Unaccusativity and subject position in the locative alternation: ‘swarm’ verbs in Spanish

Roberto Mayoral Hernández (University of Alabama-Birmingham)

The study of subject position plays a central role in Hispanic Linguistics research (Poplack 1980, Prince 1981, Silva-Corvalán 1994). From a lexical-syntactic point of view, subject position helps identify fundamental properties of verbs, such as argument structure. This paper provides theoretical and statistical evidence from the study of subject position, showing that ‘swarm’ verbs (SV, see (1)) behave as unaccusative (Perlmutter 1978), rather than unergative (Levin&Rappaport 1995), in the locative alternation (LC). This solution grants structural uniformity to the intransitive verbs (2) that display the LC (Hirschbühler&Labelle 2008).

Experiment
Subject position is a reliable test to identify intransitive verbs in Spanish (Mayoral Hernández 2006), since unaccusative verbs have a higher percentage of postverbal subjects. Our data set consists of 2,141 sentences from the online corpus CREA. The sample contains prototypical unaccusative (llegar “arrive”) and unergative (trabajar “work”) verbs, as well as the most frequent SV (3). The results indicate that SV pattern together with unaccusatives (p < .05), since they all show a higher percentage of postverbal subjects in the LC (1). However, SV like brillar “shine” behave as unergative when they do not enter the LC, since they have a higher percentage of preverbal subjects.

Conclusion
This investigation reconciles the apparently discordant classifications in Perlmutter 1978 and Levin&Rappaport 1995, by showing that SV can behave as unergative or unaccusative. If we assume that the LC is an inherently unaccusative construction, we can predict that all intransitive verbs should display unaccusative properties when they enter the alternation.

(1) Bees are swarming in the garden / The garden swarms with bees.
(2) Clouds cleared from the sky / The sky cleared (?of clouds).
(3) resonar “resound”, abundar “abound”, arder “burn”, brillar “shine”, hervir “boil”, pulular “swarm”

References