Low applicatives that take scope over denominal verbs: A case study of optional se in Spanish non-anticausative intransitive verbs

This work analyses a peculiar set of verbs that optionally allow the clitic ‘se’ in Spanish: ‘caer(se)’ (1), ‘morir(se)’ (2), ‘tropezar(se)’ (3), and ‘encallar(se)’ (4). They are special because (i) they are intransitive, (ii) they do not enter the causative-inchoative alternation (i.e. they are non-anticausative), (iii) they optionally allow the clitic ‘se’, and (iv) the presence of the clitic seems to convey little (if any) semantic content.

The analysis put forward in this work follows the basic intuition about the semantics of the clitic ‘se’ that underlies the work of De Miguel & Fernández Lagunilla's (2000). We agree with these authors that ‘se’ with (1)-(4) correlates with the presence of a (change of) state preceded by an accomplishment or an achievement. However, we will characterize ‘se’ as a nominal argument clitic rather than an aspectual operator because (i) ‘se’ has distribution typical of a clitic, (ii) has φ-features, and (iii) other complex events that are made up of an accomplishment and a change of state, as causatives in (5), rule out ‘se’, so it is unclear that ‘se’ is necessary for the state to be visible for the syntax, as De Miguel & Fernández Lagunilla (2000:32) argue.

We will defend that the syntactic properties of verbs (1)-(4) that are related to result states licensing, and are shown in (6), can be accounted for by stating that ‘se’ is within a low applicative phrase. (6a) shows an adverbial with ‘caer’ (without ‘se’) that can denote a result state, whereas the same adverbial with the pronominal version of ‘caer’ in (6b) can only denote the way of the falling and never the result state. Therefore, (6d) is infelicitous: the first adverbial denotes the result state and the adverbial in the second clause denotes another result state that is incompatible with the first one. (6c) is felicitous because the first adverbial cannot denote a result state but only the way of the falling, which is compatible with the adverbial in the second clause that denotes a result state. The applicative relates the subject (which binds ‘se’) with a state by means of a relation of possession (Pylkkänen, 2008). We argue that these verbs are denominal and are formed by conflating a noun with a verbal head that denotes that the subject undergoes a process (based on conflation, cf. Hale & Keyser, 2002). It is the conflated noun that denotes the state that the applicative head relates to the subject.

The analysis proposed in this work accounts for the aspectual and syntactic properties of ‘se’ described by De Miguel & Fernández Lagunilla, as well as for the distribution of adverbs shown in (6). Besides, this analysis can be integrated in other analyses of ‘se’ with other types of verbs (e.g. anticausatives, inherent reflexives, etc.) that argue that ‘se’ is a nominal argument (cf. Burzio, 1986; Cinque's (1988) [+arg] si; Masullo, 1999; Rivero, 2001).

References
Examples

(1) Juan (se) cayó.
Juan CL fell.
‘Juan fell.’

(2) Juan (se) murió.
Juan CL died.
‘Juan died.’

(3) Juan (se) tropezó.
Juan CL stumbled.
‘Juan stumbled.’

(4) El barco (se) encalló.
The ship CL run aground.
‘The ship run aground.’

(5) a. Juan (*se) rompió el jarrón.
Juan CL broke the vase
‘Juan broke the vase.’

b. El viento (*se) abrió la ventana.
The wind CL opened the window.
‘The wind opened the window.’

(6) a. Juan cayó de costado.  [⇒Juan ended up on his side]
Juan fell of his side.
‘Juan fell on his side.’

b. Juan se cayó de costado.  [⇒the position of Juan while falling was sideways]
Juan se fell of his side.
‘Juan fell sideways.’

c. Juan se cayó de costado y terminó boca abajo.
Juan se fell of his side and ended up face down.
‘Juan fell sideways and ended up face down’

d. #Juan cayó de costado y terminó boca abajo.
#Juan fell of his side and ended up face down.
‘Juan fell on his side and ended up face down.’