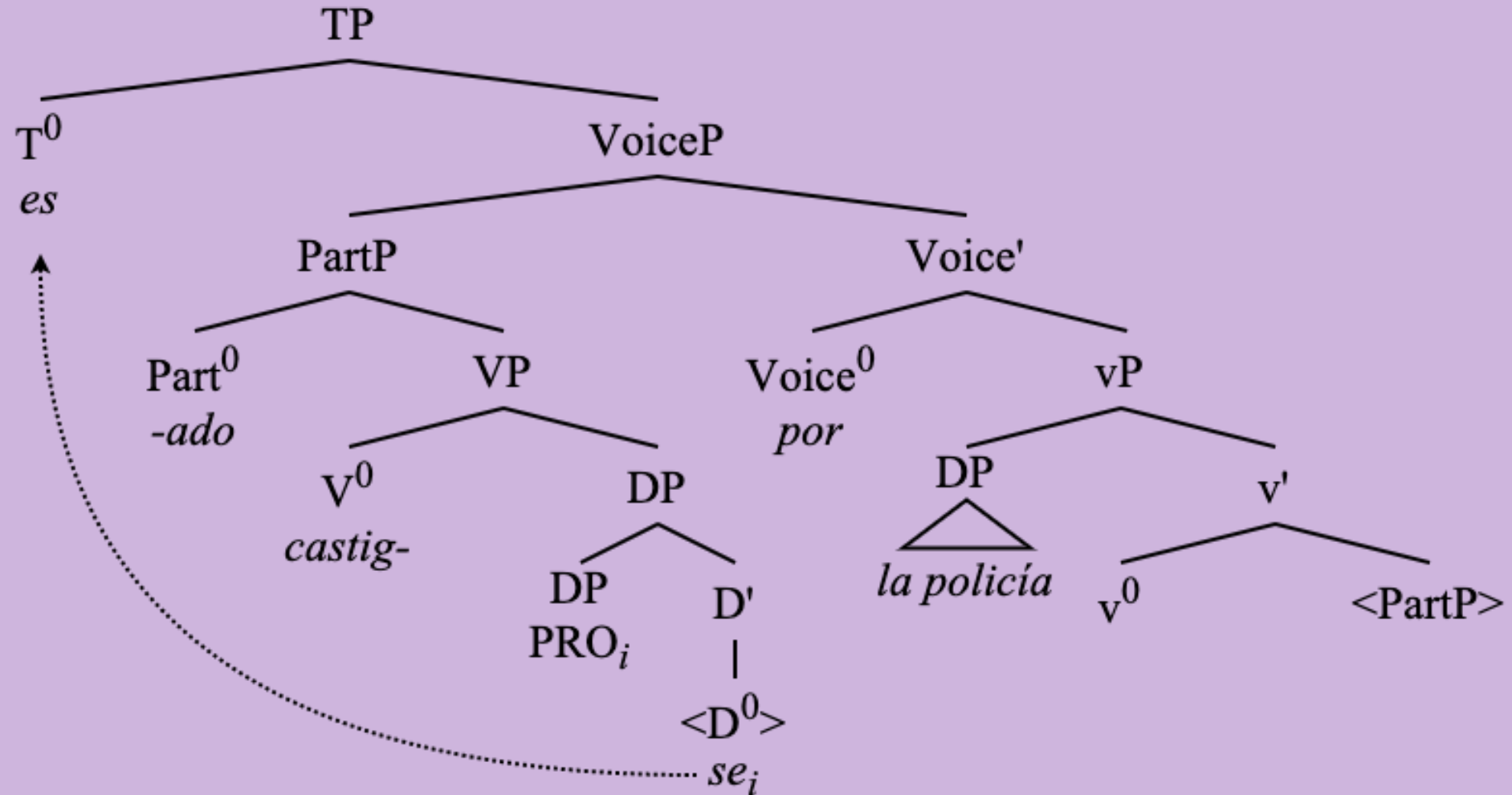
Impersonal *se* without smuggling

- Necessary for impersonal *se* to move over a smuggled internal argument?
- No!
- Impersonal *se* + standard passive:

(27) Aquí se es castigado por la policía.
 here SE is punished by the police
 ‘Here one is punished by the police.’

Impersonal *se* without smuggling

(28)



Location of *se*

- Where is *se* actually moving to?
- It does not seem to be the same as other clitics.

Location of *se*

- No PCC effects with *se*.
- PCC effects: in a string of two object clitics, the second may not be 1/2p.

- (29) a. **Me te presentaron.*
me.DAT you.ACC present.3PL.PAST
int: ‘They introduced you to me.’
- b. **Le me presentaron.*
him.DAT me.ACC present.3PL.PAST
int: ‘They introduced me to him.’

Location of *se*

- No PCC effects with *se*.

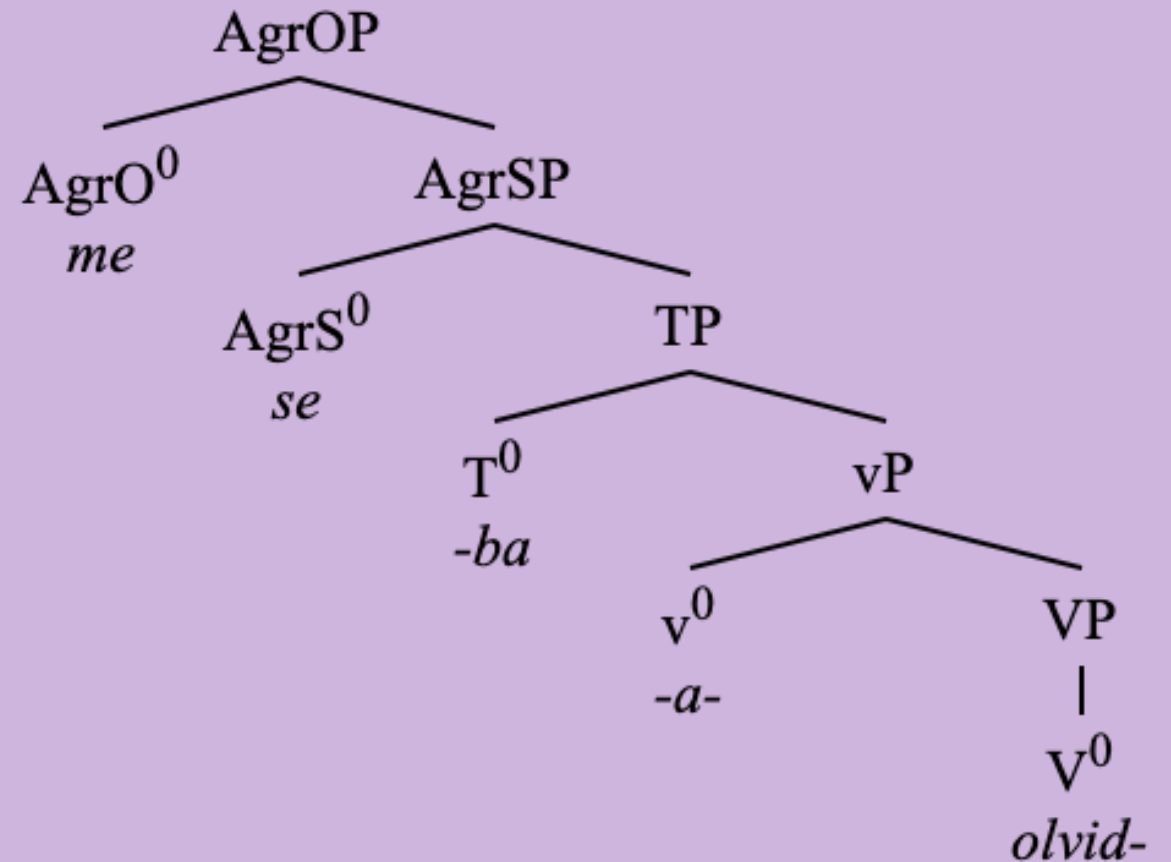
- (30) a. Se me disculpa. (impersonal)
SE me.ACC excuse.3SG
'I am excused.'
- b. Se me olvidó. (anticausative)
SE me.ACC forget.3SG.PAST
'I forgot.'
- c. ¿Por.qué te me lo llevaste tan pronto? (asp/refl)
¿why you.REFL me.DAT him.ACC take.2SG.PAST so soon
'Why did you take him from me so soon?'

Location of *se*

- Object clitics (DAT/ACC) share licensing features ([Banfi 1999](#); [Ciucivara 2009](#), a.o.).
 - AgrOP
- No such sharing with *se*.
- *Se* is in a different position.

Location of *se*

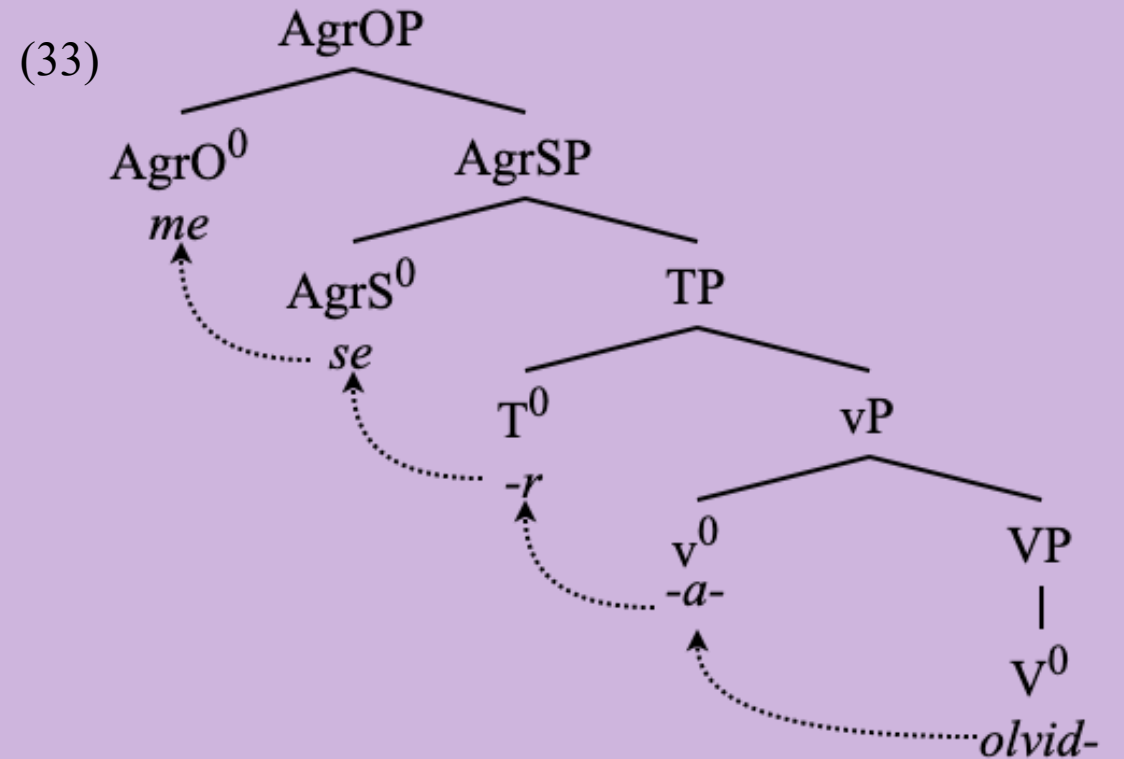
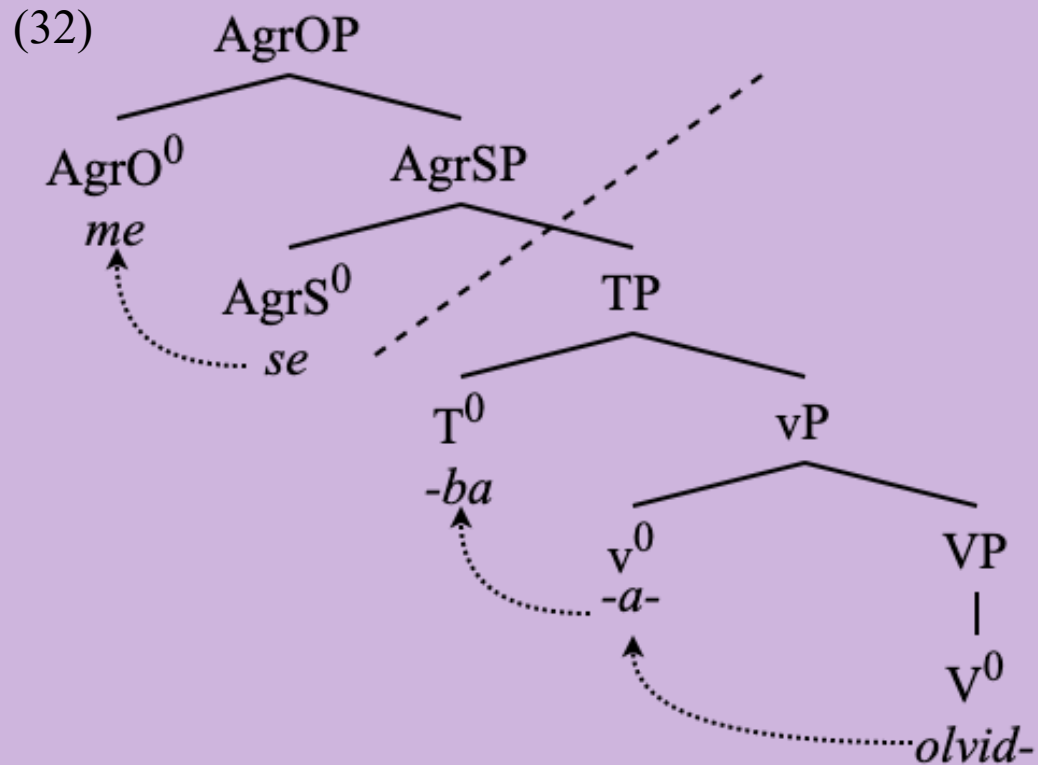
- (31) Se me olivdaba.
SE me.ACC forget.3SG.IMP
'I forgot.'



*argument positions omitted

Location of *se*

- Proclisis and enclisis: “amalgamation” domains ([Chomsky 2021](#)).



Location of *se*

- *Se* is the movement of D^0 onto AgrS^0 .
- D^0 is the locus of person features in Spanish ([Bernstein 2008](#); [Bernstein et al. 2025](#)).
- Connection between D^0 and third person ([Kayne 2000](#), a.o.).
- D^0 on AgrS^0 creates the person intervention effects for subject-verb agreement (e.g., **Se me veo*).

Location of *se*

- *Se* is a subject clitic ([Ormazabal & Romero 2024](#)).
- Connection between *se* and nominative Case
 - It's not always there ([Etxepare & Gallego 2020](#)).
- External argument licensing: Case vs. agreement.

Conclusion

- Impersonal *se* doubling an implicit argument PRO.
- PRO is bound by an operator.
- Same structure of reflexive internal arguments, which are bound by an external argument.
- Impersonal *se* clauses involve smuggling via VoiceP.
- *Se* is a subject clitic.

- Remains to be seen...
 - Cases where reflexives and passives are identical (e.g., Guaraní)
 - Other uses of *se* (e.g., aspectual)