

GUSTAR-TYPE VERBS: THEORETICAL MATTERS AND PRACTICAL APPLICATION

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Resumen: Con frecuencia, los verbos que en español funcionan como *gustar* se suelen clasificar juntos al explicarlos en una clase del primer año. Sin embargo, si se los considera de una manera teórica, se descubre que no todos los «psico-verbos» (*psych-verbs*) se comportan de la misma manera. Si se clasifican semánticamente, en vez de sintácticamente, resultará más fácil para el profesor explicarlos y para los estudiantes entenderlos.

Palabras clave: Verbos como *gustar*, verbos psicológicos, la enseñanza de *gustar*, aprendizaje de español como segundo idioma.

Abstract: The verbs that function like *gustar* in Spanish are frequently classified together when taught to students in a first year class. However, if one looks at these verbs in a theoretical way, one finds that all psych-verbs do not behave alike. By allowing a semantic rather than a syntactic classification, the teacher's ability to explain *gustar*-type verbs becomes easier and student understanding is enhanced.

Key words: *gustar*-type verbs, psych verbs, teaching of *gustar*, la enseñanza de *gustar*, learning Spanish as a second language

Resumé: En espagnol, les verbes qui fonctionnent comme «*gustar*» sont généralement classifiés dans une même catégorie lorsqu'ils sont enseignés aux étudiants de première année. Cependant si nous examinons ces verbes d'un point de vue théorique, nous trouvons que tous ces verbes psychologiques ne se comportent pas de la même façon. Si le professeur utilise une classification sémantique au lieu de syntaxique, il pourra plus facilement expliquer le fonctionnement de ces verbes et permettre ainsi à l'étudiant de mieux comprendre.

Mots-clés: Les verbes comme *gustar*, verbes psychologiques, le enseignement de *gustar*, apprendre l'espagnol como seconde langue

The so-called *gustar*-type verb is a pedagogical term used for a specific set of verbs in Spanish which seem to have similarities in usage. However, when examining them individually, one sees that the verbs grouped under the *gustar* heading differ in their ability to have a postverbal bare noun subject. The true *gustar*-type verb is not grammatical with a bare noun as subject while verbs such as *quedar* and *faltar* are commonly used without a preceding determiner. The standard structural explanation of these verbs cannot account for the bare noun subjects possible with certain *gustar* class verbs and not with others. Neither is the generative approach with its application of the Empty Category Principle able to give sufficient information about such verbs. Therefore, in order to better account for the differences in such constructions, I propose a semantic

approach which will deal with the semantic class of both the verbs and determiners (or lack thereof) to explain these structures better. By using such an approach, English-speaking students learning Spanish benefit from the ability to see the difference between the structures not only in Spanish but in English as well.

In the classroom, *gustar*-type verbs offer special problems for students since they use a post verbal subject construction in Spanish that does not correspond to either the more familiar English or Spanish SVO word order. As an added difficulty, students are faced with verbs like *quedar* and *faltar* which can be used with bare subjects. In order to facilitate the learning of *gustar*-type verbs, I have developed a method that seeks to increase student mastery of this construction as well as to insure that the elements are always placed in the correct order. The way in which I teach *gustar* may not be necessary for the good student's learning of this construction but I have tested its use with a wide range of students and found it to be very effective especially with those students who struggle when not dealing with a word-for-word translation from English to Spanish.

The standard traditional approach to *gustar*-type verbs is given by Solé and Solé (1977). They state «The indirect object forms signal the logical subject of the sentence—as opposed to the grammatical subject—and tend to occur in subject position. A few of these verbs have the same structure as English, while others function differently» (Solé and Solé, 1977:30-31). They give several examples but do not further classify or clarify the distinctions between the functioning of the various verbs nor do they attempt to define the differences between logical and grammatical subjects. The presence of a definite article in (1a) versus its omission in (1b) and (1c) are given in sentences as examples but never explained.

(1a) Le interesa el arte moderno. 'She is interested in modern art.'

(1b) Le falta experiencia. 'She lacks experience.'

(1c) Me faltan varias páginas. 'I am missing several pages.' (Solé and Solé, 1977:31)

In contrast to the lack of information about *gustar*-type verbs given by Solé and Solé, Contreras (1986) gives a very detailed generative analysis of Spanish bare subject noun phrase (NP) sentences in terms of the Empty Category Principle (ECP). This principle formulated by Chomsky in 1981 and modified in his 1986 work *Barriers* states that all empty categories must be properly governed. Empty categories include traces produced by the Move alpha rule and other phonetically null categories such as *pro* and variables. In sentences such as those in (2), the noun phrase containing *comida* is said to have the structure in (3) and the empty quantifier phrase (QP) in these sentences must be properly governed.

(2) a. Quiero comida. 'I want food.'

b. Falta comida. 'Food is needed.'

c. *Me gusta comida. 'I like food.'

(3) [_{NP} [_{QP} e] N']

According to Kayne's 1981 «a, b government hypothesis» which Contreras applies to the structure in (3), lexical categories can govern across one and only one maximal projection. With respect to the verbs in the sentences above, *faltar* 'to lack' and *quedar* 'to remain' are classified by Contreras as ergative verbs whose subject is in object position while *gustar* 'to be pleasing' is not. Since ergative verbs like *faltar* do not have their subject move to the postverbal position, the empty QP can be properly governed by the verb, as seen in (4).

(4) INFL [_{VP} [_{V'} falta [_{NP} [_{QP} e] comida]i [_{NP} pro]i]

Unlike other linguists, Contreras contends that Spanish is a VOS language, not SVO as typically proposed. If Spanish were to be classified as SVO, then the sentence «*Me gusta comida*» should be grammatical but it is not. This grammaticality would occur as a result of the empty QP's government by the inflection (INFL) of the verbal form *gusta* as seen in (5):

(5) [_S [_{VP} [V' me gusta INFL [_{NP} [_{QP} e comida] N']]]]

But to propose VOS word order for Spanish, Contreras must also account for sentences such as (6) which are frequently used in Spanish:

(6) [_S [_{NP} el hombre]i [_S INFL [_{VP} [V' sale]ti]]] 'The man leaves'

(7) *[_S [_{NP} e hombre]i [_S INFL [_{VP} [V' sale]ti]]]

He refers to these SVO sentences as pseudo-topic constructions and posits that their preverbal NPs are adjoined to a sentence or inflectional phrase (S or IP) via movement, unlike true topics which are generated in situ. These adjoined NPs are subject to the ECP and therefore cannot occur with an empty determiner. Since «e» is ungoverned in sentences such as (7), the result is ungrammatical. But there are some sentences like (8) which is fine and (9) which is not, whose grammaticality must still be accounted for by the theory posited.

(8) Viejos y niños escuchaban con atención sus palabras. 'Old people and children listened attentively to his/her words.' (Bello, 1847:76)

(9) *Comida y agua son baratas. 'Food and water are cheap.'

According to Contreras, a plural bare NP can be in the subject position of a non-ergative verb if it is linked to another plural bare NP by a conjunction. But this does not hold true for singular NPs. There must be something that conjoined plural NPs have in common which can override the ECP, but he does not provide an answer for this or for the type of sentence which has a non-ergative verb with an NP in focused position. The focused bare NP construction is not grammatical with all plural nouns, so a generalization extending to this type of sentence as applicable to plural vs. singular focused NPs is not possible. Although the ECP would seem to disallow all such constructions, obviously some other much more specific properties are involved in

focused structures in contrast to non-focused NP clauses and it is beyond the scope of this article to investigate focused structures. As Contreras notes, there must be more specific properties involved in these constructions in Spanish and I could not use syntax to explain further the differences between true *gustar*-type verbs and those that they resemble.

Turning from syntax to semantics, in her 1990 work, Laca uses an approach which calls for indefinite versus generic or universal interpretation of bare noun objects with verbs in English. A bare NP in English can have two interpretations, that of an indefinite or existential reading such as ‘Crickets were chirping near the house.’ or a generic or universal one like ‘Crickets chirp’ (Laca, 1990:25). It seems as though some verbs always select the first, while others always choose the generic interpretation for bare NP objects. Laca mentions Christophersen’s 1939 study as one of the first to note that certain verbs like «drink» or «eat» have a parti-generic interpretation while other verbs such as «hate» have a toto-generic interpretation, but he dismissed the varying quantitative interpretations as psychologically irrelevant. Even though Laca’s data focus on the object of the verb rather than the subject as is the case with *gustar*-type verbs, her ideas provide an interesting point of departure for *gustar*-type verbs in Spanish. She mentions that Spanish has an alternation of bare and definite NPs which corresponds to the existential and universal readings of English bare NPs, as in (10) and (11) respectively.

(10a) I drink water.

(10b) I eat grapes.

(11a) I hate water.

(11b) I hate grapes.

However, the verbs used in the above examples can take either bare NPs or those preceded by a determiner in Spanish because they are serving as the object of a verb and not its subject. Laca claims that the lexical content of the verb is not the only factor that separates the parti-generic from the toto-generic reading of a statement, but that the «information structure of the statement plays at least an equally important role» (Laca, 1990: 26). What seems to be a deciding factor in her hypothesis is the focus or partial focus of the object in the utterance. Her use of focus, defined by Wilson and Sperber in 1979 as the pragmatic point of the utterance, leads Laca to limit her study to generic or habitual statements which are atemporal characterizations expressed by a verb in the simple present in both English and Spanish, the simple and periphrastic past tenses in English and the imperfect past tense in Spanish. These tenses do not typically impose a time limit on the denoted event and the bare NP cannot supply the time limit because the existential or universal readings are unbounded forms, unable to define any particular quantity of individuals or items in question. Laca states that it is precisely this indifference to quantity which allows for the universal (inclusive) and the existential (non-inclusive) readings she examines. Certain verbs such as factives like *make*, *produce*,

and *build* do not permit inclusive interpretation of the object in English and they can also be found without the definite article in Spanish. In contrast, some verbs seem to force an inclusive reading on their object NPs; for example, those verbs not connected to any actual occasions of performance –the so-called affective attitude or subjective verbs. Inferences based on inclusion relationships are always prevented with verbs like *despise, hate, like, loathe*, and other verbs of emotion. Laca lists certain properties of affective attitude verbs that characterize their behavior. The first property is that of not being connected to any events in time because their reference to feelings and mental states cannot be thought of as a happening or event. The second and third properties, that of corresponding to relations between individuals, not stages, and that these verbs create an intentional context for their objects seem to have little relevance since other non-affective attitude verbs do these things as well. The fourth property, that of being non-agentive verbs, occurs because the subject of these verbs (at least in English) is an Experiencer who cannot be said to control the state specified by the verb. Affective attitude verbs share the feature of non-agentivity, which restricts any selection among individual occurrences. If I hit people, for example, I can choose which individuals within hitting distance upon whom I will act or not and as a result, I can have a non-inclusive or inclusive reading of the object. But if I like or hate people, seemingly I have nothing to chose.

In order to find the most explanatory solution for the ability of some *gustar*-type verbs in Spanish to have a bare subject and others only to be able to appear with a determiner, my approach rejects the syntactic proposal of Contreras and uses elements of Laca's semantic explanation. First, I found it necessary to divide the verbs into two groups according to their acceptance of bare noun subjects. Of the verbs in (12), Group A verbs cannot have bare noun subjects and those in Group B can occur without a determiner.

(12) Group A	Group B
<i>gustar</i> 'to be pleasing'	<i>quedar</i> 'to remain'
<i>disgustar</i> 'to displease'	<i>faltar</i> 'to lack'
<i>encantar</i> 'to delight, charm, love'	<i>hacer falta</i> 'to need'
<i>interesar</i> 'to interest'	<i>sobrar</i> 'to be left over'
<i>agradar</i> 'to be pleasing'	
<i>importar</i> 'to matter'	
<i>desagradar</i> 'to displease'	
<i>fascinar</i> 'to fascinate'	
<i>molestar</i> 'to bother'	
<i>fastidiar</i> 'to annoy'	
<i>sorprender</i> 'to surprise'	

The verbs listed in (12) cannot be dealt with simply by using the ECP for several reasons. First, positing that Spanish is a VOS language and that SVO sentences are pseudo-topic and have their preverbal NPS adjoined to IP via movement is unnecessary and seems counterintuitive since *gustar*-type verbs account for only a small percentage of verbs in Spanish; sentences with SVO order are much more common. The VSO language typology is rare according to Greenberg's 1963 study and occurs primarily among non-Indo-European languages. It is much more economical to continue to identify Spanish as an SVO language and to view the verbs in (12) as variations contrary to standard word order. Although the notion of a pseudo-topic construction may solve the Spanish problem of proper government of an empty category, it does not account for the same structure in English which is allowed to have a bare noun subject and in fact, requires it in cases of generic reference. Additionally, we are still left with the case of bare plural NPs which are conjoined to another bare plural NP as subject and are grammatical while their singular counterparts are not. The Bello example and other bare noun subjects of SVO sentences that are commonly quoted are literary examples dating from over 100 years ago but nevertheless, there should be a way in which to account for them.

It may be far more explanatory to apply some of the semantic notions Laca used for English bare objects to Spanish bare noun subjects and *gustar*-type verbs. The verbs in both groups A and B in (12) are preceded by an indirect object pronoun which acts as an Experiencer and in Laca's terms cannot control the state specified by the verb. But although the linear structure for both verbal groups appears the same, the resemblance is only superficial. Just as a bare noun direct object in English offers an inclusive or universal reading, the definite article determiner must precede a subject in Spanish in order to achieve that same reading with the Group A verbs in Spanish. The Group B verbs are commonly found without any determiner at all. Therefore, it seems that the information structure, not just the syntactic structure, is different from verbs from the two groups.

Semantically speaking, unlike the lack of a common lexical class that Laca found with some of the verbs in her study, the verbs I have placed in Group A pattern together because they are affective attitude verbs which impose an inclusive reading. The inclusive reading may be due to their inherent meaning in combination with their use of the definite article. The Group B verbs, however, are not of the affective attitude class and seem to indicate by their inherent meaning that a portion of either a count or mass noun subject is the focus of the utterance. That does not mean that Group B verbs can never be used with a determiner, but when they are, the determiner will further narrow the range of the subject. The subject of an affective attitude verb in Group A may also be preceded by a determiner other than a definite article but the universal, generic reading is lost and a bare subject with Group A verbs is ungrammatical.

By dividing the verbs in (12) into separate categories whose meaning regulates the use or non-use of a determiner, the non-native student of Spanish can make a better choice with regard to determiner use. Typically, the verb *gustar* is introduced in the middle of a first semester Spanish course and then reviewed when verbs such as *faltar*, *quedar* and other Group A and B verbs are presented. As mentioned earlier, the one thing that these verbs have in common is a post verbal subject construction in Spanish that does not correspond to either the more familiar English or Spanish SVO word order. Unfortunately, all of these verbs are taught together as though they behaved in the same way. As an added difficulty, students are confronted with verbs like *quedar* and *faltar* which can be used with bare subjects.

In order to facilitate the learning of *gustar*-type verbs, I have developed an acronym that seeks to increase student's mastery of this construction as well as insure that the elements are always placed in the correct order. The good student, as usual, has little trouble learning the construction no matter how it is taught, but the poorer student who translates from English to Spanish has a tendency to treat a *gustar* sentence as if it were a more common SVO type sentence. The students are presented with the singular forms *me*, *te*, and *le gusta* in the preliminary chapter of the textbook but without grammatical explanation. This does not seem to help the poorer student when presented with the construction later in the semester. With the overuse of reflexive and/or direct object pronouns that these students learn in preceding chapters, they commonly tend to generate phrases such as «*Me gusto*», «*Se gusta*», and «**Me lo gusta*». To assist in the placement of elements in a *gustar* construction as well as insuring that only third singular and plural forms of the verb are used along with a determiner and postposed subject, I have used the acronym CIVAS to assist my more challenged students. The acronym seems to have worked for many years, but I decided to test its effectiveness in a limited way. I had two first semester Spanish classes, one with thirty students and the other with thirty three. The smaller class was also much less able overall, with six students who lacked any previous experience with Spanish as a second language. The class overall grade average was 78% while the larger class had an overall 82% average, no F's and a higher percentage of A's. These numbers determined which class seemed to need more help-the one with a seemingly lower ability level. I presented the verb *gustar* in my usual contrastive way in both classes-English *I like coffee* versus Spanish *Me gusta el café* and I varied the indirect object pronouns, question format, and introduced the plural form of *gustar* as we preceded. I also emphasized the use of a clarifying phrase in Spanish which corresponds to a proper noun subject in English. However, in the less talented class, I used the acronym CIVAS as seen in (13).

(13) (Clarifying phrase) **I**(ndirect object pronoun) **V**(erb in third person singular or plural) **A**(rticle) **S**(ubject)

Each initial in the acronym represents the necessary components in a *gustar*-verb sentence. The clarifying phrase is between parentheses because it is optional except when a proper name is mentioned. The other elements are ordered so as to always generate a grammatical sentence as long as there is subject/verb agreement between *gustar* and its postposed subject. Two days after the presentation, I gave both classes a short 5 sentence translation quiz in which I provided English examples such as «*Pablo likes apples*» and «*We like the house*». These sentences in Spanish have a plural subject and singular indirect object or a singular subject and plural indirect object respectively; I attempted to reduce reliance on the English sentence format. I also made sure to include at least two examples in which a clarifying phrase was obligatory because the English sentence had a proper noun subject. I kept the vocabulary simple and omitted any extra modifiers in order to truly test mastery of *gustar*. Getting the correct form of the pronoun in each sentence was worth one point and the correct form of *gustar* counted as the other for a total of ten points. The results were less dramatic than I would have liked and of course, the data is extremely limited; nevertheless, in my opinion, students did benefit from the use of the CIVAS acronym. The usually poorer class had the same number of students who made five points or below as the better class and had a higher percentage of students who scored either six or seven points out of ten. There were seven in the poorer class who made six points versus ten students in the control class and six who made seven points in the poorer class versus four in the control group. Both classes had the exact same number of students who scored eight out of ten points and there was only one more student in the control class who made nine out of ten points than there was in the usually poorer class. The only perfect score was in the control class and it was made by a student who rarely misses a point on any assignment. The use of an acronym may not be necessary for the good student's learning of the *gustar* construction, but I think that its use with average and below average students seems to be effective. These less-than-gifted students seem to visualize the acronym before ordering the elements of the construction, a laborious process in the beginning, but one that gives them the confidence to use *gustar* as well as the more talented students later in the semester.

All students should eventually learn that the *gustar*-type verb in Spanish is preceded by an indirect object pronoun and followed by its subject. This process may take longer for students less able in second language acquisition, but when the students are presented with the other affective attitude verbs that function like *gustar* in Group A, they will have a model for the construction. The Group B verbs, since they are able to function with a bare noun postverbal subject, can still be taught with the use of the CIVAS acronym, but the article element can be put between parentheses to show its optional use. The affective attitude verbs of Group A and the parti-generic verbs of group B are very different in their ability to accept a bare noun postverbal subject. The Contreras proposal applying the ECP and other rules to this type of structure leaves unanswered

questions about bare nouns in certain types of constructions. Instead, a semantic approach in the case of this non SVO sentence type permits us to divide these verbs into two classes which, because of inherent meaning, allow or disallow the use of a bare subject. Since beginning students of Spanish typically learn *gustar* first and not the verbs in group B, when students learn the CIVAS acronym, they are able to have better success with an otherwise difficult formation in Spanish. Then once students are able to use *gustar* and progress into a more advanced class in which verbs of both Groups A and B are taught, the CIVAS acronym can be modified to optionally include the determiner with Group B verbs. In this way, students can be presented with the semantic differences between the two groups with the confidence that they can order the elements in both kinds of constructions with less likelihood of ungrammaticality.

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