

# Spanish change of state verbs in composition with atypical theme arguments: Clarifying the meaning shifts



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## Abstract

For many instances of verb-object combinations involving change of state verbs, different kinds of internal arguments seem to trigger distinct interpretations of the verb phrase. These are usually divided into literal uses, such as *romper la ventana* 'break the window' or *cortar el papel* 'cut the paper' and figurative uses such as *romper el desarrollo* 'interrupt the development' or *cortar la circulación* 'cut off the circulation'.

Based on an extensive manual annotation of corpus (the used corpus is the El País Corpus consisting of all the *El País* newspaper issues from 1976 to 2007 and is hosted at the Insitut Universitari de Linguística Aplicada (IULA) at the University Pompeu Fabra) data involving verb-object combinations with Spanish change of state verbs, I argue that combinations like *romper el desarrollo* or *cortar la circulación*, far from representing frozen idiom chunks, exemplify very productive compositional patterns. The frequency and naturalness with which change of state verbs take both physical and abstract entities as objects raises the question of how verbs express their meaning and makes this kind of data especially relevant for a theory of the lexicon as well as of composition.

I provide a clear inventory of the typical combinatorial patterns of *romper* and *cortar* and I show that their combinatorial behaviour is much more diverse than usually acknowledged. I then argue that these facts need to be addressed by the compositional system, rather than by postulating homophonic lexical entires (Dowty, 1979; Alonso Ramos, 2011) or contextualist accounts (Recanatí, 2005).

For a proposal I turn to Modern Type Theories, which allow me to incorporate a richer notion of lexical semantics within compositional semantics. These theories thus allow me provide an insightful compositional account of what has long been considered non-compositional, namely combinations of change of state verbs with objects denoting abstract entities.

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## 1. Introduction

What belongs to the meaning of a verb has long been a controversial issue in linguistic theory. Certainly, the meaning of a verb determines the range of situations in the world that it can be used to describe. Much of the linguistic literature on verb meaning has focused on analysing verb uses when they describe events in the physical world. Consequently, the verb's combinatorial capacity has been assumed to be restricted by default to physical entities. As a matter of fact, however, any randomly chosen text that is representative of a language, for instance a press article, demonstrates that the range of combinatorial possibilities of a verb vastly surpasses the domain of physical entities. In this context it has long been acknowledged, but hardly further developed, that the choice of arguments can strongly affect the meaning of the

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verb phrase. Marantz (1984:25), for example, observed that ‘just about every simple transitive English verb expresses a wide range of predicates depending on the choice of the direct object.’ He illustrated this observation with the verb *throw* as in example (1), where *baseball-throwing* seems to trigger some other kind of predication than *boxing-match-throwing* or *party-throwing* do.

- (1) a. throw a baseball  
 b. throw support behind a candidate  
 c. throw a boxing match  
 d. throw a party  
 e. throw a fit

It is worth mentioning that the data in example (1) do not seem to represent frozen idiom chunks, since sentence internal modification is allowed in all cases. The possibility of inserting new elements between the verb and the object suggests that these are cases of free composition. What the examples put forward by Marantz (1984) thus show very clearly is that the nature of the objects in transitive verbs has strong semantic effects on the verb phrase. I will refer informally to this phenomena as meaning shifts.

More recently researchers working with very large amounts of corpus data (Hanks and Jezek, 2008) have also underscored the importance of the semantics of the theme argument for the way the verb is understood. Among many other things, these researchers make a basic and yet much understudied observation, namely that word meanings are strongly context sensitive even with respect to their closest context, namely argument selection. Extending an observation by Asher (2011:viii) to these cases, it can be said that when word meanings are combined, the meaning of the result can differ from what standard compositional semantics together with the word’s lexicographic definitions have led us to expect.

This effect of the argument on the interpretation of the verb phrase is directly related to a broader issue with the compositionality of examples like the ones illustrated in (1). The question that arises is whether *throw* has a meaning along the lines of ‘move the arm and hand and release an object’. If that is the case, the verb can be argued to restrict its argument selection for physical entities only. Accordingly, composition with other kinds of arguments can be claimed to call for additional composition rules so as to accommodate the presupposition of a physical entity.

Yet another way of tackling the combinatorial variety of verbs, as also pointed out by Marantz (1984:25), is to try to distinguish the ‘basic’ or ‘literal’ uses of the verb in (1) from its ‘metaphorical’ and ‘idiomatic’ use. This is the path taken by cognitive linguists from the tradition of Lakoff and Johnson (1980). Such an approach principally distinguishes between uses like the one in (1-a) and the remaining combinations of *throw*. In this paper, however, I address these facts as a problem of composition and seek to situate their analysis within the theoretical linguistics literature.

In the theoretical literature, the questions raised by this broad combinatorial capacity of verbs, with its effects on the semantics of a verb phrase, have found few answers. On the one hand, theoretical linguists have avoided the problem by either considering that lexical items enter the compositional process after disambiguation, as is the case for the Montague school linguists, or have mainly limited their data to the set of examples that apply to the physical world. On the other hand, many other approaches, fundamentally belonging to the Mel’čuk school, have classified this kind of data as non-compositional in nature (Alonso Ramos, 2011). The two approaches basically rely on two distinct ways of viewing the lexicon and the process of composition. While in the first case a sense enumerative lexicon guarantees a neat process of semantic composition, in the second case examples like the ones illustrated in (1) are mostly consigned to the unfortunately too broad and too uncertain terrain of ‘figurative speech’, ‘metaphors’, ‘idioms’ and ‘collocations’.

The challenge posed by verb-object combinations, like the one illustrated in (1), thus lies in analysing what kind of combinatorial capacity a verb actually has, whether it naturally ranges beyond the domain of physical entities, and if so, if these combinations can be constrained by rules.

For the present investigation I focus on the combinatorial capacity of change of state verbs in Spanish. More concretely, I use a sample of two crucial members of this class, namely *romper* ‘break’ and *cortar* ‘cut’, for which I extensively tracked their argument selection preferences based on naturally occurring data available through corpora.

What corpus data generally illustrate is that theme arguments of change of state verbs easily range from physical objects to distinct kinds of eventualities like processes and states, as in the case of *romper* ‘break’.<sup>1</sup> This effect of the argument forces one to take a position on the theoretical horizon that stretches from theories that resolve the problems in the lexicon itself by arguing for a sense enumerative lexicon (Dowty, 1979; Alonso Ramos, 2011), to theories that underspecify verb meaning (Pustejovsky, 1995) and which favour resolving the problem in composition, up to contextualist accounts on the other extreme, which claim that lexical meaning changes in context.

<sup>1</sup> It is worth pointing out that all the corpus examples used throughout this paper have been additionally validated by Spanish native speakers.

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