Al hablar, se alterna hablando: syntactic variation between two non-finite Spanish constructions.

In many cases of syntactic variation, the relevant contexts can be divided into three groups: group i) where there is a clear preference for form a) (if not used exclusively), group ii) where there is a clear preference for form b) (ibid.), and group iii) where apparently there is free variation between forms a) and b). In this paper, it will be shown that the meanings of the types of context (i) vs. ii)) correlate with the meanings of the correspondent forms (a) and b)), and that the meanings of the latter may account for their distribution in the contexts of group iii). The case in study is the alternation between the Spanish non finite adverbial gerundio constructions vs. al+ infinitivo, as in

1)   al llegar a casa, se encontró con el vecino
     at-the arriveINF to house, himself he-met with the neighbour
     'When he came home, he ran into the neighbour'

2)   llegando a casa, se encontró con el vecino
     arriveGER to house, himself he-met with the neighbour
     'While coming home, he ran into the neighbour'

The forms will be studied in a corpus of spoken language, in which both quantitative and qualitative data will be taken into account, for this kind of variation cannot be justified on the sentence level alone, without taking the broader context into account.

Reference: