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The Expression of Affected Arguments in L2 French

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Abstract

The paper describes how affectedness is expressed in French, Spanish and L2 French by Spanish-speaking learners attending to two parameters: the thematic role under which affected arguments are realized, and the interaction between grammatical and lexical means at play. 63 participants completed an offline task in which they were presented with a series of vignettes and had to retell what happened to a blue-dressed cartoon figure. The corpus of the study consists of 252 responses: 84 were elicited in L2 French, 84 in L1 French, and 84 in L1 Spanish. The results reveal that French expresses affected arguments as subjects in the 'se faire' passive constructions (e.g., Il s'est fait agresser), whereas Spanish expresses affectedness through the realization of objects depending on causative verbs within SVO sentences (e.g., El coche impactó al ciclista) and OV(S) sentences (e.g., A él lo atropelló un coche). Our findings suggest that the instantiation of affected arguments is highly grammaticalized in French, whereas Spanish relies more on the semantics of the verb. As for L2 French, our results are coherent with previous SLA findings regarding the learner's overuse of structures available in both native and target languages but dispreferred by target language speakers (Benazzo & Andorno 2017). Regarding conceptual transfer, the results of our study suggest that the status of a given language as L1 or as L2 plays a crucial role in the dissimilar expression of affectedness across related Romance languages such as French and Spanish.

Keywords

Undergoer, affectedness, thematic roles, RRG, intra-typological variation, transfer

Introduction

Conceptual transfer has been defined as the influence of the language-mediated conceptual categories of one language on verbal performance in another language (Jarvis & Pavlenko 2010: 115). The question of whether mental representations from L1 are transferred over to L2 during acquisition has been substantially explored for the cognitive domains of motion (Slobin 2005, Bylund & Jarvis 2011, Pi Hsia 2012, Flecken et al. 2015b, Anastasio 2019) and time (Slobin 1996, Flecken et al. 2015a, Tang et al. 2021). Traditionally, the starting point of this body of research are crosslinguistic differences, such as the typological distinction between verbal vs satellite framed languages (Talmy 1985, 2000) or the contrastive analysis opposing languages lacking grammatical markers to encode some aspectual values¹ and languages in which these values are expressed by grammatical means, like French or Spanish. The two-fold typology 'path versus manner' (Talmy 1985, 2000) has proved to have an impact in the learner's grammar when it comes to express motion events for linguistic combinations involving genetic distant family languages, such as Romance's vs Germanic's. Evidence of the deeply entrenchment between L1-salient categories, like the trajectory of motion in French, and preverbal attentional patterns has been found in L2 German by French learners that focused figures and endpoints in a significant way compared to German controls (Flecken et al. 2015b). Results on language production showed that L2 German speakers used markedly fewer particles than L1 German speakers did, and that references to the location of the moving entity were significantly higher by the L1 French speakers and by the L2 German group (Flecken et al. 2015b). These authors conclude that L2 learners failed to acquire the spatial devices expressing the path of motion in a native-like way. Conversely, languages enabling the expression of motion by satellite

¹ The progressive in German and the contrast Perfective/Imperfective in English, just to mention two examples.

adjuncts, such as Italian's syntagmatic verbs –e.g., *uscire fuori*, *scappare via*, etc.– have proven to have a facilitative effect in L2 English leading to an earlier use of satellite particles compared to learners whose L1 is French (Anastasio 2019). As for aspectual conceptualizations, the dissimilar means to encode progressive values in German and Dutch² has proven to lead to different priming effects between L2 learners and Dutch controls (Gerwien & Flecken 2015). This result is consistent with crosslinguistic evidence about the production of agentive constructions and preverbal gaze allocation on agents by L1 German speakers and the production of progressive *V-ing* constructions and preverbal gaze allocation on actions by L1 English speakers (Flecken et al. 2015a). Ultimately, these results on conceptual transfer seem to support the claim formulated by Lambert et al. (2022) when they say that L2 speakers often fall back into patterns of language use that they have acquired through experience with their L1.

Our survey investigates whether conceptual transfer may be observed in the domain of affectedness, a domain of experience that can be universally expressed across languages. Unlike the above-mentioned categories of motion and time, affectedness has been relatively unexplored from a functional SLA perspective and our survey should contribute to fulfill this gap. We assume that:

- (i) Arguments are participants of the verb's semantic representation that can fulfil a well-delimited set of thematic roles (e.g., subject, direct object, etc.).
- (ii) Affected arguments are event participants that undergo a change of state or a modification at least in one of their properties (Van Valin & LaPolla 1997).

Our study aims to describe the syntactic realization of affected arguments –henceforth AAs– as well as the grammatical and lexical markers encoding affectedness across two genetic-related languages (i.e., French and Spanish) and across the L2 French learners' grammars of Spanish-speaking informants. Our research questions are as follows:

- a) What are the syntactic templates and the morphological means more frequently used by native speakers of French and Spanish to express affectedness? Are subjects within passive constructions more frequently instantiated than direct objects within active voice sentences? Do French and Spanish exhibit significant differences in the preferred patterns encoding AAs?
- b) How do learners of French use the target language constructions that corresponds with a formally similar construction in their L1? Do their L2 grammars account for transfer regarding case marking and/or the repertoire of verbal periphrases and causal verbs denoting affectedness?

In order to interpret the results of this study in light of the syntactic-semantic interface, the next section will introduce some crucial aspects of the Role and Reference Grammar (Foley & Van Valin 1984, Van Valin & LaPolla 1997). Subsequently, we will briefly review the literature on affectedness (section 2) and compare some grammatical and lexical means that mark affected arguments in French and Spanish (section 3). In Section 4, participants and methods will be presented. Sections 5 and 6 will respectively show and discuss our findings.

1. Theoretical underpinning of argument realization

It is commonly assumed that the factors that determine argument realization involve argument hierarchy (i.e., the argument roles of a predicate are ordered), semantic roles (e.g., agent, experiencer, patient, benefactive) and informational salience (i.e., topic and focus), among others (Wunderlich 2006). Passive constructions have the particularity of overriding the subject selection hierarchy based on the principle that the default choice for subject is the more agent-like argument. This is so because

² In Dutch progressive values are conveyed by the prepositional phrase *aan het* plus a verbal infinitive, whereas German does not mark progressive values by verbal means.

in passive constructions affected entities are topicalized, and any mention of the agent is optional, at least in French and Spanish. The Role and Reference Grammar (Foley & Van Valin 1984, Van Valin & LaPolla 1997) provides a theoretical syntactic model explaining language production based on the semantic macro roles of ‘actor’ and ‘undergoer’. This simplified opposition overrides prior conflicting taxonomies accounting for the individual roles of Theme/Patient and Recipient/Benefactive and appear well suited for modelling argument linking (Bornkessel et al. 2006). According to RRG, the grammar’s syntactic inventory is composed of language-specific syntactic templates that incorporate universal components related to the semantic representation of an event. The linking algorithm from semantics to syntax is based on progressive steps (Van Valin 2006: 273) and covers the following non-exhaustive list of operations: determining the actor and undergoer assignments, determining the morphosyntactic coding of the arguments –i.e., selection of the privileged syntactic argument–, selecting the template(s) for the sentence, and assigning argument(s) to positions. The relationship between argument position is expressed in the Actor-Undergoer hierarchy, which states that the leftmost argument in the logical structure will be the actor and the rightmost the undergoer. Consider examples (1a) and (1b), in which the noun phrase *the window* is the undergoer, whereas Fred is the actor.

- (1) a. *Fred broke the window*
 a'. [**do**' (Fred, Ø) CAUSE [BECOME **broken**' (window)]
 b. *The window was broken (by Fred)*

Van Valin & LaPolla (1997: 107)

The logical structure in brackets (1a') illustrates the universal components related to the semantic representation of the sentences (1a) and (1b), which indeed differ in their syntactic templates. In an accusative language like English –but also in French and Spanish–, the default choice for subject is the actor. With a two-macrorole verb –i.e., transitive verbs–, it means that the actor is the default choice for subject; the other macrorole can only be subject in a passive construction. Passive constructions like (1b) override the actor-undergoer hierarchy in the sense that the undergoer functions as subject. Therefore, these constructions result in a reduction of core elements, since the actor is either omitted or appears as an adjunct in the periphery. Sentences (1a) and (1b) are templates making part of the language-specific syntactic inventory of grammar, whereas (1a') represents the logical structure of the verb or its lexical entry. The elements in capitals in (1a') are modifiers linked to the semantic representation of the verb ‘to break’, which is the result of some kind of process caused by someone. English verb ‘to break’ reunites in its semantics both causative and accomplishment values. These semantic primitives are signified in (1a') by capital letters CAUSE and BECOME, respectively. Table 1 summarizes the constructional template inherent to passive constructions in English. We will put our results in relation to RRG when it comes to discussing some crucial aspects inherent to the language-specific syntactic templates encoding affected arguments in French and Spanish (cf. section 6).

<i>Constructional template for English passive</i>
CONSTRUCTION English passive (plain)
SYNTAX Linking: Actor ≠ subject; omitted or in peripheral by- postposition phrase Undergoer = subject (default)
MORPHOLOGY Verb: past participle Auxiliary: be
SEMANTICS Privileged syntactic argument is not instigator of state of affairs but affected by it (default)

Table 1 Constructional template for English passive adapted from Van Valin & LaPolla (1997: 433)

2. Previous studies on affectedness

Hopper & Thompson (1980: 252) define affectedness as the component of transitivity that expresses the degree to which an action is transferred to a patient. In general, affected objects are somehow altered or modified by the action expressed by the verb (Cornips & Hulk 1999). It is commonly assumed that affectedness can be represented as a scale where various degrees of affectedness are distinguished. Beavers (2011: 362) illustrates this hierarchy by comparing verbs encoding an effective action and thus, expressing a change (e.g., *to break*), to verbs encoding a contact and thus, expressing a potential change (e.g., *to hit*). This allows a clear-cut distinction between specific results and non-specific results and suggests that the degree of affectedness is intimately correlated to how specific a predicate is related to the result (Beavers 2011: 365). In this paper, affectedness is understood as a semantic parameter encoding the change of state or condition in an event participant.³

Affectedness is a multidimensional category traditionally related to causality and transitivity that has been widely approached by generative researchers and to a lesser extent by usage-based researchers.⁴ The latter have contributed to gain insight in the description of function-to-form mappings involving passive meanings in Italian (Giacalone Ramat 2020, Castellani 2021), French (Repiso & Granget 2021), French and Spanish (Gauchola 2012, Repiso & Granget accepted), French and Italian (Martinot & Gerolimich 2021) and L2 French by Italian learners (Gerolimich 2013). Giacalone Ramat (2020) focuses on the written uses of the Italian auxiliary *vedersi* and explains its frequency because it marks a higher degree of subject affectedness, compared to *essere* and *venire*. Castellani (2021) concludes that the Italian passive auxiliary *venire* is salient in written production, compared to *essere* and *andare*. In oral production, Gerolimich (2013) gives evidence of the salience of the auxiliary *venire*, compared to *essere*, whereas in French the use of the auxiliary verbs *être* and *se faire* are balanced. Repiso & Granget (2021) show a salient preference for *se faire* over *être* in non-volitional actions lexicalized by accomplishment verbs. Martinot & Gerolimich (2021) account for the prominent use of impersonal sentences with no identifiable agent in both French and Italian. To our knowledge, none of the above-mentioned studies interprets their results in light of the syntactic-semantic interface in languages. Our study aims to fulfill this gap.

3. The expression of affected arguments in French and Spanish

In the present study, we analyze the expression of affectedness focusing on the case marking of the affected argument (i.e., subject *vs.* object) and on the nature of the marker denoting the permanent or potential change experienced by the undergoer (i.e., grammatical means *vs.* verb's semantics). We will use the term 'grammatical means' to refer to fixed constructions consisting in a finite verb plus a non-finite form (e.g., an infinitive or a participle). In order to be grammatical, verbal periphrases license a fixed word order and this generally implies the AA to be syntactically realized either as subject or as a direct object. For example, the French auxiliary 'être' and its corresponding form in Spanish –i.e., 'ser'– demand that AA be necessarily realized as subject: *Il a été expulsé* / *Él fue expulsado* (He was evicted). Conversely, the causative 'faire' / 'hacer' demands that AA be necessarily instantiated as direct object: *La police l'a fait tomber* / *La policía lo hizo caer* (The police brought him down). These syntactic restrictions do not apply within SVO sentences in which affectedness is denoted by the verb's semantics. Here, both realizations either as subject or as direct

³ We assume that affected entities can take different semantic roles such as patient (i.e., entity that undergo a change of state or condition), experiencer (i.e., entity that experience internal states, such as perceivers, cognizers and emoters), theme (i.e., entity that undergo a change of location) and benefactive (i.e., entity for whose benefit some action is performed). In the current study, we refer generally to affected entities as undergoers.

⁴ Affectedness has been approached from a generativist perspective to test constraints on syntactic operations involving middles (Cornips & Hulk 1999), causatives (Alsina 1992) and other constructions (cf. Beavers 2011: 336 for an overview).

object are grammatical. For instance, one can say *Il est tombé dans l'affrontement* / *Él cayó en la pelea*⁵ (i.e., subject's realization), but it is also correct to say *Un policier l'a agressé* / *Un policía lo agredió*⁶ (object's realization).

Among the grammatical devices available in French and Spanish to encode affectedness, there is the factitive periphrasis *faire / hacer + infinitive* (2) and the passive sentences *être / ser + past participle* (3). Each of these constructions requires that AA be realized as an object and a subject, respectively. Beyond these grammatical devices, French and Spanish share some lexical means to encode affectedness such as causal-accomplishment verbs (4) and pronominal verbs denoting reciprocal values (5) within SVO sentences. Note that *se*-reciprocal values demand that AA be realized as a subject, whereas no restriction applies to SVO sentences containing a causal-accomplishment verb. Example (4) illustrates the realization of the affected argument as an object but it can also be realized as a subject: *Le cycliste mourut à la suite d'une collision avec une voiture* / *El ciclista murió tras chocar con un coche* (The cyclist died after a car crash).

(2) *Le chien a fait trébucher Nadine* / *El perro hizo tropezar a Nadine*
The dog made Nadine trip

(3) *Le vase a été jeté à la poubelle* / *El jarrón fue arrojado a la basura*
The vase was thrown in the trash

(4) *La voiture a percuté le cycliste* / *El coche impactó al ciclista*
The car hit the cyclist

(5) *Jean et Paul se sont giflés (l'un à l'autre)* / *Jean y Paul se abofetearon (el uno al otro)*
Jean and Paul slapped (one to each other)

4. Participants and method

The French control group of the study was composed of 21 native French informants: 15 women and 6 men aged between 19 and 40.⁷ Most of them were students in the 3rd year of BA degree (10 participants) or at their 1st or 2nd year of a MA degree (10 participants), and only one was already employed after having completed her MA studies. The data collection for this group took place at the University of Nantes in November 2018. The Spanish control group was composed of 21 Spanish-speaking informants: 11 women and 10 men aged between 18 and 37 and coming from different Spanish speaking countries (13 Spanish, 4 Colombian, 2 Mexican, 1 Peruvian and 1 Bolivian). The data collection of this group took place partially at the University of Nantes in December 2018 (11 informants) and partially in the Spanish region of Valladolid (10 informants) in August 2019.

The group of L2 French learners was composed of 21 Spanish-speaking informants: 19 women and 2 men aged between 20 and 42. Most of them were university students: 6 Erasmus coming from Spain, 2 regular students taking different MA degrees and 11 students being instructed at the Institute of French as a Second Language homed by the University of Nantes. Only one was not benefiting from university instruction and was employed at the time of the data collection. The data collection of the group took place at the University of Nantes between November 2018 and March 2019.⁸ All the participants completed a placement test⁹: 11 of them scored within the B1 competence level, 7 within the A2, two within the A1 and only one within the B2 (cf. Figure 1). Additionally, they provided information about other known languages and further bio-linguistic data by filling a questionnaire. Like the L1 Spanish group, the L2 French learners came from different countries: 9

⁵ *He fell in the fight.*

⁶ *A police officer attacked him.*

⁷ Except for a 67-year-old female participant who was studying for a MA degree.

⁸ In order to complete the group of French L2 learners, a 23-year-old Spanish female MA student in Language Sciences (*Sprachwissenschaft*) was recruited in April 2022 at the University of Salzburg. Prior to data collection, the student had completed an advanced course taught in French during the first term of the academic year 2021-2022.

⁹ Results obtained from the Dialang placement test targeting the vocabulary in French (Lancaster University).

from Spain, 7 from Colombia, 3 from Peru, one from Mexico and one from Venezuela. In general, the B1 / B2 learners had been exposed to French earlier –either by instructed learning or by immersion–, compared to the A1 / A2 learners (Table 2). The group of learners having scored B1 / B2 had an average of 5.5 years between the age of onset and the age at which they took part in the survey, whereas the group of learners having scored A1 / A2 had an average of 4.5 years. This means that the less advanced learners had been exposed to French for a shorter period of time.

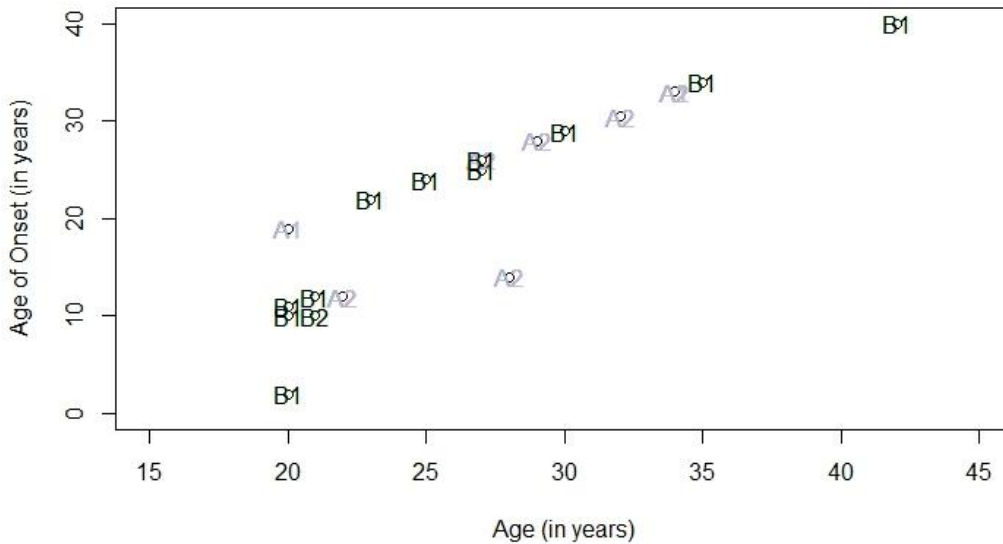


Figure 1 Level of proficiency in L2 French across learners

	Age of onset		Age	
	Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation
A1 / A2 (n = 9)	23	8.86	27.5	5.29
B1 / B2 (n = 12)	20.4	11.38	25.9	6.89

Table 2 Age of onset (in years) and age (in years) across the learners’ level of proficiency

The three groups completed an offline task in which they were presented with a blue-dressed cartoon figure and were asked to retell what happened to him. In total, eight vignettes were displayed individually on a screen. Four vignettes were target items representing the blue-dressed cartoon figure as undergoer and the other four were fillers representing him as an actor (cf. Annexes).¹⁰ When the informant had finished describing the first vignette, we passed on to the second one, and so on. There was no limit of time associated to the display of the visual stimuli. In order to avoid biasing effects linked to the order of presentation of the items, the vignettes were presented in two different orders resulting in version I and version II of the data set. Out of the 21 participants, 11 completed version I and 10 completed version II.

The audio files of the 63 participants taking part in the survey were time-aligned and transcribed using the free toolkit EXMARaLDA. The target items’ verbalizations were categorized in an Excel file and stored as tab-delimited text files in order to be processed as input files by R Studio. Responses varied in length across informants. A major methodological issue was to individuate the segment encoding affectedness. In order to do so rigorously, we focused on segments in which the blue-dressed cartoon figure was explicitly mentioned –no matter by which linguistic marker (e.g., proper noun, subject pronoun, object pronoun)– as undergoer of a permanent or potential change. Sentences expressing a factual or a potential change on the AA were categorized attending to two variables: (a) syntactic realization, and (b) affectedness marker. The values assigned to the variable syntactic

¹⁰ Animation director Andrea Rania created the vignettes’ images *ad hoc* for the survey. We thank him heartfully.

realization were *subject*, *direct object* and *indirect object*, whereas the values assigned to the variable affectedness marker were *grammatical* or *lexical*. Consider the following segments:

- (6) *Eeh Alex a été // frappé par un... mmh garçon à l'école* [FRL2-07#18]
- (7) *Ici il s'est... / il s'a battu une autre fois avec un... / avec son collègue* [FRL2-05#16]
- (8) *Alex euh il s'est rencontré avec // un ami que c'est pas // très gentil il le- il le- lui a fait tomber* [FRL2-16#34]
- (9) *Mmh... il y a un // voiture // qui a frappé à Alex* [FRL2-19#39]

We assigned to examples (6) and (7) the value *subject* because it is the case marker under which both AAs are syntactically realized. However, (6) was additionally classified as *grammatical* because the construction under which the AA is realized is the passive periphrasis 'être' + past participle, and (7) was classified as *lexical* because the element denoting affectedness is the reciprocal verb 'se battre' (to fight). We assigned examples (8) and (9) the value of *direct object* because it is the case marker under which both AAs are syntactically realized. However, (8) was additionally classified as *grammatical* because the construction under which the AA is realized is the causative periphrasis 'faire' + infinitive, and (9) was classified as *lexical* because the element denoting affectedness is the accomplishment verb 'frapper' (to hit).

The realization of AAs as indirect objects took place in combination with intransitive verbs in L1 French (2 occurrences), L1 Spanish (4 occurrences) and L2 French (6 occurrences).¹¹ In L1 French, the 84 verbalizations explicitly referred to the entity mentioned in the task's instruction. This was not the case in L1 Spanish nor in L2 French, where we elicited 2 and 6 occurrences in which the blue-dressed cartoon figure was not mentioned, respectively.¹² Additionally, in L1 Spanish we elicited 2 responses, mainly nominalizations, containing no verbal forms.¹³

5. Results

In the present section, results in L1 French, L1 Spanish and L2 French are presented. First, we give a detailed account of the set of grammatical and lexical means used by the informants to denote affectedness, and we put them in relation with the syntactic realization of AAs as subjects and direct objects. Secondly, we present Pearson's chi-squared statistical comparisons between L1 French and L1 Spanish groups, and between French controls and L2 French groups.

5.1 Syntactic realization of AAs through grammatical and lexical means

Our results in L1 French reveal a preferred grammatical pattern that consists in realizing AAs as subjects by means of the construction 'se faire' + infinitive (10). This pattern represented 40.4% over the 84 responses elicited (cf. Table 3). Beyond this pattern, French-speaking natives encoded AAs by lexical means within SV / SVO / SOV sentences containing causative or accomplishment verbs (27.3%) that allowed them to realized AAs either as direct objects (11) or as subjects (12). Here, we give three examples of the mentioned patterns:

- (10) *Il se fait poursuivre par un chien* [FRL1-10#29]
- (11) *Il y a une voiture qui le renverse* [FRL1-13#43]
- (12) *Alex faisait du vélo et il a dû tomber* [FRL1-12#39]

From an informational viewpoint, it is interesting to note that the instruction's topicalized entity is foregrounded in example (10) and backgrounded in example (11). In other words, (10) topicalizes the

¹¹ Examples: *Un chien aboie après de lui* [FRL1-16 #53], *Une voiture le... l'est tombée* [FRL2-15 #31], *Un perro le ladra* [ESL1-14 #53].

¹² Examples: *Son vélo s'a... cassé* [FRL2-16 #35], *Un carro ha estropeado su bicicleta* [ESL1-9 #35].

¹³ Example: *Alex en alguna buena situación contra un bulling* [ESL1-3 #10].

undergoer by means of the subject pronoun *il*, whereas example (11) topicalizes the actor (i.e., *une voiture*), and relegates the instruction's entity to the subordinated clause (i.e., *qui le renverse*). In example (12) the instruction's entity is topicalized as actor, not as undergoer. We will discuss the topicalization of AAs in section 6.2.

L1 French (n = 84)							
	Grammatical means			Lexical means			
	<i>Se faire</i> + Inf	<i>Être</i> + PP	<i>Faire</i> + Inf	<i>Se prendre</i> + Noun	SV / SVO / SOV [causative verb or accomplishment]	SV [state verb]	<i>Se-</i> reciprocal verb
SUBJ 77.3%	34 40.4%	7 8.3%	0	5 5.9%	9 10.7%	7 8.3%	3 3.5%
DO 20.2%	0	0	3 3.5%	0	14 16.6%	0	0

Table 3 Syntactic realization of AAs through lexical and grammatical means in L1 French

Results in L1 Spanish reveal a different way of topicalizing AAs compared to L1 French. Spanish-speaking natives use left-dislocation structures that allow the realization of AAs as direct objects within OV / OVS sentences (13). This pattern was the most frequent among the grammatical means observed (cf. Table 4), though it was mostly produced by informants from the Spanish region of Castilla (12 occurrences against 3 produced by Latin-American informants). Beyond this result, L1 Spanish and L1 French seem to converge in the expression of AAs by lexical means and, in particular, in the use of causative or accomplishment verbs allowing the syntactic realization of AAs either as direct objects (14) or as subjects (15). Even if this lexical pattern was found in both languages, in L1 Spanish it is more frequently used, representing 51.1% over the 84 responses elicited, against 27.3% in L1 French.

(13) *A Alex¹⁴ le han puesto la zancadilla* [ESL1-12#46]

(14) *El bully lo // lo golpeó* [ESL1-11#44]

(15) *Alex iba en bici // y se ha chocado con un coche* [ESL1-16#63]

L1 Spanish (n = 84)										
	Grammatical means					Lexical means				
	DO's left dislocated [OV / OVS]	<i>Ser</i> + PP	<i>Estar</i> + PP	<i>Hacer</i> + Inf	<i>Hacer que</i> + Subj.	Verb + Noun	SV / SVO / SOV [causative verb or accompl.]	SV [state verb]	SV [activity verb]	<i>Se-</i> reciprocal verb
SUBJ 39.2%	0	3 3.5%	0	0	1 1.1%	4 ¹⁵ 4.7%	18 21.4%	3 3.5%	3 3.5%	1 1.1%
DO 48.8%	15 17.8%	0	1 1.1%	2 2.3%	0	0	25 29.7%	0	0	0

Table 4 Syntactic realization of AAs through lexical and grammatical means in L1 Spanish

Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of case marking and types of markers in French and Spanish as used by L1 speakers. A rapid overview suggests different preferred patterns to encode AAs by French and Spanish-speaking natives. In French, grammatical constructions demanding the realization of AAs as subjects (upper right white square) seem to play a crucial role in the expression of affectedness. In Spanish, the distribution of case marking and types of markers does not indicate a

¹⁴ When the direct object is human and specific it is marked in Spanish by *a*, the preposition meaning 'to'. According to RRG, animate direct objects behave exactly like non-prepositionally marked direct objects. Therefore, *A Alex* in (13) should be considered a direct core argument (Van Valin & LaPolla 1997: 653), even though from a formal viewpoint it is a prepositional phrase.

¹⁵ Verbs: *Recibir* (x2), *cargarse* (x2).

clear-cut preferred pattern. However, a crucial difference compared to French lies in the important role of direct objects within grammatical constructions (upper left white square). This phenomenon is linked to the left-detached realization of AAs involving causal predicates (e.g., *Alex le han puesto la zancadilla*).

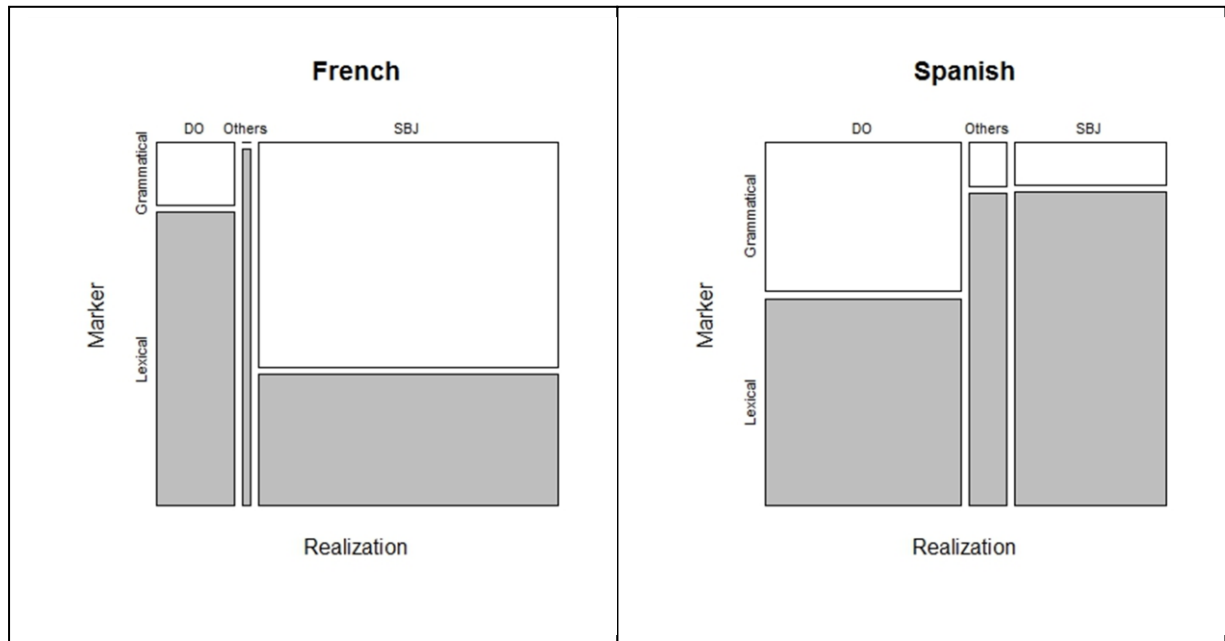


Figure 2 Distribution of case marking and markers of affectedness in French and Spanish

L2 French L2 (n = 84)									
	Grammatical means				Lexical means				
	<i>Se faire</i> + Inf	<i>Être</i> + PP	<i>Faire</i> + Inf	<i>Faire que</i> + Subj	Verb + Noun	SV / SVO / SOV [causative verb or accompl.]	SV [state verb]	SV [activity verb]	<i>Se-</i> reciprocal verb
SUBJ 55.9%	1 1.1%	13 15.4 %	0	0	0	8 9.5%	17 20.2%	4 4.7%	4 4.7%
DO 29.7%	0	0	7 8.3%	1 1.1%	0	16 19%	1 1.1%	0	0

Table 5 Syntactic realization of affected arguments across lexical and grammatical means in L2 French

Results in L2 French reveal that the grammatical means preferred by learners are the passive ‘être’ + past participle (16) and the causative ‘faire’ + infinitive (17), which represent respectively 15.4% and 8.3% of the responses elicited (cf. Table 5). Note that these grammatical devices have formal equivalent constructions in Spanish (i.e., ‘ser’ + past participle and ‘hacer’ + infinitive). However, their use in the L1 Spanish corpus sums up to 5.9% of the 84 responses obtained. As for lexical means, a striking result in L2 French is the high frequency of state verbs used to encode AAs as subjects (20.2%) as illustrated in (18).

(16) *Alex a été // frappé par un... mmh garçon à l'école* [FRL2-07#18]

(17) *La voiture l'a fait tomber de la vélo* [FRL2-14#27]

(18) *Il a eu un accident avec un // un voiture* [FRL2-02#07]

Beyond the use of the passive ‘être’ + past participle, the causative ‘faire’ + infinitive and the overuse of state verbs, learners reproduced the lexical pattern previously observed in L1 French and L1

Spanish regarding the syntactic realization of AAs either as direct objects or subjects related to causative or accomplishment verbs (28.5%).

5.2 Quantitative analyses

A quick examination of Table 6 shows a characteristic of L1 French that appears to be dissimilar from the pattern summarized for L1 Spanish in Table 7. The realization of AAs across the thematic roles of subject and direct object is particularly unbalanced in L1 French (77.3% against 20.2%) as compared to L1 Spanish (42.8% against 51.1%). Conversely, the distribution of AAs across grammatical and lexical means is particularly unbalanced in L1 Spanish (29.7% against 64.2%), compared to L1 French (52.3% against 45.2%). In other words, the subject's syntactic realization seems to be a salient feature in the expression of affectedness in French, whereas Spanish relies more on the semantics of the verb.

Analyses based on Pearson's chi-squared tests revealed that the realization of AAs as subjects is significantly higher in L1 French, compared to L1 Spanish [$X(2, N = 168) = 19.464, p < .001$], and that the realization of AAs as direct object is significantly higher in L1 Spanish, compared to L1 French [$X(2, N = 168) = 13.93, p < .001$]. Chi-squared test also revealed that grammatical means are significantly more frequent in L1 French, compared to L1 Spanish [$X(2, N = 168) = 10.895, p < .001$].

	<i>L1 French (n = 84)</i>		Subtotal
	Grammatical means	Lexical means	
Subject	41	24	65 77.3%
Direct object	3	14	17 20.2%
Subtotal	44 52.3%	38 45.2%	

Table 6 Syntactic and lexical means encoding AAs in L1 French

	<i>L1 Spanish (n = 84)</i>		Subtotal
	Grammatical means	Lexical means	
Subject	7	29	36 42.8%
Direct object	18	25	43 51.1%
Subtotal	25 29.7%	54 64.2%	

Table 7 Syntactic and lexical means encoding AAs in L1 Spanish

	<i>L2 French (n = 84)</i>		Subtotal
	Grammatical means	Lexical means	
Subject	14	33	47 55.9%
Direct object	8	17	25 29.7%
Subtotal	22 26.1%	50 59.2%	

Table 8 Syntactic and lexical means encoding AAs in L2 French

A rapid examination of Table 8 suggests that the realization of AAs in L2 French rely more on lexical means, compared to grammatical means, and more on the syntactic realization of subjects, compared to direct objects. The former preference recalls the L1 Spanish pattern shown in Table 7, whereas the latter preference recalls the L1 French pattern shown in Table 6. Pearson's chi-squared test revealed that grammatical means are significantly less frequently used in L2 French, compared to the French

controls [$X(2, N = 168) = 11.542, p < .001$]. This result is coherent with the underuse of grammatical means previously observed in L1 Spanish and thus, it may be interpreted as a transfer in the learners' grammar.

Quantitative analyses showed crucial differences between French and Spanish in the combination of the syntactic realization of thematic roles (i.e., subject vs direct object) and the construction under which the realization takes place (i.e., verbal periphrases vs SVO in which affectedness is encoded in the verb's semantics). French-speaking natives encode AA as subjects within grammatical constructions (i.e., verbal periphrasis) significantly more than Spanish-speaking natives do [$X(2, N = 168) = 33.306, p < .001$].¹⁶ Interestingly, the distribution of subjects within grammaticalized means –or verbal periphrasis– is the source of a significant difference between L2 French learners and French controls [$X(2, N = 168) = 19.527, p < .001$].¹⁷ This suggests that the L1 Spanish pattern of under-marking AAs as subjects within grammatical fixed constructions is transferred over to L2 French. In other words, learners do not seem to be aware of the extensive use of 'se faire' + infinitive to encode AAs in spoken French.

	<i>L2 French A1 / A2 (n = 36)</i>		<i>L2 French B1 / B2 (n = 48)</i>	
	Grammatical means	Lexical means	Grammatical means	Lexical means
Subject	6	15 ¹⁸	8	18
Direct object	4	5	4	12 ¹⁹
Subtotal	10	20	12	30

Table 9 Marking of affected arguments in L2 French across levels of proficiency

The distribution of markers encoding affectedness across different levels of proficiency in L2 French shows a crucial difference in the use of lexical means (Table 9). Beginner learners at A1 / A2 levels show an overt preference for realizing AAs as subjects mainly using state verbs (19), (21), whereas B1 / B2 learners seem to have acquired a larger repertoire of causative and accomplishment verbs enabling the marking of AAs either as subjects (22) or direct objects (20). The following examples illustrate this developmental pattern for two different target items (cf. Annexes, Figure 3):

(19) *Alex a ((_s)) été un accident de-/ da-/ dans la rue* [FRL2-10#15]

(20) *Il y a un ((_s)) voiture ((_s)) qui a frappé à Alex* [FRL2-19#39]

(21) *Il a peur d'un chien* [FRL2-14#25]

(22) *Alex fui- fuit d'un chien* [FRL2-21#45]

6. Discussion

After presenting our results, we will now discuss them with previous literature. In section 6.1 we interpret the results found in L2 grammars, whereas in section 6.2 we focus on the typological properties of the more frequent patterns used to topicalize AAs in French and Spanish.

¹⁶ P-value resulting from Pearson's chi-squared test (42 occurrences in L1 French against seven occurrences in L1 Spanish over a set of 168 responses).

¹⁷ P-value resulting from Pearson's chi-squared test (42 occurrences in L1 French against 14 occurrences in L2 French over a set of 168 responses).

¹⁸ 9 of them are state verbs: *Avoir peur (x3), *être peur, avoir un problème, avoir un inconvénient, avoir un accident, *être un accident, être victime*.

¹⁹ All of them are causative / achievement verbs: *Frapper (x3), taper (x2), faire mal (x3), faire du mal, empêcher de sortir, mordre, faire un croche-patte*.

6.1 Explicative factors of L2 grammars

The results of the study suggest that the form-meaning relationship linking affectedness values to the passive auxiliary ‘se faire’ is misrepresented in learners’ grammars although it is salient in the French controls’ production. What are the reasons that explain the gap between the high frequency of this form in the target language and its residual occurrences in the learners’ production? An explanatory factor may be the type of input to which the group of L2 French learners were exposed. 20 learners out of the 21 that took part in the investigation followed instruction in French at the time of data collection. Even though ‘se faire’ seem to be salient in oral French, the status of this form in the FFL’s classroom is likely to be residual compared to the well-represented passive auxiliary ‘être’, traditionally labeled as canonical (Desclés & Guentchéva 1993, Veacock-Boisédu 2008, Le Bellec 2014). A second factor, no less important, is the cognitive processes allowing the progressive integration of the form ‘se faire’ in the learner’s grammar and its contextualized exploitation related to affectedness. Prior cross-linguistic research has outlined that the learning process of non-equivalent categories entails that the learner look for a new segmentation of a given conceptual domain (Flecken et al. 2015b). Applied to affectedness, this would require that the Spanish-speaking learner inhibits the L1 pattern based on the central role of the verb’s causative semantics and reorients her attention to more grammaticalized constructions under which the AA is realized as subject. This cognitive process does not seem to be available yet for the subgroup of nine learners classified as A1/A2 in the Dialang placement test (University of Lancaster)²⁰ nor for the B1/B2 subgroup of 12 learners (except for one informant who produced the one and only token of ‘se faire’).²¹ The form-to-meaning mapping linking affectedness to ‘se faire’ seems to take place at further developmental stages. This seems plausible because transfer that requires complete reassignment of feature salience values is difficult (Ellis 2006: 183). Note that Spanish uses a formal-equivalent construction of ‘se faire’: ‘hacerse’ + infinitive. However, the use of ‘hacerse’ is semantically restricted to volitional actions intended to have been ordered by the affected entity that experiences them, and any application to non-volitional entities is ungrammatical (Gauchola 2012 : 163). This is a crucial difference from the French ‘se faire’, which marks either volitional or non-volitional entities.²² In order to map ‘se faire’ to AAs, Spanish-speaking learners should be able to inhibit the semantic restriction existing in their L1 to the formal-equivalent construction.

Our L2 French results support the idea that crosslinguistic influence arise especially in terms of under/overuse of non-target use of target language structures (Benazzo & Andorno 2017). These authors assume that differences in structures –i.e., whether or not similar markers are available in two or more languages– are perceived by users more easily than differences in use. This could certainly explain the underuse of ‘se faire’ in L2 French verbalizations denoting affectedness, as well as the overuse of the passive ‘être’ and the causative ‘faire’ + infinitive, compared to the French control group. A way of interpreting these results is to hypothesize that, when confronted with L2 verbalizations based on the expression of a domain of universal experience, the learner tends to rely on L2 constructions similar to L1 as a strategy to compensate lack of knowledge regarding TL uses. This might be specially the case for intermediate and advanced learners with a minimum of awareness about typological features common to their L1 and the target language. As for less advanced learners, it has been proven that first language’s dominant conceptual categories –the grammatically marked ones, for instance, as well as specific structural patterns– lead to a certain form of selectivity in the data that these learners actually extract from the L2 input (v. Stutterheim & Klein 1987: 197). It could

²⁰ Results obtained after completing the vocabulary test in French (<https://dialangweb.lancaster.ac.uk/>).

²¹ A 20-year old female student of Pharmacy born in Caen from Spanish parents and having lived in France during her early years of Education, before moving back to Alicante with her family.

²² Examples: *Él se hizo abofetear / Il s’est fait gifler* (volitional action), **Él se hizo abofetear / Il s’est fait gifler* (non-volitional action). This semantic restriction leads to masochistic readings in Spanish when the main verb denotes unpleasant actions. In French, two readings are possible: *He got slapped* (upon his request) / *He got slapped* (although he was not expecting it).

well be the case that some of the A1/A2 learners are just influenced by the iconicity of the semantics of the verb in Spanish when it comes to express affectedness in L2 French. This would certainly explain the relatively quick shift from state verbs to accomplishment and causative verbs in the L2 grammars of our learners as shown in Table 9.

6.2 The topicalization of AAs in French and Spanish

The crosslinguistic patterns encoding AAs by French and Spanish-speaking controls can be distinguished in two blocks: patterns in which AAs are topicalized, and patterns in which another entity different from the AA is topicalized.²³ The environments favoring the topicalization of AA's in French and Spanish are summarized in Table 10.

	French and Spanish						
	Grammatical means				Lexical means		
	<i>Se faire / Hacerse</i> + Inf	<i>Être / Ser</i> + PP	DO's left dislocated [OV / OVS] ²⁴	<i>Faire / Hacer</i> + Inf	Verb + noun collocations	SV / SVO / SOV [causative verb or accomplissement]	<i>Se-</i> reciprocal verb
SUBJ	✓	✓			✓		✓
DO			✓	✓		✓	

Table 10 Environments favoring the topicalization of AAs across subjects and direct objects

Among the environments allowing the topicalization of undergoers, the verbal periphrasis 'se faire' + infinitive has proven to be highly frequent in French, whereas in Spanish the most frequent pattern was left-detached constructions (e.g., *A Alex le han puesto la zancadilla*). Among the environments allowing the topicalization of actors, both languages proved to be productive regarding SVO constructions in which AAs are realized as objects depending of causative or/and accomplishment verbs (e.g., *Une voiture le renverse / El bully lo golpeó*). Frequencies in these patterns suggest that AAs' topicalizations are salient in French (54.7%)²⁵, whereas in Spanish this is not the case. Certainly, the left-detached construction was the most frequent device to topicalize AAs in Spanish –ahead of the passive auxiliary 'ser' and 'verb + noun' collocations– but its distribution cannot compete with the French 'se faire'. Even though these patterns of topicalizing AAs are not equally distributed in Spanish and French, they deserve to be paid attention in the aim of discussing intra-typological variation.

As mentioned in section 5.1, the left-detached construction in Spanish allows to topicalize AAs that are syntactically realized as direct objects (*A Alex le han puesto la zancadilla / *A Alex on l'a fait un croche-patte*). The resulting sentences follow the pattern OV(S), which is a word order not represented in the L1 French corpus. RRG accounts for the interaction between the lexicon and discourse pragmatics admitting that the choice of referring expressions involves the interaction of the lexicon and the speakers' model of the ongoing discourse (Van Valin & LaPolla 1997: 234), and this will affect whether the speaker chooses, for example, *he* vs *Alex* vs *the blue-dressed man*. From this viewpoint, we interpret the marking of AAs arguments in the left-detached position in Spanish as a topicalization structure stressing non-agentive entities. This pattern was highly productive in the Spanish informants' grammar and less frequent in the Latin-American's, suggesting that its representativeness depends on diatopic variation. The lack of similar constructions in the L1 French

²³ By the term *topicalization* we understand an information structure parameter consisting in the foregrounding of an event participant. Passive constructions topicalize an entity different from the agent. Other constructions allowing AAs' topicalizations are cleft constructions (e.g., *C'est lui qui a subi un grave accident / Es él quien ha sufrido un grave accidente*) and detached constructions (e.g., *Elle, je ne veux pas qu'on lui tape sur les doigts / A ella, no quiero que le golpeen los dedos*).

²⁴ Available only in Spanish.

²⁵ Figure calculated summing up the occurrences of 'se faire' + infinitive, the passive 'être' and the lexical collocation 'se prendre' + noun (46 over 84 occurrences).

corpus supports prior observations about the restriction on focal elements appearing preverbally in this language (Van Valin & LaPolla 1997: 211). In light of RRG, we can conclude (i) that Spanish affords an additional syntactic template to encode AAs, and (ii) that this syntactic template is not available in French because its word order is not so flexible. In all, these results suggest that the syntactic templates encoding AAs in Spanish are grounded in semantic and pragmatic features (i.e., semantic primitives expressed by the verb and left-detached direct core arguments), whereas the most used syntactic template in French appear to be rooted on formal features (i.e., case marking and word order). These typological differences challenge the expression of AAs in L2 French by Spanish-speaking learners. Further research targeting the expression of affected arguments in other languages deserves to be done to gain insight in this promising field.

Conclusion

Variation across languages has been explained from a functional perspective because of different linking algorithms at the syntax-semantics interface (Van Valin 2006: 273). Under this approach, it is generally accepted that informational-structural distinctions such as topic and focus can affect word order, case marking, subject selection²⁶ and many other grammatical phenomena. In order to fulfil our task, participants to the study had to verbalize the topicalization of an event participant. In particular, the target items demanded the topicalization of an event participant different from the agent (i.e., the affected argument). The cross-linguistic results show crucial differences in French and Spanish in the preferred case marking assigned to affected arguments. The L2 French results suggest that learners are not aware of the extensive use of the auxiliary ‘se faire’ in passive contexts in the target language. Applied to L2 teaching, this finding should ideally contribute to give greater visibility to the affected values of the periphrasis ‘se faire’ in the FFL classroom.

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²⁶ Intended as the privileged syntactic argument.

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Annexes

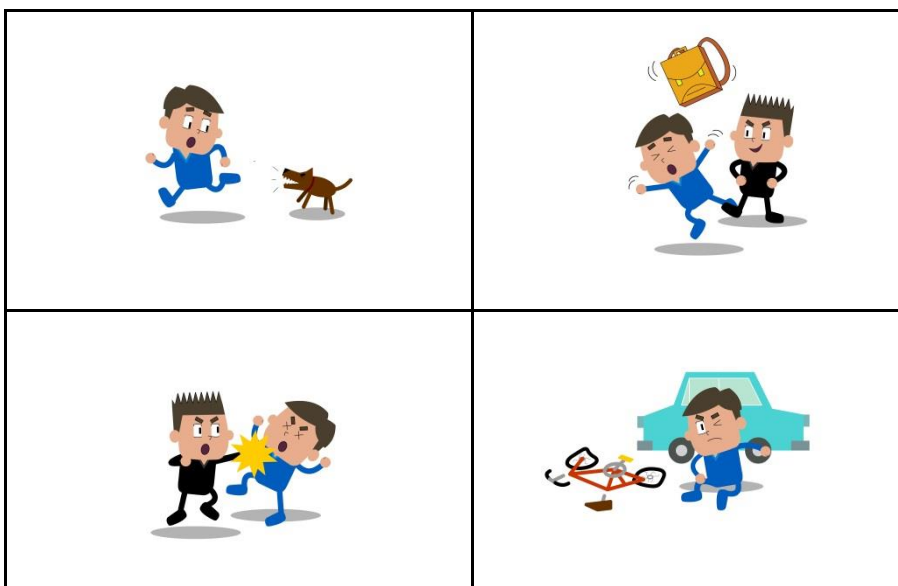


Figure 3 Offline task's target items

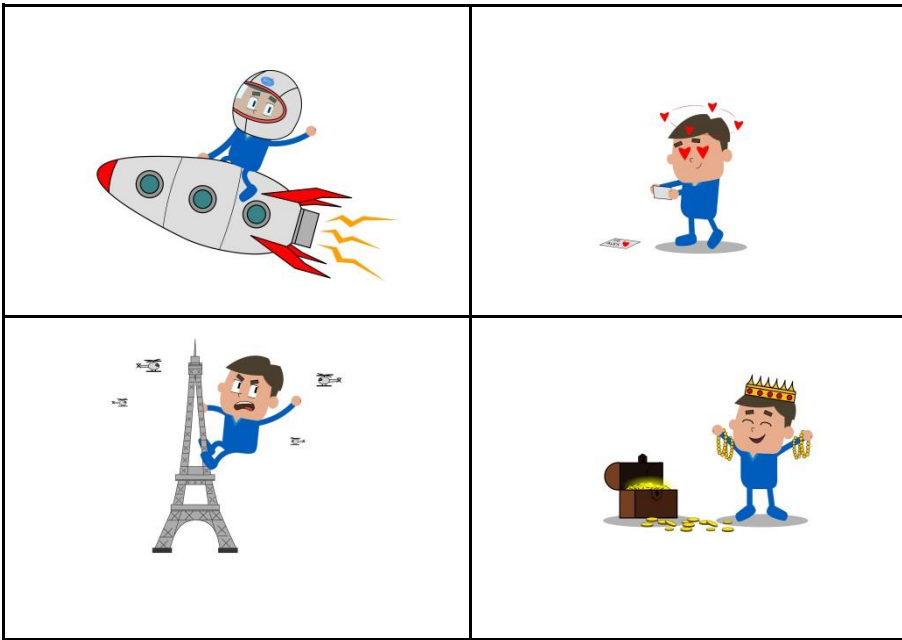


Figure 4 Offline task's fillers