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# Varying Degrees of Nominalization Found in Nominal *-ing* Forms and their Translation into Spanish

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## Resumen

Este artículo examina las distintas categorías de sintagmas nominales acabados en *-ing*, que se pueden identificar según su grado de nominalización, es decir, los *deverbal nouns*, los *verbal nouns* y los *gerunds*. Además de hacer referencia a las principales características de cada categoría, y de dar ejemplos tomados de internet y de distintos corpus, el artículo analiza las estructuras sintácticas que pueden usarse para traducir al español los sintagmas nominales acabados en *-ing*, así como también explora algunos factores que pueden influir sobre la elección entre una estructura y la otra.

**Palabras clave:** nominalización, sintagmas nominales acabados en *-ing*, *gerunds*, *verbal nouns*, *deverbal nouns*, traducción al español, el infinitivo en español.

## Abstract

*This research examines the different categories of nominal -ing forms that can be identified according to their degree of nominalization, i.e., deverbal nouns, verbal nouns and gerunds. Apart from referring to the main features of each category and providing examples taken from the internet and from different corpora, this paper explores the syntactic structures that can be used for the purposes of translating nominal -ing forms into Spanish and some factors that may affect the choice between one structure and the other.*

**Keywords:** nominalization, *-ing* forms; *gerunds*, *verbal nouns*, *deverbal nouns*, translation into Spanish, Spanish infinitive.

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## Introduction

Considering the sheer abundance of *-ing* forms in the English language, it is no surprise that a growing body of literature has focused on the different features and subcategories of nominal *-ing* forms. For the purposes of this research, the phrase “nominal *-ing* forms” will be used as an umbrella expression covering the categories of *deverbal nouns*, *verbal nouns* and *gerunds*. These three categories share their nominal function (they can function as subjects, direct objects, indirect

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objects, subjective complements, objective complements, complements of the preposition or complements of the noun, including appositions) and their morphology (all of them are formed by adding the suffix *-ing* to the stem of the verb). However, they differ in terms of their degree of nominalization. The term “nominalization” refers to:

*...the process of forming a noun from some other word-class (e.g., red + ness) or (in classical transformational grammar especially) the derivation of a noun phrase from an underlying clause (e.g., Her answering of the letter... from “She answered the letter”)* (Crystal, 2008, p. 328).

As explained by Fonteyn, De Smet and Heyvaert (2015), even though, synchronically, there is a process of nominalization, the gerund derives from a historical process of diachronic verbalization of the verbal noun since the latter preceded the former. This process of verbalization, which commenced in Late Middle English and gathered momentum in Early Modern English, implied “the reconfiguration of the NP structure of the nominal gerund into that of a non-finite clause” (p. 114), as a consequence of which, the verbal noun acquired verbal properties like the ability to take a subject, verbal complements and modifiers, including the adverbial adjunct of negation “not”, and to show aspect and voice.

### Objectives and methodology

This research is aimed at exploring the different degrees of nominalization that are present in *-ing* forms with nominal external distribution (i.e., deverbal nouns, verbal nouns and gerunds) and their translation into Spanish. To such end, this work will refer to the most salient features of each category and provide some examples retrieved from the British National Corpus (BNC) (Davies, 2004), The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) (Davies, 2008), The iWeb Corpus (Davies, 2018) and the internet. By means of these examples, it will be illustrated how different syntactic structures will be necessary when translating, depending on the type of nominal *-ing* form in question, the intended meaning and the context.

### Degrees of nominalization

Quirk *et al.* (1985) distinguish a gradience for the nominalization of *-ing* forms. This gradience extends from deverbal nouns via verbal nouns and gerunds to present participles (which do not have nominal distribution).

### Deverbal Nouns

Deverbal nouns are the *-ing* forms that show the highest degree of nominalization. They are defined by Taher (2015: 35) in the following way:

*Deverbal nouns are nouns derived from verbs, so they are fully nominalized as pure common nouns with no verbal features, but they are related morphologically to verbs. They are derived from verbs either by conversion as attempt or suffixation as destruction. They also include nouns ending in -ing that do not have verbal force as building in The building was empty* (Greenbaum, 1992).

Deverbal nouns may be pluralized and modified by adjectives and determiners (e.g., two beautiful **paintings**). The same occurs in Spanish (*dos hermosas pinturas*). Besides, in Spanish, some infinitives have been permanently lexicalized as nouns, admitting a plural form, adjectives and determiners (Real Academia Española, 1973). For example, *un alegre despertar* (a happy **awakening**), *grandes padeceres* (great **sufferings**).

The translation into Spanish of these nominalized *-ing* forms is, in most cases, also achieved by means of a Spanish deverbal noun, which, as it occurs in English, may be concrete or abstract. The following examples have been retrieved from the British National Corpus to illustrate this:

(i) The **lining** was to be white in the infantry, but many individuals purchased light blue-lined capes: *El forro debía ser blanco en la infantería, pero muchas personas compraban capas con forro celeste* (concrete noun derived from the verb *forrar*)<sup>1</sup>.

(ii) The **drawing** was signed and dated in the bottom right-hand corner: *El dibujo estaba firmado y fechado en la esquina inferior derecha* (concrete noun derived from the verb *dibujar*).

(iii) Divide the **icing** into portions and colour each as desired: *Divida el fondant<sup>2</sup> en porciones y dele a cada una el color deseado*.

(iv) The owner of the **building** was unaware of the nature of the new business: *El dueño del edificio desconocía la naturaleza del nuevo negocio* (concrete noun derived from the verb *edificar*).

(v) There can be no solutions until humanity has learned the **meaning** of words like cooperation, unselfishness, fraternity and trust: *No pueden existir soluciones hasta que la humanidad entienda el significado de palabras tales como cooperación, altruismo, fraternidad y confianza* (abstract noun derived from the verb *significar*).

(vi) This **reasoning** can not apply to the present case: *Este razonamiento no se aplica al presente caso* (abstract noun derived from the verb *razonar*).

Furthermore, it should be noted that a significant number of deverbal nouns ending in *-ing* have entered the Spanish lexicon and constitute instances of Anglicisms. Such is the case of the term “ranking,” which is commonly used in Spanish without any kind of morphological adaptation. When coming across this word, the translator may choose to adapt it («ranquin»), to use a different Spanish word or phrase («clasificación», «lista», «tabla clasificatoria», etc.) or to write it in italics (since it is an unadapted loanword). The Real Academia Española recommends the first two approaches. Other examples include “casting” (“*casting*”, «castin», «selección»), “piercing” (“*piercing*”, «pirsin»), “catering” (“*catering*”, «cáterin»), “rating” (“*rating*”, «índice de audiencia»).

## Verbal Nouns

The second place in the nominalization scale corresponds to the verbal noun, which is an abstract noncount noun (Quirk *et al.*, 1985) that takes a prepositional phrase introduced by *of* and may be modified by a determiner and an adjective (not an adverb) and take a genitive noun phrase as subject (Pullum, 1991, as cited in Taher, 2015).

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1. On the one hand, the noun “lining” (“stuff with which garments are lined”) can be traced back to the late 14<sup>th</sup> century and constitutes a deverbal noun derived from Middle English *linen* “to line” (Harper, n.d.). On the other hand, as noted in *Nueva gramática de la lengua española*, historically speaking, the deverbal noun “forro” (mid 16<sup>th</sup> century) derives from the verb “forrar” (end of 15<sup>th</sup> century) (Real Academia Española & Asociación de Academias de la Lengua Española, 2010, p. 109).

However, it is not always possible to translate this word with a Spanish deverbal noun. For instance, the expression “the lining of the airway” can be translated as «la mucosa respiratoria»/«la mucosa de las vías aéreas»/«la mucosa de las vías respiratorias».

2. The term “fondant” comes from French. It is the “noun use of present participle of *fondre* ‘to melt,’ from Latin *fundere* (past participle *fusus*) ‘to melt, cast, pour out,’ from nasalized form of PIE root \*gheu- ‘to pour’” (Harper, n.d.).

Therefore, verbal nouns are included within the category of nouns since they share the syntactic internal structure of a nominal phrase and have a nominal function in the sentence. Besides, they lack verbal features such as the ability to show aspect and voice. What is more, sometimes, they can be replaced by a deverbal noun formed by a Latin suffix (such as *-age*, *-al*, *-ance*, *-ion*, *-ment*). For instance, in the sentence “It was **the organizing of the Populist Party** that gave us the Immigration Act of 1924 along with a 'progressive' tax system” (COCA), the verbal noun may be replaced by the deverbal noun “organization” and can be translated into Spanish by means of a deverbal noun «*la organización del Partido Populista*». Sometimes, however, although the use of a Spanish deverbal noun would be grammatically correct, it would be preferable to resort to an alternative translation so as to avoid the cacophony resulting from the repetition of Latin suffixes. For example:

(vii) The coming of democracy, some fifty years after **the drafting of the Constitution**, began a process of secularization of American political thought... (The iWeb Corpus): *La llegada de la democracia, unos cincuenta años después de que se redactara la Constitución, dio lugar a un proceso de secularización del pensamiento político estadounidense* (cf. ... *después de la redacción de la Constitución dio lugar a un proceso de secularización...*).

(viii) Naturally, the increase in the refresh rate of the information brings **the questioning of the knowledge in terms of accuracy** (Seçkin Kapucu & Bıyık, 2021): *Desde luego, el aumento de la frecuencia con la que se actualiza la información pone en duda/hace que se cuestione/lleva a cuestionar la precisión del conocimiento* (cf. *Desde luego, el aumento de la frecuencia con la que se actualiza la información provoca el cuestionamiento de la precisión del conocimiento*).

In addition to the foregoing, in certain cases, in order to avoid the repetition of the preposition “*de*”, it would be preferable not to use a deverbal noun. For instance:

(ix) On the second cluster, we wish to state that Sri Lanka has had a long-abiding interest in the issues of outer space, (...), which (...) have led to **the defining of the concept of the common heritage of humankind**... (United Nations General Assembly, 2006: 24): *Acerca del segundo grupo temático, deseamos declarar que Sri Lanka siempre ha mostrado interés por las cuestiones del espacio ultraterrestre, (...), que (...) han llevado a definir el concepto del patrimonio común de la humanidad...*<sup>3</sup> (cf. *la definición del concepto del patrimonio común de la humanidad*).

The possibility of translating nominal *-ing* forms by means of an infinitive stems from the hybrid nature of the Spanish infinitive (nominal and verbal). In fact, the Real Academia Española (1973: 483) referred to the infinitive as a «*sustantivo verbal*» (literally translated as a “verbal noun”). As it occurs with the verbal noun, the Spanish infinitive may take determiners (e.g., *el cantar*), prepositional phrases (e.g., *el cantar de los pájaros*) and adjectival modifiers (e.g., *el melódico cantar de los pájaros*). This nominal nature is further stressed by the possibility of replacing the infinitive with a deverbal noun (e.g., *el canto de los pájaros*). Additionally, Spanish infinitives may be coordinated with nouns, as illustrated by the following example taken from CORPES: *Poncho recordó su cadencia al bailar, su sentir al cantar y los coqueteos que él, en su ingenuidad, interpretó como atenciones fraternales* (Real Academia Española, n.d.).

In addition to this, even though verbal nouns have traditionally been held to be action-referring, as opposed to gerunds, which were considered as capable of referring to both facts and actions, the former may also refer to facts. For instance: “The genre Harper enjoys most is espionage thrillers, so he bemoans **the lifting of the Iron Curtain**” (COCA, cited in Maekelberghe, 2019: 248) (He bemoans the fact that...): *El género que más disfruta Harper es el thriller de espionaje, por*

3. This translation has been retrieved from the official Spanish version of the relevant United Nations document.

*lo que lamenta que haya caído la Cortina de Hierro*. The foregoing sentence illustrates how the reference of the verbal noun to a fact allows for the use of a nominal clause in Spanish, apart from the possibility of using a noun (*lamenta la caída de la Cortina de Hierro*).

Besides, the verbal noun may refer to the way of performing an action (manner-reading). For example:

(x) After the verdict, telegrams and letters of praise for **his handling of the case** poured into the chambers of Judge Horton (The iWeb Corpus) (the way in which he handled the case): *Luego del veredicto, llegaron al despacho del juez Horton cartas y telegramas a raudales en los que se elogiaba cómo había llevado el caso/la forma en la que había llevado el caso/su manejo del caso*.

## Gerunds

In this research, the term “gerund” is defined as a non-finite verb which takes a nominal function and is formed by adding the suffix *-ing* to the stem of the verb. The gerund may take auxiliaries for perfection and passive voice; a subject (which, if overt, may be a determiner, an accusative noun phrase, a noun in the genitive case or a clause); and verbal complements and modifiers, such as direct and indirect objects, subjective and objective complements, and adverbial adjuncts, including the adverbial adjunct of negation. Therefore, gerunds combine the internal distribution of verbs (they have a clause-like structure) with the external distribution of nouns (they take nominal functions).

As it occurred with verbal nouns, gerunds may be translated into Spanish by means of a wide range of structures, such as nominal phrases, infinitives, clauses or the Spanish gerund. For instance:

(xi) **Drinking alcohol** prevents the production of vasopressin, an anti-diuretic hormone that the body uses to absorb water (The iWeb Corpus): *(El) tomar alcohol/el consumo de alcohol impide la producción de vasopresina, una hormona antidiurética que el cuerpo usa para absorber agua* (generic action).

(xii) You can reach Boomtown by **driving two hours from London** (The iWeb Corpus): *Puede llegar a Boomtown conduciendo durante dos horas desde Londres*.

(xiii) There would have been evidence and/or testimony about **his driving to the transfer station** and also to the fact that he consumed alcoholic beverages at the Americus Pizza King (The iWeb Corpus): *Hubiera habido pruebas y/o testimonios de (del hecho de) que condujo a la estación de transferencia y de (del hecho de) que consumió bebidas alcohólicas en Americus Pizza King* (fact).

As observed by Quirk *et al.* (1985: 1064), gerunds may refer to facts or actions:

(xiv) **Your driving a car to New York in your condition** disturbs me greatly: *(El hecho de) que conduzcas a Nueva York en tu estado me inquieta mucho*.

(xv) **Your driving a car to New York** took longer than expected: *Tu viaje en auto a Nueva York llevó más tiempo del esperado*.

The examples provided above show that, even though the structure of the gerundial phrase is practically the same, the opposition between a factual and an action reading results in two different translations.

As previously mentioned when discussing the verbal noun, the choice of one structure over the other may derive from the need to avoid the repetition of certain sounds or words. For instance:

(xvi) The scattering probability can be calculated as a function of proton radius, thus by **measuring the scattering angle** the proton radius can be found (The iWeb Corpus): *La probabilidad de dispersión puede calcularse como una función del radio del protón, de modo que, **midiendo el ángulo de dispersión**, se puede hallar dicho radio (cf. La probabilidad de dispersión puede calcularse como una función del radio del protón, de modo que, mediante la medición el ángulo de dispersión, se puede hallar dicho radio).*

(xvii) A graduate student is expected to assume full responsibility for **knowing and fulfilling graduate program and university procedures and regulations** (The iWeb Corpus): *Se espera que los estudiantes de posgrado asuman total responsabilidad por **conocer y cumplir las normas y los procedimientos de la universidad y del programa de posgrado** (cf. Se espera que los estudiantes de posgrado asuman total responsabilidad por el conocimiento y el cumplimiento de las normas y los procedimientos de la universidad y del programa de posgrado).*

(xviii) This system is inspired from a comprehensive vision that primary aims at **securing sustainability of water resources, meeting the needs of the development process and sticking a balance between the available resources and the consumption of different sectors** (The iWeb Corpus): *Este sistema está inspirado en una visión integral cuyo principal objetivo es **garantizar la sostenibilidad de los recursos hídricos, satisfacer las necesidades del proceso de desarrollo y lograr un equilibrio entre los recursos disponibles y el consumo de distintos sectores** (cf. Este sistema está inspirado en una visión integral cuyo principal objetivo es el aseguramiento de la sostenibilidad de los recursos hídricos, la satisfacción de las necesidades del proceso de desarrollo y el logro de un equilibrio entre los recursos disponibles y el consumo de distintos sectores).*

### Cases of Ambiguity

According to Quirk *et al.* (1985), if the -ing form occurs alone or is premodified by a genitive noun phrase, the construction may be regarded either as a verbal noun or as a gerund, thus constituting an instance of syntactic ambiguity (e.g., “**Reading** is good for your brain”). The previous sentence can be translated into Spanish by means of a deverbal noun or an infinitive (*[EI] leer es bueno para el cerebro/La lectura es buena para el cerebro*). Both possibilities may be used without a change of meaning. However, in certain cases, the noun (whether alone or accompanying the infinitive) is compulsory. For example, “**Fencing** is fun” may be translated as «*La esgrima es divertida*» or «*Hacer/Practicar esgrima es divertido*» but not as «*\*Esgrimir es divertido*», since «*esgrimir*» is a transitive verb in Spanish.

What is more, sometimes, the abovementioned syntactic ambiguity is accompanied by a semantic ambiguity, leading to the need to use different structures in Spanish. For instance, the -ing form in “What do you think of **his driving**?” (Mackenzie, 2004: 981 cited in Maekelberghe, 2019: 248) allows for a manner reading (*¿Qué piensas de su forma de conducir?*) and a factual reading (*¿Qué piensas de (el hecho de) que conduzca?*).

Furthermore, as noted by Quirk *et al.* (1985: 1065), if, apart from appearing alone, the -ing form functions as a direct object, a further ambiguity may result in connection with the subject, leading, once again, to two possible translations into Spanish. For instance, the sentence “I hate **lying**” may be translated as «*Odio la mentira*» (I hate it when people lie) or as «*Odio mentir*» (I hate it when I lie). In this case, the use of the Spanish abstract noun «*mentira*» conveys a generic meaning lacking a reference to a specific person, whereas the infinitive restricts the activity to the subject of the sentence. Likewise, the sentence “**His dancing** was unexpected” (Quirk *et al.*, 1992: 606) may be translated as «*Su baile fue inesperado*» (the way he danced was unexpected: nominal reading) or as

«*Fue inesperado que bailara*» (the fact that he danced was unexpected: verbal reading). In this example, the gerund is translated by means of a nominal clause «*que bailara*».

In addition to this, Quirk *et al.* (1985: 1292) point out the ability of nominal *-ing* forms to take modal and non-modal meanings. For instance, the sentence “There was **no shouting, no merry-making, no waving of flags**” conveys a non-modal meaning (it refers to the nonoccurrence of an event) and can be translated as «*No hubo gritos, festejos ni banderas agitadas*», whereas the sentence “There is **no telling what they would do**” (Quirk *et al.*, 1992: 606) carries a modal meaning (no one can tell what they would do) and can be translated as «*Es imposible saber qué harán*». This possibility can also lead to ambiguity, as illustrated by the sentence “There is **no writing** on the blackboard today,” which may be translated as «*No podremos escribir en el pizarrón hoy*» (modal gerund); «*No escribiremos en el pizarrón hoy*» (non-modal gerund); or as «*No hay nada escrito en el pizarrón hoy*» (deverbal noun).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this research has delved into the different levels of nominalization present in the broad category of nominal *-ing* forms and has examined the different syntactic structures that may be used when translating said forms into Spanish. Firstly, it has referred to deverbal nouns, which are fully nominalized and lack verbal features. As common nouns, they are mostly translated as deverbal nouns in Spanish, but they may also be translated by means of other structures, such as lexicalized infinitives or other common nouns. Secondly, this work has explored the category of verbal nouns, which have an internal and external nominal distribution and may be translated by means of nominal phrases, infinitives or nominal clauses. Thirdly, gerunds (i.e., non-finite verbs ending in *-ing* which have a nominal external distribution and a verbal internal distribution) may be translated by means of several structures, such as nominal phrases, infinitives, nominal clauses or the Spanish gerund, depending on different factors, such as the (non-)modal meaning, the fact/action/manner reading, the surrounding elements and sounds, etc. Last but not least, this work has pointed out some cases of syntactic ambiguity between different *-ing* categories, which may or may not result in semantic ambiguity (regarding the subject, a factual vs manner reading or a modal vs non-modal reading). Further studies on the current topic are suggested in order to identify other potential cases of ambiguity resulting from the different syntactic structures of nominal *-ing* forms and the consequent impact on their translation into Spanish.

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