

Biactant Spanish clauses. Syntactic markedness and semantic prototype

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In this paper I intend to look at the relationship between syntax and semantics in Spanish biactant clauses. I am particularly interested in the analysis of some characteristics of these clauses that confirm the hypothesis of the transitivity notion as a cluster concept, which has been proposed by both Lakoff (1977) and Hopper and Thompson (1980).¹

1. Core vs. peripheral participants

The present analysis is restricted to clauses with two central or core participants. With regard to the distinction between central and non-central participants, it is understood that, although grammatical encoding for the central participants is governed by universal tendencies, it is a language specific matter. As a result, the inventory of central syntactic functions of clauses must be established independently in every language. With respect to Spanish, we can assume that the central participants are those coded by the syntactic functions SUBJECT, DIRECT OBJECT and INDIRECT OBJECT.

The consideration of the indirect object as a central function and not as a peripheral one may appear controversial; there are, however, syntactic and semantic reasons that support this claim.²

When meaning is considered, the central functions clearly involve a certain weakening or 'neutralization' of semantic distinctions which can be seen in alternative constructions with non-central functions. This process, which in this case involves the indirect object, is illustrated in the following pairs of examples (1), (2) and (3):

- (1) a. *Han reservado habitaciones para los conferenciantes*
b. *Les han reservado habitaciones a los conferenciantes*
- (2) a. *No pongas aceitunas en la ensalada*
b. *No le pongas aceitunas a la ensalada*

- (3) a. *La chica acarició la cara del niño*
 b. *La chica le acarició la cara al niño*

It is worth noting here that the linguistic value of central functions cannot be identified with any particular case roles such as those of Agent, Patient, Receiver; nevertheless, it is clearly recognized by the contrast between the three central functions, as E. García has claimed in her penetrating analysis of the Spanish pronoun system (García 1975).

On considering the syntactic features of central functions, we can expect a process of grammaticalization of expression devices which leads to a less marked morphological encoding. This does not mean that core functions are universally characterized by such syntactic features as a lack of prepositional marking, which may well be the case in English. In Spanish, the occasional presence of the preposition *a* does not deny the central character of the direct object, and neither does this presence justify the alignment of the indirect object with peripheral participants.

There is, however, a significant index of expression shared by the three central functions of Spanish clauses: the possibility or necessity of agreement with the predicate of the clause, the verb.

The encoding of grammatical features of core arguments in the predicate can be manifested in Spanish through inflectional categories (that is, endings of number and person in the verbal stem for the subject function), or through unstressed personal pronouns (that is, proclitics or enclitics to the verbal form, for direct and indirect object functions). These items of agreement are apparent in the following example:

- (4) *El regalo se lo daremos nosotros al niño.*
 the gift I.O.3 D.O.3msg give.FUT.1pl we to the boy
 'We will give the gift to the boy.'

Of course, the extent of this agreement between verb and core arguments is unequal for each of the three central functions. While the agreement of the subject is virtually always obligatory, when looking at the object, if one excludes those cases of the clitic alone, the indirect objects agree in 63.40% of cases, whereas the direct objects only agree in 2.31% of cases, as you can see in Table 1:³

As the subject is the most central (or prominent) of central functions, these differences in the extent of agreement can be accounted for by the semantic and pragmatic features that predominantly characterize the subject function.

Table 1. Frequencies and percentages of verb-object agreement

	D. O.		I. O.	
With clitic agreement	1350	2,31%	2063	63.40%
Without clitic agreement	57025	97.69%	1191	36.60%
Total	58375		3254	

In consequence, central functions can be ranked in a subject-like hierarchy of agentivity-topicality (notions which here have to be considered as cluster concepts) which displays the above mentioned differences of agreement as one of its syntactic manifestations. The hierarchy is:

SUBJECT > INDIRECT OBJECT > DIRECT OBJECT

This gradation of the central functions establishes a relationship of maximum contrast between subject and direct object. As a result, the kind of clauses that display this polarization in the clearest way are those of the pattern SUBJECT-DIRECT OBJECT. Since it is not accidental that this is the pattern that in Spanish constitutes the normal expression for what are considered prototypical actions, we can interpret it as the canonical transitive pattern. Nevertheless, this pattern is also present in clauses which depart from the transitive prototype, such as those semantically less transitive clauses in accordance with Lakoff's and Hopper & Thompson's parameters.

On the other hand, not every biactant clause is encoded in Spanish by the canonical transitive pattern. If oblique functions are omitted, we can observe that a number of biactant clauses in Spanish display the pattern SUBJECT-INDIRECT OBJECT.

This presence of an indirect object, instead of the most common direct object, has been seen as a mere inheritance from Latin verbs which governed an object in the dative case. However, a few grammarians (R. J. Cuervo, S. Fernández Ramírez) noticed recurrent semantic differences in the use of an indirect object versus a direct object in Spanish. The observations of these grammarians are the starting point for the following analysis.

This analysis proposes that the variation in the syntactic coding of the object in Spanish biactant clauses supports the idea that, in the expression of events with two central participants, the transitive semantic prototype is correlated with an unmarked (or less marked) syntactic construction, whereas a

certain degree of departure from the prototype is matched with a marked (or more marked) pattern.⁴

To verify this hypothesis, it is necessary to look at two aspects of the issue.

In the first place, the semantic features of transitive clauses will be compared with these of SUBJECT-INDIRECT OBJECT clauses in order to find systematic differences of meaning coherent with the prototype model of the Transitivity notion. In the second place, it will be shown that the pattern SUBJECT-INDIRECT OBJECT is syntactically marked in contrast with the unmarked construction SUBJECT-DIRECT OBJECT. In order to explore the former, that is, the semantic configuration of biactant clauses, certain features that characterize the prototypical actions will be selected, and whether or not these features are present in SUBJECT-INDIRECT OBJECT clauses will be verified.

To start with, it is assumed that a prototypical transitive clause refers to a transfer from an agent to a patient. Agent and patient roles are defined by Langacker:

“The archetypal ‘agent’ role is that of a person who volitionally carries out physical activity which results in contact with some external object and the transmission of energy to that object. The polar opposite of an agent is an inanimate ‘patient’, which absorbs the energy transmitted by externally initiated physical contact and thereby undergoes some change of state” (1991: 210)

With regard to the features that will be examined here, we can therefore logically expect that a prototypical transitive clause will have an animate and volitional subject and an inanimate object.

2. The features of animacy

Many researchers⁵ working on typologically unrelated languages have proved that the possibilities of using a non-canonical transitive coding increase when the animacy of the subject is lowered and/or the inanimacy of the object is raised in the Animacy hierarchy.

This tendency is also confirmed by Spanish data. The SUBJECT-DIRECT OBJECT clauses and the SUBJECT-INDIRECT OBJECT clauses display a highly different picture regarding the animate vs. the inanimate character of their participants. See Table 2 and Table 3:

To assess in full measure the significance of these data, which do not exclude the existence of unexpected combinations, we should not lose sight of

Table 2. Frequencies and percentages of animate vs. inanimate participants in SUBJECT-DIRECT OBJECT clauses⁶

	Animate		Inanimate	
Subject	42258	84.13%	7971	15.87%
Direct object	8608	17.14%	41621	82.86%

Table 3. Frequencies and percentages of animate vs. inanimate participants in SUBJECT-INDIRECT OBJECT clauses

	Animate		Inanimate	
Subject	1022	24.84%	3093	75.16%
Indirect object	3825	92.95%	290	7.05%

the fact that animacy is only one factor in the long series of parameters that determine the transitivity of clauses.

In addition to the quantitative data displayed in Tables 2 and 3, other arguments can be provided in favour of the 'animacy constraint'.

As regards the animacy of the object, we can observe important qualitative differences between direct objects and indirect objects in biactant clauses: while with most verbs the indirect object is necessarily animate (and mainly human), there are only a very few verbs that govern a necessarily animate direct object (v.gr. *ayudar*, *sobornar*, etc.).

It is also interesting to note the effects of the animate or inanimate character of the object on the selection of a direct versus an indirect object with those verbs that take both patterns. We can distinguish three possibilities:

1. Verbs that take a DIRECT OBJECT if the object is inanimate, and an INDIRECT OBJECT if it is animate. Each pattern conveys a clear difference in the meaning of the verb, as can be seen in (5) and (6):

- (5) a. *Los abogados han convenido las condiciones del contrato*
[D.O.]
b. *Al abogado [I.O.] le convienen las condiciones del contrato*

- (6) a. *El gobierno importa alimentos [D.O.] de Australia*
b. *La composición del gobierno no les importa a muchos ciudadanos [I.O.]*

2. Verbs that take the SUBJECT-DIRECT OBJECT pattern when they combine with an inanimate object, but alternate the DIRECT OBJECT and INDIRECT OBJECT, with noticeable systematic differences in the meaning of the clause, when they combine with an animate object. Some of these verbs are listed in (7), while (8) shows an example of this alternation:

- (7) *admirar, alcanzar, apurar, encantar, esperar, extrañar, sorprender, tocar, etc.*
- (8) a. *Voy a extrañar a Mariana [D.O.], por ser la última mujer de mi vida* (Hist, 56)
 b. *A él [I.O.] también le extraña que, de repente, lo tan ansiado parezca recuerdo de cosa ya olvidada* (Son, 232)

3. The last group of verbs includes those that take an animate object, coded both as a DIRECT OBJECT and as an INDIRECT one. Some verbs that display this behaviour are listed in (9), while (10) shows an example:

- (9) *aburrir, alegrar, asombrar, convencer, disgustar, distraer, estorbar, fascinar, inquietar, molestar, preocupar, seducir, etc.*
- (10) a. *aunque se muere por saber qué es lo que lo [D.O.] preocupa, no le pregunta nada* (BMA, 28)
 b. *Pasan los días, y él se siente mucho mejor, pero le [I.O.] preocupa que ella no le permita ir, ni siquiera acompañarla, al lujoso hotel donde canta todas las noches* (BMA, 24)

This is a slightly problematical class of verbs when it comes to distinguishing which syntactic pattern they take. It is not always possible to distinguish between a direct or an indirect object, because the margin that separates the two constructions is in some cases unclear.

The link between the animacy features and the selection of the syntactic pattern doesn't only limit itself to the animate or inanimate character of the object, but the animacy of the subject is also an important factor in the choice between the transitive pattern versus the SUBJECT-INDIRECT OBJECT pattern, as seen in tables 2 and 3.

The low degree of animacy that characterizes the subject in the SUBJECT-INDIRECT OBJECT pattern is also corroborated by the frequency of clausal subjects in this pattern when it is contrasted with the rather exceptional presence of a subject clause in the transitive pattern. In Table 4 you can see the frequencies and percentages of clausal subjects in the two patterns:

Table 4. Frequencies and percentages of clauses functioning as subject

	Clausal subject		Others	
SUBJ-D.O. pattern	426	0.85%	49803	99.15%
SUBJ-I.O. pattern	1056	25.66%	3059	74.34%

The data in Table 4 prove again that the clauses of the pattern SUBJECT-INDIRECT OBJECT deviate widely from the transitive prototype, which includes among its components a highly agentive, and hence animate, subject. On the other hand, a clausal subject is ranked in the lowest degree of the animacy hierarchy, showing, at the same time, the lowest degree of potentiality of agency⁷. Therefore, it can be explained why some verbs that take alternatively a direct object or an indirect object reject the transitive pattern when they combine with a clausal subject. We can compare (11) and (12) to see this:⁸

- (11) a. *Le sorprendió mucho el comienzo de la guerra*
 b. *Le sorprendió mucho que comenzase la guerra*
- (12) a. *El comienzo de la guerra la sorprendió en París*
 b. **Que comenzase la guerra la sorprendió en París*

Finally, it is necessary to take into account what has already been brought to our attention by R. J. Cuervo, S. Fernández Ramírez, and above all by E. García: this is the fact that with verbs that take both patterns the choice between a direct and an indirect object depends in many cases on the animate or inanimate character of the subject. The examples (13) and (14) show this alternation.

- (13) *una chica de Nueva York toma el barco a una isla del Caribe, donde la [D.O.] espera el novio para casarse. Parece una chica muy buena, y llena de ilusiones, que le cuenta todo al capitán del barco, que es buen mocísimo, y él mira al agua negra del mar, porque es de noche, y después la mira a ella como diciendo 'esta no sabe lo que le [I.O.] espera' (BMA, 163–164).*
- (14) a. *Un hombre baja por Goya leyendo el periódico; cuando lo [D.O.] cogemos pasa por delante de una pequeña librería de lance que se llama Alimento usted su espíritu (Col, 59).*

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- b. *La señorita Elvira se conforma con poco, pero ese poco casi nunca lo consigue. Tardó mucho tiempo en enterarse de cosas que, cuando las aprendió, le [I.O.] cogieron ya con los ojos llenos de patas de gallo y los dientes picados y ennegrecidos* (Col, 73).

3. The parameter of control or volition

Another component of the transitivity notion which will be explored here is the volitional or controlled character of events designated by biactant clauses. The contention that syntactic coding of Spanish clauses reflects the existence of differences in the attribution of control or volition to the participants will be put forward.

According to the transitivity hypothesis, it is to be expected that a controlled or volitional event will be correlated with the canonical transitive pattern, and that the lack of control will be matched by a syntactically deviating pattern.

Some authors⁹ have drawn our attention to the contrast between intentional and unintentional events with regard to pairs of sentences, such as:

- (15) a. *Juan olvidó la cartera*
 b. *A Juan se le olvidó la cartera*
- (16) a. *Pedro rompió las gafas*
 b. *A Pedro se le rompieron las gafas*

These cases, however, were explained solely by focusing on the differences in the active vs. pronominal ("reflexive") character of the verb (cf., for instance, Berg-Seligson 1983: 150), and what was overlooked was that the semantic distinction between (15a) and (15b) (see above) is also present in other pairs of sentences whose predicates don't display differences in voice. This would be the case with *admirar*, *apetecer*, or *repugnar*:

- (17) a. *Creo que me parecía que ella no admiraba lo suficiente aquella fuerza que ahora poseíamos los dos [D.O.]* (Car, 102)
 b. *A Jano [I.O.] le admiraba aquella sensibilidad, tan extraordinaria y exquisita, que Pedro tenía para el Arte* (Car, 28)
- (18) a. *¿Por qué rechaza hoy lo que [D.O.] apeteció ayer?* (Son, 53)

- b. Le [I.O.] *apetece, sobre todo, un largo, largo trago de vino*
(Son, 26)

Nevertheless, it should be admitted that the most productive pattern to express the lack of responsibility or control of a participant in an event is to use the pronominal (reflexive) construction, in its “innermiddle” (“medio-interno”) meaning, which removes the participation of an agent, and to put the non-responsible but involved participant in the INDIRECT OBJECT function.

There are many verbs that take the two alternative patterns, SUBJ.-PRED.-DIR. OBJ. and SUB.-PRED.^{pronominal construction}-IND.OBJ., in correlation with an intentional vs. an unintentional meaning. Some of these verbs are listed below:

- (19) *acabar, apagar, arreglar, arrugar, confundir, derramar, desbaratar, desprender, doblar, enredar, ensuciar, estropear, hundir, levantar, manchar, mezclar, mover, perder, quebrar, quemar, romper, rasgar, terminar, volcar, etc.*

In these cases, the SUBJECT-INDIRECT OBJECT construction appears, once again, as a deviating pattern that expresses a clear semantic departure from the transitivity prototype; furthermore, the low-transitive character of the construction is stressed also by the use of the “reflexive” pronoun, which has an evident detransitivizing function.

The contrast between intentional and unintentional events doesn’t restrict itself to the constructions already mentioned, but it can also be found in other pairs of clauses where the lexical verb functioning as predicate changes. E.g., *amar / gustar, detestar / desagradar*, etc. See also (20) and (21):

- (20) a. *Siento no haberme disculpado*
b. *Me pesa (duele) no haberme disculpado*
(21) a. *Ha ganado varios millones en la lotería*
b. *Le han tocado varios millones en la lotería*

Another group of verbs that show the syntactic shift discussed here are verbs that take both patterns without any change in voice, and which can, in some cases be treated as homonymous lexical items, or, at least, as polysemous words:

- (22) *alcanzar, atraer, convenir, encantar, espantar, extrañar, importar, repeler, rendir, seducir, servir, tirar, tocar, picar, etc.*

In other cases, the differences in lexical meaning are more subtle, and are sometimes extremely unobtrusive. These are clauses that are prone to waver between the transitive pattern and the pattern with an indirect object, and this oscillation can, in some cases, make the identification of pattern virtually impossible. This is particularly so when the object is a first or second personal pronoun or, obviously, if there's no clitic. A sample of verbs that display this behaviour can be seen below:

- (23) *agradar, afectar, alegrar, asombrar, convencer, desagradar, disgustar, distraer, entretener, estorbar, fascinar, halagar, inquietar, intrigar, molestar, preocupar, sorprender, etc.*

4. Marked vs. unmarked biactant clauses

It has been shown that the pattern SUBJECT-INDIRECT OBJECT is a syntactic device that has, among other semantic implications, the effect of reducing the transitivity of a clause by removing the volitional control of the process from the participants in an event.

This claim does not imply a necessarily volitional character of the alternative pattern. That is, it is not to be expected that all transitive-coded clauses will refer to a controlled or intentional event on account of the highly volitional condition of prototypical actions.

If the semantic implications of the unmarkedness of the canonical transitive pattern are not recognized, an adequate interpretation of the contrast in meaning between most of the previously mentioned pairs of examples won't be possible. As a result of this, the sentences will probably be misunderstood, as they were by W. Croft (1991) when he wrote that the expression *Olvidé hacerlo* "is used if the experiencer intentionally forgot" (221), while *Se me olvidó hacerlo* "is used when the forgetting is unintentional [and] the experiencer is not responsible" (ibid).

I agree with the use attributed to the second clause, but the volitional interpretation of *Olvidé hacerlo* sounds very odd, unless it occurs in an explicitly intentional context with an assumed or false sense: e.g., *A propósito olvidé hacerlo*, with the meaning 'I acted as if I had forgotten (but actually I hadn't)'.

To give an adequate explanation of the volitional features that display the semantically extensive range of clauses coded by the transitive pattern, it suffices to accept "the ambiguous nature of the unmarked term" (Greenberg 1966: 26). That is to say, if the marked term, which in our case is the pattern

SUBJECT-INDIRECT OBJECT, involves the unintentionality of the event, then the unmarked term, the SUBJECT-DIRECT OBJECT pattern, is theoretically open to any interpretation, both intentional or unintentional, and other factors will determine which value each particular case will have.

If the contrast between transitive clauses and SUBJECT-INDIRECT OBJECT clauses is interpreted as a difference between the unmarked and the marked members of a category, then this is in accordance with the criteria usually used to determine markedness.

As well as the recently mentioned "neutral value" criterion, we can also refer to the "frequency criterion", according to which the unmarked term is the most frequent one: in our sample we found 50,229 cases of the transitive pattern vs. 4,115 clauses of the SUBJECT-INDIRECT OBJECT pattern.

The "zero expression" criterion also pertains to the morphologically less marked construction of the transitive pattern, given that the direct object does not take a prepositional mark except, of course, the class of *a*-marked direct objects, which should be treated as relatively marked also on a semantic level.

Finally, it is interesting to note here that the marked term will display a "sincretization" of distinctions apparent in the unmarked term. For example, the direct object 3rd person clitics have distinctions of gender (*lo / la*), and number (*lo / los, la / las*), while the indirect object 3rd person clitics only distinguish between the category of number (*le / les*), and occasionally even lose this contrast, using *le* instead of *les* to agree with a plural nominal phrase:

- (24) *Bayardo San Román le puso término a tantas conjeturas con un recurso simple: trajo a su familia en pleno* (Cro, 38)

Notes

1. In spite of the relevance of the transitivity concept for discourse analysis defended in Hopper and Thompson's article, in this description of the Spanish biactant clauses I am going to limit myself to the syntactic and semantic aspects of the matter, without prejudging its possible discourse function, which, on the other hand, could be derived from the consideration of transitivity as a semantic prototype (cf. Delaney 1987).
2. I have explained these arguments at length in Vázquez Rozas (1995).
3. The data in the tables come from a syntactic database elaborated in the Department of Spanish Philology of the University of Santiago de Compostela, in a research project managed by G. Rojo. In its final version this database will be

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the outcome of the analysis of a sample of roughly 150,000 clauses pertaining to modern Spanish oral and written texts (from Spain and Latin America).

4. Within this framework, the use of the preposition *a* with some direct objects has to be understood also as a kind of marked construction, and, accordingly, the semantic features that condition the occurrence of the preposition shouldn't be considered as high-transitivity features. This assumption goes against Hopper & Thompson's claim that an animate object implies a higher degree of transitivity of the clause than an inanimate object.
5. G. Bossong, B. Comrie, R.M.W. Dixon, G. Lazard, etc.
6. It is worth noting that the data of these patterns include the cases of *a*-marked direct objects, which, to a large extent, are marked in this way because of their animate character. If we exclude the *a*-marked direct object biactant clauses from the sample, the percentage of animate direct objects goes down to 2.25% of the cases.
7. The data of Basque and Latin offered by F. Villar (1989) also support this claim.
8. These examples are variations on those presented by Givón (1976: 170): "La guerra le sorprendió mucho", "La guerra lo sorprendió en París".
9. E.g., D. Bolinger (1960), S. Babcock (1970), S. Berg-Seligson (1983).

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