Gustar and Other Psych Verbs: A Problem in Transitivity

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Abstract: Psych verbs have attracted recent attention in syntax, but their behavior is hard to explain. In two key areas—subcategorization and behavior under three tests for transitivity—they show variation that is inconsistent with a fixed assignment to distinct structures and sort out in a continuum or “squish” that blurs transitivity distinctions. The problem suggests the need for a more integrated theory of syntax and semantics in order to improve upon the usual pedagogical explanation of “gustar verbs.”

Key Words: gustar, régimen, psych(ological) verb, transitivity, reflexives

Introduction

In textbooks, gustar receives special attention because of its difference from like. The two verbs denote a comparable emotional response, but differ in how they assign or “cast” the participants. Initially, students just learn to map ‘I like it’ onto a formulaic ‘me gusta’ without further analysis, but eventually they receive an explanation like the following: “the subject of gustar is the person or thing which is pleasing; the person to whom it is pleasing is the indirect object” (Sacks da Silva 77). Discussion concludes with a brief list of other “gustar-type” verbs: encantar, doler, faltar, etc.

One’s curiosity is piqued by that final “etc.”: what other verbs act like gustar, in what ways, and why? Traditional grammars and textbooks are silent on such questions; current theories of generative syntax and functionalist semantics, on the other hand, offer a fuller account of psych verbs but at the same time raise further problems.

Four Types

Right away, the generalization implied by an ellipsis or “etc.” must be constrained. Not all verbs of psychological reaction, or “psych verbs,” act like gustar. One difference is traditionally described as transitivity: transitive verbs (like) take a direct object while intransitives (gustar) cannot. Another difference is in how they represent the two thematic roles of psychological reactions:

- Experiencer: the entity (usually a person) who experiences the reaction.
- Cause: the thing, person, state of affairs that causes the reaction, i.e. what the experiencer is reacting to.

In this article, a verb that casts the experiencer as subject (as in I like it) is called “direct,” while one that treats it as object (as in it pleases me) is “reverse.”

The two distinctions of transitive/intransitive and direct/reverse yield four possible types of psych verbs, all of which seem present in Spanish:

Type 1 “direct transitive,” e.g. desear. With this type, the cause is expressed as direct object, and the experiencer as the subject. Other examples: temer, detestar, lamentar, querer, preferir ....

Type 2 “direct intransitive,” e.g. gozar de/en. The experiencer again appears as subject, but since the verb is intransitive, it expresses the cause as an oblique object (with a verb-specified preposition) instead of a direct one. Other examples: confiar en, desconfiar de, recelar de, simpatizar con....

Type 3 “reverse intransitive,” e.g. gustar. The experiencer is cast as indirect object,
and the cause of the response is treated as subject. The indirect object is optional as with other intransitives: *La música rock gusta en todas partes,* 'Rock music is popular everywhere,' the unspecified experiencer being inferred as generalized or impersonal. Others: *convenir, importar, doler,*... Certain verbs of impression and sufficiency are also customarily included as “gustar” verbs: *valor, bastar, faltar, sobrar,*...

Type 4 “reverse transitive,” e.g. *fascinar.* As with the preceding type 3, the cause is depicted as the subject, but since the verb is classified as transitive, the experiencer is taken to be its direct object. Other examples: *procurar, espantar, tranquilizar, interesar,*...

This four-way classification is summarized in Figure 1 for Spanish. It is important to note, though, that English shows the same set-up:

Type 1, direct transitive: *love, like, fear, enjoy,*...
Type 2, direct intransitive: *delight in, hope for, care about,*...
Type 3, reverse intransitive: *appeal to, matter to,*...
Type 4, reverse transitive: *frighten, scare, please, fascinate,*...

Transitivity: the Syntactic Side

The system in Figure 1 is appealingly neat: four classes of verbs based on a straightforward cross-classification of two binary oppositions. The classes look discrete, and current syntactic theory would assign them different underlying representations resulting from distinct subcategorization and thematic role assignments. To be sure, there are troublesome inconsistencies between and within the two languages. Why should *fascinate* and *fascinar* agree (type 4), but not *enjoy* and *gozar de,* Why should English *like* (type 1) and *please* (type 4) differ from each other and from *gustar* (type 3)?

Moreover, some verbs cross categories. *Disfrutar* and *necesitar* cast the experiencer as subject (i.e. in direct construction), but may be transitive with a direct object (type 1) or intransitive with an oblique one (type 2, with *de*). *Apetecer* may be direct transitive (type 1, *lo apetece like* *lo deseo*), or intransitive with the experiencer as object (type 3, *me apetece like* *me gusta*). In fact, *gustar* itself may appear with *de* for direct intransitive: *gusto de verte.* Similar alternation is seen in English: *that delights me* (reverse transitive) or *I delight in that* (direct intransitive). But these problems are usually treated as just lexical peculiarities of individual verbs: a dictionary would list *apetecer* and *delight* twice, “v.tr.” and “v.in.,” and the dual entries are not deemed serious challenges to overall syntactic description.

But multiple subcategorization is not the only challenge to classification. To see the full extent of the problem, one turns to Belletti and Rizzi, who account for the psych verb system of Figure 1 within current generative theory. Their analysis is as follows for Italian:

*temere* (Sp. *temer,* type 1): the experiencer is the deep structure subject, and the cause (for which they assume the role of “theme”) is direct object.

*preoccupare* (Sp. *preocupar,* type 4): both experiencer and cause originate within the verb phrase; the cause (theme) is thus a derived subject, moved into that position by

| Figure 1 |
|---|---|
| direct construction: | reverse construction |
| experiencer = subject | experiencer = object |
| transitive | type 4: FASCINAR: |
| type 1: DESEAR | su apoyo me fascina |
| (yo) deseo su apoyo | |
| intransitive | type 3: GUSTAR: |
| type 2: GOZAR DE: | su apoyo me gusta |
| (yo) gozo de su apoyo | |
transformation.

piedere (Sp. placer, gustar, type 3): as with preoccupare, but the experiencer originates as an indirect object and is assigned dative case.

These three classes are presented as discrete, differing configurationally in their very deep structures, and Belletti and Rizzi devote their article to tests that confirm them. While their overall analysis is an influential and insightful description of the overall system (aside from the criticisms of Bouchard, Herschensohn, and Legendre), three of their arguments for Italian raise doubts when applied to Spanish.

1. The Effect of “Reflexing” the Verb

First, Belletti and Rizzi maintain (135) that transitive psych verbs with a deep structure subject (type 1, direct transitive) can take a true reflexive: temersi ‘fear oneself,’ admirarsi ‘admir oneself.’ Those with derived subjects (type 4, reverse transitive) cannot; preoccuparsi, commoversi, spavantarsi ‘worry oneself, move oneself, scare oneself’ are thus blocked, since they lack a true subject in deep structure. But Belletti and Rizzi hasten to qualify their dismissal of these forms:

a) True, one can worry or scare oneself (as genuine reflexives), but for Italian that requires the emphatic se stesso instead of the clitic si (135).

b) True, preoccuparsi and spavantarsi could be reciprocal ‘worry/scare each other,’ but in that case the subjects are no longer experiencers but active agents who “voluntarily induce” the reaction (136).

c) True, preoccuparsi, commoversi, spavantarsi do occur as “inchoative” verbs with a preposition for the senses ‘worry about, be moved by, be scared by.’ But these are separate verbs ‘irrelevant’ to the types being investigated (154, fn. 2).

Yet the situation is not as clear in Spanish. Preocuparse and espantarse may be true reflexives (emphasized by a si mismo) or reciprocals (with el uno al otro or entre si) or not, but the clitic appears for all these senses, and from the reflexive or “pronominal” conjugation alone there is no distinction of ‘worry/scare oneself,’ ‘worry/scare each other’ and ‘worry about, be worried/scared.’ Nor is the appeal to “agency” successful; in los dos detectives se sorprendieron/espantaron el uno al otro there is no necessary deliberateness or “voluntary inducing” at all. Finally, in preoccuparse, commoversi, espantarse, alegrarse, etc. there is no necessary “inchoativeness” either, and whether the form refers to a state, as is likely for me alegro or me alegraba, or to a change of state, as in me alegré, simply depends on context and aspect.

Let us examine in more detail the effect of “reflexing” psych verbs in Spanish. With type 1, reflexing yields a true reflexive (the unusual me temo a mi mismo) or intensifies the subject’s experience of the emotion (me lo temo). With type 2, se may again intensify the reaction (gozar ‘enjoy,’ gozarse ‘rejoice’), but is more often lexical, an inherent part of the verb: arrepentirse de, resentirse de (nonreflexed counterparts being absent). With type 3, the effect varies: se gusta (a student overgeneralization of le→se) is odd, perhaps ungrammatical, but native speakers interpret it as a true reflexive (pleased with oneself). But antojarse, used exactly like gustar, is inherently reflexive, and curiously, doler switches to type 2 in dolerse de. This latter shift would be an isolated idiosyncrasy except for what happens next with type 4.

Type 4 verbs switch to type 2 when reflexed, systematically and en masse:

Eso me sorprende/preocupar/espanta/alegra → (Yo) me sorprendo de eso, me preupo por eso, me espanto de eso, me alegro de esto. Reflexing thus produces a casting change: the experiencer is promoted from object to subject and the cause becomes an optional oblique object. Rather than an “irrelevant” peculiarity of a couple verbs, as Belletti and Rizzi implied, reflexing is a general means of changing verb type, from reverse to direct.

Aside from the atypical true reflexive (‘worry oneself’) and reciprocal (‘worry each other’) readings, there is no real reflexivity here; adding a mi mismo to me
preocupó for its usual meaning ‘I worry/am worried’ is strange. Therefore Bello and Cuervo (474–48) posited the category of “quasi-reflexa” and argued that while la muerte nos espanta shows “acción y pasión,” nos espantamos de la muerte suggests that the subject “obra en sí mismo produciendo el espanto.” But they added that this impression is only “una imagen fugaz” since the quasireflexive actually just asserts the existence of an emotion or state with the cause in an “expresión accesoria” (oblique object), de la muerte.

Since “fleeting images” and “action and passion” are hard to identify, most analysts seek a more formal characterization of quasireflexives. Ramsey (379), for example, held that this se changes a transitive into an intransitive, and saw the shift in yo enfado a Luis → Luis se enfada as the same as in yo abro la puerta → la puerta se abre. Others concur, e.g. Batchelor and Pountain (287), Bull (137), Solé and Solé (78), Whitley (180), García (132). Masullo (179) sees in this intransitivization a parallel to the passive, an antipassive, while others, such as Alonso (97) and Babcock (33–39), describe it as middle voice (“middle” between active and passive), a productive inflectional process rather than an isolated derivational one. Babcock adds that it is this middle voice, not the passive, that underlies estar + participle for the resulting state: Juan se enojó/preocupó/arrepintió yields Juan está enfadado/preocupado/arrepentido, just as la puerta se abrió yields la puerta está abierta. She concludes that the capacity for middle voice is a test for transitivity (40).

But problems again arise. The middle voice is indeed one source of copula + participle, but both are possible with indisputably intransitive verbs: Juan se dolió → Juan está dolido, las hojas se cayeron → las hojas están caídas, Juan se murió → Juan está muerto, etc. Other intransitives accept middle voice but not copula + participle: quedar, ir, parecer. Gustar accepts neither, but its related antonym disgustar takes both. Some psych verbs generally classified as “transitive” accept copula + participle but not middle voice: fascinar, decepcionar, encantar.

Thus, reflexing or middle voice is systematically used by Spanish to shift the casting and constructional type of psych verbs. But rather than confirming the transitive/intransitive distinction, it begins to blur it.

2. The Dative/Accusative Distinction

Belletti and Rizzi assume (132) that reverse intransitives (type 3) are characterized by dative case marking, as opposed to the accusative object of reverse intransitives (type 4). Thus in Italian, intransitive piacere takes an indirect object which is preceded by a and is pronominalized with gli instead of lo/la.1 But Spanish does not require objects for either type (eso preocupas/gusta mucho), uses a with both indirect and direct objects, and varies between accusative lo/la and dative le with single-object verbs such as temer and preocupar. Bull, who developed an insightful theory for accusative (the “done-to”) vs. dative (“involved entity”), nevertheless believed (255) that native speakers are “engaged in destroying this distinction,” as in le-la ayuda, le-la asusta, a diagnosis shared by Gili Gaya (233).

But it has also been known as far back as Bello and Cuervo (474) that this variation is not free but skewed towards le whenever the object is human and the subject is nonhuman and especially inanimate, as in Eso le preocupa. This le usage contradicts the “transitive” label that dictionaries give such verbs, but has been repeatedly confirmed in polls and text counts for preference between le and la (the feminine being chosen to offset leismo): Hurst, Butt, and Benjamin (118), García, Uber, etc. To explain case, García postulates that the subject is the participant focused on as most active, le the one felt to be less active, and lo/la the entity that seems least active or inactive. For García, casting simply reflects the speaker’s perception of relative roles. If le is automatic with gustar, convenir, doler, importar, etc., this is not because of arbitrary intransitivity but because the situation is an inactive state and the human experiencer is therefore
seen as more active than the cause. But with more action-like events, the cause may appear more active than the experiencer. This explains the usual pattern in which a relatively active human cause = subject occurs with a much less active experiencer = accusative object:

(Yo) la sorprendí en el acto de robar.
while an inanimate cause = subject appears with an experiencer = dative object:

(A María) le sorprendió el resultado.
But, García maintains, the speaker is free to bring out a less forceful human cause:

A María le sorprende con mi actitud.
And the difference in relative activeness may even lead the listener to infer different events (350–63):

le distrae la filatelía (‘amuses her’)
la distrae el ruido (‘distracts her’)
le repelió el ataque (‘disgusted her’)
la repelió el ataque (‘repelled, drove her back’)
le pesó (‘made her sorrowful, weighed down on her’)
la pesó (‘weighed her’)
le encantó (‘delighted her’)
la encantó (‘charmed, cast a spell on her’)

What is cast as subject also varies. The psych verb *admirar* can be direct or reverse, and occurs in three patterns which Belletti and Rizzi would describe as distinct:

Type 1: (Ella) no admira a nadie y nadie la admira a ella. (‘She admires no one and no one admires her’)

Type 2, by reflexing: (Ella) no se admira de nada/nadie. (‘She marvels/is astonished at nothing/no one’)

Are there three different verbs here, i.e. homonyms? A polyseme with three subcategorizations? García sees such descriptions as only obscuring the overall system and the semantic oneness of each verb. As she puts it (308), “*Admirar* asserts only that a feeling of admiration took place; who felt it is left to be inferred”—inferred from the speaker’s casting of the experiencer and cause as a focused subject (*ella*), inactive accusative (*lo*), or somewhat more involved dative (*le*). And lest one discard *admirar* as a single anomaly, other verbs show the same versatility:

Type 1: (Ella) aprovechó su posición.
(Ella) confunde estas letras.

Type 3: Esta posición le aprovechó mucho.
Estas letras le confunden mucho.

Type 2: (Ella) se aprovechó de su posición.
(Ella) se confunde con estas letras.

On the other hand, García’s “activeness” must not be taken too literally. Even aside from other senses of “active” (all these examples have been ‘active’ as opposed to ‘passive’), ‘activeness’ may not entail ‘deliberateness’ or ‘the performing of an action.’ As Espinosa and Wonder note, in *Tú fastidias a Juan* the subject is not necessarily active, but “just the origin of the sentiment expressed by the verb” (130). Hurst encounters similar problems in explicating contrasts such as the following:

*la inquieta*: a nearer or more imminent danger than *le inquieta;*
*la irrita*: a more physical or direct irritation than the weaker psychological effect of *le irrita;*
*la repudia*: physical repulsion, as opposed to a mental repulsion in *le repudia;*
*la sorprendo*: a more energetic taking by surprise than *le sorprendo.*

When she generalizes in terms of relative “influence of the subject” and “dynamic quality” or “quality of force” in the effect on the experiencer, she apologizes for the imprecision, and adds (75) that “for the moment we have nothing better with which to work.” Traditional metalanguage seems designed for actor + action events, and the degrees of impact which García and Hurst perceive suggest the need for a better theory of transitivity.

At any rate, the casting of objects for “transitive” psych verbs like *preocupar* and
sorprender may reflect speaker perception of roles rather than fixed case assignment. And those roles are quite often those of an intransitive characterization of the event.

3. The Passive

As a third argument, Belletti and Rizzi (141–3) observe that although both types 1 (temere) and 4 (preoccupare) are transitive, type 1 passivizes in Italian but type 4 does not and therefore lacks a true subject. What seems a passive in Gianni è preoccupato/ disgustato/ affascinato actually describes a resultant state and should be analyzed as copula + adjective, since the participle accepts -issimo like other adjectives. The same is true of Spanish, which contrasts more sharply than Italian the true passive (with ser) and resulting state (with estar): and while Juan está preocupado (preocupadísimo) is perfectly acceptable, Juan es/fue preocupado (por . . .) does seem odd.

Therefore Babcock (59) likewise rules out the passive for reverse psych verbs in Spanish. But again, actual usage is not so fixed. As an intransitive, gustar of course does not passivize. But among the reverse transitives, some do (aterrar, disgustar, sorprender, . . .), some do not (apasionar, alegrar, preocupar . . .), and many elicit disagreements and uncertainty (asombrar, emocionar, divertir . . .). The reason is not obvious: perhaps the passive is unnecessary when reflexing (Masullo’s antipassive) is available for the same function (highlighting an object in subject position and moving the subject=cause to an optional prepositional phrase), or perhaps the object is really more indirect than direct. One of my informants expressly tied her judgments on psych verb passives to clitic choice: le encanta ‘she loves it’ and le afgie ‘it distresses her’ do not passivize, but la encanta ‘(someone) casts a spell on her’ and la afgie ‘(someone) afflicts her’ do.

Most English psych verbs passivize freely: John is feared/liked by Mary, John is (gets) worried/disturbed/amused/pleased by (with) Mary. But in Spanish, the more psychological the meaning, the more resistant the verb is to passivization. If the passive is a test for transitivity and the direct/indirect object distinction (Real Academia 1979:372, D’Introno 88), psych verbs of type 4 again seem quasi-intransitive.

A Transitivity Continuum

Spanish has a flexible system for expressing emotional reactions, and what is often taught as its prototype, le gusta, does not initially seem very representative. The system provides four types of construction

![Figure 2: The Transitivity Continuum in Reverse Psych Verbs.](image)

Key: le = preference for dative; le! = categorically dative; la = preference for accusative; le/la = dative or accusative; “reflexable” = middle voice possible for experiencer as nonreflexive/nonreciprocal subject, as in me preocupo ‘I worry/am worried’.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. El trabajo le/la__</th>
<th>Reflexable? Yes</th>
<th>2. El trabajo le__</th>
<th>Reflexable? Yes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Passive: yes</td>
<td>escapandizar, encolerizar</td>
<td>Passive: yes</td>
<td>sorprender, asombrar, complacer, disgustar, aburrir, agradar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passive: no</td>
<td>interesar, indignar</td>
<td>Passive: no</td>
<td>doler, apasionar</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>gustar, importar</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

atraer
fascinar, decepcionar
encantar
desagradar, repugnar
chocar

based on underlying syntactic roles for
which verbs are subcategorized and to
which thematic roles (experiencer, cause or
theme, agent...) are assigned. Yet the more
one attempts to pin down psych verb con-
struction, the more elusive it becomes.
There have been cases of rampant multiple
subcategorization, as well as indeterminacy
with respect to general principles of case
assignment, reflexing (middle voice, anti-
passive), and passivization that seem to
work with other kinds of verbs.

The magnitude of the problem is demon-
strated in Figure 2, which shows the results
when the three tests of reflexability, case
preference, and passivizability are jointly
applied to Spanish psych verbs. The infor-
mants were free to imagine their own mean-
ings and discourse contexts for their judg-
ments, and they evidently varied in the pos-
sibilities they saw — an outcome that is
more consonant with García’s analysis
(based on perception and inference) than
with Belletti and Rizzi’s (based on syntac-
tic distinctions in transitivity). Between the
extremes of fully transitive at the top and
fully intransitive at the bottom, there is a
continuum of decreasing transitivity, with
some clustering but no breaks between the
expected types.

How does one describe such a distribu-
tion? One interpretation is that grammar is
erratic, every verb for itself; there are no
generalizations to be captured about their
syntax. Another interpretation is that the
overall system does generate four basic
configurations, but at the lexical level
subcategorization (and case and role as-
ignment) is unfixed and fluid. Either way,
a theory such as Belletti and Rizzi’s fails to
capture the behavior of psych verbs and
runs into problems when it extrapolates
from syntax to meaning. Perhaps it is time,
then, to see how a semantic approach might
explain psych verb behavior.

Transitivity: the Semantic Side

As noted earlier, many observers see dif-
ferent levels of “activeness” in what is cast
as subject and objects. As long as this active-
ness is loosely construed as relative involve-
ment of the participants and the perceived
impact of the event, it does shed light on
why Spanish speakers may choose la
sorprendí, le sorprendí, or (ella) se
sorprendió for the same event, according to
the way they see it. Likewise, Schlesinger
hypothesizes that although neither the
experiencer nor the “stimulus” (cause) of a
psych verb is necessarily a true agent that
does anything, the language user may still
ascribe agent-like traits to a subject. He con-
firms this in an experiment in which Eng-
lish speakers rated the subjects of direct
(like, enjoy, pity...) and reverse (anger, fas-
cinate, irritate...) psych verbs for two
agentive traits, “control” (over the event)
and “intention,” and respondents in fact
perceived these to some degree in quite
inactive subjects.

Thus, when both language and meta-lan-
guage are based on transitivity, it seems
natural to look for agency in psych verbs,
in effect treating causes and experiencers
as figurative agents and patients. That
figurative level of perception must be ac-
nowledged at any rate for the hosts of
physical actions (irritar, reventar, afligir,
amoscar, jorobar, etc.) that have become
metaphors for psychological reactions. As
Bouchard (29) observes in a critique of
Belletti and Rizzi, this conversion “is ex-
tremely productive, with many verbs
switching fairly freely from a ‘normal’ use
to a Psych use.” In other words, it is a gen-
eral strategy to treat our emotional impacts
as if they were physical.

However, ex post facto appeals to agency
do not really explain transitivity: there is
circularity in claiming that the experiencer
of like becomes an agent-like subject be-
cause it is agent-like. Even worse, equating
figurative to real agency leads to interling-
gual problems far more serious than the
syntactic anomalies encountered in Belletti
and Rizzi. For example, should one follow
García all the way back to Whorf just to ex-
plain why English speakers say Juan likes
music and Spanish speakers A Juan le gusta
la música? That seems her implication: “In
Spanish, the music is in focus, and the mes-
sage is fundamentally about what an effect music has on Juan. But there is no doubt that in the real world, if any ‘perceptible’ action is going on, it is taking place within Juan, who experiences the feeling of pleasure. This motivates the English view of the event, namely that Juan ‘likes’ music, as if he did something to it” (370). If so, then one must also claim that in Juan teme la inflación Spanish speakers really see Juan as doing something to inflation. The proof that Spanish and English speakers see no genuine (i.e. nonfigurative) action here is their joint rejection of “Juan likes music” or “Juan fears inflation” with agent-oriented adverbs like deliberately, intentionally, and violently.

Another example of preconceptions about agentiveness leading one astray is provided by Bouchard, who reasons (36–7) that the subject of type 4 verbs like frighten is a true agent or “instigator” if it refers to individuals, as in they frighten her ‘they as individuals scare her’; but it is non-agentive if it refers to properties (characteristics) of individuals, as in they frighten her ‘it’s their stupidity (carelessness, etc.) that scares her.’ Since Bouchard’s version of generative theory holds that individuals as a subject NP can bind a reflexive but properties cannot, he predicts that they frighten themselves must be “bad” in the properties sense and can only be agentive. But his prediction collides with actual usage: speakers could readily use this sentence for ‘they frighten themselves with their stupidity, it’s their own stupidity that scares them.’

Such problems with psych verbs suggest the need for a better theory of the meaning of transitivity. One proposal comes from Hopper and Thompson, who define Transitivity (capitalized in this sense) as “the effective carrying over of an activity from an A(gent) to a patient” (279). But in a survey of languages they show that this Transitivity is more often partial than “cardinal,” and that it is manifested in various ways they formalize as ten distinct features (252), as summarized in Figure 3. Each such feature or parameter is scalar (more-or-less) rather than binary (either-or), so that one event may be treated as more transitive than another because of their relative values along any one scale or a linked group of scales. Hence, relative “agency” is just one of several reasons for perceptions of Transitivity; there is no single “superordinate semantic notion” for all of them (279–80), although one common denominator is a pragmatic function, the foregrounding and backgrounding of information (280–1).

This theory helps explain certain syntactic problems encountered earlier.

- Spanish provides reflexing to raise the experiencer to subject position and to demote or delete the cause (Eso le preocupa a María → María se preocupa), a process that seems to have a foregrounding function.
- Since “transitive” psych verbs like preocupar are low in “kinesis” and “agency,” they are less suitable with the ser-passive, which is more frequent for actions with perfective or “telic” aspect.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>High Transitivity</th>
<th>Low Transitivity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. no. of participants</td>
<td>two or more</td>
<td>one</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. kinesis</td>
<td>action, force, impact</td>
<td>non-action (state)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. aspect</td>
<td>telic, completed</td>
<td>atelic, partially carried out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. punctuality</td>
<td>point-like event</td>
<td>ongoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. volitionality</td>
<td>a volitional, purposeful effect</td>
<td>nonvolitional, involuntary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. affirmation</td>
<td>affirmative</td>
<td>negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. mode</td>
<td>realis</td>
<td>irrealis (unreal, contingent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. agency</td>
<td>agentic, a potent agent</td>
<td>less active agent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. object affectedness</td>
<td>object intensely affected</td>
<td>object unaffected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. object individuation</td>
<td>highly individuated (definite, concrete, animate...)</td>
<td>non-individuated (partitive, mass, inanimate, nonreferential)</td>
</tr>
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The various understandings of case distinctions with psych verbs can be seen as differences in relative “kinesis,” “agency,” and/or “object affectedness.” These differences are sharpest where a physical event figuratively became psychological (reventar, irritar, etc.) and where a contrast has emerged (encantarla vs. encantarle).

• Intransitive or quasi-intransitive psych verbs do not require an experiencer (cf. gustar), as predicted by “number of participants”; and their reverse construction may follow from lack of “volitionality.”

• Belletti and Rizzi asserted that the subjects of direct transitives (temer) show agency as opposed to those of reverse transitives (asustar, preocupar, sorprender); therefore the latter do not have true agents but patients moved up from object position. Both the assumption and the solution ran aground in Spanish, where inferences of agency vary according to context. Hopper and Thompson more flexibly allow for degrees of agency and multiple bases for selecting subjects and objects.

But although semantically, at least, “Transitivity is not dichotomous, but is a continuum,” Hopper and Thompson acknowledge that when it becomes grammaticized, morphosyntax forces the issue. They expressly cite (254) like vs. gustar. I like beer and me gusta la cerveza represent the same low-transitive situation, but each language opts syntactically for either a transitive or intransitive solution. Thus English ends up “coding” this psychological reaction as transitive while Spanish “codes” it with “various of the trappings found in intransitive clauses” (254).

Unfortunately, Hopper and Thompson do not explain why languages with otherwise similar grammars diverge in this way. If transitive/intransitive and direct/reverse are based on universal notions of real Transitivity, then why the capricious “coding” within and across languages? Perhaps amar receives a direct transitive pattern and gustar a reverse intransitive one because although both are low in “kinesis” and “agency” (two features in Fig. 3), gustar has provably more “volition” and “object affectedness.” Why then does English (for the same system and meanings) assign its gustar (like) to the same pattern as amar (love) if its antonym disgustar and synonym agradar? What special feature can be independently identified about the meaning of admirar and apetecer that allows these to be transitive or intransitive, direct or reverse?

What is needed is a theory with predictive value: given that a certain reaction has the values of a for agency, b for kinesis, c for relative object affectedness, and so on, it should be assigned to category X in a grammar with a certain setting of universal syntactic parameters. But pending a better understanding of human feelings and the verbs for them, it is still impossible to predict assignments of comparable verbs in comparable grammars or to rationalize the régimen of each verb. One can only look at psych verbs as a general group, projecting from Hopper and Thompson variation and arbitrariness in their “coding,” as in the assignment of intermediate shades of gray to either black or white. The result should be a transitivity continuum, which is precisely what was encountered earlier.

The “Squish”

Over two decades ago, Ross (1973) examined English noun phrases and pointed out that syntactic rules defined as manipulating NPs (and only NPs) do not behave as predicted. Instead, they form a hierarchy, ranging from generalized (applying to any and all NPs) to “choosy” (applying just to certain ones). Likewise, the nouns themselves form a hierarchy of relative “nounness” ranging from proper names and concrete nouns through events, abstractions, pro-forms (it, there), and nouns in idioms. But types blur and form a gradation which Ross called a “squish” and showed as a matrix correlating the noun hierarchy to
syntactic rules. The more rules considered (he expanded from three to nineteen), the more intermediate gradations of "nouniness" appeared, and without clear boundaries. Also, the less prototypically "nouny" the NP, the more variation appeared in speaker judgments, as though speakers made different inferences (128–9) about how particular items should be treated in a generalized grammar. But the gradation was no fluke of "performance": Ross believed that squishes are a common and natural part of language, and noted that this contradicted (128) the usual assumptions of discrete categories in grammatical theory.

The behavior of Spanish psych verbs also suggests a squash. Initially they seemed to fit neatly into distinct types that follow from four deep structures. But the more that psych verbs were examined, the more variation they showed in case usage, passivization, and reflex activity, and when native speakers were consulted, the squash shown in Figure 2 emerged. Numerous psych verbs alternate between direct and reverse construction and blur the transitive/intransitive distinction, assimilating in one or more ways to intransitive gustar. Presumably, speakers map high-transitive and wholly intransitive events onto a configuration of NP V (NP) with little problem, and their application of rules such as passivization follows much as predicted. But psych verbs show variable degrees of transitivity and are less obviously classified. As a result, the area typified by gustar and like is sorted out differently by different languages, and even within one language, syntactic rules that should apply are variably blocked for semantic reasons. Yet this syntactic looseness becomes communicatively useful, letting speakers exploit case contrasts for transitive quasi-actions (sorprender) vs. more intransitive gustar-like reactions (sorprenderen), again according to inferences about participant roles. The explanation of the psych verb squish, then, lies in a unified theory of form and function.

However, since the days of Generative Semantics when Ross proposed squishes, syntax and semantics have diverged. Current generative grammar shows interest in Romance psych verbs, but although it captures their basic construction, it is less successful with "fuzzy" grammar that blurs distinctions. It focuses on overall generalizations about categories and rules, but relegated interesting special properties to the lexicon (recall Belletti and Rizzi's treatment of reflexing). Even more troublesome are predictions of meaning from form (cf. Bouchard) that contradict the real use of psych verbs. It is possible that some of the facts which have been attributed to configuration, derived subjects, and principles for theta-marking reflect intuitions of semantic transitivity that cannot be defined in a theory of syntax alone.

Semantic theory (e.g. Garcia or Hopper and Thompson), on the other hand, has been able to clarify kinds of transitivity, links to discourse strategy, and the role of speakers in exploiting options (le, la, se); but its generalizations lose predictive value in language-specific and even verb-specific subcategorization, and its articulation with a formal theory of grammar is far from clear. An overall solution for psych verbs is going to require greater integration of currently disparate models of syntax, semantics, and the lexicon, and in particular better characterization of the interfaces between the following:

- semantic vs. morphosyntactic transitivity;
- degrees of semantic agenthood, the set of thematic roles, and functions defined by configuration (subject and objects);
- the relationships speakers perceive, principles of subcategorization, and the arguments of individual verbs.

Psych verb analysis also has implications for branches such as psycholinguistics: if syntactic classes are based on general cognitive and discourse principles in the human perception of Transitivity, then research should reveal differences in how "natural" vs. "arbitrary" psych verb assignments are acquired and processed. Such work would be especially valuable in second language acquisition because the problems
there are already so familiar. Spanish teachers can observe that while direct transitives (amar, temer) come easily to English speakers, the case usage of reverse verbs (sorprender, preocupar) and their “anti-passives” (sorprenderse de, preocuparse por) do not. But it is with type 3 (gustar) that notable errors arise, because expressing pleasure is a basic communicative function and English and Spanish solved this problem in transitivity in opposite ways.

Conclusion

Psych verbs challenge linguists and language learners alike because the rules are elusive; the neatness of some rules even turns out to be illusory. The major problem is a blurring of the transitive/intransitive distinction into a continuum (squish), and analysis seems to support the following tentative postulates:

1. Speakers perceive transitivity as graded on several scales, but encode it in terms of a limited number of possible structures, and subcategorize accordingly.

2. Where they perceive agents that do something and patients that receive it, they readily map agent + action + patient onto the syntactic configuration subject + verb + direct object, and tend to assign wholly inactive events or states to intransitive structures.

3. But for the gray area that includes verbs naming feelings with less active experiencers and causes, construction is less obvious. The results include:

   a. Variable subcategorization, so that speakers treat a verb as transitive with regard to one rule but as intransitive for others, sometimes disagreeing with each other.

   b. Multiple subcategorization (although not necessarily polysemy) for flexible representations — direct vs. reverse (as in admirar), or a stronger quasi-active event vs. a weaker or more figurative reaction (as in sorprender).

   c. Arbitrary subcategorization, as in gustar vs. like, although general (but language-specific) tendencies may arise in how speakers conventionally deal with such cases.

This complex picture does not make teaching easier, but for pedagogical purposes the situation may be simplified as follows:

1. In comparison with the like type of English, Spanish favors reverse construction; even direct verbs like admirar and aprovechar accept it. But in reverse construction, these and the so-called “transitive” psych verbs like sorprender and preocupar tend towards intransitivity. Hence, there is justification for regarding gustar as the prototype for how Spanish treats low-transitive psych verbs, and the generalization implied by an “etc.” for “gustar-type verbs” should be brought out even more.

2. But unlike wholly intransitive gustar, many such verbs (sorprender, preocupar, admirar) are reflexed for an alternative casting with the experiencer in subject position, in contrast with the English strategy of passivization.

As to why the two languages should differ in these ways, the apparent answer at present is just arbitrary convention, as suggested by the usual pedagogical statements. A fuller explanation needs a more integrated theory of form, meaning, and function than seems currently possible.

■ NOTES

1 I was unable to trace the origin of the term “reverse construction,” although it appears in Stillman and Gordon 1985 (148) and is implied by Ramsey (1956/1894, p. 507). “Direct” and “reverse” are not wholly satisfactory, but seem more convenient for exposition than “raised experiencer” and “lowered experiencer,” or Schlesinger’s “E-verbs” (experiencer as subject) vs. “S-verbs” (stimulus-cause as subject).

2 I exclude as “impure” psych verbs those which entail communicating the sentiment. In Pilar lamenta la molestia, Pilar simply reacts as an experiencer, while in Pilar se queja de la molestia she not only reacts but actively states (as agent) her reaction. Also generally omitted are phrases whose verb is not itself psychological: está contento/triste, le da igual/pena, le tiene miedo/celos, le deja perplejo/estupefacto.

One could question the inclusion of “volitional” verbs like querer in verbs with a “cause” role, arguing that in quiero esa casa the house does not really
cause my desire for it. But if *me apetece* has a cause, then why not *quiero*? Where is the dividing line in feelings of attraction? And if causation is weak, so is volition: it is strange to say *quiero esa casa deliberadamente* (con intención, voluntariamente).

Readers may replace “cause” with “stimulus” (Schlesinger), “trigger” (Bouchard), “theme” (preferred by some but criticized by Bouchard), or any other label for the entity that aroused a feeling in the experiencer; this analysis is not affected by nomenclature. The *real* problem, dating back at least to Fillmore, is that the theta roles of current theory have been assumed as hybrid semantic-syntactic primes without operational definitions.

This ambiguity is systematic rather than a lexical peculiarity of psych verbs. *Matarse* can be true reflexive ‘kill oneself,’ reciprocal ‘kill each other,’ or intransitive ‘get killed’; likewise *lastimarse, curarse*, etc. (There is also impersonal *se*, which is omitted here to avoid further complications.) At least for Spanish, Belletti and Rizzi’s appeal to volitional agency within sentential semantics seems far less relevant for interpretation than the context of discourse.

Saltarelli subdivides Belletti and Rizzi’s *piacere* type because of “reversibility”: either the cause (*la sigaretta piacque a Gianni*) or experiencer (*A Gianni piacciono le sigarette*) can be “subject,” requiring different deep structures (258). That argument would mean multiple deep structures for every verb in Spanish, which proposes any major constituent for a different informational focus: *Juan desea los cigarillos → Los cigarillos los desea Juan.* Los cigarillos le gustan a Juan → A Juan le gustan los cigarillos or Le gustan los cigarillos a Juan (the latter rejected as ungrammatical by Saltarelli). There is insufficient space, though, to pursue the ramifications of confusing “grammatical subject” (even a derived one) with “topic.”

Clitic choice and passivization are based on a questionnaire on (1) choice of *le, la* or either in the frames “A Luisa ___ *verbo* su trabajo” (inanimate subject) and “A Luisa ___ *verbo* su amiga” (human subject), and (2) the acceptability of the same verb in a passive “Luisa fue ___ por su amiga.” To save space, Fig. 2 merely illustrates the spread of the original 81 verbs in the survey. Given this large number, the informants were limited to three (Cuban, Argentinian, Spaniard), but their disagreements suggest that including more informants would only lead to overkill in confirming the lack of boundaries between verb types.

With current interest in the common grammar of the Romance languages, an analysis for one is often extended to others. But while Belletti and Rizzi’s argument has been influential in Romance syntax, it was based on Italian only, and perhaps many of the problems are peculiar to Spanish. My work with an Italian informant suggests otherwise, but further investigation is needed to verify their claims.

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