

### Pushing the limits of argument structure: (Spanish) tritransitives

This work aims to identify, describe and analyze a novel type of construction: the *tritransitive*. In contrast to more familiar ditransitive sentences (e.g., *Alex gave Casey a book*), the tritransitive construction has an additional argument (e.g., *Alex gave Casey a pat on the shoulder*). This construction involves three internal arguments: the direct object (*a pat* - the Theme), the locative argument (*the shoulder*) and an external possessor (*Casey*). While tritransitives in English are generally restricted to verbs of giving, a preliminary investigation of Spanish corpora (Davies 2002) provides many tritransitive examples with almost any verb denoting a transfer or change of location, and with a relatively wide range of prepositions.

- (1)
- |    |               |                |                    |                      |          |                |
|----|---------------|----------------|--------------------|----------------------|----------|----------------|
| a. | <i>Marisa</i> | <i>le=dio</i>  | <i>una palmada</i> | <i>en el hombro</i>  | <i>a</i> | <i>Emilio.</i> |
|    | Marisa        | DAT=gave       | a pat              | in the shoulder      | DAT      | Emilio         |
| b. | <i>Marisa</i> | <i>le=puso</i> | <i>el bebé</i>     | <i>en los brazos</i> | <i>a</i> | <i>Emilio.</i> |
|    | Marisa        | DAT=put        | the baby           | in the arms          | DAT      | Emilio         |
| c. | <i>Marisa</i> | <i>le=dijo</i> | <i>la verdad</i>   | <i>a la cara</i>     | <i>a</i> | <i>Emilio.</i> |
|    | Marisa        | DAT=told       | the truth          | at the face          | DAT      | Emilio         |

Tritransitives have been rarely noted (but see Armstrong 2021; see Kittilä 2007 for a different use of the label *tritransitive*) and there are no previous detailed analyses or studies on their frequency and crosslinguistic distribution (but see Lomashvili 2011 for Georgian; McGinnis & Gerds 2004 for Kinyarwanda). This construction holds particular importance to the question of valency, given that tritransitive sentences have four participants that act as arguments of the verbal predicate, a number which exceeds the maximum valency of three arguments that any identified verbal class has been theoretically proposed to licence. It also reveals striking cross-linguistic variation, ruling out verbal meaning as a point of variation and suggesting that the licensing of the external possessor is what is at issue.

This paper focuses primarily on Spanish. We contribute a description of the lexical scope and semantic properties of the construction, examine its morphosyntactic properties, and propose a formal analysis. A survey of tritransitives in other Romance languages highlights the systematic points of cross-linguistic variation in a micro-comparative approach.

Spanish tritransitives typically involve a preverbal agentive subject, a DO, a locative PP with a definite DP complement, and a clitic-doubled dative/IO. Semantically, the dative expresses the (inalienable) possessor of the locative, usually a body part. In turn, the DO/Theme holds a spatial relation with the Locative. In addition, with verbs of transfer or change of location there can be locative and possession entailments (from (1b): baby is in arms, Emilio has the baby). These properties seem to be the combination of relations found in ditransitives with *give*-type and *put*-type verbs. Interestingly, Spanish allows dative arguments with both types of verbs.

- (2)
- |    |               |                   |                       |           |                |
|----|---------------|-------------------|-----------------------|-----------|----------------|
| a. | <i>Marisa</i> | <i>le=entregó</i> | <i>los documentos</i> | <i>a</i>  | <i>Emilio.</i> |
|    | Marisa        | DAT=delivered     | the documents         | DAT       | Emilio         |
| b. | <i>Marisa</i> | <i>le=puso</i>    | <i>azúcar</i>         | <i>al</i> | <i>café.</i>   |
|    | Marisa        | DAT=put           | sugar                 | DAT.DET   | coffee         |

It could be argued that in the case of *give*- and *put*-type verbs, the Theme and Locative are selected by the verb, and the possessor dative is licensed by the DP in the locative PP. In other words, tritransitive constructions could emerge from a ditransitive base augmented by an extra argument (an applicative or an external possessor). This perspective is difficult to maintain, however, given that Spanish tritransitives and their entailments also obtain with verbs of removal (*sacar* 'take-out', *extraer* 'remove'), unaccusatives (*faltar* 'lack', *llegar* 'reach', *caer* 'fall', *salir* 'go-out'), and even activity verbs (*pintar* 'paint', *escribir* 'write', *coser* 'sew'). The question arises, then, about

how the arguments, the dative possessor in particular, are licensed.

Cuervo's (2020) typology of (dative) applicatives proposes a three-way distinction among benefactives (high applicatives), possessors (low applicatives) and affected (middle) applicatives. Tritransitive datives are distinguished from benefactives in that they do not share the same meaning or distribution (restriction of full lexical datives). On the other hand, dative possessors in tritransitives seem to share properties with both low and middle applicatives; semantically, the dative is interpreted as the possessor of the Theme (as in low applicatives) while it is merged above (external to) the predicational structure of Theme and Locative (as middle applicatives). For example, binding of possessive *su* in the Theme by a quantified dative shows that the dative is higher than the Theme, just as in regular ditransitives (Demonte 1995).

- (3) a. *Le=entregó su<sub>i</sub> llave en la mano [a cada huésped]<sub>i</sub>.*  
 DAT=handed their key in the hand DAT each guest  
 b. *\*/?Le=entregó [cada llave]<sub>i</sub> en la mano a su<sub>i</sub> dueño*  
 DAT=handed each key in the hand DAT its owner

Beyond Spanish, Romance presents remarkable variation in the degree of productivity of the tritransitive. Quebec French, for example, patterns much like Spanish (4a) as does Rumanian (4b), while tritransitives in Hexagonal French (4c) and Italian (4d) show more restrictions.

- (4) a. *Jean (lui<sub>i</sub>)=a mis à Marie<sub>i</sub> un chapeau sur la/sa<sub>i</sub> tête.* (QFR)  
 John DAT=AUX put DAT Mary a hat on the/her head  
 b. *John i=a pus Mari=ei o pălărie pe cap.* (ROM)  
 John DAT=AUX put Mary=DAT a hat on head  
 c. *Jean lui=a mis (\*à Marie) un chapeau sur la tête.* (HFR)  
 John DAT=AUX put (at Mary) a hat on the head  
 d. *Gianni le=ha messo un cappello in testa (\*a Maria).* (IT)  
 John DAT=AUX put a hat in head (at Mary)

Three points of variation emerge: i) the possibility of clitic doubling (SP, QFR, ROM), correlating with high degree of productivity; ii) licensing of a possessive determiner in the locative argument (QFR); iii) the types of compatible predicates (restricted in HFR and IT).

## Conclusions

Tritransitive constructions challenge descriptively attractive theories of argument structure that propose lexical valence of verbs as the organizing principle of sentence structure, as evidenced by the wide range of verb types that participate in this construction in Spanish. More amenable is an approach whereby arguments are introduced by specialized heads. Variation is accounted for within a typology of applicative arguments, namely, the availability of an applicative projection below the verb that takes a predicational structure as complement.

## Selected references

**Armstrong, G. 2021.** Te puse la mano en el hombro ‘I put my hand on your shoulder’: A solution to a puzzling constraint on multiple external possession relations in Spanish. *Isogloss. Open Journal of Romance Linguistics* 7,10: 1-28. **Cuervo, M.C. 2020.** Datives as applicatives. In A. Pineda & J. Mateu (eds.), *Dative constructions in Romance and beyond*, 3–41. Berlin: Language Science Press. **Davies, M. 2002.** Corpus del Español: 100 million words, 1200s-1900s. **Demonte, V. 1995.** Dative alternation in Spanish. *Probus* 7: 5-30. **Kittilä, S. 2007.** A typology of tritransitives: alignment types and motivations. *Linguistics* 45(3), 453-508. **Lomashvili, L. 2011.** *Complex predicates: The syntax-morphology interface*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. **McGinnis, M. & D. Gerdts. 2004.** A phase-theoretic analysis of Kinyarwanda multiple applicatives. Proceedings of the 2003 Canadian Linguistic Association Annual Conference, 154–165.