On the (im)possibility of -ble adjectives from unaccusatives in Germanic and Romance

Isabel Oltra Massuet, URV

When faced with unaccusative-based -ble cases like Catalan agradable ‘pleasant’, Spanish perdurable ‘long-lasting’, English perishable (DiSciullo 1997) or German verwesbar ‘decay-able’ (Flury 1964), an analysis of -ble adjectives as selecting transitive verbs undergenerates the number of adjectives that speakers find acceptable (cf. Aronoff 1976, Anderson 1992, Riehemann 1993); on the other hand, accounts that assume a unique -ble requirement for an internal argument overgenerate (cf. Williams 1981, Oshita 1994, Gràcia 1992, 1995), since most unaccusative verbs cannot become bases for -ble, as illustrated by the impossibility of Catalan *cabell creixible ‘growable hair’, Spanish *tren llegable ‘arrivable train’, English *emergeable truth or German *passierbarer Unfall ‘happen-able accident’ (Siebert 1999; but Riehemann 1993). Interestingly, under certain circumstances, such impossible forms become perfectly acceptable in Spanish, e.g. Llegó todo lo llegable ‘It arrived everything that could arrive’, or not quite as ungrammatical as one would expect in German, e.g. ?Es passierte alles Passierbare ‘It happened everything that could happen’ (G. Müller, personal communication), although they remain ungrammatical for (most?) Catalan speakers and are impossible in English. In this talk I discuss the properties of this small set of existing unaccusative-based -ble forms in these languages and contrast them to the impossible ones in an attempt to contribute a better understanding of the conditions underlying deverbal -ble affixation, which in turn, may shed light onto the general properties of unaccusatives and the architecture of grammar.

References