

**‘Exploring inter-constructional
relations in the *constructicon*:
A view from Contrastive (Cognitive)
Construction Grammar’**

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Claims of this presentation

[Claim 1]:


Functional pressures (in particular, the **illocutionary** function of a construct) play a pivotal role in furnishing **robust generalizations** not only among **superficially similar** configurations but also within **formally different** ones, thus pointing to (**pragmatic**) **function** as a plausible unifying factor binding the network of constructions together.



Boas (2010) on Contrastive Construction Grammar:

Another advantage of this contrastive approach is that the semantic description (including discourse-pragmatic and functional factors) of an English construction can be regarded as a first step towards a *tertium comparationis* that can be employed for comparing and contrasting the formal properties of constructional counterparts in other languages. This means that the meaning pole of constructions should be regarded as the primary basis for comparisons of constructions across languages – the form pole is only secondary. (Boas 2010: 14-15, emphasis in original).

A second insight is that constructions enable linguists to state generalizations across languages at different levels of granularity. (Boas 2010: 15).



(1) (a) What's this fly doing in my soup?
(*What's X doing Y?* **construction**;
henceforth WXDY) (Kay and Fillmore 1999: 4)

(b) Pero ¿qué hace/está haciendo esta mosca
but what does is doing this fly
en mi sopa?
in my soup
(**'Pero ¿Qué V-*hacer*-finite X Y?' construction**)




(2) (a) The young James **found himself** a virtual prisoner of the Red Douglasses in Edinburgh castle (BNC AS7 0994)

(The self-descriptive subjective-transitive construction)

(b) Al final de esa temporada pensé que acabaría mi trayectoria en el Barcelona, pero sin darme cuenta, **me encontré** en el paro (CREA).

‘At the end of the season I thought I would end my career in the Barcelona football team but, without being aware of it, I found myself out of my job’



[Claim 2]:

The fact that these two *prima facie* formally unrelated constructions share the expression of a judgement of *incongruity/unexpectedness* by the subject/speaker can be connected with higher-level, more general constructions (e.g. depictive secondary predication constructions) and lower-level, more idiomatic-like constructions (e.g. deictic *there* constructions).

(3) (a) I found/saw Peter **tired/#blue-eyed**

(b) There goes Mary **singing the blues/
*being blue-eyed**



[Claim 3]:

There is a **remarkable degree of similarity**, on both syntactic as well as semantico-pragmatic grounds, between these two pairs of constructions in English and Spanish. However, the constructions are **by no means identical**, thus lending further credence to Croft's (2001) contention that argument structure is not only construction-specific but also language-specific.



[Claim 4]:

The behaviour of these two constructions in English and Spanish can be taken to point to the existence of a smooth interaction of relatively idiomatic constructions (e.g. the WXYD construction) with the more general constructions (e.g. secondary predicates) in shaping the *construct-i-con* (see Kay and Fillmore 1999: 7 for a similar view).



2. The WXYD construction in English and Spanish

(4) (a) What's this fly doing in my soup?

(b) How come there's a fly in my soup?

(Kay and Fillmore 1999: 4)

(5) (a) Pero *¿qué hace el niño en la cocina?*

'What's the child doing in the kitchen?'

(b) (Pero) *¿Qué hace el niño con un cuchillo en la cocina?*

'What is the child doing with a knife in the kitchen?'

(c) *¿Qué demonios/ diablos hace el niño con un cuchillo en la cocina?*

'What the hell is the child doing with a knife in the kitchen?'



2.1. The Semantico-Pragmatic motivation

“(...) the *What’s X doing Y?* construction, like the *How come* question construction, directly encodes, in addition to a request or demand for an explanation, the pragmatic force of attributing what we call incongruity to the scene or proposition for which the explanation is required.” (Kay and Fillmore 1999: 4)



2.2. Grammatical evidence for the WXDY construction

(I) It must contain in the lexical verb slot the verb “do” and “hacer” (‘do’) in English and Spanish, respectively. However, Spanish is considerably more tolerant than English in allowing most dynamic verbs in this slot in this construction.

(6) (a) What’s this fly doing/*aiming at in this soup?

(b) ¿*Pero qué está haciendo/tramando* Connor en el campo de batalla? What’s Connor doing/planning in the battlefield?

www.filmaffinity.com/es/reviews/1/517417.html

(II) This construction, despite the presence of the present participle, is incompatible with a **progressive** reading. However, this restriction is operational in the case of English, but not in Spanish:

(7) (a) “What’s he doing knowing the answer?”

(b) “*He’s knowing the answer”

(Kay and Fillmore 1999: 6)

(c) *Perdone, ¿pero qué hace Vd. lavando el gato, no ve que se le va a ahogar?*

‘Excuse me, what are you doing washing up your cat, can’t you see that you are going to get him/her drowned?’

(d) *Vd. está lavando el gato*

‘You are washing up your cat’



An important observation regarding the **Y complement**: The range of structures that can constitute the Y element is the same, or nearly the same, as the range of structures sometimes called secondary predicates (Kay and Fillmore 1999: 22).

(8) (a) He arrived **without the money**

(b) She left him singing **flamenco**


(9) (a) What is he doing **without the money**?

(b) What is he doing **singing flamenco**?

But similarities should not be **overemphasized**:

(10) What is she doing **the winner**? (**specific to English?**)

The realization of the Y element as a noun is not acceptable in Spanish, thus pointing to a language-specific asymmetry between these languages regarding this construction (Croft 2001).



3. The self-descriptive subjective-transitive construction


The semantics of the construction runs as follows (Gonzálvez-García 2001):

X_j UNEXPECTEDLY REALIZES Y_j IS UNINTENTIONALLY Z

(11) The young James **found himself** a virtual prisoner of the Red Douglasses in Edinburgh castle (BNC)

(12) *Al final de esa temporada pensé que acabaría mi trayectoria en el Barcelona, pero sin darme cuenta, me encontré en el paro* (CREA).

‘At the end of the season I thought I would end my career in the Barcelona football team but, without being aware of it, I found myself out of my job’



3.1. The semantico-pragmatic motivation for the construction

3.1.1. Non-agentive, non-volitive perception/cognition:

Those verbs implying agentive processes of perception appear to be incompatible with this configuration:

(13) (a) * I just don't **look at/encounter/contemplate** myself whispering "Let him go and you stay, Izzie" (Examples adapted from BNC) [cf. *see/ imagine/ picture/ conceive*, etc]

(b)* La verdad es que no me **miro/vigilo/observo** yo escribiendo sobre ti el día de tu muerte (Examples adapted from *La Vanguardia* 10/03/1994)[cf. *veo/ imagino*]

'The truth is that I don't look at/match/observe myself writing on you the day of your death'

(14) What he did was find a couple of tickets for the concert: #
What he did was find himself with a couple of tickets for the concert



3.1.2. Unexpected state of affairs/action/process:

Those matrix verbs conveying an anticipated prediction or expectation clash with the unpredictability implication associated with this frame.

(15) *#As expected/ To my surprise*, I found myself appointed chairman of the research committee (Example adapted from Van Ek & Robat 1984: 312 and approved by native informants)

(16) Tengo yo una pesadilla en la que *#como cabría esperar/ para mi sorpresa*, me veo decrepito dentro de unos años (Example adapted from *El País* 02/08/1987)

‘I have a nightmare in which, *#as should be expected/ to my surprise*, I see myself decrepit within the next few years’



3.1.3. Stage-level construal of the Y element:

The Y element must be likely to be construed as expressing a transient, temporary, episodic property:

(17)*I found myself blue-eyed/intelligent/a man/George Bush
(Example created by the author and approved by native informants)

(18)**La verdad es que, por la mañana, me encontré con ojos azules/
inteligente/ un hombre/ George Bush* (Example adapted from *ABC electrónico*, 06/8/1992)

*‘The truth is that, in the morning, I found myself blue-eyed/intelligent/a man/George Bush’



3.1.4. Informational salience of the XP element:

The more informationally salient a given XP, the more felicitous it will be in this frame (Focus= the unpredictable or pragmatically non-recoverable element in an utterance, Lambrecht 1994: 207; cf. Ackerman and Goldberg 1996)

(19) A. I found myself the object of a takeover

B. That's a lie! You found yourself the victim of a terrorist attack

B.' That's a lie! # You did not find yourself in any specific state/situation

(20) *Y entonces rápidamente me encontré escribiendo por dinero (CREA)*

B. Eso es mentira. Tú te encontraste escribiendo por pura vocación

B.' Eso es mentira. #Tú no te encontraste haciendo nada

Sometimes informational salience may save an otherwise unacceptable result:

(21) #He finds himself the only person:: He finds himself the only person in the building.



Another interesting asymmetry between English and Spanish:

One final point should be noted regarding the morphosyntactic realizations of the Y element. While English allows every category to occur in this slot, including NPs, Spanish is less tolerant than English in disallowing this category in the Y slot and employing a finite *que*-clause instead.

(22)(a) He found himself the target of a terrorist attack

(b) *Se encontró el objetivo de un ataque terrorista

(c) Se encontró **con que era el objetivo de un ataque terrorista**

He found, to his surprise, that he was the target of a terrorist attack



4. Exploring the connections of the WXDY and the self-descriptive subjective-transitive constructions with other constructions in the constructicon

Fillmore and Kay note that the Y element in the WXDY construction shows similar restrictions to (subject/object-oriented) secondary predicates (see also González-García 2009, 2011 on the subjective-transitive construction).

(23) He arrived **sober** (**primary predication**)

(24) I consider her **an excellent person** (**secondary predication**)

(25) *Llegó sobrio*

(26) *La considero una excelente persona*



Are robust generalizations feasible?

In my opinion, the answer is definitely **yes**. A robust generalization emerging from the data examined here is that the Y element in the following constructions (involving different levels of abstraction/specificity as well as compositionality/idiomaticity):

- (i) **the WXDY construction** (What's this fly doing in my soup?)
- (ii) **the self-descriptive subjective-transitive construction** (I found myself out of a job)
- (iii) **the subjective-transitive construction** (I found the chair uncomfortable)
- (iv) **the deictic *there-ahí* construction(s)** (There goes Jonny singing the blues)



There are at least **two** powerful semantic commonalities observable in these four constructions in English and Spanish:

(I) The Y element (or, alternatively, the XPCOMP) must encode a **stage-level** (temporary) rather than individual-level (permanent) property.

(15)(a) *What is he doing blue-eyed/tall/George Bush?

(a') *Pero qué hace con los ojos azules/alto/siendo George Bush?

(b) #I suddenly found myself blue-eyed/tall/George Bush

(b') #Me encontré de repente con los ojos azules/alto/siendo George Bush

(c) #Here comes John blue-eyed/tall/George Bush

(c') #Ahí viene John con ojos azules/alto/siendo George Bush



(II) The Y element (or, alternatively, the XPCOMP) must encode a **characterization**, rather than an identification of, the X element.

(27)(a) I consider her **an excellent person**/***the woman who's just sitting right there**

(a') La considero **una excelente persona**/***la mujer que está sentada justo ahí**

(b) *What's she doing **the woman who's just sitting right there?**

(b') *Pero qué hace **(siendo) la mujer que está sentada justo ahí?**

(c) *I suddenly found myself **the woman who's just sitting right there**

(c') *De repente me encontré **con que era la mujer que está sentada justo ahí**

(d) *Here comes Mary (being) **the woman who's just sitting right there**

(d') *Ahí viene María **(siendo) la mujer que está sentada justo ahí**



5. Some closing remarks:

A similarity in pragmatic function, *viz.* the expression of a judgement by the subject/speaker of the state of affairs in question as being incongruous, unexpected (and more likely than not to be interpreted as new information) is coupled with a similar patterning regarding the semantico-pragmatic restrictions on the Y (or, alternatively, XPCOMP) element.

It still remains to be explored how far this criterion can be reliably used as a unifying element in shaping not only **intra-constructional**, but especially **inter-constructional** relations in the construction in English and Spanish.



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Thank YOU very much for your attention!
Any comments, questions, suggestions, etc. are
indeed more than welcome!

