

A Crosslinguistic Analysis of English ‘Converbs’ in Contrast with Prepositional Infinitives in Spanish to Contribute with the Art of Translation

*Marina Laura Álvarez*¹

Universidad del Salvador

✉ marinaalvarez76@hotmail.com

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Abstract

The notion of *converbs* has been studied cross-linguistically since the concept was first introduced by Haspelmath (1995) to refer to the use of a variety non-finite clauses with adverbial meaning. Despite the large number of correspondences that have been observed in different languages within the scope of adverbial non-finite phrases, the adverbial infinitive in Spanish does not fit into this categorial classification, probably due to its strong nominal reference. Likewise, in terms of a possible translation into English there seems to be a deep correlation of the adverbial infinitive in Spanish with the gerundial phrase in English, which is also interpreted as the most nominal of all English non-finites. Nevertheless, it is their shared nominal feature that allows them to appear as complements of a preposition which typically introduces them within an adverbial construction. Therefore, we believe it is worth asking: is it plausible to include English gerunds or Spanish infinitives within the category of *converbs*? This controversy has led to a discussion which aims at bringing light to the contrastive analysis of adverbial constructions known as *converbs* in these two languages. In turn, we expect that this comparison will contribute with the harsh task of translating non-finite phrases.

Key words: non-finite verbs, *converbs*, adverbial infinitive, English-Spanish translation

Resumen

La noción de *converbos* ha sido estudiada de manera translingüística desde que el concepto fuera introducido por Haspelmath (1995) para referirse al uso de una variedad de cláusulas no finitas con valor adverbial. A pesar del número de correspondencias que

¹ *Marina Laura Álvarez* is a Conference Interpreter (USAL). She also holds a BA in English Language and in Teaching English at Higher Education. She is a doctoral student in Letters at Universidad Católica Argentina. As a professor and a researcher, she has devoted herself to Contrastive Analysis and has been lecturing on the areas of Linguistic Structures and Contrastive Grammar at the School of Philosophy and Letters (UCA).

se observan entre las diferentes lenguas que alcanzan el empleo adverbial de frases verbales no finitas, el infinitivo adverbial del español parece no ingresar en dicha clasificación categorial, probablemente debido a su fuerte referencia nominal. Asimismo, en términos de su traducción al inglés, se observa un profundo vínculo entre el infinitivo adverbial del español con la frase gerundiva del inglés, que también se interpreta como una forma netamente nominal entre las formas no finitas del inglés. Sin embargo, es justamente su capacidad nominal la que posibilita que estas formas verbales aparezcan como complementos de una preposición nexos que los introduce en la función adverbial. Por consiguiente, creemos conveniente preguntarnos: ¿es posible incluir al infinitivo preposicional del español o al gerundio del inglés dentro de la categoría de converbos? Esta controversia puede conducirnos a una discusión que logre aclarar sobre el análisis contrastivo de las construcciones adverbiales conocidas como converbos en estas dos lenguas. Además, esperamos que esta comparación contribuya con la trabajosa tarea de la traducción de las formas verbales no finitas.

Palabras clave: formas verbales no finitas, converbos, infinitivo adverbial, traducción inglés-español

Introduction

The main goal of this paper is to address a challenging issue concerning the English-Spanish translation of *converbs*, and in this task, converbs will be contrasted with the adverbial infinitive in Spanish, taking into consideration that the Spanish construction is, in fact, a prepositional phrase in which the infinitive is intrinsically nominal and depends on its nexus to appear within an adverbial construction that resembles a converb.

A similar behavior is observed within the gerundial phrase in English, which is also interpreted as the most nominal of all English non-finites. With the aim of clarifying the English-Spanish translation process, we will approach the prepositional infinitive in Spanish and the alternating form in English, among which the gerund seems to be the English counterpart, because both are identified as half verbs-half nouns. Besides, we will observe whether an analysis of the notion of converbs, which are merely adverbial, will allow us to assess a plausible addition of these non-finite phrases to this categorial classification.

Av. Alicia Moreau de Justo 1300. Puerto Madero. Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires. C1107AAZ.
Teléfono: (011) 4349-0200 c. e.: depto_lenguas@uca.edu.ar

It will be our main goal to analyze non-finite adverbial phrases based on the classification proposed by the typological study carried out by Haspelmath (1995) on the category of converbs which identifies crosslinguistic patterns in which it is possible to detect a language unit, i.e. the adverbial construction, which undergoes the evident diversity of structures among languages.

In general, converbs are expressed differently in various languages and the classification includes adverbial participles and adverbial gerunds. However, the infinitive is excluded from the classification of converbs in both languages, which leads to the introduction of the following questions: which syntactic elements divide the adverbial territory in the Spanish infinitive?, what sets the infinitive apart from converbs?, and, finally, can its high frequency of usage allow us to consider it as a converb? These are the type of interrogations that we will make in order to seek for a plausible expansion of the classification of converbs in order to contribute with the English-Spanish translation.

Following a cognitive functional approach, we will delve into the analysis of adverbial non-finite phrases, including the adverbial infinitive in Spanish with the hope to identify if it is possible to reach a congruency in meaning despite the difference in the structure with other converbs.

All in all, this analysis will allow us to draw the necessary linguistic comparisons through the analysis of patterns which will help us to describe the syntactic, semantic and morphological features of the non-finite adverbial phrases and will help us to consider an array of possible semantic interpretations of the Spanish infinitive within the adverbial clause which might be classified as converbs.

Objectives

In this paper, we have, firstly decided to inspect the traditional grammatical analysis of non-finite adverbial clauses to bring light to the category of converbs. In this task, we will identify some of the most relevant distinguishing features of converbs as regards the different possible translations from English into Spanish or vice versa.

Secondly, a contrastive analysis between English and Spanish will be developed in order to identify the possibility of introducing the Spanish infinitive within the classification of converbs based on the knowledge that there has been a diachronic expansion of usage, which is specially marked in romance languages, based on what Cristofaro (2003) and Schulte (2007) have already proven in previous studies.

More precisely, we will observe why it would be interesting to expand the category of converbs into the uses of adverbial infinitives in Spanish, and analyze the evident correlation with the gerund in English, in order to see if the analysis benefits a clearer Spanish-English translation of this type of adverbial non-finite phrases.

Methodology

In this paper, a crosslinguistic variationist analysis will be implemented in order to compare the adverbial Spanish and English infinitives as well as participles and gerunds as possible variants within the category of converbs. This research is based, on the one hand, on the belief presented in previous typological studies that affirm that languages vary and, on the other hand, on the fact that it is possible to establish linguistic universals which serve as a logical framework for the variationist research (Greenberg, 1963). Therefore, this crosslinguistic study intends to identify features that characterize the variants and to understand how they vary.

In agreement with Comrie's ideas (1989), the contrastive analysis arises from a classificatory principle, in this case, the category of converbs, which aims at observing languages in order to learn the structural properties that describe the languages which are compared. In this sense, our linguistic analysis uses typology as a linguistic method to make a morphological, semantic and syntactic comparison of the structures that are identified as converbs and that are expressed differently in varied languages, especially in English and in Spanish, since they show different grammatical descriptions. This universality principle, therefore, allows for comparisons to be made, even in languages such as English and Spanish, which, despite being Indo-European languages, belong to a different origin and deserve to be juxtaposed.

Analysis of the Category of Converbs in English and Spanish

Antecedents

The term ‘converb’ was coined by Ramstedt (1903), but it was first used by Nedjalkov (1987) in the same sense as it is used in the present in general typology, and it was recently taken by Haspelmath (1995) in the research paper that we will be discussing in this current study.

By definition, a converb is a grammatical category that classifies non-finite verbs with adverbial functions that include present and past participles, as well as gerunds in the languages in which the gerund shows an adverbial meaning. In line with this argument, it is worth mentioning that this classification does not include the adverbial infinitive as a converb, even though the infinitive shows a high frequency of usage with adverbial meaning both in English and in Spanish (Schulte, 2007).

The Morphology of Converbs

Converbs are dependent verbal forms which are marked by affixation, mainly by suffixes due to the fact that these constructions are more frequent among languages that prefer suffixation (Greenberg, 1978; Bybee-Pagliuca-Perkins, 1990), although there are languages in which converbs are marked by prefixes.

On the other hand, there are ‘periphrastic converbs’, as the mark for the French gerund ‘*en*’, for instance, ‘*en chantant*’ (singing), or the mark for the infinitive in English as in ‘*to- sing*’, which can be interpreted as the adverbial infinitive in Spanish, ‘*al cantar*’, ‘*para cantar*’, etc. depending on the context.

As regards the grammatical mark of the infinitive in English, there is an important consensus that the particle ‘to’ derives from the preposition ‘to’ which has been grammaticalized as an empty carrier or as the most expanded grammatical marker for the infinitive in all of its uses. It has been shown that the preposition ‘to’, which expresses the notion of a ‘forward movement’, may be associated (at a more abstract level) with the

notion of ‘purpose’ as a result of a process of grammaticalization (Haspelmath, 1989 - 2009).

As the adverbial uses of the infinitive moved apart from the idea of purpose and began to be used in a number of new constructions, the particle ‘to’ diachronically lost its original meaning and resulted in the most widely spread grammatical marker for the adverbial infinitive in English (Fischer, 2000).

Even in previous studies, Jespersen (1929) explains that due to the increasing usage of the {to-infinitive} over other non-finite forms in English, it derived into a weakening of the prepositional meaning until it was extinguished in most cases. This is how the {to-infinitive} has come to be the natural infinitive in English, even over the {bare infinitive} which is used in a limited number of cases.

This prepositional derivation of the grammatical marker ‘to’ leads to the question whether there is some similarity with the adverbial infinitive in Spanish. Despite having a high nominal value, the Spanish infinitive may be identified with an adverbial meaning when it is constituted as a prepositional phrase with a preposition functioning as its nexus (Hernanz, 1999).

If we take, for example:

(1) She worked hard to get through college successfully.

(1.a) Se esforzó mucho para terminar con éxito la universidad.

It is clear that, even though the empty carrier ‘to’ in the {to-infinitive} lacks meaning, it could be detected that some of its original meaning still remains, specially under adverbial uses which are related to the idea of purpose or posteriority, i.e. connected with the idea of forward movement, which resembles the construction made up by an adverbial infinitive in Spanish.

The Semantics of Converbs

As regards the possible interpretations of the adverbial infinitive in the English-Spanish translation, it would be convenient to clarify that this type of adverbial constructions belong to a phenomenon that allows the manifestation of a variety of contents that are connected with what is known as the ‘circumstances of the enunciation’ which is an area

of study that, in turn, gives way to different possible interpretations related to the subjectivity of the speaker (Marcovecchio, 2012).

In this sense, the different possible interpretations of the adverbial infinitive will mainly be transmitted by the nexus that introduces the adverbial infinitive in Spanish and may vary in English from the ‘temporal/ purposive’ reading to the ‘causative’ interpretation, depending on the context in which they appear, together with the semantic content of the verbs that make up the adverbial construction and the connection of the infinitive with the main clause.

It should be noticed that the verbal forms which are used in English when confronted with the array of adverbial interpretations deriving from the adverbial infinitive in Spanish may typically vary between the present participle and the infinitival phrase in English, especially when the phrase is not ‘purposive’ as in (1), (1.a) but ‘temporal’ showing ‘anteriority’ or ‘causal’ in meaning. If we take, for example:

(2) *Peeling the onions, she couldn't stop crying.* (=temporal ‘anteriority’/ causal)

(2.a) *Al pelar las cebollas, no podía dejar de llorar.*

(3) *Watching the movie, she remembered her grandma.*

(3.a) *Al mirar la película, recordó a su abuela.* (=temporal ‘anteriority’/ causal)

In contrast with:

(4) *To feel better, she decided to go for a walk.* (=temporal ‘posteriority’/ purposive)

(4.a) *Para sentirse mejor, decidió salir a caminar.*

It can be observed that the idea of ‘posteriority’ connects more naturally with the infinitive in English.

All in all, although the adverbial infinitive is the chosen form in Spanish, the meaning expressed by the adverbial infinitive affects the translation in English, and it is known that among the number of converbs that can be identified to cover the different adverbial interpretations, the present participle is preferred when an idea of ‘anteriority’ and the infinitive is preferred when the non-finite represents an idea of ‘posteriority’ in relation to the main clause.

The Category of Converbs as Embedded Reduced Clauses

Converbs are characterized as dependent verbal forms, i.e. which usually lack grammatical markers for the categories of person, number, tense, or mood and are said to depend, semantically and syntactically, on the main clause. However, according to Nedjalkov (1987), this classification of converbs made up by non-finite phrases is not appropriate for languages which use finite verbs within the category of converbs, which can be the case of subordinate adverbial clauses, also identified as dependent units.

Both English and Spanish make use of finite clauses to express adverbial meaning, as it could be the case of ‘conditional’, ‘concessive’, ‘purposive’ or ‘time’ clauses, just to mention a few. However, in this paper, we will focus on non-finite forms which adjust to the category of converbs described by Haspelmath (1995), i.e. non-finite phrases with adverbial meaning, since the traditional analysis already offers enough information about adverbial constructions with finite phrases.

As regards the dependent feature of converbs, they appear as embedded clauses and, as such, there seems to be agreement in the English-Spanish translation, although, as it has already been shown, the alternating forms may vary. There are a number of factors regarding: the type of subject of the non-finite phrase (whether it agrees or not with the subject of the main clause), the connection with the idea of ‘anteriority’ or ‘posteriority’ in relation to the finite in the main clause and also the possibility to appear within an adverbial phrase despite being intrinsically nominal, as the gerund in English and the infinitive in Spanish.

In this sense, converbs are some sort of *reduced clauses* in which the subordinating conjunction, in English, sometimes is kept, as in:

(5) *When leaving home, she met a very old friend.*

Here the converb which is made up by a present participle in English appears as a reduced adverbial clause, introduced by a subordinating conjunction, which helps clarify the ‘temporal’ adverbial notion of ‘simultaneity’.

Notice that this sort of reduced clause is not allowed to dangle in order to avoid misunderstanding. This means that it would be awkward to produce a statement such as:

(5*) **When leaving home, the shops were closed.*

Because, the subject of the main clause seems to be completely disconnected with that of the non-finite, therefore, the statement shows some sort of ambiguity derived from an undefined subject.

In its translation into Spanish, we resort to a ‘temporal’ adverbial infinitive:

(5.a) *Al salir de casa, se encontró con un viejo amigo.*

This, once again, shows the high frequency of usage of the adverbial infinitive despite being internally nominal, i.e. in its function as the complement of the preposition. Now, with the aim to identify a similar construction in English, which is also made up by a prepositional phrase with adverbial meaning, the gerund appears as the alternating form for the adverbial Spanish infinitive, as in:

(6) *By turning the lights off when you leave a room, you will surely save energy.*

(6.a) *Al apagar la luz cuando sales de una habitación, seguramente ahorrarás energía.*

Here the gerund is quite rarely allowed to dangle; however, we may hear examples such as:

(7) *Without knowing whether the food was enough for a quarantine, a new digital purchase was ordered.*

(7.a) *Al no saber si la comida era suficiente para una cuarentena, se encargó una nueva compra digital.*

Here, both the gerund in English and the infinitive in Spanish function as prepositional complements, which are said to have an implied subject, which does not agree with the subject of the main clause. According to Burton-Roberts (1989), Choice English avoids such dangling gerunds, however, the construction is not excluded entirely, especially when the subject of the gerund is clearly understood, or when it is impersonal or unimportant.

Therefore, the adverbial gerund may appear with a coreferential subject or it may be allowed to dangle, when it appears in initial position and as long as the gerundial phrase is identified as a complement of a preposition, i.e. depending on the preposition which functions as its nexus and which allows the gerund, which is merely nominal, to be assigned an adverbial interpretation.

As regards the infinitive in English and its ability to dangle, the infinitive shows a more flexible connection with the main clause and it is allowed to dangle more freely even under adverbial functions such as adverbial adjuncts.

(8) *To get to London from Buenos Aires, we had to fly for 12 hours. (coreferential subjects)*

(8.a) *Para llegar a Londres desde Buenos Aires, tuvimos que volar por 12 horas.*

(9) *To get to London from Buenos Aires, two stops were made. (dangling infinitive)*

(9.a) *Para llegar a Londres desde Buenos Aires, se hicieron dos escalas.*

It should also be clarified that in the cases in which the adverbial function is that of an external sentence modifier or disjunct, which typically refers to a comment made by the speaker, it is the function that justifies the speaker as the subject of the phrase, as in:

(10) *To be honest, the flight was tiring. (dangling disjunct)*

(10.a) *Para ser honesto, el vuelo fue cansador.*

Therefore, the adverbial infinitive functioning as disjunct is also allowed to dangle without offering much difficulty.

The Mark of Subject in Converbs

Since converbs lack morphological marks for the categories of person and number, there usually appears a coreferential subject which can be identified as a ‘covert’ type of subject because it agrees with that of the main clause or it is said to be ‘latent’ in the sense that it can be deduced from an argument of the verb within the main clause. In general, the subject is covertly expressed within the sentence, and agrees with that of the main clause, as in:

(11) *To get to the meeting in time, she took her car and drove straight to work.*

(11.a) *Para llegar a la reunión a tiempo, (ella) tomó/ agarró su auto y condujo/manejó directo al trabajo.*

But there are languages in which the subject can be overtly expressed, mainly when the subject is different from that in the main clause, as in:

(12) *For Eddie to get to the meeting in time, a taxi had to be reserved.*

Here, the overt subject of the adverbial infinitive in English is introduced by the complementizer ‘for’ which simply introduces the unrelated subject of the infinitival phrase and cannot be identified as a preposition. The overt subject in this type of phrases also shows that it can dangle, i.e. it shows no connection with the subject of the main clause. In Spanish, the suggested translation would resort to a converb with a finite verb, as in:

(12.a) *Para que Eddie llegue a la reunión a tiempo, se tuvo que reservar un taxi.*

Although a postponed overt subject is also allowed in the case of the adverbial infinitive in Spanish.

(12.b) *Para llegar Eddie a la reunión a tiempo, se tuvo que reservar un taxi.*

There are cases in which the subject of the converb, mainly in participial phrases, is identified as ‘absolute’, which means that it is overtly expressed within the non-finite phrase, but shows no connection with the subject of the main clause and cannot find a dependence with the arguments of the finite in the matrix. This can be observed in:

(13) *Summer being over, we got back to work.*

(13.a) *Al terminar el verano, volvimos a trabajar.*

In this sense, converbs may be found within what is known as *nominative absolute constructions*, which are converbs whose subjects do not depend on the main clause because the subject is explicitly or overtly expressed or because the subject can be assigned an arbitrary interpretation. In other words, the nominative absolute construction is an adverbial phrase, or converb which is constituted by a nominal phrase which has been inserted within the non-finite phrase as the subject of the converb.

In turn, these types of constructions show a double function since they appear as embedded clauses, which contribute to the main clause and simultaneously seem to appear in coordination with the matrix, meaning:

(13.c) *Summer was over, and we got back to work.*

(13.d) *Terminó el verano y volvimos a trabajar.*

The structure of coordination which can be identified as a feature of these absolute constructions, allows for the inclusion of a new type of subject, which is different from that in the main clause. In Haspelmath (1995:27) ‘absolute constructions’ are also

exemplified both with the gerund in Spanish and the participle in English. These constructions show that both can accept an overt subject within the non-finite phrase, as in:

(14) *God permitting, we will leave this quarantine.*

(14.a) *Permitiéndolo Dios, saldremos de esta cuarentena.*

The Spanish version containing a gerundial phrase with a postponed subject and the English version made up by a participle with its own subject in initial position, both fulfilling the adverbial subordination offered by converbs, and admitting an overtly expressed subject.

The identification of the type of subject, also proposed by Haspelmath (1995) becomes fundamental to determine if it is possible to include the infinitive within the description of converbs. It has been observed that the adverbial infinitive in Spanish with an idea of ‘purpose’ typically contains a subject which is coreferential with the subject of the matrix, and that will, therefore, be the most frequently found form. In this sense, Schulte (2007) proposes that the extension of adverbial infinitives in romance languages originates from the use of infinitives which contain coreferential subjects.

Is it Possible to Extend the Category of Converbs to the Adverbial Infinitives?

As it has been observed, in order to facilitate the task of translation, the Spanish adverbial infinitive has been of use to paraphrase other converbs. However, as we have already anticipated, the infinitive does not fit into the classification of converbs provided by Haspelmath (1995). This is probably because the infinitive, which is considered a verb-noun, especially in European languages such as Spanish, requires a preposition to fulfill an adverbial function.

A close parallelism can be established with the gerundial phrase in English, which is basically nominal. Therefore, the gerund will only be used with an adverbial meaning if it becomes the complement of a preposition within a prepositional phrase which is used to express an adverbial notion. This means that the gerundial phrase in English is not the best example of an English converb or, at least, not the most frequent one.

Besides, it has been shown that when dealing with English-Spanish translation difficulties concerning converbs, the translation of English converbs has frequently been solved by means of an adverbial infinitive in Spanish. In line with this paper, Cristofaro (2003), in a recent typological study, examines the presence of ‘*deranked clauses*’ when classifying adverbial phrases in different languages, among which the adverbial infinitive plays an important role.

Later, in a crosslinguistic study carried out by Schulte (2007) in which a diachronic tracking of the adverbial infinitive was made in romance languages, it could be proved that there has been an expansion in the variety of prepositions that began to be implemented to express different adverbial notions until reaching a high frequency of usage.

Likewise, it is believed that the English adverbial infinitive, which originated as a prepositional phrase with ‘to’, went through a process of grammaticalization and began to expand its range of usage over new adverbial notions, thus losing its prepositional function so as to become a grammatical marker, as we explained above.

For all these reasons, although we are comparing languages that deserve a different grammatical description, we believe that the adverbial infinitive should be included within the classification of converbs with the aim to clarify the different possible translations.

Final Thoughts

A crosslinguistic analysis of the categories of converbs has shown that the development of the adverbial infinitive in romance languages and in English adjusts to a common pattern, which is present in these languages, allowing for certain types of reduced adverbial clauses to be construed by means of non-finite phrases, among which, we believe the infinitive should be included.

The similarity among the languages that use the adverbial infinitive is so important that it is quite unlikely for it to be the result of a mere coincidence. The possibility of combining different prepositions with the non- finite phrase in order to express an

adverbial notion allows us to conclude that new structural conditions have been established to give birth to the adverbial infinitive in Spanish.

According to Schulte (2007), there has been a parallel development of the adverbial infinitive based on several universal principles, which have been described above. It has also been observed that as regards the translation of converbs, something very similar is happening with the adverbial gerund in English, which despite being primarily nominal, it can be found as complement of a preposition with adverbial meaning.

Hence, it can be stated that the classification of converbs has been useful to determine that non-finite phrases which are typically nominal can also be included within this classification when they are combined with a variety of prepositions that allow the non-finite to express adverbial meaning.

Undoubtedly, the identification of the subject within the adverbial phrase also remains as a prevailing pattern of usage of the adverbial infinitive among other converbs. Therefore, it can be stated that the possibility of predicting the type of subject in this kind of constructions has triggered a wider use of adverbial infinitives cross linguistically.

To summarize, although the adverbial function is not among the primary uses of the infinitive, as Haspelmath (1995) explains, we are in the presence of a grammaticalization process, mainly marked by the notions of ‘purpose’ and ‘posteriority’. Consequently, we believe that including the infinitive within the classification of converbs opens the array of possibilities for the translator to identify the most suitable English-Spanish translation of these non-finite phrases.

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