Fine-tuning facts: Evidence from Spanish and Portuguese
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Since the seminal work of Kiparsky and Kiparsky (1970), the expressions the fact of/that, el hecho de (Spanish) and o facto de (Portuguese) have been used as a standard test for factivity of predicates, as in (1) and (3), respectively. In Spanish el hecho de is also analyzed as a paraphrase of the clausal nominalization el que (2) (Demonte 1977, Serrano 2014), while el que has recently been proved to not be restricted to factivity (Serrano 2014), the former continues to be used as a reliable test for factivity (Serrano 2014, a.o.). However, we document and analyze evidence which reveals non-factive interpretations of this expression both in Spanish and Portuguese under specific semantic conditions, showing that it is not an infallible test of factivity.

Our data show the contribution of both lexico-semantic and syntactic constraints of the interpretation of the nouns hecho (Spanish) and facto (Portuguese). Examples in which the complement of el hecho de and o facto de is not true are given in (4)-(7). Such uses show that the (non-)factivity of the complement of the noun fact depends on the veridicality of the overall sentence. The nouns el hecho de and o facto de may receive a non-factive interpretation under two types of conditions: (i) the non-veridicality of the predicate that selects for el hecho de; e.g. verbs meaning ‘render difficult’, ‘cast doubt’, ‘deny’, as in (5)-(6), or (ii) through the negation of positive implicative verbs like consentir ‘allow’ (Karttunen 1971), as in (7).

On the other hand, factive interpretations are obtained with aspecual and change of state verbs like comenzar (‘begin’), seguirse (‘continue’), and a range of veridical contexts including evaluitive verbs like disgustar (‘not please’) and constructions like se demostró (‘it was proved’), es cierto (‘it is true’), and sucedió (‘it happened’), as in (8). The data highlight the importance of considering the veridical properties of the whole sentence in order to re-examine the validity of commonly used factivity tests across languages (Schulz 2003).

This paper contributes to the discussion on the syntax of factivity and clausal nominalization in Romance and other languages (Delicado Cantero 2013, Serrano 2014, a.o.), and the current research on the categorial and syntactic structure and the semantic compositionality of so-called ‘constructions/collocations’ (Mendívil 1999, a.o.). It also brings a cross-linguistic perspective to current debates on the nature of veridicality (Karttunen and Zaenen 2005).
(1) María lamenta (el hecho de) que Pedro esté triste. [Span.]
(2) María lamenta (el) que Pedro esté triste. [Span.]
‘Mary regrets (the fact) that Peter is sad’
(3) Lamento (o facto de) que a casa tenha sido vendida. (Barbosa 2013: 1847) [Port.]
‘I regret (the fact) that the house has been sold.’
(4) las actitudes hacia las mujeres que resultan de este desequilibrio de poder dificultan el hecho de que las mujeres puedan salir de estas situaciones violentas. [Span.]
‘the attitudes towards women that result from this power imbalance stand in the way of the fact that women may get out of such violent situations’
(5) A maioria das pessoas questionadas também afirma que duvida do facto de que, um dia, possa realmente haver processo contra Nyimpine Chissan [Port.]
‘The majority of the people who were questioned also claims that they doubt the fact that, one day, there may actually be a [judicial] case against Nympine Chissan’
(6) E a propósito de estar com alguém, tem sido lançados imensos rumores sobre Ed Sheeran… Porém, o cantor negou o facto de haver qualquer envolvimento romântico [Port.]
‘And regarding being in a romantic relation, there have been many rumors about Ed Sheeran… However, the singer denied the fact that there is any romantic involvement’
(7) no consentía el hecho de irse de allí cuando había sido el quien había interrumpido su descanso.
‘He would not agree to the fact of leaving when he had been the one who had interrupted his rest’
(8) sucedió el hecho de que había un panal de abejas y mucha gente salió picoteada. [Span.]
‘It happened the fact that there was a honeycomb and many came out with stings’

References