ON ANTICAUSATIVE SE

Maria Poponeţ

PhD Student, "Babeş-Bolyai" University of Cluj-Napoca

Abstract: This paper aims at shedding light on the syntax and interpretation of the reflexive clitic se of Romanian anticausative constructions, i.e. se-marked non-reflexive constructions exhibiting a causative transitive counterpart. While Folli (2002, quoted in Schäfer 2008) claims that se is an aspectual marker that signals a telic change of state verb, we opt for an analysis that can account for the appearance of this clitic in unaccusative verbs irrespective of their aspectual properties. We believe that Schäfer's (2008) account designed for change of state verbs in which the clitic is a Voice expletive can be extended to the other anticausatives.

Keywords: anticausative se, causative alternation, verbs of change of state, non-agentive verbs of manner of motion, se-marked verbs of spatial configuration

1. Introduction

Verbs of change of state that can be used either in the transitive (cf. (1a)) or in the intransitive (cf. (1b)), where the object of the transitive variant and the subject of the intransitive variant share the thematic role patient or theme, are thought to participate in the causative alternation. The meaning of the transitive, which exhibits an external argument bearing the role causer, is "cause to V-intransitive" (cf. Levin and Rappaport Hovav 1995).

1) a. *John broke the window.*
   b. *The window broke.*

According to the unaccusativity hypothesis (cf. Perlmutter 1978), the argument of the intransitive member of the pair is projected in direct object position (cf. Burzio 1986, Levin and Rappaport Hovav 1995, among others), a hypothesis that elegantly accounts for the semantic and syntactic features of the structure.

The causative alternation is not restricted to verbs of change of state, and characterizes "move and change verbs" (cf. Jespersen 1927, quoted in Levin and Rappaport Hovav 1995: 93). Still, the

Arhipelag XXI Press, Tîrgu Mureş, ISBN: 978-606-8624-03-7

BDD-V3974 © 2016 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:04:13 UTC)

great majority of alternating verbs consists in verbs of change of state, the class of alternating verbs of motion being rather small (e.g. *bounce, move, roll, rotate, spin*). Levin and Rappaport Hovav hold that alternating verbs of motion are used non-agentively in the intransitive variant, and can be included in the class of verbs of change if they can be taken to express a change in position. Importantly, such verbs differ aspectually from change of state verbs, and show an atelic behaviour.

Languages like Romanian usually mark the intransitive member of the alternating pair with the reflexive clitic pronoun *se*, a marker of anticausative morphology (cf. Haspelmath 1993). By virtue of morphological marking, alternating *se*-marked unaccusatives are often called anticausatives.

Romanian registers semantically diverse alternating *se*-marked unaccusatives (cf. Dragomirescu 2010), from which we selected a sample consisting of categories with contrasting aspectual properties: verbs of change of state (e.g. *a se deschide* "to open") and non-agentive verbs of manner of motion (e.g. *a se rostogoli* "to roll"). A look at verbs of spatial configuration (e.g. *a se afla, a se găsi* "to be found"), where the relation between the transitive and the intransitive is not one of semantic causation[1], but rather one defined by detransitivization, will shed light on the "meaning" of unaccusative *se*. The clitic pronoun *se* exhibited by unaccusatives is the most "bleached" version of the reflexive pronoun; it is empty of meaning, simply a marker of valence reduction.

Since most alternating unaccusatives are verbs of change of state, and most of them are morphologically marked in Romance languages, the morphological marking on these verbs has received special attention in the literature. In what follows, we investigate the analyses proposed for the clitic pronoun *se* in change of state verbs[2] in search for an analysis that can account for the morphological marking of other *se*-marked unaccusatives[3].

2. Approaches to anticausative *se*

Three types of analyses have been adopted in the literature for the clitic pronoun exhibited by verbs of change of state in Romance languages. According to one view, *se* marks the absence of an external argument (cf. Schäfer 2008), the second view holds that *se* indicates aself-caused event in which a property of the internal argument is responsible for the event (cf. the reflexive analysis proposed by Chierchia 2004), while under the third view, the clitic forces the VP to be telic (cf. Folli 2002, quoted in Schäfer 2008).

[1] *The transitive does not mean "cause to V-intransitive".*
[2] *The only class whose morphological marking has been analyzed, to our knowledge.*
[3] *A thorough analysis of these verb categories is left for future research.*

Arhipelag XXI Press, Tîrgu Mureş, ISBN: 978-606-8624-03-7

BDD-V3974 © 2016 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:04:13 UTC)

2.1. Schäfer (2008)

In Schäfer's (2008)account, the clitic *se* is connected to a semantically empty Voice projection which does not introduce a theta-role. Inspired by Haspelmath's (1993) typological study, Schäfer assumes that anticausative morphology appears in unaccusative verbs for "reasons of iconicity". Cross-linguistically, marked unaccusatives tend to denote events of lower spontaneity (e.g. "break") than unmarked unaccusatives (e.g. "bloom", "wilt"). Verbs expressing events of low spontaneity compensate for the high expectation of an external argument by projecting a formal, non-thematic placeholder of the external argument.

Schäfer claims that the information concerning the type of unaccusative, i.e. marked vs. unmarked, comes from the root. Following Alexiadou et al. (2006: 190, who build on the distinction between internally and externally caused verbs in Levin and Rappaport Hovav 1995), he proposes four types of verbs of change of state based on the encyclopedic semantics of their roots:

2) √agentive (*murder, assassinate*)
√internally caused (*blossom, wilt*)
√externally caused (*destroy, kill*)
√cause unspecified (*break, open*)

While √*agentive* and √*externally caused* roots form verbs that do not alternate as they do not show intransitive variants, √*internally caused* roots form unmarked unaccusatives which lack transitive alternates[4].

The class of roots √*cause unspecified* in Alexiadou et al., which participate in the causative alternation, is divided by Schäfer into two subclasses: roots that form marked unaccusatives (√*unspecified marked*) and roots that form unmarked unaccusatives (√*unspecified unmarked*). The cut-off point is idiosyncratic and varies from language to language. Importantly, it is only roots that form marked unaccusatives (√*unspecified marked*) that show anticausative morphology.

The Romanian counterparts of the English verbs above behave as predicted: *a asasina* "to assassinate", and *a distruge* "to destroy" only show transitive variants (cf. (3a), (5a)), and do not form anticausatives (cf. (3b), (5b)), *a înflori* "to blossom" is non-*se*-marked (cf. (4a)), and does not show a transitive (cf. (4b)), while *a deschide* "to open" alternates and forms a *se*-marked anticausative (cf. (6a,b)).

3)	a.	*Teroristul*	*l-*	*a*	*asasinat*	*pe*	*senator.*
		terrorist.the	CL.3SG.ACC	have.AUX.3SG	assassinated	PE	senator

[4] *Under Distributed Morphology, the framework assumed by Schäfer, verbs are derived from category-neutral roots by the verbalizing functional head v.*

Arhipelag XXI Press, Tîrgu Mureş, ISBN: 978-606-8624-03-7

BDD-V3974 © 2016 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:04:13 UTC)

"The terrorist assassinated the senator."

b. **Senatorul s- a asasinat.*
senator.the SE have.AUX.3SG assassinated
"*The senator assassinated."

4) a. *Pomii au înflorit de la căldură.*
trees.the have.AUX.3PL blossomed from heat
"The trees blossomed from the heat."

b. **Căldura a înflorit pomii.*
heat.the have.AUX.3SG blossomed trees.the
"*The heat blossomed the trees."

5) a. *Buldozerul a distrus clădirea.*
bulldozer.the have.AUX.3SG destroyed building.the
"The bulldozer destroyed the building."

b. **Clădirea s- a distrus.*
building.the SE have.AUX.3SG destroyed
"*The building destroyed."

6) a. *Ion a deschis uşa.*
Ion have.AUX.3SG opened door.the
"Ion opened the door."

b. *Uşa s- a deschis.*
door.the SE have.AUX.3SG opened
"The door opened."

Thus, events of low spontaneity project a formal non-thematic placeholder of the external argument, leading to marked unaccusatives/anticausatives, e.g. *a se deschide* "to open". For languages that mark their anticausatives with a reflexive clitic pronoun (e.g. the Romance or Slavic

Arhipelag XXI Press, Tîrgu Mureş, ISBN: 978-606-8624-03-7
BDD-V3974 © 2016 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:04:13 UTC)

languages), Schäfer proposes that the reflexive clitic spells out an expletive Voice head which does not project a specifier. The placement of anticausative morphology in Voice is motivated by the fact that Voice is the host of other valence-changing phenomena like passivization (cf. Schäfer 2008).

2.2. Chierchia (2004)

Chierchia (2004) proposes that unaccusatives are derived from transitives by a process of reflexivization, an operation which takes a relation as its argument and sets the two arguments of the relation to be identical with one another.

Under this analysis, unaccusatives are interpreted as causatives, with the causing factor being interpreted statively. The intended interpretation of the sentence *The boat sank.* is "some property of the boat (or some state the boat is in) causes it to go down" (Chierchia 2004: 37).

The analysis that he outlines tries to make sense of the reflexive morphology present on a great majority of unaccusatives in Italian. The reflexive analysis of unaccusatives is reinforced by the licensing of *da sé* "by itself", which, as he holds, is only possible if the argument has both causer and theme entailments.

Nonetheless, his arguments do not stand on closer scrutiny. First, the phrases carrying the meaning "by itself" do not necessarily express self-causation and are not restricted to dynamic verbs. Second, the reflexive morphology is not a blueprint of dynamic verbs.

Some researchers already argued that *da sé* and its counterparts in other languages does not express that some property of the theme argument caused the event but rather deniesthat a causer of the change of state event can be identified (cf. Reinhart 2000, Pylkkänen 2002).

We argue that in Romanian, the equivalent of Italian *da sé,* i.e. *de la sine* "by itself" (lit. "from self")carries the meaning "no external cause interfered in the normal course of the event". Modification of unaccusatives expressing automatic change of state events (cf. Haspelmath's 1993 classification) is relevant for establishing the use of the phrase.

Thus, in the examples below, *de la sine* asserts that no cause is identified that interfered in the natural development of the event, which, in these cases, does not signify that the subject argument or its properties is responsible for the event.

7) a. *Părul* *s-* *a* *uscat* *de la* *sine.*
hair.the SE have.AUX.3SG dried from self
"The hair dried by itself."

b. *Cubul* *de* *gheaţă* *s-* *a* *topit* *de la* *sine.*
cube.the of ice SE have.AUX.3SG melted from self

Arhipelag XXI Press, Tîrgu Mureş, ISBN: 978-606-8624-03-7

BDD-V3974 © 2016 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:04:13 UTC)

"The ice cube melted by itself."

c. *Carnea s- a dezgheţat de la sine.*
meat.the SE have.AUX.3SG defrosted from self
"The meat defrosted by itself."

The sentence (7a) does not mean that the hair or its properties caused the drying. Rather, the hair dried without a hair drier due to crucial external conditions like the heat. Similarly, the ice cube could not have melted without heat (cf. (7b)), the meat could not have defrosted in the absence of heat (cf. (7c)). In these situations, denying the interference of a cause in the event is not equivalent with the subject argument causing the change. Since sentences modified by *de la sine* ban the interpretations whereby the argument is both causer and theme, we have no reason to believe that unmodified sentences have this meaning. Chierchia's claim that phrases carrying the meaning "by itself" are licensed by causers in unaccusatives is weakened by such examples.
Moreover, we tracked down an example of a sentence containing a stative verb modified by *de la sine*. This conclusively shows that in Romanian the phrase is not necessarily licensed by a causer.

8) *Bullmastiff- ul este, de la sine, loial membrilor familiei*
Bullmastiff the be.3SG from self loyal members.DAT family.GEN
sale şi chiar docil şi prietenos.
his and even obedient and friendly
"The Bullmastiff (a dog breed) is, by himself, loyal to the members of his family, and even obedient and friendly."
(http://www.dogvet.ro/bullmastiff.html)

So far, we have shown that the meaning and licensing possibilities of *de la sine* do not support a reflexive analysis of unaccusatives in Romanian. Next, we argue that the morphological argument is not a strong one either.
Romance languages register stative verbs of spatial configuration that are marked by the reflexive clitic *se/si*, e.g. Italian *trovarsi*, French *se trouver* (cf. Levin and Rappaport Hovav 1995), orRomanian *a se afla, a se găsi,* all of which mean"to be found", which, given their stative character, cannot be assigned a reflexive analysis. Noteworthy, in such stative verbs, the clitic pronoun inflects for the full range of person and number just like in reflexives proper: the features of the clitic pronoun *mă* in (9) are first person singular, in agreement with the implicit nominative subject argument *eu* "I". Nonetheless, the agreement between the clitic pronoun and the nominative argument does not automatically point to a reflexive analysis of these verbs.

Arhipelag XXI Press, Tîrgu Mureş, ISBN: 978-606-8624-03-7
BDD-V3974 © 2016 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:04:13 UTC)

9)	*Ieri,*	*când*	*m-*	*ai*	*sunat*	*mă*
	yesterday	when	CL.1SG.ACC	have.AUX.2SG	called	SE.1SG
	aflam	*în*	*faţa*	*teatrului.*		
	find.IMPERF.1SG	in	front.the	theatre.GEN		

"Yesterday, when you called me, I was in front of the theatre."

2.3. Folli (2002)

An approach meant to account for the aspectual properties of the clitic *se/si* is outlined in Folli (2002). This author notices that Italian *si*-marked unaccusative verbs of change of state can occur with *in*-adverbials, but not with *for*-adverbials (cf. (10)). Responsible for their telic behaviour, she holds, is the clitic *si*.

10)	*La*	*finestra*	*si*	*è*	*chiusa*	*in*	*un*	*secondo/*	**per*	*un*	*secondo.*
	the	window	SE	be.AUX.3SG	closed	in	a	second	for	a	second

"The window closed in one second/*for one second." (Schäfer 2008: 14, (15b))

A similar behaviour has been reported for *se*-marked unaccusatives in French (cf. Labelle 1992) or Spanish (cf. Armstrong 2011). Romanian *se*-marked verbs of change of state follow this pattern (cf. (11)).

11)	*Fereastra*	*s-*	*a*	*deschis*	*într-*	*o*	*secundă/*	**timp*	*de*	*o*
	window.the	SE	have.AUX.3SG	opened	in	a	second	time	of	a
	secundă.									
	second									

"The window opened in one second/*for one second."

Following Ramchand (2008), Folli proposes that these verbs are made of a process head spelled out as *si* in anticausatives, and a result state as its complement. It is worth mentioning that Ramchand's process head is the equivalent of the VP in a VP structure articulated in VP shells, consequently *si* is not placed in the head that introduces the external argument[5], and does not readily account for the relationship between *se*-marked anticausatives and the corresponding transitives.

Moreover, the class of *se*-marked anticausatives is not restricted to verbs of change of state. Remember that languages show non-agentive verbs of manner of motion that are *se*-marked, have

[5] *The head introducing the external argument is the initiation head in Ramchand.*

Arhipelag XXI Press, Tîrgu Mureş, ISBN: 978-606-8624-03-7

BDD-V3974 © 2016 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:04:13 UTC)

transitives and are atelic, unlike verbs of change of state. The Romanian verb *a se rostogoli* "to roll" is an example: the verb alternates (cf. (12b)), but is atelic as shown by the ban on *in*-adverbials modification (cf. (12a)).

12) a.

Mingea	*s-*	*a*	*rostogolit*	*timp*	*de*	*10 secunde/*	**în*
ball.the	SE	have.AUX.3SG	rolled	time	of	10 seconds	in
10 secunde.							
10 seconds							

"The ball rolled for 10 seconds/*in 10 seconds."

b.

Copilul	*a*	*rostogolit*	*mingea.*
child.the	have.AUX.3SG	rolled	ball.the

"The child rolled the ball."

Furthermore, there are stative *se*-marked verbs of spatial configuration whose morphological marking requires an explanation.

In the case of alternating verbs of change of state or non-agentive verbs of motion, both members of the pair are dynamic; also, in *John opened the door.*, John causes the state of things of the corresponding intransitive *The door opened.*

The relationship between *se*-marked verbs of spatial configuration and their transitive "alternates" is rather quirky: the transitive is dynamic, while the intransitive is stative; the transitive does not mean "cause to V-intransitive". The sentence in (13a) does not convey the meaning that the tourists caused the placement of the lake nearby the town Bicaz; natural causes are responsible for the location of the lake.

13) a.

Într-	*un*	*final,*	*turiştii*	*au*	*găsit*	*Lacul*	*Izvorul*
in	a	final	tourists.the	have.AUX.3PL	found	lake.the	spring.the
Muntelui		*din*	*apropierea*	*oraşului*	*Bicaz.*		
mountain.GEN		from	closeness.the	town.GEN	Bicaz		

"The tourists finally found the lake Izvorul Muntelui nearby the town Bicaz."

b.

Lacul	*Izvorul*	*Muntelui*	*se*	*găseşte*	*în*	*apropierea*
lake.the	spring.the	mountain.GEN	SE	find.PRES.3SG	in	closeness.the
oraşului	*Bicaz.*					
town.GEN	Bicaz					

"The lake Izvorul Muntelui is found nearby the town Bicaz."

Arhipelag XXI Press, Tîrgu Mureş, ISBN: 978-606-8624-03-7

BDD-V3974 © 2016 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:04:13 UTC)

Aspectually, the transitive is an accomplishment; the tourists come to discover the location of the lake as a result of some action. By contrast, the intransitive is stative and consists in the predication of the location of the internal argument by the locative phrase.

The transitive and the intransitive share the meaning of location due to the obligatory locative phrase. The stative intransitive lacks an external argument, but displays the clitic *se*, most likely a marker of valence reduction of the transitive. An approach whereby the clitic *se* expletivizes the Voice head (cf. Schäfer 2008) can account for the features of such *se*-marked statives.

So far, we have seen that anticausative *se* shows up on verb categories with contrasting properties like verbs of change of state, non-agentive verbs of manner of motion, and, by extension, stative verbs of spatial configuration[6]. All these verbs lack an external argument, and are, consequently, unaccusative.

Of the analyses that we explored so far, Schäfer's (2008) account stems out as the most suitable one for the broader class of anticausatives, and can be extended to non-agentive verbs of manner of motion and stative verbs of spatial configuration. The projection of anticausative *se* in the head of the phrase that introduces the external argument, i.e. VoiceP, can account for the properties of the unaccusatives discussed above; the expletivized Voice accounts for: (i) the connection between the intransitive and transitive alternates of verbs of change of state and non-agentive verbs of manner of motion; (ii) the telicity of verbs of change of state[7]; (iii) the relationship between *se*-marked verbs of spatial configuration and transitives.

A slight modification is, nonetheless, in order. Recall that Schäfer proposed an analysis designed for verbs of change of state according to which the clitic *se* is a formal, non-thematic placeholder of the external argument that verbs expressing events of low spontaneity project to compensate for the high expectation of an external argument. However, stative verbs of spatial configuration do not carry the meaning of external causation; with these verbs the clitic is simply a marker of valence reduction. *Se*-marking is not conditioned by verbs which express events of low spontaneity in the intransitive, but rather by verbs which show a transitive variant; the clitic *se* is generally a mark of valence reduction, empty of meaning. Thus, Schäfer's analysis can account for the morphological marking of all unaccusatives in question, if we restrict the proposed semantic motivation to verbs of change of state and perhaps non-agentive verbs of manner of motion.

3. Conclusions

In this paper, we showed that unaccusative verbs with contrasting aspectual properties, like verbs of change of state, non-agentive verbs of manner of motion, and verbs of spatial configuration,

[6] *The morphology that these verbs exhibit is not exactly anticausative, but rather detransitivizing.*
[7] *The expletivized Voice bans the projection of the unique argument of the verb in SpecVoiceP.*

Arhipelag XXI Press, Tîrgu Mureş, ISBN: 978-606-8624-03-7

BDD-V3974 © 2016 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:04:13 UTC)

display anticausative morphology in Romanian. What these types of unaccusatives have in common is the lack of an external argument, as reinforced by the possibility of a transitive variant, and morphological marking by the clitic pronoun *se*. The most suitable analysis for these verbs exhibiting heterogeneous properties is the one proposed by Schäfer (2008), where anticausative *se* is a variable empty of meaning which expletivizes the phrase that introduces the external argument.

REFERENCES:

Alexiadou, Artemis, Elena Anagnostopoulou and Florian Schäfer (2006). "The properties of anticausatives crosslinguistically", in Mara Frascarelli (ed.), *Phases of interpretation*, 187-212, Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Armstrong, Grant (2011). *Two classes of transitive verbs: Evidence from Spanish*, PhD dissertation, Georgetown University.

Burzio, Luigi (1986). *Italian syntax. A government and binding approach*, Dordrecht: Reidel.

Chierchia, Gennaro (2004). "A semantics for unaccusatives and its syntactic consequences", in Artemis Alexiadou, Elena Anagnostopoulou and Martin Everaert (eds.), *The unaccusativity puzzle: Explorations of the syntax-lexicon interface*, 22-59, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Dragomirescu, Adina (2010). *Ergativitatea. Tipologie, sintaxă, semantică,* Bucureşti: Editura Universităţii din Bucureşti.

Haspelmath, Martin (1993). "More on the typology of inchoative/causative verb alternations", in Bernard Comrie and Maria Polinsky (eds.), *Causatives and transitivity*, 87-120, Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Labelle, Marie (1992). "Change of state and valency", *Journal of Linguistics* 28: 375-414.

Perlmutter, David (1978). "Impersonal passives and the Unaccusative Hypothesis", in *Proceedings of the fourth annual meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society*, 157-189, Berkeley: Berkeley Linguistics Society.

Pylkkänen, Liina (2002). *Introducing arguments*, PhD dissertation, MIT.

Ramchand, Gillian (2008). *Verb meaning and the lexicon: A first phase syntax*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Reinhart, Tanya (2000). "The theta system: Syntactic realization of verbal concepts", *OTS working papers*, Utrecht University.

Schäfer, Florian (2008). *The syntax of (anti-)causatives. External arguments in change-of-statecontexts*, Amsterdam, The Netherlands: John Benjamins.

Arhipelag XXI Press, Tîrgu Mureş, ISBN: 978-606-8624-03-7

BDD-V3974 © 2016 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:04:13 UTC)