How to "Eat" without Actually Eating: Marking Metaphor with Spanish Se and Italian Si

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Abstract : Using data from online corpora (Spanish CREA, Italian CORIS), this paper examines the relatively understudied use of Spanish se and Italian si exemplified in (1) and (2), respectively. (1) El rojo es … el que se come a los demás. 'The red (bottle) is the one that outshines/*eats the rest.'(2) … ebbe anche la saggezza di mangiarsi tutto il suo patrimonio. '… he even had the wisdom to squander/*eat all his estate.' In these sentences, se/si accompanies the consumption verb comer/mangiare 'to eat', without which the sentences would not be interpreted appropriately. This se/si cannot readily be attributed to any of the multiple functions so far identified in the literature: reflexive, ergative, middle/passive, inherent, benefactive, and complete consumptive. In particular, this paper argues against the feasibility of a recent construction-based analysis of sentences like (1) and (2), which situates se/si within a prototype-based network of meanings all deriving from the central meaning of 'COMPLETE CONSUMPTION' (e.g., Alice se comió toda la torta/Alicesi è mangiata tutta la torta 'John ate the whole cake'). Clearly, the empirical adequacy of such an account is undermined by the fact that the events depicted in the se/si-sentences at issue do not always entail complete consumption because they may lack an INCREMENTAL THEME, the distinguishing property of complete consumption. Alternatively, it is proposed that the sentences under analysis represent instances of verbal METAPHORICAL EXTENSION: se/si represents an explicit marker of this cognitive process, which has independently developed from the complete consumptive se/si, and the meaning extension is captured by the general tenets of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT). Two conceptual domains, Source (DS) and target (DT), are related by similarity, assigning an appropriate metaphorical interpretation to DT. The domains paired here are comer/mangiare (DS) and comerse/mangiarsi (DT). The eating event (DS) involves (a) the physical process of xEATER grinding yFOOD-STUFF into pieces and swallowing it; and (b) the aspect of xEATER savoring yFOOD-STUFF and being nurtured by it. In the physical act of eating, xEATER has dominance and exercises his force over yFOOD-STUFF. This general sense of dominance and force is mapped onto DT and is manifested in the ways exemplified in (1) and (2), and many others. According to CMT, two other properties are observed in each pair of DS & DT. First, DS tends to be more physical and concrete and DT more abstract, and systematic mappings are established between constituent elements in DS and those in DT: xEATER corresponds to the element that destroys and yFOOD-STUFF to the element that is destroyed in DT, as exemplified in (1) and (2). Though the metaphorical extension marker se/si appears by far most frequently with comer/mangiare in the corpora, similar systematic mappings are observed in several other verb pairs, for example, jugar/giocare 'to play (games)' and jugarse/giocarsi 'to jeopardize/risk (life, reputation, etc.)', perder/perdere 'to lose (an object)' and perderse/perdersi 'to miss out on (an event)', etc. Thus, this study provides evidence that languages may indeed formally mark metaphor using means available to them.

Keywords : complete consumption value, conceptual metaphor, Italian si/Spanish se, metaphorical extension.

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