

A RAISING ACCOUNT OF *LLEVAR* + TIME IN SPANISH

Francisco Ongay González
University of Calgary

In this paper, I present a novel description of the temporal construction in Spanish that uses the verb *llevar* ‘to carry’ to indicate the duration of a situation. This description departs from the traditional approach taken by descriptive grammars such as the one from the Real Academia Española (henceforth RAE 2009), but also from the more technical account within generative grammar of Fernández-Soriano and Rigau (2009). I propose that, in this construction, the verb *llevar* takes two arguments: a time phrase (indicating the duration) and a small clause (depicting the situation whose duration is being characterized); furthermore, I claim that this is a raising construction, with the sentential subject being base generated inside the small clause. In section 1, I describe the construction; in section 2, I present and criticize the previous descriptions; in section 3, I present my own account; in section 4, I provide support for the raising analysis; section 5 concludes.

1. The issue

In Spanish, the verb *llevar* is used in a construction that expresses the duration of a situation up to a certain moment, as shown in (1):

- (1) a. María lleva tres años trabajando aquí.
Mary carries three years working here
‘Mary has been working here for three years.’
- b. Cuando la conocí, María llevaba tres años trabajando aquí.
when ACC met, Mary carried three years working here
‘When I met her, Mary had been working here for three years.’
- c. La próxima semana, María llevará tres años trabajando aquí.
the next week, Mary will-carry three years working here
‘Next week, Mary will have been working here for three years.’

If the verb *llevar* is in present tense (1a), the situation is interpreted as ongoing up to the moment of speech. If it is in past or future tense, the situation is interpreted as ongoing up to a moment in the past or the future, expressed in (1b) and (1c) by the phrases *cuando la conocí* and *la próxima semana*, respectively.

The description of this construction needs to take into consideration three elements and their interaction with the verb *llevar*: (i) the subject of the sentence (*María*), (ii) the time phrase (*tres años*), and (iii) the rest of the sentence, which expresses the situation

(*trabajando aquí*); since this third constituent is always tenseless, I will refer to it as *the tenseless phrase* during the rest of this paper.

2. Previous accounts

2.1 Traditional periphrastic description

In the most recent Spanish grammar published by the RAE (2009), this construction is characterized as a gerund periphrasis.¹ A gerund periphrasis is a construction with a main verb in gerundial form and a conjugated auxiliary verb. The nucleus of the predicate is the verb in gerundial form, which selects its arguments, and the auxiliary verb provides grammatical information such as tense and person.

An example of a well-known gerund periphrasis is given in (2), which is identical to the continuative periphrasis in English:

- (2) María está trabajando.
'Mary is working.'

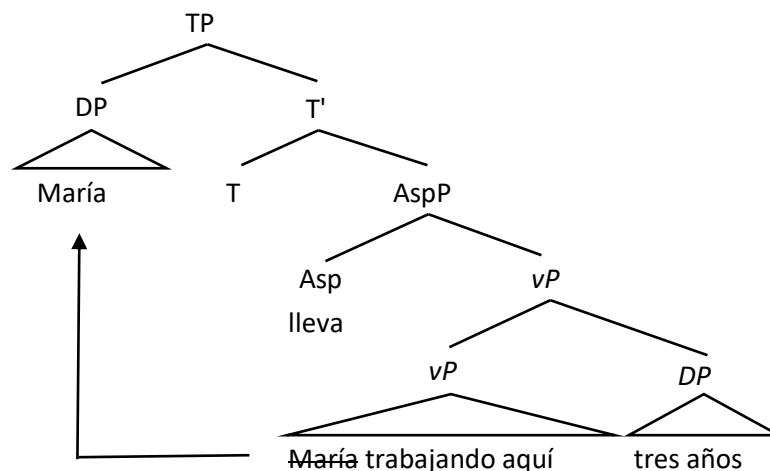


Figure 1. The traditional periphrastic account.

In verbal periphrasis, the auxiliary verb is a functional head in the extended projection of VP. In the case of (2), the verb *estar* 'be' is an aspectual head, and since the *llevar* construction also expresses a continuative state, it has been assumed that *llevar* is also an aspectual head (cf. García Fernández et al. 2006). In Figure 1, a tree reconstructed from this analysis is given.

¹ In this paper, I present RAE 2009 as a paradigmatic example of the traditional analysis that appears in most descriptive works treating this construction such as Yllera 1999, Marín Gálvez 2000, Sedano 2000, Camus 2004, and García Fernández et al. 2006.

In the structure depicted in Figure 1, the subject of the sentence, *María*, is generated inside vP and moves to Spec,TP for case requirements and to satisfy the Extended Projection Principle (EPP), as it is usually assumed that subjects do. Note that, since the time phrase, *tres años*, is not thematically selected by the verb in vP (*trabajar* ‘work’), and auxiliary verbs are not supposed to select for arguments (cf. RAE 2009: §28.3c), the only possible analysis is that it is an adjunct.²

There are several problems with this periphrastic explanation. First, as we stated, in this analysis the time phrase would be an adjunct, but that would predict it is optional. Nevertheless, as shown in (3), the sentence is ungrammatical without that constituent:

(3) **María lleva trabajando aquí.*

Furthermore, the time phrase can be pronominalized with an accusative clitic, a behaviour characteristic of direct objects (cf. Campos 1999), which are arguments, not adjuncts:

(4) *Los últimos tres años, María los lleva trabajando aquí.*
 The last three years, Mary ACC carries working here
 ‘For the last three years, Mary has been working here.’

A second problem is that it is expected that verbal periphrasis be composed by a main verb and an auxiliary verb. Furthermore, since this construction is characterized as a gerund periphrasis, we expect the main verb to be in gerundial form. Nevertheless, the tenseless phrase need not be a gerund, and it actually can be non-verbal, as shown in (5), where it is shown that the same position can be occupied by a participle, an adverb or a prepositional phrase:

(5) *María lleva tres años [atrapada / aquí / en esta empresa].*
 Mary carries three years [trapped / here / in this company]
 ‘Mary has been [trapped / here / in this company] for three years.’

Finally, the structure in Figure 1 predicts that the position of the time phrase is after the tenseless phrase. This order is grammatical, but the opposite one (time phrase - tenseless phrase) is more common, and, from my own judgments as a native speaker, less marked.³

² These descriptive works admit that the time phrase seems to be a complement of *llevar*, thus recognizing that it does not behave as an adjunct. I am not claiming here that in RAE 2009 it is stated that the time phrase is an adjunct, but that if the construction is to be considered periphrastic, that would be the only possible analysis, leading to a contradiction.

³ Just as an example to illustrate this trend, from the 49 examples of this construction reported in the ADESSE database (<http://adesse.uvigo.es/>) (García Miguel 2012), 38 (77.6%) have the time phrase before the tenseless

Therefore, we can conclude that this construction should not be seen as a periphrastic one, an opinion shared by Fernández-Soriano and Rigau (2009). These authors highlight some other behaviours of periphrases that differ from the *llevar* + time construction, but I will not pursue further demonstration in this paper. In the following section, I will present and criticize the analysis made by Fernández-Soriano and Rigau (2009).

2.2 Fernández-Soriano and Rigau (2009)

After showing compelling evidence that the periphrastic account of the *llevar* + time construction is wrong, Fernández-Soriano and Rigau (2009) propose that *llevar* is a light verb that takes a PP as its complement. The head of the PP is an abstract allative (i.e., destination) preposition with two arguments: the subject (external argument) and the time phrase (internal argument). The tenseless phrase is an adjunct of the time phrase. In Figure 2, a tree reconstructed from this analysis is shown:

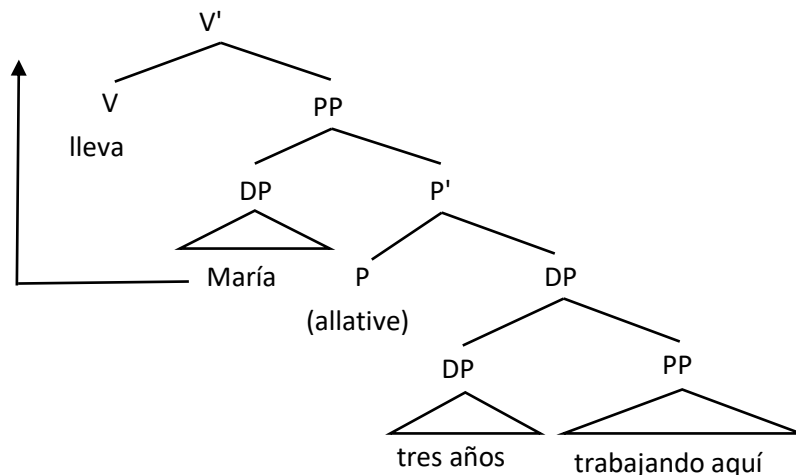


Figure 2. Fernández-Soriano and Rigau’s (2009) account.⁴

The reasoning behind this structure is that *llevar* usually has the meaning of taking something from one place to another, and takes a PP headed by the allative preposition *a* ‘to’ as its complement, as shown in (6) (the authors’ (20)):

phrase, and only four (8.2%) have the tenseless phrase before the time phrase; seven examples (14.2%) have the time phrase fronted by *wh*-movement or focalization, and therefore the relative order between time phrase and tenseless phrase cannot be assessed. Even though the sample is small, the observed trend supports the idea that the canonical position of the time phrase is right after *llevar*.

⁴ The tenseless phrase is represented as a PP because the authors claim that gerundial forms are prepositional in nature, which helps explain why that position can also be filled by a prepositional phrase.

- (6) María [_{vp} [lleva [_{pp} los libros a la escuela]]].
 Mary carries the books to the school
 ‘Mary takes the books to the school.’

Since, contrary to (6), the preposition is phonologically null in the *llevar* + time construction, the authors claim that it incorporates into the verb. The actual head of the predication is this abstract preposition (the verb *llevar*, being a light verb, serves as support for it), and the subject is generated as the external argument of PP, later raising to its final position. The authors also claim that the tenseless phrase is not required by the syntactic structure, and that it appears to be mandatory for pragmatic reasons.

There are a few problems with this analysis. First, the description of the subject and the tenseless clause, as well as their relationship, is highly counterintuitive: the sentential subject is always interpreted as the subject of the tenseless phrase, be it verbal or not, yet the authors claim that it is not part of said tenseless phrase, but the external argument of an abstract preposition. Furthermore, the tenseless phrase is claimed to be an adjunct, even though the point of the construction is to express the duration of the situation predicated by that tenseless phrase.

It can be argued with syntactic evidence that the subject must form a constituent with the tenseless phrase. In (7), we apply this structure to the sentential idiom *El burro hablando de orejas* (lit. ‘The donkey speaking about ears’), which is used when a person is being hypocritical or oblivious to their own defects, which they criticize in others. This idiom has the form of a tenseless clause, with *el burro* ‘the donkey’ as its subject.

- (7) [El burro] lleva tres años [~~el burro~~] hablando de orejas].
 The donkey carries three years ~~the donkey~~ talking about ears
 ‘Someone has been hypocritical/oblivious for three years.’ (lit. ‘The donkey has been talking about ears for three years.’)

It is usually assumed that idioms are base generated as constituents; thus, the fact that this structure can be applied to such an idiom indicates that the subject forms a constituent with the tenseless (gerundial) phrase, and therefore it could not be generated in a higher position, as the external argument of the alleged silent preposition.

Another problem is that, in their account, the tenseless phrase forms a constituent with the time phrase, since the first is an adjunct inside of the second. But, as shown in (4), repeated below as (8a), the time phrase can be pronominalized with an accusative clitic. If the tenseless phrase were part of the constituent headed by the time noun, we would expect that the pronominalization yield (8b) instead:

- (8) a. Los últimos tres años, María los lleva trabajando aquí.
 The last three years, Mary ACC carries working here
 ‘For the last three years, Mary has been working here.’

- b. *Los últimos tres años trabajando aquí, María los lleva.
 The last three years working here, Mary ACC carries
 ‘For the last three years working here, Mary has been.’

If the time phrase and the tenseless phrase were part of a single constituent, as claimed by the authors, we would expect the pronoun to substitute for the whole constituent, just as in (8b), where the accusative pronoun *los* intends to refer to *los últimos tres años trabajando aquí*.

Finally, the analysis of Fernández-Soriano and Rigau (2009) suggests that the subject raises from its base generation site as the external argument of PP to its final position (Spec,TP). I agree with these authors’ claim that this is a raising construction, but it must be noted that, in their account, this movement could only be motivated by the EPP, with no implications for case checking, since, in Spec,PP, the DP *María* would be the closest DP c-commanded by *v*, and therefore it could get accusative case. In the analysis that I propose in section 3, the raising is necessary because the DP is generated in a caseless position.

In conclusion, while I agree with Fernández-Soriano and Rigau (2009) in the fact that this construction cannot be characterized as a periphrasis, the structure they propose is unable to handle syntactic evidence like the pronominalization of the time phrase or the underlying structure of sentential idioms. For these reasons, I reject their account.

3. Analysis

Throughout the previous section, I have shown that both previous accounts are unable to handle certain important aspects of this construction: the position of the subject inside the tenseless phrase and the argumental nature of the time phrase. In this section, I show an alternative analysis that addresses these problems.

Let us start with the tenseless phrase. As discussed, this constituent does not need to be headed by a verb in gerundial form: it can have a participle, an adverb, or a prepositional phrase. Importantly, it cannot have a finite verb. These facts are illustrated in (9):

- (9) a. María lleva tres años [trabajando / atrapada / aquí / en esta empresa].
 Mary carries three years [working / trapped / here / in this company]
 ‘Mary has been [working / trapped / here / in this company] for three years.’
- b. *María lleva tres años [trabaja aquí].
 Mary carries three years works here
 (int.) ‘Mary has been working here for three years.’

Since this phrase is tenseless, but predicative, I will assume it is a small clause. Following Citko 2011, I will represent this as a phrase whose nucleus is a(n abstract) functional head:

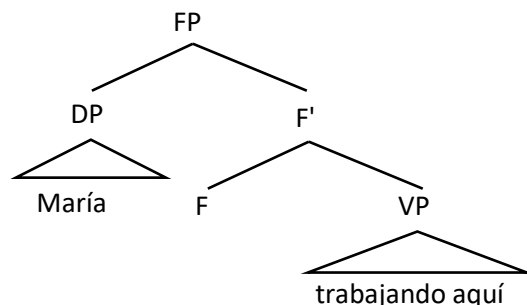


Figure 3. The tenseless phrase represented as a small clause.

As for the category of F, Fernández-Soriano and Rigau (2009) suggest, following Mateu and Amadas 1999 and Mateu 2002, that gerunds, participles, and adverbs have a prepositional nature, so it might be that a silent or overt preposition sits in that position. This is a reasonable assumption, but I will leave the question open for the time being. What is crucial is that it does not have a T head, and therefore the external argument is unable to check accusative case.

Now, let us discuss the verb *llevar* and its relationship with the time phrase. Since the time phrase is mandatory and can be cliticized, as shown in (3) and (4), repeated as (10) below, we can assume that it is an argument.

- (10) a. * *María lleva trabajando aquí.*
 Mary carries working here
 ‘Mary has been working here.’
- b. *Los últimos tres años, María los lleva trabajando aquí.*
 The last three years, Mary ACC carries working here
 ‘For the last three years, Mary has been working here.’

Nevertheless, since the time phrase is not thematically selected by the head of the small clause, *llevar* must be a V head with two arguments: the time phrase and the small clause. Notice that in this position, the time phrase is the highest argument of V, and therefore it will be the closest DP c-commanded by v , which explains the accusative case overtly realized when the phrase is pronominalized. This structure, shown in Figure 4, also yields the unmarked constituent order (time phrase - tenseless phrase). Notice that the structure in Figure 4 is similar to a ditransitive structure. I argue that both arguments of *llevar* are internal because it is a raising construction.

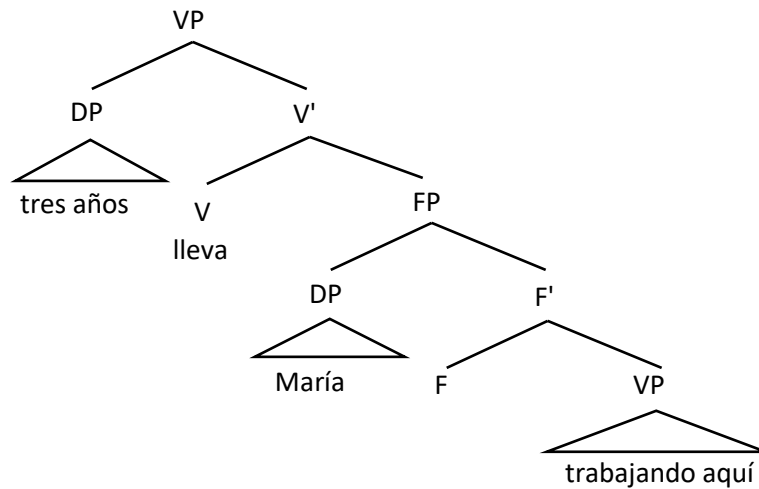


Figure 4. The VP of the *llevar* + time construction.

As the derivation proceeds, the EPP needs to be satisfied by merging (or moving) an argument in Spec,TP. *Llevar* has no external argument, and the time phrase already has accusative case, so the next candidate is the subject of the small clause. Since that DP is in a caseless position, this movement not only satisfies the EPP, but it also allows the DP to check its case requirement, getting nominative case. As shown in Figure 5, *llevar* moves from V to T, as it is assumed that Spanish verbs do, yielding the correct word order. This structure is compatible with the facts that Fernández-Soriano and Rigau (2009) neglect (i.e., the subject is base generated inside of the tenseless phrase and the time phrase is in an argumental position where it can check accusative case), and it is also simpler, because it does not posit an abstract preposition as the complement of *llevar*.

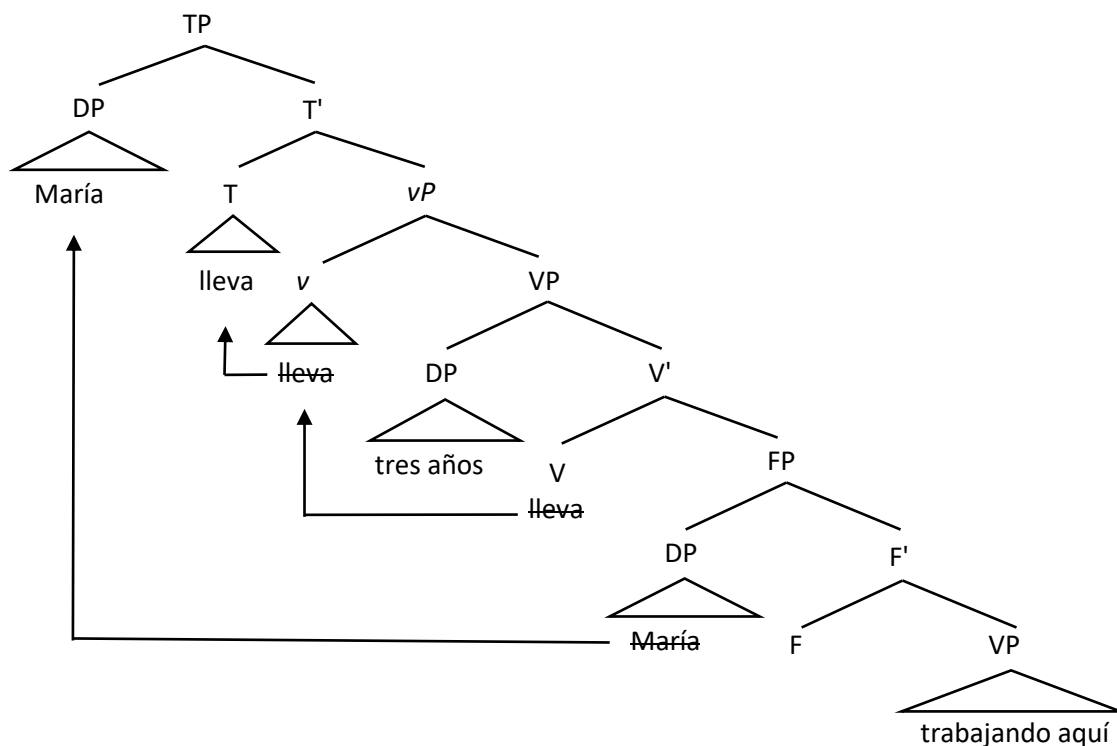


Figure 5. The TP of the *llevar* + time construction, showing the raising of the subject.

4 Support for a raising analysis

At this point, we can wonder if the subject is in fact raising to Spec,TP or if this is a control structure. In other words, an alternative analysis could posit that the subject of the tenseless phrase is actually a PRO whose reference is controlled by the higher subject. There are two reasons to reject this idea: first, as already stated, the position of the subject inside the tenseless phrase is caseless, and therefore merging a PRO would lead to a crashing derivation, since no T head licensing null case is present. Additionally, syntactic tests can be applied to show that this structure behaves like raising and not like control (cf. Hornstein et al. 2005):

The first test is idiomaticity. Idiomatic readings survive when idioms are inserted in raising constructions, but not in control. As we have seen for *llevar* + time, the idiomatic reading of (7), repeated below as (11) is maintained.

- (11) El burro lleva tres años hablando de orejas.
 The donkey carries three years talking about ears
 ‘Someone has been hypocritical/oblivious for three years.’ (lit. ‘The donkey has been talking about years for three years.’)

A second test is voice transparency. When passivized, the interpretation of raising constructions is the same because the movement does not affect the thematic relations.

Therefore, since the propositional meanings of (12a-b) are the same, this construction has voice transparency.

- (12) a. María lleva tres años escribiendo un libro.
 Mary carries three years writing a book
 ‘Mary has been writing a book for three years.’
- b. Un libro lleva tres años siendo escrito (por María).
 A book carries three years being written (by Mary)
 ‘A book has been being written (by Mary) for three years.’

Hence, we can conclude that the subject of the sentence originates inside of the small clause (the tenseless phrase) and raises to Spec,TP.

5. Conclusions and further research

In this paper, I have presented a novel approach to the syntactic structure of the Spanish *llevar* + time construction that addresses some important problems found in previous accounts. I have shown that this is not a periphrastic structure, as claimed by descriptive grammars like RAE 2009, and I have shown that the analysis of Fernández-Soriano and Rigau (2009) is also problematic because it does not take into account the syntactic properties of the subject and the time phrase. I have proposed a structure where *llevar* is a predicate that takes two internal arguments: the time phrase, and a small clause, whose external argument raises to the subject of the sentence.

While I believe that the account presented here is correct, there are some issues that I have not addressed and that could guide further research. First, the periphrastic account captures the intuition that the verb *llevar* in this construction is a functional head. As Gómez Rubio (2022) notes, this verb shows a certain degree of grammaticalization. In the periphrastic view, *llevar* is an aspectual (functional) head just as *estar* in the present continuous. This is contradicted by the account presented here, where *llevar* is a predicative (lexical) V that takes arguments. More work should be done to determine the exact category of *llevar*, although considering it a light verb, as Fernández-Soriano and Rigau (2009) do, might be on the right track. Light verbs are semantically bleached and form a predicate with their syntactic complement. Fernández-Soriano and Rigau (2009) claim that the actual head of the predicate is the abstract allative preposition, but since I have rejected their account, we must think that another constituent has this role. Even if the analysis presented here were to be modified, the final analysis needs to capture the fact that the time phrase has argument-like properties and that neither the time phrase nor the tenseless phrase should be treated as adjuncts.

A second concern has to do with the aspectual restrictions of *llevar*. This construction is ungrammatical if the verb is in perfect aspect. According to Fernández-Soriano and Rigau (2009), this can be explained because the incorporation of the allative preposition clashes with the meaning of perfect aspect, which the authors claim to be similar to the

preposition *from*, following Demirdache and Uribe-Extebarria 2000.⁵ The account presented here has no way of predicting these aspectual constraints, although I would like to point out that I have found some counterexamples, like the one in (13), found in an internet discussion forum:

- (13) Yo he llevado tres años intentando aprobar el TFG.
 I have carried three years trying pass the TFG
 ‘I had been trying to pass the TFG for three years.’
 (<https://yaq.es/foro/la-universidad-un-mundo/fraude-tfg>)

I find (13) unacceptable, but, unless it was a typing error (which seems unlikely), it does seem to have been produced by a native speaker. Further investigation is needed to explain this matter, but, even if we accept that the aspectual constraints are operative, and that the verb incorporates the meaning of an allative preposition, I maintain that the relationship between *llevar*, the time phrase and the small clause (with the subject generated inside of it) must follow the lines of the present study, because the structure proposed by Fernández-Soriano and Rigau (2009) yields incorrect assumptions regarding pronominalization, case checking, and idiomaticity.

Finally, it should be noted that the *llevar* construction alternates with a similar construction with the verb *tener* ‘to have’. The construction with *tener* seems to be characteristic of American Spanish. Fernández-Soriano and Rigau (2009) indicate that it is not subject to the same aspectual restrictions than the construction with *llevar*, but my own native intuitions as an American Spanish speaker contradict their claim, so I will assume for the time being that the *tener* construction has an identical structure as the one with *llevar*, although this is a matter that calls for further research.

References

- Campos, Héctor. 1999. Transitividad e intransitividad. In *Gramática descriptiva de la lengua española*, ed. Ignacio Bosque and Violeta Demonte, 1519–1574. Madrid: Espasa.
- Camus, Bruno. 2004. Perífrasis verbales y expresión del aspecto en español. In *El Pretérito Imperfecto*, ed. Luis García Fernández and Bruno Camus, 511–572. Madrid: Gredos.
- Citko, Barbara. 2011. Small Clauses. *Language and Linguistics Compass* 5(10): 748–763.
- Demirdache, Hamida and Myriam Uribe-Extebarria. 2000. The primitives of temporal relations. In *Step by Step: Essays in Minimalist Syntax in Honor of Howard Lasnik*, ed. Roger Martin, David Michaels and Juan Uriagereka, 157–186. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Fernández-Soriano, Olga and Gemma Rigau. 2009. On Certain Light Verbs in Spanish: The Case of Temporal Tener and Llevar. *Syntax* 12(2): 135–157.
- García Fernández, Luis (dir.), Ángeles Carrasco Gutiérrez, Bruno Camus Bergareche, María Martínez-Atienza, and María Ángeles García García-Serrano. 2006. *Diccionario de perífrasis verbales*. Madrid: Gredos.

⁵ See Gómez Rubio 2022 for other arguments in favour of considering that *llevar* incorporates the meaning of an allative preposition in this construction.

- García Miguel, José M. 2012. Lingüística de corpus y valencia verbal. In *Encoding the Past, Decoding the Future: Corpora in 21st Century*, ed. Isabel Moskowich and Begoña Crespo, 29–57. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Gómez Rubio, Joshua. 2022. Predicación, gramaticalización y perífrasis verbales. Doctoral Dissertation, Universidad Complutense de Madrid.
- Hornstein, Norbert, Jairo Nunes, and Kleantes K. Grohmann. 2005. *Understanding Minimalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Marín Gálvez, Rafael. 2000. El componente aspectual de la predicción. Doctoral Dissertation, Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona.
- Mateu, Jaume. 2002. Argument structure: Relational construal at the syntax-semantics interface. Doctoral Dissertation, Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona.
- Mateu, Jaume and Laia Amadas. 1999. Extended argument structure: Progressive as unaccusative. *Catalan Working Papers in Linguistics* 7: 159–174.
- Real Academia Española. 2009. *Nueva gramática de la lengua española*. Madrid: Espasa.
- Sedano, Mercedes. 2000. Perífrasis de gerundio en el español hablado de Caracas. *Opción* 32: 35–53.
- Yllera, Alicia. 1999. Las perífrasis verbales de gerundio. In *Gramática descriptiva de la lengua española*, ed. Ignacio Bosque and Violeta Demonte, 3253–3390. Madrid: Espasa.