

A Por as a Serial Preposition in Spanish

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Aaron Yamada

University of California, Davis

Introduction.

In Peninsular Spanish, the preposition *a* 'to' can be placed directly before the preposition *por* 'for' to indicate a semantic notion of objective and finality, or fetching, as in (1).

- (1) *Voy a por vino.*
I go to for wine.
'I'm going to get wine.'

The *a por* construction is most frequently used with verbs of movement, such as the verb *ir* 'to go.' The following examples (2a) – (2c), however, show that its use does extend beyond canonical movement verbs.

- (2)a. ...*no eran pocas las tentaciones que sentía de vencerse*
not were few the temptations that felt of overcome.REFL

a por el torero.
to for the bullfighter
'...the temptations it felt to overcome itself to get the bullfighter were not scarce.'
(ABC, 09/06/1997, cited from CDH)
- b. *En cuanto se le quede la capaza vacía, lo tienes aquí a por comida.*
As soon as him remain the basket empty him you have here to for food
'As soon as his basket's empty, you have him here getting food.'
(Martínez-Mena, 1977, cited from Gómez-Ortín, 2005)
- c. ...*que se detuviese a por el regaliz y la novela.*
that REFL detain to for the licoriceand the novel
'...that she would stop to get the licorice and the novel.'
(Landeró, 1989, cited from CDH)

Furthermore, the *a por* construction can be used in exclamatory phrases with no verb at all, as in (3).

- (3) ¡*A por el campeonato!*

to for the championship
'On to the championship!'

What makes the *a por* construction curious is that in all dialectal varieties of Spanish, the same semantic notion of fetching and objective can be conveyed without using the preposition *a*, as in (4).

- (4) *Voy por vino.*
I go for wine.
'I'm going to get wine.'
'I'm going because of wine.'
'I'm going through wine.'

The difference, however, is that the preposition *por* hosts a variety of semantic notions, and without the preposition *a* or any additional context, phrase (4) can have several possible interpretations, as above illustrated. In only using the preposition *por*, it is not explicitly clear without context which semantic notion the speaker intends to convey. It has thus been concluded that the combined use of both prepositions *a* and *por* serves to eliminate ambiguity and make clear the semantic notion of fetching (de Bruyne, 1999), as in phrase (1).

Prepositional Sequences.

What has been less conclusive is the analysis of the construction itself with respect to its syntactic classification. One approach to the *a por* construction would be to classify it in line with other "prepositional sequences" that occur in Spanish (RAE, 2009). Examples of prepositional sequences are shown in (5a) and (5b).

- (5) a. *Paseaban por entre los álamos.* (de Bosque, 1997)
strolled:3p through between the poplars
'They would take a stroll among the poplars.'
- b. *Dame los libros de sobre la mesa.* (de Bruyne, 1999)
give me the books from on top of the table
'Give me the books from on top of the table.'

These cases express specific prepositional relationships that could not be made clear by one preposition alone. In (5a) and (5b), the spatial relation between the verb and the prepositional

object could have multiple interpretations without the use of two prepositions. These double prepositional structures are mapped configurationally as in (6), with a preposition complemented by a prepositional phrase.

(6) *Paseaban* [_{PP}**por** [_{PP}*entre los álamos.*]]

The *a por* construction can be organized into an identical configurational structure as the above cases of prepositional sequences, as in (7).

(7) *Voy* [_{PP}**a** [_{PP}**por vino.**]]

However, there are certain mismatches that will arise if we continue to analyze *a por* as being a prepositional sequence in the same sense as those seen in (5a) and (5b). As pointed out by Ignacio de Bosque (1997), the preposition *a* cannot take other prepositions as complements, nor can it be a complement of another preposition. Additionally, unlike the examples in (5a) and (5b), the prepositions in *a por* cannot be used to create their own individual phrases. Consider the following iterations of phrase (5a), in which each preposition in the prepositional sequence can be used to create two separate grammatical phrases.

- (8) a. *Paseaban* **por** *los álamos.*
 strolled:3p through the poplars
 ‘They would stroll through the poplars.’
- b. *Paseaban* **entre** *los álamos.*
 strolled:3p between the poplars
 ‘They would stroll between the poplars.’

This shows that there exists an exclusive prepositional relationship between the verb, either preposition, and the prepositional object. If we apply the same test to an *a por* phrase, it will result in an ungrammaticality, as in the following iterations of ‘*Voy a por vino*’ in (9a) and (9b).

- (9) a. **Voy a vino*
 b. *Voy por vino.*

Phrase (9a) is ungrammatical because the preposition *a* following a verb of movement should precede a complement that indicates place or location. Phrase (9b) is grammatical, and to

readdress a prior point made, it already includes one of the meanings of its original iteration in ‘*Voy a por vino*’. This illustrates one of the essential differences between the *a por* construction and prepositional sequences. In prepositional sequences, two prepositions are equally contributing some prepositional information or parameter to a more specific prepositional relationship. In *a por*, on the other hand, an equal contribution is not seen from both prepositions *a* and *por* because the preposition *a* is not needed to convey the semantic notion of finality or objective; the preposition *por* can express that meaning on its own. Although the preposition *a* may not contribute prepositional information to the larger constituent *a por*, it can be seen as a marker that is actually reducing the semantic notions of the preposition *por* to that of finality and objective.

In the following phrases (10a) and (10b), the adverbs *allí* ‘there’ or *justo* ‘just/right’ can be inserted in between the two prepositions of a prepositional sequence.

- (10) a. *Paseaban por allí, entre los álamos.*
 strolled:3p through there, among the poplars
 ‘They would take a stroll through there, among the poplars.’
- b. *Paseaban por justo entre los álamos.*
 strolled:3p through right between the poplars
 ‘They would take a stroll through right between the poplars.’

This adverb insertion test will result in an ungrammatical phrase when observed in an *a por* structure, as in (11a) and (11b).

- (11) a. **Voy a allí, por vino.*
 go:1s to there for wine
- b. **Voy a justo por vino.*
 go:1s to right for wine

The ungrammaticality arises as it did in the previous test; the preposition *a* in this case can only take a complement of location or place. It does not allow adverbs. These tests show that there exists a clear difference between the *a por* construction and prepositional sequences. This difference primarily arises from the nature of the prepositions in question. Prepositional sequences such as *por entre* are unique in the sense that they take two spatial prepositions and

use them in a logical order that would denote a more specific spatial relationship. This logic does not follow with the *a por* structure, in which the relationship being imposed by the two prepositions is one of direction leading to objective, rather than location. Furthermore, whereas in a prepositional sequence the semantic notions of both prepositions are essential, in *a por* the preposition *a* is not needed in order to convey the notion of finality and objective, as illustrated by (4). It is therefore clear why the structure *a por* behaved differently in these tests alongside prepositional sequences; the preposition *a* caused the majority of the grammaticality issues in these tests because it is semantically extraneous with respect to the notion of fetching.

Taking this into account, it does not seem fair to classify *a por* in line with prepositional sequences that occur in Spanish. If we cannot classify *a por* as a prepositional sequence, then perhaps we can analyze it as being an entirely different kind of syntactic unit.

Serial Verb Constructions.

In certain languages of Southeast Asia, South America, Oceania, and Africa, there exist serial verb constructions (SVC's) which are composed of two verbs that act as one verbal unit and express a single eventhood (Bisang 2009, Carstens 2002, Hamel 1993). SVC's are illustrated in (12a), from Ijo, a language of Nigeria, and in (12b), from Loniu, an Oceanic language.

- (12) a. *Àwọ̀n ẹ̀yẹ̀ fò lẹ̀ sórí igi* (Carstens 2002: 11)
 PL bird **fly go** to+top tree
 ‘The birds flew to the top of the tree.’
- b. *iy ta yó'ósé imon* (Hamel 1993: 115)
 3s Prog **walk 3s-return**
 ‘He is walking back.’

In (12a) and (12b), a sequence of two separate verbs work in tandem to express one single action, as if they were a single verb. In the same manner that these verbal units are analyzed as SVC's, perhaps it would be more accurate to analyze *a por* as if it were a sequence of two prepositions which act as a single prepositional unit. If *a por* is indeed a “serial preposition construction”, then we should expect it to behave like a serial verb construction and

follow the same tendencies as serial verb constructions. These tendencies include the following, as established by Bisang (2009):

i) Two verbs act as a single verb and express a single eventhood

If in a SVC, two separate verbs function as a single predicate and express a single action, then a serial preposition construction should do the same, in that two separate prepositions would form a single prepositional unit and express a single prepositional relationship between the verb and prepositional object. As described above, one of the key singularities of the *a por* construction is the fact that it does not express two distinct spatial relationships, as is the case in *por entre*, in which the semantic meanings of both *por* ‘through’ and *entre* ‘between’ are integral. In the case of *a por*, the two prepositions do not equally contribute such parameters, but instead convey the single prepositional notion of fetching.

ii) Two verbs share the same grammatical categories

Verbs that compose SVC’s must share the same grammatical categories, which include tense, aspect, mood, and polarity. Although we cannot make comparisons between the tense and aspect of SVC’s and *a por*, it is certainly worth noting that in the *a por* construction, both prepositions do share similar semantic information. Examining *a* as a locative preposition of direction, and *por* as a locative preposition of objective, it can be argued that the two prepositions perform similar semantic functions; that is, both prepositions can imply movement towards some goal. It is therefore the case that the use of the preposition *por* alone in Latin America can convey the same meaning as the *a por* construction in Peninsular Spanish.

iii) Two verbs may not be separated, except by a direct object

Two verbs that constitute a SVC may not be separated by other material such as overt syntactic markers, but they may be intervened by a direct object. The parallel that we can draw in the *a por* construction is that in the test for adverb insertion, separating the prepositions *a* and *por* would result in an ungrammaticality, as seen in (11a) and (11b).

Evidence from Twitter: Coordinated Phrases.

A search of Twitter corpus data was conducted during the month of May 2015 to see to what extent *a por* could be or not be separated. Using Twitter's Advanced Search, I searched for tweets in which *a por* would maintain both its prepositions in phrases of conjunction or disjunction. For example, in a conjunction phrase, *a por* would be followed by some prepositional object *X*, the conjunction *y* 'and', another *a por* construction, and another prepositional object *Z*, as in (13).

- (13) (*Twitter*, 05/26/2015)
Voy a por mi amigo y a por mi libro
 I go to for my friend and to for my book.
 'I'm going to get my friend and my book.'

The corpus was also searched for examples identical in structure, but without the second preposition *a*, as in (14).

- (14) (*Twitter*, 05/13/2015)
...tengo que ir a por el capi y por iron man
 I have to go to for the (Captain America) and for Iron Man
 'I have to go get Captain America and Iron Man.'

Identical searches were conducted for examples of disjunction. In examples of disjunction, *a por* would be followed by some prepositional object *X*, the disjunction *o* 'or', and another *a por* construction preceding some prepositional object *Z*, as in (15).

- (15) (*Twitter*, 05/30/2015)
... no sabes si ir a por un Golfo a por un Bugatti
 NEG know if go to for a Golf or to for a Bugatti
 '...you don't know whether to get a Golf or a Bugatti.'

Examples of disjunction in which *a* was not used after the disjunction were also searched, as in (16).

- (16) (*Twitter*, 05/18/2015)
...a por los 2 o por uno de ellos?
 to for the 2 or for one of them
 '...to get both of them or to get one of them?'

Examples of *a por X y Z*, or *a por X o Z*, were not searched as they would not exhibit any signs of separation with respect to the two prepositions in question. Table (1) shows a summary of tokens observed in the Twitter search.

Table 1. Results of Twitter corpus search, 05/01/2015 to 05/31/2015

| Conjunction | Tokens | % | Disjunction | Tokens | % |
|---------------------------------|------------|----------------|---------------------------------|-----------|----------------|
| a por <i>X</i> y a por <i>Z</i> | 582 | 88.72% | a por <i>X</i> o a por <i>Z</i> | 78 | 84.78% |
| a por <i>X</i> y por <i>Z</i> | 74 | 11.28% | a por <i>X</i> o por <i>Z</i> | 14 | 15.22% |
| por <i>X</i> y a por <i>Z</i> | 0 | 0.00% | por <i>X</i> o a por <i>Z</i> | 0 | 0.00% |
| <i>Totals</i> | <i>656</i> | <i>100.00%</i> | <i>Totals</i> | <i>92</i> | <i>100.00%</i> |

The data show that there indeed exists a preference for the doubling of the preposition *a* in both conjuncted and disjuncted phrases, thus supporting the notion that *a por*, in line with serial constructions, is preferably inseparable. Worth noting is the fact that no tokens were observed to show the *a por* construction following the sole preposition *por* and conjunction or disjunction. If analyzed as a serial preposition, perhaps it is the case that when used in coordinated phrases, *a por* must be used uniformly before and after coordination and command both *por* prepositions, either by doubling itself entirely or only doubling the *por* preposition, as in (17a), where *a* is excluded after conjunction. It would follow that no tokens of (17b), where *a* is excluded before conjunction, were found because the *a por* construction is not used uniformly before and after coordination, and the preposition *a* does not command both *por* prepositions.

- (17) a. *Voy a por vino y por agua.*
 I go to for wine and for water.
 ‘I’m going to get wine and water.’
- b. ?? *Voy por vino y a por agua.*
 I go for wine and to for water.
 ‘I’m going to get wine/I’m going because of wine/I’m going through wine and to get water.’

I propose that as a serial construction, the preposition *a* may be dropped after conjunction or disjunction as long as it is introduced before said conjunction or disjunction, as in (17a). In this position, it not only serves to eliminate ambiguous semantic meaning from *por*, as earlier mentioned, but also from the second *por* following coordination, as it configurationally

commands both *por* prepositions. Phrases such as (17b) were consequently not found because with *a* not limiting the semantic meaning of *por* before coordination, it gives an ambiguous interpretation coordinated with an *a por* construction identifying the semantic notion of fetching, creating a semantically clumsy sentence. In this case, two distinct semantic prepositional relationships could be applied to the same verb, contributing to the awkwardness of the phrase. Additionally, speaking logically, it seems unusual that a speaker would first use *por* with the notion of fetching, followed by *a por*, which also denotes fetching. Lacking from current research are studies examining the effects of coordination on serial verb constructions, which would naturally be of great interest to this analysis.

Conclusion.

It is clear that the *a por* prepositional construction shares several qualities with serial verb constructions: two prepositions act as one preposition, they cannot be separated by other material such as adverbs, they express only one prepositional relationship between their arguments, and both prepositions share similar semantic notions. The evidence shows that *a por* is not a case of a preposition complemented by another prepositional phrase, as in the case of prepositional sequences, but rather, a serial prepositional construction whose individual constituents act as a single unit. Classifying *a por* as a serial preposition construction, with parallels to serial verb constructions, therefore offers a more conclusive explanation of the construction than classifying it as a prepositional sequence. This analysis is interesting not only because it offers a novel explanation to a considerably lesser-studied language phenomenon, but also because it applies an analysis of serial constructions well outside the canon of languages in which serial constructions are typically found. What remains clear is that more research is needed in the application of serial constructions in Romance languages.

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