Comprehending and creating novel verb-noun compounds in Spanish: The role of constructional meanings

This study examines native speakers’ comprehension and production of novel [Verb + Noun (V + N)] compounds in Spanish (e.g., sacacorchos ‘pulls-out corks [corkscrew]’) based on insights drawn from constructional approaches (Boas 2003, 2005; Lakoff, 1986, 1987; Goldberg, 1995, 2006, among others). Most previous studies, which mainly concerned the endocentric or exocentric nature of the Spanish [V + N] compounds, have treated them as having one common structural and semantic property (Contreras 1985; Clements 1992; Varela 1990; Wong-opasi 1994, among others). More recently, however, a more semantically oriented analysis in Yoon (in press) within the framework of Construction Grammar (Lakoff, 1986, 1987; Goldberg, 1995, 2006), has claimed that there are two types of [V + N] compound constructions in Spanish, each with its own respective constructional meaning: Type 1 with higher transitivity in its associated predicate that normally involves a true patient (e.g., limpiabotas ‘cleans-boots [shoeshine boy]’) in which there is a potential beneficiary of the action; and Type 2 with a lower degree of transitivity that does not involve a true patient in its associated predicate (e.g., tientaparedes ‘feels-walls [one who gropes his/her way]’) and where the existence of a potential beneficiary of an action is not suggested. Yoon (in press) further suggests that the productivity of both patterns is related to the existence of a different construction for each compound type. In other words, newly formed expressions are acceptable to the extent that they can be associated with both the form and meaning of the two types of [V + N] compound constructions that already have unit status, and that individual occurrences of Spanish [V + N] compounds are sanctioned by either of the two constructions.

In order to address the issue of productivity of Spanish [V + N] compounds outlined above, I have conducted a study that consists of comprehension and production tasks. A total of ten native speakers of Spanish participated in both tasks. In the comprehension task, which was based on a multiple-choice format, the participants were asked to identify the best description for each of a total of eleven compounds. If they did not find any possible definition of the given compound in the given descriptions, they were asked to write their own definition that would work for that compound. In the production task, on the other hand, the participants were asked to create novel compounds consisting of a verb and a noun for each of a total of twelve descriptions of an object or a person. The results of the comprehension task revealed that the participants tended to interpret some novel compounds only as a Type 1 compound in which a potential beneficiary of the actions is evoked in an action scenario and the object involved in the action is more likely to be affected; they associated other novel compounds only with the Type 2 meaning if such an interpretation was not available. The majority of the novel compounds, however, were interpreted either as Type 1 or Type 2, depending on whether the participants highlighted the resultant state of the action in which the presence of the potential beneficiary of such an actions is suggested. The results of the production task revealed that the participants created numerous examples of creative novel compounds with a wide range of lexical items, but the method of creation was not a random process, but regulated by the core constructional meanings of either the Type 1 or Type 2 compound construction. This study proposes that the two types of constructional meanings play a crucial role in the comprehension and creation of novel compounds (cf: constructional coercion in Michaelis 2003, 2004), but external constraints such as world knowledge (Boas 2005) is also deemed important in order to fully understand the cognitive mechanism that regulates the productivity of the Spanish [V + N] compound.