

COMPLEMENTATION IN ENGLISH AND SPANISH POSSESSIVE VERBS. COGNITIVE AND CONTRASTIVE STUDY

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1. INTRODUCTION

This article summarizes a contrastive study of English and Spanish possessive verbs, carried out through the application of cognitive theory. There are two main **reasons** for choosing possessive verbs as the object of study. Firstly, the category of possession is central to language and human life, which makes possessive verbs very frequent. Moreover, it's a category with a wide variety of realizations: possessive verbs are found together with possessive structures such as possessive pronouns or adjectives, Saxon genitive, and so on. Secondly, many possessive verbs have a marginal and non-prototypical status with respect to other transitive verbs. This is reflected, for example, on the fact that some of them do not accept a passive alternative.

2. AIM AND HYPOTHESIS

The **aim** of the study was then to study the complementation patterns of possessive verbs, paying special attention to those examples whose complement was not the prototypical Direct Object. The object is to find an explanation from a cognitive point of view for their complementation patterns (Direct Objects in some cases, less prototypical Complements in others). There are two main **hypothesis** previous to the study: (a) possessive verbs will show features of non-prototypical transitivity and (b) there will be a gradation within the same category, ranging from verbs far away from the prototype to prototypical verbs.

3. METHODOLOGY

As far as **methodology** goes, a corpus was created with possessive verbs found in texts from the digital

edition of the newspapers *El País* and *The Times* (www.elpais.es; www.thetimes.co.uk) between November 2001 and February 2002¹. Fourteen texts from each newspaper were included, therefore fourteen texts in each language, with 40 possessive verbs in English and 37 in Spanish. Although a greater number of texts was analyzed, in many cases no possessive verbs were found. A possible reason is the chosen genre: journalist texts are typically narrative and therefore contain more action than relational and stative processes. More possessive verbs were found in editorials or leaders than in articles devoted to recent news, which narrated events that had just taken place.

Two types of **analysis** were carried out: (a) on the one hand, a semantic analysis, with an examination of the conceptualizations of the possessive meaning in the different verbs and the participants in the sentence; (b) on the other hand, a syntactic analysis, based on the study of the types of Complements that follow these verbs.

4. THEORETICAL BASES

In order to carry out the study, two main theoretical bases were used: (a) cognitive linguistics and (b) studies about the category of possession. Within **cognitive linguistics** it is important to bear in mind the concepts of *iconicity* and *prototype*, especially *syntactic prototype*, as found in Winters (1990:304). The concept of prototype has been applied to the transitive sentence through studies such as those by Taylor (1995) or Givón (1993). The **prototypical transitive sentence** is therefore described from two angles, semantic and syntactic. From a **semantic** point of view these authors coincide in the fact that in a prototypical transitive clause:

- (a) there are two participants, encoded as Subject and Object
- (b) the Subject, typically a human being, acts and controls the action (volitionality)
- (c) the Object is a concrete and highly individuated Patient affected by the action of the Agent
- (d) the Verb is affirmative and realis, and expresses a non-durative and sequential action.

¹ The examples are referred to by the following notation:
TT (*The Times*) + number of text / I (English) + number of example
EP (*El País*) + number of text / E (Spanish) + number of example

From a **syntactic** point of view, a prototypical transitive clause has a verb and a Direct Object, an Object that has no prepositional link with the verb and which can become the Subject in a corresponding passive clause (i). As in prototypical categories, within Direct Objects we find a gradation ranging from these prototypical Direct Objects to those which:

- (a) are introduced by a preposition (Prepositional Objects) (iii)
- (b) cannot become Subject of a passive clause (Predicator Complements (CPs) for Downing and Locke (1992)) (iv)
- (c) both the two previous cases (called Predicators Complements by Downing and Locke, Prepositional Complements by Huddleston (1988)) (v)

These continuum could be represented as follows:

TRANSITIVITY	+	DIRECT OBJECT i
		INDIRECT OBJECT ii ²
		PREPOSITIONAL OBJECT iii / PREDICATOR COMPLEMENT (without preposition) iv
	-	PREDICATOR COMPLEMENT (with any preposition) v

As to **possession**, the starting point is Seiler' s definition of possession, as a binary relation between "substance and substance" and "nominal and nominal". Possession is seen as an *experiential gestalt* (Heine 1997:5) defined as a prototypical notion involving a constellation of properties such as the following:

- (a) the Possessor is a specific human being
- (b) the Possessed is a specific concrete thing (usually inanimate) not an abstract
- (c) the relation between the two is an exclusive one, that is, for each Possessed there is only one Possessor
- (d) the Possessor has the right to make use of the Possessed only with the permission of the Possessor
- (e) the relationship of possession is a long-term one, measured in months or years rather in minutes or

² The Indirect Object in English can become Subject of a passive clause and can be paraphrased with a Prepositional Group introduced just by *to* or *a* in Spanish. These features place it between prototypical Direct Objects and the rest of Complements and Objects.

hours.

(f) in linguistic discourse, the Possessor is presented as a referential entity

(g) the Possessor is responsible for the Possessed

(h) Possessor and Possessed and in close spatial proximity

Possessive verbs are just one of the various possibilities available for expressing possession. And within possessive verbs a variety of structures is found:

- (1) *Juan tiene un libro.*
- (2) *El libro es de Juan.*
- (3) *El libro le pertenece.*
- (4) *El libro consta de tres capítulos.*

This variety of structures shows according to García-Miguel (1995:80) the marginal status of these verbs: "Esta variedad de esquemas para indicar una misma relación substancial (la posesión y la relación todo-parte) parece apoyar el carácter marginal (no prototípico) de las relaciones estáticas entre las predicaciones transitivas". The transitive schema, due to its unmarked character, is applied to structures that are far from the prototype, as relational processes, and within them, possessive verbs.

5. DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS OF THE CORPUS

The first remarkable feature of the corpus analyzed is that the most common verbs are those with the most central possessive meaning, that is, those which do not include other semantic feature like *abound* (possession + great quantity) or *include* (containment). There were no examples of *have got*, normally related to the possessive meaning of *have*, nor verbs such as *possess* or *own*. In all the examples the semantic role of the participants is Possessor and Possessed. Nevertheless, other roles could be found in the other examples from the texts where the possessive meaning was not so clear, as the following ones:

EP11: *Fraga pide que no se **tenga** "miedo injustificado" al cambio "cuando son precisamente las reformas parciales las que evitan las globales".*

TT13: *Even though a third of the adult population **has** high blood pressure, only half of those sufferers are having it treated.*

In these cases the semantic role of the Subject is Experiencer, and not Possessor, as in expressions such as *to have a cold / pain / shock*.

5.1. SEMANTIC ANALYSIS

As it was mentioned above when dealing with methodology, the analysis was carried out from two perspectives, syntactic and semantic. From a semantic perspective there are three relevant aspects: (a) semantic roles, (b) conceptualization and point of view and (c) order and informative structure of the sentence. As for **semantic roles**, in both languages there is a clear majority of inanimate Possessed (around 90%). In English most Possessors are also animate (almost 60%) and human, except two examples (I38 and I39). However, in Spanish there is not such a difference in Possessors. Therefore, in this corpus Possessors are \pm animate and Possessed - animate.

Another aspect worth mentioning is the varieties of **point of view**. In some examples we can find different categorizations according to the point of view, as with *pertecener - belong*, *tener - have*. In the possessive verbs that have been studied, the meaning of possession is conceptualized as a relationship between two participants of the utterance, one of whom possesses the other or exerts control over it. Taking this conceptualization as basic, we can find some prototypical examples (*have*) and others that change the perspective (*belong*). This capacity of possessive verbs to express different points of view through the interchange of verbs makes unnecessary the possibility of a passive equivalent. By changing the verb or using alternative structures such as possessive pronouns or adjectives or genitives we obtain the same effect as in the passive alternative. That would be a reason why verbs as *have* or *belong* to do not have a passive correspondent.

This also has to do with the **order and informative structure** of the sentence, in terms of the functional linguistics theory. Langacker (2001:173) characterizes the Possessor as a conceptual reference point which allows the access to a range of potential domains, that is, the Possessed. This implies a relationship between Possessor and given information and Possessed and new information in discourse. In this way, the unmarked order would be Possessor + Possessed. In the examples from this corpus the majority of cases follow this unmarked order. Those where we find the order Possessed + Possessor can be also accounted for with what has been previously stated: (a) in most of the cases the

Possessed is a pronoun (in Spanish therefore it is obligatory for it to appear before the verb), and as a pronoun is given information: it refers back to an entity previously mentioned in discourse; (b) in the rest of the examples after reading the context it can be found that the Possessor is the new information. The structures with *belong to - pertenecer a* are less prototypical, less frequent, more indirect and more marked (for instance, they need a preposition between Possessor and Possessed). They change the usual order and perspective and they are less iconic.

Other verbs in the periphery of the possessive category, as it was mentioned before, would be those which add a feature to the basic meaning of *have*: *contain, hold*, etc. Verbs like *get* or *lose*, although not appearing in this corpus, could be considered as a less prototypical form of possession, as they refer to a possession that is acquired or lost. Also in the periphery of the category we could find the uses of *have* and *get* as aspect markers, as in *I got it ready* or *Lo tengo dicho*.

5.2. SYNTACTIC ANALYSIS

Prototypical transitive verbs, those which have a Direct Object as Complement, have been differentiated by the possibility of an alternative in the passive voice (all the examples in the corpus are in the active voice). Those Complements which cannot become Subject of a passive sentence have been analyzed as Predicator Complements (CP), a general label used by Downing and Locke (1992) to describe non prototypical Direct Objects (which have to be described in more detail in further studies).

In Spanish it has been considered that the Predicator Complement can be substituted by the pronouns *la / lo / las / los* when it is a nominal group, but it cannot be the Subject of a passive clause.

The analysis shows that the possessive verbs of this corpus are not very prototypical with regard to transitivity in both languages: examples with a Direct Object are around 5 and 13 % in Spanish and English, respectively. This reflects an iconicity principle: neither semantically nor syntactically are they prototypical verbs. Most of the Complements are Predicator Complements realized by nominal groups (64 % in Spanish, 70% in English). Structures with just one Complement are also the most frequent (more than 90 %). This coincides with the basic meaning of these verbs, the relationship between two

nominal groups. When there are two Complements (CP CP) both are obligatory constituents and in most of the cases the first is the Possessed entity and the second has a local (also metaphorically) meaning, as in the following examples:

EP10 E25 *tiene su base // en el barco* CP (NG) // CP (PG)

TT9 I24 *had the club // in his hands* CP (NG) // CP (NG)

6. CONCLUSIONS

As the first hypothesis of this study established, in general possessive verbs are not prototypical verbs neither on syntactic nor on semantic grounds. In most of the cases they do not have a Direct Object that can become the Subject of a corresponding passive, as in prototypical transitive clauses. They do not have either a Patient argument that is affected by the action of an Agent, or do they express an action, as prototypical transitive verbs, but a relationship. But although in general the category is not prototypical, there is a continuum between the different verbs in their semantic and syntactic behaviour, as the second hypothesis stated. This gradation appears in the verb complements: from highly transitive verbs which admit a Direct Object (e.g. *include*) we can go to verbs like *have*, whose Complement is a Predicator Complement. In the semantic aspect there is also a continuum. Starting by verbs with a central possessive meaning, as *have*, which merely expresses the relationship between two entities, we go farther away from the prototype by adding features such as quantity, the relationship of containment, etc. If we still went further by adding more specific features, we would find verbs such as *hold*, *seize* or *grasp*, in the border of the category and difficult to classify as possessive verbs.

These examples also show the iconicity principle: an irregular conceptualization (in semantic roles and types of processes) is expressed also by irregularity in syntax, more concretely in complementation (in Predicator Complements and not Direct Objects). Possessive verbs are not prototypical as they express relational processes, not material processes and they do not have as argument an Agent or prototypical Patient. If they are not prototypical in their meaning, they are not either in their syntactic behaviour: as grammar is symbolic, these verb complements reflect their diversion from the prototype.

It is remarkable that both English and Spanish show the same prototypical effects; everything said

before is valid for both languages. In future studies it would be interesting to enlarge the corpus and the number of languages. Moreover, it would be important to study the alternatives and their motivation in the expression of possession, apart from verbs, that is, those cases where the speaker chooses between a possessive verb, a possessive adjective or pronoun or a genitive.

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