3-26-1982

HACER and Expressions of Time

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Fails, Willis C. (1982) "HACER and Expressions of Time," Deseret Language and Linguistic Society Symposium: Vol. 8 : Iss. 1 , Article 6. Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/dlls/vol8/iss1/6

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The Spanish verb hacer which has the basic meaning of 'to do' or 'to make,' is also used in several specialized constructions. It is used to express various aspects of the weather "Hace calor" as well as in the causative construction "Hice pintar la casa." Among the important constructions which employ hacer, are the so-called "expressions of time." The constructions which I will discuss are typified by the following examples.

Hace una hora que canta. 'He has been singing for an hour.'

Hace una hora que llegó. 'He arrived an hour ago.'

These constructions are often difficult for the native speaker of English to master. I think there are three reasons for this difficulty. First, the Spanish equivalents of these English constructions cannot be obtained by translating the English structure word-for-word. Second, the Spanish equivalents for the two different English constructions are in fact quite similar. And third, the presentations of these structures in grammar books are generally incomplete and disjointed. They simply fail to provide an adequate linguistic explanation or characterization of the structures involved.

In this paper, I shall briefly discuss the ways in which the temporal expressions with hacer have been treated. I shall offer a general characterization of these structures. I shall also consider the kinds of events that may be expressed in the dependent clause of such constructions as well as alternative syntaxes to the general characterization I shall propose.

In introducing the two structures previously exemplified, most language text books (MLA, 1973 for example) merely present examples such as those already given. The text books then often typify the constructions with the following formulae:

HACE + period of time + que + PRESENT TENSE VERB FORM

HACE + period of time + que + PRETERITE TENSE VERB FORM

The texts indicate that if the verb form is in the present tense, the construction refers to how long something has been going on. If the verb is in the preterite, it refers to how long ago something happened. In some texts (Solé & Solé 1982), the contrast shown by the juxtaposition of the above formulae is lost since the two constructions are presented in different chapters.
Some texts show (as does Castells & Lionetti, 1978) that there is also a construction:

HACIA + period of time + que + IMPERFECT TENSE VERB FORM

According to Castells & Lionetti, this construction is used "when the action is described as beginning, continuing, and then stopping in the past." This description is not accurate as can be shown by the following example:

Cuando lo vi por última vez, hacía cinco meses que Juan trabajaba en la fábrica.

'When I saw him last, John had been working at the factory for five months.'

According to Castells & Lionetti, John would have had to have stopped working for the factory in the past. Such is not necessarily the case, however. To their credit, Castells & Lionetti do present the above three formulae at the same point in their text. Other authors (Iglesias & Meiden, 1975) even separate the construction containing the present tense verb form and the construction containing the imperfect tense verb form. This separation masks an important similarity that exists between these two constructions—that they both measure how long an event has been going on.

At the same point in their text at which Castells & Lionetti consider the three formulae already presented, they also introduce for each an alternative which differs basically only in word order. Thus in their presentation, "Hace una hora que llegó" has one formula and "Llegó hace una hora" has another. Since each of the three formulae already presented has an alternate form, Castells & Lionetti introduce the constructions by stating that there are "six basic hacer-formulas... used to report ongoing or past duration, or time since." As far as I am concerned, to present these structures separately or as six different constructions is ad hoc and fails to capture the linguistic realities of these constructions.

Ramsey (1954, revised by Spaulding) gives a more complete analysis of these constructions. He states that:

Hacer expresses the length of time between two points. The initial point is always past; the terminal point may be past, present or future. Hacer corresponds to the terminal point, and is past, present or future accordingly:

He then cites examples, with hacer conjugated in the imperfect, present and future tenses. Ramsey continues by stating, "the verb following hacer corresponds to the initial point." He proceeds throughout the succeeding pages to give examples grouped by the tense of the second verb.

While Ramsey includes more varied examples of temporal expressions with hacer, he nevertheless fails to characterize the entire construction.
My proposal

I propose that all expressions of time containing hacer can be derived from the following formula:

HACER + period of time + que + CONJUGATED VERB FORM

In actual speech, hacer is always conjugated in the third-person singular since it is part of an impersonal construction. Nevertheless, the infinitive appears in the formula since the actual form of the verb will vary according to the tense in which it is conjugated. The tense of hacer controls the temporal reference point with respect to which an elapsed amount of time is measured. Hacer, therefore, may theoretically be conjugated in any tense, since the reference point may be moved around in time to conform to any temporal configuration.

The next important element of the formula I propose is that of the conjugated verb form. The grammatical aspect of the conjugated verb form is what is important here. It characterizes the nature of the relationship between the reference point and the beginning of the period of time. If the grammatical aspect is IMPERFECTIVE, then the period of elapsed time which is measured relative to the reference point covers a period of time during which an event was taking place. If the grammatical aspect is PERFECTIVE, then the period of elapsed time which is measured relative to the reference point covers a period of time since an event took place. The actual tense of the conjugated verb in the dependent clause (as with verbs in all dependent clauses) depends on the tense of the main clause. The grammatical aspect, however, is selected by the speaker in order that he might specify the relationship between the two endpoints of the elapsed period which he wishes to express as shown in the following drawings.

Verb in IMPERFECTIVE tense -- indicates how long event is sustained

Verb in PERFECTIVE tense -- indicates how long ago event occurred

If the formula is to be substantiated, then, as suggested, it will be possible to conjugate hacer in any tense together with a verb form showing either IMPERFECTIVE or PERFECTIVE grammatical aspect. In order to test this hypothesis, I prepared a simple fill-in-the-blank questionnaire and presented it to several native speakers to obtain a corpus of data. I do not claim statistical validity for the randomness of the sample nor for its size. My purpose was merely to sample native-speaker intuitions.

Consider the following examples:

1. Hace una hora que estoy aquí.

2. Hace una hora que llegué.
Sentences #1 and #2 show the most common type of construction, i.e. with *hacer* in the present tense indicating that the reference point with respect to which we are measuring the one hour of elapsed time is now. The verb of the dependent clause of #1 shows IMPERFECTIVE aspect (present tense) and hence the sentence shows how long my being here has been going on. The verb of the dependent clause of #2 shows PERFECTIVE aspect (preterite tense), thus showing how much time has elapsed since my arrival.

3. Cuando lo vi, hacía una hora que estaba aquí.

4. Cuando lo vi, hacía una hora que había llegado.

Sentences #3 and #4 illustrate *hacer* in the imperfect tense. This shows that the reference point is in a past time frame and that it is relative to another event. The verb of the dependent clause of #3 shows IMPERFECTIVE aspect (imperfect tense) indicating that up to the point at which I saw the other person, my being here was in progress and indeed had been going on for one hour. The verb in the dependent clause of #4 shows PERFECTIVE aspect (pluperfect tense) to show that the arrival was completed in the past prior to another event completed in the past—namely my seeing him.

5. Ayer hizo un año que está aquí.

6. Ayer hizo un año que estaba aquí.

7. Ayer hizo un año que llegó.

Sentences #5, #6, and #7 show the use of *hacer*, in the preterite—a form not considered in any of the aforementioned treatments of the *hacer*-construction. The reference point is thus placed at an absolute point in the past—it is not relative to any other event. In both #5 and #6, the verb of the dependent clause shows IMPERFECTIVE aspect, thus indicating the measurement of a period of time during which an action was sustained. The present tense of #5 indicates that the action is still maintained to the present moment, but the measured period of time is through yesterday. The imperfect tense of #6 indicates nothing concerning the individual's presence at the present time, only that at the end of the period of time in question he was still here. The preterite tense of #7 indicates that the elapsed interval measured the time since the individual's arrival. I would have expected a pluperfect to emphasize the anteriority of the arrival with respect to the reference point, but such was not reported by any of the informants. Since the grammatical aspect of the verb form is nevertheless perfective, the results are not inconsistent with my hypothesis.

8. Mañana hará un año que está aquí.

9. Mañana hará un año que estará aquí.

10. Mañana hará un año que llegó.
With *hacer* conjugated in the future, the reference point with respect to which the interval of time is measured falls in the future time frame. In #8 and #9, with the verb tense showing imperfective aspect, the time measured refers again to how long the event will have been going on. The present tense of #8 vs. the future tense of #9 is explainable by the fact that the present tense is often used to indicate future events when the reference is obviously future as in #8. In #10, in which the verb shows PERFECTIVE aspect, the time interval measured is the time elapsed since the occurrence of the event with respect to the future reference point. Since the event has already come to a conclusion in the past, the preterite is used in #10. The foregoing explanations of #8, #9 and #10 interpret the future conjugation of *hacer* as referring to future time. The future tense is also used to express probability in the present. Under this interpretation, #9 would be impossible, since the reference to the termination of the period of time is NOT future, but rather present.

11. Ayer me dijo que en una semana haría un año que estaba aquí.

12. Ayer me dijo que en una semana haría un año que estaría aquí.

13. Ayer me dijo que en una semana haría un año que había llegado.

In #11, #12 and #13 *hacer* is conjugated in the conditional tense which is essentially a backshifted version of the future tense. The two possibilities for IMPERFECTIVE tenses are the imperfect and the conditional. The PERFECTIVE tense must be the pluperfect to indicate the relevant anteriority of the completion of the event. Again, like the future, the conditional may be used to express probability in the past, an example of which would be #14.

14. Haría un año que estudiaba chino.

With this meaning of probability, the conditional tense does not co-occur in the dependent clause.

There remain two more verb forms in which we have not yet seen *hacer*. These belong to the subjunctive mood.

15. Dudo que haga un año que esté aquí.

16. Dudo que haga un año que haya llegado de California.

17. Dudaba que hiciera un año que estuviera aquí.

18. Dubaba que hiciera un año que hubiera estado aquí.

In #15-18, although some informants chose to express the verb of the second dependent clause in the indicative mood rather than in the subjective, the grammatical aspect of the tenses within those moods corresponded in all cases. The IMPERFECTIVE tenses of #15 and #17 indicate the time interval during which the event would have occurred. The PERFECTIVE tenses of #16 and #18 indicate the time interval which would have elapsed since the completion of the former event.

5.5
One further observation at this point. The formula I propose also accounts for the ungrammaticality of #19 which is so often produced by beginning language students when attempting to state "I have been here for three hours.

19. *Hace tres horas que he estado aquí.

To express the IMPERFECTIVE notion the ongoingness of one's presence, one must use an IMPERFECTIVE tense, thus excluding the possibility of the present perfect.

Nature of events

Having established the validity of the basic formula, I would like to turn my attention to the nature of the events which can occur in the dependent clause of hacer-constructions. All of the previous numbered examples were carefully selected so that the events that occurred in dependent clauses that were expressed by verbs conjugated in IMPERFECTIVE tenses were events that were durative in nature—that is events which could conceivably be sustained indefinitely. The events that occurred in the PERFECTIVE tenses were events that were terminative in nature—that is events that must be carried out to the end in order for it to be said that they happened at all. Thus the event "estar aquí" is durative, while "llegar" is terminative. The question is whether DURATIVE events can occur in the PERFECTIVE construction and vice versa.

Consider the following data:

20. Hace tres horas que estoy aquí.
21. Hace tres horas que estuve aquí.
22. *Hace tres horas que llego.
23. Hace tres años que llego a las seis.
24. Hace tres horas que voy llegando.

Sentence #21 shows that a DURATIVE event can be used in the PERFECTIVE construction. The sense here is that the period of time being measured is the time since the termination of a DURATIVE or sustainable event. Sentence #22 shows unacceptability of a TERMINATIVE event in the imperfective construction unless as is shown in #23 and #24 the event is viewed as habitual or is changed to a construction with a DURATIVE verb such as 'ir' modified adverbially by a present participle.

It is interesting to note the influence that the negative can have on the nature of an event. "Ir al cine" is a TERMINATIVE event. One must actual arrive at the theater and view the movie in order to say that the event took place at all. "No ir al cine," on the other hand is a DURATIVE event—one which may be sustained.

5.6
Compare the following:

25. Hace tres semanas que fui al cine.
26. Hace tres semanas que no voy al cine.
27. *Hace tres semanas que voy al cine.
28. Hace tres semanas que voy al cine cada noche.

Thus, #26 is acceptable because the event is DURATIVE and the construction is IMPERFECTIVE. The TERMINATIVE event "ir al cine" is compatible with the PERFECTIVE construction as shown in #25, but is incompatible with the IMPERFECTIVE construction as shown in #27—unless, as in #28 the reference is to the durative nature of a habitual action.

Permutations

There remains only one more problem in connection with the hacer constructions with which I must deal. These are the possible permutations of the the basic construction as outlined in the formula.

Consider the following as pertaining to the IMPERFECTIVE construction:

29. Hace un año que vive en San Francisco.
31. ?Vive en San Francisco hace un año.
32. Vive en San Francisco desde hace un año.
33. Desde hace un año vive en San Francisco.
34. Hacía un año que vivía en San Francisco.
35. ?Vivía en San Francisco hacía un año.
36. Vivía en San Francisco desde hacía un año.

In the permutations of the IMPERFECTIVE constructions the preferred form includes the preposition desde. (Compare #31 and #35 to #32 and #36 respectively.)

But what of the following examples? Isn't #37 an exception to the rule requiring the insertion of desde in the permutation of IMPERFECTIVE constructions.
37. Estaba aquí hace un año.

38. Hace un año, estaba aquí.

39. Estaba aquí ayer.

I think not. Compare #30-32 with #37-39. The latter express an entirely different concept. The phrase "hace un año" merely fixes a point in the past with respect to now at which someone's being here was in progress. The phrase is permutable as is the adverb *ayer*.

In contrast with IMPERFECTIVE constructions, the permutation of the PERFECTIVE construction does not require the insertion of any new elements. Compare the following:

40. Hace un año que vino a San Francisco.

41. Vino a San Francisco hace un año.

42. Hace un año, vino a San Francisco.

Here sentence #42 is analogous to both #41 and #38.

**Conclusion**

As I began studying these constructions I was amazed at the paucity of detail I found in the literature concerning them. They can be fairly complex as attested by some of the examples in this paper. Hopefully, the observations I have made and the formula I have presented will shed new light on understanding of these constructions.

**References**


