

# THE USE OF THE GERUND IN SPANISH

*Carmen E. Díaz Zayas*

Much has been said and written about the gerund in Spanish, sometimes in a simple manner, sometimes in a somewhat obscure and complicated way. The latter fails to accomplish its task, which is to clarify the usage and functions of the Spanish gerund.

In one of his essays, Washington Llorens, Director of the Academy of Arts and Sciences of Puerto Rico, lets the gerund speak for itself: "I am feared and, so, neglected. Because of me, academics sin, purists and perfectionists bungle, the timid get confused, the bold blunder and even grammarians perspire."

How true, but Mister Gerund might have added, "Nevertheless, journalists adore me, legislators pay tribute to me and translators... ah! ... translators grant me the place of honor, use me indiscriminately and open doors to me even when they shouldn't." Of course, it must be understood that not all translators pay extravagant homage to the gerund... only the bad ones.

In this essay I intend to specify briefly the ways the gerund is used in Spanish and discuss the confusions which may arise when translating from English.

## I. Characteristics of the Gerund in Spanish

1. Used with verbs whose action has not been concluded, the gerund expresses duration or repetition, as in the following examples: *Está lloviendo.* (It is raining.) *Está saltando.* (He is jumping.)

2. The gerund expresses an action that is simultaneous with that of the main verb of the sentence: *Terminó su discurso diciendo que se comprometía a hacerlo.* (He ended his speech saying he was committed to doing it.)

3. The gerund may express an action which takes place immediately before or after the main verb of the sentence. These uses are exemplified, respectively, as follows: *Saliendo de la casa, sufrió un accidente de autos* (Leaving the house, he had a car accident). *Se levantó airado, empujando la silla violentamente* (He got up exasperated, pushing the chair away violently.)

It should be mentioned here that some grammarians accept the use of the gerund in the former sense, but reject it in the latter. In any case, doubts may arise, and when they do, it is best to avoid using the gerund. One would say instead, *Al salir de la casa, sufrió un accidente de autos* (As he left\* the house, he had a car accident). *Se levantó airado y empujó la silla violentamente.* (He got up exasperated, and pushed the chair away violently.)

4. According to the *Esbozo de una nueva gramática...*, the gerund cannot be used as a modifier. It is wrong to say, for example, *Te envío la resolución nombrando a Juan miembro honorario...* (I am sending you the resolution naming Juan honorary member...). The correct form is *Te envío la resolución que nombra a Juan miembro honorario* (I am sending you the resolution which names Juan honorary member.)

## II. Main Functions of the Gerund in Spanish

1. Adverbial function: the gerund may function adverbally, showing manner: *La miró temblando* (Trembling, he looked at her). In some cases, however, although the gerund does function as an adverb, it may be misused if the sentence expresses two actions that cannot logically take place at the same time: *Hablaron comiendo* (They talked eating, i. e., while eating). Of course, if the speakers don't know basic table manners, it would be correct to use the gerund here; but assuming they do know them and are above talking with their mouths full, the correct thing to say would be, *Hablaron durante la cena* (They talked during dinner).

2. Explanatory function: The gerund has an explanatory function when it refers to the subject of the main verb of the sentence: *La joven, deseando sólo verlo una vez más, luchó desesperadamente por vivir* (The young girl, wishing only to see him once more, struggled desperately for her life). *La joven* (the young girl) is the subject of *desear* (to desire) and *luchar* (to struggle). The

---

\*The expressions "as he left" and "on leaving" are both translations of the Spanish "al salir." The latter translation, like the Spanish original, is not time-specific. Here the more time-specific form has been used to avoid confusion in regard to the form. —Translator's Note.

explanatory phrase can be left out without altering the meaning of the main clause.

The gerund cannot be used to specify the subject--the function legislators are so fond of giving it. We constantly read in the newspapers about a *ley creando, ley prohibiendo, ley permitiendo* (law creating, prohibiting or permitting), instead of *ley que crea, ley que prohíbe, ley que permite* (law that creates, prohibits or permits), etc. This construction, carried over from English, is incorrect in Spanish because it attributes to the gerund an adjectival function which it does not have in Spanish.

3. In reference to the direct object of the main verb: In this case, the direct object is the subject of the gerund, as in *Observábamos las aves guareciéndose del agua* (We watched the birds sheltering themselves from the rain). *Observábamos* (we watched) is the main verb and *las aves* (the birds) is both the direct object of the main verb and subject of the gerund.

The action of the main verb and that of the gerund are simultaneous and denote action visibly in progress. The gerund cannot be used to express enduring qualities or states. It is therefore incorrectly used in phrases such as *resolución nombrando, ley creando artículo citando* (resolution naming, law creating, article quoting), etc.

4. The gerund as an absolute construction: In this case the gerund had its own subject, which is neither the subject nor the object of the main verb: *Prestándote Juan el dinero, podrás efectuar el negocio* (With Juan lending you the money, you will be able to make the deal).

5. The independent gerund: Used in captions for pictures, photographs, etc.: *El presidente saludando a los invitados* (The president greeting guests). The independent gerund is also used in elliptical sentences, such as *siempre comiendo* (always eating); and in titles, such as *Contestando preguntas* (Answering questions).

### III. Confusions

Now that the correct functions of the gerund in Spanish have been enumerated, let us discuss some confusions which arise when translating from English, and some incorrect uses of the gerund.

In Spanish the gerund is easily identified by the endings *-ando* and *-iendo*.

In English, the *-ing* ending may be utilized as an adjective (Sleeping Beauty) and in two verbal uses (She is walking, She likes walking). So, there are several ways of translating the *-ing* form into Spanish:

She is <i>sleeping</i>	Está durmiendo (gerund)
	Duerme (presente)
<i>disgusting</i> person	persona desagradable (adjective)
It was <i>raining</i>	Llovía (past progressive)
<i>Being</i> here is	Estar aquí (infinitive)
I like <i>fishing</i>	Me gusta la pesca (noun)
<i>changing</i> world	mundo cambiante (progressive participle)
to be <i>sitting</i>	estar sentado (past participle)
law <i>prohibiting</i>	ley que prohíbe (relative clause)

1. There are various ways the -ing form may be translated into Spanish, the principal error consisting in giving the gerund an adjectival function, as in the case of *ley prohibiendo* (law *prohibiting*) instead of *ley que prohíbe* (law that prohibits). One must keep in mind that the gerund in Spanish has adverbial and explanatory functions, and does not serve as it does in English, as a modifier or specifier. (Exceptions to these rules are *hirviendo*, "boiling," and *ardiendo*, "burning," which have assumed adjectival functions through usage.)

2. Another major mistake in Spanish lies in combining *estar* (to be) with the gerund *siendo* (being), a literal translation of the English expression *is being*. For example, "The letter is being read," could be translated as *Se lee la carta* or *Se está leyendo la carta*, but not the literal *La carta está siendo leída*.

In Spanish, the two forms of the verb "to be" are *estar*, a continuing verb, and *ser*, a permanent verb, thus, to combine the two results in a contradiction, and besides, the construction is in the passive voice.

3. Another mistake lies in using the construction *estar* (to be) + gerund with verbs expressing a brief action. It is correct to say *está caminando* (She is *walking*—the verb indicates movement) and *está escuchando* (He is *listening*—indicating a progressive action), but not *le estoy enviando* (I am *sending* you ... ) because the act of sending something is of short duration. Nor is it correct to say *Le estamos contestando su carta del ...* (We are *answering* your letter of ...). The construction *estar* + gerund denotes continuing action and in both the aforementioned cases, a perfective action is implied.

4. It is an error to create a parallel between two actions that occur far enough apart in time that the second ought not be considered to follow the first immediately: for example, *El restaurante abre a las 10:00 a.m., cerrando a las 12:00 p.m.* (The restaurant opens at 10:00 a.m., *closing* at 12:00 p.m.) or *El papá terminó su gira triunfal, regresando a Italia* (The Pope concluded his triumphal tour, *returning* to Italy.)

5. Although there is considerable difference in the way the gerund is used in Spanish and English, there is one point at which usage is virtually the same, and that is when it is a question of enduring action: *She was playing, joking, running, laughing all the time* could be translated, *Se la pasaba jugando, bromeando, corriendo, riendo todo el tiempo*. However, in Spanish, repetition of the gerund may become tiresome, and since the imperfect tense may express the same idea, the gerund is often translated in that tense *Jugaba, bromeaba, corría, reía todo el tiempo* (She played, joked, ran, laughed all the time).

#### IV. Conclusion

To sum up, the principal errors when using the gerund in Spanish are:

1. To give it an adjectival function, as in English.
2. To combine *estar* with *siendo*, by analogy with *is being*.
3. To use the construction *estar* + gerund for perfective or brief actions, as in the cases of *está dando un grito, dando un salto o disparando un tiro* (He is *letting* out a scream, or *giving* a jump or *firing* a shot).
4. To use the gerund when there is *no* temporal correspondance between the principal verb and the gerund.
5. To make sentences unnecessarily heavy by overworking the gerund.

#### NOTA

The English translation of this article was done as part of the work of a seminar in translation, in the Fall semester of 1979, by Aileene Alvarez, Sonia Arroyo, María Avellaneda, Gloria Domenech and Gail Tosto, who wish to thank Dr. Rosemary Bennet for reading and commenting on the translation. -Ed.