

Comparing Rates and Constraints in Present Perfect / Preterit Variation in Spanish

Perfect (anterior) to perfective grammaticalization is well established in cross-linguistic studies, especially for Romance (e.g., Bybee, Perkins and Pagliuca 1994, Squartini and Bertinetto 1995). While some Romance languages have essentially carried this grammaticization path to completion (e.g. French, Northern Italian), Spanish varieties are presently located at different intermediate stages (Harris 1982). In most Peninsular (=Spain) varieties, the Present Perfect (PP) form has grammaticalized into a hodiernal past perfective, displacing the Preterit in past situations occurring on the same day as the speech event (Schwenter 1994), while in Mexican varieties, which represent a diachronically earlier stage, it is not temporal distance, but rather imperfective aspect and pragmatic considerations of current relevance that are important (Company 2002). PP / Preterit variation is found in both varieties, although the locus of this variation appears to be different in each case: in Spain both forms occur in past perfective contexts (1), in Mexico both appear in perfect of result contexts (2).

- (1a) ayer HE COMPRADO un aire acondicionado y me da calor en vez de frío (COREC, BCON014B)
- (1b) ‘yesterday I BOUGHT (PP) an air conditioner and it gives me hot instead of cold’
ayer PASÉ yo por un edificio que estaba todo de chapas (COREC, CCON004C)
‘yesterday I PASSED by (Pret) a building that was all metal panels’
- (2a) ¡Está goldo, goldo, goldo! HA SALIDO muy sanito, fijate (México, Habla culta, 408)
‘[about her nine-month-old] He is fat, fat, fat. He HAS TURNED OUT [PP] very healthy, you know’
- (2b) ya LEVANTARON un gran edificio. Ya está toda la estructura (México, Habla culta, XXXI, 428)
‘they HAVE PUT UP [Pret] a big building. The structure is already all set’

A persistent problem in the analysis of PP – Preterit variation, however, is that it is difficult to assess in objective fashion the notion of current relevance, which is typically taken to be the principal feature distinguishing the two forms (cf. Van Herk 2001). Likewise, determining a priori which PP tokens are aspectually perfective—but not currently relevant—is also highly subjective. Our approach attempts to overcome these drawbacks through a multivariate analysis of all PP and Preterit forms (N = 3000) in oral Peninsular (COREC) and Mexican Spanish (Habla Culta, Habla Popular) data.

The relative frequency of the PP in the Peninsular corpus is 55%, versus only 17% in the Mexican data. Following the comparative variationist method (Poplack and Tagliamonte 2001, Tagliamonte 2002), we compare a wide range of linguistic constraints on PP-Preterit variation. Our analysis reveals that some factors show the same constraint hierarchy but a different magnitude of effect (e.g., polarity, clause type, lexical aspect), others reverse the constraint hierarchy (e.g., co-occurring *ya* ‘already’ favors PP in Spain, Preterit in Mexico), while some are relevant in one variety only (e.g., temporal distance in Spain). These results suggest that in (at least some) grammaticalization processes, the encroachment of a new form (here, the PP) on an old one (here, the Preterit) is manifested in both increased relative frequency and changes in linguistic conditioning (cf. Kroch 1989).

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