Agentivity (and lack thereof) in Ibero-Romance middles

Imanol Suárez-Palma
University of Florida

THE DATA

- Middle constructions denote inherent properties of the verb’s notional object, which is realized as the grammatical subject. In Ibero-Romance are characterized by:
  - Reflexive clitic se
  - Non-perfective tenses
  - Agreement between verb and notional object
  - Impossibility of introducing an agent with a by-phrase

- Crosslinguistically, these sentences denote the participation of a generic agent in the event.

- Interestingly, in Asturian the reflexive pronoun is said to be optional (ALLA 2001).
- a. Este pan *(se) desmiga fácilmente *(por Juan) Spanish
  this bread REFLEX crumbles easily
  by Juan
- b. Aquest pa *(s'es)molla fácilment *(per Joan) Catalan
  This bread crumbles easily.
- a. Esta esti pan esmigayasa*(se) facil *(por Xuan) Asturian
  This bread crumbles easily.
- These sentences allow insertion of a purpose clause controlled by its implicit agent; such clause forces the presence of the reflexive in Asturian.
- a. Esta pan esmigayasa*(se) facil pa emparar cachapos. Asturian
  This bread is easy to crumble to bread staks.
- b. Esta pan *(se) desmiga fàcilment para emparar cachapos. Spanish
  This bread is easy to crumble to bread staks.

- Change of state verbs allow a non-agentive reading, which may be enhanced by means of a PP like por si mismo/*mismo *(by itself). This PP is only licensed in the absence of the reflexive in Asturian.
- a. Esta pan esmigayasa*(se) facil pa si mismo. Asturian
  This bread crumbles easily on its own.
- b. Esta pan *(se) desmiga facilmente por si mismo. Spanish
  This bread crumbles easily on its own.

- On the contrary, activities/accomplishments notionally implying the participation of an agent, necessarily require the reflexive in Asturian.
- a. Esta pan esmigayasa*(se) facil pa si mismo. Asturian
  This bread crumbles easily on its own.
- b. Esta pan *(se) desmiga facilmente por si mismo. Spanish
  This bread crumbles easily on its own.

- Les novelos de misterio lleen*(se) con facílida, the novels of mystery read REFLEX with ease
  Mystery novels read easily.

THE PROPOSAL

- The presence of the reflexive in these languages spells out a passive Voice head encoding the participation of a generic agent (Krater 1996; Schäfer 2008).

- Two configurations can yield middle sentences containing change-of-state verbs:
  - A generic reflexively marked passive, with Voice (5a)
  - A generic anticausative, without Voice (5b)

- Cuervo’s (2003) typology of verbalizing heads:
  - Activities (e.g. to sing, to read, etc.): VP
  - Events of change/happening (e.g. to fall, to happen, etc.): νGO
  - States/existentials (e.g. to be excited): νBE
  - Causatives (e.g. John broke the vase): νDO + νBE
  - Anticausatives (e.g. The vase broke): νGO + νBE

(5) a. a. VoiceP  
   Voice se  
   νP   νP
   νGO  νBE
   -ar
   DP  νP  νP  esti pan  νBE  √νesmigay-

- While the reflexive in (5a) spells-out the form of the passivized Voice head in Ibero-Romance, it may also spell-out the verbalizing head of change (νGO) in Spanish or Catalan; Asturian differs from those languages in that its νGO does not have phonological content.

- Middle contexts containing change-of-state verbs allow the insertion of an additional dative argument, introduced by an affected applicative head (Cuervo 2003; Suárez-Palma 2020) which can be interpreted either as affected by the notional object’s resulting state if merged below the first subevent (νDO or νGO), or as unintentional cause of the event if merged on top.

- Crucially, the unintentional causer interpretation is only possible in the se-less generic anticausative in Asturian (5b above), where the position above νGO is not filled by Voice, unlike the generic se-passive counterpart (5a).

(6) a. A Xuan, esti material ruémpe-νi facil. Asturian
   to Xuan.DAT this material Dawg-3SG.DAT easy
   i. ‘Xuan accidentally causes this material to break easily,’
   ii. ‘This material breaks easily, and Xuan is affected by it.’
   iii. ‘It is easy to break Xuan’s material, and he is affected by it.’

- b. Una Xuan, esti material ruempes-y facil. Asturian
   to Xuan.DAT this material Dawg-3SG.DAT easy
   i. ‘Xuan accidentally causes this material to break easily,’
   ii. ‘This material breaks easily, and Xuan is affected by it.’
   iii. ‘It is easy to break Xuan’s material, and he is affected by it.’

- These data suggest there exists a competition between the dative introduced by the applicative head and Voice for the position atop the first subevent. This phenomenon can be explained by adding to Wood & Matatza’s (2017) notion of i*, i.e. an argument introducing functional head whose spel-form varies depending of its surrounding environment; thus, i* would surface as Voice in the context of νDO and as Appl when its complement is νGO.

(7) a. i* applies as unintentional causer (no Voice)
   i. [AppP i* a Xuan,][AppP i* 3SG.DAT 3SG esti material 3SG 1st 1st 1st 1st 1st 1st]
   AppP as affected by an event (with or without Voice)
   i. [νDO i* a Xuan,][AppP i* 3SG.DAT 3SG esti material 3SG 1st 1st 1st 1st 1st 1st]

CONCLUSIONS

- The presence of the reflexive in Asturian is not optional. The reflexive in Ibero-Romance middle contexts stands for a Voice projection in the structure codifying the participation of a generic agent in the event.

REFERENCES