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

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This paper explores inter-constructional relations in the constructicon from a contrastive (English-Spanish) standpoint (see further Boas 2010 for a full blown defence of Contrastive Construction Grammar). The investigation presented here concentrates on two prima facie distinct constructions. The first one, the so-called WXDX construction, encodes in English the expression of a judgment of incongruity by a judge in relation to some state of affairs (Kay and Fillmore 1999: 21), a characterization which can be duplicated for its Spanish counterpart, the ¿Pero qué V-hacer-finite X Y? construction, as illustrated in (1)-(2). The second construction under scrutiny here, the self-descriptive subjective-transitive construction, has the skeletal meaning X UNEXPECTEDLY REALIZES S IS UNINTENTIONALLY Y (author 2001, 2008) and is exemplified in (3)-(4) for English and Spanish, respectively:

(1) What is he doing knowing the answer? (Kay and Fillmore 1999: 6)
(2) Pero ¿qué hace él últimamente tan ocios-o? (CREA)
But what do-PRS.2SG lately so idle-M.SG
What are you doing so idle lately?
(3) I found myself the object of a takeover (BNC)
(4) Me encontré sol-o ante el peligro (CREA)
1SG.REFL find-INDEFPRET.1SG alone-M.SG in.front.of DEF.M.SG danger
‘I found myself alone facing danger’

Drawing on (Cognitive) Construction Grammar (Goldberg 2006), a number of significant analogies and differences are pinpointed between these two constructions in English and Spanish. As far as the analogies are concerned, these constructions (i) convey an unexpected state of affairs/action/process, (ii) impose a stage-level (i.e. temporary, accidental) construal of the Y element, (iii) usually convey a contingent or negative state of affairs and (iv) are more felicitous if the Y element is informationally prominent. An important asymmetry between these two constructions concerns the morphosyntactic realizations of the Y element in English and Spanish. Thus, the WXDX and the self-descriptive subjective-transitive construction in English are more tolerant of, say, NPs in the Y slot than their Spanish counterparts, as evidenced in the grammaticality contrasts in (5)-(6):

(5) (a) What is she doing the winner? (Kay and Fillmore 1999: 34, emphasis added)
(b) *Pero ¿qué hace ella ganador-a?
But what do-PRS.2SG 3SG winner-F.SG
(6) (a) He found himself the target of a terrorist attack (BNC)
(b) *So encontró el objetivo de un ataque terrorista
3SG.REFL find-INDEFPRET.3SG DEF.M.SG target of INDF.M.SG attack terrorist

A number of robust generalizations can be seen to emerge from the cursory analysis of the constructions under investigation here: First, the WXDX and the self-descriptive subjective-transitive constructions have similar illocutionary forces in English and Spanish: the expression of an observed incongruity and an unexpected situation in which the subject/speaker is unintentionally involved, respectively. It can be plausibly claimed that there is a considerable degree of correlation between the illocutionary forces in question and the semantico-pragmatic make-up of these constructions, most notably, the requirement that the Y slot should feature a stage-level (rather than individual), informationally prominent and, preferably, negative or contingent state of affairs, thus pointing to illocutionary or pragmatic function as a likely unifying factor in the constructicons of languages such as English and Spanish.

Second, important differences must nonetheless be noted, which impinge on the morpho-syntactic realization of the Y element in these two constructions. Thus, NPs are acceptable in the Y slot in English as long as these encode an episodic characterization, rather than an identification, of the X element. By contrast, NPs are systematically ruled out in Spanish in these constructions. Asymmetries of this kind thus lend further credence to Croft’s (2001) contention that argument structure is construction-specific and language-specific, while also calling for a much more fine-grained mapping of the inherent semantico-pragmatic properties of a construction’s elements onto their morpho-syntactic realizations than has so far been done in (Cognitive) Construction Grammar (see González-García 2009 for further discussion).