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Constructional borrowing in indirect language contact situations: from *Watergate* to *Fernándezgate**

Préstamos construccionales en situaciones de contacto indirecto: de *Watergate*
a *Fernándezgate*

MONTSERRAT MARTÍNEZ VÁZQUEZ
Universidad Pablo de Olavide
mmarvaz@upo.es

Abstract: Borrowing involves the replication of form-meaning associations, including (partially filled) words or phrases, and argument structures that are useful in specific communicative contexts. A large corpus-based analysis of a novel Spanish construction was conducted to demonstrate the borrowability of morphological abstract schemas, even in indirect contact situations. The findings indicate that the English *-gate* schema has been successfully replicated in Spanish. The identification of numerous formations constructed with Spanish bases provides evidence for the schema's integration into the *constructica* of Spanish speakers, who extend it in creative ways, both formally and semantically.

Keywords: constructional borrowing; Spanish; *-gate*; morphological construction; indirect contact.

Resumen: El préstamo implica la copia de asociaciones de forma y significado –incluidas palabras o frases (parcialmente saturadas) y estructuras argumentales– que resultan útiles en contextos comunicativos específicos. Para demostrar la posibilidad de préstamos morfológicos, incluso en situaciones de contacto indirecto, se ha llevado a cabo un análisis de corpus. Los resultados indican que la construcción inglesa *-gate* se ha reproducido con éxito en español. La identificación de numerosas formaciones construidas con raíces españolas prueba la integración del esquema en los *constructica* de los hispanohablantes, que lo amplían de manera creativa, tanto formal como semánticamente.

Palabras clave: préstamo construcciona; español; *-gate*; construcción morfológica; contacto indirecto.

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1. Introduction

Borrowing involves the transfer of different types of linguistic material between different languages in various contact scenarios. This material is typically a lexical item (Pulcini, Furiassi & Rodríguez González, 2012) that fills a gap in the linguistic inventory of the recipient language or is motivated by sociological factors, such as the prestige of the donor language (Matras, 2020). It has been argued that the grammatical system of a language is rigid and resistant to borrowing (Matras, 2020: 234; Sunde, 2018: 101). Few cases of grammatical borrowing have been documented, and they typically occur in situations of intense contact, such as Cantonese-English contact in Hong Kong (Hok-Shing Chan, 2022), or English in contact with Spanish in Puerto Rico (Pérez Sala, 1973; Vaquero, 1990)¹.

This paper focuses on a type of language contact situation that has received less attention. It concerns situations where mostly monolingual speakers are exposed to the lingua franca (LF) indirectly, particularly through various news channels and the Internet. This type of contact language situation has been described as “remote”, “weak” or “indirect” (Peterson, 2017; Balteiro, 2018). The Internet’s constant exposure to LF and its rapid spread to other languages through translation and adaptation (McLaughlin, 2011) has broadened the concept of language contact scenarios and expanded borrowing from single items to much more complex structures. Despite English being a foreign language in most Spanish-speaking countries, even speakers with limited knowledge of English use certain expressions that they have been exposed to and are able to repeat in specific contexts, such as in Internet communication (Balteiro, 2018: 123).

Based on the theoretical postulations of construction grammar (CxG), I assume that speakers’ knowledge of language consists of a network of constructions; “it’s constructions all the way down” (Goldberg, 2006: 18), or as Boogaart, Coleman, & Rutten (2014: 1) put it, “it’s constructions everywhere!”. The hypothesis here is that when speakers borrow language material from another language, they borrow constructions, that is, “learned pairings of form with semantic or discourse function including *morphemes or words, idi-*

¹ Pérez Sala (1973), in what he claims was the first study of syntactic anglicisms in Puerto Rico, noted that studies of syntactic borrowing are still quite limited. Vaquero (1990) estimated that only 5 % of the total number of anglicisms identified in the press in San Juan (Puerto Rico) were syntactic.

oms, partially lexically filled and fully general phrasal patterns” (Goldberg, 2006: 5, emphasis mine)². In order to prove this hypothesis, a review of phrasal and argument structure borrowing will be conducted, and a corpus-based analysis of borrowing at the morphological level will be provided. This paper addresses two research questions: (i) is the English *-gate* construction used in Spanish? If so, (ii) what factors have contributed to its emergence and how is it used?

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 is devoted to the analysis of constructions in the process of L2 acquisition. Section 3 presents the argument that borrowing should be conceptualised as the incorporation of linguistic elements at different levels of the lexicon-syntax continuum. In support of this argument, a review of cases of borrowing that extend beyond the word and innovative processes of word formation that may operate interlinguistically are discussed. Section 4 introduces the English *-gate* construction. Section 5 presents a corpus-based analysis of its Spanish replica, with the corpus and data presented in section 5.1 followed by an analysis of the grammatical aspects of the construction (section 5.2) and its socio-pragmatic features (section 5.3). Section 6 offers concluding remarks.

2. Constructions in L2

Bencini & Goldberg (2000) conducted a sentence-sorting experiment to test their claim that constructions are “psychologically real linguistic categories that speakers use in comprehension” (2000: 650). The results showed that American students relied more on constructional meaning to group sentences than on the use of the same verb. The sorting experiment was replicated with L2 learners of English in studies conducted by Liang (2002), Martínez-Vázquez (2004), Gries & Wulff, (2005) and Valenzuela-Manzanares & Rojo-López (2008). The results showed that non-L1 English speakers also rely on abstract constructional meaning, particularly at advanced levels. These studies on L2 acquisition align with the process of first language acquisition, which involves a two-step process. In this process, the child moves inductively from knowledge of specific verb usage to knowledge of more abstract argument structure patterns (Goldberg, Casenhiser & Sethuraman, 2004).

² Booij (2010: 15) argues that the category MORPHEME should not be included in this list as it is not an independent pair of form and meaning. Bound morphemes are part of morphological schemas, and their meaning is only accessible in the morphological constructions that incorporate them.

During language acquisition, speakers gradually shape their linguistic inventories or *constructica* based on “common scenes of experience that are socially shared” (Hilpert, 2014: 159). Höder (2012, 2018) argues that speakers learn an additional language in essentially the same way as in L1 acquisition, incorporating new referential meanings, and new grammatical and socio-pragmatic functions that facilitate communication in a given environment. Multilingual speakers create an interlingual network of constructions that includes interlinked language-unspecific and language-specific constructions. Within the framework of Höder’s diasystematic constructional grammar (defined as “common usage-based CxG as applied to language contact situations”, Höder, 2018: 37), the speaker’s new material or “interlanguage” is also incorporated into her *constructica*, which involves a reorganisation of the learner’s entire linguistic knowledge (Höder, Prentice & Tingsell, 2021).

It should be noted that Höder (2012: 255) considers language contact in intense contact situations (“long-term, stable, intense multilingualism, socially embedded in multilingual speaker groups”). However, the last decade has witnessed an increasing interest in different language contact scenarios, including weak language contact situations (see Boas & Höder, 2021). Höder, Prentice & Tingsell (2021) argue that a gradual restructuring of the *constructicon* also occurs with the use of additional languages by individual speakers who are not necessarily part of a stable multilingual group.

3. Borrowing along the lexicon-syntax continuum

The abundant literature on lexical borrowing is a clear demonstration of how easily single words and fixed idioms are copied. However, as Hok-Shing Chan (2022: 5) argues, constructional borrowing and lexical borrowing are the same phenomenon; they represent “the best expression in specific communicative contexts”. Speakers borrow form-meaning pairs (i. e. constructions), including words, idioms, phrases, or clausal patterns, which may be partially or fully lexically filled. Given that borrowing entails the incorporation of linguistic elements at varying levels of the lexicon-syntax continuum, the most appropriate umbrella term to cover all types of borrowing is “constructional borrowing”.

For instance, recent studies have focused on partially filled constructional borrowing in weak contact scenarios. For example, Coleman (2016) studies an innovative construction in Dutch that combines lexical and grammatical features of the English ‘time’ *-away* construction. His analysis shows that

some speakers of Dutch possess a construction that is “an exact formal and semantic replica of this English construction” (2016: 93). Similarly, Zenner, Heylen & Van de Velde (2018) describe another English construction borrowed in Dutch as an example of contact-induced pragmatic borrowing (*Beste boek ooit*, ‘Best book ever!’).

Martínez-Vázquez (2021) provides cases of argument structure borrowing across typologies. It is argued that e-communication verbs in Spanish, such as *tuitear*, *wasapear* or *instagramear*, are incorporated into transitive constructions that combine two events in one: the use of the means of communication (manner) and the transfer event (cause), as in *tuitear su felicitación*, *wasapear los emoticonos* or *instagramear fotos*. These transitive patterns replicate the conflated patterns typical of the Germanic languages, but unusual in the Romance languages, where the ‘preferred’ pattern would contain two separate events (Talmy, 2000), as in *enviar una felicitación (por Twitter)*.

Additionally, the corpus data presented by Martínez-Vázquez (2020) reveal the existence of other argument structures with *tuitear* that are almost exact copies of English patterns, which are rare or absent with other Spanish communicative verbs, for example, the construction with sentential complements (*El presidente Donald Trump ha tuiteado que el pueblo de Venezuela tiene el apoyo de EEUU*) or with reaction objects (*Yoko Ono no tuiteó sus impresiones*). It is argued that the replication of the English argument structures may have been facilitated by the fact that these novel verbs are semantically opaque to Spanish speakers. Unconstrained by verbal semantics, speakers copy the English pattern where the final meaning is the result of integrating the meaning of the verb into the meaning of different constructions, a behaviour not paralleled by other communicative verbs in Spanish.

Furthermore, a case of phrasal constructional borrowing is discussed in Martínez-Vázquez (2024). Novel NP constructions with PP postmodifiers, such as *la mujer detrás de la bandera* or *la mujer detrás de la artista*, are not approved by the Real Academia de la Lengua Española (RAE, 2009: 858-859), yet they are common in corpora and widely accepted by L1 Spanish speakers, suggesting contact-induced ongoing change (Martínez-Vázquez, 2024).

The studies above offer evidence of constructional borrowing beyond the word level. However, little attention has been given to morphological borrowing within the CxG framework, possibly due to its greater focus on phrasal and clausal constructions rather than morphology (Hilpert, 2014: 74; Boogaart et al., 2014: 5). Nonetheless, Booij & Hüning (2014: 91-93) do mention some instances of morphological borrowing.

Words are complex items and, like syntactic constructs, “instantiations of constructional schemas” (Booij, 2010: 3). As Hilpert (2014) rightly points out, word formation processes and syntactic constructions exhibit similar behaviour; they select the elements they combine with (*I have long known your father* but not **I have long read this book, runner vs drowner or stander*) and they show coercion effects (2014: 76). Speakers also store partial schematic constructions, for example, the exposure to a set of words ending in *-able* results in the internalisation of the associated schematic meaning. This enables speakers to create new words successfully:

Someone who is *skypable* is ‘someone who can be skyped’, that is, reached over a computer-mediated channel of communication. By the same token, a fabric that is *washable* ‘can be washed’, a *foldable* chair ‘can be folded’, and so on. You can observe that speakers come up with new and original coinages of this kind, which suggests that they have not only mentally stored a long list of adjectives ending in *-able*; rather, they have stored a construction that is partially schematic, so that it allows the formation of new words such as *pigeonholeable* ‘can be pigeonholed’ or *cut-and-paste-able* ‘can be cut-and-pasted’ (Hilpert, 2014: 76).

One form of innovative word formation is secretion: part of a word is randomly cut off and used as a combining form to create new words or blends (e. g. *-(a)holic*). These secreted affixes (Fradin, 2000: 46-47), also called splinters (Lehrer, 2007; Bauer, Lieber & Plag, 2013: 525) or combining forms (Warren, 1990; Mattiello 2023)³, are unpredictable, and often considered extragrammatical (Mattiello, 2013, Fradin, 2000). A splinter is initially non-morphemic, but after repeated use it can undergo semantic reinterpretation and generalisation, instantiating a schema model (Mattiello, 2018: 3-4). For example, the form *-(a)holic*, first considered a “combining form” and later a “suffix” in the *OED*, has become extremely productive and frequent, semantically evolving from the meaning of alcohol involved in the model to refer to “a person addicted to what is specified by the first element” (Mattiello, 2018: 14-15).

Speakers are constantly looking for new forms of expression, but the source of innovation is not necessarily limited to one language. For example, the word *hamburger* originates as a German borrowing (*German Hamburger* a native or inhabitant of Hamburg in Germany), shifts to an adjective, *Hamburger steak*, and is then clipped to *burger*, which finally becomes a “terminal

³ Mattiello (2023: 50) differentiates between affixoids and combining forms, noting that the former also appear as independent words, like *-free* in *gluten-free*.

element” attached to a noun denoting a bun with what is specified in the base (*beefburger*, *porkburger*) (*OED*)⁴. This pattern becomes so productive that it is borrowed by other languages. For example, Spanish uses *burger* (mostly with the Spanish spelling *búrguer*) as a full schema, not as a suffix, and changes its meaning metonymically to refer to a burger bar, rather than the food itself, which is usually referred to with the adapted Spanish variant *hamburguesa* (literally, a woman from Hamburg).

In conclusion, the aforementioned borrowing processes demonstrate that speakers store schemas from other languages, with potential formal and/or semantic adaptation as required by their linguistic needs.

4. The *-gate* construction

A more recent example of constructional borrowing involves the secreted form *-gate*. In the 70s, following the Watergate scandal of 1972, *-gate* became a model for blends referring to specific instances of political crisis associated with the underlying Watergate (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech & Svartvik, 1985: 1583). The *OED* included this “combining form” in 1989 as a “terminal element” denoting “an actual or alleged scandal” (and usually an attempt to cover it up), comparable in some way to the Watergate scandal. The base for this formation is the name of a place, person, organisation, or common noun associated to the scandal (*OED*).

The grammatical status of this *-gate* segment is unclear –part of a blend (Quirk et al., 1985: 1583), a terminal element (*OED*), a suffix (Trips, 2017, Metcalf, 2002), a splinter (Bauer et al., 2013) or a secreted affix (Fradin, 2000)–forming a substitution blend (Kemmer, 2003: 91), often a playful combining form (Miller, 2004) or a secreted combining form extended by “paradigmatic substitution” or “analogy via schema” (Mattiello, 2018, 2023).

Novel formations of this type are typically considered to be ephemeral, achieving “a brief surge of productivity in response to an outstanding event” (Quirk et al., 1985: 1583). Trips (2017) even mentions a reporter who announced the death of “the most overused suffix in all of media history” in 2009. However, this novel bound form-meaning association, or partially filled construction, remains operative; what is temporary are the political events that give rise to the new terms. As noted by Hüning (2000: 123), scandals

⁴ www.oed.com.

“come and go” and are no longer talked about. In the same vein, Mattiello (2023: 186) clarifies that *-gate* nouns are periodically coined, but only used in the years around their creation.

As Mattiello (2018: 4) explains, the evolution from a novel splinter to a productive morpheme is a gradual diachronic process. This process includes intermediate stages that involve semantic reinterpretation and generalisation. Mattiello’s (2023: 63) corpus analysis demonstrates that *-gate* has undergone a semantic extension and lost its political connotation when used with common nouns. An example of this is *wine-gate*, which dates back to 1973 and refers to a case of fraud involving the mislabelling of cheap wine with expensive Bordeaux labels. Additionally, Wikipedia⁵ provides a list of 319 *-gate* terms that refer to scandals and controversies in various fields, including arts and entertainment, journalism and academics, technology, sports, conspiracy theories, film and TV, and a miscellaneous category called ‘other’. This indicates that the use of *-gate* is still expanding.

Under a CxG approach, Traugott & Trousdale (2013: 189) explain that the constructionalization of schemas typically occurs gradually. However, lexical micro-constructions⁶ produced by word formation and “extra-grammatical” processes are usually instantaneous. This was the case with the original micro-construction *Watergate*. According to Booij (2010: 90), the first formations were created by analogy with *Watergate*. These early coinages led some speakers to produce a schema that abstracted from the original model. Booij (2010: 90) presents this new word-formation template as (1). Traugott & Trousdale (2013: 165) describe this as a case of the constructionalization of a (sub)schema.

$$(1) \quad [[X]_{Ni} \text{ [gate]}_{Nj}] \leftrightarrow [\text{political scandal pertaining to SEM}]_j$$

The *-gate* schema represented in (1) can be considered a “constructional idiom” at the word level, i. e. “a schema in which at least one position is lexically fixed, and at least one position is variable” (Booij, 2013: 3). Booij (2010) argues that analogical processes and the establishment of schemas can coexist. He acknowledges that some speakers may still use *Watergate* as a model for new coinages. However, the appearance of an abstract schema for *-gate* words does

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_-gate_scandals_and_controversies

⁶ Traugott & Trousdale (2013: 16) propose different levels for the analysis of constructional change: schemas, subschemas and microconstructions. The latter represent the lowest level in the constructional hierarchy and are instantiated by “constructs” (attested tokens).

not dissolve the link with the word *Watergate*. This link still reinforces the entrenchment of the subschema (Booij, 2010: 91). In a similar vein, Mattiello (2018) considers that this process of word-formation gives rise to productive series after a few prototypical words, which represent a schema model (analogy via schema).

5. *-gate* in Spanish

The word-formation schema in (1) was successful and quickly adopted by other languages, including Spanish, which had not previously documented cases of secretion (Rainer, 2021: 436)⁷.

Méndez Santos (2011) conducted a corpus-based analysis of the use of *-gate* in Spanish. The study analysed 142 tokens of 35 different types from two newspapers, *ABC* and *La Voz de Galicia*, up to 2009. Her first example dates from 1978 (*CIA-gate*), but the second type, *Presidente-gate*, does not appear until 1986. This new word, which refers to a Spanish political scandal, is the most frequent type in her corpus (59 tokens). Only three of Méndez Santos's examples appear as single words (*Irangate*, *Zapaterogate*, *pezóngate*), the others are either hyphenated (even the word *Water-gate*) or appear as separate words (*Monica gate*, *becaria gate*), which suggests that this word formation process was not yet fully established⁸.

In order to find out whether speakers have internalised the *-gate* schema as a new morphological construction in Spanish, a corpus-based analysis of the *-gate* construction over the last few decades follows.

5.1 *Corpus and data*

To identify marginal or “extra-grammatical” forms, such as the *-gate* formations, which are not considered normative in Spanish and have been rejected

⁷ Hünting (2000) concludes that *-gate* formations have been integrated into the morphological system of Dutch, and they are also present in other Germanic languages such as German, Afrikaans, Danish, Swedish and Norwegian, as well as in French, Spanish, and Italian.

⁸ Quirk et al. (1985: 1537) note that compounds are often spelled as separate words when the collocation is relatively unestablished. As the sequence gains greater acceptance, hyphenation represents an intermediate stage before the words are written as a single unit.

by Spanish authorities⁹, it is necessary to use large contemporary corpora, particularly those containing informal language, which is free from normative pressure. It should be noted that Méndez Santos (2011: 25) only found 2 examples of *-gate* words in Corpus de Referencia del Español Actual and 13 in Davies' Corpus del Español. Accordingly, larger corpora were elected for analysis, namely Davies' News on the Web corpus (NOW)¹⁰ and EsTenTen18 (EsTT, hereafter), from the TenTen family of corpora available through Sketch Engine)¹¹. NOW comprises 6.689 million words from web-based newspapers and magazines in 21 Spanish-speaking countries from 2012 to 2019. EsTT contains 16.953 million words of European and American Spanish extracted in 2018. Both corpora contain mass media language, which is an important source of innovation (Mattiello, 2023: 62) and is ideal for finding texts on political scandals and public affairs.

Searches were conducted in both corpora for words ending in *gate*¹². The initial search string “*gate”, grouped by words, yielded 1,791 types (56,111 tokens) in NOW, which is limited to 10,000 items. The simple query “*gate” in EsTT generated a frequency list comprising 5,257 types and 139,667 tokens. Given the large number of examples, only those types that appeared more than ten times were selected. These types were then subjected to manual analysis to exclude numerous false positives, such as names (e. g. *Stanegate*, *Ausangate*) and other Spanish words ending in *-gate*, predominantly imperatives of certain verbs (e. g. *abrigate*, *descárgate*). This resulted in 77 types (12,561 tokens) in NOW, and 86 types (13,360 tokens) in EsTT, which are presented in (2) and (3), respectively. The types are listed in descending order with their raw and normalised frequencies (only if higher than 0).

It is important to note that the formations recorded in (2) and (3) are lexemes, not word forms. To facilitate comparison, different spellings were integrated, including upper and lower case, and some hyphenated spellings (e. g. *FIFAgate*, *FifaGate*, *fifa-gate*). Moreover, the analysis did not consider the use

⁹ The Fundación del Español Urgente (Fundéu), in collaboration with RAE, rejects *-gate* formations in Spanish in favour of constructions such as “escándalo/caso de”, or more descriptive expressions: “Filtración de correos o el caso de los correos son alternativas preferibles a mailgate” (<https://www.fundeu.es/dudas/palabra-clave/gate/>).

¹⁰ www.corpusdelespanol.org/now/

¹¹ www.sketchengine.eu/

¹² A search for formations as separate words (* gate) occurring more than ten times yielded 10 types in NOW (*fifa gate* 852, *mop gate* 44, *puntita gate* 22, *cuaderno gate* 21, *diesel gate* 18, *milico gate* 16, *paco gate* 15, *rusia gate* 15, *latorre gate* 15 and *pemex gate* 10) and seven types in EsTT (*fifa gate* 373, *mop gate* 70, *diesel gate* 47, *PEMEX gate* 25, *puntita gate* 25 and *Penelope gate* 15).

of accent marks in Spanish bases (e. g. *pezón-gate*), as such marks are frequently absent in informal Internet language. To illustrate the phenomenon of spelling integration, the most versatile type, *rus(s)igate*, exhibits a remarkable degree of variation, with 20 different spellings.

Only five types appear hyphenated more than ten times in EsTT or NOW (*FIFA-gate* 25/399, *MOP-gate* 60/196, *Rusia-gate* 10/41, *Pemex-gate* 1/23, *Puntita-gate* 1/22, *deflate-gate* 2/12 and *Lasaña-gate* 0/10). This demonstrates a distinct shift towards a suffix-like behaviour when compared to the corpus of Méndez Santos (2011), which predominantly comprises hyphenated formations (31 out of 35 types). The use of hyphens indicates that the formation is “relatively unestablished”, yet they are also used “to designate sequences as ad hoc ‘compounds’ for typographical clarity” (Quirk et al., 1985: 1536-1537). Three types appeared exclusively with hyphens (*Schoklender-gate*, *Iran-contragate* and *lasaña-gate*).

- (2) *fifagate* 3205 (0.48), *rus(s)igate* 2215 (0.33), *dieselgate* 1569 (0.23), *pacogate* 731 (0.11), *irangate* 586 (0.09), *milicogate* 532 (0.08), *defla(te)gate* 459 (0.07), *spygate* 234 (0.03), *pemexgate* 222 (0.03), *bendgate* 210 (0.03), *cobijagate* 151 (0.02), *mastergate* 143 (0.02), *celebgate* 135 (0.02), *pentagate* 133 (0.02), *pizzagate* 116 (0.02), *clima(te)gate* 100 (0.01), *tesisgate* 100 (0.01), *puntitagate* 88 (0.01), *penelopegate* 87 (0.01), *ibizagate* 85 (0.01), *aufgate* 74 (0.01), *mopgate* 70 (0.01), *nipplegate* 68 (0.01), *penal(ty)gate* 63 (0.01), *anten(n)agate* 55 (0.01), *monexgate* 55 (0.01), *crashgate* 47 (0.01), *nueragate* 44 (0.01), *monacogate* 41 (0.01), *toallagate* 37 (0.01), *hairgate* 36 (0.01), *piñeragate* 35 (0.01), *moggigate* 33, *yomagate* 32, *gloriagate* 31, *qatargate* 28, *phonegate* 26, *cablegate* 25, *rubygate* 25, *mailgate* 25, *d’allessigate* 25, *bolsogate* 25, *corinnagate* 24, *hackergate* 22, *sexgate* 22, *fernándezgate* 22, *swiftgate* 21, *lolagate* 21, *lázargate* 20, *pezongate* 20, *calcetagate* 20, *albagate* 20, *niembrogate* 19, *benallagate* 19, *contragate* 18, *morogate* 18, *staingate* 17, *sofofagate* 17, *penisgate* 17, *dipugate* 17, *valijagate* 16, *perchagate* 16, *latorregate* 14, *emailgate* 14, *lydiagate* 13, *coiffeurgate* 13, *batterygate* 12, *preteltgate* 12, *petrogate* 11, *carmengate* 11, *correogate* 11, *paellagate* 11, *cashgate* 11, *bountygate* 11, *boudougate* 10, *zapatagate* 10 and *lasaña-gate* 10.
- (3) *dieselgate* 2246 (0.13), *fifagate* 1391 (0.08), *rus(s)igate* 1127 (0.07), *pemexgate* 953 (0.06), *gamergate* 579 (0.03), *banintergate* 542 (0.03), *celebgate* 478 (0.03), *irangate* 445 (0.03), *clima(te)gate* 418 (0.02), *cablegate* 411 (0.02), *mopgate* 366 (0.02), *bendgate* 332 (0.02), *anten(n)agate* 230 (0.01), *quirinogate* 184 (0.01), *defla(te)gate* 170 (0.01), *pepegate* 166 (0.01), *milicogate* 166 (0.01), *monexgate* 163 (0.01), *crashgate* 159 (0.01), *pizzagate* 154 (0.01), *cobijagate* 138 (0.01), *yomagate* 128 (0.01), *valijagate* 107 (0.01), *contragate* 107 (0.01), *piñeragate* 102 (0.01), *figueroagate* 97 (0.01), *nueragate*

94 (0.01), pacogate 94 (0.01), batterygate 89 (0.01), spygate 89 (0.01), pedalgate 74, penelopegate 69, toallagate 68, moggigate 62, narcogate 60, swiftgate 53, ciagate 51, petrogate 47, hackergate 47, schoklender-gate 46, duartegate 45, puntitagate 45, carmengate 43, correogate 42, niembrogate 41, boudougate 40, qatargate 37, angolagate 34, nipplegate 29, pirelligate 29, sexgate 28, sobeidagate 28, melendezgate 28, rubygate 27, monicagate 27, camargate 24, sorianagate 24, fernándezgate 11, sindegate 27, lázarogate 25, barcenagate 24, lydiagate 23, pezongate 22, corinnagate, bellotagate 22, ritagate 20, macrigate 20, oscargate 19, dossiergate 19, quesogate 19, eregate 18, paellagate 17, pujolgate 15, iran-contragate 15, guarogate 15, toñogate 14, twittergate 14, guategate 13, irakgate 13, reutersgate 12, katrinalgate 12, bragasgate 12, lewinskygate 11, bocagate 11, trajegate 10 and ramoncíngate 10.

The considerable number of identified types (163) and tokens (25,921), listed in (2) and (3), demonstrates that the *-gate* construction is widespread in Spanish. The token frequency, or degree of entrenchment, and the absolute number of distinct forms, or type frequency, are factors that predict the construction's productivity (Goldberg, 2006: 93).

It is noteworthy that Mattiello (2023) considers *-gate* to be among the most productive and widely recognised splinters (2023: 60) in her corpus, and specifically states that they are highly productive in terms of type frequency (2023: 172). She identified a total of 102 English *-gate* types (39 in COCA and 63 in NOW). The present sample of Spanish formations, limited to those with a frequency of 10 or more, comprises a greater number of types, 162 (76 from NOW and 86 from EsTT). Additionally, the token numbers identified by Mattiello (2023) –1,468 in COCA and 14,875 in NOW– are smaller than those identified in the present study (12,506 in NOW and 13,360 in EsTT). Moreover, a comparison of the normalised frequencies of types attested in Mattiello's NOW corpus and my Spanish NOW findings (which have a similar composition and timespan) reveals an unexpected result: three of the seven coinciding types in both corpora are more frequent in Spanish than in English: *fifagate* (0.52/0.01, *russiagate* (0.36/0.11) and *atennagate* (0.01/0.00).

Another interesting finding is that the absolute frequency of some of the most prevalent types in EsTT and NOW is not necessarily higher in the largest corpus, as illustrated in figure 1. One potential explanation for this is the ephemeral nature of these formations, discussed in section 4. It is reasonable to assume that a more comprehensive corpus such as NOW, which includes texts from a period of eight years (2012-2019), could potentially yield a greater number of scandals than EsTT, which only includes texts from 2018. For

example, *russiagate*, which refers to Russian interference in the 2016 United States presidential election, is more frequent in NOW than in EsTT, which only contains texts from 2018.

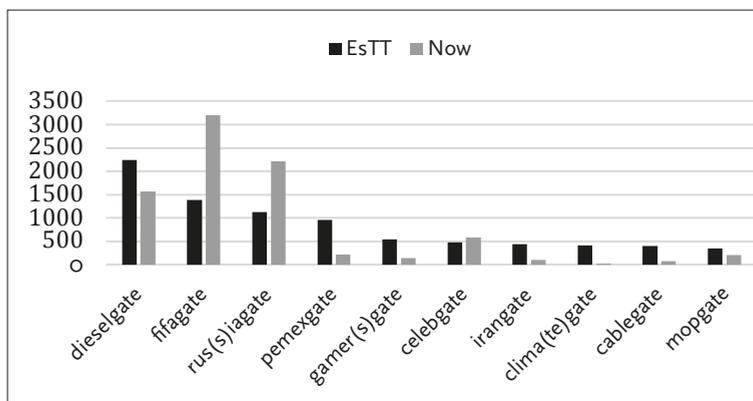


Figure 1. Type frequency (absolute) in EsTT and NOW

To evaluate and analyse the productive use of this symbolic schema in spontaneous creation, a sample of individual instances of the construction (hapax legomena) with unambiguous Spanish bases was selected from both corpora. From an initial concordance list of 596 one-item words ending in *-gate* in NOW and 1,696 in EsTT, only those containing the *-gate* schema with unequivocally Spanish common nouns (i. e. not shared by English as in *nobelgate* or *emojigate*) were selected. The final list comprises 239 tokens, resulting from the merging of 117 words from NOW and 155 from EsTT, with the exclusion of 33 duplicates. The bases of these hapaxes with their original spelling are presented in (4).

- (4) adjunto, agenda, alcohol, alfalfa, algo, almuerzo, alpaca, alzheimer, anchoa, ancla, anillo, arañazo, arbol, arroba, arroz, asesor, asesores, aspersore, auditorio, avión, azúcar, bahía, balon, barrica, bastón, batería, beca, besamanos, beso, bicho, bidet, bigote, bloggertwitter2.0, boli, bolso, bomba, bono, botija, braga, buitres, caca, cachopo, calcetas, calor, camiseta, cancer, canje, carbon, carcasa, cargamasdelacuenta, cartera, caspa, caviar, cemento, cerrojo, chamba, chandal, chateo, cheques, chihuahua, chococarroz, chofer, chuzo, cine, cinta, cisterna, cochinito, codazo, colcha, colchon, comillas, congreso, conquista, contrato, controladores, corrup, corte, cotillón, crecientas, cristal, cuadernos, cuarteles, cuchara, cuerpo, culo, curriculum, debate, desafuero, desinfla, despacito, destiñe, detective, diurético, dólar, dólarfuturo, dragado, eco, elefante, emision, encuesta, erasmus, eres, es-

cucha, espía, espionaje, evento, explosion, falda, familia, fan, filtro, filtro, formacion, fotocopia-cuaderno, fragata, frontera, fusión, galleta, ganancia, garganta profunda-watergate, gas, gato, gaucho, general, gobernador, grasa, guacamole, guagua, gusano, hacienda, hamburguesa, hazte-la-rubia, hueco, humo, interbolsa, jamon, joya, lascajas, lavado, legua, libro, loquesea, lunar, maestro, magistrados, maleta, maletín, maquillaje, maquinaria, mastér, membrillo, meme, memo, mensaje, mentira, mequemariapor-dentro, mili, morena, mugre, nefasta, notas, ñoño, octubre, olla, orgullo, padre, padredeneymar, padron, paella, palo, pan, pan, pantalla, pantalón, papaya, papel, papelito, parque, pasillo, pasta, pato, pedo, pegamento, pelotudo, penalti, pepino, perro, pie, piojo, pis, plasma, platano, plato, polera, pollo, polola, popular, postér, presupuesto, prosti, psicologo, puente, putanesca, putita, quesadilla, radar, rancho, remedio, repostaje, reptil, rosada, ruso, sarcófago, senado, souvenir, submarino, superclasico, superior, Susanita-dfectuosa, tambor, tanga, tarifazo, tarjeta, tesis, testamento, teta, textil, tierra, tigre, tomate, tómbola, túnel, valij, vestido, volumen, voto, yogurt, yate and yeso.

The pervasiveness and creative use of *-gate* formations in Spanish suggests that some Spanish speakers have an abstract schema like (1) in their mental grammars. Section 5.2 will present an analysis of the grammatical variants, while section 5.3 will examine the socio-pragmatic factors that may underpin their use.

5.2 Analysis of the Spanish *-gate* construction

The lexically filled position in the *-gate* construction is a fixed phonological element retaining the English pronunciation /geit/. The variable slot is a noun that designates a relevant person or inanimate object chosen as the source domain to focus on a specific scandal. These nouns refer metonymically to a person, institution or element that was actively or passively involved in the event, or to the place where it took place. The resulting noun exhibits the behaviour of a proper noun (Huddleston, 1984: 230), as it is inherently definite (*el correogate* /**un correogate*, **los correogates*), although the word forms do not always begin with a capital letter, as is the case with proper nouns. Similarly to proper nouns, these novel nouns constitute an open class and are typically not included in dictionaries. It should be remembered that this word formation is not considered grammatical in Spanish and that these terms are transient in nature, being coined on an ad hoc basis and used for only a limited period

of time, as people lose interest in the event they name over time (Quirk et al., 1985: 1583; Hünning, 2000: 123; Mattiello, 2023: 186).

The non-normative nature of these words is frequently indicated using quotation marks. This is evident when the word is borrowed, as in *bendgate*, *crashgate*, but also with newly coined formations, such as in *vestido-gate*. Another common feature illustrating the lack of normativeness is the use of abbreviation (such as *Bolso* for *Bolsonaro*, *dipu* for *diputación*, or *corrup* for *corrupción*).

Of the types with a frequency greater than 10, NOW contains 40 types (52 %) built with common nouns and 37 (48 %) with names (personal nouns, names of institutions and toponyms), while EsTT shows 35 (41 %) formations with common nouns and 51 (59 %) with names. Some of these nouns refer to global scandals and copy the English form, with some bases adapted to the Spanish spelling. This phenomenon can be observed with names (e. g. *Rus(s)igate* appears 84 % of the time with the Spanish base *Rusia*, while the English spelling *Russia* is used 16 % of the time) and nouns (e. g. 84 % of *antennagate* and 16 % of *antenate*). Other names (e. g. *Penelope*, *Zapata*) and common nouns (e. g. *cable*, *penalty*, *pizza*) are identical in both languages. Nevertheless, 16 (21 %) of the formations in NOW and 17 (20 %) in EsTT were coined with unambiguous Spanish common nouns (e. g. *tesisgate*, *toallagate*), which suggest that they were coined in Spanish-speaking countries to name domestic scandals. Furthermore, the 239 hapaxes in (4) include Spanish bases. Some of these formations are more elaborate than those discussed for English (OED; Mattiello 2023: 162). For example, some employ adjectival bases (e. g. *rusogate*, *ñoñogate*, *superclasicogate*), verbal bases (e. g. *destiñegate*) or pronominal bases (e. g. *algogate*). Other bases are more creative including compounds, phrases and even clauses (e. g. *crecicuentasgate*, *chocoarrozgate*, *dólarfuturgate*, *botadeorogate*, *garganta profunda-watergate*, *padredeneymargate*, *mequemariapordentrogate*, *cargamasdelacuentagate*, *hazte-la-rubiagate* and *loqueseagate*). Furthermore, a formation with the temporal noun *octubre* exemplifies a semantic expansion of the original schema to encompass the temporal context of the scandal.

Finally, the occasional use of *gate* as a full schema (including its plural form), as in (5)-(8), suggests a further development in the evolution of the construction in Spanish, since, as noted by Bauer et al. (2013: 528), a splinter can become a free form as it becomes more productive.

- (5) La podredumbre ha alcanzado niveles extratmosféricos (**los gates** todos, que han sido muchos, empezando por el lascajsgate) (EsTT 4945141428).
- (6) Casi en tono humorístico, casi cualquier producto nuevo de Apple sufre un “**gate**”. Muy famosos son el antennagate del iPhone 4 o el más reciente bendgate del iPhone 6 (EsTT 5413188076).
- (7) [...] comentando a otro usuario lo del bendgate, hairgate, destiñegate y todos **los gates** de este año (NOW MuyComputer).
- (8) Los **gates** todos (liborgate, f&f-gate, inmo-gate, corrup-gate ...), que han sido unos cuantos (EsTT 848096336).

5.3 *The Spanish -gate construction in context*

The corpus data has revealed a highly diverse range of *-gate* formations. A review of their usage in context is presented herewith to investigate the socio-pragmatic factors behind the formation of these words in Spanish.

The practice of borrowing, particularly from the English language, has become a popular trend, especially given the prestige of the English language worldwide (Matras, 2020). Furthermore, once a scandal is labelled with a *-gate* term in English, employing a different referential expression could result in confusion. The novel coinage, which has already been disseminated internationally, is more rapidly understood than descriptive phrases, such as those recommended for Spanish (see note 12). Translation is also a factor favouring the borrowing process (McLaughlin, 2011), as illustrated in (9).

- (9) La prensa ha denominado el escándalo **trousergate**, o lo que es lo mismo: **pantalón-gate** (EsTT 6274030628).

Nevertheless, the intended effects that these formations are designed to achieve are of greater interest. A preliminary point for consideration is the extension from the political sphere to other domains. The generalization of meaning observed in the English *-gate* formations by Mattiello (2023: 63) is also present in Spanish. The concept of actions that are deemed illegal or immoral extends to financial matters beyond the political realm, such as sports (e. g. *pedalgate*, *desinflagate*) or other highly profitable industries, such as banking or telecommunications (e. g. *batterygate*, *antennagate*). Moreover, although Watergate was a proven scandal, *-gate* words are also used to refer to other ‘alleged’ scandals (as defined by the *OED*). The constant repetition of these allegations in the mass media can create a dangerous sense of truth

for some audiences. This strategy of spreading fake news is evident in constructions such as *pizzagate*, which falsely accused Hillary Clinton of involvement in child abuse at a pizza restaurant. The use of such terms as a political weapon is evident from the fact that reports of discreditable behaviour by politicians, typically in non-political scenarios, are often only reported by media outlets with opposing political views. For instance, the term *mastergate*, which refers to a fraudulent degree obtained by the right-wing President of the Community of Madrid, Cristina Cifuentes, was predominantly cited in left-wing channels. Conversely, *tesisgate*, which refers to alleged partial plagiarism in the doctoral thesis of the socialist President Sánchez, was mostly reported in conservative media.

A few of the *-gate* nouns identified in the Spanish corpora are associated with negative personal issues of politicians. For example, Clinton's haircut on Air Force One, which purportedly affected air traffic at LA airport, was labelled *hairgate*. Similarly, President Holland's high salary paid to his hairdresser was referred to as *coiffeurgate*. This French formation serves to confirm the international nature of this construction.

Another common target of *-gate* nouns is the reporting of sexual scandals, including the infidelities of politicians (*Monicagate*, *Zippergate*, *Corinnagate*) or celebrities (*puntitagate*), as well as public nudity scenes (*celebgate*, *pezongate*, *penisgate*). These examples are mostly viewed as mere gossip. This suggests that the Spanish construction may have evolved to include mockery and sarcasm.

The playful side of this word-formation process noted by Miller (2004), explicitly mentioned in example (6), is also present in less common *-gate* nouns that refer to humorous anecdotes. For example, *quesadillagate* refers to a recipe for this dish that, ironically, does not include cheese. Similarly, the terms *chickengate* and Spanish *pollogate* are used to make a humorous reference to an incident in which KFC ran out of chicken in the UK and ran an advertisement with an image of an empty bucket of fried chicken with the letters "FCK"¹³. Other food-related terms, such as *paellagate* (referring to Spaniards' rejection of Jamie Oliver's recipe with chorizo), are used to describe relatively

¹³ However, it should be noted that the homonymous *pollogate* was coined to refer to a case of drug money laundering involving a person nicknamed "Pollo Carvajal", while the English *chickengate* also refers to a case of bribery in Kenya. Similarly, the term *tetagate* has been employed to refer to different incidents where a bare breast was shown. This term is also an informal and humorous reference to the same incidents as *pezóngate*, the Spanish translation of *nipplegate*, which was coined after Janet Jackson's 2004 Super Bowl incident. However, it has

minor incidents. Although another food-related case, *lasaña-gate*, had more serious consequences as it referred to a food poisoning episode involving players of a Premier League football team before an important match.

The proliferation of *-gate* coinages is also perceived as a source of amusement, as evidenced in (10) and (11), where the semantic expansion to include “prohibited actions” or “minor issues” is also explicitly stated.

(10) Después del “Water”-gate, teníamos el “ordenador- bolsillo”-gate, el “lavabo”-gate, ahora el “móvil”-gate. Pronto tendremos el “acoso”-gate, “comportamiento”-gate, el “vestido”-gate, el “arma”-gate y una larga lista de **acciones vetadas** según las reglamentaciones para jugar al ajedrez en torneos (EsTT 2650535345).

(11) Parece que cada **pequeño problema** que surja se va a convertir en el nuevo “LoQueSeaGate”: AntennaGate, BateriaGate, CargaMasDeLaCuentaGate (EsTT 2650535347).

Finally, the opaque side of the secreted form *-gate* is likely the reason for some redundancies found in the examples. For instance, the word *desafuero-gate* contains a base, *desafuero*, which already denotes an outrageous incident. According to Mattiello (2023: 162), words with common nouns as bases tend to co-occur with the noun *scandal*¹⁴. This is also a tendency in Spanish, not only with common nouns, but also with acronyms (*el escándalo del FIFAgate*) and proper nouns (*el escándalo del Penelopegate*). EsTT contains 2,713 co-occurrences of *escándalo* with *-gate* terms. However, the most frequent co-occurring noun is *caso* (2,990 co-occurrences), which does not portray the issue as a negative element. This would illustrate the extension of the construction towards less serious or jocular cases.

6. Concluding remarks

This study has demonstrated that borrowing involves the replication of form-meaning associations that are useful in specific communicative contexts. In today’s world, speakers are frequently exposed to other languages, even in non-direct language contact situations. When a new schema fills a

also been used in relation to other celebrities, hence, it is here in the plural: ¡que luego vienen los ‘pezóngate’! (EsTT 8037145395).

¹⁴ Hüning (2000: 126) notes a similar trend in Dutch.

gap in their linguistic repertoires, they incorporate it and, after possible formal and/or semantic adjustments, they eventually integrate it into their *constructica*. Newly established schemas are usually words, but partially lexically filled words, patterns and argument structures can also be borrowed.

A large corpus-based analysis of a novel Spanish morphological construction was conducted to demonstrate the borrowability of morphological foreign abstract schemas. In English, the word *Watergate* served as a model for creating new words by analogy (Booij, 2010: 90; Mattiello, 2018). The splinter *-gate* became a bound form attached to toponyms to refer to the place where similar political scandals occurred. The bases soon extended to proper nouns and common nouns, which were used as source domains to target different types of scandals. This created a series of words with bound meanings. The first formations gave rise to an abstract schema, (1), that was productively used to form new nouns (Booij, 2010: 90). This illustrates a case of “constructionalization of a (sub)schema” (Traugott & Trousdale, 2013: 165).

The results of the corpus analysis indicate that the English *-gate* schema has been successfully replicated in Spanish, which provides a positive response to the first research question (i. e. whether the English *-gate* construction is used in Spanish). The corpus data illustrate a high type frequency, with 163 types exhibiting a frequency of greater than 10 in both corpora. A notable proportion of the corpus types are exact replications of fully specified individual instances in English, particularly those with high frequencies. These instances often refer to high-profile international scandals, such as *dieselgate* and *Russiagate*. In some cases, these instances have been adapted to Spanish spelling (*diéselgate* and *Rusiagate*). Such borrowings could be regarded as instances of lexical borrowing, whereby a full schema is replicated. Nevertheless, it is also common practice to use nouns ending in *-gate* with Spanish bases to name scandals that originate in Spanish-speaking countries (such as *Pepegate*, *nueragate* and *valijagate*). This suggests that some Spanish speakers have internalised the *-gate* schema and are not merely replicating individual foreign *-gate* words. The identification of numerous hapaxes built with unequivocal Spanish bases (117 in NOW and 155 in EsTT) provides further evidence of the schema’s establishment in the mental grammars of Spanish speakers, who employ it in creative ways to extend the schema, both formally (with verbal, adjectival, phrasal and clausal bases) and semantically (in reference to non-political matters and other minor incidents).

The second research question, which concerns the factors that have contributed to the emergence of the phenomenon and the manner of its

employment, has led to an analysis of the socio-pragmatic factors of the examples in context. In addition to the rationale behind other borrowing processes from English, such as those related to the popularity of English and the need for journalists to refer to global political issues of international interest, which have already been coined in English, the intended effect of these nouns has been identified as a key area of interest. For instance, they have been employed as political instruments to portray adversaries in a negative light, whether through the fabrication of fictitious scandals (such as the *pizzagate* incident) or the accentuation of personal issues that are irrelevant to the profession. Additionally, a jocular function has been identified, particularly in the hapax legomena and other infrequent formations. This expressive function also serves to confirm that the speakers have internalised the schema.

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