

The Spanish impersonal *se*-construction. Constructional variation and change¹

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to analyze, synchronically and diachronically, aspects of the Spanish impersonal *se*-construction that have not yet been satisfactorily accounted for in Spanish linguistics:

- (1) *se* (*le*) *empuja* (*al niño*)
 MM DAT push ACC the boy
 'They/people push (him)/(the boy)'

In particular, the paper focuses on case-marking. What remains particularly unexplained is, in the first place, why the pronominal object (the clitic) in the impersonal *se*-construction is in dative (*le*); and, in the second place, why the use of the accusative (*lo/la*) has been gaining ground for the last two centuries.

The study has been carried out within the framework of construction grammar (e.g. Croft 2000, 2001; Goldberg 1995; Langacker 1987/91). It is argued that objects in impersonal *se*-constructions have a construction specific formal/semantic status in the users' grammar, which is different from the status of objects in corresponding prototypical personal constructions. This may explain the differential pronominal case marking of the object in the two constructions.

In addition, it is suggested that case marking of objects in prototypical personal constructions progressively functions as a model for case marking in the impersonal *se*-construction. The gradual acceptance of the accusative is thus accounted for in terms of form-meaning reanalysis of the object relation involved in this construction. Particularly, it is argued, on the basis of formal, semantic, historical and typological evidence, that this form-meaning reanalysis is motivated by the fact that the Differential Object Marker (*a*) tends to be reanalyzed as a General Object Marker.

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1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to discuss patterns of variation and change in the Spanish impersonal *se*-constructions that have not yet been satisfactorily accounted for in Spanish linguistics. In particular the paper focuses, synchronically and diachronically, on case marking.

The impersonal *se*-constructions have been thoroughly studied in Spanish linguistics. Among others, Maldonado has recently done extensive work in this area (see e.g. Maldonado 1992, 2000; Martín Zorraquino 1979; Santiago 1975). However, it is far from clear why the impersonal *se*-construction with direct object, when it was originally formed in the 16th century, exclusively marked the direct object with a clitic in dative case, even in those cases in which the accusative would be preferred in corresponding prototypical transitive constructions (e.g. Bello 1847; Martín Zorraquino 1979; Mendikoetxea 1999; Monge 1954; Santiago 1975). Today this case marking pattern is still a common phenomenon. Another question though is why the construction, since the 18th century, is gradually changing toward a possible accusative object-marking (see e.g. Fernández-Ordóñez 1999; Mendikoetxea 1999). In short, what remains particularly unexplained is, in the first place, why the impersonal *se*-construction marks the object with a clitic in dative (*le(s)*); and, in the second place, why the accusative has been gaining ground for the last two centuries. In this paper it will be proposed that an analysis within a general framework of construction grammar (Croft 2000, 2001; Goldberg 1995; Langacker 1987, 1991) is best suited for a more complete understanding of case-marking phenomena discussed in previous studies on the subject.

The next section offers a brief introduction to the Spanish impersonal *se*-construction. In Section 3, some identifying criteria for subject- and object status will be outlined and in particular the subject/object status of the NP in impersonal *se*-constructions will be discussed. In Section 4, basic principles in Construction Grammar will be presented

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and applied to Spanish case-marking phenomena. In Section 5, it will be shown that this approach, in addition, is appropriate for a more profound understanding of a series of changes that the impersonal *se*-construction has undergone. Finally, in Section 6, the most influential previous proposals and contributions to the discussion will be outlined and criticized in the light of the Construction Grammar approach.

2. The impersonal *se*-construction

Originally Spanish *se* was a clitic reflexive derived from the Latin reflexive. In Modern Spanish *se* is still used as a reflexive marker, but it also has a number of other functions, in particular as a marker in so called impersonal *se*-constructions. The *se*-construction is thus quite a complex area of Spanish linguistics, hence I will preliminarily introduce some basic construction types that are relevant for the discussion of case marking in this construction.

I will, in what follows, refer to the prototypical transitive construction, in which the subject is also the agent, by the notion *personal construction*, abbreviated as *P-construction*:

- (1) Juan empuja al niño /Juan lo empuja P-construction
 Juan pushes(3s) ACC the boy /Juan ACC pushes(3s)
 'Juan pushes the boy / Juan pushes him'

Se-constructions may be reflexive versions of the prototypical P-construction, cf. (2):

- (2) Juan se lava P-construction
 Juan REFL washes(3s)
 'Juan washes himself'

However, in other *se*-construction types the agent of the verbal action does not coincide with a grammatical subject. This category of *se*-constructions, which is the one that is in focus here, will be referred to as impersonal *se*-constructions, or as abbreviated IMP-constructions. Another feature of the IMP-constructions is that the function of the *se*-marker

no longer is reflexive as in the P-construction in (2). Following Kemmer (1993) and Maldonado (1992) we have to distinguish the middle values of *se* from its reflexive value. Clear separability among participants equates with reflexive constructions, while low degree of distinguishability pertains to middle constructions (Maldonado 1992). Thus, in this paper the *se*-marker in the impersonal *se*-construction is basically understood as a marker of the middle domain. Henceforth, *se* will be ascribed the function middle-marker (MM) in these constructions.

The IMP-constructions may be divided roughly into three different construction-types, IMP1, IMP2 and IMP3:²

(3)	se	venden	las	casas	IMP1-construction
	MM	sell(3p)	the	houses(p)	(passive meaning)
		'the houses are being sold (by someone...)'			
(4)	se	(le)	empuja	(al niño)	IMP2-construction
	MM	DAT	push(3s)	ACC the boy(s)	("active" meaning)
		'They (people) push (him/the boy)'			
(5)	aquí	se	vive/come	bien	IMP3-construction
	Here	MMI	ive/eat(3s)	well	("active" meaning)
		'you live/eat well here ...'			

In the P-constructions the agent is explicitly coded as a subject, or merely referred to in the verbal inflection. In the IMP-constructions, on the other hand, the agent is not specified in the construction. Since the NP in IMP1 is typically inanimate, or at least indefinite, IMP1 is interpreted as a "passive" construction in which the patient has been promoted to grammatical subject (subject-verb agreement) and the agent has been demoted to be only implicitly present. IMP2 and IMP3 are interpreted as so-called *impersonal*

² It should be noted that this is simply a broad outline, for introductory purposes, of the impersonal *se*-construction types. It is by no means intended to be exhaustive, nor a canonical classification. If it were, reference to verb classes would have been indispensable. For further details on the various construction types, see Maldonado 1992.

“active” constructions. The NP in IMP2 is prototypically an animate patient, marked by the preposition *a* as a direct object. However, when IMP2 has a pronominal (clitic) object, this object is typically in dative (*Ie(s)*). In IMP3 there is neither a grammatical subject nor an object. The discussion in this paper will be centered on the IMP2-construction as compared with the prototypical P-construction.

3. Subjects and objects

At this point we need, preliminarily, some criteria that identify subject and object status in grammatical constructions. The absence of such criteria makes it difficult to evaluate proposed analyses of grammatical phenomena that involve the notion of subject and object, e.g. the pronominal case marking of the object in the IMP2-construction analyzed in this article. Subject and object status will thus be discussed in this section and identifying criteria for subject status and object status will be applied to the IMP-constructions in subsection 3.2.

In his influential paper on subjecthood, Keenan addressed the question whether subjects can by any means be identified universally (Keenan 1976). He did not intend to find any universal combination of subject properties. Instead, he formulated a universal notion of subject that allows different languages to show specific means to mark the subject. This type of definition implies that some subjects are more subject-like than others in the sense that they present a fuller complement of the subject properties listed by Keenan. In short, subject is a universal grammatical notion, though subjecthood turns out to be a matter of degree, according to Keenan. Theoretical and methodological considerations, however, make it difficult to maintain the universal concept of subject, as we shall see below in Section 4. In particular, typological differences and great constructional variation make any empirically based argument for subject unreliable.

Following Keenan (1976) for the time being, formal subject (and object) properties, as opposed to semantic properties, can be divided into two kinds: *coding properties* and *behavioral properties*. Subject-verb agreement, morphological case and position are *coding properties*, whereas the notion of *behavioral properties* is concerned with the syntactic behavior of subjects. Subject-verb agreement is one of the coding properties that have been considered definitional of subjects. However, it is worth noting that it fails to be a necessary, nor a sufficient, condition on subjecthood (see e.g. Keenan 1976; Sigurdsson 1996). In languages that have case-marking, the usual case for subject is nominative and for object it is accusative. Regarding word order, subjects in prototypical sentences are typically the leftmost occurring NP. Infinitive control (PRO) and conjunction reduction have been considered some of the most important behavioral subject properties (e.g. Eythórsson & Barðdal 2003).

As far as case marking is concerned, it is often assumed that morphological case will correlate strongly with a given grammatical relation, or at least with a given semantic role. The accusative, e.g., is usually seen as the case that marks the direct object and correlates with patient. However, in some languages, e.g. Spanish, the case marking of the direct object is due to more specific conditions for the NP in question. This phenomenon has been termed Differential Object Marking (DOM) (see e.g. Aissen 2003; Bossong 1985, 1991, 1998; Comrie 1989; Haspelmath 2001). Variation in DOM has been shown to be structured by the dimensions of animacy and definiteness, so that the degree of prominence on these dimensions directly correlates with the likelihood of overt case marking (Aissen 2003). It is often claimed in the literature, mainly on the basis of intuition, that the function of DOM, e.g. in Spanish, is to disambiguate subject from object. The idea is that if the direct object resembles a typical subject, it has to be case-marked. There are clearly cases in which DOM has a disambiguating function, but, as Aissen (2003) points out, in other cases the absence of

case-marking could not possibly lead to ambiguity. Since subjects are associated with both agenthood and topicality, animacy and definiteness turn out to be unmarked properties for subjects (Keenan 1976). On the contrary, these are marked properties for objects (Aissen 2003). This relation between subject and object properties can thus be reformulated in terms of *markedness reversal* (Battistella 1990; Comrie 1979; Croft 1990): the high prominence, which is marked for objects, is exactly what is unmarked for subjects.³

3.1 Subject and object in Spanish

Basically, Spanish makes use of subject-verb agreement, a complex system of DOM and pronominal case to distinguish subject and object.⁴ Subject-verb agreement is the basic coding property for subjects in prototypical constructions, as shown in (6)-(7):

- (6) **Pedro** compró dos chaquetas
 Pedro bought(3s) two jackets
 ‘Pedro bought two jackets’
- (7) **Pedro y María** compraron una casa
 Pedro and María bought(3p) a house
 ‘Pedro and María bought a house’

³ Comrie has in later work suggested that DOM should be understood in terms of an iconic relation between markedness reversal and markedness of formal structure: marked object types (high in animacy and definiteness) are morphologically more complex than unmarked object types (low in animacy and definiteness) (Comrie 1989). Cf. fundamental markedness theory (e.g. Greenberg 1966) and the idea of markedness agreement (Andersen 2001a). Notice, however, that a general principle of iconicity would favor case on all objects, which is precisely what does not happen in DOM systems (Aissen 2003). Aissen suggests that there is an additional constraint, an economy condition, since the overt marking of atypical objects facilitates comprehension where it is most needed, but not elsewhere. DOM systems are thus, according to Aissen, governed by two basic principles: 1) Iconicity, and 2) Economy.

⁴ Subjects and objects cannot, thus, be identified exclusively by means of the syntactic position of the constituents. This is also the case in German, as opposed to e.g. English, Icelandic, Feroese and Mainland Scandinavian (Eythórssón & Barðdal 2003).

Spanish follows the general pattern of DOM, as outlined in the previous section, by overtly marking the high-prominence (marked) human object by the preposition *a*, and leaving the low prominence (unmarked) object types with no morphological mark:

- (8) Está mirando a la niña
 (he) is watching ACC the girl
 ‘He is watching the girl’
- (9) Está mirando el espectáculo
 (he) is watching the show
 ‘He is watching the show’

In the Spanish DOM-system, as well as in DOM in many other languages, accusative case is identical to dative case, and the dative case is the source for DOM accusative case (Aissen 2003, Bossong 1991). There is, thus, a close connection between accusative case and dative case. Moreover, direct and indirect objects are structurally similar in being non-subject arguments (Harris and Campbell 1995).

3.1.1 Pronominal case

Pronominal subjects and objects show per se case distinctions. The pronominal case-system is outlined in Table 1.⁵ Forms that are relevant for this study are in bold:

⁵ Spanish linguists frequently make mention of the etymological use with reference to the use of the forms derived from Latin: *lo(s)*, *la(s)*, *lo* (accusative) and *le(s)* (dative) for direct and indirect object respectively. See e.g. Cuervo (1895); Fernández-Ordóñez (1993, 1999); Fernández Ramírez (1964); García (1975, 1986, 1990, 1992); Klein-Andreu (1981, 1998); Lapesa (1968); Roldán (1975). In this paper I use the notions *pronominal case-system* and *etymological case* with reference to this etymological use.

	Unbound forms		Clitics	
	Nominative	Prep. case	Accusative	Dative
Singular:				
1.p.	yo	mí	me	me
2.p.	tú	ti	te	te
3.p.	él/ella/ello	él/ella	lo/la/lo	le
Plural:				
1.p.	nosotros/as	nosotros/as	nos	nos
2.p.	vosotros/as	vosotros/as	os	os
3.p.	ellos/as	ellos/as	los/las	les

Table 1 The pronominal case system in Spanish.

Pronominal objects may be unbound DOM-marked (*a*-marked) objects in prepositional case, or clitics that typically precede the verb, cf. (10). Under certain conditions these clitics duplicate an unbound object, cf. (11):

- (10) **La** compramos el año pasado
 ACC bought(1p) last year
 ‘We bought it last year’
- (11) **La** miramos **a** **la niña**
 ACC watched(1p) ACC the girl
 ‘We watched the girl’

Thus DOM in Spanish may also be head-marking, i.e. a specific kind of object-verb agreement (Haspelmath 2001). For example, unbound pronominal objects require object agreement (= object doubling) by means of a clitic object (agreement) marker:

- (12) **La** miramos **a** **ella**
 ACC watched ACC her
 ‘We watched her’

When analyzing pronominal case marking patterns in Spanish the *ismo-variations* should always be taken into account. This is a phenomenon according to which clitic case-

marking of the direct and the indirect object diverges from the basic prepositional case-system represented in Table 1. *El leísmo* is the most important of these variations. In regions of *leísmo* the direct object is marked by a clitic in dative (*le*), preferably with reference to a masculine participant: It appears primarily in cases of animate participant, and less in cases of inanimate participant; it tends to be strongest in the masculine, singular and less in the masculine plural; and it is even less frequent in the feminine gender. See e.g. Cuervo (1895); Fernández-Ordóñez (1993, 1999); Fernández Ramírez (1964); García (1975, 1986, 1990, 1992); Klein-Andreu (1981, 1998); Lapesa (1968); Roldán (1975).

3.2 Identification of subject and object status in IMP-constructions

Coding-properties:

The NP-position is, as mentioned, not a reliable indicator of subject and object in Spanish. Case distinctions are, moreover, only fully specified in the pronominal system, see Section 3.1.1. The basic coding device for subject is thus subject-verb agreement, cf. the P-construction in (1)-(2). Regarding the IMP1- and the IMP2-construction, repeated for convenience:

(3)	se	venden	las	casas	IMP1-construction
	MM	sell(3p)	the	houses(p)	(passive meaning)
					'the houses are being sold (by someone...)'
(4')	se	(les) empuja	(a los niños)	IMP2-construction	
	MM	DAT push(3s)	ACC the boys(p)	("active" meaning)	
					'They (people) push them/the boys'

the agreement-condition for subject is fulfilled in the IMP1-construction as well, cf. (3), whereas it is not in the IMP2-construction, cf. (4'). NP's in IMP2 are overwhelmingly human and definite and obligatorily case marked by the preposition *a*, just like the human definite direct object in the prototypical P-construction, in accordance with the DOM-system. Subjects in P-constructions are never marked by the preposition *a*, and it is therefore

plausible to assume that the NP in IMP2-constructions have direct object status. Moreover, the fact that the NP in IMP2 may be substituted by an object pronoun indicates object status for that NP, as opposed to the NP in the IMP1-construction in which this is not possible in standard Spanish.

Behavioral properties:

Even though the subject/object status in IMP1 and IMP2 seems rather clear, we should also take some behavioral subject properties into account. Notice that a specific subject type in a specific language may present only coding properties but no, or only a few, behavioral subject properties, not to mention semantic properties. In other words, NPs may look like subjects, but only to a very limited extent behave like them (Keenan 1976). It is generally assumed, cf. Section 3, that subjects may be coreferentially deleted across coordinate conjunctions. This condition is fulfilled for P-constructions and IMP1-constructions, but not for IMP2-constructions:

- (13) Juan sacó dinero del banco y Ø compró una
 Juan took(3s) money from the bank and bought(3s) a
 casa. P-construction
 house
 ‘Juan took money out of the bank and bought a house’
- (14) Se arreglan las casas y se venden Ø IMP1-construction
 MM repair(3p) the houses and MM sell(3p)
 ‘The houses are repaired and sold’
- (15) *Se conoce a la niña y se respeta Ø
 MM know ACC the girl and MM respect
 IMP2 construction
- (15’) Se conoce a la niña y se respeta a the girl
 MM know ACC the girl and MM respect ACC la niña
 ‘People know the girl and respect her’

Control of PRO-infinitives has been used as a reliable subject test in many languages.

In control constructions the subject of the infinitive is left unexpressed showing identity with

an NP that pertains to the finite verb. In Spanish this condition is fulfilled for prototypical P-constructions:

- (16) Fernando vende las casas P-construction
 Fernando sells(3s) the houses
 ‘Fernando sells the houses’
- (17) Fernando necesita vender las casas Pro-infinitive
 Fernando needs(3s) Ø to sell the houses
 ‘Fernando needs to sell the houses’

For most verbal predicates subjects in the IMP1-construction do not control PRO-infinitives, cf. (19). Instead, the status of passive subject is taken over by the infinitive clause, cf. (20):

- (18) Se venden las casas IMP1-construction
 MM sell(3p) the houses(p)
 ‘The houses are being sold’
- (19) *Se necesitan vender las casas Pro-infinitive
 MM need(3p) Ø sell the houses(p)
 ‘The houses need to be sold’
- (20) Se necesita vender las casas
 MM need(3s) sell the houses
 ‘It is needed to sell the houses’

However, specific groups of verbs, in particular those with auxiliary properties, actually allow for infinitive control in the IMP1-construction:⁶

- (21) Se pueden vender las casas
 MM can(3p) Ø sell the houses(p)
 ‘The houses can be sold’

⁶ Notice, however, that if the two verbs are analyzed as constituting one syntactic unit (periphrasis), these examples are not instances of infinitive control constructions.

- (22) Se dejan oír las voces
 MM let(3p) Ø hear the voices(p)
 ‘The voices can be heard’

As regarding the IMP2-construction, in which the NP shows coding properties for object (case-marking), it is not possible to show, on the basis of the control-construction, whether the NP behaves syntactically as subject or object:

- (23) Se ve a las niñas IMP2-construction
 MM see(3s) ACC the girls
 ‘You can see the girls’
- (24) Se necesita ver a las niñas IMP1-construction
 (?) MM need(3s) see ACC the girls
 ‘It is needed to see the girls’

Nevertheless, it seems plausible to analyze (24) as an IMP1-construction, in which the infinitive clause is a passive subject and the NP an embedded direct object. In other words, it is not likely that the NP in (24) controls PRO-infinitive in an IMP2-construction, though it cannot be explicitly shown by the test.

Semantic considerations also suggest that the NP has subject- and object status in IMP1 and IMP2 respectively. The IMP1, see (3), is basically a passive construction that involves a prominent patient (subject) and a demoted agent. The meaning of IMP2, see (4), is relatively more active, in the sense that the presence of an underlying agent, though still unspecified, is more appreciable. On the other hand, the *a*-marked NP (object) in IMP2 is, compared with IMP1, relatively downgraded on the scale of prominence. See Maldonado 1992 for further details.

In this section I have shown that NPs in IMP1 and IMP2 seem to have subject and object status respectively. But I have also shown that these NP’s, as compared with NPs in P-constructions, do not necessarily fulfill the same conditions for subject/object status. In

short, they are not subject/object in the same sense as subject/object in prototypical P-constructions.

4. A usage-based analysis

In this section my principal concern will be to show how the syntactic context conditions the status of grammatical relations, e.g. the object relation, and hence the patterns of case-marking. First, I will address some more general issues concerning constructions, grammatical categories and syntactic argumentation. As a main point, it will be argued that grammatical categories are epiphenomena. Grammatical constructions, of distinct complexity, are seen as linguistic primitives, from which the grammatical categories are derived. With this basic view on grammar in mind, the question of constructional variation in the impersonal *se*-construction, including the pronominal case-marking, will subsequently be reconsidered.

In *usage-based* approaches to grammar, grammatical development is not centered in rule-based abstractions, but rather grounded on actual usage events. It is argued that grammatical structure emerges from language use: language learners comprehend and produce specific utterances – and then make item-based abstractions across these. Theoretically, the key lies in the recognition that the nature of linguistic competence is usage-based, in the sense that linguistic units are seen as being abstracted from usage events (Bybee 1985; Langacker 1987). A usage-based approach is necessarily a construction-based approach given this ontological status of linguistic units. The fundamental implication of the usage-based model is that the existence of constructions in grammatical representation is a function of frequency and similarity in form and meaning. Constructions are thus basic rather than epiphenomenal, and rules in grammar are nothing more than (abstracted) schematic constructions (cf. Goldberg 1995). As a consequence, networks of constructions are sufficient for a full description of lexicon and grammar, which form a continuum. In a

more radical version of construction grammar (Croft 2001), adopted in this paper, it is further hypothesized that since constructions are the primitive units of representation, the categorical status of their elements is dependent on the construction(s) in which they occur, not the other way around.

4.1 How do we identify and distinguish constructions?

According to *usage-based* approaches to grammar, we face the task, as language users and language learners, of (re)analyzing and categorizing the utterances we hear into discrete (construction) types. The identification of constructions is thus essentially a categorization problem (Croft 2001). Therefore, as linguists, we face a difficult task if we want to prove whether one construction type is essentially different from another construction type, or merely represents observed instances of systematic variation (being a subconstruction). On the other hand, this is an empirical question that, in spite of its subtlety, in principle is testable. As long as this kind of question has not been studied empirically, we will have to resign ourselves to arguments. Let us once again compare the P-construction in (1) with the IMP-constructions in (3) and (4), repeated here for convenience:

- | | | | | |
|-----|--|-----------------------------|------------------------------------|---|
| (1) | Juan empujaa
Juan pushes(3s)
'Juan pushes the boys / Juan pushes them' | los niños
ACC the boys | /Juan los empuja
ACC pushes(3s) | P-construction |
| (3) | se venden
MM sell(3p)
'the houses are being sold (by someone...)' | las casas
the houses(p) | | IMP1-construction
(passive meaning) |
| (4) | se (le) empuja
MM DAT push(3s)
'They (people) push (him/the boy)' | (al niño)
ACC the boy(s) | | IMP2-construction
(“active” meaning) |

There are, without any doubt, discontinuities between the structure of prototypical Spanish active clauses, i.e. the P-construction, and the passive IMP1-construction (see Section 2 and 3.2). First of all, since constructions are symbolic units, categorization of

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utterances into construction types is based on both formal and meaning properties. Hence, the existence of the IMP1-passive as a construction type, opposed to the P-construction type, is basically due to the middle marker *se* (MM) and the passive meaning, in particular the lack of an explicitly encoded agent. The IMP2-construction is differentiated from the P-construction for mostly the same reasons, though they are diathetically closer. We may also ask whether IMP1 and IMP2 are categorized as different constructions by the user, though a clear and unambiguous distinction between the IMP1- and IMP2-construction is by no means a crucial prerequisite for analyzing the differential pronominal object marking in P-constructions and IMP2-constructions, which is my principal concern in this paper. In IMP2 the NP is obligatorily case marked as an object, even in relatively rare instances of the construction in which the NP is inanimate; and very often it is doubled, or substituted, by an object pronoun. IMP1 does not have the same formal properties. In IMP1 the NP shows agreement with the verb and the NP is almost never case marked. In some dialects substitution with an object pronoun is possible: *se las vende* [MM ACC sell3s]. Even more conspicuous is the semantic disparity of the two constructions: In prominence structure the IMP2-patient is relatively downgraded (the IMP1-patient is relatively prominent), whereas the presence of the IMP2-agent is relatively strong, though still unspecified (the IMP1-agent is relatively marginalized). The IMP1-participant is almost always nonhuman/inanimate, whereas IMP2 involves a human/animate participant. Consequently, since IMP1 and IMP2 diverges significantly in terms of formal as well as conceptual-semantic differences, it is plausible to assume that they are categorized as different construction types in users' grammar. To conclude: Regarding both form and meaning, there are significant differences among the P-, IMP1- and the IMP2-construction. I will therefore assume that they are categorized as different construction types in users' grammar. See also Delbecque (2002) and Maldonado (1992).

4.2 Methodology and syntactic argumentation

Some of the most important insights in Construction Grammar are closely related to the question of methodology and syntactic argumentation. One methodological question of primary importance is: is there a general method for determining basic grammatical categories? The distributional analysis is usually the basic method underlying syntactic argumentation, and it has especially been used to identify basic grammatical categories in complex constructions (Croft 2001). The basic idea is that certain construction-types can be used to define a syntactic category. For this purpose such construction types are usually called an argument, a test or a criterion for including that category in the analysis. Syntactic argumentation of this kind is thus basically about claiming a certain behavior in one or more construction types in order to show the existence and delimitation of some category in the grammar. And the arguments for such category membership are considered to be stronger if the category in question can be determined across many constructions. Thus the syntactic argumentation is obviously stronger if it is based on several constructional tests – the more the better. For instance, it has often been argued that the categories subject and object can be determined, on a distributional basis, using certain constructional tests (= rules); cf. the criteria used in Section 3 to identify subject- and object status. This is demonstrated in Table 2, taken from Croft (2001: 14):

		Constructional tests				
Categories		I	II	III	IV	V
	Subject	√	√	√	√	√
	Object	*	*	*	*	*

Table 2 Tests for subject and object.

I: Nominative Case marking (pronouns): She congratulated him; *Her congratulated he.

II: Agreement of the verb: She(i) likes(i) horses; *She like-Ø(i) horses

III: Controlled null NP of Infinitive Complement: Jack told Fred(i) Ø(i) to by a car; * Jack told Fred(i) to give Ø(i) (50\$).

IV: Null NP of imperative: \emptyset Learn Hungarian; * Mary teach \emptyset (Hungarian)

V: Null NP in "Conjunction reduction" coordination: She fell and \emptyset broke her hip; *She(i) died and they buried \emptyset (i).

Each one of these five constructional tests offers a way to show the existence, in English, of grammatical subject as opposed to object. For practical purposes, for example, the case marking construction or the construction of verbal agreement serve as tests for subject and object in English: **Mary** (*she, her**) *congratulates* **them** (*they**), as well as in Spanish: **María** (*ella, la**) *les* (*ellos**) *felicita*.

However, as Croft (2001) points out, this method implicates serious problems. First of all, the arbitrariness in the selection of constructional tests makes this kind of syntactic argumentation unreliable. In our effort to define a category, e.g. subject or object, for some analysis we are carrying out, we tend to choose criteria that fit our specific purpose. In other words, no matter which set of tests we choose as a justification for the use of a category in some specific analysis, it will always be possible to find counterexamples in other contexts, though the apparent strength of an argumentation obviously depends on which criteria for categorization are supposed to justify the analysis in question. The reason is simply that different constructional tests, used to define a particular category, often show different distributional patterns when applied to a broader range of construction types.

We find a special case of distributional mismatch in the rules for distinguishing Spanish subject from object. Typical criteria (constructional tests) for subject and object in Spanish, such as verbal agreement and case-marking, cf. Section 3.1, do not easily show a uniform distributional pattern when applied to both IMP-constructions and their counterpart P-constructions. I will argue that despite the fact that the NP has subject- and object status in IMP1 and IMP2 respectively, as demonstrated in Section 3.2, unavoidable distributional mismatch will, from a methodological point of view, prevent us from defining unified,

cross-constructional categories of grammatical subject and object. In Spanish, the most commonly used indications of grammatical subject, as opposed to the direct object, are, as we have seen, the subject-verb agreement (number) condition and pronominal case-marking, in which nominative and accusative (dative) indicate subject and object respectively:

(25)	Los padres the parents(p) 'the parents sell the house'	venden sell(3p)	la casa the house(s)	P-construction
(25a)	* Los padres the parents(p)	vende sell(3s)	la casa the house(s)	
(25b)	Ellos NOM3p 'they sell the house'	venden sell(3p)	la casa the house(s)	
(25c)	* Los ACC3p	venden sell(3p)	la casa the house(s)	
(26)	El niño the boy(s) 'the boy calls the parents'	llama call(3s)	a los padres ACC the parents(3p)	P-construction
(26a)	*El niño the boy(s)	llaman call(3p)	a los padres ACC the parents(3p)	
(26b)	*El niño the boy(s)	ellos NOM3p	llama call(3s)	
(26c)	El niño the boy(s) 'The boy calls them'	los/les ACC/DAT	llama call(3s)	

The subject-verb agreement-condition is applied in (25), (25a) and (26), (26a) while the pronominal case-marking criterion is applied in (25), (25b,c) and (26), (26b,c). In the impersonal IMP1-construction in (27), however, the agreement construction is not an unambiguous criterion for determining the grammatical relation since an IMP1-variant without agreement is common as well, cf. (27a). Moreover, pronominal case-marking is neither a reliable indicator, cf. (27b) and (27c). Substitution of the IMP1-subject by a

nominative pronoun, as in (27b), requires very special contexts;⁷ and substitution of the IMP1-subject by an accusative pronoun, as in (27c), is certainly not recommended by the Spanish Academy, though it is extendedly used in some parts of the Spanish-speaking community:

- (27) Se venden **las casas** /se buscan empleados
 MM sell(3p) the houses /MM need(3p) employees
 'the houses are being sold / employees are needed' IMP1-construction
- (27a) Se vende **las casas**/ se busca empleados
 MM sell(3s) the houses/ MM need(3s) employees
- (27b) ??Se venden **ellas** /se buscan **ellos**
 MM sell(3p) NOM3p /MM need(3p) NOM3p
- (27c) (*)Se **las** vende
 MM ACC sell(3p)

If we consider the IMP2-construction in (28), we are confronted with the same problem: the (subject-verb) agreement condition and the pronominal case condition (NOM, ACC for subject, object respectively) do not unambiguously indicate subject or object status for the noun phrase, in particular when applied to the widely accepted standard use of the construction:

- (28) Se ve **a los niños** IMP2-construction
 MM see(3s) ACC the boys
 'You can see the boys'
- (28a) (*)Se ven **a los niños**
 MM see(3p) ACC the boys(p)
- (28b) *Se **ellos** ve
 MM NOM see(3s)

⁷ In very specific contexts the NP may be substituted by a pronoun in nominative case: *ellas se venden* 'they sell (well)' with a slightly different middle-, i.e. nonpassive-, meaning; though the use of the demonstrative pronoun, with no case distinction, seems more natural: *éstas se venden, aquéllas no* 'these ones sell (well), that ones do not'.

(28c) (*)Se los ve
 MM ACC see(3s)
 ‘You can see them’

In (28a) object-agreement will normally be refused as agrammatical.⁸ (28b) shows that the pronominal object cannot have the nominative form and (28c) shows that the accusative form is unacceptable for most speakers.⁹ The analysis is summarized in Table 3:

Example	Verbal agreement	Nom. case-marking	Acc. case-marking
25	√	√	*
26	*	*	√
27	(√)	??	(*)
28	(*)	*	(*)

Table 3 Subject/object identification: distributional mismatch.

When only prototypical constructions, like (25) and (26), are included, the picture is clear: the distributional pattern nicely defines subject status (25) as opposed to object status (26). However, when it comes to IMP-constructions, like (27) and (28), the outcome is no longer transparent and unambiguous, and shows at best a distributional mismatch. As a consequence, the range of members in each category depends on which constructional test we choose as being decisive for the subject-object distinction. The conclusion we may draw from this very simplified example of Spanish data is that the distributional method seems to be unsuitable for defining subject status as opposed to object status in general terms, as soon as we broaden the range of expressions to include not only the prototypical constructions. The use of distributional data of this kind to provide definitions of a limited set of grammatical categories is simply incompatible with the grammatical variation found within and across languages. On the other hand, the method appears to be essential for empirical

⁸ It is possible, though difficult, to find this construction with verbal agreement; see Mendikoetxea 1999.

⁹ In some regions it is possible to substitute the masculine noun phrase with a clitic object pronoun in accusative, (see e.g. Alarcos Llorach 1995: 210f ; Mendikoetxea 1999: 1697f). See also Section 6.

research into grammatical representation. The price for the continued use of the distributional method is that we are forced to either count on an almost infinite number of different categories for the noun phrase in Spanish, determined by an, in principle, unlimited number of constructional tests and distributional patterns, or to recognize that subject status and object status are construction dependent linguistic phenomena (Croft 2001). The latter option seems to be the most fruitful.

Standard distributional analyses imply another serious methodological problem. Given basic principles of compositionality, the argumentation is basically circular since categories are identified and defined by means of constructions that are built up by the same categories to be defined. In other words, the constructional tests have been chosen exactly because they involve the grammatical categories we want to define.

Given the undeniable fact of linguistic variation, and the circularity of standard distributional methods, we will have to discard either the distributional method or the assumption that categories/relations are the theoretical primitives of syntactic theory (Croft 2001). But what is the alternative to distributional methods? Such analytical tools can only be abandoned at the price of empirical coverage and theoretical consistency, calling for methodological opportunism.¹⁰ The simple abandon of the distributional method is therefore not the solution that will be advocated in this paper.

The conclusion must be that the methodological shortcomings of the distributional analysis, outlined above, can only be avoided in an appropriate way, maintaining scientific rigidity, by giving up the componential principle, according to which grammatical categories are analytical primitives that need identification and a definitional status. Instead, grammatical constructions themselves, of different degree of specificity, should be attributed

¹⁰ Methodological opportunism selects constructional tests that fit specific analysis, and ignores the evidence that can be provided by using other criteria that do not match the expectations of the analyst (cf. Croft 2001: 45).

the status of being linguistic primitives, in accordance with basic principles of the usage-based model. It follows directly from this point that specific construction types are the units to be ascribed constraining syntactic conditions, revealed by the constructional tests.

4.3 Object status and clitic case-marking

In the previous section I argued that a conception of grammatical categories, such as subject and object, based on construction tests, is methodologically problematic. What is then the categorical status of the basic constituents of grammar? The answer follows straightforwardly from one of the basic claims in Radical Construction Grammar (Croft 2001), as outlined in the introduction to Section 4: since constructions, rather than categories, are the primitive units of grammar, the definition of grammatical categories depends on the construction in which they occur, not the other way around. Categories are construction specific, so to speak. Specifically, subjects and objects in impersonal IMP1- and IMP2-constructions are not the same as subjects and objects in corresponding prototypical P-constructions, though the P-constructions and the IMP-constructions share certain properties. We cannot, consequently, expect objects in P- and IMP2-constructions to have necessarily the same semantic content and the same form. In this perspective the dative marked pronominal object in the IMP2-construction occurs as a natural variant of the accusative marked object in the prototypical personal construction. In fact, the motive for the existence of such variation in case-marking per se needs no further explanation.

The analysis offered so far in this paper has first of all been a radically different approach to the morphosyntactic analysis of the IMP-construction: the peculiarity of the IMP-construction itself is claimed to motivate a case marking that is different from the one used in the prototypical P- construction. One might object, rightly, that I still have not explained the specific use of the pronominal dative in the IMP2-construction. Recall that while Spanish dative case (*a*) for indirect object is identical to accusative case for DOM-

marked objects, their pronominal case is not the same, see Section 3.1. It is therefore striking that the pronominal object in the original IMP2-construction was always dative marked, whereas, at that stage of development, this was certainly not the case in corresponding prototypical P-constructions with animate object (e.g. Fernández-Ordóñez 1993). In the latter, the animate participant, likewise preceded by the preposition *a*, was often pronominally case-marked in accusative, depending on the nature of the verbal predicate of course. It is tempting to argue that since the Spanish pronominal case system (see Table 1) consists of only nominative, accusative and the dative, the use of the dative in IMP2 is motivated as the only plausible combinatorial variation. However, if we take into account that morphological variation in the Spanish pronominal system is in general substantial, in particular as regards the clitics, it is questionable whether the case system per se should be ascribed a decisive role. In addition, the fact that Spanish is a PRO-DROP language implies that specific pragmatic conditions have to be met when we use the pronominal nominative form. The existence of such conditions goes against the possibility that the composition of the pronominal case system itself should be a decisive factor for the choice of pronominal case.

It seems clear to me that semantic factors must be taken into account, and that particularly the construction specific semantic properties of the object in IMP2 may have played an important role.

This object is for historical reasons, as we shall see in Section 5, usually a human (animate) participant, which is a non-prototypical direct object participant.¹¹ Recall, on the other hand, that indirect objects are almost always human (animate). Semantically, the

¹¹ In a dynamic situation in which an intended activity involves a transmission of energy from an agent to a patient, and in which the patient is affected by the activity, this patient represents the prototypical properties of the object role. (Hopper and Thompson 1980; Langacker 1991). The prototypical indirect object is an *a*-marked animated participant.

IMP2-object is thus a marked object that resembles the prototypical indirect object. But why is the pronominal object in the original IMP2-construction always in dative case, whereas corresponding P-constructions with animate object trigger pronominal accusative? The reason is that compared with the transitive situation in a prototypical P-construction, transitivity is reduced in the IMP2-construction in the sense that the existence of a merely schematic, and implicitly construed, agent implies that the IMP2-object is no longer directly affected by a subject (Maldonado 1992). In other words, transitivity reduction motivates the choice of the dative, instead of the accusative, in the IMP2-construction.

To conclude this section, let me emphasize that an explanation of the use of the pronominal dative in the IMP2-construction according to which the choice of the dative is semantically motivated, is only one part, the semantic part, of the construction grammar analysis. In order to achieve a more complete understanding of the phenomenon, we need an approach to syntactic categories that differs radically from the standard view, as the one presented earlier in this section.

4.4 The relevance of using constructional tests

In the previous sections we have seen that constructional tests, such as verbal agreement and pronominal case marking, may only define subject status as opposed to object status in the local context of specific constructions. In this section it will be argued that the use of constructional tests in fact is relevant, but only when the outcome is interpreted as syntactic constraints on specific construction types, not as defining criteria for grammatical categories. More specifically, we will consider the constraining impact which alternating word order may have on IMP-constructions.

In Spanish it is possible to have deviations from the basic SVO-structure. Although word order surely influences the information structure in prototypical P-constructions with

subject and object, the argument structure is normally not affected by changes in word order, as demonstrated in (29) and (29a):¹²

(29) **Pedro** abre la puerta Patient = Object.
 Pedro opens(3s) the door Agent = Subject = **Theme**.

‘Pedro opens the door’

(29a) La puerta la abre **Pedro** Patient = Object.
 the door ACC opens(3s) Pedro Agent = Subject = **Rheme**.

In short, word order basically does not influence the distribution of grammatical subject and object in prototypical personal constructions. In IMP-constructions, on the other hand, there is only one argument, and the grammatical status of this argument is certainly not always unaffected by word order alternations. In some cases word order affects not only the information structure, but also the argument structure to some degree, depending on the lexical specifications. This is demonstrated in (30) – (30a):

(30) Se abre **la puerta** (IMP1)
 MM opens(3s) the door
 ‘the door is being opened’

(30a) **La puerta** se abre
 the door MM opens(3s)
 ‘the door opens’

In (30) the patient is prominently construed as a subject, by means of agreement, whereas the agent is marginalized as an implicitly encoded schematic participant (see Maldonado 1992: chap.V). In (30a) the patient has been moved to thematic position, an alteration that makes it even more salient, almost as though it were an explicit agent of the verbal action. Since there is only one explicitly coded participant in this construction,

¹² Notice, however, that when the object NP is fronted, as in (29a), the use of the clitic (*la*) is obligatory: **La puerta abre Pedro*.

alterations in constituent-position will thus easily affect how we conceive the role of this participant as a verbal argument. What happens is basically that the word order shift has altered the status of the construction: The word order shift tends to be a shift from passive construction to middle construction: in (30) the meaning is that the door is opened by someone, which is the passive voice; in (30a), on the other hand, the door simply opens by itself, which is the middle voice. More specifically, the word order shift seems to affect the subject status (degree of prominence) of the participant in this construction. It has to be emphasized that the semantic impact of this constructional operation (inverting the constituent position) highly depends on the lexical specifications, in particular from the verb. The effect is, e.g., substantial with verbs like *abrir* ('open') and *cerrar* ('close'), whereas it is minimal with verbs like *construir* ('construct') or *vender* ('sell'). Moreover, the distinction passive-middle is context sensitive. The interpretation, thus, depends on how the constructional and the lexical meaning component fit in the expression, and it depends on the specific context, all together in accordance with basic principles in Construction Grammar (see e.g. Goldberg 1995).

In principle, similar alterations of the construction may occur when the argument position is switched in impersonal IMP2-constructions with explicitly coded object; although the object marker *a* seems to assure that the argument, to some extent, preserves its object status in users' interpretation of the construction (Delbecque 2002). The effect of the word order shift on the interpretation of the construction type thus seems to be weaker in this case.

5. The diachronic explanation: form-meaning reanalysis

Available data on variation and change in pronominal case-marking in Spanish (see e.g. Fernández-Ordóñez 1993, 1999; García 1975, 1986, 1990, 1992; Klein-Andreu 1981, 1998; Lapesa 1968; Martín Zorraquino 1979; Mendikoetxea 1999; Santiago 1975) show an

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extremely complex pattern. This involves the dative marked (*le*) direct object in the IMP2-construction, which is in focus in this paper, but also various manifestations of the before mentioned *ismo-variations*. Taking the rich data provided in the literature into account, patterns of variation and change may be rethought as elements of a continuous process toward a less fixed system of pronominal case-marking. In particular, the variation increases after the 18th century, when the accusative begins to appear gradually, in the usage of some speakers in some regions. Table 4 illustrates the situation in modern Spanish, which has been more or less stable since the 18th century (adapted from Mendikoetxea 1999: 1695):¹³

Feminine		Masculine	
Singular	Pluralis	Singular	Pluralis
se la	se las	*se lo	?se los
se le	se les	se le	se les

Table 4 *Se* + clitic object pronoun (third person).

Nevertheless, this grammatical pattern is not fixed. Notice that there seems to be a clear tendency of convergence in the IMP2-construction toward the pattern that characterizes the prototypical P-constructions, that is, a change from the exclusive use of the dative toward accepting the use of the accusative.

To account for this variation and changeability, I have argued in this paper that interpretations of case-marking patterns need to be usage-based and centered theoretically in the form-meaning construction. As regards a general discussion of whether language change is a gradual process, see e.g. Croft 2000: 49ff and references cited there. The gradualness and diversity of this change suggests that case-marking patterns are continuously susceptible

¹³ Table 4 represents peninsular usage. In Latin-American dialects this process of change toward using the accusative has advanced even more.

to actual variation in usage. However, we have to distinguish between two different types of usage based explanations:¹⁴

- A) A paradigmatic approach, which is centered in the claim:
Case marking (changes) reflects a motivated choice by the user.
- B) A syntagmatic approach, which is centered in the claim:
Case-marking (changes) reflects a specific (re)analysis of the construction in users' grammar.

According to the paradigmatic approach, the users' choice, based on e.g. usefulness and functionality, is a decisive parameter for an explanation. A paradigmatic interpretation of the data on case-marking could be of the following type: The actual use of dative instead of accusative case-marking reflects specific discourse-functional conditions, for instance that it is always preferable for the user to avoid an ambiguous interpretation of the construction. This kind of explanation will be exemplified in more details in Section 6. A syntagmatic explanation, on the other hand, is centered in the (re)analysis of case-marking in relation to its local context of form-meaning mappings. This involves the possibility that changes in case-marking reflect a process of reanalysis of this context. As a natural extension of the construction grammar approach advocated in this paper, I will follow the position that language change is essentially syntagmatic rather than paradigmatic (see e.g. Croft 2000; Newmeyer 2003). Construction grammar is a particularly attractive framework for analyzing syntagmatic changes in case marking because it patterns processes of reanalysis, which is one of the most important mechanisms in language change, in a natural way:

Form-function reanalysis is syntagmatic: it arises from the (re)mapping of form-function relations of combinations of syntactic units and semantic components. The

¹⁴ For further details, see the general discussion in Labov 1994: chap. 20; Newmeyer 2003: 694; Croft 2000: chap. 5.

process may nevertheless have an apparently paradigmatic result, for example, a change of meaning of a syntactic unit. (Croft 2000: 120)

5.1 The formation of the impersonal se-construction

The historical development of the impersonal *se*-construction has been studied by several scholars.¹⁵ In a very brief and simplified form, it can be outlined as follows: The Latin reflexive developed gradually into the Spanish reflexive, the middle, the impersonal passive (IMP1), and finally into the impersonal “active” constructions (IMP2 and IMP3). In this section the changes that the *se*-construction has undergone will be reinterpreted as a matter of successive processes of form-meaning reanalysis (Croft 2000).

In the Romance languages the passive meaning has been observed in reflexive constructions from the very first literary documents. The emergence of the Spanish impersonal passive construction (IMP1) may be understood as a form-function reanalysis of the reflexive construction in users’ grammar (Croft 2000: 132). The gradual formation of the passive construction by reanalysis depends on the local contextual conditions, such as the verbal meaning, whether the subject can be interpreted as agent, or whether the agent is rather to be searched for outside the clause. In particular, the use of reflexive constructions with inanimate, not agent-like, subject has been a motive for the reanalysis. Moreover, the infinitive construction, with abstract meaning, seems to bridge the change in reflexive expressions from reflexive to passive meaning (Monge 1954: 31ff.). The reflexive meaning, already beginning to fade, soon disappears in these constructions and the passive meaning spreads, as a process of actualization (Andersen 2001b), to finite constructions. Correspondingly, we may see the reflexive marker in some contexts being reanalyzed as a middle marker (MM) (cf. Kemmer 1993; Maldonado 1992).

¹⁵ The presentation of the processes of historical change in this section is based on Lapesa (2000) and Monge (1954), unless further references are provided.

In Old Spanish the reflexive passive (IMP1) was also used, though to a limited extent, with animated subject, as in (31):

- (31) Se mataban los cristianos (Cuervo 1987: 220)
 MM killed(3p) the Christians
 'the Christians were killed'

As we might expect, this use was not the most frequent, however, since inanimacy of the subject was the principal motive for inferring the passive instead of the reflexive meaning (in which the animate subject typically is involved actively in the verbal act). After all, it is a fact that these constructions with animate subject and passive meaning had a short life, maybe influenced by the potential ambiguity of the construction (reflexive, reciprocal or passive interpretation): In (31) the Christians were either killed, or they killed themselves/one another. It is possible that the ambiguous interpretation to some extent was a motive for marking the patient as an object instead of subject by means of the preposition *a*, eliminating the ambiguity.¹⁶ In any case, this process of change gave rise to the emergence of a new construction, IMP2, as exemplified in (32):

- (32) se matabaa los cristianos
 MM killed(3s) ACC the Christians
 'they killed the Christians/the Christians were killed'

The birth of the IMP2-construction may be understood as a form-function reanalysis of the IMP1-construction, cf. (31). In the new interpretation (impersonal “active” meaning) of the construction there is more awareness of the role of the implicit agent. From being a marginal element it is reinterpreted as a more central part of meaning, whereas the patient is assigned less prominence. From being construed as a prominent, subject-like, part of

¹⁶ Such an explanation would yield a paradigmatic motivation for the change. However, some scholars argue against this explanation of the change. See e.g. Martín Zorraquino (1979) and Newmeyer (2003). *Constructions* 1/2005 (www.constructions-online.de, urn:nbn:de: 0009-4-1457, ISSN 1860-2010)

meaning the patient is reinterpreted as a less prominent, object-like, part of meaning. Compared with the prototypical transitive situation in the P-construction, see Section 4.3, the IMP2-construction is conceived of as lower in transitivity; cf. the transitivity reduction hypothesis (Maldonado 1992). On the expression side this reanalysis leads to formal changes of the construction: the patient is no longer construed as the most prominent participant by means of verbal agreement. Instead it is *a*-marked as an indication of objecthood, see (32). In the corresponding pronominalized variant of this construction the object is marked by a bound clitic in dative, as shown in (33):

(33) se **les** mataba.
MM DAT killed(3s)

The use of the pronominal dative in the IMP2-construction is due to the reduction of transitivity; morpho-syntactically, it ties in with a construction grammar point of view. This has been analyzed in detail in Section 4. In the next subsection, I will discuss the Modern Spanish use of the accusative in this construction, cf. (34):¹⁷

(34) se **las** mataba (a las niñas)
MM ACC killed(3s) ACC the girls
'they killed them (the girls)'

5.2 Toward an accusative pronominal object in the IMP2-construction: a further reanalysis

In Old Spanish the human object in the prototypical P-construction (without *se*) was typically marked by the accusative *lo/la*, as exemplified in (35)-(36):¹⁸

¹⁷ In Italian this development has advanced further than in Spanish. In Italian the “active” impersonal constructions with accusative object can be observed from the very first writings (Maiden: 1995):

Si può vederli
MM can(3s) see ACC
'you can see them'

¹⁸ Information about the size and the composition of the diachronic corpus CORDE is available in detail on the website: <http://www.rae.es/>.

- (35) y aquellospreciados príncipes y cavallerosla miraron.
 and those appreciated princes and gentlemen ACC looked.3pl
 ‘and those appreciated princes and gentlemen looked at her’
 (CORDE, Ortúñez de Calahorra, 1555)
- (36) Leones lo empuxaron; y el primero ... lo comio
 Lions ACC pushed(3p) and the first ACC ate(3s)
 ‘lions pushed him; and the first ... ate him’
 (CORDE, anónimo,1553)

Since then different patterns of case-marking have spread, first of all as a *leísmo*, according to which the dative *le(s)* in some regions replaces the accusative *lo(s)/la(s)* as a marker of the direct object; see Section 3.1.1.¹⁹ In the IMP2-construction the use of the dative can be observed systematically from the 16th century, when this construction first appears:

- (37) ... se le encerró en Monzón junto a Palencia ...
 MM DAT jailed(3s) in Monzón next to Palencia
 ‘they jailed him in Monzón next to Palencia’
 (Corde, Jerónimo Zurita, 1562)

It is clear, however, that the IMP2-construction has changed gradually after the 18th century toward a possible use of the accusative *lo/la*. In Iberian Spanish this tendency has been particularly strong in the feminine forms *la(s)*, it is less accentuated in the masculine plural, and almost absent in the masculine singular, cf. (34) and (38).²⁰

- (38) Se le(la) empuja (a la niña) (IMP2-construction)
 MM DAT(ACC) push(3s) ACC the girl
 ‘they push her (the girl) / she (the girl) is being pushed’

¹⁹ See e.g. Fernández-Ordóñez (1993, 1999); Klein-Andreu (1998); Lapesa (1968) for further details.

²⁰ See e.g. Martín Zorraquino (1979); Mendikoetxea (1999); Santiago (1975) for further details.

Regarding the explanation of this development in Spanish, let me briefly recall, by way of comparison, that the genitive object in Russian is governed by e.g. the negative construction. Jakobson (1936/1984) argued, thus, for a general semantic distinction between the genitive and the accusative in terms of a limitation on the extent to which an object participates in an event. However, Timberlake observes that the genitive is gradually being replaced by the accusative, and he argues that this shift can be accounted for by the degree of individuation of the object (see Timberlake 1977: 158-68). In this respect, Croft argues that the gradual shift to accusative marking reflects an attenuation of the semantics of the governed genitive case by what he terms hyperanalysis, which is a specific type of reanalysis (Croft 2000: 123).

As far as the Spanish IMP2-construction is concerned, we may similarly see changes in case marking patterns indicating that the user increasingly interprets the role of the argument in the IMP2-construction on the basis of prototypical object features and less on a certain similarity with the prototype for dative object. We may thus hypothesize that the *a*-marker in the IMP2-construction tends to encode properties of transitivity, at the expense of properties of animacy, and that this is what motivates the use of the accusative instead of the dative in the clitic construction. If this is so, the object in the IMP2-construction is in a process of being reanalyzed on the basis of common semantic features shared with the object in the prototypical P-construction.²¹ This explanation is particularly plausible when we take into account that the P-construction is much more frequent than the IMP2-construction.²² In fact, the object in (35)-(38) clearly has a common semantic ground by its role as a patient. This similarity between the two construction types can be seen even clearer

²¹ Notice that this proposal rests on the idea that the similarity between the IMP2-object and the prototypical indirect object originally must have influenced the user-interpretation of the construction leading to the choice of the dative form in the clitic construction. See Section 5.3.

²² I am thankful to an anonymous referee for having drawn this point to my attention.

if we compare (39) and (38), repeated for convenience, in which almost the same transitive situation with an unspecified agent is construed differently:

- | | | | | | | |
|------|-----|----------------------------|----------|----------|----------------|-------------------|
| (39) | La | empujan | (a | la niña) | P-construction | |
| | ACC | push(3p) | ACC | the girl | | |
| | | 'they push her (the girl)' | | | | |
| (38) | Se | le/la | empuja | (a | la niña) | IMP2-construction |
| | MM | DAT/ACC | push(3s) | ACC | the girl | |
| | | 'they push her (the girl)' | | | | |

On the expression side the increasing use of the accusative in IMP2 is a formal manifestation of the reanalyzed semantic role that lies behind the use of the pronominal case marker.

The analysis is strongly supported by the observation that the DOM-marker *a*, in some regions, tends to be reanalyzed as a general object marker, for short, a GOM-marker. If the *a*-marker tends to be reanalyzed as a GOM-marker, the interpretation of the IMP2-construction in users' grammar, including the choice of pronominal case for the object, will be determined on the basis of similarity between the IMP2-object and prototypical objects in the P-construction. This tendency seems to be considerable in American Spanish (Company 2002), but still rather weak in the peninsular Spanish (Mendikoetxea 1999). Moreover, Weissenrieder (1985) has observed that inanimate common noun objects are case-marked in some contexts in modern Spanish. Such an ongoing reanalysis of the *a*-marker is in line with the central claim in Delbecque (2002). Nicole Delbecque argues that it is descriptively and explanatorily inadequate to define the preposition *a* as a redundant marker of individuated personal reference, as tradition holds. Her central claim is that Spanish has a double transitive paradigm relying on the *a/ø* alternation as a device for modeling the subject-object relationship (2002: 81). And she does not see this as being limited to the active voice: "It is also responsible for the existence of different types of middle and passive constructions, ..."

(Delbecque 2002: 122). Interestingly, the same development, from DOM-marker toward GOM-marker, has been observed in Romanian, which, however, uses an entirely distinct preposition to mark the direct object (*pe* = ‘*on, upon*’, from Latin *per*) (see e.g. Holtus et al. 1989: 104f; Dobrovie-Sorin 1994). In a broader historical-typological perspective the picture is the same. In the Old Spanish DOM system, definite human-referring direct objects may be marked by the preposition *a* (but need not be) which is the same preposition used for marking indirect objects:²³

(40) ...rreciba a mios yernos como él pudier major
 Receive ACC my sons-in-law as he can best
 ‘...receive my sons-in-law as he can best’

(41) ...quando dexaron mis fijas en el rrobredo...
 When (they)left my daughters in the oak-forest
 ‘...when they left my daughters in the oak-forest’ (El Cantar de Mío Cid,
 Aissen 2003: 462)

The DOM-system in modern Spanish is very complex, yet one thing is clear: *a* is now obligatory with objects that refer to definite and indefinite-specific human participants:²⁴

(42) Dejaron *(a) mis hijas en el bosque
 (they)left ACC my daughters in the woods
 ‘They left my daughters in the woods’ (Aissen 2003: 471)

Similar historical changes can be observed in other languages. In fact, the usual scenario in languages with DOM is expansion. Latin did not have DOM for instance, but the

²³ For instance the Spanish of the *El Cantar de Mío Cid* from the 12th century.

²⁴ For further details on DOM in Spanish, see e.g. Isenberg (1968), Kliffer (1982), Laca (1995), Pensado (1995), Torrego (1998), and Weissenrieder (1985, 1990, 1991). Standard textbooks like Ramsey (1894/1956) and Butt and Benjamin (1988) are very useful sources of documentation. On the historical development of DOM in Spanish, see Laca (2001). References are cited in Aissen (2003).

system occurs widely in modern Romance; and DOM in Japanese has apparently expanded to involve all objects, and thereby ceased to be differential (Bossong 1991). See Aissen (2003) for further details.

To summarize, I have in this section suggested that case marking of objects in prototypical P-constructions may progressively function as a model for users' analysis of case marking in the IMP2-construction, in particular when we take into account the fact that the P-construction has a substantially higher frequency than the IMP2-construction. Thus, it is likely that the semantic motivation for reanalysis is strengthened by frequency effects.

This kind of reanalysis may also explain why the IMP1-construction, in which the NP is a patient as well, yet has a (passive) subject status, tends to undergo similar changes. As pointed out in Section 4.2, case marking of the IMP1- subject by substitution with a pronoun in nominative is possible, though it requires very special contexts. Yet there is an increasing tendency toward substituting the NP with an accusative object pronoun, in particular among certain groups of speakers and in specific dialects (see e.g. Martín Zorraquino 1979; Mendikoetxea 1999; Santiago 1975):

- | | | |
|-------|--|-------------------|
| (43a) | Pedro vende la casa
Pedro sell(3s) the house
'Pedro sells the house' | P-construction |
| (43b) | Pedro la vende
Pedro ACC sell(3s)
'Pedro sells it' | ACC-marked NP |
| (44a) | Se vende la casa
MM sell(3s) the house
'The house is for sale/they sell the house' | IMP1-construction |
| (44b) | Se la vende
MM ACC sell.3sg
'They sell it' | ACC-marked NP |

I suggest that in this case the passive IMP1-construction, characterized by a prominent (promoted) NP, see (44a), is reanalyzed on the basis of the NP's general object (patient) properties leading to acceptance of accusative pronominal case marking, see (44b).

6. Previous proposals

Many scholars have tried to explain the original pronominal case-marking in the impersonal *se*-construction (IMP2) and the way it has changed. In this section some of the most influential proposals will be outlined and discussed.

Originally Bello (1847) observed that there was preference for using *le* (dative) as a distinctive feature of IMP2-constructions. He claimed that the IMP2-construction had an indirect object that, as expected, in the pronominal form was case-marked in dative. It has correspondingly been maintained, by those grammarians who followed Bello's original proposal, that, in the first place, the case-marked object was not a direct object, but an indirect object. The reason suggested was that the IMP2-construction was closely related to the ditransitive variant of the IMP1-construction as exemplified in (45):

- (45) se da admiración a Juan Ditransitive IMP1-construction->
 MM give(3s) admiration DAT Juan
 'Juan is given admiration'
 se le da admiración Dative marked pronominal variant->
 MM DAT give(3s) admiration
 'he is given admiration'
 se le admira Dative marked IMP2-construction
 MM DAT admire(3s)
 'he is admired/they admire him'

It seems doubtful, however, that the dative marking in the IMP2-construction should be due to a specific development in the relatively peripheral ditransitive IMP1-variant. It seems more plausible, as I have argued in Section 4, that the dative is motivated by a particular syntactic-semantic structure in the IMP2-construction. This point of view is in line *Constructions* 1/2005 (www.constructions-online.de, urn:nbn:de: 0009-4-1457, ISSN 1860-2010)

with the basic principles in García's work developed for the analysis of *ismo-variations*, particularly in P-constructions (García 1975, 1986, 1990, 1992). García argues that in order to understand these variations we have to focus on the nature of the subject and the object in different constructions (1975: ch.VII). In this paper I have elaborated theoretically on this position providing a better understanding of case-marking patterns in IMP-constructions.

As a theoretical extension of the original observation made by Bello (1847), Mendikoetxea (1992: ch.4) has pointed out that the *se*-marker, due to its original reflexive object function, is bounded to the accusative case. Presumably, there should thus have been a significant pressure on the system for having a non-reflexive pronominal object marker in dative, not accusative, when the IMP2-construction was formed. However, as pointed out in Section 4.3, the morphological variation in the Spanish pronominal system has always been substantial. It is therefore not convincing to ascribe such a decisive role to the case system per se. Against the analysis proposed by Mendikoetxea, we may further object that the argument is seriously weakened by the fact that the prototypical use of the accusative gradually extends to the IMP2-construction from the 18th century and up to now (see Section 5.2), regardless of any supposed system pressure due to the fact that the prototypical function of the *se*-marker is still the reflexive object function (accusative) in Modern Spanish. So there is no reason to expect that the assumed effect of some kind of system pressure should have disappeared.

According to Alarcos Llorach (1995), and many other grammarians, the question of case marking in IMP-constructions is closely related to the so-called *ismo-variations*, that is, patterns of case marking that diverge from the pronominal case-system (see Section 3.1.1). Fernández-Ordóñez (1993) points out, with reference to the IMP2-construction, that only few scholars have looked for geographical differences in the use of etymological case. The latter refers to a study in which it is observed that the sequence *se lo* is not used in IMP2-

constructions in the etymological regions of Spain, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Panamá, Venezuela and Colombia, whereas it is completely normal in Chile and Argentina (Studerus 1984). However, for reasons analyzed in Section 4 in this paper, it is problematic to focus simplistically on a possible direct impact on the IMP2-construction from patterns of variations observed in prototypical P-constructions. But most importantly, the use of the dative-marker *le* in the IMP2-construction has been common among *non-leístas* as well, which turns out to be a major problem for this kind of explanation.²⁵ The point I want to make here is that the concept of etymological case, anchored in the prototypical P-construction, is traditionally assumed to be directly applicable to the IMP-construction as well. This is highly problematic from a theoretical-methodological point of view, as I have shown in Section 4.

Analyzing the same kind of evidence observed by Bello, Maldonado has recently pointed out that the use of the *lo/la/le* clitics demonstrates the non-subjecthood of the noun phrase in IMP-constructions, but that its object status is unclear in these constructions (1992: 287). He does not, however, carry out an explicit analysis of this issue. Many grammatical problems, concerning principally the conceptual structure of IMP-constructions, have been solved, or clarified, in Maldonado's cognitive approach (e.g. Maldonado 1992, 2000); and the analysis offered in this paper certainly complements Maldonado's analysis, as far as his transitivity reduction hypothesis is concerned; see the analysis in Section 4 and 5. Nevertheless, a framework that captures the constructional variability, also at the level of linguistic form, has been lacking. The discussion of subject and object status in these constructions requires a cognitive framework that captures the constructional variability and duly gives attention to grammatical form. The principal objective of this paper has thus been to offer such an analysis.

²⁵ Users of *lo(s)/la(s)* for direct object in prototypical P-constructions.

As an instance of the paradigmatic explanation, see Section 5, various scholars have claimed that the dative pronominal object is preferred by the user to avoid ambiguity. The argument is that an IMP2-construction with an accusative marked object would be ambiguous, since the *se*-marker is also used as a dative-marker (e.g. Fernández Ramírez 1964; Santiago 1975). The ambiguity is exemplified in (46), cf. Santiago (1975: 96):

- (46) se lo quita ->
 (46a) (él) se lo quita
 He DAT ACC removes(3s)
 'he removes it from himself/another person' (personal interpretation, i.e. P-
 type)
- (46b) se lo quita
 MM ACC removes(3s)
 'they (unspecified agent) remove him' (impersonal interpretation, i.e.
 IMP2-type)

The point maintained by these linguists is that this ambiguity is avoided by having dative *le* as an object marker. The fact that usage in the last centuries has shown a gradual acceptance of the accusative (see Section 5) seems, however, to weaken this argument, although the potential ambiguity might have had a limited impact on the formation of the IMP2-construction. Moreover, it is rather unlikely that a mere ambiguity in very specific contexts on its own should have had such a radical influence on grammatical form. William Labov (1994) has observed that in actual speech, one variant is rarely chosen over another as a result of an intentional individual choice. Instead he argues that the choice is forming part of what he calls *systemic readjustment*, whose meaning is close to the implications of what is meant by the term *form-meaning reanalysis* (Croft 2000), adopted in this paper. Labov claims that the pressure from specific communicative needs is often relatively weak, and can be overridden by a variety of other factors (Labov 1994: 550). See also the discussion in Newmeyer 2003.

Regarding the proposals outlined in this section, if not all attempts to explain the case-marking patterns in the IMP-constructions, the most serious problem is that it is generally assumed that case-marked objects in P-constructions and IMP-constructions have the same grammatical status. If the object in prototypical P-constructions is case-marked as accusative, it is assumed that the object in IMP2-constructions also should be expected to be so; and that deviations from the expected pattern must be due to specific historical conditions or specific conditions in language use.

7. Conclusion

In this paper I suggest a usage-based and syntagmatic interpretation of the available data on case marking patterns in Spanish impersonal *se*-constructions. More specifically I claim that Construction Grammar, among other very similar cognitive approaches, is the best candidate for the analysis of such constructional variation and change. In particular, I have shown that the original choice of the dative marker for direct object in IMP2-constructions, as well as recent alterations of usage toward using accusative forms in this construction, is morpho-syntactically natural, and semantically, historically, and typologically motivated.

From a theoretical and methodological point of view, the Construction Grammar approach has led to the recognition that formal as well as semantic categories in grammar are construction dependent and consequently epiphenomena. This insight has been mostly ignored in the literature treating this issue and an important point has thus been missed: The NP in the IMP2-construction has a special object status in users' grammar, formally and semantically, and has therefore been pronominally case-marked distinctly (the dative *le*).

I propose that case marking of objects in P-constructions progressively functions as a model for case marking in the IMP2-construction, by means of form-meaning reanalysis of the object relation involved in this construction. I further argue, making use of formal, semantic, historical and typological evidence, that this point is supported by the observation

that the Differential Object Marker (DOM) tends to be reanalyzed as a General Object Marker (GOM).

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