

The Adjectival and Verbal Forces at Play in Present and Past Participles:

A Cross-Linguistic Approach

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Abstract

This paper explores the split nature of participles, which may show verbal or adjectival forces depending on the particular context in which they appear. It briefly refers to some problems of categorization affecting participles and points out certain ways in which participles with full adjectival force can be distinguished from those with verbal force as well as some of the limitations to the proposed tests. Moreover, it uses a cross-linguistic approach, resorting to translation into Spanish as a tool for the identification of participles with full adjectival force.

Key Words: present participles, past participles, full adjectival force, verbal force, Spanish participles, cross-linguistic approach

Resumen

El presente trabajo explora la naturaleza dividida de los participios, que pueden mostrar valores verbales o adjetivales según el contexto específico en el que aparecen. Además, se mencionan, brevemente, algunos problemas de categorización que afectan los participios y ciertas formas de distinguir los participios con valor adjetival pleno de aquellos con valor verbal, así como algunas limitaciones de las pruebas que se proponen para identificarlos.

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Asimismo, se aplica un enfoque interlingüístico, puesto que se recurre a la traducción al español como herramienta para identificar los participios con valor adjetival pleno.

Palabras clave: participios presentes, participios pasados, valor adjetival pleno, valor verbal, participios españoles, enfoque interlingüístico

Introduction

The distinction between word classes is not always so clear-cut. The existence of words such as *boring*, *moving*, *simplified*, *worried*, etc., which take the form of present and past participles but may have verbal or adjectival force depending on the context (among other factors), illustrates the fact that, in certain cases, the linguistic boundaries between one category and the other may become blurry.

The English term *participle* and its Spanish translation *participio* derive from Latin *participium*, which means "participation", since participles partake of the qualities of the verb, the adjective and the noun (Zorrilla, 2013). The English participle is a specific type of non-finite which can be used as part of compound verb forms (e.g., *is sending*, *was sent*, *has been sent*), or can function as an adjective (e.g., *an interesting book*; *a worried parent*), as an adverb (e.g., *Running late*, *he didn't have breakfast*; *Wakened by the smoke*, *he called the fire department*) or as a noun (e.g., *the suffering*; *the injured*).

The Spanish participle, in turn, is defined as a non-finite verb capable of showing gender and number, which commonly resembles the adjective in its grammatical functioning and can participate in the formation of passive constructions and other compound verb forms (Real Academia Española, n.d.). Therefore, the English participle and the Spanish participle share their categorization as non-conjugated verbs, their resemblance with the adjective and their ability to form compound verb forms.

Objectives

This paper will delve into the verbal and adjectival forces present in both past and present participles, focusing on those participles in which the adjectival force is stronger, which are referred to as participles with “full adjectival force”. To such end, this work will first point out certain problems regarding the categorization of participles. Secondly, it will examine whether or not position and (in)transitivity should be considered for the purposes of differentiating participles with verbal and adjectival force. Thirdly, it will analyze the usefulness of translation into Spanish as a tool for distinguishing participles with full adjectival force. Last but not least, it will outline some tests that can be helpful to identify these participles as well as some constraints found on said tests.

Categorization Issues

The dual nature of participles has led to the development of different views on their categorization. Whereas some authors draw a line between verbal participles and adjectival participles (Wasow, 1977), others distinguish between participles and participial adjectives (Quirk *et al.*, 1985). Meltzer-Asscher (2010, p. 2) suggests that some participles “double as both verbs and adjectives (since the verbal and adjectival forms are homophonous), while others are only verbal”. Most dictionaries describe words such as *alarming*, *amazing*, *charming*, *exciting*, *ashamed*, *conceited*, *crowded*, *fascinated*, etc. as adjectives, without any mention to participles. What is more, some dictionaries include examples of participles with verbal force (e.g., a *burning* house/building/car) under the category of adjectives (see, for example, Cambridge University Press, n.d.; Macmillan Publishing Company, n.d.; Oxford University Press, 2021).

In addition, participles can also be perceived as part of a continuum, ranging from pure verbs to pure adjectives (Fernández Martín, 2012). According to this view, participles would

be closer to pure verbs or to pure adjectives depending on the particular context in which they appear. This latter view is the one adopted in this paper, i.e., participles are considered to have verbal and adjectival forces, which will become stronger or weaker when realized in a particular context. The expression “full adjectival force” or “FAF” will be used herein to refer to those participles which function as, and share the features of, adjectives, and in which the verbal force is minimal. For instance:

(i) A meeting *organized* a month ago (*una reunión organizada hace un mes*): VERBAL FORCE.

(ii) A hard-working and *organized* person (*una persona trabajadora y organizada*): FAF.

It is worth noting that, in Spanish, *organizada* is a participle in (i) but an adjective in (ii), the two forms being homonyms (Real Academia Española & Asociación de Academias de la Lengua Española, 2010, p. 524). Likewise, whereas in the phrase “worrying attitude” (*actitud preocupante*), in English, *worrying* is considered herein as a participle with full adjectival force, in Spanish, *preocupante* is not a participle but an adjective derived from the Latin present participle, since there are currently no present participles in Spanish (Real Academia Española & Asociación de Academias de la Lengua Española, 2010).

Furthermore, certain expressions may be ambiguous in terms of their verbal or adjectival force. For example:

(iii) She is *calculating* (Quirk *et al.*, 1985, p. 414): expressing a quality (*Es calculadora*): FAF/expressing an action in progress (*Está calculando*): VERBAL FORCE².

(iv) *Unwrapped* presents (McIntyre, 2013, p. 2): presents which have not been wrapped (*regalos sin envolver*): FAF/somebody unwrapped the presents (*regalos desenvueltos*): VERBAL FORCE.

² The ambiguity is resolved in Spanish through the use of the verb *ser* or *estar*. This will be discussed in the following section.

Distinguishing Participles with Adjectival Force from those with Verbal Force

Although, in some cases, the adjectival or verbal force of the participle is easy to discern, in others, the difference between one and the other is not so evident. Both participles with adjectival force and those with verbal force can derive from transitive and intransitive verbs.

For example:

Example	Force	Category of the verb from which it derives
(v) She saw the comedian <i>entertaining</i> the audience.	Verbal	Transitive
(vi) He gave an <i>entertaining</i> speech.	FAF	Transitive
(vii) I saw a <i>moving</i> train.	Verbal	Intransitive
(viii) He tried to hit the <i>moving</i> ³ target.	FAF	Intransitive
(ix) <i>Frightened</i> by the noise, I couldn't go back to sleep.	Verbal	Transitive
(x) He was <i>frightened</i> all the time.	FAF	Transitive
(xi) The <i>escaped</i> convicts remained hidden.	Verbal	Intransitive
(xii) The area was full of <i>dilapidated</i> buildings.	FAF	Intransitive ⁴

What is more, both participles with adjectival force and participles with verbal force can appear in attributive, predicative and postnominal position.

Example	Force	Position
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³ In this case, the participle *moving* has adjectival force because it is not referring to an action in progress as in (vii) (a train which *was moving*: *un tren en movimiento*), but, rather, it refers to the type of target in question (*un blanco móvil*), as opposed to a static target.

⁴ “Intransitive verb: to decay, deteriorate, or fall into partial ruin especially through neglect or misuse” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

(xiii) A <i>burning</i> house.	Verbal	Attributive
(xiv) A <i>shocking</i> theory.	FAF	Attributive
(xv) I saw the house <i>burning</i> .	Verbal	Predicative
(xvi) That theory is <i>shocking</i> .	FAF	Predicative
(xvii) Anyone <i>participating</i> in the competition can go.	Verbal	Postnominal
(xviii) He told me something <i>interesting</i> .	FAF	Postnominal
(xix) The <i>proposed</i> theory was confirmed later on.	Verbal	Attributive
(xx) <i>Spoken</i> language will also be assessed.	FAF	Attributive
(xxi) She found the apartment tastefully <i>decorated</i> by him.	Verbal	Predicative
(xxii) They seem very <i>tired</i> .	FAF	Predicative
(xxiii) The money <i>stolen</i> by the thief was found.	Verbal	Postnominal
(xxiv) Anyone <i>interested</i> should apply.	FAF	Postnominal

Moreover, it is worth noting that not all adjectives can appear in attributive or predicative position (e.g., the *principal* reason/*the reason is *principal*; the old man is *asleep*/*the *asleep* old man). Therefore, the fact that a participle can or cannot appear in a given position cannot be taken as a reliable indicator of its verbal or adjectival force.

In addition to this, as noted by Wenyan Gu (2020, p. 5), “generally speaking, a present participle when used as adjective usually donates the **characteristics** of the modified noun rather than its verbal action. A past participle when used as adjective indicates the **state** of the modified noun with passive meaning” (emphasis added). For example:

(xxv) He is an **annoying** man: *Annoying* is a quality describing the man (*Es un hombre irritante*): FAF.

(xxvi) He is **annoyed** because things didn't go as planned: The man is in the state of being annoyed (*Está molesto porque las cosas no salieron como esperaba*): FAF.

(xxvii) He is **annoying** me with his attitude: The man is conducting the action of annoying somebody (*Me está molestando con su actitud*): part of the finite verb.

(xxviii) I **was annoyed** by his attitude: His attitude annoyed me (passive voice) (*Me molestó su actitud*): part of the finite verb.

As previously mentioned, present participles with full adjectival force are commonly used to express qualities (e.g., amazing, embarrassing, terrifying, shocking, worrying, etc.). In addition, they can serve as specifiers referring to the type to which the modified noun belongs. For instance: moving target (What type of target? A moving one), hanging bridge (What type of bridge? A hanging one). This can be evidenced by the corresponding Spanish translation, which will generally allow an adjective (e.g., *asombroso, vergonzoso, aterrador, impactante, preocupante, móvil, colgante*, etc.). Conversely, participles that have verbal force do not commonly allow such translation (for example: a moving train: *un tren en movimiento, un tren que se está moviendo, *un tren móvil*; a crying child: *un niño que está llorando, *un niño llorador*)⁵ (see more examples in Annex 1).

Furthermore, as evidenced by the examples provided above, broadly speaking, in Spanish, the verb *ser* is used when the quality describing the subject is perceived as inherent in the subject or stable (e.g., *es irritante, asombroso, vergonzoso, aterrador, impactante, preocupante*), or is not related to an idea of process or change but, rather, is used to include the subject within a certain category of beings (e.g., *es [un blanco] móvil, es [un puente] colgante*). *Estar*, in turn, is used when what is predicated about the subject is the result of an action, transformation or change, or is regarded as temporary (e.g., *está molesto, cansado,*

⁵ However, some exceptions can be found. For instance, *a waving flag* (verbal force) can be translated as *una bandera ondeante*, and *a shifting landscape* (verbal force) can be translated as *un paisaje cambiante*.

aburrido) (Real Academia Española & Asociación de Academias de la Lengua Española, 2005). These last examples can be translated into English by means of a past participle with full adjectival force (is annoyed, bored, tired), since, as previously indicated, past participles with full adjectival force generally refer to the state of the modified noun. However, it should be noted that this is not always the case. For instance, in the expression *written language*, the participle with full adjectival force is referring to the kind of language in question, and, therefore, the Spanish verb *ser* should be used in this case (*es escrito*, rather than *está escrito*).

What is more, on the one hand, *estar* can be used to show an action in progress when combined with a gerund (-ando, -iendo), which corresponds to the English combination “verb to be + present participle” (e.g., We are dancing: *Estamos bailando*). On the other hand, the verb *ser* can be used with a participle to form a periphrastic passive construction, equivalent to the English construction “verb to be + past participle” (e.g., *fue llevado*: was taken).

Consequently, for the purposes of determining whether a given participle has adjectival or verbal force in a specific context, translation into Spanish can prove to be a useful tool. As previously mentioned, the use of *ser* as a main verb followed by an adjective denoting a quality (e.g., the comedian is entertaining: *el comediante es divertido* [adjectival force]) or as an auxiliary for the passive followed by a participle (e.g., That story was written by Edgar Allan Poe: *Esa historia fue escrita por Edgar Allan Poe* [verbal force]) and the use of *estar* as a main verb followed by an adjective denoting a state (e.g., I am bored: *Estoy aburrida* [adjectival force]) or as an auxiliary for the progressive tense followed by the Spanish gerund (e.g., The comedian is entertaining the audience: *el comediante está entreteniendo a la audiencia* [verbal force]), as well as the possibility (or impossibility) of adjectivization, can be helpful to such end.

In addition to this, several tests have been proposed to distinguish participles with full adjectival force from those with verbal force. For reasons of space, only some of these tests will be addressed in this paper.

Firstly, as pointed out by Quirk *et al.* (1985, p. 415), gradable adjectives can be modified by the intensifier *very*, while verbs can be modified by other intensifying adverbs, such as *very much* and *very well*. For instance: “She loved him very much”; “He was very much loved (by her)”; “He was loved very much (by her)”; **“He was very loved”*⁶.

Secondly, a way to identify participles with verbal force is taking into account their ability to take typical modifiers of the verb such as agents and direct objects. Therefore, in the sentence “The man was offended by the policeman”, the presence of the agent indicates the correspondence to the active voice (The policeman offended him) (Quirk *et al.*, 1985, p. 414). Likewise, it is possible to say “The door was opened by John” (verbal force) but not **“The door remained opened by John”* (adjectival force) (Sleeman, 2011, p. 4)⁷. The same is true in Spanish, where adjectives cannot take an agent (except for certain adjectives ending in *-ble*), since they do not refer to the process itself: “*una alberca (limpiada - *limpia) por el encargado*” (Real Academia Española & Asociación de Academias de la Lengua Española, 2010, p. 526)⁸. Similarly, an explicit DO signals the verbal nature of the participle (as in the

⁶ However, Quirk *et al.* note that this test only applies to gradable participles. For instance, it is possible to say: *A very interesting book* and *He is very interested*; but not **very boiling concrete*, **very freezing room*, **very deserted island*, **very unbeaten team* or **very unarmed man*. The same constraint applies to the use of comparatives and superlatives for the purposes of identifying the adjectival force of the participle. For example, we may say *more interesting than* but not **more freezing than*, **more unbeaten than*, etcetera.

Additionally, an adjectival force interpretation is called into question in sentences such as “The man was very offended by the policeman” (Quirk *et al.*, 1985, p. 415), where the presence of the agent suggests that the participle has verbal force. Furthermore, in the sentence “I’m very much obliged for your help”, *obliged* has adjectival force but, nevertheless, is pre-modified by *very much* instead of *very*.

⁷ Nevertheless, in sentences such as “The dictator remained unsupported by the warlords” (McIntyre, 2013), the addition of the prefix *un-* to *supported* —**unsupported* is not a verb— and the presence of the finite *remained* run counter to a verbal force interpretation.

⁸ The Real Academia Española and the Asociación de Academias de la Lengua Española (2010, p. 553) note the different perspectives regarding sentences such as “*Las ventas están afectadas por la crisis*” or “*Está muy presionado por los problemas*”, which may be interpreted as a periphrasis formed by “*estar + participle*” (since they are modified by an agent) or as a copula verb plus an adjective (since they can be modified by the adverbial intensifier *muy*: “*muy afectadas por la crisis*” and “*muy presionado por los problemas*”). The first interpretation is the one adopted in *Nueva gramática de la lengua española*. These examples are similar to the sentence “The

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example “He is *annoying* me with his attitude”), whereas the lack thereof (“He is *annoying*”) evidences the adjectival force of the participle, since a transitive verb must take a DO (Quirk *et al.*, 1985).

Thirdly, the adjectival force of participles can be revealed by their ability to take the *un-* prefix. Wasow (1977) asserts that the *un-* prefix may be added to two large classes of lexical items: (i) verbs, the meaning of which is reversed by the prefix (e.g., *fasten/unfasten*, *do/undo*) and (ii) adjectives (e.g., *reliable/unreliable*, *aware/unaware*). In this last case, the prefix is added to convey an opposite quality or state. Therefore, words such as *unacknowledged*, *unaided*, *unbeaten*, *unceasing*, *uncoordinated*, *unexposed*, *unfocused*, *uninterested*, *uninformed*, *unknown*, *unmodified*, *unrefined*, *unresolved*, *unscheduled*, *untouched*, *unwilling*, *unchanging*, *unconvincing*, *unappealing*, *uninteresting*, *unsettling*, *unsurprising*, etc. are participles with full adjectival force, since verbs **unacknowledge*, **unbeat*, **uncease*, etc. do not exist⁹. Likewise, in Spanish, participles differ from adjectives, among other things, in that the former do not have negative prefixes if such prefixes are not part of the verb from which they derive. As a consequence, *inutilizado* and *incapacitado* can be participles because they derive from the verbs *inutilizar* and *incapacitar*, respectively, whereas *injustificado*, *incivilizado*, *inesperado* e *indeseado* are adjectives, since verbs **injustificar*, **incivilizar*, **inesperar* o **indesear* do not exist (Real Academia Española & Asociación de Academias de la Lengua Española, 2010, p. 526).

Fourthly, Wasow (1977) claims that certain verbs such as *act*, *become*, *look*, *remain*, and *seem* take participles which are lexical adjectives as complements. For example: the book

man was very offended by the policeman” provided above, where there is a co-occurrence of the intensifier *very* and the agent.

⁹ It is worth mentioning that not all participles with full adjectival force may take the *un-* prefix (for example: **unannoying*, **unshocking*), since this prefix is not admitted by all adjectives (e.g., **unbeautiful*, **unugly*, **unold*).

*seems interesting; she looks worried; he became annoyed*¹⁰. Conversely, when the participle is preceded by a verb of temporal aspect, such as *keep*, *resume*, or *cease*, said participle has verbal force (Emonds, 1991). For example: They *kept annoying* me (cf. *They kept annoying). In such cases, the verb of temporal aspect may be analyzed as an aspectual semi auxiliary followed by the main verb (kept + annoying: transitive verb of complete predication) or as a finite verb followed by a direct object (kept: transitive verb of complete predication + annoying me: DO).

Last but not least, Quirk *et al.* (1985, p. 414) argue that participles have full adjectival force when they form compounds, such as *hard-boiled*, *heart-breaking*, *frost-bitten*. Other examples include *well-educated*, *well-behaved*, *well-known*, *densely populated*, *Spanish-speaking*, *wind-powered*, *ready-made*, *time-consuming*, *mouth-watering*, *thought-provoking*, *good-looking*, *long-lasting*, *easy-going*, *far-reaching*, *never-ending*, *forward-thinking*, among others.

Conclusion

In summary, this paper has examined the hybrid nature of participles: verbal and adjectival. Participles have been presented as part of a continuum, ranging from pure verbs to pure adjectives, the latter being referred to as participles with “full adjectival force”. As it has been shown, both participles with verbal force and participles with full adjectival force can derive from transitive or intransitive verbs, and may appear in attributive, predicative or

¹⁰ However, examples such as “They seem very underrated by everyone” (McIntyre, 2005) raise doubts as to the validity of said test since the presence of an agent suggests that the participle has verbal force.

Besides, not all participles with full adjectival force can appear in predicative position after said verbs. For example, it is possible to say “the *purported* benefits” but not *“the benefits act/become/seem/look/remains *purported*”. Similarly, it is correct to say “the *alleged* criminal” but not *“the criminal acts/becomes/seems/looks/remains *alleged*”.

Likewise, in examples such as *moving target* or *hanging bridge*, it would not be possible to say “the target acts/becomes/seems/looks/remains *moving*” or “the bridge acts/becomes/seems/looks/remains *hanging*”.

postnominal position. As a result, their position and their (in)transitive nature cannot evidence by themselves the relevant verbal or adjectival force.

However, it is possible to discern such verbal or adjectival forces by applying different tests. One of those tests consists in translating participles into Spanish to check if the verb *ser* or the verb *estar* is used and to see whether or not an adjective can be used as a possible translation (in the case of present participles). Other tests mentioned herein entail considering the ability of participles with full adjectival force to be modified by *very*; to take the prefix *un-*; to be used as subjective complements of certain intransitive verbs of incomplete predication such as *act*, *become*, *look*, *remain*, and *seem*; and to form compounds. Conversely, participles with verbal force can be identified by their ability to be modified by agents and direct objects, and to follow verbs of temporal aspect such as *keep*, *resume*, or *cease*.

Nevertheless, as it has been shown, all the tests mentioned in this paper have certain limitations or exceptions, and, therefore, it is important not to rely on one test exclusively and to consider the particular context in which participles appear. In this respect, the limitations on the usage of translation into Spanish as a tool to identify participles with full adjectival force would benefit from more detailed analyses in order to see if a pattern can be found to account for such exceptions.

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