

Abstract

How can experimental methods inform research on complex predicates in Romance? Insights from a self-paced reading study

Complex predicates are a widespread phenomenon in a variety of languages surfacing in different forms such as verb-particle constructions, serial verb constructions, verbal periphrases, complex tenses, causative constructions or resultative constructions. Especially in Romance languages (as compared to e.g. Germanic languages), verbal periphrases are a fairly frequent type of complex predicates. Periphrasticity being considered a central characteristic of all Romance languages (cf. e.g. Pusch/Wesch 2003: 1), a range of semantic values (temporal, aspectual, modal and diathetic) are commonly expressed by verbal periphrases, although their inventory and frequency vary to some extent among the individual languages (cf. e.g. the abundant inventory in Spanish or Portuguese vs. a rather restricted selection in French). Verbal periphrases are generally defined as a combination of two (or more) verbs – sometimes joined by a preposition or conjunction – which form a single predicative unit (cf. e.g. Gómez Torrego 1999: 3325). While the first (finite) verbal element (often a strongly desemantised auxiliary or semi-auxiliary) holds the flectional markers, the second (non-finite) verbal element (infinitive, gerund or participle) contributes the main semantic information to the predicative unit. As their meaning is usually not (or only in a limited way) compositional, i.e. not deducible from the sum of the single component parts, periphrastic verbal constructions can pose problems to L2 learners, especially in combination with an L1 that is typologically different from the target language (e.g. German).

Various studies show that experimental methods can prove very valuable in theory building and shaping (cf. e.g. Boye/Harder's [2012] usage-based theory of grammaticalisation, Hennecke/Wolf's [2021] constructivist processing model or Van Lancker Sidtis' [2004] dual-process model of language). While data from aphasia, for instance, could already inform linguistic theory building (cf. e.g. Boye/Bastiaanse 2018), methods such as self-paced reading, eye-tracking or ERPs have been found highly insightful in the field of L2 acquisition and processing (cf. e.g. Conklin/Pellicer-Sánchez 2016, Roberts 2016 and Marsden et al. 2018) – particularly with respect to multi-word units (cf. e.g. Siyanova-Chanturia 2013, Schmitt/Underwood 2004 and Siyanova-Chanturia/Van Lancker Sidtis 2019), of which complex predicates are also a part. In order to investigate how periphrastic predicates in Romance are processed by native and non-native speakers, a self-paced reading study is administered to a L1 German experimental group and a L1 Romance control group. To this end, a selection of verbal periphrases in Spanish, French and Italian is presented in a non-cumulative reading paradigm on a computer screen, followed by an acceptability rating and a comprehension question. Data from a pilot study on Spanish do not only suggest highly variable acceptability judgements and reaction times, but also varied reading patterns, which may serve as an indicator for the distribution of attentional resources in processing the periphrastic structures under investigation. In what way and to what extent these results from experimental research can enrich our understanding of complex predicates and advance research in the field will be discussed in the present contribution.

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(478 words; excl. title and references)