Differential distribution of Spanish Preterite and Imperfect with iterated eventualities

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Abstract

We propose, following Langacker (2000, 2009), that the core difference in the distinct interpretation of adverbially-qualified sentences in Spanish is related to the aspectual conceptualization of habituality and iterativity. That is, the perfective signals that the component events of individual instances of the event are anchored to particular points in time, whereas the imperfective signals that the component events are not anchored to any particular points in time. We qualify the previous assertion, however, with empirical data that shows that native speakers of Spanish tend to judge the imperfective form more felicitous than the perfective form, irrespective of the adverbial nature of the context that frames the verbal predicate. For that purpose, we analyze the proposed effect of accidental versus non-accidental contexts (cf. Menéndez-Benito 2001). Furthermore, we argue that type of adverbial does not seem to have a differential effect on the judgments of native speakers either. We conclude that tense, seems to be the factor that most clearly affects the selection of past tense morphological marker, with the use of remote past tense contexts favoring the use of the Imperfect.

Keywords: Tense, aspect, iterativity, habituality

1. Introduction

Spanish marks aspectual distinctions with the use of distinct forms of past tense. That is, whereas the Spanish Preterite serves to focus on the episodic nature of particular eventualities, the Imperfect focuses on the fact that eventualities are generalizable. The use of adverbial quantifiers (e.g., siempre = always), however, entails that both the Preterit and Imperfect will convey the notion of generalizations of particular episodes. Nevertheless, as Menéndez-Benito (2002 : 369) points out, “this prediction is not borne out: even when an adverbial quantifier is present, imperfective and perfective forms do not have the same distribution”. If this is the case, how do we
Menéndez-Benito proposes that iterated eventualities represented with the imperfective are defined as non-accidental and make reference to kind-denoting subjects, while eventualities represented with the perfective are defined as accidental statements, thus they make reference to stage-level predicates. In fact, a study based on Portuguese data provided empirical support for Menéndez-Benito’s claim, even though Menéndez-Benito’s argument was based on Spanish data.

In this paper, we will analyze data from Spanish native speakers which shows that the accidental versus non-accidental contrast is not relevant for the analysis of iterated eventualities marked with adverbial quantifiers. Furthermore, we will argue, following Langacker (2000, 2009), that the core difference in the distinct interpretation of adverbially-qualified sentences is related to the aspectual conceptualization of habituality and iterativity respectively. That is, the perfective signals that the component events of individual instances of the event are anchored to particular points in time, whereas the imperfective signals that the component events are not anchored to any particular points in time.

2. Aspectual meanings: boundedness and iterativity

Caudal and Roussarie (2005: 267-268) assert that, in general, the perfective form focuses on changes of state, whereas the imperfective form focuses on the permanence of the state in the world. Therefore, the basic meaning of the perfective is associated with boundedness and may refer to the beginning and/or end of a situation, thus it may be inceptive, punctual or completive (see Depraetere, 1995 for a detailed explanation of boundedness as opposed to telicity). Thus, in example (1a), the verb to eat is associated with a sense of termination of the activity (i.e., the consumption of the apple). In contrast, imperfective aspect, being unbounded, focuses on the internal structure of the situation viewing it as ongoing, with no specific endpoint (imperfective aspect can be durative or habitual), as in (1b).

\[(1) \ 
\begin{align*}
\text{a. } & \text{ Julián comió una manzana.} \quad \text{[bounded]} \\
& \text{‘Julián ate (PRET) an apple.’} \\
\text{b. } & \text{ Julián comía una manzana.} \quad \text{[unbounded]} \\
& \text{‘Julián ate/was eating (IMP) an apple.’}
\end{align*}
\]

The decision to use one or the other marker of past tense is not arbitrary, but mostly related to discursive factors such as grounding (i.e., foreground versus background), or even pragmatic ones (cf., imperfective forms create “distance” from the interlocutor to soften requests). For instance, in sentence