Some Differences Between English and Spanish

Concerning Direct-Object Constructions

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Abstract

This paper is devoted to studying some syntactical differences between English and Spanish as regards direct-object constructions.

The paper consists of four sections. Sections 1 tackles the question of whether there always is an entity denoted by the direct-object expression. Section 2 attempts to cope with problems raised by verbal nouns governing direct objects. Section 3 approaches double direct-object constructions. Finally, Section 4 deals with some relationships between direct-objects and passive-voice transformations.

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Section 1.- Definite and indefinite direct-objects

A serious problem concerning the difference between direct-object constructions in English and in Spanish is the following. Due to its using prepositions 'a' (only) in some cases, Spanish can easily distinguish these two statements:

(1) Estoy buscando a un amigo
(2) Estoy buscando un amigo

In English, both (1) and (2) would translate as (3)

(3) I'm looking for a friend

Now, to be sure, (1) entails (4), which (2) doesn't:

(4) Hay un amigo a quien estoy buscando

The problem then arises as to whether or not (3) entails (5):

(5) There's a friend whom I'm looking for

But, obviously, (3) is the surface transformation of two different deep-structure sentences, one of which does indeed entail (5), whereas the other does not.

However, the question to be taken up in this connection is whether in English an alternative procedure is available for distinguishing -whenever it's felt necessary- the two readings of (3).

First of all, we had rather find out the deep structure of such sentences. I am cognizant of no other account than paraphrases such as:

(6) I'm endeavouring to find a friend

Now, (6) is tantamount to (7):
(7) I'm endeavouring to bring about that I have found a friend

    Now, according as the scope of the "indefinites article"
    'a' (that is to say: of the deep-structure particular-quantifier)
    in (7) is narrow or large, (7) will be read as (8) or as (9):

(8) There's a friend I'm endeavouring to bring about that I have
    found him

(9) I'm endeavouring to bring about that there's a friend I have found

    Now, disambiguation of (3) can be carried out fairly
    smoothly. Passive-structure are common in English. Hence, (8)
    can be expressed in English as (10), which (9) cannot

(10) A friend is being looked for by me

    (10) sounds odd. Nevertheless, I think oddness is
    ensuant on the particular example's own peculiar features (such
    as the occurrence of a deictic). We can say, for instance, that
    Jesus was unsuccessfully looked for by his parents.

    The foregoing discussions, however, has not allowed us
    to pinpoint any systematic difference between English and Spanish
    as regards the problem of the existence of one entity refered to
    by the direct object. Spanish doesn't always use a prepositional
    means in order to distinguish the two cases. Roughly speaking,
    that use only occurs when the object, should it exist, would be a
    person. So, Spanish faces the same ambiguity problem as English
    does in cases such as (11)

(11) Te debo un libro

    For, I may have borrowed a particular book from you,
    which then I owe you. But, on the other hand, I may have promised
    you to give you some book or other, and then there's no book I
    owe you. (I will not tell you, on giving you a book later on: '
    this is the book I owed you'.) We can guess that (11) is the
    surface-structure transform of two different deep-structure
    sentences, to wit:

(12) Tengo el deber de que haya un libro que yo te dé
(13) Hay un libro que tengo el deber de darte

    So, wherever direct objects' referents are -or should be-
    inanimate, Spanish seems to fare the way English does.
Section 2. - Verbal Nouns Governing Direct-Objects

One most striking particularity of English, as compared with some other languages, is its having verbal nouns governing a direct object. To myself, this is evidence of the fact that, in English, noun phrases and verb phrases have more features than they do in other Indo-European languages.

Take, for instance, a sentence like (1):
(1) Glenn's whipping the dogs is exasperating

While obviously 'whipping' is, in (1), a noun - since 'Glenn's' is a "subjective genitive" according to traditional terminology, 'the dogs' appears to be the direct object of that very same noun. Moreover, verbal nouns can also govern adverbs, as in (2) hereafter:
(2) Glenn's whipping the dogs ruthlessly is exasperating

How could we translate (2) from English into Spanish? Perhaps an appositive translation would be (3):
(3) Es exasperante que Glenn pegue despiadadamente a los perros con el látigo.

Nevertheless, a perhaps stylistically more objectionable translation could still show a similarity between English and Spanish in this connection. So, I'm going to explore (4) as a possible translation of (2):
(4) El pegar Glenn despiadadamente a los perros con el látigo es algo exasperante

What I deem highly interesting in (4) is that it shows that Spanish does after all possess nouns governing direct objects and adverbs as well. Such are nominalized infinitives. This construction is peculiar to Spanish, at least as compared with Latin and French (and perhaps other Romance languages). (French, e.g., can nominalize infinitives through prefixing a preposition 'de' to them; but those nominalized infinitives can have no subject but one constituent of the main clause, which, on the other hand, cannot even be expressed within the infinitive phrase: 'De voyager si souvent a rendu Jean insouciant', which would translate as 'Jean's travelling so often has made him careless')

My point is that Spanish nominalized infinitives share many features with English nominalized gerunds:
1) they may have any explicit subject
2) they may govern whatever a verb can govern (direct objects, indirect objects, adverbs and adverbial phrases).
As for Spanish, though, a difficulty arises which does not exist as regards English. In English the subject of a nominalized gerund is always expressed before the gerund and usually bearing the genitive mark. In some carelessly uttered or else complicated sentences that mark can be missing: 'The chestnut sorrel horse your kind uncle Cecil bought yesterday limping has upset your aunt'; it would be odd to add the mark of genitive immediately after 'yesterday', wouldn't it. Moreover, Thackeray and other writers have failed to comply with the grammarians' prescription according to which the genitive mark must always be expressed before any nominalized gerund. So, even if Kingsley's asking 'Can you conceive a father permitting such insolence?' can be regarded as a case of normal gerundive - which could be paraphrased as 'Can you conceive a father who might permit such insolence?'-, a phrase like 'on a servant addressing him, Martin startled' can only be read as meaning 'on a servant's addressing him, Martin startled'. Nonetheless, it ought to be granted that most English nominalized gerunds' expressed subjects are added the genitive mark */s/*.

Spanish, on the other way, puts nominalized infinitives before their expressed subjects (unless those subjects are represented by possessive pronouns, as, e.g.: 'tu tratar tan desconsideradamente a la novia de Alberto lo ha indispuesto con nosotros', which may even be objected to by some grammarians, although I for one think it's a syntactically well-formed, if stylistically odd, sentence.)

Hence, unlike English, Spanish has nominalized verbal-forms (viz., infinitives), whose subjects occur after them and are affected by no segmentally explicit mark indicating their subject-status. How, then, is that status indicated?

Wherever the direct object of a Spanish nominalized infinitive denotes one (or several) definite person(s) or personalized entity(ies), Spanish resorts to the prepositional mark. So the following sentences are all unambiguous: El favorecer Andrés a los sublevados ha traído malas consecuencias El querer Genoveva a Baldomero no puede por menos de suscitar los celos de Mauricia.
However, when the direct object denotes one or several persons without singling them out, the preposition is usually omitted. Then, ambiguity is averted by the subject's not bearing the prepositional mark. Let's take (5):

(5) El buscar Amadeo una novia nos está volviendo locos a todos

(5) can only have a reading: Amadeo's seeking a fiancée is causing much trouble to us all. Now, suppose the subject is also indefinite, as in (6):

(6) El buscar un alumno una novia es algo que antes no se había producido

(6) is somewhat ambiguous, even though the order of expressions indicates which is the subject and which is the direct object.

On the other hand, since the prepositional mark is usually omitted when there is in the sentence an indirect object in order to avoid ambiguity, a nominalized infinitive followed by its subject and by a direct object and indirect one is bound to be ambiguous, since (7) and (8) are both ambiguous:

(7) El enviar el vecino de Alfredo a su sobrino a su tío ha complicado todo el asunto

(8) El enviar el vecino de Alfredo su sobrino a su tío ha complicado todo el asunto

To be sure, the language dislikes such ambiguous (and awkward) constructions, and resorts instead to paraphrases.

Let's now have a look at the cases wherein the direct object denotes nonpersonal entities. Here we can see that these direct objects are prefixed with the prepositional mark, in order to avoid ambiguity:

(9) El romper la pelota al vidrio me ha irritado sobreamanera

Obviously, no one says (10), which would be ambiguous:

(10) El romper la pelota el vidrio me ha irritado sobreamanera

But what about the cases wherein the direct object is not defined? Here the construction would perforce be bothersomely ambiguous, and so is avoided. Sentences like (11) are not usually uttered:

(11) El romper la pelota un vidrio me ha irritado sobreamanera

(11) could be disambiguated (supposing 'la pelota' to be the subject of 'el romper') as follows:
(12) El romper la pelota a un vidrio me ha irritado sobremanera

Is (12) a grammatical sentence? It is difficult to answer by yes or no. (Probably a natural language's syntactical rules are not clear-cut or sharp-edged, but fuzzy.)

Anyway, English doesn't face any similar ambiguity-problem concerning nominalized gerunds. The subject, wherever expressed, is always placed before the nominalized gerund, and is in possessive case. The direct object follows the gerund and is in objective case.

Moreover, while English is rife with such constructions, nominalized infinitives in Spanish are not very common, the language preferring other constructions, which are less awkward. So a sentence like (13) would be translated into Spanish as (14)

(13) Brutus' killing Caesar shocked many people
(14) Que Bruto matara a César escandalizó a mucha gente

Notice, however, that Spanish nominalized infinitives present a very odd feature. For one thing, they are not just nouns, but names: the definite article prefixed to them is a mark of propernamehood. Granted, Spanish is somewhat wavering—unlike Italian, e.g.—as regards using the definite article before names; in some Spanish dialects it sounds substandard to say 'la María', although such phrases are most commonly used. But 'la virtud', 'la felicidad', 'el odio' are proper names, as can be ascertained by any transformational test. For another, though, in Spanish nominalized-infinitive phrases can have NP constituents which bear no mark showing their function within the nominalized-infinitive phrase, viz. the "subject", which is, so to say, dangling. That feature sets nominalized-infinitive phrases apart from all other NP's.

Unlike Spanish nominalized infinitives, English nominalized gerunds behave, in that respect, like ordinary nouns. So, 'the task's being accomplished' and 'the task's accomplishment' are interchangeable and show the same structure (whereas 'el ser realizada la tarea' and 'la realización de la tarea' show clearly distinguishable patterns.)

What is common to Spanish nominalized infinitives and to English nominalized gerunds, what sets them apart from ordinary NP in both languages, is their governing direct objects and other complements the same way as VPs do.
Section 3.- Double Direct-Object Constructions

Another difference between English and Spanish as regards direct-object constructions is the frequency in English of sentences containing two direct objects, one denoting a person and the other denoting an impersonal entity—or, at least, a person dealt with as if it were an impersonal object. Examples of such kind of constructions are:

(1) Ian gave his friend a tape-recorder
(2) Cable us the news
(3) Sing your sister another song

To be sure, the two direct objects are not treated in the same way when the sentence is put in passive voice. So, (1) has two passive-transformations, (4) and (5):
(4) His friend was given a tape recorder by Ian
(5) A tape-recorder was given by Ian to his friend

(A problem can arise as regards (4) because of backward pronominalization, which perhaps is not acceptable in some English dialects. Alternatively, we could choose: 'Ian's friend was given a tape recorder by him'.)

Although, as passive-transformations show, the two direct objects do not fulfill the same syntactical function in the sentence, we can still call them 'first direct object' and 'second direct object' respectively.

Obviously, Spanish lacks any structure of this kind (i.e. sentences having the same structure as (1)), and any structure like the one of (4), too.

Nevertheless, we are bound to admit that, in Spanish, the difference between direct object and indirect object tends to dwindle for several reasons:

1) The use of preposition 'a' as a mark of direct object for persons and personalized objects— with all the qualifications needed for making such a rule more accurate—, and also as a mark of indirect object.
2) The small frequency of passive constructions, except pronominal passive in some dialects. In other dialects, though—e.g. in Quiteño—pronominal passive has been given up, the pronoun 'se' being always a subject: 'Se venden papas' instead of 'Se venden papas'.
3) The blurring of the boundary between "accusative" and "dative" third personal pronouns, which used to be—and remains in some idiolects, as the one spoken by the author of this paper—the only left-over of the Latin case-difference between accusative and dative.

However, in some Spanish dialects the difference between direct object and indirect object still remains alive by dint of third personal nominalizations. For instance: 'Dí el sombrero a tu hermana' will in Madrid Spanish be transformed into 'Se lo di'. But in Quito-Spanish the sentence will be transformed into 'Le di', the direct object being deleted when the pronominalization is performed.

So, for a Quiteño speaker it may be hard to grasp the difference between direct object and indirect object, which in English is very important. For, while some verbs govern two direct objects, others cannot do the same. You cannot say: *'Say me the truth'.

The difference between English verbs that can have two direct object and the ones that cannot is not semantically conditioned. Nor is it phonetically conditioned, of course. It is morphemically—i.e. lexically—conditioned (as is, e.g., in Spanish, the difference between masculine and feminine nouns—in most cases, or the difference between first-conjugation, second-conjugation, and third-conjugation verb-stems.)

A special kind of two-direct-object constructions is made up by infinitive subordinate clauses: 'They accepted the prisoners to be released'. Here again we find something which Spanish lacks. (Spanish does have constructions such as 'Eleuterio vió florecer las azucenas', which might be interpreted as double direct-object patterns. I still think that, unlike English—where this kind of constructions make up a particular case of the double direct-object pattern—, Spanish doesn't deal with this construction in such a way as to entitle linguistics to view them as a double direct-object pattern. You cannot say *'Las azucenas fueron vistas florecer por Eleuterio'.) Now, that kind of construction is extremely frequent in English and even constitutes a strikingly powerful means of expression, due to which many messages can be put in a simpler and more straight-forward way than in Spanish. Let's see some examples and their
respective translations into Spanish:
(6a) I'd advise you to do the same
(6b) Le aconsejo que haga lo mismo

(Here, 'le' –in the idiolect spoken by the present writer– is an indirect object. 'Le aconsejo hacer lo mismo' would sound

to me...grammatical)
(7a) I allowed myself to be prevailed upon
(7b) Me dejé persuadir

(Here we seem to have in Spanish the same kind of construction. Nevertheless, that appearance is misleading. (7a) can be

transformed into 'I was allowed by myself to be prevailed upon', which perhaps sounds odd, but is grammatical, all the same. But

(7b) cannot be transformed like that. Another difference test

which can be applied is the following: 1) replace the subject of (7)

with a third-person subject (either nominal or pronominal); 2) trans-

form (7) into a passive-voice sentence; 3) excise the "agent-com-

plement" of that passive-voice transform (i.e. the subject of (7));

4) retrench the infinitive phrase and put the resulting segment in

interrogative form preceded by 'what'. We can thus ascertain that,

while the answer to 'What was I allowed to?' is 'to be prevailed

upon', the correct reply to... '¿Qué me fue permitido?' is not

'persuadir' but 'ser persuadido'. So, the underlying form (the
deep-structure form) of (7b) is very different from its surface-
structure form, whereas in English no such divergence between
deep-structure and surface-structure needs to be asserted in this case.

(8a) He reported the bed to be ready
(8b) Anunció que la cama estaba lista

Obviously, (8a) can be transformed into 'The bed was reported to be ready by him', whereas no such transformation can

be performed with (8b).

Accordingly, double direct-object constructions, which are so frequent and so useful in English, need to be recognized

as a peculiar feature when that language is compared with Spanish.
Section 4. - Direct Objects and Passive-Voice Transformations

The most striking difference between English and Spanish concerning direct-object constructions is that, while English resorts to passive-transformations for ascertaining whether a given constituent in a sentence is a direct-object, such move becomes less and less available in Spanish, wherein passive voice is not frequently used. (Even pronominal passive has been waived in some dialects.)

Passive-voice transformations in English seem to show that that language doesn't make a clearcut difference between direct-object constructions and what we could loosely call 'prepositional constructions'. We have in English sentences like:

(1) Susan was waited for until ten o'clock
(2) His travelling expenses were paid for by his sister
(3) Their plight was often complained of
(4) The drought was much suffered from
(5) Carol had to be apologized to

Now, semantically,'sin against', 'apologize to', 'suffer from', 'complain of', 'pay for' and 'wait for' are transitive VP. Their intransitiveness is a matter of surface-structure. While you can ask, e.g., 'From what are you suffering?', you cannot ask '"Up what are you setting?' Moreover, you can say 'People set a milestone up', but not 'People suffered hunger from'. So, 'seek after' is a compound word, and a transitive verb for that matter, whereas 'suffer from' is not a word, and 'suffer' is an intransitive verb. Yet, I think that the difference is not semantically but lexically determined.

Let's compare those English constructions with several Spanish ones:

(7) Estuvimos hablando de la crisis
(8) La crisis estuvo siendo hablada de por nosotros

Obviously, (8) is not grammatical. Moreover ¿Qué estuvo siendo hablado por nosotros?' is not grammatical either. Accordingly, Spanish distinguishes transitive from intransitive constructions much more sweepingly than English does. Nonetheless, no semantical difference exists between the "actions" (in the widest sense) denoted by transitive verbs and the ones denoted by intransitive
verbs. Many actions are denoted by an intransitive verb in a language and by a transitive one in another language:

to approach = aproximarse a  
to enjoy = gozar de  
to survive = sobrevivir a  
to lack = carecer de  
to forego = renunciarse a  
to attend = asistir a  
to wait for = esperar  
to look for = buscar  
to listen to = escuchar  
to look at = mirar

But why does surface-structure bring in a semantically unwarranted difference? Historical reasons would be unconvincing, since they don't explain the synchronical mechanisms of the language. What seems to me a perhaps more satisfactory answer is that governing a (syntactical) direct object and governing a (syntactical) complement through a certain preposition are suprasegmental allomorphs in C.D. (lexically conditioned). I here use 'suprasegmental' with a wide meaning so as to include under it order of words, too. According to this view, patterns are suprasegmental morphemes.

Why do languages have -in surface structure- allomorphs in C.D.? I suppose that, for answering this kind of questions, we ought to resort to the semiotics and the psychology of communication. Introducing variety makes it easier to keep up the attention of the listener.

So, I conclude that differences between transitive verbs and many intransitive ones belong to surface-structure. (According to the view favoured by the present writer, deep structure is semantical.)

Spanish goes further them English in bringing in a cleavage between transitive and intransitive verbs. Unlike Spanish, English deals with many (surface-structurally) intransitive VP in a way closely resembling the one it deals with transitive verbs.
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