Background/Claim: There are two primary ways of analyzing the reflexive clitic se in sentences like (1): (i) se is a part of an optional complement of the consumption verb, a low applicative (Armstrong 2010) or the complement of a goal-like P (Campanini & Schäfer 2011; De Cuyper 2006; MacDonald 2004) that forces a bounded interpretation of the event or (ii) se is a light verb that obligatorily marks the fact that the consumption verb describes a bounded event (Basilico 2010; Sanz 2000). In this paper, I draw from all of this work to argue that se has an in-between status in these constructions, functioning as either an Appl head or a light verb as shown in (2a/b). I then use this idea to motivate a distinction between consumption verbs and other activity verbs in Spanish that has consequences outside of se constructions. The overall claim is that ‘internalization’ (i.e. – the subject’s taking in of a quantity denoted by the verb phrase), which is a conceptual notion, is represented in Spanish as a feature [+/-INTERNAL] on individual lexical roots as shown in (3). This feature is argued to have both morpho-syntactic and semantic consequences in the language.

se Constructions: The proposal is based in part on se constructions like (1). The in-between status of se is motivated first by the fact that many speakers (the majority of those consulted here) require se in order to interpret consumption events described by verbs such as comer as bounded (cf. Sanz 2000) as shown in (4). This can be easily accounted for if the obligatory use of se is a light verb while its optional use is an applicative. Interestingly, no other activity verb class outside of consumption verbs requires the presence of se in a context where it describes a bounded event as shown in (5). For these verbs, se is always optional, and hence an Appl. This pattern correlates with the fact that the data on ‘unselected’ arguments from De Cuyper (2006) and Folli & Harley (2005) only applies to consumption verbs and not to any other kind of activity as shown in (6). While se appears obligatorily with the root \(v\)com(er) to mark the fact that there is an unselected subject – object combination, the same kinds of examples with other activity verbs sound odd when marked with se. Sentences like (6a) are argued to be bounded events in which se serves as a marker of a partial kind of abstract meaning (i.e.- ‘the subject is the causer of the disappearance of the object’) that is only possible with lexical roots where it obligatory appears as a light verb (cf. Folli & Harley 2005). Finally, se is compatible with any other kind of (third person) applicative that can appear with consumption verbs whereas it cannot appear with certain applicative constructions typical of creation verbs, such as benefactives, as shown in (7). If se is a light verb when it appears with consumption verbs and an applicative when appearing with other activity verbs, this difference is expected.

The Relevance of the [+/-INTERN] Feature: In order to account for why a light verb is spelled out as a pronominal clitic, some explanation is necessary. I claim that vocabulary insertion is sensitive to the value of the [+/-INTERN] feature on the V head in bounded transitive constructions like those of (8), where [q] indicates that the object DP is an object of quantity (Borer 2005; MacDonald 2004). If a verb stem is marked [+INTERN] (8a), then vocabulary insertion is required to spell out the phi features of the subject in v as the se clitic while a verb stem specified as [-INTERN] does not induce this particular reflex at vocabulary insertion in the same grammatical context. This explains why it is only for consumption verbs that there is any kind of obligatory use of se in bounded transitive events. The nature of the applicative construction is outlined in (9). I suggest that it is a defective applicative head (Cuervo 2003) that selects a bounded event and adds a subject-oriented conventional implicature (separated by a colon in 9b), cf. Bosse, Bruening & Yamada 2010) stating that the quantity denoted by the VP is an “internalization” (cf. Campanini & Schäfer 2011). This forces the presence of a subject capable of internalizing (literally or metaphorically) that quantity. The Appl head itself is bound by the subject and spelled out by the reflexive clitic. The bleaching of this implicature, something expected for verbs that already describe events of internalization (= consumption verbs), is what triggers a re-analysis of Appl as v. Lastly, the examples in (10) show that consumption verbs can form adjectival passives whose sole argument is interpreted as the agent.
rather than the theme of the consumption event (Bosque 2009: 2099). This is not consistently possible for any other class of activity verbs (10a’/b’). I claim that this difference is another grammatical property that is sensitive to the [+/-INTERN] feature. Thus, the feature is not simply an arbitrary label used to explain the nuances exhibited in SE constructions but appears to have more general relevance in the language.

(1) Juan se comió el pastel.
Juan SE.3s ate the cake

(2) a. \([v [\text{DP Subj}] v [\text{Appl SE} [\text{VP} [\text{DP Obj}]]]]\)
b. \([v [\text{DP Subj}] v-\text{SE} [\text{VP} [\text{DP Obj}]]]\)

(3) Types of activity-denoting roots

\(\text{[-INTERN]}\)
\(\text{\textbackslash{com}(er) (eat), \textbackslash{beb}(er) (drink), \textbackslash{le}(er) (read)}\)
\(\text{[-INTERN]}\)
\(\text{\textbackslash{cocin}(ar)(cook), \textbackslash{cant}(ar) (sing), \textbackslash{barr}(er) (sweep)}\)

(4) CONTEXT: “Juan ate the entire cake”
a. Juan \(\text{\textasciitilde} (se) \) comió el pastel. (Type 1 Speaker)  
b. Juan (se) comió el pastel. (Type 2 Speaker)

(5) CONTEXT: “Juan swept the entire house”
Juan (se) barrió la casa. (Type 1 & 2 Speakers)

(6) a. El mar \(\text{\textasciitilde} (se) \) come la playa.
The sea SE.3s eats the beach
b. El viento \(\text{\textasciitilde} (se) \) barre la calle.
The wind SE.3s sweeps the street

(7) a. Juan se le comió el pastel a María.
Juan SE.3s DAT ate the cake DAT María
b. Juan \(\text{\textasciitilde} (se) \) le cocinó una cena a María
Juan SE.3s DAT cooked a dinner DAT María

(8) RELEVANCE OF [+/-INTERN] IN TRANSITIVE ENVIRONMENTS

a. \([v [\text{DP Subj}]_q \alpha \{V_{[-INTERN]}-v\}_q \alpha [v [V_{[-INTERN]} [\text{DP Obj}]-\text{q}]]\]\n
b. \([v [\text{DP Subj}]_q \alpha \{V_{[-INTERN]}-v\}_q [v [V_{[-INTERN]} [\text{DP Obj}]-\text{q}]]\]\n
(9) APPLICATIVE CONSTRUCTION

a. \([v [\text{DP Subj}] [\text{Appl-[q]} [v [V [\text{DP Obj}]]]]]\)
b. \([\text{Appl-[q]}] = \lambda e_{\text{SE}_3}\lambda e. f(e) : \text{internalization(e)}\)

(10) a. una persona bien comida
a person well eaten
(\(=\) a person who has eaten a lot)

b. una persona muy leída
a person very read
(\(=\) a person who has read a lot)