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$$\succ \quad \quad \quad \wedge$$
 \succ \triangleright

When that call to stats is first encountered, if stats was not previously compiled, IDL is assuming it is not a function, it is an array indexed with parentheses. In array indices there cannot be an equal sign, which is the syntax error. If you compile stats, then IDL knows there is a function called stats, and interprets that line as a function call.

(or "compile_opt idl2", which also changes the default integer to 32 bit)

to the beginning of the timeseries procedure. This will make only square brackets allowed for array indexing, so parentheses will always mean function calls.