

# *Tener*: ¿Lo tenemos entendido?

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## Introduction

Languages are dynamic systems that undergo change with the passage of time. From the basic level of sounds to more complex areas of discourse, transformations and alterations take place as usage changes. One historical change of interest here is grammaticalization, which refers to a word's change from a lexical item to a grammatical item; a "content word" becomes a "function word" (Hopper & Traugott, 2003). Semantic bleaching, often considered a subcategory of grammaticalization, specifically refers to a lexical item's loss of most or all of its earlier or original lexical content (Heine, 1993). In discussions of these types of historical changes, verbs of possession often come up as words that undergo such processes. They seem to be particularly susceptible to modifications and shifts in function, and that susceptibility, according to Bybee (2007), results from their high frequency of usage. This is clearly evident in English in the perfect constructions, in which forms of the verb *to have* have developed into auxiliaries with a participle. The same is true of the Spanish verb *haber*, which was once used as a verb of possession, but has since become an auxiliary in perfect constructions with participles. Examples of current or former possessive verbs that have become auxiliaries are found in the following examples:

- 1) *Haber* in Spanish: perfect constructions, future, conditional, *ha de saber*, etc.  
*Ha hecho, había hecho, hará, haría*
- 2) 'Have' in English: auxiliary verb in perfect constructions  
'They have gone', 'she had gone'
- 3) *Ter* in Portuguese in *tempos compostos*  
*Ele tem falado, eu tinha falado*

The word *tener*, from the Latin *tenēre* ('to hold, keep, grasp') has since replaced *haber* as the primary verb with the meaning 'to have' in the possessive sense (Langacker, 2009, p. 103). In spite of this replacement, it seems that *tener* has also become vulnerable to the same type of change as *haber* and is therefore undergoing a process of grammaticalization and semantic bleaching like other verbs of similar meaning and usage. As mentioned above, frequency likely plays a role in this process. *Tener* has become part of several common expressions that could be considered "chunks" of words that are stored and used together as units (Bybee, 2010). Some of those expressions include the following:

*Tener hambre/sed*

*Tener frío/calor*

*Tener sueño, suerte, razón, ganas, prisa, celos, cuidado, miedo*

Expressions with *tener* are so common that they are used in situations that would normally call for constructions with a copulative verb in English ('to be') and an adjective. In the case of Portuguese, a mix occurs, with some expressions having the form of copulative verb *estar* + preposition *com* + noun, and others having *ter* + noun. I'm hot/cold.

I'm hungry/thirsty.

She's jealous.

You're lucky.

You're right.

*Estou (Tô) com frio/calor.*

*Estou (Tô) com fome/sede.*

*Ela está (tá) com ciúmes.*

*Você tem sorte.*

*Você tem razão.*

The idea here is that the vulnerability of *tener* to semantic bleaching should not be unexpected if Bybee's (2007) claims are upheld. It is evident that the verb has come to be used in constructions that are not meant to communicate the idea of literal possession of an object. This is highly apparent when a third element is part of the construction, such as a prepositional phrase or an adjective.

*Tenerlo en cuenta*

*Lo tendré en cuenta*

*Tenerlo presente*

*Ténganlo presente*

The most common constructions that include *tener* are transitive and thus have two parts: a possessor (a subject, explicit or implied) and an object of possession. The basic structure could be described with the following template:

X (possessor) *TENER* Y (possessed)

With these two elements, constructions like the ones below are considered complete.

*Ella tiene un libro verde*

*Los niños tienen varias tareas*

*(Yo) Tengo tres carros*

However, some constructions feel incomplete without a third element. Consider the following examples:

*Tengo a los hijos enfermos.*

*Me tiene por gracioso.*

*Esa niña me tiene enloquecida.*

*Me tiene hartado esta tarea.*

In these sentences, an adjective or prepositional phrase appears to be an essential part of the construction; without them, something is lacking. If a speaker were to say only, “*Me tiene*,” the hearer would likely be left asking, “*Te tiene . . . ¿qué?*” Or perhaps they would ask, “*¿Cómo te tiene?*” The verb is serving different semantic functions in these contexts.

The sentences that are complete with two elements generally preserve a more concrete semantic quality associated with possession, while those with three elements appear to incorporate a bleached usage of *tener*. Despite the frequency-induced alterations, it is still possible to find semantic remnants of the idea of possession in the three-element examples. In the following sections, I will briefly examine three construction types and comment on possible connections to the original lexical content of the verb.

## ***Tener vs. Tener a***

The first three-element construction set warranting a closer look is that characterized by the use of *tener a*. Sentences containing this pairing of verb and personal *a* are of interest because they provide an example of a case in which the verb *tener* no longer has an explicitly possessive meaning when contrasted with examples that do not have the personal *a*. Consider the following sentences:

*Tengo un gato.*

*Tengo al gato enfermo.*

In the first, the idea of possession is clear and explicit, but in the second, something different is being communicated. When a speaker uses a sentence like the second one, what is programmed into such a construction semantically? Why not just say, “*Mi gato está enfermo*”? I propose here that the unit *tener a* is used to emphasize or declare the investment of another party in a situation, or ownership in a connection or relationship. How does this relate to the idea of possession? One possible theory is that owners invest in their possessions and therefore have some degree of interest in things that belong to them. In addition, the idea of ownership in general extends beyond just owning items to owning a connection to a possession. The second sentence permits the expression of the owner’s role in the situation, or his or her attachment to the condition of the cat.

Besides incorporating a sense of investment, it appears that this construction also serves to promote a subject to a greater place of importance or involvement in the scenario described by the sentence. Consider the difference between the following sentences:

*Tengo al gato enfermo.*

*El/Mi gato está*

*enfermo.*

The first sentence above gives attention to the owner of the cat, while the second seems to be focused primarily on the cat; in other words, in the first, attention is drawn to the owner and his or her stake in the condition described. Put most simply, the first is about the owner, and the second is about the cat. This construction is not restricted to describing only the physical condition of the theme, but can also refer to Y's location, as in "*Tengo a mi hermana en Nueva York.*" The subject's connection to the sister and her whereabouts is programmed into the sentence.

A possible template for this kind of construction is found below:

X HAS STAKE IN THE FACT THAT Y (theme) IS IN STATE/CONDITION Z

According to the template, the subject does end up "having" something (albeit an abstract concept): stake in the situation.

## ***Tener por: Construction of Consideration***

The second construction of interest is that formed with the verb-preposition pairing *tener por*. This unit communicates the same idea as the verb *considerar*. Some examples of this usage are found below (Davies, 2016):

*Me tienen por perezoso*

*No me tiene por hijo*

*Me tengo por culpable*

*Me tienen por venturosa*

*Me tengo por un defensor absoluto*

The meaning behind the sentences above could be concisely summarized in the following construction template:

X CONSIDERS Y TO BE Z

In the third and fifth items, X and Y have the same referent, since the subject considers him or herself (as the object of the preposition) to be Z. The element Z may be an adjective or a noun, as is seen in the examples.

Some questions of interest also arise from the use of this construction. How does the idea of possession still linger in *tener por*? One possible explanation is that the subject of a sentence "has" the notion that the modifying element Z applies to the theme (i.e., the object of the preposition); the subject has the object figuratively placed in the role or condition occupying the Z slot. This usage may also be connected to the older, archaic meaning of *tener*, when, as previously mentioned, it meant 'to hold, grasp' (Langacker, 2009). The subject metaphorically 'holds' someone in the role or condition of Z. Many uses of this type of construction seem to have a negative connotation (e.g., 'hold prisoner,' 'hold in contempt'), which could be due to the fact that 'holding' is viewed as firm and restrictive; the subject is preventing the theme's escape from an undesirable condition or portrayal. If such a metaphorical connection exists, this description would contribute to additional discussion of 'hold' and related words as lexical items experiencing a process of grammaticalization. This can be seen in additional English

expressions like ‘hold someone responsible/accountable,’ or to ‘hold’ someone or something ‘in high regard.’

Although not directly relevant to the discussion of *tener*, some additional questions regarding the use of *por* in this construction are worth considering. Why is *por* the preposition that accompanies *tener*? What meaning of *por* would fit in this situation? One possibility is provided here. The use of *por* as an indicator of approximate location, be it spatial or temporal, might have connections to this construction. The use of *por* is considered “less precise” than that of other prepositions, such as *en*, in certain situations (Butt & Benjamin, 2004, p. 510). The subject may metaphorically place the object in the approximate vicinity of whatever role or condition fills the Z slot. The use of this construction does not seem to offer a concrete confirmation of the subject’s consideration as fact without additional context; rather, it seems to carry the sense that the subject’s consideration or belief does not reflect the truth. The use of a verb like *saber* would imply more certainty, as in “*saben que soy culpable*,” when compared to the example “*me tengo por culpable*.” An underlying feeling remains that any belief is only a notion, and may therefore only be “around” the truth in the same way that arguments accompanying the expressions *por aquí* and *por ahí* are ‘around here’ or ‘around there’ (Butt & Benjamin, 2004, p. 511). Another possibility for the presence of *por* is cause; one party’s consideration of another could be influenced by a previous event or pre-existing reason.

Further exploration of this construction may reveal more insight into semantic connections. Given the considerations above, possible alternatives to the template are:

X HAS THE NOTION THAT Y IS (OR IS IN STATE/CONDITION) Z

X HOLDS Y TO BE Z / X HOLDS Y IN THE VICINITY OF Z

## ***Tener* as a Verb of Ongoing Influence**

In addition to the construction types listed above, another variety incorporates *tener*, now as a verb of ongoing influence. This class of construction communicates the idea of forcing or causing someone to be in a certain state or condition and has an imperfective aspect. According to Radden and Dirven (2007), the notion of possession can be dynamic and relate to action (p. 281). Consider the examples below:

*La decadencia es un fantasma que me tiene casi obsesionado.*

*Eso hasta ahora me tiene más o menos contenta.*

*A mí lo que me tiene indignado es . . . el descuido con que se está hablando ahora.*

In all three cases, something is causing the individuals (serving as objects in the sentences), in a continuous way, to be in a particular state. A possible construction template for this type of use has been included below:

X IS CAUSING Y TO BE IN STATE/CONDITION Z

The third element, Z, does not have to be an adjective, though, as can be seen in sentences such as the following:

*Los tenía llorando por su cuento.*

*La tengo escribiendo mis cartas.*

These two examples have a gerund, with an adverbial (or perhaps adverbial adjectival) function, in the Z slot.

The imperfective nature of the construction becomes clearer after doing a corpus search (Davies, 2016), which yields a high frequency of tokens containing either a present tense conjugation (*tengo, tiene*, etc.) or an imperfect conjugation (*teníaís, tenían*, etc.). Examples with a preterit conjugation are very infrequent, but they do exist and usually signal the beginning of the condition filling the Z slot (e.g., “*hasta que me tuvo apretada*”), which is consistent with usage of the preterit as defined in reference grammars like the one compiled by Butt and Benjamin (2004).

As in the case of *tener a* discussed above, the idea of having stake in a situation seems to be relevant here; therefore, the two construction types share the same proposed lexical remnants. However, the role of the subject in this most recent set of examples is primarily active. The examples from the earlier section have subjects in a more passive role (referring to state of activity, not sentence structure). In this third construction, the subject is actively responsible for the condition or state of Y and is therefore invested in (in the case of animate subjects), or connected to (in the case of inanimate subjects), the scenario. However, while the role of the subject(s) is apparent, our attention is easily drawn to the theme; it seems easier to say that the sentence is about the theme.

## Conclusion

As shown in the discussion above, *tener* has been semantically bleached in constructions with a third element, unlike the more common transitive groupings containing only two parts. I’ve discussed how the idea of possession might linger in three different construction types, in addition to presenting some related ideas of interest.

There are many opportunities for investigation in this area. One previous study (Hilferty & Valenzuela, 2001) examined the complements of *tener* and the forms of those complements which have been deemed “grammatical” or “ungrammatical”; however, the examples used in that study were of the two-element variety described above (i.e., those in which *tener* retains a clear semantic meaning of possession in the typical transitive format). Future investigations might uncover additional uses of *tener* in situations with a less obvious semantic quality of possession. One phrase of interest is “*tener a alguien olvidado*,” which does not easily fit in any of the templates I proposed.

An additional area of possible investigation is that of *por* and other prepositions used with *tener* in chunks. Although I have offered a possible explanation for the use of *por* in the second construction type, much more can be done to research semantic and etymological connections in fixed units. This is true not only in cases involving *tener*, but in instances of set verb-preposition units in general.

Another possible area of research is that involving the types of elements or arguments that are “acceptable” in constructions with *tener*. The first two types discussed in this paper involved only animate participants as subjects and objects, but the third allowed for inanimate subjects. An investigation of expressions with inanimate objects (i.e., complements) would also contribute to the dialogue. Sentences like “*No la tengo hecha*” (*la* referring to *una tarea*), which resemble those considered to be a possible starting point for the grammaticalization of *haber*, were not addressed in this paper (Penny, 2014, pp. 193-194).

As far as *tener* is concerned, it is likely that the process of grammaticalization and semantic “departure” will continue in the future. We will have to wait to see what new kinds of usage arise with the evolution of the Spanish language.

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