

Expressions of intentionality and inter-speaker agreement: English speakers show less convergence and certainty in their constructional choices than Spanish speakers

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Languages differ in the number and types of constructions they proffer to their speakers for expressing intentionality (e.g., Shibatani & Pardeshi 2002). English and Spanish are a case in point (Filipović 2018): Spanish features five different constructional types, while English provides three (as exemplified in Table 1, adapted from Gibbons 2003). While these formal differences are well-known, the semantic differences between constructions and across languages still need to be understood better. In particular, the factors involved in speakers' decision-making on which construction to use when describing an event warrant more in-depth investigation.

We therefore investigated which constructions native English and Spanish speakers choose to describe a given set of events, and on what basis speakers might make their decisions. Moreover, we explored how much speakers agreed in their choices, and how underlying conceptualisations might be responsible for the findings. A picture story consisting of 32 black and white illustrations was created (Nilsson 2021, see Figure 1 for examples), providing the non-verbal stimuli for the elicitation of event descriptions. Based on a model of intentionality, which drew upon both previous literature on intentionality as well as the cognitive-semantic modelling framework UER (Schalley 2004), the illustrations were created such that each of the Table 1 constructions was expected to be elicited comparably often.

Ten English and ten Spanish native speakers were (i) presented with the illustrations in a set order and asked to orally describe what was happening on each one in turn, (ii) requested to order the illustrations so that they formed a coherent story and to retell that story, and (iii) queried about specific illustrations and the constructional choices they made in their description of the displayed events. Speakers created more than 60 descriptions across tasks (i) and (ii), i.e., more than 1200 event descriptions were collected and annotated. Descriptions were categorised into above constructional types, and with the help of the UER model and the results from (iii), their cognitive-semantic features were identified.

The findings show that the Spanish speakers display a substantial inter-speaker agreement and demonstrate more consistency in their constructional choices than English speakers who display more variance (as seen in Figure 2), notwithstanding that Spanish proffers more constructions from which to choose. Moreover, English speakers appear to be less certain about their choices, as more of them changed their constructional choices in hindsight, when queried about their choices and the underlying event conceptualisations. The cognitive-semantic differences found across the eight constructional types were identified, allowing us to isolate factors involved in speakers' decision-making on which construction to use as well as explain why English speakers appear as less consistent in their choices than Spanish speakers.

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Tables and Figures

Table 1. Degrees of intentionality (descending from high to low)

Spanish constructions	English constructions
1A. <i>Rompí un coche</i> 'I broke a car' (active)	1B. <i>I broke a car</i> (active)
2A. <i>Rompieron un coche</i> 'They broke a car' (3pl active)	2B. <i>A car was/got broken</i> (passive)
3A. <i>Un coche fue roto</i> 'A car was broken' (true passive)	3B. <i>A car broke</i> (inchoative)
4A. <i>Se me rompió un coche</i> 'It happened to me that a car broke' (reflexive pseudo-passive with dative of interest)	
5A. <i>Se rompió un coche</i> 'A car broke' (reflexive pseudo-passive)	

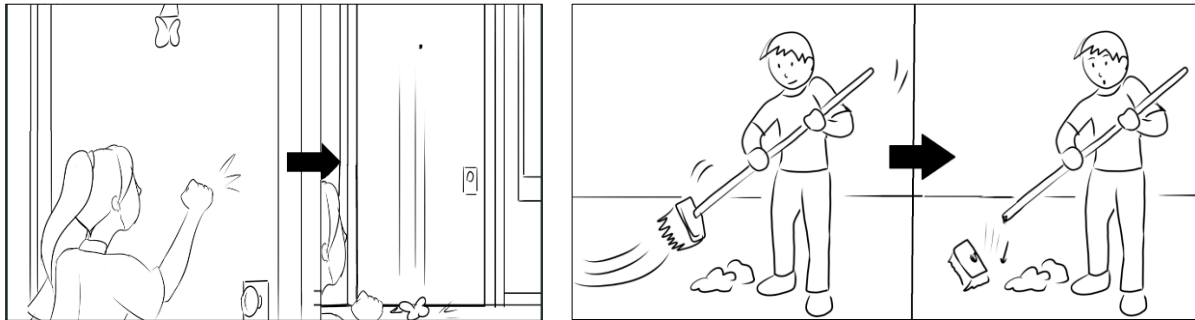
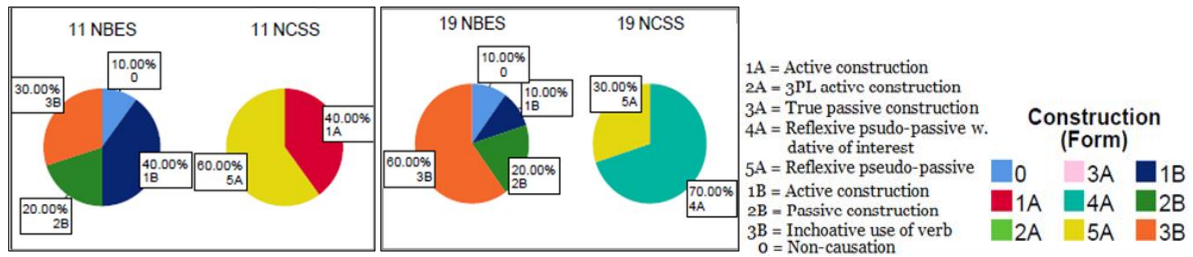


Figure 1. Example illustrations (nos. 11, 19)



NBES=native British English speakers, NCSS=Native Castilian Spanish speakers
 Figure 2. Distribution of constructional types for the example illustrations (nos. 11, 19)