Is sun more like wind or storm? The use of impersonal FACERE with weather nouns in three Romance languages

Romance languages, and in particular French, Spanish and Italian, possess two possibly competing impersonal constructions to encode the presence of weather phenomena through the use of the weather noun. On the one hand, they make use of the plain existential verb HABERE 'to have' in French and Spanish or ESSERE 'to be' in Italian, as in FR *il y a du vent* / ES *hay viento* / IT *c'è vento* 'there is wind'. On the other hand, they use the verb FACERE 'to do' as in FR *il fait vent* / ES *hace viento* / IT *fa vento.* According to Bauer (2000), these two structures have arisen as alternatives to the diminishing use of intransitive weather verbs (*cf.* FR *venter*) in Latin in order to conform to the spread of transitive SVO structures. Indeed, our diachronic study for French revealed that up to Middle French, within the domain of weather, *il fait* tends to combine with dynamic phenomena such as thunderstorms (FR *il fait orage*), while *il y a* is reserved for more static phenomena such as fog (FR *il y a du brouillard*). However, from Pre-classical French (1550) onwards, this distribution is abandoned in favor of another functional division: *il fait* seems to specialize in the qualitative expression of atmospheric states (*cf. il fait grand vent* 'there is strong wind'), while *il y a* is primarily used to state the presence or absence of weather phenomena (*cf. il n'y pas un brin de vent* 'there is no wind whatsoever').

The aim of this contribution is double: a) we confront our diachronic analysis of French with synchronic empirical data for French, Italian and Spanish based on the Sketch Engine TenTen corpora using the studied nouns 'rain', 'snow', 'fog', '(thunder)storm', and 'wind' in order to verify the potential role of the dynamicity factor and the qualitative / quantitative context factor; b) we include into the analysis the previously leftout weather noun 'sun' as it might denote a prototypical static phenomenon, although all three languages under study possessed at some point in their history a verbal equivalent for it (*cf.* French *soleiller*, Italian *solere*, Spanish *solear*).

Although the use of the plain existential verb is dominant in the three languages, our data reveal that they feature very different trends in the use of FACERE. In Spanish, the use of this verb is almost exclusively maintained with 'sun' and 'wind', while in Italian it is rarely used, although nouns denoting complex dynamic phenomena such as (thunder)storms, for which no specific weather verb is available in this language, tend to be slightly more frequent. French occupies an intermediate position using FACERE dominantly with 'sun' (static) and 'thunderstorm' (dynamic). We claim that the differences in the use of FACERE in the encoding of weather in these three languages can be linked to their respective use of impersonal structures.

Keywords: weather, existential, impersonal, Romance languages, *facere*

References

BAUER, B. (2000) *Archaic Syntax in Indo-European: The Spread of Transitivity in Latin and French*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.