The ‘grammar as fragment’ view revisited from a contrastive perspective: Beyond finite complement clauses in English and Spanish

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Drawing on naturally-occurring data extracted from the spoken components of the British National Corpus (BNC henceforth) and the Corpus de Referencia del Español Actual (CREA henceforth), this paper critically revisits the analysis of (object) finite complement complements proposed in Thompson (2002), who contends that the complement-taking predicates together with their subjects are stored as epistemic/evidential/evaluative fragments. This paper critically examines whether this analysis can be argued to hold for other complementation strategies with greater syntactico-semantic compression, such as verbless complement clauses (or, alternatively, “small clauses”) after *verba cogitandi* in English (e.g. “think”, “consider”, “find”, “believe”, etc) and Spanish (“considerar” ‘consider’, “ver” ‘see’, “encontrar” ‘find’, “creer” ‘think’), as in (1)-(2) below:

(1) The Chinese consider the dry testicles of balls a great aphrodisiac (BNC KCU 9875)
(2) Yo es-e tramo lo consider-o fundamental

1SG DIST-M.SG path ACC.3SG consider-PRS.1SG essential

‘I consider that path essential’ (CREA, Oral, GC-14, Mujer de 60 años. Catedrática de instituto)

The verbless clause frame is shown to display a number of intricate constraints on the semantico-pragmatic profile of the entity in the object slot and the obligatory predicative phrase (XPCOMP) which cannot be adequately accommodated within Thompson’s analysis. Drawing on Gonzálvez-García (2003, 2007, 2008), it is argued that the entity in the object slot is usually specific, since it functions semantically as the STIMULUS of perception by the subject/speaker. This explains among other things, why e.g. existential “there” in English – which conveys an abstract setting – is barred in this environment, but is nonetheless acceptable in the finite counterpart. Consider (3) below:

(3) He believed there *(to be) new genera amongst them (BNC ALU 897) :: He believed that there were new genera amongst them

In addition, the XPCOMP should encode an original, direct stance by the subject/speaker implying a high degree of commitment towards the state of affairs envisioned in the complement clause. Crucially, this restriction does not hold for the corresponding finite-clause counterparts, which allow identifying XPCOMPs such as proper nouns.

(4) #I found the winner Mary :: I found that the winner was/had been Mary
(5) (a) * A aquell-a mujer la cre-ía Agustina Izquierdo
[OBJ DIST-F.SG woman ACC.3.F.SG think-IMPPRET.1SG Agustina Izquierdo [NAME]]
(b) Cre-ía que aquell-a mujer era Agustina Izquierdo
[think-IMPPRET.1SG COMP DIST-F.SG woman be.1SG Agustina Izquierdo [NAME]]

The most significant difference observed in this environment in these two languages concerns information structure (see also Ambridge and Goldberg 2008). The verbless clause configurations frequently occur in spoken Spanish with a preverbal unstressed clitic “lo”, as in (2) above, giving discourse prominence to an explicit or implicit co-referential fronted constituent. The overall conclusion is that while, at a high degree of resolution, there is indeed evidence for the existence of fragments such as “find X difficult” or “lo veo dificil” (“I see it difficult’) in spoken English and Spanish, broadest generalizations of the type captured in Goldbergian constructions (Goldberg 2006) are nonetheless necessary to account for otherwise puzzling restrictions on the entity in the object slot and the XPCOMP, at least from the point of view of encoding (see Boas 2008 for the implications for encoding). Finally, this paper shows how the commonalities and idiosyncratic particulars of the configurations in (1)-(2) can be connected with three other sub-constructions after verbs of saying, volition and preference and which, taken together, form the family of object-related depictives (Gonzálvez-García 2008) in English and Spanish.