Transitivity, subjectivity and discourse:
A corpus analysis of Spanish argument structure

This paper explores correlations among transitivity, subjectivity and type of discourse in Spanish. Studies on the syntactico-semantic organization of the clause generally focus on its representational function: a clause encodes events, with their participants and circumstances. The relationship between the functional configuration of the clause and the event represented is seen as a manifestation of the motivated, symbolic nature of linguistic structures, and as showing the "objectivity" of the representation of states of affairs by means of grammatical constructions. This is not to say that to every extralinguistic event there corresponds just a single linguistic argument structure, but it does mean that the correspondence between a linguistic construction and the situation it describes is stable and intersubjective, i.e. shared by all the users of the linguistic system. Therefore, transitivity is seen as relatively independent of the speaker's role in the message, unlike such properties as deixis, modality, tense, aspect or voice.

The findings reported by Thompson and Hopper (2001) call into question the communicative role of argument structure, in the sense that even though argument structure may constitute an objective representation of the relationships among the participants in events, such representations are only of secondary interest in conversational discourse (Tao 2003; Kärkäinen 2003). This secondary standing is attested not only by the predominance of single-participant clauses noted by Thompson and Hopper but also by the rarity of the complex constructions that, paradoxically, have been focused on by the descriptions of clause syntax that have enjoyed most popularity in recent decades (Levin 1993; Goldberg 1995).

In the paper, we rely on a large syntactic data-base of contemporary Spanish (159 thousand clauses from a 1.5 million word corpus) to test to what extent the communicative function of argument structure is mainly related to the descriptive vs. evaluative (subjective) aims of discourse.

First, we determine the degree of subjectivity of different textual genres represented in the corpus by means of quantitative analysis of morpho-syntactic and semantic features presumably related to subjectivity: 1st person subject (or object), present tense, and proprioceptive process (mental, relational vs. material). We note that some of these traits are frequently associated in spoken language reinforcing each other and shaping a kind of "cluster" that in some cases routinizes in markers of epistemic stance (*creo, supongo, me parece* 'I think'…). This fact points to the prevalent subjective bias of spoken discourse.

Then, we will show to which extent argument structure reflects these genres differences in the degree of subjectivity. Although it has been claimed that there is a contrast in transitivity (high vs. low in Hopper & Thompson's analysis of English data), corpus-based research is needed to confirm this claim. Besides, different languages might show different pictures. In Spanish, subjectivity features mentioned above prove to be related to number of arguments per clause, particular syntactic patterns, and coding devices such as lexical vs. pronominal clitic instantiations of participants.

We aim to show how quantitative differences among genre-specific corpora, which are assumed to arise from the different communicative needs that they are used to satisfy, can be used to test insights into the nature of the linguistic expression of subjectivity at genre level.