

The Spanish progressives: linguistic exploitation of a maverick category?

Christopher J. Pountain

Queen Mary University of London

In this paper I shall examine the evidence for viewing the development of the Spanish progressives as an instance of a process which I have labelled **capitalisation**: ‘the historical process by which a linguistic feature which already exists in a language comes to be substantially exploited for wider purposes, sometimes simply making overt distinctions which were previously covert, but sometimes apparently creating new expressive possibilities’ (Pountain 2000).

Spanish is rich in progressive periphrases, which can be regarded as a subset of an even richer set of periphrastic verb forms. I refer to the progressive as a ‘maverick category’ in Spanish because it indeed does have such multiple exponents, which also have other nuances, because the expression of progressivity is not limited to these forms, and because there has been a good deal of debate about what is admissible about a verbal periphrasis and what is not.

The verbal periphrases of Spanish are often highlighted as a particular expressive richness of the language, and it seems that in Spanish such constructions have grammaticalised more readily than in some of its sister languages. A number of verbs denoting location and directional movement combine with the gerund; four in particular (*ir, estar, venir* and *andar*) overall increase in frequency in the course of time, and have distinctive meanings within the broad category of ‘progressive’.

I look at two more recent developments which appear to enhance this range. First, the combination of *estar* with *siendo* (gerund of the copular *ser*), which has been a subject of purist controversy but which has undergone a significant increase in frequency from the 19th century onwards, so extending the combinatorial possibilities of *estar* as the default progressive and indeed the ongoing exploitation of *estar* more generally. Secondly, I consider the evolution of *llevar* + gerund, which has been growing in frequency since the 18th century in its expression of progressivity across ‘time since when’ and which is testimony to the continuing productivity of periphrases involving the gerund.

Pountain, Christopher J. 2000. ‘Capitalization’. In John Charles Smith & Delia Bentley (eds), *Historical Linguistics 1995, Volume 1: General Issues and non-Germanic Languages*, pp. 295-309.

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