

# Labile verbs in peninsular Spanish: a vernacular phenomenon barely researched

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## Abstract

The western variety of Peninsular Spanish is characterised by having a series of labile verbs, as the consequence of the displacement of a transitive verb by an intransitive one. Specifically, the verbs *caer* ('to fall'), *quedar* ('to stay') and *entrar* ('to enter') can induce a direct object although they are intransitive. In this paper, I will study its current extension and the possible semantic factors that favour the transitivisation of these verbs.

## Introduction

This article is two-fold: firstly, to provide an overview of the current diffusion of the causativisation phenomenon in vernacular Spanish; secondly, to find the semantic factors that apply to the use of an intransitive verb as transitive. In order to understand the different strategies that peninsular Spanish possesses to make causative sentences, it is necessary to compare examples (1 – 4).

- (1) Le hice ver la película, aunque no quería  
3sg.dat. make.pst.1sg see.inf. the film although neg want-pst-3sg  
(‘I made him watch the film although he did not want to’)
- (2) Juan sube – Juan sube las maletas  
Juan go up.pres.3sg. – Juan go up.pres.3sg. the luggage  
(‘Juan goes up’ – ‘Juan puts the luggage up’)
- (3) a) Tiré el vaso – El vaso (se) cayó  
throw.pst.1sg the glass – the glass (refl) fall.pst.3sg  
(‘I threw the glass’ – ‘The glass fell’)
- b) Dejé los libros en la mesa – Los libros (se) quedaron en la mesa  
leave.pst.1sg the books on the table – the books (refl) stay.pst.3pl on the table  
(‘I left the books onto the table’ – ‘The books stayed on the table’)
- c) Metí el coche en el garaje – El coche entró en el garaje  
put in.1sg.pst. the car in the garage – the car enter.3sg.pst. in the garage  
(‘I put the car into the garage’ – ‘The car entered the garage’)
- (4) Se me cayó el vaso mientras caminaba  
Refl dat.1sg fall.pst.3sg the glass while walk.pst.1sg  
(lit. ‘To me the glass fell while I was walking’)

Standard Spanish shows four different constructions that can express causation: (1) a periphrastic construction formed by the verb *hacer* ('to make') plus an infinitive; (2) a change or extension of the arguments; (3) lexical pairs, one of which expresses causation and the other effect; and, finally, (4) a construction formed by the reflexive pronoun (*se*) plus a tensed verb and an experiencer dative. The last alternative connotes the agent's lack of willingness although he or she might have taken part in the action.

However, some vernacular varieties of western peninsular Spanish can eliminate the strategy represented in (3) by employing the intransitive lexeme to also express causation (5 a – c):

(5) a) Caí el vaso

fall.pst.1sg the glass

('I fell the glass down')

b) (Me) quedé los libros en la mesa

(refl.1sg) stay.pst.1sg the books on the table

('I stayed the books on the table')

c) Entré el coche en el garaje

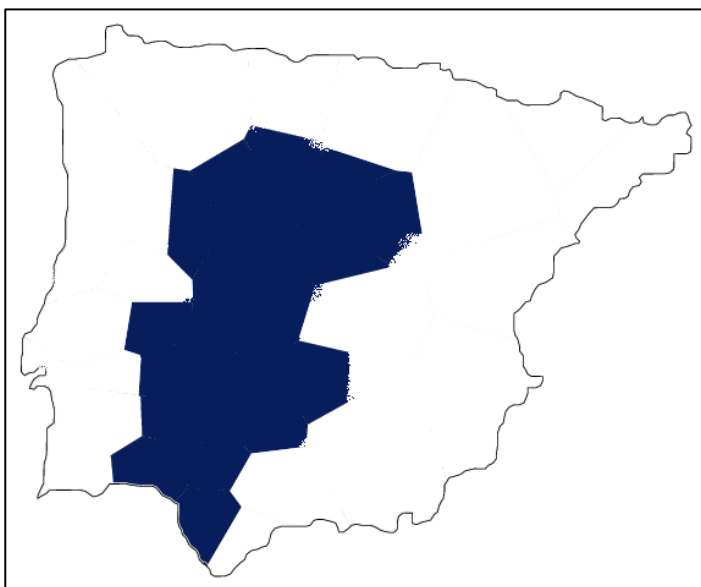
enter.pst.1sg the car in the garage

('I entered the car into the garage')

This type of construction is called *labile* and below, I will explain the different arguments that have been put forward regarding this phenomenon; then I will describe the methodology and corpus; later, I will analyse the results and I will conclude by making some remarks followed by the list of references.

#### State of the art

The causativisation phenomenon in Spanish has not been researched in depth. As a matter of fact, the literature has been devoted to establishing the spatial diffusion of the vernacular phenomenon and, according to Zamora Vicente (1970), Alvar (1996), Montero (2006), Ariza (2008) and Jiménez Fernández & Tubino Blanco (2014), it is attested in the provinces of Burgos, León, Ávila, Zamora, Salamanca, Valladolid, Cáceres, Badajoz, Toledo, Ciudad Real and western Andalusia (Map 1).



Map 1. Extension of the phenomenon in the literature

Likewise, Alvar (1996), Ariza (2008) and García Mouton (1994) have noticed that *entrar* ('to enter') is the most diffused causativised verb, whereas *caer* ('to fall') and *quedar* ('to stay') are found in smaller areas. Besides, *caer* ('to fall') seems to be slightly more reduced in its extension than *quedar* ('to stay').

Montero (2006) has been the only author that has suggested a possible linguistic explanation for the transitivity of the aforementioned verbs. According to her, there is a semantic difference between (6) and (7), since the latter emerges to express a voluntary action caused by the agent, while the former expresses lack of willingness and control.

(6) Caí el vaso

fall.pst.1sg the glass

('I fell the glass down')

(7) Tiré el vaso

throw.pst.1sg the glass

('I threw the glass')

Although many transitive verbs that express causation have an intransitive homologous, which makes an antipassive voice (i.e. *The sun melts the ice – The ice melts*), the phenomenon under investigation has the opposite effect: an intransitive verb ousts a transitive lexeme that expresses causation and it ends up being used transitively.

### Methodology

With the aim of collecting current data about the causative phenomenon that provide us with information on its semantic factors as well as its geographical distribution, I have carried out fieldwork throughout the areas referred to by the literature. As it deals with a non-standard phenomenon, I have surveyed not very educated speakers, since they represent a social profile more inclined to maintain this vernacular phenomena. In Table 1, I will detail the number of informants and the occurrences I have obtained.

Informants	Occurrences
200	1.938

Table 1. Data of the survey

The data collection method has been designed not to prime the informants. Due to the difficulty of recording the emergence of this phenomenon during an ordinary interview or through indirect questions because of its lack of spontaneity (Gilquin, 2010; Mesthrie, 2011), I compiled a series of filmed scenes in which a person carried out certain activities that implied the use of the verbs under study. The speakers were asked to describe spontaneously the scenes they were watching. These sequences pre-established each lexical pair, taking into account different sorts of patients and agents. Table 2 provides some information about the filmed scenes.

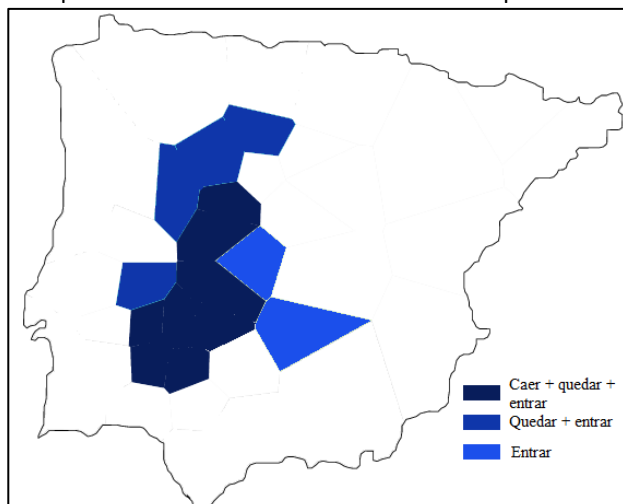
Human agent – human patient	Human agent – non-human patient	Non-human agent – non-human patient
A puts B into the car	A puts B into an envelope	A (wind) puts B (sheet of paper) into the bin
A makes B sad (A leaves B sad, literally in Spanish)	A leaves B onto the table (on purpose / not on purpose)	A (wind) leaves B (sheet of paper) onto the table
A throws / drops B to the floor	A throws / drops B to the floor (on purpose / not on purpose)	A (wind) throws / drops B (sheet of paper) to the floor

Table 2. Survey

This methodology has enabled the qualitative and quantitative collection of instances shown hereinafter.

### Results

The spatial diffusion of the results obtained is presented in Map 2 (Nerbonne et al., 2010).



Map 2. Current spatial diffusion of Spanish labile verbs

Map 2 shows that, nowadays, there are three different linguistic areas producing the causativisation phenomenon. The lightest tone of blue represents the zone where only *entrar* ('to enter') is used transitively instead of *meter* ('to put in'). To the north there is an area (as well as a western point) characterised by the use of both *entrar* ('to enter') and *quedar* ('to stay') at the expense of *meter* ('to put in') and *dejar* ('to leave'). In the middle, the darkest blue, presents the spread of lability to even *caer* ('to fall') at the expense of *tirar* ('to throw'), so it is the area where the causativisation phenomenon is strongly established. At this point, it is important to remark that, compared to the statements made by the literature on the subject, the current extension of the vernacular phenomenon has decreased dramatically. Furthermore, unlike previous research findings, I have not obtained any tokens of this phenomenon in the provinces of Burgos, Segovia, León and southern Valladolid. Additionally, the non-standard linguistic behaviour shows signs of starting to fade in eastern Cáceres and Ávila. The districts with the higher amount of instances are Salamanca, Cáceres and Badajoz.

Map 2 also illustrates the displacement of the labile use of the verbs *entrar* ('to enter') and *quedar* ('to stay') by the standard pattern. This can be argued because of the relic areas produced by the spread of the normative model. But, regardless of this, when we take into account the geographical diffusion of the vernacular phenomenon, it is clear it responds to the wave model (Wolfram & Schilling – Estes, 2003), since the urban points have not followed the standard more than the rural ones. Therefore, the demography of the municipalities I have surveyed has not played any role in the spread of the standard. Within the causativisation process, the most widespread verb to be used as labile is *entrar* ('to enter'), while *quedar* ('stay') has a more reduced area of influence. Eventually, *caer* ('to fall') is the least diffused labile verb and it runs uninterruptedly along the zones of the Roman silver route, from southern Zamora down to western Andalusia.

In other words, the informants that transitivise *caer* ('to fall') should also do it with *quedar* ('to stay') and *entrar* ('to enter') (i).

- (i) Entrar > quedar > caer

The hierarchy in (i) can be explained as follows: if a speaker causativises the verb *quedar* ('to stay'), he or she may causativise *entrar* ('to enter'), but not yet *caer* ('to fall'). The transitivisation of a verb in the hierarchy implies the transitivisation of those on its left, but not on its right.

However, if we focus our attention on the semantic nuances that trigger the use of the labile or the distinction between intransitive and transitive, the phenomenon turns out to be more complex. Firstly, the same speakers that are characterised by the causativisation process have also resorted to the standard pattern in certain cases. For one, all the informants consistently employed the vernacular in readings of the agent's lack of willingness and agent's lack of human trace, as well as in atelic actions (8 – 13).

- (8) Se ha quedado las gafas en la mesa

Refl have.pres.3sg. stay.pcp the glasses on the table

(‘She has stayed the glasses on the table’)

- (9) Ha                    quedado la luz encendida  
have.pres.3sg stay.pcp. the light switch.pcp.

(‘She has stayed the light on’)

- (10) La chica ha                    caído el vaso sin                    querer  
The girl have.pres.3sg fall.pcp the glass without want.inf.

(‘The girl has fallen the glass not on purpose’)

- (11) Ha                    caído la botella al                    sentarse  
Have.pres.3sg fall.pcp the bottle to+the sit.inf+refl

(‘She has fallen the bottle when she sat’)

- (12) El viento ha                    caído la calabaza  
The wind have.pres.3sg fall.pcp the pumpkin

(‘The wind has fallen the pumpkin’)

- (13) La chica abre                    la puerta y entra                    la silla en el despacho  
The girl open.pres.3sg the door and enter.pres.3sg the chair in the office

(‘The girl opens the door and enters the chair into the office’)

Sentences (8 – 11) possess an animate agent that has done the action unintentionally; sentence (12) is characterised by having a non-human agent while (13) presents an atelic action, since the scene shows a girl dragging a chair into an office.

However, only a few speakers produced the intransitive verb in very transitive readings, as (14 – 17) show.

- (14) La chica ha                    decidido quedar los libros en la mesa  
The girl have.pres.3sg decide.pcp. stay.inf the books on the table

(‘The girl has decided to stay the books on the table’)

- (15) La chica ha                    cogido el vaso y lo                    ha                    caído  
The girl have.pres.3sg take.pcp. the glass and acc.3sg. have.pres.3sg fall.pcp

(‘The girl has taken the glass and she has fallen it’)

- (16) ¿Cómo que qué ha                    hecho? Caerla                    [la botella]  
How that what have.pres.3sg do.pcp fall.inf+acc.3sg [the bottle]

(‘What has she done? Fall it’)

- (17) Te                    coge                    y te                    entra                    en el coche  
Acc.2sg take.pres.3sg and acc.2sg enter.pres.3sg in the car

(‘She takes you and enters you into the car’)

In (14 – 16), the agent has carried out the actions willingly, while (17) presents a telic action and a human patient.

The informants that have not produced (14 – 17) but they have done so in (8 – 13), have preferred to employ the normative transitive verb in readings of agency, animacy, willingness or telicity, as (18 – 22) show.

(18) La chica coge la botella y la tira a la papelera

The girl take.pres.3sg the bottle and acc.3sg throw.pres.3sg to the bin

(‘The girl takes the bottle and throws it into the bin’)

(19) La chica coge el vaso y lo tira al suelo

The girl take.pres.3sg the glass and acc.3sg fall.pres.3sg to+the floor

(‘The girl takes the glass and throws it to the floor’)

(20) Al final deja los libros en la mesa y se va

To+the end leave.pres.3sg the books on the table and go away.pres.3sg

(‘She eventually leaves the books on the table and goes away’)

(21) Mete el papel en el sobre

Put in.pres.3sg the paper in the envelope

(‘She puts the sheet of paper into the envelope’)

(22) Mete los folios en el archivador

Put in.pres.3sg the papers in the folder

(‘She puts the papers into the folder’)

Sentences (18 – 20) provide an agent that has thrown the bottle or has left the books on purpose. Examples (21 – 22) present a telic action, since the informants have expressed the achievement of *put into* and not the period of time the chair needs to be dragged into the room, as in (13). Hence, based on the semantic nuances of the collected tokens, we obtain the hierarchies represented in (ii - iv).

(ii) Unwilling human agent > non-human agent > willing human agent

(iii) Non-human patient > human patient

(iv) Atelicity > telicity

The continua must be read as follows: if the informants causativise the intransitive lexeme in non-human agent readings, they also do so for unwilling human agents. Likewise, if they causativise the intransitive with a human patient, they have to do so for non-human patients. Additionally, if they causativise the verb in telic readings, they do the same in atelic readings. The spread of the causative phenomenon always goes rightwards in the hierarchies and it is implicational. Below, I will try to argue why Spanish has this linguistic behaviour regarding causativisation.

### Analysis

Spanish usually marks causativisation through lexical pairs. This strategy is attested cross-linguistically together with morphological and periphrastic constructions (Comrie, 1981). Lexical pairs are characterised by having an intransitive lexeme to express effect and a transitive lexeme to express cause. However, in the evolution of Latin to Romance languages, many transitive verbs changed the number of their valencies and started to be used intransitively (Heidinger, 2014; Gianollo 2014). The peninsular Spanish phenomenon, nonetheless, deals with the extension of valencies in intransitive verbs, which become transitive. This is rarely witnessed and the only author who has noticed this situation is Bilous (2012) for current colloquial French, again in the verb *tomber* (‘to fall’). The use of the same lexeme to express both cause and effect is called *labile* (Haspelmath, 1993; Letuchiy, 2004; 2009; Kulikov & Lavidas, 2014) and, among all the subtypes of *labile* verbs, the Spanish

phenomenon fits anticausative patient-preserving labile verbs (Creissels, 2014), since only unaccusative verbs are inclined to be transitivised. However, Spanish presents other strategies to mark the different types of intransitivation. Compare examples (23 – 24).

(23) El atleta corre cuatro horas

The athlete run.pres.3sg four hours

(‘The athlete runs for four hours’)

(24) Se han caído las hojas de los árboles

Refl have.pres.3sg fall.pcp the leaves of the trees

(‘The leaves of the trees have fallen’)

Sentences (23) and (24) show an intransitive verb with different sorts of subject. While (23) is characterised by an unergative verb because it possesses an agent, (24) presents an unaccusative verb that sends the subject (in this case, the patient) to a location held prototypically by the object or patient. Mendikoetxea (1999) has noticed that Spanish tends to lay unaccusative subjects in this position as a way to mark lack of willingness or control. This behaviour is in line with the statements made by Perlmutter (1978), Dowty (1991) or Ackerman & Moore (2001) with regard to the distinction between unergative and unaccusative intransitive verbs. Whereas the former usually possess a volitional subject and, consequently, an agent, the latter lack subject’s control and, therefore, the subject behaves as a patient rather than as an agent and has similar traces to those held by the objects of transitive verbs.

The non-marked constructions of unaccusative verbs in Spanish as well as the conversion of others into labile is closely related to the behaviour that ergative-absolutive languages show. In this type of alignment, A is encoded through a specific case-marker whereas O and S are encoded within a shared specific case-marker. Nominative-accusative languages, on the contrary, have a marker for S and A, and another one for O (Dixon, 1994). Spanish unaccusative S participants are usually placed in a prototypical O position and the vernacular phenomenon raises the unaccusative verb to be used in transitive constructions in which the A is semantically S. Indeed, according to Dixon, some ergative languages can choose either an agent subject or a patient subject, depending on the semantics of the context. So, in these languages, intransitive verbs that denote typically controlled activities select an agent subject, while uncontrolled activities are usually coded through a patient subject. Besides, there are verbs with an intermediate behaviour: the same lexeme sometime prefers a patient subject (if the situation lacks control) and it sometimes chooses an agent subject if the action is based upon any type of control. On these grounds, the verbs *caer* (‘to fall’), *entrar* (‘to enter’) or *quedar* (‘to stay’) select a patient subject (O) in a reading of no control and they choose an agent subject when there has been certain degree of control (after all, the girl who drops the bottle not on purpose is somehow to blame for this action). In other languages, such as Agul or Korean, these differences depend on the fact that the subject may be the author or the agent of a causative construction (Daniel et al., 2012; Kim, 2012): the author does not do something on purpose and the agent does.

To better understand the causativisation process it is important to analyse how transitivation works. In principle, a transitive verb is likelier to emerge if it fulfils certain semantic requirements: agency, aspect, volition, kinesis or affectedness (Hopper & Thompson, 1980; 1982). The more agentive, the more telic, the more willing, the more affected or the more individualised, the more likely a transitive verb will be chosen. Based on my research results, the choice of the intransitive lexeme is triggered in readings of scarce or null agency (12), of lack of willingness (8 – 11) or of little affectedness of the patient (13 and 17). The more intentional, animate (18 – 20) or telic (21 – 22), the more probable the informants’ tendency to select the normative transitive lexeme. Therefore, vernacular speakers resort to the intransitive lexeme when the semantics of the sentence does not fit transitivity, because the normative transitive lexemes in Spanish are too transitive and causative to express lack of willingness, lack of control, little affectedness or atelicity.

In reality, this behaviour agrees with the causativisation processes attested worldwide. For Comrie (1981), Comrie & Polinsky (1993), Shibatani (1976) and Aikhenvald & Dixon (2000), the likelihood of causativising a verb depends on the parameters of animacy of the subject, control, volition, prominence or degree of cause. Causativisation can also be encoded through inflectional means. Hungarian uses instrumental, dative or accusative case-marking, depending on the parameters described above. Thus, accusative means more control or volition whereas instrumental connotes lack of willingness or control (Givón, 1976; 2001). The same applies to certain verbs with an experiencer in Spanish. Compare (25 – 26).

(25) El hombre la ha asustado

The man acc.3sg.fem. have.pres.3sg frighten.pcp.

(‘The man has frightened her’)

(26) La tormenta le ha asustado

The storm dat.3sg. have.pres.3sg frighten.pcp

(‘The storm has frightened him/her’)

In (25), the human agent, who controls the situation, selects an accusative object. However, in (26) the non-human subject has triggered the dative because it cannot control or be willing to the situation (Fernández-Ordóñez, 1999). Nevertheless, Spanish lacks a rich inflectional system and it only relies on case-marking in pronouns, therefore it cannot distinguish semantic features by these means.

So, in Spanish, the rise of the verbs *caer* (‘to fall’), *quedar* (‘to stay’) and *entrar* (‘to enter’) instead of their corresponding transitive lexemes depends on the same features as causativisation or transitivisation do. They usually emerge in constructions where there is not a human agent, there is little affectedness, no control, unwillingness or atelicity. As Spanish lacks a rich inflectional system and the normative transitive verbs connote much transitivity, the western part of the Iberian Peninsula resorts to the unaccusative verbs to connote the semantic nuances enumerated above. The strategy of lability coexists with the standard use of these lexical pairs, since the same informants characterised by the vernacular phenomenon employ the standard one in highly transitive cases. Only a few speakers have extended the labile strategy to all the semantic nuances.

Moreover, the labile construction in Spanish approaches the ergative-absolutive configuration, but Spanish also possesses certain linguistic contexts quite similar to the ergative behaviour. Specifically, the subjects of unaccusative verbs are regularly placed in typical object positions and verbs with an experiencer alternate between accusative and dative, depending on the type of subject and patient.

### Conclusions

The vernacular phenomenon in western peninsular Spanish, consisting of the causativisation of certain unaccusative verbs, has dramatically decreased in geographical terms. Unlike the statements we can find in the literature, nowadays it is attested in the neighbouring zones along the Roman silver route, which has always been a main communication road in western Spain. Specifically, the phenomenon shows an implicational behaviour, based on the fact that the informants that transitivise *caer* (‘to fall’) must do so with *quedar* (‘to stay’) and *entrar* (‘to enter’). Likewise, once these verbs become transitive in sentences with an unwilling human subject, the informants spread the transitivisation to readings with non-human agents and then, willing agents. Furthermore, if they causativise a verb with a human patient, they also do so for non-human patients; likewise, if they causativise for telic sentences, they also do so in atelic ones.

As Spanish lacks a rich inflectional system, the semantic nuances are expressed through lability, which is quite rare cross-linguistically. It is one of the different resources that this language possesses to mark agency and authorship, together with the valency changes in verbs with an experiencer or the position of unaccusative subjects to typical object positions.

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