3-26-1982

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Clegg, J. Halvor (1982) "Aspect in Spanish Grammar," Deseret Language and Linguistic Society Symposium: Vol. 8 : Iss. 1 , Article 5. Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/dlls/vol8/iss1/5

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Aspect in Spanish Grammar

J. Halvor Clegg
Brigham Young University

The concept of aspect in Spanish grammar is not a new one. It was first mentioned by Frederick Hanssen as early as 1913 in relationship to Ser and Estar (Hanssen). This same concept was in turn taken by Samuel Gili y Gaya (1961) and developed to a greater extent. William Bull (1965) did an excellent structural analysis on Ser and Estar. The elements of particular importance in this presentation were the descriptive adjectives, the past participles and the adverbs of place. In this study he pointed out the general semantic distinctions between the usage of the two verbs. Although his terminology was different, the concept was semantic aspect. Professor Marta Luján (1979) recently wrote an excellent presentation dealing with the subject in great detail.

In the early seventies I had become aware of Gili y Gaya's writings on Ser and Estar and had taught the concept to graduate students at the University of Wisconsin, though never to the depths that Professor Luján achieved.

At the same time, Gili y Gaya (1961) had pointed out the presence of aspect in the verb tenses. This is taught generally with emphasis on the preterite and the imperfect tenses in Spanish.

Just what is aspect? It is best defined as a perspective or point of view. Things can be viewed from two opposing perspectives. One perspective is narrow and specific. Most authors call this perfective. The other is broad and general. This is called imperfective. In the case of the preterite and imperfect tenses this can be viewed in a time frame. Where a beginning and or end are emphasized the aspect is perfective. Where a broad frame is desired and the beginning or end are not important the imperfective or general perspective is utilized. The preterite is used for perfective aspect and the imperfect is used for imperfective aspect.

In the sentences

"Hice todo lo que pude."

"Hice todo lo que podía."

"Tuve una carta."

"Tenía una carta."

we see the effect of the perfective and imperfective aspects. In the first sentence we get a meaning of "I did as much as I wanted to and quit". In the second sentence we get "I did as much as I was able to". In the third we understand that "I received a letter." In the fourth "I had a letter in my possession".
In the case of *Ser* and *Estar*, the perfective aspect is assigned to *Estar*. The imperfective aspect is assigned to *Ser*. Professor Luján points out that *Ser* has both "stative" and "non-stative" properties while *Estar* has only non-stative properties. Stative is taken here to mean "a physical or mental state". When these verbs take an adjective, *Ser* can take either stative or non-stative adjectives. *Estar* on the other hand can only take non-stative adjectives. Examples of non-stative adjectives are *lleno*, *vacío*, *contento*, etc.

"Está lleno." but not "Es lleno."
"Está vacío." but not "Es vacío."
"Está contento." but not "Es contento."

This assignment is based on a time frame where a perfective time requires *Estar* and an imperfective time requires *Ser* (Luján, 1979). Concepts like *lleno*, *vacío* and *contento* are considered semantically non-stative or perfective.

She goes on to point out that aspect theory works for all of the categories described by *Estar*. The past participle can take either *Ser* or *Estar*.

"El banco fue cerrado." and "El banco estaba cerrado."
"La ventana fue rota." and "La ventana estaba rota."

In the first case we talk about the *closing* of the bank versus the fact that the bank was already closed. In the second case we're concerned with the *breaking* of the window versus the fact that it has already been broken.

Adjectives can occur with either verb as well.

"Ellas son bonitas." and "Ellas están bonitas."
"Ese es feo." and "Ese está feo."

In the first set of sentences we're saying that the girls are pretty versus the fact that they got all painted up today. In the second set we're saying that that thing is ugly versus the fact that it's ugly now.

Adverbs of place also can be shown to fit this explanation as well.

"La clase es en 109 TMCB." and "La clase está en 109 TMCB."
"La fiesta es en el parque." and "La fiesta está en el parque."

In the first case it's the event that is the concern versus the group that takes part in the class. In the second example the event is the party and the second sentence talks about the party members.

Semantic aspect is found in works on the *Subjunctive* and *Indicative*
moods. Bergen (1978) uses "Reservation" as his term. Bull (1965) used "experienced versus non-experienced". We have used imperfective and perfective. Imperfective has been used to typify the subjunctive (as well as "reservation" and "non-experienced"). Perfective has been used to typify the indicative.

"El general ha dicho que lo fusilen." and "El general ha dicho que lo fusilen."

"Me alegro que Pablo haya venido." and "Me alegro que Pablo haya venido."

In the first case we have a sharp difference in meaning. The difference is that on the one hand the general says that they are shooting someone and on the other he's commanding them to shoot someone. In the second case (spoken by a Spanish speaker) I'm saying that I'm glad that he has come versus I'm glad that he's come.

Espinosa and Wonder (1976) use the same concept to talk about relative clauses and adjective position. The terms that they use are "especificativa" and "no-especificativa" (or "explicativa"). When a specific meaning is required the clause is a regular restrictive clause or the adjective is placed behind the noun. When a non-specific meaning is desired the clause is placed in commas and the adjective is placed before the noun.

"Tiene bonitos hijos la señora López." and "Tiene hijos bonitos la señora López."

"Ahí ves las hermosas montañas de Utah." and "Ahí ves las montañas hermosas de Utah."

"Los hijos que están aquí son bonitos." and "Los hijos, que están aquí, son bonitos."

"Ahí ves las montañas de Utah que son hermosas." and "Ahí ves las montañas de Utah, que son hermosas."

In the first case we either congratulate or insult señora López. If we place the adjective before the noun or use a non-restrictive clause we say that all of her children are nice looking. If we place the adjective after the noun or use a restrictive clause we say that she must have other ugly ones at home. In the case of the mountains we're saying that Utah has beautiful mountains if we place the adjective before the noun or use a non-restrictive clause, but if we place the adjective after or use a restrictive clause we're saying that these are the pretty ones and that there are some others that are ugly.

The concept of aspect can be extended to many other areas of grammar. Whenever a binary choice has to be made this can be shown to be done on the basis of aspect. If the selection is made on the basis of semantics then semantic aspect is used. This is the case with Ser and Estar, the subjunctive and indicative, and can be extended to concepts such as Sino vs. pero, conocer vs. saber and Qué vs. cuál.

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Semantic aspect can also be seen in the prepositions. The classical case is Por and Para. Por is assigned the imperfective aspect and Para is perfective in nature.

"Voy por México." and "Voy para México."

"Nos vemos por las seis." and "Nos vemos para las seis."

"Esto lo hago por ti." and "Esto lo hago para ti."

In the first case we're saying that we're going through México versus to México. In the second one it can be before, at or after six versus any time up to six. The third case is ambiguous on the part of por. It can mean I'll do it in your stead; I'll do it through you or I'll do it because of you. "With para it means that you'll be the recipient of what I do.

This same technique can be used with any set of two prepositions. One will always be more perfective than the other. In the case of a/para/hacia/hasta we see:

"Voy a la casa." and "Voy para la casa."

"Voy para la casa." and "Voy hacia la casa."

"Voy hacia la casa." and "Voy hasta la casa."

In the first set we see that a is more specific than para, meaning that I'll go in a more direct line. In the second set hacia is more specific than para, again meaning more directly. In the third set hasta is more specific than hacia since I'm going right up to the house.

Semantic aspect can also be used in the selection between articles, whether definite or indefinite. It can be carried even further to reflect the choice between deletion of an article and its realization. This was shown in a thesis by Meredith (1974).

"No tengo tiempo para tomar mujer."

"Tu hermano va por pan."

In the first case it could be el tiempo and either una or la mujer. The presence of the article makes the sentence more specific. In the second sentence it could be el or un in front of pan which would again give a more specific sentence.

The verb tenses are considered by most authors to be a case of morphological or grammatical aspect. It is true that the aspectual distinction is manifested in the morphemes. In fact, aspect is considered to reside in the present and past participles in the compound tenses in English. Imperfective aspect is found in "be + -ing" and perfective aspect is found in "have + -ed". These same forms exist in Spanish. The imperfective aspect is found in "Estar + -ndo" and
perfective aspect is found in "Haber + -do". Spanish is different, however, in that it has an additional perfective tense in the preterite.

In cases where there is a presence of grammatical aspect and semantic aspect, semantic aspect dominates. This means that in a sentence like "La puerta fue abierta," the imperfective nature of *ser* dominates over the perfective nature of the preterite "fue" and the perfective nature of the past participle "abierta". This gives a resultant imperfective statement.

Here we see, then, a relative sampling of the use of aspect in Spanish grammar. There are other possibilities as well. The concept is currently in limited use among language teachers and appears to be growing in significance.

References


