

## **The anticausative alternation in Italian and Spanish: a historical corpus-based perspective**

The causative alternation is the grammatical alternation whereby languages express externally caused (CAUSAL) vs. spontaneously occurring (NONCAUSAL) events. Typological studies have shown that the alternation is encoded via different patterns across languages, based on whether the causal event, the noncausal one, both, or neither are overtly marked (see Tubino-Blanco 2020). A cross-linguistically peculiarity of several languages of Europe is that, in this area, one finds an exceptional preference towards explicit marking of the noncausal event (Nichols et al. 2004), which goes under the name of anticausativization (Haspelmath 1987; Zúñiga & Kittilä 2019: 41–53). In many of these languages, as is common cross-linguistically (Bahrt 2021), anticausativization is formally expressed by the same marker of reflexivity. Examples from Italian and Spanish are given in (1) and (2). Notably, alongside the anticausative pattern, in these languages one also finds labile verb pairs, as in (1b-c).

Regarding the alternation between anticausative and labile patterns, it has been shown that individual verbs may trigger anticausativization more frequently than others, to the effect that verb meanings can be ranked based on their likelihood to receive anticausative marking (Haspelmath 1993, 2016). To explain these preferences, scholars have resorted to either verb semantics or frequency effects. Semantics-based accounts appeal to notions such as spontaneity (Haspelmath 1987) and claim that verbs lexicalizing events less likely to occur spontaneously more frequently trigger anticausative marking (Haspelmath 1993: 106). In frequency-based approaches, marking asymmetries mirror frequency asymmetries, based on the assumption that higher usage frequency items are more predictable and favor shorter coding (Haspelmath 2021). This means that verbs that more routinely occur in noncausal contexts are less likely to occur in the anticausative pattern (Haspelmath et al. 2014). These findings have also been confirmed by corpus data from French and Spanish (Heidinger 2019).

A yet unresolved issue with frequency-based approaches is that “we cannot measure the earlier frequencies” (Haspelmath 2016: 601). To overcome this issue, this work aims at testing whether claims advanced by the frequency-based approach are borne out by historical data and what the interplay is between semantic and frequency effects.

To do so, we undertake a contrastive exploration of the distribution of anticausative marking in historical corpora of Spanish and Italian. The choice of Italian and Spanish is also due to the fact that systematic diachronic studies on anticausatives in these languages are relatively few (e.g., Portilla 2007; Cennamo 2012, 2021). Data for Italian come from the MIDIA corpus whereas data for Spanish come from the CDH corpus, both including texts ranging from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In particular, based on the 20 verb meaning pairs list in Haspelmath et al. (2014), reported in (3), we have sampled (max) 500 tokens of each of the corresponding Italian and Spanish verbs. For each verb, we extract data regarding their token frequency in causal vs. noncausal contexts and on the encoding of the alternation (anticausative vs labile). This will allow us to explore whether the observed frequency of the verbs under investigation in causal and noncausal contexts changes over time and what this reveals about asymmetries in the encoding of the anticausative alternation in Italian and Spanish. In addition, we also consider a number of additional factors that have been claimed, on synchronic grounds, to play a role in the choice of the anticausative vs. labile pattern, including semantic features of the subject (animacy, control) and aspectual properties of the verbs (Cennamo 2012, 2021; de Benito Moreno 2022: Chap. 4). By resorting to regression modelling techniques, we assess whether the role of these factors is stable across time or differences can be pinpointed at specific language stages and across languages.

The results of this work will contribute to showing how anticausativization comes about, and will offer the first in-depth empirical assessment of how anticausative markers spread through the verbal lexicon across time.

## Examples

- (1) a. *Il ragazzo bruciò il cibo* CAUSAL  
the boy burn.PST.3SG the food  
'The boy burnt the food.'
- b. *Il cibo si bruciò* NONCAUSAL-ANTICAUSATIVE  
the food REFL burn.PST.3SG
- c. *Il cibo bruciò* NONCAUSAL-LABILE  
the food burn.PST.3SG  
'The food burnt.'
- (2) a. *Juan rompió la mesa*  
J. break.PST.3SG the table  
'Juan broke the table.'
- b. *La mesa se rompió*  
the table REFL break.PST.3SG  
'The table broke.'
- (3) *boil, freeze, dry, wake up, go out/put out (fire), sink, melt, stop, turn, burn, fill, rise/raise, improve, rock, connect, gather, open, break, close, split*

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## Corpora

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