Variable se Marking in Spanish Ingestive Verbs: A Quantitative Analysis

Juliana De la Mora (The Ohio State University)

The Spanish ingestive verbs *comer* ‘eat’ *beber* ‘drink’ and *fumar* ‘smoke’ variably occur with the pronoun *se* and its person/number variants. Many scholars (De Miguel and Fernandez-Lagunilla 2000, Nishida 1994 Sanz 2000, Zagona, 1996) have claimed that *se* is an aspectual marker, and its use imposes a completive interpretation; on this view *se* can occur only with telic predicates. However, it is possible to find examples that show that the alternation between *se*-marked and non-*se*-marked constructions is not only constrained by aspectual-related factors, but also by other factors such as the degree of individuation of the object (cf. Hopper and Thompson 1980):

(1) Ayer ví a Sergio, (#se) estaba comiendo unos tacos pero todavía no le servían
   ‘Yesterday I saw Sergio, he was about to (#se) eat some tacos but they hadn’t been served yet’

Previous variationist studies of Spanish variable *se* marking in motion verbs (Aaron and Torres Cacoullos 2005, Torres Cacoullos and Schwenter 2008) have revealed a set of linguistic factors that contribute to the variability. Among these are clause type, subject expression, grammatical person, tense-mood-aspect, and polarity. Thus, a confluence of pragmatic and aspectual factors has been claimed to be relevant to variable *se*-marking in Spanish, but qualitative studies cannot explain the myriad of factors determining this variation and their interactions. Following the variationist method, I analyzed variable *se*-marking in ingestive verbs in different dialects of Spanish. My analysis of 500 tokens from spoken and written corpora revealed that highly definite objects, highly animate subjects and objects, first and second person and affirmative clauses favor the *se*-marked forms of *comer*. In the case of *beber*, highly definite objects, third person and oral register favor the *se*-marked form. These results reveal that the meaning of *se* is determined in conjunction with the lexical/semantic properties of the verb and not by overarching properties of a generalized *se* construction as suggested in prior qualitative research.

References