Symmetric and non-symmetric reciprocals in Serbo-Croatian

The inventory of recipocal markers of Serbo-Croatian (SC) is superficially similar to those of many Germanic and Romance languages: A dedicated reciprocal marker with visibly quantificational binominal structure (*jedan drugog* in SC), which occupies an argument position; and a phonologically weak, reflexive-reciprocal-middle marker (*se* in SC) that can be shown to be a verbal argument structure operator rather than a nominal argument. Like the aforementioned languages, Serbian also occasionally relies on adverbial expressions such as the adjunct *medjusobno* 'among [them]selves' to describe reciprocal situations. There are, however, important systematic differences among these languages in the conditions that govern the use of each marker, and among the markers themselves. While the syntactic properties of *jedan drugog* and (especially) *se* have been the subject of a number of studies (among others Franks 1995; Moskovljevic 1997; Progovac 1997; Marelj 2004), we focus on a comparative characterization of their reciprocal uses and especially on the role of a semantic factor, symmetry, in their distribution.

Cross-linguistically, a number of distributional properties of reciprocals have been shown to depend on the symmetry, or lack thereof, of the events described by reciprocal predicates (Dimitriadis 2004). This is also the case in SC; the so-called "discontinuous reciprocal" construction is only possible with *se* reciprocals, and only with verbs whose reciprocal form has an "irreducibly symmetric" meaning:

(1) a. Jovan se čuje s   Marijom
         John se hears with Maria
         'John and Mary talk'
     b. * Jovan se udara s   Petrom
         John se kicks with Peter
         'John is kicking with Peter'

On the other hand, *a*symmetric predicates like *follow* can be used with *jedan drugog,* but not with *se*:

(2) a. Slonovi   su mirno pratili   jedan drugog
         elephants aux quietly followed one   other
         'The elephants quietly followed each other (in a line)'
     b. * Slonovi   su se mirno pratili
         elephants aux SE quietly followed

It can be shown that it is the situation, not the predicate, that is incompatible with *se*: If we imagine a situation where the elephants are walking behing one another in a circle, its use becomes grammatical.

In the above respects the reciprocals of SC resemble those of, e.g., German, which show essentially the same distribution. But *jedan drugog* has another, more unusual characteristic: It is incompatible with predicates such as *sresti* 'meet', which by their semantics are irreducibly symmetric even as non-reciprocals. Example (3) is ungrammatical, while (4b) is only possible with a non-symmetric, agentive meaning: It suggests that the table reaches out to touch the wall, and vice versa. The symmetric meaning paraphrasable as "be in physical contact" is ruled out when *jedan drugog* is used.

(3) * Sreli   su   jedan drugog na ulici
        pro met Aux one   other   on street
        'They met each other on the street'

(4)   a. Sto   i   zid se dodiruju
            table and wall SE touch
            'The table and the wall are touching (each other)'
       b. # Sto   i   zid   dodiruju jedan drugog/drugi
            table and wall touch   each other
            'The table and the wall touch each other'

While we know of no Germanic or Romance language that shares this restriction, it is found in other Slavic languages, including Polish, Czech, and Slovenian.

(5)   a. ?? Spotkali jeden drugiego na ulicy   (Polish)
       b. ?? Oni spotkali sebe   (Czech)
       c. ?? Peter in Tone sta srecala drug drugega   (Slovenian)

            They/Peter and Tone met each other (on the street)

Reciprocal *se* can also be used in "depatientive", or arbitrary object, constructions; here too symmetry is involved: Only symmetric predicates can be so used.

(6)   a. On se   tuče
            he SE fights
            'He fights with other people'
       b. * On se udara
             he SE hits
             'He kicks other people'

Another noteworthy property of *se* is its inability to license an accusative object in ditransitive or pleonastic (double) reciprocal constructions (contrary to the predictions of Reinhart and Siloni (2005) for this type of language).

It can be seen that the two reciprocals are subject to a complex interaction of semantic and syntactic constraints, and are, variously, similar or different to equivalent reciprocals in other languages.

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