

Perfect potential: Semantic change in narrative contexts across Spanish

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In this study, we offer an analysis of the Present Perfect (PP) (e.g. *Ha llegado Juan* ‘Juan has arrived’) in three Spanish dialects: Argentinian River Plate Spanish (ARG), Peninsular Spanish (PEN), and Peruvian Spanish (PER), with special focus on the prevalent uses of the PP and the pragmatics associated with each usage. For the PP in PEN, we follow Schwenter (1994) in claiming that evolution and change along the proposed anterior-to-perfective grammaticalization cline (Bybee, Perkins & Pagliuca 1994) – i.e. the use of the PP to encode perfectivity – is motivated by the erosion of the epistemic notion of relevance in the PP. This erosion occurs as a result of using the PP in situations where no relevance is intended. The current analysis, however, argues that the mechanisms underlying the grammaticalization of the PP in ARG and PER are not the same as those proposed for the PEN cases, suggesting instead an extension of the epistemic contexts licensing the PP. More generally, we claim that narrative contexts represent a significant locus for pragmatic innovation and that these effects are not parallel in all cases of semantic change.

Previous analyses of the PP in PEN and PER have pointed to increased frequency vis-à-vis the simple perfective past (or Preterit) to suggest similar trends in semantic change. Despite a lower overall frequency, the PP in ARG displays similar aspectual trends in that perfectivity arises in cases of indefinite past reference (Rodríguez Louro 2008). In line with Bybee et al. (1994), we claim that semantic change with the PP occurs along temporal and/or epistemic lines and; moreover, that the motivating factors are associated with narrative discourse. Three main narrative uses are identified: temporal sequencing in same day narratives (and extension to before-today contexts), epistemic uses to encode vividness, and indefinite temporal location. Specifically, we propose that while in PEN the PP is used in hodiernal narrative sequences, PER displays epistemic narrative usage, and ARG uses the PP to encode indefiniteness in temporal location. While PEN and PER have been shown to use the PP in hodiernal and epistemic contexts, respectively (Howe & Schwenter 2003), the perfective nature of the ARG PP is seen in examples such as *Me he enamorado de tipos; me enamoro de tipos* (CC07MS17) ‘I have fallen in love with guys; I do fall in love with guys’, where the Present Simple occurs after the PP to make present relevance explicit.

To summarize, issues of hodiernal narrative sequencing and indefinite temporal location drive PEN and ARG, respectively. Epistemic nuances such as narrative vividness motivate PP usage in PER. Thus, while these cases share a common source for discourse innovation (i.e. narrative contexts), the results are quite different. Moreover, this analysis demonstrates that comparisons of overall frequency distributions can obscure pragmatic factors relevant to the specific pattern of semantic change.

We conclude by proposing that, despite the intrinsic meaning potential of the PP, it is interaction in narrative contexts that eventually allows for this potential to be realized.

References

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