

**ON THE NON-REFLEXIVE MEANING OF INCHOATIVE VERBS**

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**Abstract:** *In Romance languages, unaccusative verbs generally take part in the causative-inchoative alternation, exhibit reflexive morphology and can license phrases carrying the meaning “by itself”. Some of these features are shared with reflexive verbs giving rise to reflexive analyses of inchoatives, such as Chierchia (2004) or Koontz-Garboden (2009). However, despite the apparent similarity between reflexives and inchoatives, the two verb types differ in terms of semantics: Reflexive verbs display genuine semantic reflexivity in which agent subjects are actively involved in the process, whereas inchoative verbs are assigned a weak semantic reflexivity where properties of the argument cause the event (Chierchia 2004). In this article, we will show that the formal resemblance between reflexives and inchoatives does not warrant a weak semantic reflexivity of inchoatives. Thus, arguments underlying reflexive analyses, such as the licensing of “by itself” and the meaning of inchoatives, will turn out to be inconclusive in our study. First, we focus on the licensing and meaning of “by itself” in inchoative contexts, and we show that inchoatives do not pattern with reflexives. Second, we investigate the meaning of inchoative verbs in the absence of “by itself”, seeking to establish if semantic reflexivity is tenable for these verbs. In our survey, the 33 Romanian speakers that we consulted dismiss even a weak reflexive analysis of inchoatives in which properties of the subject argument are responsible for the change of state event.*

**Keywords:** *inchoatives, reflexive morphology, “by itself”, semantic reflexivity, Romance.*

**1. The Romance data: Semantic analyses of inchoatives**

The causative-inchoative alternation has been the focus of several studies in the literature attempting to account for the relationship between the causative transitive and the inchoative intransitive derivatively. The inchoative intransitive expresses a change resulting into a state (1b), while the causative transitive additionally specifies the cause of the change of state (1a). Importantly, the two syntactic types share the theme role which is object in the transitive and subject in the intransitive (i.e. *the door* in (1a,b)). Syntactically, inchoatives are unaccusatives, i.e. intransitive verbs whose arguments are projected in object position, as supported by various tests (Perlmutter 1978, Burzio 1986, Alexiadou, Anagnostopoulou, & Everaert 2004).

- (1) a. *John opened the door.*  
 b. *The door opened.*

In Romance languages, the inchoative member of the pair usually carries reflexive morphology, the formal resemblance between inchoatives and reflexives motivating reflexive analyses of the alternation, like Chierchia (2004) or Koontz-Garboden (2009).

### 1.1. Chierchia (2004)

For instance, Chierchia (2004) holds that the relationship between causatives and inchoatives can be explained by reflexivization, an operation which takes a relation as its argument and sets the two arguments of the relation to be identical with one another. This operation can account for the shared thematic role theme and also for the reflexive morphology present on inchoatives.<sup>1</sup> It is worth mentioning that in the reflexive analysis of unaccusatives assumed by Chierchia the causing factor is interpreted statively, e.g. sentence (2b) would mean “some property of the boat (or some state the boat is in) causes it to go down” (Chierchia 2004: 37).

(2) a. *Gianni ha affondato la barca.*  
 Gianni AUX.3SG sink.PRF DET boat  
 “Gianni sank the boat.”

b. *La barca è affondata.*  
 DET boat AUX.3SG sink.PRF  
 “The boat sank.” (Chierchia 2004: 36, (26a,b))

An important argument in support of the reflexive analysis of unaccusatives is the licensing of *da sé* “by itself”. The fact that this phrase is licensed by Italian reflexives (3a) and inchoatives (3b,c), and banned from statives (4a) and verbs that express involuntary physical functions such as *sudare* “sweat” (4b), allegedly indicates that *da sé* is sensitive to a causer role.

(3) a. *Gianni si è lavato da sé.*  
 Gianni SE AUX.3SG wash.PRF by self  
 “Gianni washed by himself.” (Horvath and Siloni 2013: 219, (3a))

b. *La porta si è aperta da sé.*  
 DET door SE AUX.3SG open.PRF by self  
 “The door opened by itself.”

c. *La barca è affondata da sé.*  
 DET boat AUX.3SG sink.PRF by self  
 “The boat sank by itself.” (Chierchia 2004: 43, (42a,b))

(4) a. *\*Gianni conosce il latino da sé.*  
 Gianni know.PRS.3SG DET Latin by self  
 “Gianni knows Latin by himself.”

b. *\*Gianni ha sudato da sé.*  
 Gianni AUX.3SG sweat.PRF by self

<sup>1</sup> By comparison, causativization would fail to explain the shared thematic role and also the reflexive morphology on inchoatives in Romance.

“Gianni sweated by himself.” (Chierchia 2004: 42, (39a,b))

In short, citing the unstable valence of verbs (e.g. the non-*se*-marked unaccusative *affondare* “to sink” has a transitive alternate in (2a)) and the licensing of *da sé* “by itself” regardless of reflexive morphology (see (3b) vs. (3c)), Chierchia claims that both *se*-marked and non-*se*-marked unaccusatives are derived by reflexivization.

Second, as highlighted above it should be kept in mind that Chierchia assigns a weak semantic reflexivity to inchoatives in which properties of the entity with subject function are responsible for the event. This is opposed to strong semantic reflexivity where the subject entity has the semantic role of agent actively involved in the unfolding of the event.

### 1.2. Koontz-Garboden (2009)

While Chierchia (2004) proposes that all unaccusatives are derived by reflexivization, in Koontz-Garboden (2009) only the *se*-marked inchoatives in Spanish retain the causative operator, and thus express a self-caused event. Koontz Garboden’s reflexive analysis of *se*-marked inchoatives is based on negation phenomena and the licensing of *por sí solo* “by itself”. As far as the former argument is concerned, Schäfer and Vivanco (2013) convincingly show that negation does not favour a reflexive analysis of Spanish *se*-marked inchoatives.

On the other hand, regarding the licensing of *por sí solo*, Koontz Garboden restates Chierchia’s arguments according to which the phrase is only allowed in dynamic contexts where a causer can bind the phrase, which would explain the ban from the stative predicates in (5a,b).

- (5) a. \**Juan sabe ingles por sí solo.*  
 Juan know.PRS.3SG English by self only  
 “Juan knows English by himself.”
- b. \**El caro es rojo por sí solo.*  
 DET car COP.3SG red by self only  
 “The car is red by itself.” (Koontz-Garboden 2009: 107, (63a,b))

However, unlike Chierchia, he goes one step further and argues that *por sí solo* is accommodated only by *se*-marked inchoative contexts which would indicate that only the *se*-marked inchoatives have a reflexive meaning. By hypothesis, non-*se*-marked inchoatives are not derived from transitives, since transitives are either not attested or sporadic, and hence there is no causative operator to bind *por sí solo* (6a,b).

- (6) a. ??*La leche hirvió por sí sola.*  
 DET milk boil.PST.3SG by self only  
 “The milk boiled by itself.”

- b. ??*El niño creció por sí solo.*  
 DET child grow.PST.3SG by self only  
 “The child grew by himself.” (Koontz-Garboden 2009: 108, (65b,c))

This perspective seems to overlook the meaning of internally caused verbs where properties of the subject argument are highly involved in bringing about the change (Levin and Rappaport Hovav 1995), in other words, subjects are causers that could bind *por sí solo*. Indeed, one can notice that as opposed to the fully unacceptable stative examples in (5a,b), sentences (6a,b) are marginally acceptable. The marginality of the sentences comprising internally caused verbs seem to call for a pragmatic, rather than a semantic explanation, i.e. the acceptability of the phrase depends upon the likelihood of an alternative to the self-caused scenario. In (6a) the self-caused scenario is the unexpected one since boiling is usually the result of external factors, whereas in (6b) marginality stems from the pleonastic use of *por sí solo*: children grow due to inherent properties of their bodies, so stressing this fact is redundant in the absence of additional information specifying that no growing hormones were needed, for instance.

So far, we have seen that the licensing of “by itself” lies at the core of semantic analyses of inchoatives in Romance. Thus, in Koontz-Garboden’s account only Spanish *se*-marked inchoatives are assigned a reflexive analysis as only *se*-marked inchoatives take *por sí solo*, whereas Chierchia extends the semantic analysis to all dynamic unaccusatives in Italian by virtue of their licensing of *da sé*.

In what follows, we turn to Romanian data and we examine some of the arguments adduced in support of semantic analyses of inchoatives in Romance. Apart from the often quoted licensing of “by itself”, we also take a closer look at the meaning of inchoatives.

## 2. The Romanian data

We begin this section by focusing on the licensing of *singur* “alone; by itself” which can co-occur both with reflexives and inchoatives, although it triggers different meanings as filtered out by the distinct phrases it can be replaced with.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, in the sentences below Romanian *singur* “alone” can modify both agentive reflexive verbs (7) and inchoatives (9), but there are differences in the interpretations it prompts. Given the acceptability of the interpretation in (8), where Ion is actively involved in the washing process, one can assert that *singur* hinges on a causer with reflexives.<sup>3</sup>

- (7) *Ion s- a spălat singur.*  
 Ion SE AUX.3SG wash.PRF alone  
 “Ion washed by himself.”

<sup>2</sup> Some of these arguments were presented in our previous work (Poponeț 2015, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> The continuations in (8) and (10) are inspired from Schäfer (2007).

- (8) *Ion a realizat spălarea singur.*  
 Ion AUX.3SG perform.PRF washing.DET alone  
*Nimeni nu l- a ajutat.*  
 nobody not CL.3SG.ACC AUX.3SG help.PRF  
 “Ion did the washing alone. Nobody helped him.”
- (9) *Părul s- a uscat singur.*  
 hair.DET SE AUX.3SG dry.PRF alone  
 “The hair dried by itself.”
- (10) a. *\*Părul a realizat uscarea.*  
 hair.DET AUX.3SG perform.PRF drying.DET  
 “The hair did the drying”
- a’. *\*Proprietăți ale părului au realizat uscarea.*  
 property.PL ART.GEN hair.GEN AUX.3PL perform.PRF  
 drying.DET  
 “Properties of the hair did the drying.”
- b. *Nimeni/ Niciun obiect n- a intervenit.*  
 nobody no object not AUX.3SG intervene.PRF  
 “Nobody/No object intervened.”

No such causer is warranted by inchoatives, i.e. sentence (9) does not mean that the hair or its properties caused the drying (see the unacceptability of (10a,a’)), but rather, the hair dried naturally without a hair drier (10b) due to crucial external conditions such as natural heat. It seems that when it modifies inchoatives the phrase denies the interference of external causes in the development of the event, and overlooks “silent” external factors like heat or wind that have a bearing on the process under discussion. Hence, automatic verbs like *a se usca* “to dry”, *a se topi* “to melt” or *a se dezgheța* “to defrost” (Haspelmath 2005) modified by *singur* do not express self-caused events and prove crucial for understanding the use of this phrase, which is to assert that no external cause interfered in the normal course of events.

Moreover, as revealed by our internet search, it is worth mentioning that *singur* is often in free variation with *de la sine* “from self” in inchoative contexts.

- (11) *Părul s- a uscat de la sine/ singur.*  
 hair.DET SE AUX.3SG dry.PRF from self alone  
 “The hair dried by itself.”

By contrast, reflexives ban *de la sine* “from self”, the phrase which asserts the natural course of events, and are acceptable with emphatic pronouns like *el însuși*

“he himself” (12a). Emphatic pronouns reinforce the unexpected causer role of the entity in subject position and are excluded from inchoatives due to the infelicity of the added causer entailments. These verbs can only accommodate *de la sine* (12b).

- (12) a. *Ion s- a spălat \*de la sine/ el însuși.*  
 Ion SE AUX.3SG wash.PRF from self he himself  
 “Ion washed \*from self/ he himself.”
- b. *Părul s- a uscat de la sine/ \*el însuși.*  
 hair.DET SE AUX.3SG dry.PRF from self it itself  
 “The hair dried from self/ \*it itself.”

We can conclude that Romanian *singur* is ambiguous between “alone” (when modifying reflexives) and “by itself” (when co-occurring with inchoatives). In fact, there are specialized phrases for the two meanings, i.e. *el însuși* “he himself” (and variants) for reflexives and *de la sine* “from self” for inchoatives.

To sum up, not only are there distinct phrases that modify reflexives and inchoatives, but even the licensing of *de la sine* does not necessarily point to a reflexive analysis of inchoatives in Romanian. Although automatic inchoatives showed that the function of the phrase is to deny the interference of external causes in the natural development of the event, it is not clear if other inchoatives, especially internally caused verbs do not express self-caused events, in support of Chierchia’s reflexive analysis.

This prompted our investigation of the interpretation of inchoatives which are not modified by *de la sine*. In our survey, 33 Romanian speakers, aged 20-50, were enquired about the meaning they associate with several *se*-marked and non-*se*-marked inchoatives. Specifically, each sentence in the questionnaire had to be assigned a meaning from a set of four options: (a) a change of state meaning; (b) a self-caused reflexive meaning; (c) both meanings; (d) neither meaning.

The verbs put to the test are listed in the table below and consist of externally caused change of state verbs, automatic verbs and internally caused verbs. Externally caused verbs and automatic verbs are *se*-marked, while internally caused verbs are non-*se*-marked in Romanian. If we take reflexive morphology seriously, the *se*-marked inchoatives are more likely to receive the self-caused paraphrase than the non-*se*-marked ones. However, we hypothesize that it is not the reflexive morphology on unaccusatives, but rather the properties of the subject entity that have a bearing on a self-caused paraphrase, internally caused verbs being the best candidates for a reflexive meaning. Nevertheless, the results of our survey do not support even a weak semantic reflexivity of inchoatives in which the causing factor is a property of the subject argument.

*Table comprising the results of the test for the identification of the reflexive meaning of inchoative verbs*

<b>Sentence/Meaning of the sentence</b>	<b>Mean</b>
<b>1. Geamul s-a spart.</b> “The window broke.”	
a. Geamul a devenit țăndări. “The window became pieces.”	87.87%
b. Proprietăți ale geamului au cauzat spargerea. “Properties of the window caused the breaking.”	0%
c. Both variants.	6.06%
d. Neither variant.	6.06%
<b>2. Părul s-a uscat.</b> “The hair dried.”	
a. Părul a devenit uscat. “The hair became dry.”	81.81%
b. Proprietăți ale părului au cauzat uscarea. “Properties of the hair caused the drying.”	0%
c. Both variants.	9.09%
d. Neither variant.	9.09%
<b>3. Pomii au înflorit.</b> “The trees blossomed.”	
a. Pomii sunt în floare. “The trees are in blossom.”	66.66%
b. Proprietăți ale pomilor au cauzat înflorirea. “Properties of the trees caused their blossoming.”	6.06%
c. Both variants.	24.24%
d. Neither variant.	3.03%
<b>4. Calculatorul s-a stricat.</b> “The computer broke down.”	
a. Calculatorul a devenit nefuncțional. “The computer became non-functional.”	78.78%
b. Proprietăți ale calculatorului au cauzat stricarea lui. “Properties of the computer caused its breaking down.”	0%
c. Both variants.	21.21%
d. Neither variant.	0%
<b>5. Cubul de gheață s-a topit.</b> “The ice cube melted.”	
a. Cubul de gheață a devenit apă. “The ice cube became water.”	63.63%
b. Proprietăți ale cubului de gheață au cauzat topirea. “Properties of the ice cube caused the melting.”	12.12%
c. Both variants.	24.24%
d. Neither variant.	0%
<b>6. Lemnele au putrezit.</b> “The logs rotted.”	
a. Lemnele au ajuns să aibă putregai. “The logs came to have rot.”	39.39%

b. Proprietăți ale lemnelor au cauzat putrezirea lor. “Properties of the logs caused their rotting.”	21.21%
c. Both variants.	33.33%
d. Neither variant.	6.06%

As is apparent from the table above, the externally caused verbs *a se sparge* “to break” (sentence [1]) and *a se strica* “to break down” (sentence [4]) are assigned option (a) associated with the change of state meaning in high percentages, 87.87% and 78.78%. An exclusively reflexive meaning is forcefully rejected given the 0% registered by option (b) of these sentences.

The meaning of the automatic verbs *a se usca* “to dry” (sentence [2]) and *a se topi* “to melt” (sentence [5]) put to the test is clearly the change of state one, since 81.81% and 63.63% of our respondents opted for option (a). The reflexive meaning expressed by option (b) registered 0% in the case of *a se usca* “to dry”, and 12.12% for *a se topi* “to melt”.

The internally caused verb *a înflori* “to blossom” (sentence [3]) is attributed the change of state meaning (option (a)) by 66.66% of the consulted speakers, with the reflexive meaning chosen by 6.06%. On the other hand, *a putrezi* “to rot” (sentence [6]) is assigned the change of state meaning by 39.39%, while the reflexive meaning is selected by 21.21%. Although the change meaning has less than 50%, the percentage is higher than the percentage received by the reflexive meaning, a significant segment of our respondents (i.e. 33.33%) opting for a change event in which properties of the logs caused the process (option (c)).

While spontaneity increases from externally caused verbs to automatic verbs, and further to internally caused verbs (Haspelmath 2005),<sup>4</sup> the percentages of the change of state meaning decrease because properties of the entities undergoing the change gain ground. Nevertheless, the change of state meaning stands out and is undoubtedly the meaning conveyed by inchoative verbs regardless of their spontaneity.

### 3. Conclusions

This article rejected reflexive analyses which, based on morphological (i.e. reflexive morphology), syntactic (the presence of a transitive alternate) and semantic arguments (i.e. the interpretation of sentences comprising “by itself”) analyze unaccusatives as reflexivizations of causative transitives. First, the interpretation of automatic verbs modified by *de la sine* “from self” proved that the general function of the phrase in inchoatives is to deny the interference of an external cause in bringing about the event, and thus causer entailments are not necessarily imposed upon the subject argument. Second, the results of our survey showed that the consulted speakers rejected even a weak semantic reflexivity of inchoatives where the causing factor is not an action, but a property of the subject argument. Based on

<sup>4</sup> Spontaneity refers to the likelihood for an event to occur naturally without an external instigator (Haspelmath 1993).

these arguments, we can conclude that what inchoatives express is merely change of state.

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