

Characterising verbs in English and Spanish: a corpus-based contrastive study

Noelia Ramón García

UNIVERSITY OF LEÓN

1. Introduction

This paper is part of the ACTRES project on contrastive linguistics (University of León, Spain), which attempts to establish functional-semantic equivalents in English and Spanish in a number of problematic areas. This paper deals with verbal characterisation in English and Spanish and the different semantic functions associated to the syntactic realizations of these functions. This is a particularly problematic semantic area in an English-Spanish contrast, and leads to negative interference in translation.

In both languages there is a wide range of syntactic means available for characterising verbs, and the meanings may relate to time, place, manner, purpose, etc. This apparent complexity, however, conceals subtle associations between particular meanings and the most frequently used syntactic form to actualise those meanings (Bondarko 1991). Authentic language data corresponding to two sample verbs, *make* and *hacer*, have been extracted from monolingual corpora to reveal these associations.

2. Adverbials: syntax and semantics

When considering verbal modification in a broad sense, we are considering the grammatical category usually called *adverbials*. Following Biber et al. (1999), we distinguish three types of adverbials: a) circumstance adverbials add information about the action or state described in the clause; b) stance adverbials add information related to the speaker's opinion about what he/she is saying; c) linking adverbials serve a connecting function rather than adding information to a clause. I will only consider circumstance adverbials here, as they are the most frequent class, they have a wide range of meanings, and can be actualised by various syntactic categories. I will focus on meaning distribution only, leaving aside issues related to the position of adverbials in the clause.

Circumstance adverbials may be realized by a variety of syntactic forms, as mentioned above, ranging from adverbs and adverb phrases (AdvPs) to NPs, PPs, finite clauses and non-finite clauses of various types. They may convey a variety of meanings, too, including time, place, manner, instrument, reason, purpose, condition, concession, addition/restriction, recipient, and perspective.

The aim of this paper is to carry out a syntactic and semantic analysis of all the instances found in our sample corpora, in order to find possible patterns of typicality that would associate particular grammatical units to specific meanings, since "the different semantic categories of circumstance adverbials are not associated equally with these different syntactic forms." (Biber et al. 1999: 787). The contrast of such results will reveal patterns of functional-semantic equivalence in English and Spanish.

3. Methodological procedure

Two sample corpora of roughly 30 million words each were extracted from Cobuild/Bank of English and CREA (Corpus de Referencia del Español Actual), including texts from 1990-2001 written in British English and European Spanish.

The verb *make* was chosen for the analysis as it is among the ten most common verbs in the English language¹. The referential equivalent in Spanish – the verb *hacer* – was chosen to carry out the contrast. Both verbs occur with a high frequency in their respective languages, and all senses have been taken into account, including all uses as single verbs, in fixed expressions, collocations or lexical bundles.

1 According to the word lists provided by Cobuild/Bank of English.

Only forms in the present tense were selected for the analysis. Considering that adverbials are often optional clause elements, 1000 concordances were extracted for each language to obtain a sufficiently representative number of instances of verbal modification. In English I selected 500 concordances of the 3rd person singular –s form *makes*, and another 500 concordances of the base form *make*. In Spanish examples were extracted from all six possible morphological forms of the verb *hacer* in the present tense: *hago*, *haces*, *hace*, *hacemos*, *hacéis* and *hacen*..

All the concordances were analysed independently in each language from a formal and from a semantic perspective. Only those cases with a single adverbial were taken into account to allow for a clear picture of the syntax-semantics patterning.

In the English subcorpus there were 195 cases of single adverbial modifiers (19.5%), whereas in the Spanish subcorpus there were 338 instances (33.8%). There seems to be a stronger inclination towards verbal modification in *hacer* than in *make*, which may simply be due to their different lexical scopes. This is no major drawback, though, since the focus here lies in the correlation between form and meaning where there *is* verbal modification.

4. Juxtaposition & contrast

In a number of semantic functions, English and Spanish showed very strong trends towards the use of one particular grammatical structure. Additive and restrictive meanings were always actualised by adverbs or AdvPs in both languages. The meanings of recipient and instrument were in all cases realised by PPs. And finally, condition and concession were expressed exclusively by means of finite clauses in our corpora. We can speak here of a one-to-one relationship between meaning and form.

The six remaining functions, however, presented less strong associations between form and meaning, and the trends observed in English and Spanish can be seen in contrast in the following figures, which include the percentage of occurrence of each form for each function in both languages.

The semantic function of time is realized in English mainly by PPs (*the plans that he makes over the year*) and adverbs or AdvPs (*make any difference right now*), both in the group labelled “adverb”, followed by finite clauses (*As the baby grows, several experiences make this struggle more bearable*) and, to a smaller extent, by NPs (*make it even tougher for them this time*). No single structure dominates clearly over the rest in this case. In contrast, the Spanish half of the inverted pyramid shows a slightly less homogeneous situation, with over 50% of instances realized by adverbs or AdvPs (*lo que hago ahora*),

SEMANTIC FUNCTION: TIME

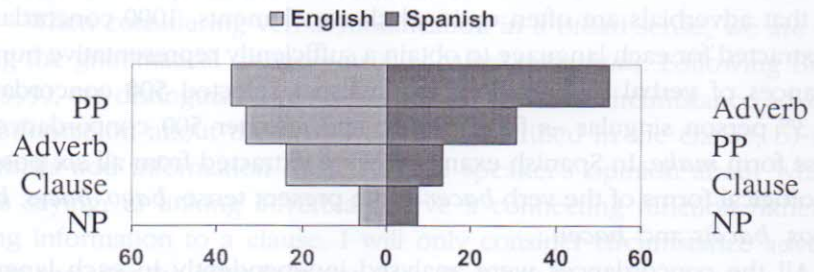


Figure 1: English-Spanish contrast for the semantic function of time.

followed by PPs (*el dinero que hacemos en tres meses*). The remaining units are the same in both languages, but with somewhat different percentages of occurrence. The contrast illustrated in Figure 1 indicates little variation in this particular semantic function in English and Spanish. There may be cases where PPs in English may yield PPs or adverbs in Spanish, where they are more prominent.

SEMANTIC FUNCTION: PLACE

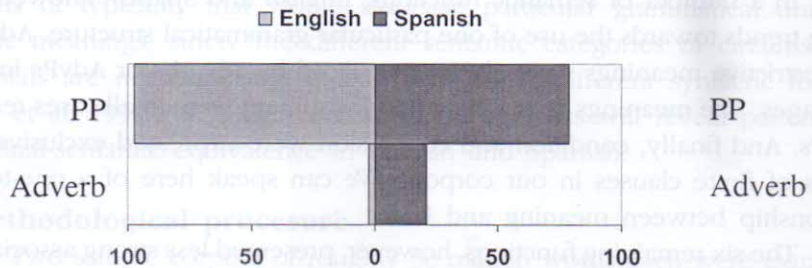


Figure 2: English-Spanish contrast for the semantic function of place.

Locative meanings are overwhelmingly realized by PPs in English (*we make fine wine in England*), with only a small percentage of adverbs: ... *makes a fine base here*. A very similar trend can be observed in Spanish, with a clear preference for PPs: *¿qué hago yo en Valencia?* The use of adverbs, however, is more frequent in Spanish than in English: *no sé qué hago aquí*. Consequently, it seems probable that some PPs in English may correspond to adverbs in Spanish, showing the same trend observed in Figure 1.

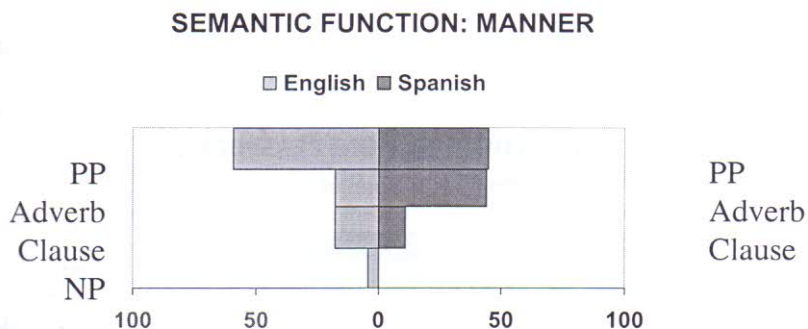


Figure 3: English-Spanish contrast for the semantic function of manner.

Manner is realized mainly by PPs in English, with over half the instances: *which, in some ways, makes them the archetypal slacker band*. Non-finite clauses and adverbs show small percentages of occurrence, and there was one case of a NP. In Spanish there are two major syntactic realizations for expressing manner, PPs and adverbs: *lo que hacemos de forma instintiva; lo hacemos bien*. Only a small percentage of cases corresponds to clauses: *lo hacemos relacionándolos con otras palabras*. Figure 3 shows a much stronger trend in Spanish towards the use of manner adverbs than in English, which results in PPs in English probably yielding adverbs or AdvPs in Spanish. Again we find a similar trend to those found in Figures 1 and 2.

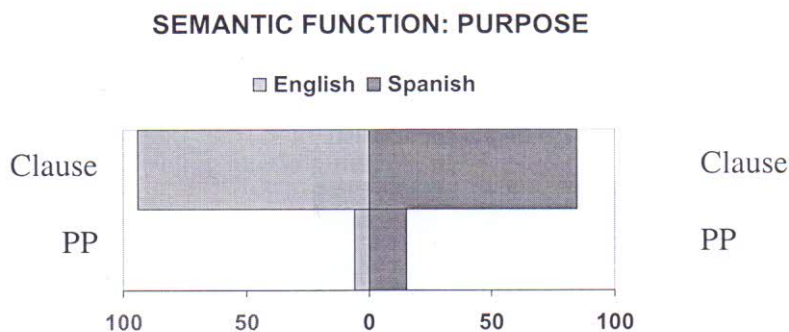


Figure 4: English-Spanish contrast for the semantic function of purpose.

The trend is very similar in both languages for the meaning of purpose, with clauses at the top: *she makes every effort to keep it clean; ¿Qué haces para equilibrarte?* PPs occur only in a few marginal cases. We can see here a very

strong link between meaning and its syntactic realization similar in both languages.

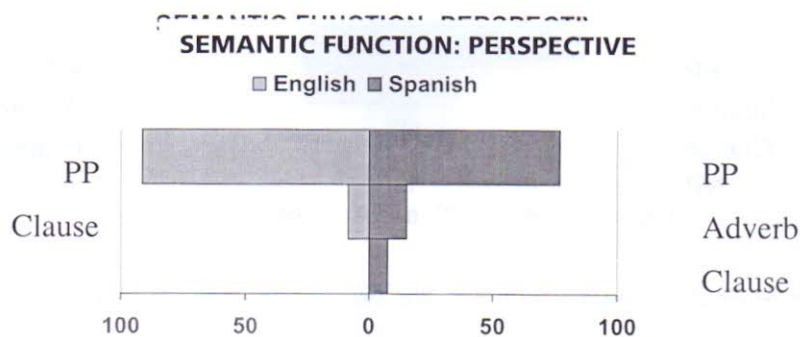


Figure 5: English-Spanish contrast for the semantic function of perspective.

The semantic category labelled “perspective” includes a small number of concordances that relate to the expression of respect, perspective or contextualisation. The actualisation of this meaning is overwhelmingly associated to PPs in English and Spanish: ... *makes decisions in terms of economic motivations*; *hacemos cambios según las necesidades*. The Spanish corpus contained examples of AdvPs, and in each language I found one case of a non-finite clause with this meaning. Figure 5 shows a very similar trend in English and Spanish.

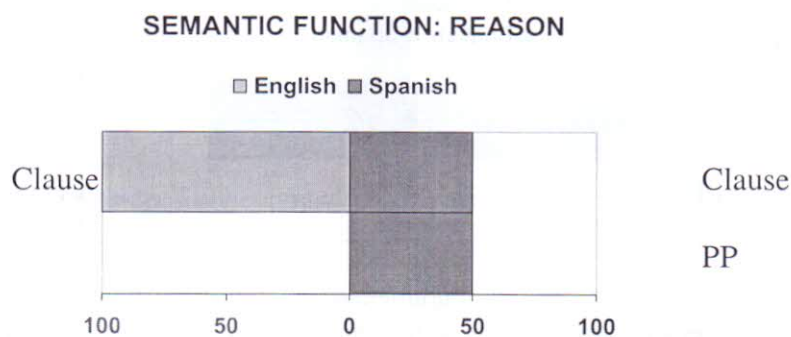


Figure 6: English-Spanish contrast for the semantic function of reason.

Finite clauses express the semantic function of reason: *make the most of it because we may never play: lo hago porque es la única forma de asegurarme de que ...* There is a straight one-to-one relationship in English, whereas in Spanish we find 50% of occurrences realized by PPs too, most of which headed by the preposition *por*: *lo hacemos por deducción*. The single option in English may be due to the small number of examples of this particular meaning in our corpus. Nevertheless, Figure 6 shows that clauses present a much stronger option in English than in Spanish. A number of clauses may thus be translated into Spanish by PPs including complex NPs, for example.

5. Conclusions

The data show that some types of meanings expressed by adverbials have a one-to-one correspondence with particular syntactic realizations. The most common syntactic realizations for circumstance adverbials in general are PPs, and not adverbs.

The semantic function of time is the one that presents the widest range of possible realizations in both languages, whereas in the remaining functions there is always one major grammatical resource: PPs for manner, place and perspective, and clauses for reason and purpose. The trends are similar in both languages, although adverbs seem to be more recurrent in Spanish than in English, where PPs constitute the most frequent syntactic category. This difference is particularly noticeable in the case of time and manner, and should be taken into account in translation activities.

To conclude, it is necessary to point out that this is merely a preliminary study on the question of verbal modification in English and Spanish, based exclusively on data found for one single verb in each language. Further studies on the topic should cover a broader range of verbs, enabling us to be more precise in establishing interlinguistic correspondences.

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