

Narrative Discourse in Spanish: A Two Reference Points System for Verb Tense Representation

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ABSTRACT: Numerous systems have been conceived to date to show the temporal meanings associated with tenses. Some of them claim to be universal but fail to represent the contrast between tenses like Spanish imperfect and *pretérito*. Others describe only the tenses basic meaning, excluding other narrative uses that these tenses have in discourse, and without considering the role of lexical aspect in tense selection and interpretation. This article will address this issue by proposing a new temporal system with two reference points (R and N) and two kinds of events in terms of lexical aspect (narrative and commentative). This new system makes it possible to differentiate strictly grammatical temporal relations (between the event and R) from discursive temporal relations (between the event and N), as well as to represent the multiple contextual uses of the imperfect and the *pretérito* of Spanish. To illustrate the narrative uses of these tenses in discourse, we provide examples from a corpus of narratives in the past produced by native Spanish speakers. The examples taken from the corpus show that the *pretérito* can represent both synchronous and anterior relations between events and N, but it only designates narrative processes and their perfect phase. The imperfect, for its part, represents both commentary and narrative processes, as well as the progressive phase of the latter, but seems to be limited to designating a synchronic relation between the event and the point N.



Discurso narrativo em espanhol: um sistema de dois pontos de referência para a representação dos tempos verbais

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RESUMO: Diversos sistemas foram concebidos até hoje para representar os significados temporais associados aos tempos verbais. Alguns deles afirmam ser universais, mas não conseguem representar o contraste entre tempos como o pretérito imperfeito e o pretérito perfeito do espanhol. Outros descrevem apenas o significado básico dos tempos verbais, excluindo os usos narrativos que esses tempos assumem no discurso e sem considerar o papel do aspeto lexical na seleção e interpretação do tempo verbal. Este artigo aborda essa questão propondo um novo sistema temporal com dois pontos de referência (R e N) e dois tipos de eventos em termos de aspeto lexical (narrativo e comentativo). Esse novo sistema permite diferenciar as relações temporais estritamente gramaticais (entre o evento e R) das relações temporais discursivas (entre o evento e N), bem como representar os múltiplos usos contextuais do pretérito imperfeito e do pretérito perfeito do espanhol. Para ilustrar os usos narrativos desses tempos no discurso, apresentamos exemplos de um corpus de narrativas no passado produzidas por falantes nativos de espanhol. Os exemplos extraídos do corpus mostram que o pretérito perfeito pode representar tanto relações sincrônicas quanto anteriores entre os eventos e N, mas designa apenas processos narrativos e sua fase perfeita. O pretérito imperfeito, por sua vez, representa tanto processos comentativos quanto narrativos, bem como a fase progressiva destes últimos, mas parece restringir-se à designação de uma relação sincrônica entre o evento e o ponto N.



INTRODUCTION

Numerous models have been conceived to date to show the temporal meanings associated with tenses. Some of them claim to be universal (Reichenbach, 1947; Te Winkel, 1866), but fail to contrast tenses like the imperfect and the simple past. Others are based on languages that have this contrast, such as Spanish (Bello, 1951) and French (Lareau, 2008; Vet, 1991), but describe only their basic meaning, excluding the frequent contextual uses that these tenses have in discourse, and making no distinction between events that have an inherent boundary (*Ella fue (actuó de manera) inteligente / She acted wisely*) and those that do not (*Ella era inteligente / She was intelligent*).

Recent studies aimed at creating and validating interlinguistic models of temporal reference, beyond language-specific features, have highlighted the importance of distinguishing temporal information related to tense, grammatical aspect, and lexical aspect (Grisot, 2018, 2021; Meyer et al., 2013). This article addresses this issue by proposing a new tense system with two reference points: the grammatical reference point, which we call R, and the narrative reference point, which we call N. While R accounts for the temporal relations that define the basic grammatical meaning of a tense, N—our main contribution—enables the representation of contextual uses of verb tenses in discourse, including temporal relations of anteriority, simultaneity, and posteriority that go beyond the scope of purely grammatical meaning.

We claim that the existence of two reference points allows to differentiate strictly grammatical temporal relations from discursive temporal relations and, therefore, makes the system more universal. We also defend the importance of differentiating events according to their lexical aspect, as well as representing the aspectual phases that are present in the language. To

illustrate the contextual uses of tense in real speech, we will use examples taken from a corpus of narratives in the past produced by 20 native speakers of Spanish.

1. THE BASIC MEANING OF GRAMMEMES AND POINT R

In essence, grammatical tense specifies the temporal relation that exists between two prominent points in any discourse about events: the **event** itself, usually noted E, and the **speech act**, usually noted S. However, given the complex temporal relations that can be expressed by tenses across languages, it is common for models to also have a so-called **reference point**, usually noted R. Although Reichenbach was not the first to propose this third point—to our knowledge, that would be Te Winkel (1866)—, he was certainly the most influential. In his seminal paper, he argues that in English, events (E) are never situated directly in relation to the moment of speech (S), but rather in relation to a reference point (R) which itself is situated in relation to S (Reichenbach, 1947, p. 288). Thus, there are two types of relations that are relevant to describe the grammatical tense system of English: the relation between the event and its reference point (E/R), and the relation between the reference point and the speech act (R/S). Table 1 sums up the simple relations that exist in his model of English:

E/R	Term	R/S	Term
$E < R$	Anterior	$R < S$	Past
$E = R$	Simple	$R = S$	Present
$E > R$	Posterior	$R > S$	Future

Table 1 - Simple relations E/R and R/S according to Reichenbach

Source - Own elaboration



In this model, the imperfect in Spanish is represented by the same E/R and R/S relations as the *passé simple/pretérito*, i.e., both are forms of simple past ($E=R$ & $R<S$), but they differ in that the imperfect is an “extended” tense while the *passé simple/pretérito* is not, as illustrated in Figure 1 (Reichenbach, 1947, p. 291).

Figure 1 - Spanish's *passé simple* (left) and *imparfait* (right) according to Reichenbach

Source - Own elaboration



In contrast with Reichenbach's ideas, already in the 19th century, the Hispanic linguist Andrés Bello explained the contrast between these tenses from the temporal point of view, affirming that the *pretérito* (*cantó*) “means priority of the attribute to the speech act” (Bello 1951 [1847], 180), while the imperfect (*cantaba*), *copretérito* in his nomenclature, “means the coexistence of the attribute with a past thing” (p. 181). Other linguists have taken up Bello's ideas in more recent works. For example, Rojo (1990; see also Veiga, 2010) states that some verb tenses express temporal relations that can be represented by means of single-vector formulas, since they are oriented directly from the point of origin (O), while others are represented by bivectorial formulas, since they express temporal relations oriented from another reference that is measured from O. Thus, for example, the *pretérito* would be in the first group, since it designates anteriority with respect to the origin and, therefore, is represented by a single-vector formula: O-V. On the other hand, the imperfect would belong to the second group, since it expresses synchrony with respect to a point in the past, therefore it is represented by a bivectorial formula: (O-V) oV.

Based on a similar analysis, Lareau (2008) proposes a new inflectional category called *décalage* (shifting), which makes it possible to better represent the differences between the imperfect and the simple past of French (see also the $\pm$ *distancé* feature proposed by Vetters, 2017). This category specifies whether the grammatical reference point (R) coincides with the moment of speech or has been displaced from it. In other words, **shifting** indicates whether a clause is temporally anchored to the speech act itself (non-shifted) or to a point anterior to it (shifted). Unlike the traditional distinction between absolute and relative tenses (Vetters, 1996), which concerns how an event (E) is directly located with respect to the moment of speech (S) or with respect to another past event, Lareau's shifting operates at a different grammatical level: it encodes whether the reference point itself has undergone a temporal displacement. However, to maintain terminological continuity with prior work (e.g., Vetters, 1996), we retain the labels *absolute* and *relative* as approximate equivalents to *non-shifted* and *shifted*, respectively, though they are not fully interchangeable.

Hence, in Lareau's model, French finite verbs in the indicative mood are always represented as bearing a pair of grammemes, one of shifting that encode the grammatical location of the reference point (R), and one of tense proper, which locates the verb in relation to its reference point, as illustrated in Table 2. The *absolute* grammeme means that the reference point (R) is simultaneous to the speech act. The *relative* grammeme indicates that the grammatical reference point R is in the past; this point can be an event expressed by another verb in the sentence, but it does not have to be explicit in the sentence.

Table 2 - Tense model of Lareau
 (2008)

Source - Own elaboration

Tense		Shifting	
		Absolute	Relative
	Anterior	<i>a aimé / aima</i>	<i>avait aimé</i>
	Simultaneous	<i>aime</i>	<i>aimait</i>
	Posterior	<i>aimera</i>	<i>aimerait</i>

For instance, the form *aima* ('loved') bears a grammeme from the category of tense, *anterior*, and one of the category of shifting, *absolute*. In terms of Reichenbach's E/R and R/S relations, it could be expressed as $E < R$ and $R = S$, which corresponds to an event presented as temporally detached from the moment of speech (see example 1). In contrast, the form *aimait* ('was loving' / 'used to love') bears the grammeme *simultaneous* in the tense category and *relative* in the shifting category. This means that $R < S$ (the reference point is prior to the speech act) and the event is situated within a past frame ($E = R$) rather than anchored directly to the speech act (see example 2).

(1) Hier, il **chanta** sa chanson préférée au concert.

'Yesterday he sang his favorite **song**_{PERF} at the concert.'

(2) Il **chantait** très bien, avec une voix puissante.

'He **sang**_{IMPERF} very well, with a powerful voice.'

In both Lareau (2008) and Rojo's (1990) models, the difference between the simple past tense (il *aima/amó*) and the imperfect tense (il *aimait/amaba*) is explained by the type of relation (anteriority vs. synchronicity) that they maintain with their referent. Thus, the *passé simple* and

the Spanish *pretérito* designate an action anterior to a reference point that is synchronous to the moment of speech, while the imperfect designates an action synchronous to a reference point that is anterior to the moment of speech. The difference between both systems lies in the fact that Lareau (2008) created a new category (different from tense) to differentiate the forms that are represented by means of a monovectorial relation (established directly with respect to the point of origin) from those that are represented by a bivectorial relation (established directly from a reference anterior to the origin). In this article, we will follow his model to define the basic meaning of tenses.

A question that arises from these considerations is whether these categories are sufficient to define the semantics of tense. According to Lareau (2008), verb tenses have multiple meanings, and his model (Table 2) only considers their basic meaning. The polysemic nature of verb tenses has been addressed by authors such as Labeau (2005), Howard (2005), and Cruz Enríquez (2019), among others. In the next section we propose a new coordinate that aims to better model complex temporal relations that are expressed in different contexts, mainly in past narrations.

2. THE CONTEXTUAL USE OF GRAMMEMES AND POINT N

Based on the relevance of all these categories and values associated with the different features mentioned above, we propose a new point of reference to represent the contextual temporal relations expressed by verb tenses: the narrative reference point N. While the grammatical reference point R allows to represent the temporal relation that serves to define the basic meaning of a verb tense, the narrative reference point N that we propose here serves to represent the different contextual uses of verb tenses in a semantic-pragmatic model (see Grisot, 2018, 2021; Meyer et al., 2013 for other semantic-pragmatic studies of verbal tense in a corpus).

We define the narrative reference point N as a point (or temporal space) associated with an event—explicit or implicit—, marking its relative temporal position on the chronological line and making it possible to establish temporal relations (anteriority, synchrony and posteriority) that are communicatively significant in relation to other events which are, in turn, associated with the same or with a different narrative reference point. By “relative” we mean “not absolute”, i.e., relative to other narrative reference points in the chronological timeline. Thus, a sequence of actions can be analyzed as a sequence of narrative reference points, each of which is associated with one (or more) events of this sequence.

The relation between N and S depends on the textual sphere in which it is found. For example, in the sphere of the *comment* (Weinrich, 1973) the relation of anteriority with respect to the moment of speech is relevant from the communicative point of view, so $N = S$. Observe that, in (3), a deictic adverb has been used, i.e., the event is oriented from the moment of speech: yesterday means that it is before today (see Lo Cascio, 1986). In this context, the Spanish *pretérito* (*cantó*) has its basic meaning and express a relation of anteriority of the event with respect to the grammatical point of reference ($E < R$).

(3) Juan, no quiero ir a ver esa película, la **vi** ayer.

‘Juan, I don’t want to go watch that movie, I **watched**PERF it yesterday.’

Deictic adverbs and tenses are opposed to the anaphoric ones in terms of their relation to the moment of speech. In Spanish, the tenses that express simple temporal relations with respect to the moment of speech have their basic meaning when the event maintains the same relations to R and N, i.e., when $R = N$ (see Table 3).

Tense	E/R	R/S	E/N	N/S
Presente (<i>canta</i>)	E=R	R=S	E=N	N=S
Pretérito (<i>cantó</i>)	E<R	R=S	E<N	N=S
Futuro (<i>cantará</i>)	E>R	R=S	E>N	N=S

Table 3 - Relations between E, R, N, and S in absolute tenses

Source - Own elaboration

The coincidence between E/R and E/N, or R/S and N/S, is not accidental: in their basic meaning, tenses establish a grammatical relation to R that simultaneously corresponds to the discourse relation represented by N. However, the introduction of N becomes necessary once we move beyond basic meanings. In contexts such as indirect or free indirect discourse, or in narrative sequences, R continues to encode the grammatical relation, but N makes it possible to represent additional discourse-driven relations that R alone cannot capture.

In (3), for example, E has the same relation to R and N, as shown in Figure 2, where $|E| < N$, with $N = S$, and $|E| < R$, with $R = S$.

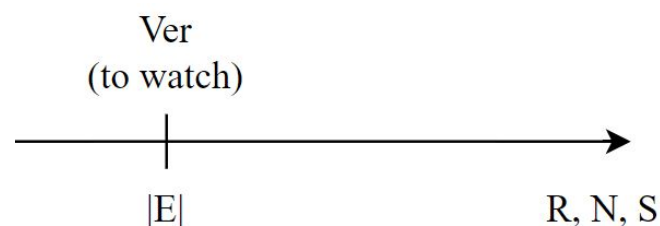


Figure 2 - Representation of the *pretérito*'s basic meaning

Source - Own elaboration

Note that the event *to watch a movie* has inherent boundaries (de Miguel, 1999; Vendler, 1967). To show the boundaries, we represent these events with the symbol $|E|$.

Relative tenses derive from the transposition into the past of absolute tenses in indirect and free indirect discourse (Rohrer, 1986, p. 82). In other words, relative tenses express, in their basic meaning, the same relation between E and R as their homologous absolute tenses, but R is anterior to S ($R < S$). On the other hand, since we are focusing on the basic meaning, E has the same type of relation to R as to N. Unlike their homologous absolute tenses, the relation between E and S is not relevant, and this is rendered in our model by the fact that N is not synchronous to the time of speech. When narrating in the past, N is anterior to S ($N < S$), as shown in Table 4:

Table 4 - Relations between the coordinates E, R, N, and S in simple relative tenses

Source - Own elaboration

Tense	E/R	R/S	E/N	N/S
Imperfecto (<i>cantaba</i>)	$E=R$	$R < S$	$E=N$	$N < S$
Condicional (<i>cantaría</i>)	$E > R$	$R < S$	$E > N$	$N < S$

In examples (4) and (5), the event (*to be innocent*) is simultaneous to N ($E = N$), but in (5), since it is a statement of the narrative sphere (or the past perspective), N is anterior to S ($N < S$) and synchronous to the event that projects the utterance to the indirect discourse: to say ($|E| = N$).

(4) El hombre le dijo al policía: “La chica es inocente”.

‘The man told the police: “The girl **is** innocent.”’

(5) El hombre le dijo al policía que la chica **era** inocente.

‘The man told the police that the girl **was** IMPERF innocent.’

The process of *to be innocent*, which lacks an inherent boundary, is viewed as a state in Vendler's (1967) classification, or as a commentative process in Cruz Enríquez (2022). Importantly, in the context shown in example (5), the imperfect has its basic meaning, since it designates a commentative process that is synchronous with both R and N. We will represent this absence of boundaries by eliminating the sidebars that we use to represent the narrative processes, which do have inherent boundaries: E (See Figure 3, where $E_0 = N_{t1}$ with $N < S$, and $E = R$, with $R < S$).

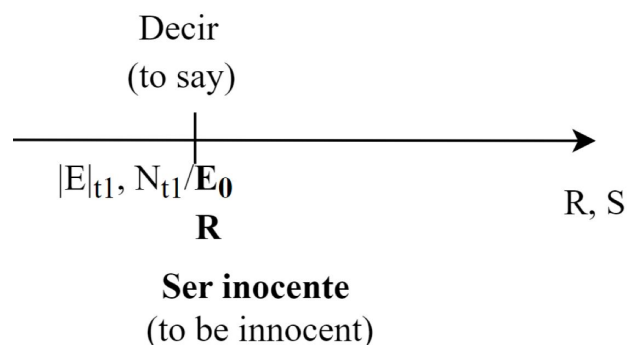


Figure 3 - Representation of the imperfect with its basic meaning

Source - Own elaboration

Note that E has the subscript zero (E_0) since it is not an event that moves the story forward. For this reason, the subscript of E is different from that of N, since N is synchronous and is tied to a process of the narrative sequence, which does move the story forward (to say: $|E|_1 = N_{t1}$).

3. CONTEXTUAL USES OF SPANISH PRETÉRITO AND IMPERFECT FROM A NARRATIVE CORPUS

In this section we aim to illustrate how the integration of a narrative reference point allows to represent the different narrative uses of verb tenses. To do so, we will use examples taken from a corpus of Spanish narratives. We will focus on the two most polysemic past tenses of Spanish, the *pretérito* (*cantó*) and the imperfect (*cantaba*).

3.1. CORPUS

The examples in this section come from our own corpus of written narratives produced by 20 native speakers of Spanish (14 women and 6 men) from Cuba, Spain, Colombia, and Mexico. To collect the data, we had the approval of the (Name) University's Research Ethics Committee. The corpus comprises approximately 9,600 words in total.

All participants had either college or university level. The average age of the participants was 46.45 years, with a range from 22 to 71 years. All participants grew up as monolingual Spanish speakers; however, seven of them now speak French as a second language and currently reside in Quebec province. No significant differences in the narrative uses of past verb tenses have been documented across the dialectal varieties represented in the corpus. The Rioplatense variety was intentionally excluded from the study due to its notably different use of the present perfect (*ha cantado*), which is far less frequent than in the other varieties. Although this form rarely appears in narrative texts, we considered that this fact could influence the choice between *cantó* and *había cantado* in background discourse (e.g., reported speech), and such variation was beyond the scope of this study.

The task we used to collect the corpus data consisted of written narratives based on a sequence from the silent film *Modern Times* (Charles Chaplin 1936). The chosen 8-minute sequence (from minute 35'16 to minute 43'28) begins with the scene entitled *Alone and hungry* and has 5 scenarios:

1. On the street: includes the theft of a loaf of bread by the poor girl, the rich lady ratting on the girl, and the girl's arrest;
2. In the cafeteria: the man eats everything he wants and does not pay the bill, so he is arrested by a policeman;
3. In the police truck: the man meets the girl who stole the bread;
4. On the street: the characters manage to escape and sit in front of a house;
5. Inside the house: (as part of their imagination) the characters experience a familiar and domestic scene.

The fragment was chosen because it has a sequence of events (ideal for analyzing the narrative sequence of the foreground) and simultaneous actions and scene changes (which allow analyzing the background: descriptions, character feelings and thoughts). On the other hand, the sequence in which the characters imagine what it would be like to live together in a house like the one before them is likely to be narrated from the character's perspective.

Before showing the sequence to the participants, it was explained to them who the main characters were, and they were offered some information that would allow them to enrich the background in the narration. For example, they were told that the main character had just been

released from prison and wished to return to it (since he didn't have a job and at least his food was guaranteed there), and that the girl was an orphan and homeless. Participants watched the entire sequence twice and then had to narrate, in writing, the story they had seen in the sequence. They were asked to narrate in the past, trying to offer as many details as possible about what happened in the sequence and avoiding present tense. During the viewing, they were allowed to take notes to avoid forgetting important actions, but they were not allowed to listen to the sequence again afterward. The average time to complete the writing task was 45 minutes. To promote the use of past tense, it was suggested that they begin the narrative with the phrase *Había una vez* ('Once upon a time'), in line with what other researchers have done so with the same objective (Bardovi-Harlig, 1998, Hasbún, 1995).

3.2. NARRATIVE USES OF THE *PRETÉRITO*

So far, we have seen that the *pretérito* has its basic meaning in contexts in which the relation of anteriority of E to S is relevant, as in (3), which we repeat below as (6), where the event is not located in a narrative sequence and, therefore, it is not synchronous to a new N point either.

(6) Juan, no quiero ir a ver esa película, la **vi** ayer.

'Juan, I don't want to go watch that movie, I **watched**PERF it yesterday.'

In the case of the *narrative* sphere, where the *pretérito* of Spanish (*cantó*) point to events of a narrative sequence, as in (7), also known as the foreground of the narrative (Bardovi-Harlig, 1998; Dry, 1992; Reinhart, 1984), the relation to S is no longer relevant from the communicative point of view. For this reason, N is not simultaneous to S, but, in any case, anterior to it, since it is a narrative in the past ($N < S$). It also advances in time together with the sequence of events. This corresponds to Kamp & Rohrer's (1983) narrative progression.

(7) Aquel día Miguel **se levantó**, **se duchó**, y más tarde **salió** de su casa.

‘That day Miguel **got up**^{PERF}, **took**^{PERF} a shower, and later **left**^{PERF} home.’

Note that these events also have an inherent boundary, which allows them to be narrated, i.e., placed in a narrative sequence in such a way that each event is, in principle, posterior to the preceding one. Each event of the sequence is synchronous to its own narrative reference point ($|E| = N$). The relation between each E and R does not change, since it refers to the basic meaning of the tense ($|E| < R$). Hence, in this case, R is not synchronous to N, but posterior: $R > N$. In this study, a tense is considered not to express its basic meaning when its temporal configuration diverges from the canonical relation between E, R and N that defines its prototypical value. In general, when a tense does not express its basic meaning, E maintains different relations with R and N, so R is not synchronous to N ($R \neq N$).

Thus, for example, in (7), each action is interpreted as posterior to the preceding one, even in the absence of an explicit marker of posteriority, as in *Miguel got up, took a shower* (as opposed to *later he left home*, which has an explicit marker). The adverbs *that day* and *later* are anaphoric, i.e., they do not express any relation to S. In Figure 4, we show the scheme of the narrative sequence, where $|E|_{1-3} = N_{t1-t3}$, with $N < S$, and $|E|_{1-3} < R$, with $R = S$:

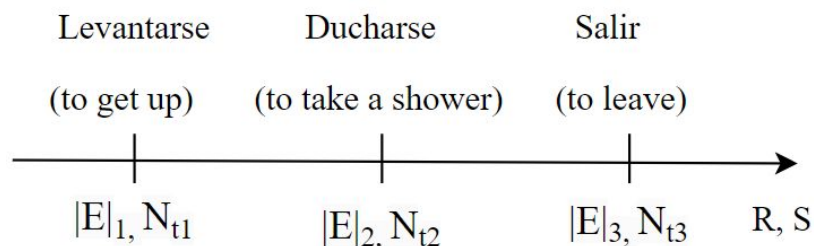


Figure 4 - Representation of *pretérito* in the narrative sequence

Source - Own elaboration

It is important to point out that the capacity of some events to be narrated, i.e., placed in a narrative sequence, has given rise to different approaches. For example, Cruz Enríquez (2022) classifies processes considering their capacity to be narrated or not, in narrative and commentative, respectively. She claims that only narrative processes can appear in a narrative sequence. Following Cruz Enríquez (2022), we will refer to these events as “narrative processes”, since we seek to show some of the contextual uses of tenses, a narrative sequence being one of the contexts that allow us to illustrate one of the uses of the *pretérito*.

Note that in (8), the *pretérito* could be replaced by the present tense without changing the temporal relations between the events in the narrative sequence (see (9)).

(8) Ambos **fueron** a hablar con el policía. Entonces este **liberó** a Chartot y **arrestó** a la joven.

‘They both **went**_{PERF} to talk to the policeman. He then **released**_{PERF} Chartot and **arrested**_{PERF} the young woman.’

(9) Ambos **van** a hablar con el policía. Entonces este **libera** a Chartot y **arresta** a la joven.

‘They both **go** to talk to the policeman. He then **frees** Chartot and **arrests** the young woman.’

The present can even be combined or coexist with the *pretérito* in the narrative sequence, as in (10):

(10) No le **consideran** culpable y **capturan** a la joven. Acto seguido, el hombre **entra** a un restaurante, **pidió** comida en abundancia [...]

‘They do not **consider** him guilty, and they **capture** the young woman. Right after, the man **enters** a restaurant, he **asked** for abundant food [...]

It is worth noting that in this context (the narrative sequence) the *pretérito* does not have its basic meaning, it designates an event (a narrative process) that is synchronous to N ($|E| = N$). The verbal tense that replaces it, the present, designates, in its basic meaning (see Table 3), an event that is synchronous to point N ($E = N$). In (11), on the other hand, the present makes the sentence ungrammatical, probably because, in this case, the *pretérito* has its basic meaning and designates an event that is prior to N ($|E| < N$).

(11) Juan, no quiero ir a ver esa película, la ***veo** ayer.

‘Juan, I don't want to go see that movie, I ***see** it yesterday.’

Let's see now another use of the *pretérito* that may appear in a narrative text and is related to example (11). Observe sentence (13), where the statement of (12) is projected in indirect discourse:

(12) La señora le dijo al policía: “La chica **robó** una barra de pan”.

‘The lady told the police: “The girl **stole**PERF a loaf of bread.”’

(13) La señora le dijo al policía que la chica **robó** una barra de pan.

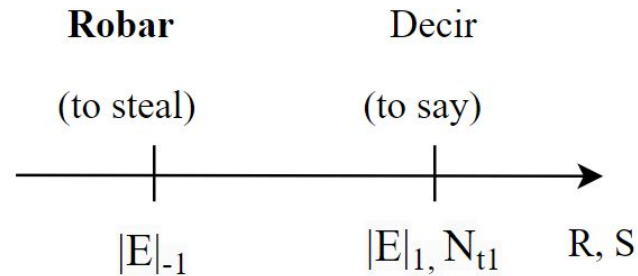
‘The lady told the police that the girl **stole**PERF a loaf of bread.’

In (13), as in (12), the event (*to steal a loaf of bread*) is prior to N ($|E| < N$), but in this case, because it is a statement in the narrative sphere, N is prior to the time of speech ($N < S$). It should be noted that N is synchronous to the event that projects the utterance to indirect discourse: *to say* ($|E| = N$). Thus, it is the verb of the main utterance belonging to the narrative sequence that guides the temporal relations of anteriority, synchronicity and posteriority in a

narrative text. In terms of reference points, we can state that $|E| < R$ and $|E| < N$. The scheme of (11) is shown in Figure 5, where $|E|_{-1} < N_{t1}$ with $N < S$, and $|E|_{-1} < R$, with $R = S$:

Figure 5 - Representation of the pretérito as a non-transposed form in indirect speech

Source - Own elaboration



If we compare (13) to (14), we see that, in this context, the pluperfect (*había robado*) could also be used.

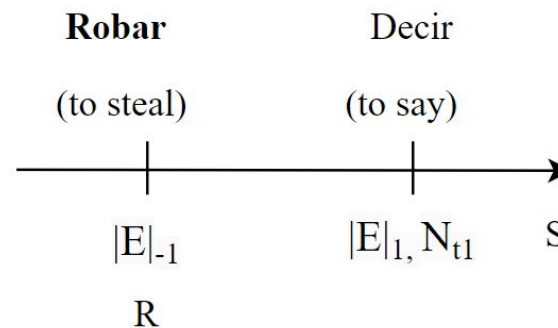
(14) La señora le dijo al policía que la chica **había robado** una barra de pan.

‘The lady told the policeman that the girl **had stolen** a loaf of bread.’

In (14), as in (13), $|E| < N$, but the relation between R and S is different since the pluperfect (*había robado*) is a relative tense ($R < S$), i.e., in its basic function it designates a synchronous event to R . The scheme of (14) is shown in Figure 6, where $|E|_{-1} < N_{t1}$ and $E-1 = R$, with $R < S$:

Figure 6 - Representation of the pluperfect as a transposed form in indirect speech

Source - Own elaboration



We have found in the corpus a balanced use of the *pretérito* and the pluperfect to indicate anteriority of the event with respect to point N.

(15) En ese momento una señora le indicó al panadero que la muchacha se **había robado** una barra de pan.

‘At that moment, a woman told the Baker that the girl **had stolen** a loaf of bread.’

(16) Más adelante subió al camión la muchacha que **robó** el pan.

‘Later the girl who **stole** the bread climbed into the truck.’

It’s interesting to point out that there are syntactic contexts, like some relative clauses, where the use of the *pretérito* could make the proposition ambiguous in terms of temporal relation between the event and the narrative reference point. We found in the corpus that kind of ambiguity, but in all cases the context allowed to determine that the event was anterior to N, not synchronous. In (17), for example, because we watched the whole sequence of the movie, we know that the policeman had heard the merchant’s accusation before arriving at the scene, and therefore, we know that the event is anterior to N.

(17) Ante la algarabía se presentó un policía que **oyó** la acusación del comerciante y se dispuso a conducir a la autora [la ladrona] a la estación [...].

‘In the face of the uproar, arrived a policeman who **heard**^{PERF} the merchant's accusation and set out to drive the author [the thief] to the station [...].’

In (18), in the relative clause (in bold), the event can be interpreted as anterior to N ($|E| < N$), so the sentence is equivalent to the one in (19). This interpretation is quite plausible, considering that in the first scene of the video Chaplin is arrested by a policeman, who frees him a few seconds later to apprehend the real thief.

(18) El policía, **quien lo arrestó**, lo metió en una furgoneta.

‘The policeman, **who arrested**PERF him, put him in a van.’

(19) El policía, **quién lo había arrestado**, lo metió en una furgoneta.

‘The policeman, **who had arrested** him, put him in a van.’

However, this event (to arrest) is more likely to be part of the narrative sequence for several reasons. First, it is unlikely that the participant will remember the face of the policeman from the first scene, enough to know whether it is the same agent and, furthermore, this information is irrelevant to the story. Secondly, in the scene that the participant is narrating, the character’s arrest by an agent also takes place, so it makes more sense that he is referring to this arrest than the one in the first scene. Thus, everything seems to indicate that the event is part of the narrative sequence and, therefore, synchronous to N ($|E| = N$).

When contexts would not be sufficient to disambiguate, all participants preferred to use the pluperfect, as in (20):

(20) Una señora que pasaba y **había visto** todo le indicó que la chica había robado el pan.

‘A lady who was passing by and **had seen** everything told him that the girl had stolen the bread.’

The use of the pluperfect as a transposed form of the *pretérito* may respond to the fact that there is no tense in Spanish whose basic meaning is a relative version of the *pretérito*. On this, Arias Bedoya (2018) points out that, to fill these gaps, the *pretérito*, which primarily expresses the combination of the anterior + absolute grammemes, fulfills the role of the combination anterior + relative (2018, p. 96). The use of *había cantado* as a transposed form of *cantó* may also reflect the close relation between ‘anterior’ and ‘perfect’ meanings, since, as Rojo points out, “for an action to be prior to another, it must have previously reached its perfection” (1990, p. 34). This may indicate that there is a neutralization of the two, especially in the context of free indirect discourse and indirect discourse.

According to Arias Bedoya, the *pretérito* of Spanish not only expresses the combination anterior + relative, but also the combination anterior + absolute + perfect, which is that of the almost extinct *pretérito anterior* (*hubo cantado*) (2018, p. 96):

(21) En cuanto **terminó/hubo terminado** de comer, se marchó.

‘As soon as he **finished/had finished**PRET ANT eating, he left’

Sentence (21) shows one of the few contexts in which the form *hubo cantado* used to be employed in Spanish: the adverbial temporal clause (de Toledo & Rodríguez Molina, 2008). Although it has lost ground to the *pretérito*, as in (22), it is still possible to find it today in narrations produced by native Spanish speakers, as in (23). This was the only occurrence of *hubo cantado* found in the sample, and it appears to be motivated by the stylistic weight that this form currently carries, making it a particularly marked choice.

(22) Cuando el camión **arrancó**, él perdió su equilibrio.

‘When the truck **started**, he lost his balance.’

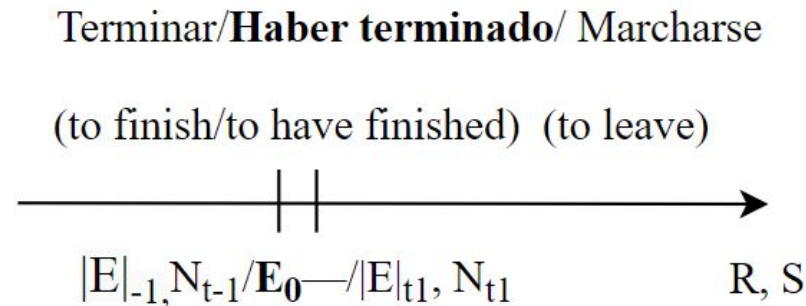
(23) Cuando este **hubo partido**, Chaplin imitó los gestos frívolos de la esposa.

‘When he **had left**PRET ANT, Chaplin imitated the frivolous gestures of his wife.’

Figure 7 shows the scheme of (21), where *to have finished eating* is shown as the perfect phase of the event *to finish eating*. The latter could have been part of the narrative sequence, but instead the focus here is on its perfect phase to show the anteriority relation (immediate or not) of the event *to finish eating* with respect to the event *to leave*, which is part of the narrative sequence. To indicate that it is a perfect phase, we use the symbol E_0- , where $E_0- < N_{t1}$, with $N < S$, and $E_0- < R$, with $R = S$.

Figure 7 - Representation of *pretérito anterior*

Source - Own elaboration



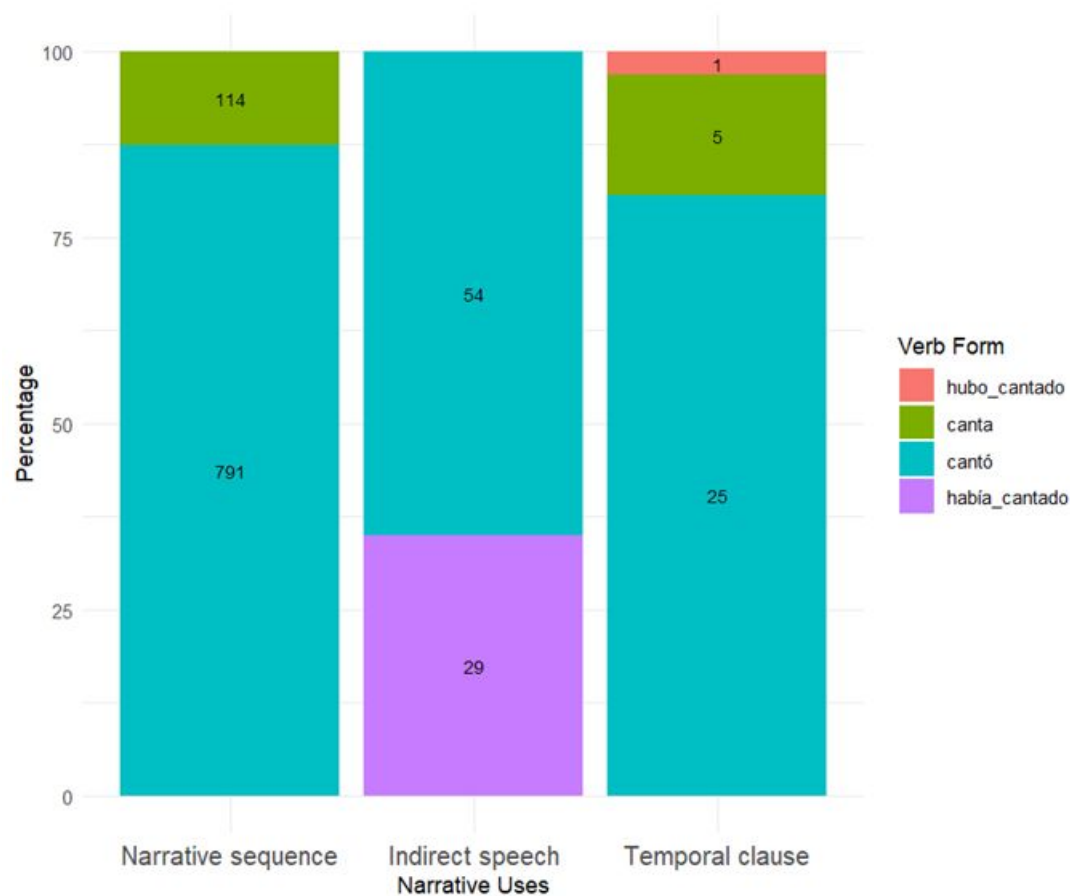
Note that the only difference between the *pretérito* (*cantó*) and the *pretérito anterior* (*hubo cantado*) is precisely that the former designates, in its basic meaning, a narrative process, while the latter designates the perfect phase of a narrative process. In sum, a tense (*cantó*) that, in its basic meaning, designates a narrative process anterior to R and to N ($|E| < N$, $|E| < R$) has

replaced a tense (*hubo cantado*) that designates a perfect phase with which it shares the same relation of anteriority between E and R/N ($E_0 - < N_{t1}$, $E_0 - < R$). Hence, the perfect reading is attenuated, while immediate anteriority is made more salient. Considering that, as we mentioned above, there is a close relation between the anteriority and the perfect meanings, it is not surprising that the *pretérito anterior* in Spanish has lost ground to the *pretérito*. It should be noted that this case is different from the one mentioned above (see (14) and Figure 6). In that earlier example, a tense (*había cantado*), which in its basic meaning designates a perfect phase synchronous to R ($E_0 - = R$) and to N ($E_0 - = N_{t1}$), is also used to express anteriority of a narrative process with respect to N ($|E|_{-1} < N_{t1}$). In such contexts, the perfect meaning overrides and neutralizes the anterior one. By contrast, in the present case, the perfect meaning is attenuated, while the anterior reading becomes more salient.

Figure 8 shows the percentage of *cantó* compared to other forms used in the corpus across three narrative uses: the narrative sequence, reported speech, and temporal clauses. While its use is clearly predominant in the narrative sequence, *cantó* is also the most frequently used form in all three contexts, highlighting its high degree of polysemy in Spanish. The graph displays usage percentages and also provides the exact number of occurrences for each form.

Figure 8 - Percentage of cantó and other verb forms per narrative use.
 Figure created by the authors using R

Source - Own elaboration



So far, we have seen that, in narrative texts, the *pretérito* can represent both synchronous and anterior relations between events and N, but it only designates narrative processes and their perfect phase. Let us see now the contextual uses of imperfect in the corpus.

3.3. NARRATIVE USES OF THE IMPERFECT

As we mentioned before, the imperfect can be defined, in its basic meaning, as: $E_0 = N_{t1}$ with $N < S$, and $E = R$, with $R < S$. However, the Spanish imperfect has other contextual uses that can be represented by the four coordinates. One of them appears in a narrative sequence, when the events (narrative processes) are synchronous to N ($|E| = N$).

(24) Chaplin contaba cómo las plantas de manzana tenían gajos con manzana dentro de la habitación, las **tomaba**, las **comía**, luego las **botaba**.

‘Chaplin told how the apple plants had branches with apples inside the room, he **tookIMPERF** them, **ateIMPERF** them, then **threwIMPERF** them away.’

Note that, unlike what happens when the imperfect has its basic meaning (see (5): *El hombre le dijo al policía que la chica era inocente*), in this context each event ($|E|$) is synchronous to its own point N , hence both coordinates have the same subscript, as shown in Figure 9, where $|E|_{1-3} = N_{1-3}$ with $N < S$, and $E_{1-3} = R_{1-3}$, with $R < S$.

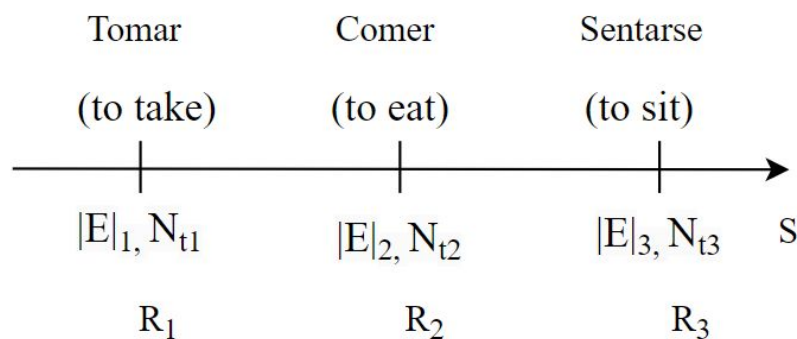


Figure 9 - Representation of the imperfect in the narrative sequence

Source - Own elaboration

It should be noted, however, that the use of the imperfect in a narrative sequence provides an important nuance to the narrative: it marks the desire to narrate from the perspective of a character, not from the more impersonal point of view of the narrator, as explained by Cruz Enríquez (2019, 2022) in her model of past tenses. Another contextual use of the imperfect, at least in Spanish, is observed in contexts in which a process in a progressive phase is represented from a character's perspective. This occurs, for example, when the main verb is a perception verb, such as to see in (25) and (26):

(25) y vieron como su dueño salía para el trabajo.

‘and they saw how their owner was leaving for work.’

‘and they saw how their owner leftIMPERF for work.’

(26) La dama elegante, al ver que la policía se llevaba a Charlie y dejaba libre a Margarita [...].

‘The elegant lady, seeing that the policeman was taking Charlie away and was setting Margarita free [...].’

‘The elegant lady, seeing that the policeman takeIMPERF Charlie away and setIMPERF Margarita free [...].’

Figure 10 shows the scheme of (25), where $-E_0- = Nt1$ with $N < S$, and $E = R$ with $R < S$. Note that the event (*to leave*) is synchronous to the point N that is tied to the event of the main clause (*to see*), hence it does not have the same subscript as N. To indicate that it is a progressive phase, we use the symbol $-E-$. Note that, in this case, the subject of consciousness is available even if the grammatical subject is not explicit (*they*).

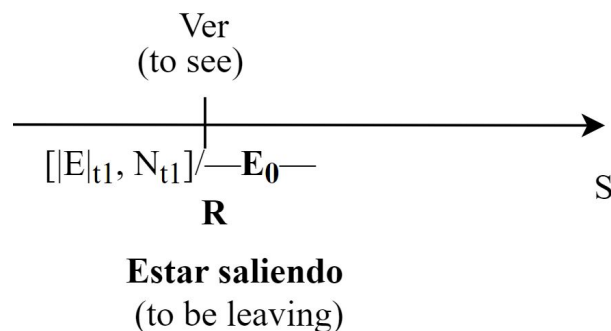


Figure 10 - Representation of the progressive phase

Source - Own elaboration

The same happens when the perception event is not explicit, but it is obvious that it is presented from the perspective of one of the characters, as in free indirect discourse (see (27), (28), and (29)), and in some relative clauses (see (30)).

(27) El repartidor **forcejaba** con Margarita.

‘The delivery man **was struggling** with Margarita.’

‘The delivery man **struggled**IMPERF with Margarita.’

(28) Detrás de ellos, un panadero **vendía** su mercancía de manera ambulante.

‘Behind them, a baker **was selling** his wares in an itinerant manner.’

‘Behind them, a baker **sold**IMPERF his wares in an itinerant manner.’

(29) Un camión **descargaba** mercancía en dicha panadería.

A truck **was unloading** merchandise at that bakery.’

A truck **unloaded**IMPERF merchandise at that bakery.’

(30) Mientras, salía de una bella casa una pareja feliz que se **despedían** con besos y abrazos.

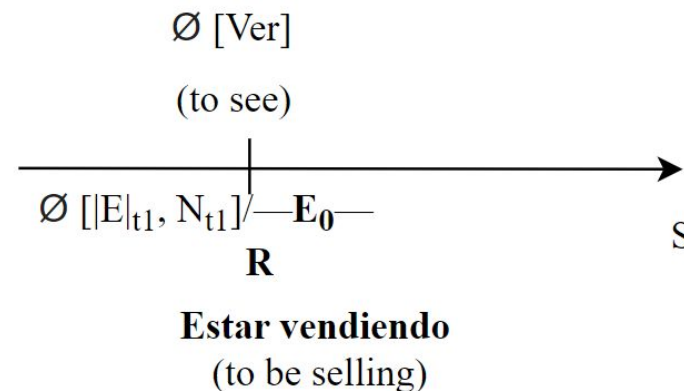
‘Meanwhile, a happy couple who **was saying** goodbye with kisses and hugs left a beautiful house.’

‘Meanwhile, a happy couple who **said** IMPERF goodbye with kisses and hugs left a beautiful house.’

As shown in Figure 11, where $—E_0— = N_{t1}$ with $N < S$, and $E = R$, with $R < S$, in (28), as in (25), the event (*to sell*) is synchronous to the N that is tied to the event of the principal clause, a perception process (*to see*). Unlike the previous case, here the main event is not explicit. That is why we use the symbol $\emptyset$.

Figure 11 - Representation of the progressive phase in the free indirect discourse

Source - Own elaboration



In these cases, the Spanish progressive periphrasis (*estar* + gerund) can also be used, as in (31), (32), and (33).

(31) En ese momento un señor **estaba entrando** el pan.

‘At that moment a man **was bringing** the bread inside.’

(32) El panadero **estaba descargando** el pan de una camioneta.

‘The baker **was unloading** the bread from a van.’

(33) Entonces [la chica] chocó y derribó a Chaplin, que **estaba caminando** en la misma dirección.

‘Then [the girl] collided and knocked over Chaplin, who **was walking** in the same direction.’

Another context in which the imperfect is used to designate the progressive phase of a narrative process is that of temporal adverbial clauses, as in (34) and (35), where we have underlined the event that is synchronous and is tied to N. In this context, we did not find any instance of the progressive periphrasis of Spanish (*estar* + gerund) in the corpus.

(34) Cuando se la **llevaban**, Chaplin dijo que había sido él [...]

‘When they **were taking** her away, Chaplin said that it had been him [...]

‘When they **took**_{IMPERF} her away, Chaplin said that it had been him [...]

(35) Cuando éste **salía**, una señora que [...] había visto todo le indicó que la chica había robado el pan.

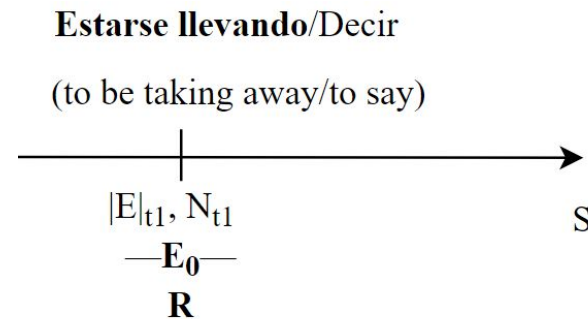
‘When he **was leaving**, a lady who [...] had seen everything told him that the girl had stolen the bread.’

‘When he **left**IMPERF, a lady who [...] had seen everything **told** him that the girl had stolen the bread.’

Figure 12 shows the scheme for (34), where $-E_0- = N_{t1}$ with $N < S$, and $E = R$, with $R < S$. The event to take (*someone*) away could have been part of the narrative sequence, but the participant chose to focus on its progressive phase to show the synchronicity of that event with respect to the main event (*to say*), which is indeed part of the narrative sequence.

Figure 11 - Representation of the progressive phase in the free indirect discourse

Source - Own elaboration



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‘At that moment a man **was bringing** the bread inside.’

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‘The baker **was unloading** the bread from a van.’

(33) Entonces [la chica] chocó y derribó a Chaplin, que **estaba caminando** en la misma dirección.

‘Then [the girl] collided and knocked over Chaplin, who **was walking** in the same direction.’

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(34) Cuando se la **llevaban**, Chaplin dijo que había sido él [...]

‘When they **were taking** her away, Chaplin said that it had been him [...]

‘When they **took**IMPERF her away, Chaplin said that it had been him [...]

(35) Cuando éste **salía**, una señora que [...] había visto todo le indicó que la chica había robado el pan.

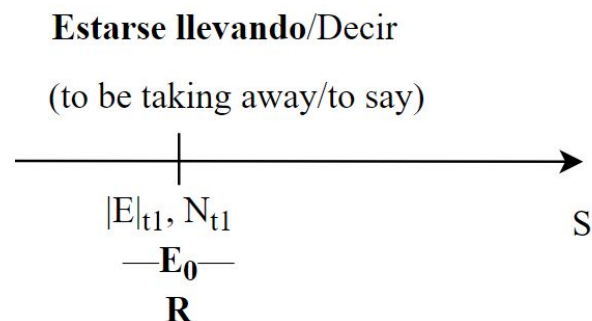
‘When he **was leaving**, a lady who [...] had seen everything told him that the girl had stolen the bread.’

‘When he **left**IMPERF, a lady who [...] had seen everything told him that the girl had stolen the bread.’

Figure 12 shows the scheme for (34), where $\text{---}E_0\text{---} = Nt1$ with $N < S$, and $E = R$, with $R < S$. The event to take (*someone*) away could have been part of the narrative sequence, but the participant chose to focus on its progressive phase to show the synchronicity of that event with respect to the main event (*to say*), which is indeed part of the narrative sequence.

Figure 12 - Representation of the progressive phase in the adverbial clauses of time

Source - Own elaboration



Note that the only difference between the imperfect (*cantaba*) and the progressive phase (*estaba cantando*) is that the former designates, in its basic meaning, a commentary process (E), while the latter designates the progressive phase of a narrative process (—E—). This is another evidence in favor of the inclusion of the type of process in the model.

Figure 13 shows the percentage of *cantaba* compared to other forms used in the corpus across three narrative uses: with its base meaning (in commentative predicates within reported or free indirect speech), with progressive meaning in reported speech and temporal clauses, and in narrative sequence from a character's perspective. While *cantaba* appears most frequently with its basic meaning, it is, like *cantó*, the most frequently used form in all three contexts, also highlighting its high degree of polysemy in Spanish. The graph displays usage percentages and also provides the exact number of occurrences for each form. It is worth noting that in temporal clauses, *estaba cantando* was never used with a progressive meaning. Of the 34 temporal clauses found in the sample, *cantaba* was used 31 times and *canta* 3 times. This pattern reflects a difference that has been reported between native speakers and second-language learners of Spanish, the latter tending to use the periphrastic form more frequently than native speakers (Cruz Enríquez & Alba de la Fuente, 2024).

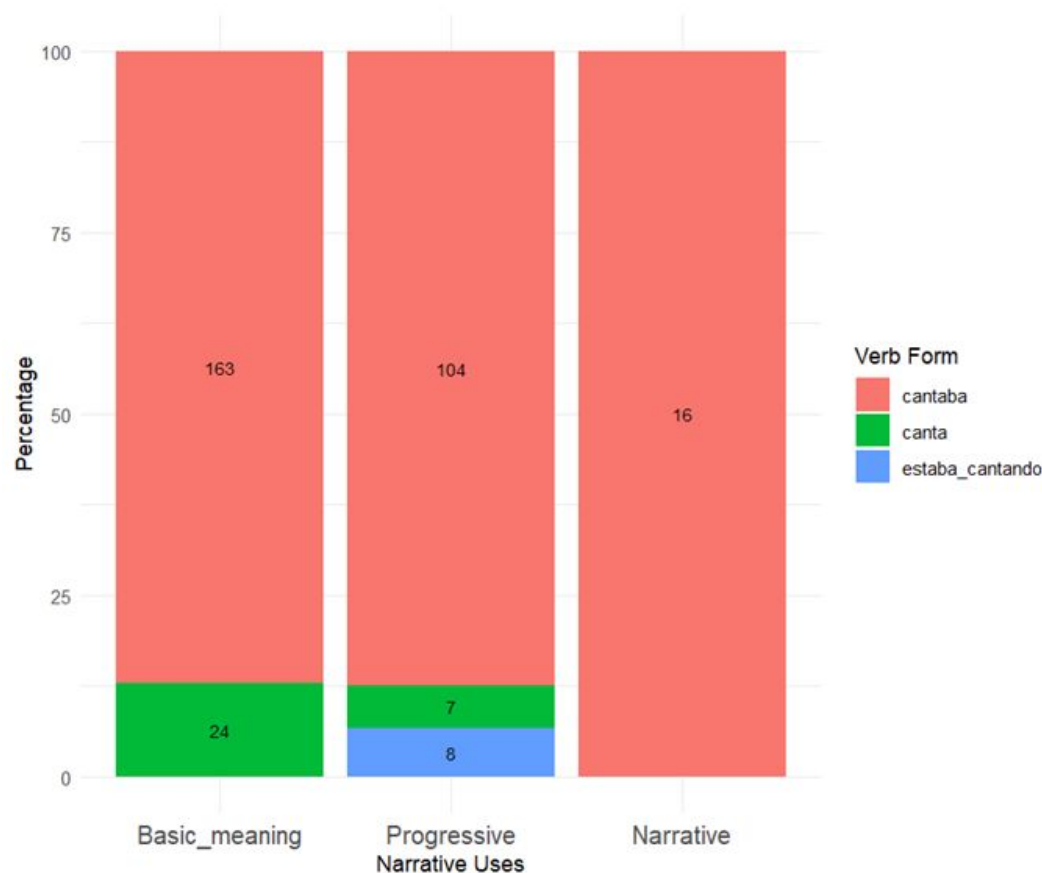


Figure 13 - Percentage of cantaba and other verb forms per narrative use. Figure created by the authors using R

Source - Own elaboration

It's interesting to point out that there are syntactic contexts where the use of the imperfect to express the progressive phase could make the proposition ambiguous in terms of type of process, i.e., it could be interpreted as a commentative process, not as the progressive phase of a narrative process. For example, in (36) the free discourse clause (in bold), if analyzed in isolation, could be ambiguous. The event can be interpreted as a commentative process, meaning

‘to have a job’. In this case, we could interpret this phrase as ‘Chaplin was surprised because he thought that the girl was unemployed, and he just found out that she has a job.’ But we could also interpret that it is a progressive phase of a narrative process, and that ‘Chaplin was surprised because he thought that the girl was on vacations, and he just saw her working.’ This ambiguity is reinforced by the fact that the verb *trabajar* itself allows both readings: in Vendler’s classification it is an activity verb and therefore atelic, while in Cruz Enríquez’s classification it can function either as a commentative process or as a narrative process.

(36) Chaplin estaba sorprendido: **la chica trabajaba**.

We found in the corpus that kind of ambiguity, but, once again, in all cases the context was sufficient to determine that the process in the imperfect was not characterizing the subject but rather referring to a narrative process in its progressive phase: the action was actually taking place. So, we know that the truck was actually unloading merchandise at that moment in (37), and the policeman was guarding the door in (38).

(37) Un camión **descargaba** mercancía en dicha panadería.

‘A truck **was unloading** merchandise at said bakery.’

‘A truck **unloaded**IMPERF merchandise at said bakery.’

(38) Arrastraron con ellos al policía que **cuidaba** la puerta.

‘They dragged with them the policeman who **was guarding** the door.’

‘They dragged with them the policeman who **guarded**IMPERF the door.’

Thus, in narrative texts, the imperfect can represent both commentary and narrative processes, as well as the progressive phase of the latter, but seems to be limited to designating a synchronic relation between the event and the point N.

CONCLUSION

The goal of this article was to present a new semantic-pragmatic temporal system of four coordinates that allows to represent both the basic meaning and the narratives uses of tenses, especially for the two most polysemic Spanish past tenses: *cantaba* and *cantó*. To do so, we proposed the addition of a new reference point, the narrative reference point N. We showed how the presence of two reference points, R and N, allows to differentiate strictly grammatical temporal relations from discursive temporal relations. We also showed the importance of differentiating events according to their lexical aspect by representing differently the commentative processes (E), the narrative processes ($|E|$) and the aspectual phases of narrative processes, such as the perfect (E—) and the progressive phases (—E—). To demonstrate the relevance of all the elements that are part of this new temporal system, as well as discursive temporal relations between the four coordinates in a real speech sample, we showed examples of narrative uses of tenses, mainly the *pretérito* and the imperfect, from a corpus of narratives in the past produced by 20 native speakers of Spanish. We have seen how the *pretérito* can represent various types of temporal relations between the event and the narrative reference point, and that it can designate both a narrative process and the perfect phase of a process. We have also seen that the imperfect can express commentary and narrative processes, as well as the progressive phase, but it seems to be more limited than the *pretérito* in terms of temporal relation between the event and the narrative reference point, since it always designates events synchronous to N. In general, native speakers use these tenses in all their narrative uses, even in syntactic contexts

that are more likely to be ambiguous, such as free indirect discourse. While these contexts may be structurally ambiguous, they are not pragmatically ambiguous, as the surrounding discourse provides sufficient cues for correct interpretation.

We hope that the system proposed in this article will be helpful for a better understanding of temporality in Spanish, as well as the role of tense, lexical aspect and grammatical aspect in tense selection in discourse.

One limitation of the present study is the small sample size, which does not allow for statistically meaningful analyses. However, the main goal of this article is to illustrate the proposed analysis and to pave the way for future research. Such research should include larger datasets covering a wider range of Spanish varieties, in order to examine whether dialectal variation has an impact on the verbal forms used in past-time narration. In addition, the study should be replicated in other languages to test the applicability and cross-linguistic relevance of the system.

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