

Introduction

How does grammar evolve? “The more it changes, the more it stays the same,” states Bybee (2010: 1), and synthesizes a usage-based approach to language change, which forms the background for this book.^{1,2} In Bybee’s view, languages constantly change but do so in certain ways formed by domain-general mechanisms. The idea is that results of these changes are observable in recurring linguistic patterns in unrelated languages. The real universals are diachronic. The goal of this work is to investigate verbal categories in Latin American varieties of Romance in the light of these assumptions, through an in-depth study of one case of grammatical evolution: the development of Preterits and Perfects in Porteño Spanish.

A major morphosyntactic change has occurred in Porteño Spanish, the urban vernacular of Buenos Aires, Argentina. The Perfect—here preliminarily defined as a past with current relevance—is practically absent from the language of young and adolescent speakers, as the Preterit—here used to refer to the language-specific past perfective category—has taken on the functions previously associated only with the Perfect.³ Originally, Porteño Spanish had separate categories to express past imperfective and a past perfective and past with current relevance. In present-day Porteño Spanish, the Perfect category has virtually disappeared, and the Preterit expresses the functions previously restricted to the Perfect.

In this work, I take a prototypical approach to the perfect’s semantics, meaning that I take a perfect to express four different subfunctions: experiential, resultative, recent past, and persistent situation. These subfunctions share the semantic notion of current relevance (CR), which is included, to different extents, in their semantic scope. In Porteño Spanish, the Preterit is currently polysemous and conveys both past perfective and, crucially, past with CR in young and adolescent speakers, as in example (1):

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- 1 “Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose” is the original quote from French novelist and critic Jean-Baptiste Alfonse Karr (1808–1890).
 - 2 This work—based on the authors’s Ph.D. dissertation (Fløgstad 2015)—was partly supported by the Research Council of Norway through its Centres of Excellence funding scheme, project number 223265.
 - 3 Capital letter refers to the language-specific category.

(1) Past with CR (experiential)

(10:03/2)⁴

Probaste	chipá?	No	probaste	chipá?
Try.2SG.PRT	chipá	NEG	try.2SG.PRT	chipá ⁵

‘Have you tried chipá? You haven’t tried chipá?’

Older and middle-aged speakers, on the other hand, appear to be in a transition stage in which both the Preterit and Perfect are used to express past with CR. No clear synchronic restrictions on their use are attested. What is found, however, is that the experiential function appears to be the first of the subfunctions associated with the Perfect to be expressed by means of Preterits.

Why is an expanding Preterit newsworthy? In a usage-based approach to language change linguistic structure is understood to be in constant flux. Change is understood to occur along certain paths of development. One such path involves the expansion of Perfects, and demise of Preterits. Perfects tend to become “something else,” such as pasts or past perfectives, as Dahl (2004: 275) points out. In contrast, he argues, “past tenses and perfectives rarely develop into anything else: they seem to be, in a sense, the stable final point of that development.” Dahl’s claim is not compatible with the development in Porteño Spanish or with developments in a large cross-linguistic comparison of Romance languages, as I will show in the remainder of this work.

1.1 Competing Categories

The competition between a Perfect and a Preterit has, at least since Meillet (1958 [1912]), been known to end with the expansion of the former; the Perfect tends to gain terrain, and the Preterit tends to disappear. This development has occurred in, for instance, French, where the Perfect, or *Passé Composé*, has taken over the functions of the past perfective, or *Passé Simple*. In Porteño Spanish, however, the Preterit has spread, almost completely replacing the Perfect.

Much has been written about the “well-behaved” perfects (a term also used by Laca 2010), and their expansion to past or past perfective. Since Meillet’s initial observation of the “invasion” of the perfect into the past’s territories, this “drift” has been understood as an undisputable fact of historical linguistics,

4 These numbers refer to minute (10), second (03), and informant number (2), in order for the examples to be traceable in the electronic corpus. To consult the audio files, contact the author.

5 Only those forms relevant to the linguistic analysis will be glossed.

and, as Schaden (2012: 4) notes, it is one of the best known grammaticalization processes: a directional tendency, or “path of development” (Bybee et al. 1994: 105), called the perfective path, here presented in a simplified version:

be/have + participle → resultative → anterior → perfective/simple past

The expansion of perfects is relatively easily accounted for using insights from studies on morphosyntactic and semantic change, as well as from insights on processing of synthetic vs. analytic forms. Perfects are typically young analytic forms, easy to process, and their use can be explained by the speaker’s desire to be clear or easily processible (Slobin 1977). Past/past perfectives, on the other hand, typically are synthetic and opaque; they are older forms. Semantically, the expansion of perfects is generally taken to occur due to an increase in frequency triggered by the CR component. Because the perfect expresses past with CR, the idea is that speakers use the perfect more often than necessary in order to present their contribution as relevant, “AS THOUGH it were highly relevant to current concerns” (Bybee et al. 1994: 86–87, capitalization in the original; see also Chapter 4).

Directional tendencies thus have their origins in usage patterns. This directionality is crucial to a usage-based approach to language. The same directional tendencies occur in unrelated languages because speakers of all languages share a common cognitive makeup, which includes, e.g., analogical thinking and categorization. The expansion of the perfect can be explained by alluding to the way in which language is used: communicative motivations, processing constraints, and the speaker’s wish to be clear.

Surprisingly, however, the competing relationship between Perfects and Preterits appears to create very different outcomes, when one looks outside the well-known European examples. That is, in many languages where a Perfect and a Preterit exist, the Preterit is expanding.

Not only Porteño Spanish but also various other Spanish and Portuguese varieties spoken in Latin America have lost, or are in a process of losing, the Perfect. In these languages, the Preterit expands. It appears, then, that the competing relationship between a Perfect and a Preterit can lead to the expansion of either. But what triggers the expansion of a Preterit?

1.2 A Model for the Expansion of the Preterit

The focus of this study is on innovation—more specifically, on the generation of variation (Blythe & Croft 2012: 271), which causes the spread. Rather than focusing on the global decrease in the use of the Perfect, focus is on

the various subfunctions associated with the Perfect in order to propose a step-by-step model for the expansion of the Preterit, which is assumed to begin in transitional contexts (Fried 2009) in which the Preterit is used without temporal specification, that is, through contexts that are temporally indeterminate and lack temporal anchoring. These contexts are what Schwenter & Torres Cacoulios (2008) refer to as having irrelevant temporal location, that is, which cannot be queried by “when” (pg. 17); in addition to those referred to as indeterminate; where the analyst and possibly the interlocutor cannot resolve the temporal distance of the past situation with respect to utterance time. Interestingly, such contexts have also been suggested as the locus of the expansion of a Perfect (Schwenter & Torres Cacoulios 2008); a finding that only strengthens the assumption that these contexts are particularly prone to new uses. In fact, Schwenter and Torres Cacoulios (*ibid.*: 33) suggest that indeterminate contexts may be the locus of change in temporal systems in general. I shall show how in these contexts, a functional overlap and the abstract CR component of the experiential function lead to this use appearing in contexts in which the Preterit is used in its place, eventually creating a pragmatic routine, and subsequently a conventionalization, of the novel use of the Preterit.

The model I propose is in accord with general principles of usage-based approaches, especially the nondiscreteness of categories, and the gradual nature of linguistic change. The proposed model has several advantages, especially because it operates with microsteps (Traugott & Trousdale 2010a, b; 2013). This term refers to the fact that language change can be traced back to small changes—microsteps—that take place in actual usage-events. Such microsteps illustrate the gradual nature of change. Change does not occur through abrupt saltations.

This model is particularly useful when it comes to accounting for the heterogeneous distribution of the Perfect/Preterit in Romance, and especially in Latin American varieties of such. By assuming that change occurs via microsteps, I can put forward a hypothesis of why the categories do not change abruptly but how certain subfunctions may survive. As I shall show, Latin American varieties of Spanish vary as to whether the subfunctions of the Perfect are expressed by means of Preterits. Operating with microsteps may provide an explanation of why, for instance, the Mexican Perfect is assumed to prevail as the conveyor of imperfective function. This may be because microsteps begin in the subfunctions semantically closer to the Preterit (such as the experiential mentioned above) and have not led to a macrochange in this variety.

The new uses of the Preterit arise as language is used. Linguistic forms always have an array of possible interpretations, very few of which are ever conventionalized (macrosteps are in fact rare). It is therefore important to note

that I assume no determinism in the steps taken. A microchange need not lead to a macrochange. For *Porteño* Spanish specifically, this means that an incipient change needs not come to completion, and may halt its development in the changing process. This assumption is in line with Traugott and Trousdale (2013: 112), who state that also very robust grammatical markers can become restricted and peripheral and may even disappear.

Consequently, I assume that the path metaphor frequently used to account for changes such as the opposite of the one occurring in *Porteño* Spanish (the widely studied expansion of a Perfect) needs reconsideration. Despite the growing number of publications on Latin American varieties in which Perfects are documented to clearly fall into disuse (see, among others, Rodríguez Louro 2009), this decline has had few consequences for the prevailing view in grammaticalization theory on tense and aspect; perfects still are assumed to develop into pasts/past perfectives (see Hengeveld 2011: 589–590 for a recent example). Why can this be? One possibility is simply that these studies often are conducted within the realm of grammaticalization theory (see, e.g., Torres Cacoullós & Walker 2011). Schwenter and Torres Cacoullós (2008: 6) symptomatically observe that current analyses place the *Meixan* Perfect on a developmental stage prior to the *Peninsular* Perfect, implying its being, in fact, on a grammaticalization path. A second possibility is that paths of development are an essential part of grammaticalization—perhaps the most essential evidence in favor of grammaticalization's being a unified process, and not just a collection of separate phenomena well known to the historical linguist (as critics claim; see, e.g., Janda 2001; Joseph 2011). A third factor is that regular paths of development are taken to constitute diachronic universals (Bybee 2008; 2010), and it is assumed that reconstruction is possible on the basis of the path's presumed regular trajectories (Heine & Kuteva 2007). That is, if universals arise in use, it follows that the processes creating them must follow similar paths.

While grammaticalization has been subject to intense criticism, from both insiders and outsiders to the field (see, e.g., Börjars & Vincent 2011 for recent overview), the regularity of tense/aspect developments (also known as source determination; Bybee et al. 1994) has not been subject to a systematic criticism (but see Norde 2009; 2010). It is sporadically mentioned that paths need not come to completion (Bybee 2010: 77–78; Norde 2009: 32; Traugott & Dasher 2002: 87), and that “small steps may not be on a continuous unidirectional path” (Traugott & Trousdale 2013: 75). However, these acknowledgements have had few consequences for the framework, as the presumed regularity of the perfective path still prevails as a crucial tenet of grammaticalization theory and of source determination.

To sum up, it is the goal of this work to show the following:

1. The competition between a Perfect and a Preterit in Latin American varieties of Romance may create steps in the expansion of either.
2. Such diverse developments may stem from the functional overlap between the two categories, enabled in contexts that are temporally indeterminate.
3. Importantly, a crosslinguistic comparison uncovers a clear tendency: the tendency for the morphological expression of past with CR to disappear. Whether the remaining form is the former Preterit or the former Perfect varies.

The ultimate purpose of this book is thus to show that the instability exists at the level of the distinction, and is not form-specific.

This book is structured as follows:

Chapter 2 presents the diachronic, usage-based approach here employed, as well as an overview of the semantics of the temporal and aspectual categories in question. A usage-based view which acknowledges microsteps is taken, as well as a prototypical approach to grammatical categories which allows for gradience between members of categories, and categories.

Chapter 3 provides background information about the varieties in question and offers an overview of the sociolinguistic context in the relevant parts of Argentina and Uruguay and of the local linguistic varieties.

Chapter 4 treats the field of source determination, and approaches to the perfect's development in detail. It is argued that the assumption that the source meaning determines the path of the construction is not supported empirically.

Chapter 5 presents the methodology and discusses challenges associated with a semantic analysis of spontaneous speech data.

Chapter 6 goes through the results extracted from the available data: the gradual decrease of the Perfect in Porteño Spanish and the variation in the expression of past with CR, based on four types of oral and written sources.

Chapter 7 provides an analysis of the expansion of the Preterit. I argue that the possibility for the Preterit to expand begins in transitional contexts, in which the Preterit appears in an already-established time frame, which allows for it to occur alone. I further argue that a two-step process of pragmatic strengthening and reanalysis triggers morphosyntactic variation in the experiential function, and subsequently the change in the entire category, through microsteps.

Chapter 8 provides a synthesis of the findings and a discussion of their theoretical implications. It is concluded that the tendency is not for the perfect to expand, but for the morphological expression of perfect to disappear. The expanding category may be the former perfect, or the former preterit.