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# Accounting for Morpho-Syntactic Change in Spanish: The present perfect case

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## 1 Introduction

The present perfect is a Romance form used initially to refer to anterior and imperfective events. For its part, the simple past was the tense used both to indicate actions which had taken place at a definite point in time in the past ('El año pasado estuve en Suiza' [I was in Switzerland last year]) and events occurring near to the time of communication ('Me levanté a las siete' [I got up at seven o'clock]), whether on the same day ('Comí a las dos y media' [I had lunch at half past two]), or slightly beforehand ('Me quité la chaqueta porque hacía calor' [I took off my jacket because it was hot]). This use of the simple past has long been documented in Romance languages, but in many cases it has been completely replaced by the compound perfect, which is specialized in 'anterior' references, but currently used for the same sequences as the simple past.

A double grammaticalization process is considered to have taken place: on the one hand, of the functions (that of the auxiliary 'haber' [have] in the inflexion of compound tenses) and, secondly, of the compound form to refer to perfective situations ('He comido a las dos y media' [I had lunch at half past two]), added to its normal anterior use ('He estado en Suiza' [I have been in Switzerland]). Thus, we appear to be dealing with a case of syntactical-semantic change, which appears to have concluded in other Romance languages, and also a phenomenon of grammaticalization and variation from one verbal form to the other.

This work attempts to analyze the uses of these two competing forms in a Spanish-speaking community: the metropolitan area of Madrid. Each area of Spanish presents a completely diverging situation as regards the above-mentioned change. We would venture that grammaticalization of the present perfect has been concluded entirely in Madrid Spanish (the present perfect is used virtually categorically as 'perfective', as well as 'anterior', and the simple past as perfective, but irrelevant in the present). In Canary Islands Spanish as in Alicante Spanish (Schwenter 1994), however, another grammaticalization degree would be found.

## 2 On grammaticalization: From the anterior to the perfective sense

In most Romance languages the use of the present perfect to denote references which are 'proper' to the simple past has been recorded. The former has acquired a specialized function to operate as an 'anterior' and as a description of 'past states with significance in the present'. It has also come to describe perfective, terminative states and situations which have taken place within the time of communication (King 1992).

Both Harris 1992 and Fleischman 1983 have drawn up tables to illustrate the various stages of this process in different Romance languages. For the Spanish language, both authors consider that the distinction is maintained between 'anterior' perfect (relevant

in the present) and 'perfective' (irrelevant in the present), but they have not noted the importance of the 'encroachment' of the present perfect in the terrain of the simple past to express recent actions (close in time to the time of communication or on the same day). Fleischman (1983: 198) – wrongly – considers that there is a preference in the usage of simple past at the expense of present perfect in Castilian Spanish. In the case of Alicante Spanish, Schwenter (1994) considers that there is a "grammaticalization of the present perfect in progress" as a result of its use only for same day (*hodiernal*) contexts, and its different generational distribution.

Grammaticalization does not describe linguistic states, but rather processes whereby a structure develops grammatical functions in certain contexts for which it gradually adopts new grammatical functions (Lehman 1985: 303; Hopper and Traugott 1993: 15; Heine, Claudi and Hünnemeyer 1991). This process, initiated by means of metaphorical and metonymic procedures (Traugott and König 1991), becomes an aspect of linguistic evolution which generates situations of polysemy and homonymy when both forms are used with different grammatical functions. Interaction between discourse and grammar is considered fundamental, because both the role played by conversational context and textual relationships (propositional, ideational and interpersonal (Halliday 1978) generate the adequate framework for a form to adopt more than one grammatical function. The description of the process not only implicitly rules out the principle of "one form, one function" (Bybee, Pagliuca and Perkins (in Traugott and Heine eds, 1991) but also implies the constantly-evolving situation of language in the framework of daily usage; Grammar shapes Discourse, and Discourse shapes Grammar (Lichtenberk 1991: 76). Thus, the mechanisms used by speakers to pragmatically encode new meanings and senses becomes related to the study of language in its social context.

As regards verbal forms, grammaticalization processes occur in the change of mode, tense or aspect categories. This has been called 'secondary meaning' (Dahl 1985), given by the conventionalization of certain conversational implications. In the case of the present perfect, for example, the sense of 'current relevance' is considered to be marginal compared to its true 'anterior' meaning, i.e., its occurrence is not constant but derived rather from certain incidental textual contexts. However, this approach has been rejected (Hopper and Traugott 1993: 75) on the grounds that the functional possibility of a form is derived from its own semantic possibilities, i.e., from the relationship between form and function, which need not be unidirectional.

With regard to the present perfect, as has been noted above, the grammaticalization of the perfective sense has been amply documented. This is functionally equivalent to the simple past (Bybee and Dahl 1989; Bybee, Perkins and Pagliuca 1994; etc) but apparently does not stem from a metaphorization of meanings. Instead, it corresponds to the shift from an 'anterior' abstract function to a more precise 'perfective' function which is also part of its grammatical nature.

### 3 Alternance in Madrid Spanish

We carried out a methodological procedure for Madrid Spanish. Respondents were selected choosing a similar proportion of individuals from each generation, sex and socio-cultural level<sup>1</sup>. All the respondents came from the Greater Madrid area. To compensate and contrast

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<sup>1</sup> 95 speakers were interviewed, 48 women and 47 men. Generational boundaries were as follows: 1st generation 20-34yrs, 2nd generation 35-54, and 3rd generation 55 and over. Socio-cultural levels were also considered by combining education level, income level and occupation.

the results, we (also) used examples taken from a corpus collected by Esqueva and Cantarero (1981), *El habla de la ciudad de Madrid. Materiales para su estudio*.

In order to be able to measure the process, we asked respondents to narrate events that had occurred on the same day, the previous day, and two or three months ago<sup>2</sup>. We chose the different time perspectives in the hope that it would be possible to ascertain the degree of grammaticalization of the usage of the present perfect and simple past.

The use of the grammaticalized present perfect can be said to be categorical for the description of events occurring at a point in time very close to the time of communication and on the same day. Of 829 examples, the simple past was used in only 4% of cases (33)<sup>3</sup>.

The 'perfective' present perfect is, therefore, the form used mostly for expressing events close in time to the moment of communication:

- (1) *Me he comprado* unos zapatos preciosos en aquella zapatería de la esquina (hace unas horas)  
I bought a lovely pair of shoes in the shoeshop on the corner (a few hours ago)
- (2) *Hemos caminado* desde la Gran Vía hasta aquí (ahora)  
We walked from Gran Vía up to here (just now)
- (3) *Nos has hecho* una buena faena (hace escasos momentos)  
You really messed us up (a few minutes ago)

Among the data provided by *El habla culta de Madrid*, we managed to find abundant examples similar to the previous ones:

- (4) *Me ha hablado* usted que ha estado cinco meses en Londres  
You told me you have been to London five times
- (5) *Me ha dicho* usted que no estaba de acuerdo con esa generación quizá un poco más joven que usted  
You told me that you didn't agree with that generation which is perhaps just a bit younger than you
- (6) *Me has ido* a preguntar una cosa que voy a tener cuerda para rato  
You asked me something that is going to keep me thinking for a while

Having obtained these revealing data, we then undertook the narrative survey. We asked respondents to tell us things that had occurred 'the same day', 'the previous day', and 'two or three months ago', just as we described before.

As predicted, the results were rather different: for same day contexts the present perfect was always used:

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2 We follow Schwenter's approach (1994:93) and use a command form: "Tell me about your day today." in order not to influence the use of present perfect or simple past.

3 These data were obtained from free conversation. The frequencies taken as baselines, however, correspond to the directed interview specified below.

## a) Same day

- (7) Hoy *he venido* a dar un beso a mi abuelo, que hoy es su cumpleaños, y *he venido* a felicitarle a la salida del pediatra. *Le hemos cantado* el "cumpleaños feliz", *ha abierto* los ojos y *se ha emocionado*. *Ha sido* muy bonito... L. es la primera vez que venía y *se ha quedado* maravillado con todo lo que ha visto. Luego *hemos regresado* a casa y ahora me *has hecho* unas preguntas... Bueno, en fin, lo *he pasado* muy bien y espero que se repita.

Today, I came to give Granny a kiss, because it's her birthday and I went to wish her many happy returns on coming back from the paediatrician's. We sang Happy Birthday to her, she opened her eyes and got all emotional. It was lovely... It was the first time L. had come and she was delighted with what she saw. Then we went back home and now you've asked me some questions... Well, I had a great time and I hope to do it again.

Very frequently also it was used to express events that had occurred the day before:

## b) Previous day

- (8) Ayer *hemos celebrado* una reunión con todos los alumnos del colegio. Lo más difícil *ha sido* poder reunir a tanta gente en tan poco tiempo. *Ha sido* una experiencia muy bonita volver a ver a ese ramillete de amigos de antes y ojalá que esto sirva para generar más unión entre nosotros. Lo bonito *ha sido* que la gente *ha respondido* bien. *Hemos comido* de lo lindo, *hemos bebido*, *hemos cantado* y *hemos recordado* los viejos tiempos.

We held a meeting yesterday with all the old pupils. The hardest part was to get so many people together at such short notice. It was nice to see the crowd of friends from days gone by and I hope it serves to organise more meetings. The nice thing was the positive response. We had a great lunch, drank, sang and recalled old times.

Conversely, for actions in the more distant past, the frequency of the simple past began to increase:

## c) Two or three months ago

- (9) Hace cosa de dos meses, J. y yo nos *encontramos* en una discoteca y *fue* maravilloso; no *me importó* nada hablar con él aunque sólo fuera por esa noche. *Me invitó* a una copa, *estuvimos* charlando todo el tiempo de temas estrictamente profesionales, aunque en aquel ambiente no pegaba mucho, bueno, incluso bailamos un poco. Para mí fue un reencuentro positivo, porque lo *vi* mucho más natural conmigo que otras veces. *Me llevó* a mi casa, *me dejó* en el portal y *me dijo* que me llamaría algún día, pero después, *pasó* algo así como un mes y medio, y no lo *vi* mas.

About two months ago, J. and I met at a disco and it was great; I didn't mind talking to him, albeit for one night only. He bought me a drink, we chatted the whole time about our jobs, although the subject was not appropriate to the place, well, we danced a bit also. I thought it was a positive thing to meet again, because I

found him much more at ease with me than on other occasions. He took me home, left me at the door and said he would ring me some day, but a month and a half went by and I didn't see him again.

In Esgueva and Cantarero (1981) we also find the present perfect used for events 'on the same day':

- (10) No *has dado* tiempo de grabar una... una cinta magnetofónica (...) Pues *he hablado*, pues, de... de historia (...) ¿Cuántas copas te *has bebido*? ¿*Has salido* así de casa? (...) No, cuando *hemos salido* de la casa de modas (...) Bueno, con el abuelo ya *hemos hablado* bastante.

You didn't give us enough time to record a... a tape (...) Well, I *talked*, you know, about... history (...) How many drinks did *did you have*? Did you go out like that? (...) No, when we left the fashion shop (...) Well, we have talked enough with Grandad.

In addition, for events which happened 'yesterday':

- (11) Y al día siguiente nos dijeron: ayer *hemos pensado* hacer esto. Venga a trabajar. Lo hacemos por la mañana.

And the following day they told us: yesterday we thought about doing this. Let's get down to work. We'll do it in the morning.

- (12) Hace dos días *ha estado* comiendo por ahí con unos extranjeros que habían venido para asuntos de allí.

A few days ago he went out for lunch with people from abroad who had come to deal with business from over there

The simple past is also used for events which happened some time ago:

- (13) Pues como tú sabes, me *casé* con él... la Iglesia del Espíritu Santo, el día trece de julio a las seis y media de la tarde, con un calor horrible y... y muy tranquila, porque estaba tranquilísima; no *me emocioné* nada, *me di* cuenta de toda la ceremonia, y todo, perfecto. Por la mañana *me fui* a confesar con A. y después a llevar las maletas.

Well, you know, I married him... at the Church of the Holy Spirit, on 13 July, at half past six in the evening, and it was horribly hot and... I was very calm, I was really calm; I didn't get emotional at all, I was completely aware of the ceremony and everything was perfect. In the morning, I went to confession with A. and then to take the luggage.

However, examples of the present perfect were also found in these contexts:

- (14) ¿Qué *he hecho* yo este verano? ¡Ah! sí. Bueno, *he estado* trabajando todo el mes de agosto y luego *he ido*, *he estado* veinte días en los Pirineos. *He entrado* por Fuenterrabía (...) y haciendo eses, eses, *he salido* por la parte de Gerona. Y luego, *hemos bajado* por la, por la Costa...

What did I do this summer? Oh, yes! Well, I was working throughout August and then I went off, I was in the Pyrenees for twenty days. I went in through Fuenterrabía (...) and, taking all the winding roads, I came out via Gerona. And then we travelled down along the Coast...

Alternance of both forms has also been observed:

- (15) Precisamente, este verano *estuve* en San Sebastián. Hacía muchos años que no estaba en San Sebastián; y entonces, me *ha gustado* mucho, aparte de la lluvia, que me *he mojado* muchísimo de, de verlo, el gusto, la distinción de las, de las chicas, de las mujeres de San Sebastián.

This summer I was in San Sebastian. I hadn't been in San Sebastian for many years; well, I loved, except the rain, which soaked me through, to look at their dress sense, the distinguished girls, the women of San Sebastian.

It can be seen that the 'anterior' meaning of the present perfect with respect to the 'perfective' meaning of the simple past is also maintained in relatively distant past contexts, i.e., when the event took place quite some time before the time of communication. In "today" and "yesterday" contexts, the differences between the two forms are minimized; the present perfect is grammaticalized to perform perfective functions in place of the simple past. The 'perfective' sense of present perfect is, thus, completely grammaticalized to describe sequences which are immediately anterior to the moment of speech (generally within the same day), and it is beginning to spread to contexts which are more remote, such as events which took place 'yesterday'. This situation may be interesting since it would imply that this form is gaining ground at the expense of the simple past and that it may completely supplant it. To study this possibility, we analyzed usage frequencies of this form for events that occurred on days prior to the time of communication. From our narrative surveys for the 'yesterday' context we obtained a total of 174 examples, 122 (70%) of which corresponded to the present perfect and 52 (30%) to the simple past. On the contrary, in the contexts of 'two or three months ago' the proportion of use of each verbal form vastly different: 42 (18%) out of 235 cases used the present perfect and 193 (82%) the simple past. The results are quite definitive, indicating both the projection of the present perfect beyond those contexts which are closer to the communication time, as well as an increase in usage. The distribution among the different social groups also shows that this is an increasing phenomenon, due to its frequency among young groups, as shown in the following table:

	Present Perfect	Simple past
1st Gen. (20-34)	(39) 22%	(12) 7%
2nd Gen. (35-55)	(67) 39%	(4) 2%
3rd Gen. (55--)	(16) 9%	(36) 21%

Table 1: Percentages of use of each form for each generation group in 'before today' contexts.



As can be seen in the Table, the highest percentage of use of the grammaticalized present perfect is found in the second generation, followed by the first, whereas the competing form, the simple past, appears mainly in the third generation. This clearly indicates that the grammaticalized form will make further inroads in future.

However, the distribution by sociocultural levels does not show the same clearcut pattern, although there is a clear tendency for it to appear among members of intermediate sociocultural levels, as can be seen in the following table:

	Present Perfect	Simple Past
1st (low) level	(13) 7%	(7) 4%
2nd (middle-low) level	(45) 26%	(14) 8%
3rd (middle-high) level	(52) 30%	(16) 9%
4th (high) level	(12) 7%	(15) 9%

**Table 2: Percentages of use of each form by sociocultural level in 'before today' contexts.**

The results obtained lend further support to the idea that the grammaticalized present perfect for 'before today' sequences is quite deeply-rooted among this community due to its presence among intermediate groups. Indeed, the very low percentage of use of the alternative form could be an indication that it is a scarcely used form and that its use might decrease.

On the other hand, the distribution by sex is not significant, the percentages for use in each case being quite regular. This can be seen in table 3:

	Present Perfect	Simple Past
Male	(72) 41%	(32) 18%
Female	(50) 29%	(20) 12%

**Table 3: Percentages of usage of each form by sex in 'before today' contexts.**

It can be inferred from the above considerations not only that the grammaticalized 'perfective' use of the present perfect has been fully introduced in the speaking habits of Madrid people for events which occurred on the same day or shortly before the time of communication time, but also, and quite definitely, that this form is spreading through other designative areas of the simple past, such as events that occurred the previous day. This means that the grammaticalization process in this speech community is quite advanced and the change has proven successful for speakers.

However, it is also necessary to evaluate attitudes towards this phenomenon. In order to detect this attitude, we carried out research to evaluate and assess awareness of this form. The interview was passed to the same respondents who had provided the initial data

and also the data of the narrative survey described in the present work. The questions were as follows<sup>4</sup>:

(16)

1. Which of these two constructions would you say?:
  - a) "*Esta mañana me he levantado* a las siete"
  - b) "*Esta mañana me levanté* a las siete"  
[I got up at seven this morning]
2. Which construction do you think is the most adequate in a formal context?:
  - a) "*He llegado* tarde porque había mucho tráfico" (esta mañana)
  - b) "*Llegué* tarde porque había mucho tráfico" (esta mañana)  
[I arrived late because the traffic was heavy (this morning)]
3. Do you think it is more correct and portrays you in a better light to say "*Hoy he comido* a las dos y media" rather than "*Hoy comí* a las dos y media"?  
[I had lunch today at half past two]

Overall, there were no negative attitudes towards the use of the grammaticalized form; rather, it was considered a 'normal' form for sequences of this type. Most people responded to the first question that the compound form was the one to be used, almost immediately discarding the use of the simple past form. With regard to the second question -which of the forms would be used in a formal context-, again a majority of respondents chose the grammaticalized form. Lastly, there was no particular attitude towards the degree of correctness of one or other form; the most frequent answer was that both were equally acceptable. There was a correspondence between use and attitude, since the majority of 'positive' responses were given by respondents from the first generation and middle sociocultural levels. Frequencies were quite homogeneous as regards sex. Due to the negligible number of negative attitude responses, significant conclusions cannot be drawn in this regard.

The use of the grammaticalized form, therefore, is deeply rooted in the Madrid community; it is not considered to be an 'abnormal' form, and its spread to other past contexts indicates that its use fits perfectly well the expression of such events.

#### 4 Different degrees of grammaticalization

The grammaticalization process studied is clearly unevenly spread across the community studied. It seems that the shift from the abstract function of the 'anterior' perfect past to a 'perfective' is almost completely established in Madrid Spanish. The maintaining of both referential systems (present perfect and simple past) in other Spanish varieties, such as Canarian Spanish for example should be due to an older standard, a previous state of the language in which this evolution had not occurred. The change, however, has been feasible in other Romance languages and in mainland varieties (such as Madrid Spanish), where the

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4 We tried not to choose verbs which elicited the anterior use of the present perfect (representations of acts lasting into the present), such as *morir* 'die', *nacer* 'to be born', etc. We included adverbs in the model sentences so that the perfective reference would be better perceived by respondents.

use of the simple ('perfective') past has been progressively forced out and replaced by the present perfect.

In Canarian Spanish, for example, the system of the two forms is maintained fully: the present perfect is used in its 'anterior' sense, linked with the present, whereas the simple past is used with its 'perfective' value. The former, therefore, has not suffered an 'erosion' of its meaning, nor has it been grammaticalized to perform perfective functions, as has happened in other Spanish varieties on the mainland, e.g:

- (17) Vine porque tenía que contarle a mi vecina lo que me pasó esta tarde  
I came because I had to tell my neighbour what happened to me this afternoon
- (18) Te mando este fax para comunicarte que me *he inscrito* (esta mañana) en el Curso de Información Geográfica  
I am sending you this fax to let you know that I registered (this morning) for the Geographical Information Course.

In Alicante Spanish, for example, Schwenter 1994, considers that this step has taken place due to the break-up of the boundary between the 'anterior' meaning with relevance in the present and the 'perfective' meaning with the same relevance in the present, and as such it has become generalized. According to Reyes (1990: 115) this change is due to a process of desubjectivization of the perfect, eliminating the value of 'abstract' present relevance and presenting only the much more precise value of 'past'. The desire to specify a past action which is close in time ('relevant here and now') to the communication time is what has produced the grammaticalization of the present perfect for this reference and the 'substitution' of the simple past.

The reasons for this process, however, should not be generalized for all cases. Rather they can be said to be due to different degrees of grammaticalization with respect to the type of speech community and its linguistic and social circumstances. In the Spanish of the Canary Islands, this incipient grammaticalization process has commenced only in contexts near to the time of communication. As we have seen, this process has extended beyond the boundary of closeness to speech time in the Spanish of Madrid. The reasons why a form gradually adopts new functions are related to communicative intention and the desire to convey certain messages. Hence, the fact that a structure becomes grammaticalized in a language may result from social reasons. This aspect has been insufficiently discussed by grammaticalization theoreticians (Hopper and Traugott 1993), but would constitute the basis of our explanation of these two different degrees of evolution of the same form.

Since the present perfect is capable of relating the past with the present, it is the adequate form to recount events which, although past, have happened in the present (the same day); consequently, it achieves sufficient communicative efficiency to acquire a new grammatical function. However, as the form gradually appears in situations which are more remote from those occurring on the same day, the opposition between anterior/perfect becomes blurred and the substitution of the simple past for events which took place some time ago (such as our examples of two or three months ago) cannot be made entirely because the abstract 'anterior' function cannot be eliminated when we narrate 'long' past events. On the other hand, this process may have been initiated due to a communicative need to isolate the past time which was 'relevant in the present' or 'close to the communication time' from those past times deemed to be 'irrelevant' or 'not close to the communication time'. The explanation is, therefore, a function-oriented one, and the process is a response to a communicative need on the part of speakers. However, in the Spanish of the Canary Islands this process has not taken place, but the separation of the 'same today', 'yesterday' or 'some time ago' contexts should be made equally through

other pragmatic procedures, and thus the hearer can easily identify each reference. Consequently, the fact that each speech community presents the same pragmatic phenomenon in two different forms is explained from a social point of view. The geographical location of Madrid, combined with its centralism, has facilitated reception of influences from other speech communities, both mainland and foreign, and this has propitiated a highly permeable linguistic system. It is not surprising, therefore, that this grammaticalization process has evolved so far, similar to that of the French language, for example. On the contrary, in the case of the Spanish of the Canary Islands, an insular variety which had less contact with the mainland for a long time, the system of each verbal form has been preserved intact (as Catalán pointed out thirty years ago). This situation is now changing, given that contact between the islands and the continent has been strengthened by the decentralization of power in Madrid following the arrival of devolved government. Moreover, there has been a marked increase in sea and air communications, which has fostered exchange and mobility of speakers. To the above-mentioned factors, we must add also the influence of the media, which has become increasingly well-received in the islands over the last few decades. However, this process, as we have discussed, is just beginning; we may be witnessing just the initial stage, and we cannot predict with certainty if full introduction will occur as has happened in Madrid Spanish.

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