On anticausative middles in Spanish

Middle constructions in Spanish are characterized by the presence of the clitic “se”, non-perfective tenses, and verbal agreement between the verb and the DP-theme in preverbal position (unmarked) (1a)-(4a). Moreover, any transitive verb can occur in these structures, and the possibility of introducing an agent by means of a por phrase (by-phrase) is banned. However, unlike other Romance languages such as French or Romanian, verbs of change in middle constructions allow the insertion of a high applicative head to add a non-selected dative argument entailing a slight degree of agency (initiator of the event), as (1b). A dative argument can also appear with certain verbs such as ver (to see) or leer (to read), as in (2b); in those cases, the dative entity does not participate in the event, but a relation of inalienable possession is established between the dative DP and the DP-theme. Nonetheless, not all verbs in middle constructions allow for a dative DP to be added. Fully agentive events such as those in (3) and (4) block the insertion of a dative argument; in fact, it would be possible for a dative argument to occur in (4) only if the clitic SE is not present, therefore losing the middle reading.

Looking at these contrasts, it appears that the insertion of non-selected dative arguments in middle constructions (1b)-(4b) is restricted to those cases in which the dative DP’s participation in the event is minimal (i.e. initiator of the event or affected by the notional object’s final state) or non-existent. Events requiring the full participation of an agentive entity appear to block the insertion of an applicative head. For the purposes of this presentation, I focus on structures like those (1), which I will call anticausative middles due to the fact that the predicates in them are always change-of-state verbs undergoing the causative alternation (as in the case of anticausative constructions), and I provide an analysis of (1), in line with the current theory of Spanish dative constructions and (anti)causatives.

Following Pylkkänen (2002) and Cuervo (2003), I assume that these dative DPs are in fact affected applicatives, whose function is to relate an additional argument to an event. Cuervo (2003) analyzed this type of arguments in anticausative contexts, which she defined as complex events (vGO+vBE), and determined that the dative DP is an instance of a quirky subject, occupying the SpecTP position. However this seems not to be always the case of datives in anticausative middles. Instead, I argue that two possible configurations can yield these structures, which can be seen in (5): on the one hand, one in which the dative DP merges in a position structurally higher than TP, thus favoring the DP-theme’s promotion to SpecTP, triggering agreement with the verb via a head-spec configuration (5a); on the other, one where the dative DP occupies SpecTP, preventing the DP-theme to escape the VP domain (5b), i.e. an identical derivation to Cuervo’s (2003) for anticausatives.

In addition to highlighting the need to establish a more detailed classification of Spanish middle constructions with respect to their interaction with applicative phrases, the analysis I provide here answers three main questions, namely: i) what is the derivation of these structures; ii) why do verbs of change allow the insertion of affected applicatives; iii) what position within the left-periphery does the dative-DP occupy, based on evidence from subjecthood tests from Fernández-Soriano (1999) and Masullo (1992).
(1) a. Las patatas asturianas se frien rápidamente.
   The potatoes Asturian SE fry.3PL quickly.
   “Asturian potatoes fry quickly”.
   b. {A mi/ti/él/nosotros/vosotros/éllos} las patatas asturianas se
       {Tome/you/him/us/you/Them} the potatoes Asturian SE
       {me/te/le/nos…} frien rápidamente.
       {me/you/him/us…DAT} fry.3PL quickly.
       “I have the ability to fry Asturian potatoes quickly”.

(2) a. Mi letra se lee fácilmente.
    My handwriting SE read.3PL easily
    b. {A mi/*ti/*él/*nosotros/*vosotros/*ellos} mi letra se
       {To *me/*you/*him/*us/*you/*Them} my handwriting SE
       {me/*te/*le/*nos…} lee fácilmente.
       {me/*you/*him/*us…DAT} read.3SG easily.
       “My handwriting reads easily”.

(3) a. Los coches con dirección asistida se conducen fácilmente.
    The cars with direction assisted SE drive.3PL easily
    “Cars with power steering drive easily”.
    b. {*A mi/*ti/*él/*nosotros/*vosotros/*ellos} los coches con dirección asistida se
       {To *me/*you/*him/*us/*you/*Them} the cars with direction assisted SE
       {*me/*te/*le/*nos…} conducen fácilmente.
       {*me/*you/*him/*us…DAT} drive.3PL easily

(4) a. Los veleros (se) navegan fácilmente.
    The sailboats (SE) sail.3PL easily.
    “Sailboats (are) sail(ed) easily”.
    b. {*A mi/*ti/*él/*nosotros/*vosotros/*ellos} los veleros (se)
       {To *me/*you/*him/*us/*you/*Them} the sailboats (SE)
       {*me/*te/*le/*nos…} navegan fácilmente.
       {*me/*you/*him/*us…DAT} sail.3PL easily
    “Sailboats sail easily”.

(5) a. A mí, [TP las patatas asturianas se me frien rápidamente].
   b. [TP A mi se me frien las patatas asturianas rápidamente].

References:


