

English Progressives Translated into Spanish: Corpus-based Functional Equivalents

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Abstract

English *Be+ V-ing* and Spanish *Estar + G* periphrastic constructions share a relatively high degree of similarity, formally and functionally. Their formal resemblance might be useful at early stages of foreign language learning, although this similarity ought to be looked into cautiously, and even critically, at more advanced stages of the learning process. These two constructions are central resources for realising progressive aspect in each language. However, this functional equivalence cannot be taken for granted *always*; the English periphrasis conveys other meanings, displaying an array of semantic functions wider than the Spanish one, whereas Spanish offers other means for conveying progressive aspect and meanings, which overrides any (hypothetical) one-to-one functional relation between these two resources. This is especially interesting for translation purposes, which necessarily involve a choice. This study aims at creating a collection of Spanish translational options of English present progressive constructions by analysing real parallel concordances.

1. Introduction

This paper examines the translation of the English periphrastic construction *Be + V-ing*, so-called progressive construction, into Spanish, following the tenets of three interrelated disciplines: applied, functional and corpus linguistics. The present study is application-oriented for it seeks to create a set of translational options which might be adopted as prospective strategies for future translation, which might contribute acceptability and correctness to the translation-product. It is functional because it is the function, i.e., the meaning realised by the

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English progressive construction which is described and contrasted with their translation, rather than the grammatical structure *per se*. A functional approach assumes that language is a tool for communication, which is attained whenever this is *used* to transmit a meaningful message. Therefore, the description of how similar meanings have been realised in two different languages such as English and Spanish, which are subject of numerous translation tasks, will reveal cross-linguistic correspondences, providing equivalent means of communication. This, in turn, triggers the corpus-based nature of the study. Linguistic corpora provide real linguistic usage and, more importantly, offer contextual information, which is essential in any meaning-based descriptive analysis. Parallel corpora are an appropriate tool for this study, for the analysis of real translations will depict actual translated usage of the language and the insights drawn from the study might facilitate the applications in mind more accurately.

As mentioned, this is a cross-linguistic study which digs into the functional relation between English and Spanish. There are two autonomous but interrelated disciplines within this field of research, namely Contrastive Analysis (CA) and Translation Studies (TS), which complementarily contribute to intercultural communication. The present analysis is mainly concerned with translation, although it draws on results from a previous English-Spanish contrastive analysis on present tenses which pays special attention to progressives (Rabadán, forthcoming). In order to observe how the English phenomenon has been translated into Spanish, I have used an English-Spanish translation corpus, namely, the ACTRES Parallel Corpus (P-ACTRES). The analysis will reveal a repository of one-to-many translational options or, in other words, functional equivalents.

English *Be+ V-ing* and Spanish *Estar + G* share a relatively high degree of similarity, formally and functionally. Meaning wise, both are central resources for realising progressive aspect in each language. However, this functional equivalence should not be taken for granted *always*. Whether equivalence is preserved or not must be accounted for by means of both a contrastive and translation study as will be shown.

The auxiliary of the progressive construction is marked for verbal tense, either present or past. This study focuses only on *present* progressive constructions, that is, periphrases whose auxiliary belongs

with the simple present tense paradigm, even though some expressions convey future uses.

2. English and Spanish Progressives

In this paper, the term *progressives* refers to the periphrastic constructions *Be + V-ing* and *Estar + G*, in English and Spanish respectively. The label *progressive* refers to the structure which typically realises progressive aspect, although the type of constructions under analysis might realise other functions. As a matter of fact, the English progressive construction conveys other meanings, sometimes embedded within the progressive aspect but not always. When translating from English into Spanish, this multifunctional phenomenon is worth keeping in mind.

Be + V-ing and *Estar + G* have both undergone an advanced process of grammaticalization whereby they have become a standard periphrastic construction whose auxiliary verb is now devoid of lexical content and marks the *ongoingness* inherent in progressive aspect, whereas the non-finite verbal form contributes lexical meaning and shapes the syntactic co-text. They two, auxiliary plus non-finite verb, are one and the same meaningful whole. However, even though this formal similarity might favour their cross-linguistic association, especially at early stages of language learning, it is their functional equivalence which guarantees their translatability.

Both constructions refer to progressive aspect, that is, a process which is in the course of its development, ongoing and, thus, incomplete. Aspect is a semantic notion that can be realised in various ways; along with the periphrastic constructions under consideration here, adverbial complementation might also convey aspect grammatically, as well as certain linguistic items which carry aspectual meanings lexically (*aktionsart*), such as aspect verbs. In both languages, the occurrence of certain lexical and syntactic items as progressives or accompanying progressives often modifies the original progressive meaning. This leads to a varied array of semantic functions to be conveyed by English progressives (cf 4.1.), which challenges their translation into Spanish. This is due to the fact that not all the semantic functions of the English periphrasis are shared by Spanish *Estar + G*,

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such as *future intention*, or to the fact that their typicality rates differ (Rabadán, forthcoming). This is why being aware of the real equivalence between these two resources is essential for preventing unacceptable translations derived from an overuse of the Spanish construction as a functional equivalent (translationese).

Along with the multifunctional nature of the English resource, which does not match the functional array of the Spanish periphrasis completely, there is another complication to bear in mind: Spanish offers other means for conveying progressive aspect, which overrides any (hypothetical) one-to-one functional relation between the two resources. This, in turn, implies the possibility of translationese in the use of *Estar* + *G* as a translational option. Whatever the function of the English resource or the realisation of progressive meaning in Spanish, these must be accounted for in context, which urges a corpus-based description.

3. The Data

The parallel concordances which will be analysed have been taken from P-ACTRES, a translation corpus built by the ACTRES research group¹ at the University of León, Spain. P-ACTRES contains nearly 2.5 million words counting original English plus their translation into Castilian Spanish together. It is representative of general-language texts, distributed into five sub-corpora: fiction and non-fiction books, news editorials, magazine articles and ephemera. The data under examination in this paper have been taken from a smaller population of nearly 250 thousand words of the books (fiction plus non-fiction) sub-corpora. The corpus is browsed on-line using Corpus WorkBench, a browser which makes it possible to search for grammatical categories (full words or truncated) and even strings of words. When searching in the population for this study, I chose as my key word a truncated option: any verb ending in *-ing*. This search retrieved nearly 5 thousand concordances, which have been analysed manually so as to classify the *-ing* constructions in terms of their semantic function: adverbial constructions, descriptive constructions, progressives, etc. Over one

¹ <http://actres.unileon.es/>

thousand of them were progressives, although this study reports only on those whose auxiliary was in the present tense, sample which amounts up to 417 parallel concordances.

After this selection process, the original halves of the parallel concordances will be described according to their semantic function and the translational options will be examined so as to a) see which are the functional equivalents offered and b) contrast them with the original in terms of their semantic equivalence.

4. The Study

Once the data have been selected, the study develops in two main stages, with the former focusing on the semantic classification of the original halves of the concordances and the latter on the translations.

4.1. *Semantic description of English progressives*

A descriptive analysis of the progressive constructions within context has revealed a range of different semantic functions or meanings realised by the various concordances. The co-textual information participates in the semantic functions of the English construction, often introducing shades to the original progressive meaning, either lexically (e.g. by means of the non-finite verb of the construction) or grammatically (e.g. through adverbial complementation). Table 1 illustrates the distribution of each function within the total sample.

Table 1. Semantic functions of English progressives

Meaning	Instances	%
Progression	296	71%
Temporary habit	33	8%

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Will	27	6.5%
Temporary state	26	6.2%
Inchoation	16	3.8%
Iteration	10	2.4%
Result	7	1.7%
General validity	2	0.4%
TOTAL	417	100%

Apart from a couple of functions in which the notion of progress is hardly present, some are actually on the borderline with progressive meanings, and it is possible to appreciate hints of it in the construction. However, lexical and contextual items contribute specific shades of meaning which favour a more detailed classification. Let us have a look at each semantic function.

PROGRESSION: this is the central meaning of English progressives, which explains its outstandingly high typicality rate (71%). An event is in the midst of its development, in progress, ongoing. This implies that the action has duration and is incomplete, happening *here and now*.

- (1) He is listening, watching and marvelling.

Amongst the constructions conveying progression, 4.8% occur in subordinate clauses of the conditional and/or concessive type, or clauses in which there are linguistic items which hint at virtuality such as *perhaps, maybe*, or indeterminate semantic content: *whoever, whatever*, etc.

- (2) which means keep your microphones off unless you're speaking.
- (3) maybe I'm getting old, maybe I'm slowing down, but nothing I tried -not even making sure he lost the election- did the trick.

TEMPORARY HABIT: 8% of the concordances seem to convey temporary habit, that is, a habit, common activity which is frequently realised by the agent during a fairly extended, although bounded, period of time. The action is not necessarily occurring at the

time of speaking, but it is a reality of the present moment, viewing present in a broader sense: these days, for the time being, etc.

- (4) ...he ought to be taking lessons from Catullus, poet of love, whom they are translating in tutorials.

In example 4, the adverbial *in tutorials* reinforces the idea of temporary habit since tutorials are scheduled sessions during the school year for students and teachers to meet and discuss course topics.

WILL: slightly more than 6% of the data express a plan or intention to do something in the future time. In as many as half of the concordances found, adverbial complementation enhances this meaning by means of time adverbs such as *today, tomorrow, tonight*, time clauses and a few prepositional phrases (PP).

- (5) I'm leaving the college *tonight*, sir.
 (6) "I'm coming back to the White House *as soon as the plane is fueled*," the President said.

TEMPORARY STATE: states lack dynamism, which is one of the main features of progressive meanings. However, I have found a number of constructions referring to a state, the peculiarity being that it is a temporary state. Overall, the construction implies emphasis of the state being extraordinary.

- (7) My mistress has had to sell some property, but she's being clever with the arrangements.

INCHOATION: a bunch of progressives indicate (near) beginning of an event (3.8%). Most of the periphrases contain an aspect verb, which hint at the starting stage of an action. In other words, it is the lexical verb of the periphrastic construction which conveys the inchoative meaning (*aktionsart*), instead of the whole construction. Among the aspect verbs observed are *begin, start, grow, break out* and also *find*, which is sometimes used to encode inchoation (e.g. 9).

- (8) Three, and this applies to all agencies, we are initiating COG.

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- (9) that's why Mundy is finding it hard to take Dimitri seriously.

ITERATION: a smaller percentage of progressives (2.4%) have been interpreted as conveying iteration, i.e. non-continuous repetition. This indicates that the event is not so easy to perceive as if it was continuously ongoing. That is, the event is repeated but not successively.

- (10) and when you are trying to save every dollar so you can send the kids to college, games of chance are not where.

RESULT: seven concordances, representing nearly 2% of the total sample, have been labelled as conveying result. There are two criteria according to which English progressives have been classified as realisation of *result*: a) the fact that the original construction could be paraphrased into a present perfect verb phrase in English and b) the occurrence of co-textual information which frames the progressive so that it expresses cause-effect.

- (11) But Scabius is trying for a Balliol scholarship, I reminded him
[But Scabius has applied/tried for a Balliol scholarship,...]
(12) ...is it morally permissible to turn the needy away because we think that they are altering our cultural mores?

As examples 11 and 12 show, such a meaning is partly realised by lexico-grammatical means, since the progressive construction acquires this function within a specific co-text, in which there might be linguistic items which hint at the meaning under discussion. The construction itself preserves the progressive meaning so that the result or consequence is taking place at the present moment.

GENERAL VALIDITY: two concordances do not express progression or any of the related meanings. Rather, they refer to a situation which tends to be always the case, no matter the actual aspectual connotations involved. In other words, a couple of concordances refer to a situation with general validity in time. Usually, these situations can be conceived of as general truths or general statements, under certain circumstances.

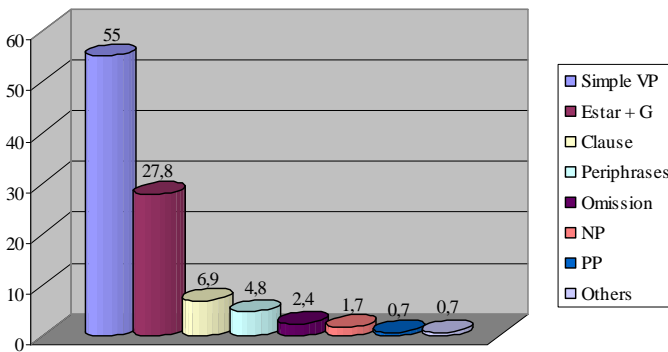
- (13) Ugly men can force themselves on women, ugly women make overtures to men; if one resists, one is not playing the game.

4.2. Description of Spanish translational options

A second stage involves the observation and classification of the translational options offered in Spanish as functional equivalents. First, I will comment on the options found for each semantic function and then I will contrast them with the original English progressives to see whether functional equivalence is really preserved.

By looking at the translations, a group of recurrent options for the whole sample can be extracted. Figure 1 illustrates the frequency distribution of the various translational options.

Figure 1. Translational options of progressives



As can be seen, there are two preferred resources for translating English progressives into Spanish: a simple VP and the equivalent periphrasis *Estar + G*. These two options are verb phrases which in the vast majority of cases are conjugated in *presente de indicativo*. Let us remember that the original English progressives are also present-tensed constructions, and that, except for those functions which imply other temporal references (e.g. future), the translations are expected to keep this meaning too. These two options could be considered central functional equivalents for two important reasons: a) they display a high

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frequency of use and, even most importantly, b) both are typical devices for conveying progressive meanings in Spanish (Rabadán, forthcoming), the latter being the most central option. This last remark could well question the acceptability of my results, for, as can be observed, *Estar + G* ranks second on the list. However, let us not forget that the English progressives convey functions which are not shared by the Spanish progressive, and that the typicality rates for conveying other common meanings are not exactly the same. Since figure 1 illustrates the options for translating *any* English progressive, it is normal, even expected, that *Estar + G* does not rank first, for this would hint at a possible overuse (translationese) of this resource in English-Spanish progressive translation. Therefore, it turns necessary to look at the translation of each semantic function individually.

4.2.1. Recurrent translational options per semantic function

PROGRESSION: slightly more than half of the progressive constructions (53.3%) have been translated into Spanish as simple VPs, all of them in *presente*.

- (14) “...the country is heading for revolution,” he replies.
(14T) Porque el país se encamina a la revolución – contesta.

The second most frequent option (29.5%) is *Estar + G*. The auxiliary is always conjugated in *presente*, apart from two odd cases; one instance of *imperfecto*, which belongs with a narrative progressive in the English original (e.g.15) and a future form which is introduced by a reporting verb of doubt: *wonder*.

- (15) She is leading her mother to the painting.
(15T) Está conduciendo a su madre hasta el cuadro.
(16) Down the corridor Lucy lies in her bed –is she thinking of me, I wonder, as I think of her?
(16T) Lucy reposa en su cama: me pregunto si estará pensando en mí como yo en ella.

Most of the omission instances found for the whole sample occur when translating progressive constructions. As shown by

example 17-17T, omission (2.9%) does not jeopardize the acceptability of the translation. In fact, it may well be motivated for the sake of idiomaticity.

- (17) I'm working on it.
 (17T) Estoy en ello.

There are several verbal periphrases used as translational options here (2.9%). Most of them are gerundial periphrases, five instances of *Seguir + G* and one of *Ir + G*. It is particularly interesting to comment on this fact because, of the various Spanish periphrases, the gerundial ones share a greater degree of equivalence with progressives conveying proper progressive meaning. This is so because, irrespective of the auxiliary “las perífrasis de gerundio presentan la acción vista en su desarrollo, en su transcurso (aspecto ‘cursivo’), por lo que las denominamos ‘cursivas’” (Yllera, 1999: 2983). All the occurrences of *Seguir + G* are used to translate original concordances in which there is an adverbial of frequency-continuity, namely *still*.

- (18) Below them at the Bavarian lakeside the merry-go-round is still belching out its honky-tonk and the Silesian matador is still crooning about amor.
 (18T) Al bajo, a orillas del lago bávaro, el tiovivo sigue vomitando su estridente cencerreo y el torero silesio sigue canturreando sobre el amor.

Two other periphrases are *Ir a + INF*, which implies inchoation. The original constructions, however, are clearly progressive, interpretation which is backed up by deictic devices such as *here*. These two options convey modulation, so the translator must have interpreted the original differently.

- (19) Look, I'm asking for a little help here.
 (19T) Mirad, voy a pedir os un poco de ayuda.

Among the peripheral options, there are NPs (1.5%) and PPs (1.1%), which fail to preserve functional equivalence, for they no longer

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express progression. These items are morphologically related to the original *-ing* form so the lexical content is maintained.

- (20) Why you asking, Logan, querido.
(20T) ¿Por qué esa pregunta, Logan, querido?

TEMPORARY HABIT: there are just two recurrent translational options: simple VPs (69.7%) and *Estar + G* (30.3%). Apart from a simple VP which is conjugated in *imperfecto*, all the constructions convey present tense.

- (21) ...he ought to be taking lessons from Catullus, poet of love, whom they are translating in tutorials.
(21T) Si va a convertirse en poeta debería estar estudiando a Catulo, poeta del amor, al que traducen en las tutorías; pero es Tácito el historiador, cuyo latín es tan difícil.
(22) He's passing himself off to you as My personal messenger
(22T) Se está haciendo pasar ante vosotros por Mi mensajero personal.

WILL/ FUTURE INTENTION: 56% of the translations correspond to a simple VP, the majority of which are conjugated in *presente* and just three in *futuro simple*.

- (23) We do not want them saying where they are going when they take off.
(23T) No queremos que nadie diga dónde van cuando despeguen.
(24) I'm leaving the college tonight, sir.
(24T) Dejaré la facultad esta misma noche, señor.

A significant number of occurrences (40%) are translated into Spanish by means of the periphrasis *Ir a + INF*, in which the lexical verb –auxiliary- is always conjugated in the *presente de indicativo*.

- (25) “I'm coming back to the White House as soon as the plane is fuelled,” the President said.
(25T) Voy a volver a la Casa Blanca tan pronto como el avión cargue el combustible - dijo el presidente.

TEMPORARY STATE: a simple VP is used in half of the sample and *Estar + G* ranks second (30.8%). All the occurrences are conjugated in *presente*.

- (26) But if Mundy is fishing for Dimitri 's nationality, he's wasting his time.
 (26T) Pero si Mundy intenta sonsacar a Dimitri su nacionalidad, pierde el tiempo.
 (27) IBM, he can swear, is killing him, turning him into a zombie.
 (27T) IBM, podría jurarlo, le está matando, le está convirtiendo en un zombi.

INCHOATION: the most recurrent option in this context is an aspectual semiperiphrasis which marks the beginning stage of a process such as *Empezar a + INF* and *Comenzar a + INF*. These constructions keep the semantic content of the original construction perfectly. All the periphrases are conjugated in *presente de indicativo*.

- (28) ...as dark as a raven's wing and I 'm afraid she is beginning to look absurd.
 (28T) ...tan oscuro como el ala de un cuervo, y me temo que empieza a presentar un aspecto absurdo.

I have also found three instances of *Estar + G*, in all cases conjugated in *presente de indicativo* as well.

- (29) Three, and this applies to all agencies, we are initiating COG.
 (29T) tres, y esto afecta a todas las instancias, estamos estableciendo el GOG.

In such cases the inchoative meaning is preserved lexically, rather than grammatically as happens with the other periphrases.

There are a few simple VPs (31.25%) in *presente* which preserve the inchoative meaning lexically.

- (30) He has reached the summit and is starting down the hill.
 (30T) Ha llegado a la cima e inicia el descenso.

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ITERATION: the vast majority of iterative progressives are translated into Spanish as simple VPs, and 30% as *Estar + G*. All in *presente de indicativo*.

- (31) I am arguing, then, that in Kant 's as well as Arendt's work we encounter.
- (31T) Sostengo, entonces, que en el trabajo de Kant tanto como en el de Arendt encontramos.
- (32) Fifth Column reports coming in from everywhere.
- (32T) Están llegando informes sobre la Quinta Columna desde todas partes.

RESULT: the main options are the same as for other functions, with a VP being the most recurrent. Some of these are conjugated in the present perfect, tense which hints at the idea of result (e.g. 33-33T). Other options are rather free and, even though they keep the lexical content of the original, it is difficult to observe functional equivalence.

- (33) But Scabius is trying for a Balliol scholarship, I reminded him.
- (33T) Pero Scabius ha solicitado una beca de Balliol, le recordé.

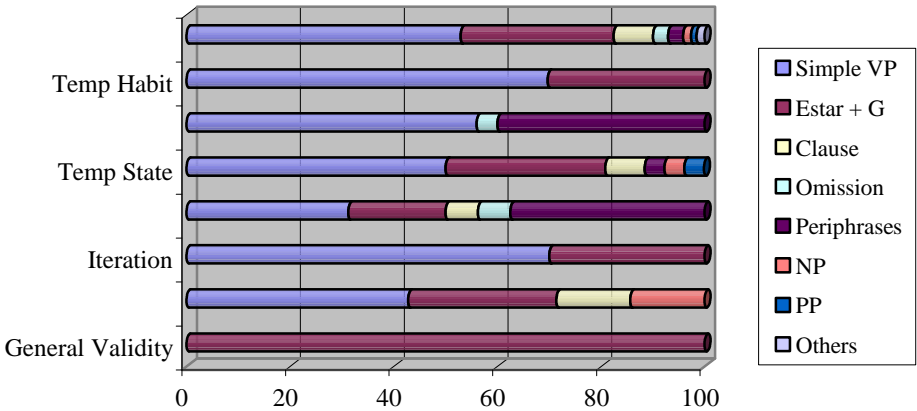
GENERAL VALIDITY: the two constructions which originally convey “general validity” in English have been translated into Spanish as a progressive construction made up of *Estar + G*. This is not a central option of the Spanish progressive construction, which brings to light an instance of translationese.

- (34) If one is finicky about sex, is one rejecting life?
- (34T) ¿Si eres un remilgado en el sexo, estás rechazando la vida?

As the analysis reveals, a simple VP or the gerundial periphrasis *Estar + G* in *presente* share most of the semantic functions realised by English present progressives. This is proved by the high degree of recurrence of one and another as translational options of each function. There are however, other ways of realising these functions, most of them all the same equivalent and acceptable. Figure 2 illustrates the

Spanish translational options found for each semantic function of the English progressives.

Figure 2. Translational options per semantic function



4.2.2. Functional contrast between Spanish translations and English originals

On the assumption that functional equivalence is a condition for translation, i.e., it is mandatory that the translation keeps the function² of the original so that the two texts under analysis hold a translational relation, it is fairly safe to argue that the bulk of options respect this principle. On the one hand, I have not identified drastic changes in meaning. On the other, the most recurrent options are central devices in Spanish for conveying the various meanings that the English progressives convey. In other words, the forms which are recurrent in the translations are associated with the meanings to be expressed. Nevertheless, whether the actual use of these devices as translation equivalents differs from their typical use in spontaneous Spanish needs further verification.

A further stage of the analysis is devoted to verifying whether any of the Spanish devices is overused as a translational option and more precisely whether this is particularly the case with *Estar + G*.

² Since this is a grammatical study, by function I refer to the meaning of a given grammatical construction in the original text, rather than to the function of the whole text, as can be considered in other functional approaches to translation.

Considering the observations made by Rabadán on her contrastive data, an estimate of the expected behaviour of the phenomena under verification has been attempted. Concerning the progressive function, and contrary to my expectations, the Spanish periphrasis seems not to be overused since the option preferred is a simple present VP. This is indeed a central option in Spanish for realising this meaning, but not the central one. In relation to the remaining functions, their formal realisation belongs to possible, correct options. A sound account of their acceptability should be based on the empirical observation of a representative sample of each one, which leaves a niche open for further research.

5. Conclusions

By means of a parallel corpus-based study it is possible to identify translational options which can be considered as functional equivalents, on the assumption that the degree of translatability between two resources equals their functional equivalence. The analysis has revealed a collection of cross-linguistic correspondences which show that the translation possibilities offered in Spanish for English progressives are one-to-many. In other words, there are various resources in Spanish for conveying each of the different functions realised by English progressives. The possibility of a choice is not limited to one for each function but there are several equivalents for the realisation of every meaning. Out of these options, simple VPs and *Estar + G* are especially recurrent. This, along with their centrality in Spanish for realising progressive-type meanings, guarantees their relative acceptability as translation of original progressives. The results obtained in a previous comparable, corpus-based contrastive analysis serve as control data which help to observe the actual degree of acceptability –on semantic terms– of some of these options, namely *Estar + G* and simple VPs, which succeed in communicating the original meaning.

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