

## **PEDAGOGY: COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES**

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### **Preterite/Imperfect Half-Truths: Problems with Spanish Textbook Rules for Usage**

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Abstract Preterite/imperfect usage has the reputation of being one of the hardest grammatical features of Spanish to learn. While this is partly due to the fact that English does not indicate aspectual differences in the same way Spanish does, some of the blame lies with misleading textbook explanations which often are only half-truths, at best. A discussion of problematic P/I textbook explanations shows why the presentation of a more reliable, simpler set of principles serve as a preferable alternative to the problematic rules of thumb.

Key Words: preterite, imperfect, aspect, Spanish, grammar rules, rules of thumb, meaning change, context, half-truth

#### **Introduction**

The preterite/imperfect (P-I) distinction is a late-acquired feature of Spanish (van Naerssen, Frantzen, Harrison) which is difficult for language learners whose first language is English, in part because English does not signal aspectual choice in the same way Spanish does. Consequently, learners must be trained to view actions differently. Textbook explanations are partly to blame for the difficulty students have with this concept because in their attempts at capturing the P/I distinction, they often provide confusing, unreliable, and even inaccurate explanations.

Even after learners understand the basic P/I differences, they continue to struggle with the distinction. Part of the difficulty stems from the fact that different people may view the same events from different perspectives and, consequently, capture the different perspectives by using either the preterite or imperfect. As Lunn points out, "Both language-learners and linguists are likely to experience initial difficulty with preterite and imperfect, because the fact is that most past-tense situations can be described using either aspectual label" (50). Ozette makes a similar point: "Without being contradictory, a speaker could refer to the same incident in one instance with the

preterite and in another with the imperfect" (687). Even when specific contexts are provided, some are ambiguous enough to allow native speakers to opt for either aspect, according to their interpretation of the context (Garcia and van Putte).

Textbooks tend to present rules for P/I usage as absolutes and do not adequately explain the perspective issue. Consequently, when students encounter "evidence"-oral and written input-that apparently contradicts the rules, they become confused and frustrated.

#### **Problems with Rules**

Although providing students with rules explaining certain grammatical features of a language is clearly beneficial, giving too many rules can be confusing. Chastain asserts that "Extensive explanations replete with lengthy discussions of all the minor nuances and rare exceptions may accomplish little other than to convince all except the most intellectually gifted that trying to comprehend grammar is a hopeless waste of time" (162). Herschensohn observes that "Pedagogical grammars too often explain the target language in a complicated and exception ridden format which requires pedagogical energy on the part of teacher and student" (411). She characterizes good

grammar explanations as follows: "A concise and linguistically accurate grammar presentation attempts to mimic the native speaker's knowledge of the language, and to use the simplest and most economical description available" (411).

Garrett discusses the problems that "rules of thumb" can cause when learners misapply the rules because they do not fully understand them. As one example, she cites a typical explanation given in German grammar textbooks for making the choice between accusative and dative cases. Texts state that the accusative case must be used after the preposition with verbs of motion that signal movement from one place to another. As Garrett notes, this is true on the face of it, but errors occur because students often focus on only one part of this rule of thumb—the verb of motion part—and forget the directionality portion; thus, they incorrectly use the accusative with verbs that show motion, but not directionality (e.g., "to skip" and "to struggle") (142). Learners become confused because textbooks do not stress that for the rule to be true, both features of the verb—motion and directionality—must be present for the accusative case to be used.

As Garrett's example shows, with all grammar explanations, whether they originate from a textbook or a teacher, it is important to anticipate the ways that students might misinterpret them. A good grammar explanation should be unambiguous, reliable, succinct, and easy to remember.

## Procedure

The P/I explanations provided in 30 college Spanish textbooks and grammar reference books were examined to determine what types of explanations were problematic. There were 11 beginning-level, nine intermediate-, and 10 advanced-level books. All the beginning and intermediate texts, and most of the advanced ones, are the most recent editions of currently-used texts, all published in the 1990s. The four "vintage" advanced-level books, also in their most recent editions, were published much ear-

lier than the other texts: one in the 1950s, one in the 1960s, one in the 1970s, and one in the 1980s. Major publishing houses published all the textbooks and all are widely available.

While many texts contained essentially good explanations, even these were frequently laced with half-truths of six types. The Table shows that none of the 30 textbooks contained all six of the problematic rules of thumb and that only one—an advanced text—did not have any of them. The textbooks need not be identified because they are typical of problematic explanations that are widespread. In addition, the purpose here is not to critique specific textbooks but rather to point out the inadequacies contained in typical Spanish textbook rules of thumb for P/I usage. Alternate explanations will be proposed to replace the faulty rules of thumb. These will consist of a set of broader principles fewer in number and more reliable than the defective ones of the textbooks.

The list that follows contains common rules of thumb for P/I usage which are either close paraphrases or verbatim quotes taken from explanations provided in several of the textbooks examined.<sup>1</sup>

- 1) "The imperfect describes emotional or mental activity."
- 2) "The imperfect is used to express repeated or habitual past action."
- 3) "Would + infinitive" signals use of the imperfect.
- 4) "Certain words and expressions are frequently associated with the preterite, others with the imperfect."
- 5) "Some verbs take on a special meaning in the preterite tense."
- 6) "When two actions occur simultaneously in the past, the imperfect is used."

Undoubtedly, all teachers of Spanish have used several—if not all—of these explanations when presenting P/I distinctions. The rules, however, mislead students because they are only "half-truths." Because they are only sometimes true, when

students discover the rules to be unreliable, they often feel confused—even deceived. Some of the aforementioned P/I rules of thumb should be entirely eliminated because they are so unreliable as to be virtually false. Others should be modified and used in conjunction with a few basic principles that encompass nearly all of P/I uses.

### Preterite/Imperfect Principles

The above-mentioned rules of thumb suggest that there are special cases to be considered in deciding which aspect to use, but in reality, only a small set of principles governs P/I usage. Once students can handle the basic principles, they will be equipped with the necessary knowledge to make aspectual choices in the majority of contexts without having to rely on English translations or to rely on specific-case rules. The recommended P/I principles are as follows:

- 1) The *imperfect* is used for
  - a) actions and states in progress at some focused point in the past,
  - b) habitual past actions,
  - c) repetitious past actions,
  - d) anticipated/planned past actions.
- 2) The *preterite* is used to focus on
  - a) the completion of past actions or states,
  - b) the beginning of past actions or states.<sup>2</sup>

Textbooks already use variations of these principles, along with the other rules of thumb that are largely unnecessary, since these few principles sufficiently explain the vast majority of the “special” P/I uses that the rules of thumb address. The following sections discuss each of the six “half-truths” and propose P/I principles as replacements.

### Problematic P/I Rules of Thumb

#### (1) The Imperfect is Used with Verbs of Emotion and Mental Activity

As the Table shows, nine of the books

examined—three beginning, four intermediate, and two advanced—presented this rule of thumb.<sup>3</sup> The claim that the imperfect is used with verbs of emotion and mental activity is only half true. It is true if the emotion or mental activity is ongoing or in progress at the moment being focused on, as in the following examples.

- 1) Ana *estaba* contenta mientras leía la carta de su novio.
- 2) Carlos *pensaba* en sus padres cuando, de repente, aparecieron.
- 3) *Creíamos* que Paco llegaría muy pronto.

A special rule of thumb for verbs of emotional and mental activity is unnecessary because these cases are already covered by Principle 1a, which indicates that the imperfect is used to express actions or states in progress. The “ongoingness” principle is preferable to this rule of thumb because it encompasses all types of verbs, not just verbs of emotion and mental activity.

The following five sentences demonstrate why Rule of Thumb #1 is only half true. In the first two sentences, the *preterite* has been appropriately used with a verb of emotion; in the last three, with mental process verbs. The parenthetical notes indicate whether the preterite usage focuses on the beginning of an action or on its completion:

- 1) *Me entusiasmé* al oír las noticias. (beginning)
- 2) David *estuvo contento* por un rato hasta que volvió a pensar en el accidente. (completion)
- 3) Cuando Tomás vio a una mujer en un vestido rojo, *pensó* en su novia. (beginning)
- 4) Carlos *pensó* en su novia todo el día. (completion)
- 5) Durante sus años en la universidad, David no *creyó* en Dios. (completion)

When students encounter these types of sentences, it is natural for them to become confused and frustrated if they have learned

that emotions and mental activities are expressed using the imperfect. If the imperfect-used-with-verbs-of-emotion/mental-activity rule is used as the guiding principle, these five examples must be treated as violations of that rule. In contrast, if the P/I principles are followed, these sentences do not have to be considered exceptions to any rules. They are all governed by the P/I principle: sentences 2, 4, and 5 by Principle 2a and sentences 1 and 3 by Principle 2b.

In sum, because the broader P/I Principles not only explain the rule of thumb but also the "violations," and because the "violations" can create confusion, this rule of thumb should be eliminated from textbook and classroom explanations.

## (2) The Imperfect Is Used to Express Repeated or Habitual Past Action

Most textbooks have an explanation similar to Rule of Thumb #2 in which the terms "repeated" and "habitual" are used together in the same sentence. Of the 30 books examined, 17 used the term "repeated" in their explanation. While the "habitual" reference is accurate, the term "repeated" is a problem because it is ambiguous and can cause confusion. Depending upon the way in which repeated actions are characterized, they may be expressed using either preterite or imperfect. For example, if a certain number of repetitions is mentioned, whether one or one hundred, the preterite is used, as in the following example: *Fui a su despacho diez veces*. The reason for the use of the preterite in this case is that the completion of the actions is stressed rather than their repetitious nature. Clearly, since this cannot be a habitual or customary action, the imperfect cannot be used.

Because of the imprecision of the term "repeated," one might be inclined to consider entirely omitting the reference to "repeated" actions and simply using the term "habitual" or "customary." Can this be done? To answer this question, consider the following example: *El teléfono sonaba cada vez que Enrique intentaba acostarse*. In this

example, the verbs do not indicate habitual action (Principle 1b) because actions that occur on one day cannot be considered habitual or customary; nor do they indicate a single action in progress (Principle 1a). Rather, they indicate *repetitive* or *repetitious* actions (Principle 1c).

Solé and Solé characterize these types of actions as "repeated ongoing events" (64). One of their examples of this kind of action is: "*Los invitados llegaban unos tras otros. El anfitrión los hacía pasar*" (65). In reality, Principle 1a could be stretched to accommodate situations such as this (as Solé and Solé do); however, maintaining two separate principles is conceptually simpler.

In sum, because Rule of Thumb #2 is only half true, the recommendation here is that it be kept but modified. The word "repeated" should be avoided because of its imprecision but it cannot be eliminated altogether, since it is necessary to account for repeated actions that are not habitual but whose repetition—and not completion—is focused upon. Instead, terms such as "repetitive" or "repetitious" should be used.<sup>4</sup> Finally, Rule of Thumb #2 should be divided into two separate rules since "habitual" and "repetitive" actions are not the same. (See P/I Principles 1b and 1c.)

## (3) "Would + Infinitive" Signals Use of the Imperfect

Three English verbal constructions are typically given as English structures that signal the use of the imperfect: 1) "was/were + verb-ing," 2) "used to + infinitive," and 3) "would + infinitive." While "was/were + verb-ing" is a completely reliable predictor of imperfect usage and "used to + infinitive" is quite reliable, "would + infinitive" is not because of its ambiguity. The problem with "would" will be discussed in some detail, after a brief discussion of the other two structures.

"Was/were + verb-ing" consistently signals use of the imperfect because it is used in English to indicate past actions in progress. Because of its reliability, its inclusion in textbook explanations is valuable.

However, it is not sufficient to point out that this structure always signals the use of the imperfect. The underlying reason—P/I Principle 1a—should be emphasized.

“Used to + infinitive” is nearly as reliable as “was/were + infinitive.” As long as it is used to signal habitual or customary past actions, it signals imperfect usage. However, “used to” can also signal completion, indicating what used to be but no longer is. As Dominicis and Reynolds explain, “When this is the case, the stress is on the ending of the action and the preterite must be used” (8). They provide the following example and English translation to illustrate their point: “*Mi padre fue profesor de español, pero ahora es comerciante.*/My father used to be a Spanish teacher but he is now a merchant” (8). Including “used to” as a signalling device for the imperfect did not seem to be problematic in the 30 textbooks examined because, although nearly all of them—27: 10 beginning, seven intermediate, 10 advanced—mentioned “used to” in their explanations and/or examples, they made clear that habitual or customary actions were intended. Only two of the books (both advanced) included an explanation like the Dominicis and Reynolds one above which shows “used to” signalling the endpoint. While this usage may be rare, it would seem prudent for textbooks to supplement their “used to” explanations by adding reference to this fact in a footnote.

Unlike the consistently reliable “was/were + verb-ing” structure and the quite reliable “used to + infinitive,” the other English verbal construction—“would + infinitive”—does not consistently signal the use of the imperfect. The problem with the “would” structure is that it is ambiguous. It is used in English both for conditional statements and for habitual past actions. The following four English sentences illustrate this ambiguity:

- 1) If I were you, I would do it right now.
- 2) I would lend you the money but I don't have it.
- 3) I said I would do it when I returned.
- 4) When I was in third grade, I would

stay after school to help the teacher.

While each sentence contains the word “would,” only #4 would be rendered in Spanish with the imperfect because it indicates habitual past actions (Principle 1b). When “would” is the conditional modal verb in English, as in the first three examples, the conditional is also used in Spanish. While it is typical for textbooks to indicate that “would” is a signalling device for the imperfect, the explanation of this essential distinction is usually not provided—if at all—until the conditional tense is explained. Fifteen of the 30 textbooks examined used “would” as part of their explanation of the imperfect without including a “warning” about its conditional usage. Of these 15 books, seven eventually did clarify this as part of their explanation for the conditional tense, but eight never did provide a clarification. Two additional texts (identified in the Table as “✓<sup>3</sup>”) also used “would” as a signalling device but they contrasted conditional and habitual usage of “would” in their explanations of the imperfect. Because they provided immediate clarification, they are not considered problematic.

When “would” is given as a signalling device for use of the imperfect, if no reference is made to the conditional use of “would,” some students may get the impression that the one way to express “would” in Spanish is by using the imperfect. So that students will not have to “unlearn” or relax the would-imperfect association when they get to the conditional explanation, textbooks should make a brief reference to the non-habitual use of “would” in English, at least by referring to the conditional explanation that occurs later in the text. In addition, a set of contrasting sentences in English, similar to those given above, should be provided to show the differences, along with an exercise in which students would be asked to decide which English sentences indicated habitual actions—and would thus take the imperfect—and which did not.

In summary, rather than simply indicating that “would + infinitive” signals the use of imperfect, it must be made explicit that

this structure signals the use of the imperfect only when referring to habitual past actions (Principle 1b). Along with the explanation, it is important to supply counter-examples and explanations of the conditional use of "would + infinitive." Students will not necessarily be able to do this on their own.

#### (4) Preterite/Imperfect Usage with Certain Expressions

Textbooks often provide lists of certain phrases and claim they signal the use of preterite or imperfect. As the Table shows, while these lists were fairly common in the beginning and intermediate books examined, the advanced-level books almost never provided them. Apparently, authors consider the lists helpful for lower-level learners, as they build their understanding of aspectual differences, but once they have reached some level of competence, they are no longer needed. However, the danger is that although a few of the phrases are reliable signalling devices for aspectual choice, most are not. Consider the explanation provided in one first-year textbook: "Certain words and phrases are often associated with the preterite since they indicate a limited time period. These phrases tell when the action started and/or stopped." Below is a portion of the list that accompanied their explanation:

- a specific time: *a + la(s) + hour*;
- a general time: *por la mañana*;
- a date: *el martes/ el 25 de junio de 1817/ en 1965; el mes pasado, tarde/ temprano/ pronto/ después/ luego/ ayer/ anteayer/ anoche*
- a certain amount of time: *por dos años/ por una hora/ por cinco meses*

Almost all of these expressions can be used with either preterite or imperfect verbs, depending upon the context. The set of contrasting sentences provided below illustrates how each phrase can be used with both a preterite and an imperfect verb.

- A las ocho *me acosté*. / A las ocho ya *leía*

la tarea para el lunes.

• *Hice* mi tarea por la mañana. / *Ayer*, por la mañana, *caminaba* por la calle cuando *vi* el accidente. / De niña, *hacía* mi tarea por la mañana.

• Susana *nació* en 1965. / En 1965, aunque sólo *tenía* 16 años, David ya *asistía* a la universidad.

• Carlos *estudió* por una hora y luego se acostó. / De niño, Daniel *leía* por una hora antes de acostarse.

Although it is true that a few of the listed expressions (e.g., *por dos años*), would not likely be used in the imperfect, by the time all the unreliable expressions are eliminated from the list, what remains is scarcely a list. Instead of attempting to create a completely reliable list—which may not be possible—learners should be encouraged to rely on the P/I principles because they will be equipped with the necessary information to analyze each context they encounter. They will not need to rely on a memorized list of phrases that might or might not occur to determine which aspect to use.

An additional example will demonstrate the inadvisability of providing this type of list. Another first-year text provides the typical list with the heading "Time expressions often associated with the preterite" which includes, among other expressions, *anoche* and *el año pasado*. Then, on the very next page, a past tense passage in Spanish is provided for students to study preterite and imperfect usage. The first sentence in the passage includes *anoche* used with a verb in the imperfect as well as one in the preterite: "*Anoche* (1) *miraba* la televisión cuando (2) *oí* un reportaje especial." Three pages later, there is an exercise which contains the phrase *el año pasado* used with a verb in the imperfect: "*¿Trabajaba o estudiaba usted el año pasado?*" As these examples show, expressions such as *anoche*, *el año pasado*, *ayer*, etc., are no more associated with the preterite than they are with the imperfect. This type of list should not be provided. Its message is not even half true.

The expressions that texts commonly list as ones usually associated with the imper-

fect (e.g., *siempre, cada día, todos los lunes, generalmente*, etc.) are indeed more often used with the imperfect than with the preterite, and, as such, more statistically reliable than those associated with the preterite. However, the fact remains that they are unreliable predictors of imperfect usage. Contexts in which completion of the events is stressed over their habitualness require that preterite be used. Consider the following two examples.

In the first paragraph of “La señorita Bibiana,” a short story by Ana María Matute, *siempre* is used with the preterite: “*Tenía ya muy rebasados los treinta años y el aire severo e intolerante. Pero todos en el pueblo decían que a los veinte, a los veinticinco, a los treinta ... siempre tuvo el mismo aspecto*” (58).

The second example shows the use of the phrase *todos los días* with the preterite: “*Fui a Valencia y mientras estuve allí comí paella todos los días*” (Quilter 99).

Several of the textbooks that provided lists like these in the initial presentation of preterite or imperfect subsequently informed students of the “real truth.” For example, the first-year textbook quoted in the first paragraph of this section later pointed out,

Although you have learned that certain phrases are generally associated with a particular tense, these phrases do not automatically signal the use of that tense.... The use of the imperfect or preterite is determined by context of the entire sentence, not by one word or phrase.

One wonders why the lists were provided in the first place.

As has been shown, lists of expressions that supposedly signal use of the preterite are completely unreliable; it is recommended here that they not be included in textbook explanations. While the phrases typically associated with imperfect usage are probably statistically more reliable than the ones associated with the preterite, exceptions occur often enough to limit the value of such a list. If the underlying P/I principles are emphasized, a list is unnecessary.

### (5) Some Verbs Take on a Special Meaning in the Preterite Tense

There is a small set of verbs that most textbooks highlight as having “different meanings” when used in the preterite.<sup>5</sup> For example, most textbooks explain that in the preterite, *conocer* means “met” (not “knew”), *saber* means “found out” (not “knew”), *querer* means “tried” (not “wanted”), *no querer* means “refused” (not “did not want”), *tener* means “received” (not “had”), *poder* means “managed to” (not “could”), etc. Of the 30 textbooks reviewed, three of the eleven first-year texts, one of the nine intermediate texts, and two of the 10 advanced texts did not discuss the concept of the so-called meaning change verbs. Three of the advanced books discussed—but rejected—the notion that these verbs belong to a special category; therefore, they were counted as not having this problematic rule of thumb.

While it is not harmful to state that *saber* in the preterite is *often* expressed in English as “found out,” etc., it is crucial to stress that these verbs are not unlike “normal” verbs when used in the preterite. In each case, the preterite of “meaning-change” verbs focuses on the beginning or the end of the action or state just as it does with “normal” verbs (Principles 2a and 2b). However, the contention that “some verbs take on a special meaning in the preterite” is misleading because it suggests that the changes in meaning always occur. In reality, they do not apply in all contexts.

Some researchers (e.g., Bull, and Quilter) seriously question the special meaning designation for these verbs. Quilter cites three reasons why they should not be viewed as special:

It is true that the English equivalencies for these verbs do at times deviate from what we would expect given the citation form in the dictionary. But does this fact mean these verbs are somehow ‘special’ in the sense of ‘irregular’ or ‘unusual,’ behaving differently from other verbs? Three considerations should make us suspicious about the claim of exception: (a) native speakers do not appear to notice any consistent shared difference between the pastness of forms like *tuve* and *supe* and that of *hablé* or *corrí*; (b) ... ‘special’ preter-

ites can themselves be translated in more than one way; and (c) the phenomenon, whatever it is, does not seem to be limited to these five verbs. (91)

Bull explains the P/I distinction for these—and all—verbs in terms of cyclic and non-cyclic events. A non-cyclic event is one that, once initiated, can be extended indefinitely (such as walking); a cyclic event is one that once it takes place, stops and cannot be extended indefinitely (such as sitting down). (Bull 1965, 168–70, presents a more thorough discussion of cyclic and non-cyclic events.) Bull maintains the following:

It may be said, now, in recapitulation, that at RP [the retrospective axis] the Imperfect describes the imperfective aspect of either cyclic or non-cyclic events (*moría, caminaba*) while the Preterite is used in speaking of the terminative aspect of cyclic events or the initiative aspect of non-cyclic events (*A la una se fué, El presidente habló a la una*). (169)

Using this as a basis, Bull continues, explaining why verbs like *saber* need not be treated differently:

This formulation eliminates the need for special rules dealing with *supo/sabía, conoció/conocía*, etc. To know, in the sense of possessing knowledge, and to know in the sense of being acquainted with, have all the characteristics of non-cyclic events. Both are definable at their inception and both may be extended indefinitely. It follows, then, that *saber* and *conocer* differ in no way from other non-cyclic events. The Preterite (*supo, conoció*) indicates initiative aspect (the beginning of knowing, in either sense) while the Imperfect (*sabía, conocía*) describes the event in progress. (169–70)

Interestingly, researchers explain the preterite usage with this set of verbs differently. As we have seen from the previous citation, Bull contends that the verbs of this set, when used in the preterite, signal the beginning of the events. Solé and Solé, on the other hand, explain that with “non-conclusive events” (which correspond to Bull’s “non-cyclic events”), “the preterit may either refer to the moment of its beginning, or to the end of the event, which coincides with its termination” (58). Similarly, Guitart argues that “the contrast between PRET and IMP is the same in speaking of complete (cyclic) occurrences as it is in speaking of extendable (noncyclic) occurrences” (142).

This difference may be explained by the fact that, at least in some cases (e.g. *conoció* and *supo*), those who claim that the special preterites signal the end of the action are relying on the English translations (met, found out) whereas those who contend that they signal the beginning of the action are not (“the beginning of knowing” [Bull 170]). Bull explains this difference thus: “The two cultures are looking at reality through different windows and from a frame of reference of different logics” (170). What Bull does not address—and Solé and Solé, and Guitart, do—is the ability for the preterite to be used to focus on the endpoint of any type of action, not just cyclic events.

The following examples show why this rule of thumb—that certain verbs change meaning in the preterite—is only partially true. The key issue here is that there are contexts in which the “meaning change” verbs do not have the special meanings; that is, they would best be translated into English using the “normal” meaning of the infinitive. As Dominicis and Reynolds point out when discussing the meaning change verbs, “Sometimes the preterites of these verbs retain their original meanings.” They provide the following example and translation: “Siempre *supe* que ibas a triunfar./I always *knew* that you were going to succeed” (12). While the following discussion will center on *querer, saber, conocer, and tener*, the same type of analysis applies to other verbs of this set.

Some of the authors of the textbooks examined for this paper have seemingly forgotten that by the time the special meaning preterites are presented, their books have already provided practice with some of the “meaning change” verbs in the preterite, but without the special meanings! For example, in one first-year text, a contrastive preterite/imperfect chart was provided in which it was indicated that *querer* means “to try” when used in the preterite and “to want” when used in the imperfect. An observant student might ask why the preterite of *querer* suddenly means “tried” when, in the previous chapter (when the preterite was introduced), they had done an exercise

(totally in the preterite) in which *querer* occurred but would have been translated as “wanted,” a translation that now seems to be reserved for the imperfect. In the all-preterite exercise referred to, all verbs in the paragraph were to be conjugated in the preterite because all the actions and states contained in it were viewed as completed. The sentence that this hypothetical student was referring to was: “*A sus amigos les (encantar) \_\_\_\_\_ el plato y (querer) \_\_\_\_\_ saber el nombre.*” In this context, it is clear that *quisieron* would be translated as “wanted,” not as “tried.” This example contradicts Bull’s contention that the preterite is used to signal “the initiative aspect of non-cyclic events” (169); in this case, the preterite is used to signal the *completion* of a non-cyclic event.

Another first-year textbook does something similar. In an exercise (which appears well before the discussion of “meaning change” verbs) preterite verb forms are to be practiced. In the portion that follows, the correct form of the preterite of *saber* is to be used in each blank to complete the conversation:

- Nosotros no \_\_\_\_\_ nada de lo que preguntaron en ese examen. ¿Tú \_\_\_\_\_ algo?  
 —¡Nada! Yo tampoco \_\_\_\_\_ ni una palabra.

In this context, the preterite of *saber* would be translated as “knew/did not know”; “found out” does not make sense.

A second-year text provides the following example to show that when *tener* is used in the preterite, it means “received” or “got”: “*Ayer tuve buenas noticias de Silvia.*” While it is true that, in this example, *tuve* would be translated in English as “received” or “got,” a counter-example will show that *tuve* can also be translated as “had,” which according to this and many textbooks should be reserved for the preterite: “*Ayer tuve dolor de cabeza.*” *Tuve* would not be translated in this example as “got” unless I still have the headache; “had” is the more likely translation. (Quilter 91 gives additional ex-

amples of this nature.)

*Avanzando*, an intermediate text by de la Vega and Salazar, does not include *tener* among its meaning-change verbs. Interestingly, the authors use *tener* as an example to demonstrate the P/I distinction in general terms—not in terms of meaning changes. Their examples provide further evidence that the preterite of *tener* is not always rendered in English as “got/received”: 1) For the preterite, they provide: “*Cuando tuvo dinero gastó mucho.* (Sugiere que terminó el hecho de tener dinero y el hecho de gastarlo.)” (36); 2) for the imperfect, they provide: “*Cuando tenía dinero gastaba mucho.* (Durante el período indefinido de tiempo de tener dinero siempre tenía la costumbre de gastarlo.)” (36). Recall that the rule of thumb tells us that *tuvo* in the first example should be translated as “received,” when in reality, both the preterite and the imperfect would be translated as “had.” The difference lies in the fact that in the preterite example, the termination of the event is stressed. In the imperfect example, the stress is on habitualness.

Consider next the use of *conoció* in the already cited example, the first paragraph of “La señorita Bibiana” by Ana María Matute:

Tenía ya muy rebasados los treinta años y el aire severo e intolerante. Pero todos en el pueblo decían que a los veinte, a los veinticinco, a los treinta ... siempre tuvo el mismo aspecto. De niña nadie la *conoció*. Llegaron al pueblo, ella y su madre, cuando Bibiana era ya una mujer. (58)

In this context, the use of the preterite of *conocer* appears to be referring to the action as completed, or, more accurately, not completed, so that “De niña nadie la *conoció*” would be translated as “When she was a child, no one *knew* her.” It seems quite unlikely that Matute meant to convey the idea that no one made Bibiana’s acquaintance when she was a child, which would be the case if the beginning of *conocer* were being stressed.

Quilter gives an example which depicts usage similar to that of the Matute example: “Abraham Lincoln nunca *conoció* a George

Washington" (91); he translates *conoció* as "knew." This and the previous example provide two more instances in which the preterite has been used to signal terminative aspect of non-cyclic events, not the initiative aspect, as Bull has contended (169).

Another indication of the problems inherent in characterizing this set of verbs as having meaning changes in the preterite can be shown by the fact that it is not only the preterite of *conocer* that can be translated as "met." The imperfect—in its habitual usage—can also be translated as "met," as illustrated by the following example: "*Cuando trabajaba para el gobierno conocía a gente importante cada semana.*" Here "met (repeatedly)" is the idea rather than "knew," as the rule of thumb indicates.

For the verbs in the meaning-change category, the "special meanings" generally hold true within contexts that are being relived. For example, in "*Mientras limpiábamos la casa, mi hermano mandó que yo sacara la basura, pero no quise,*" *no quise* would be translated as "I refused," as the rule of thumb suggests. However, when focusing on the endpoint of actions or states, it is possible for the preterite to be translated either with the "special" meaning or with the "normal" one. Examine the use of *quise* in the following two examples:

- 1) "Durante dos años, *quise* ser médico, pero luego cambié de idea y decidí hacerme abogado."
- 2) "Por dos minutos, *quise* abrir la botella pero no pude. Terminé arrojándola contra la pared."

In the context of the first sentence, *quise ser médico* would be translated as "I wanted to be a doctor," not "I tried to be a doctor." This statement indicates that, for a period of time, I wanted to be a doctor, but that period of time came to an end.<sup>6</sup> In the context of the second sentence, "tried" works as the translation, whereas "wanted to" does not.

In sum, textbook explanations suggesting that certain verbs, when used in the preterite, function differently than other

verbs used in the preterite are untruthful. As has been shown, the "meaning change" verbs follow all of the P/I principles and they have a much richer lexical and semantic potential than the rule of thumb suggests. Nevertheless, it may not be prudent to entirely eliminate the discussion of "meaning change" verbs from textbook explanations because the English translations can help students understand the P/I distinction. However, textbook explanations should stress the underlying P/I principles that govern this set of verbs, just as it governs all other verbs. Finally, the explanation should not leave the impression that these verbs always "change meaning." As has been shown, there are many contexts in which they do not.

## (6) The Imperfect is Used for Two or More Simultaneous Actions

Even the generally accepted rule that the imperfect is used for two simultaneous actions does not always hold true. Quilter, pointing out that two or more *preterite* verbs can portray two simultaneous *completed* actions, cites the following example: "*Juan salió en el momento en que Ana entró*" (96). Using the imperfect would not be appropriate for these two simultaneous actions, because, as Quilter notes, these actions have no duration. The chief difference between this example and a more typical one—"María leía mientras su hijo dormía"—is that, in Quilter's example, the actions took place at the same time. They were completed at the moment they took place (cyclic actions in Bull's terminology).

Nevertheless, simultaneous actions need not be cyclic in nature for them to be rendered in the preterite. The preterite can express even simultaneous durative actions if the emphasis is on their completion rather than their duration. Ramsey explains this usage of the preterite in the following way:

In narration, where the events are wholly past the preterite applies to actions of some and any duration, provided we have no special reference to the fact of their continuance. It is as if the area over which the action extends were by the perspective of time re-

duced to a mere point. (323)

Two examples illustrate this usage. Ramsey gives an example taken from *La de Bringas*, XX, by Benito Pérez Galdós: “Mientras *estuvieron* solos, Bringas y su mujer apenas *hablaron*” which Ramsey translates as “While they *remained* alone, Bringas and his wife scarcely *spoke*” (326). The second example, examined in section 4 above with regard to the phrase *todos los días*, is: “*Fui a Valencia y mientras estuve allí comí paella todos los días*” (Quilter 99). In both examples, although the actions expressed by *estuvieron/hablaron* and *estuve/comí*, respectively, lasted for some time, their termination is the focus rather than their duration; hence, the use of the preterite.

This rule of thumb would be more truthful if it were rephrased, perhaps as follows: “The imperfect is used for two or more simultaneous *ongoing* actions; less frequently, the preterite can be used for two or more simultaneous completed actions, or, in the case of simultaneous durative actions, to focus on their completion, rather than on their duration.” Unfortunately, making the rule completely truthful has also made it lengthy, and consequently, it loses one of the characteristics of a good grammar explanations, that of economy (Herschensohn 411). The P/I principles, on the other hand, are superior to both the original and the modified rule of thumb because they are not only reliable but also succinct.

### Principle 1d: Imperfect for Anticipated/Planned Actions

The use of imperfect for planned/anticipated actions (P/I Principle 1d) is rarely presented in textbooks. Only six of the 30 books examined for this study included an explanation of this usage. (Two were beginning texts, one was intermediate, and three were advanced.) The omission of an explanation for this usage cannot be justified on the basis of infrequency in the input because it occurs fairly often. It occurs in the “*ir + a + infinitive*” structure as well as with

simple verbs (as in: *Paco iba a salir tan pronto como volviera su madre, Alicia dijo que salía el viernes próximo para Europa*). Perhaps some textbook authors elect not to present it because of its conceptual difficulty, but there are three reasons why it should be presented: 1) As noted, it is not rare in the input that students will be exposed to, and 2) because of this, when such sentences occur in a conversation or in reading material, students may feel bewildered because this usage does not follow the rules they have learned for the imperfect: habitual past actions or past actions in progress. Perhaps the strongest reason for presenting this principle along with the other P/I principles is that 3) once students understand the six principles, they will be equipped with nearly all the necessary information to make accurate P/I choices.<sup>7</sup>

### Conclusions

Several typical rules of thumb for preterite/imperfect usage in Spanish are problematic because they are only half true at best. Because they are “half-truths,” they confuse and frustrate students. A few of these rules are so questionable that they could be entirely eliminated from textbook explanations. Others can serve if modified. However, even accurate rules of thumb are best understood in terms of the underlying preterite/imperfect principles that govern them. For this reason, it is the principles that teachers should stress when discussing preterite/imperfect usage. Presenting a few reliable principles and reinforcing them with practice and discussion will go a long way toward building a solid understanding of the concepts underlying preterite/imperfect usage.<sup>8</sup>

### ■ NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The rules presented within quotation marks are verbatim quotes; the others are close paraphrases.

<sup>2</sup>Two of the textbooks examined—one beginning, one advanced—did not even mention the fact that the preterite is used to signal the beginning of an action.

<sup>3</sup>Only textbooks that contained this rule *without explanation* were counted as problematic. That is,

some texts contrasted preterite/imperfect usage with these verbs indicating that the preterite signals a change of mental/emotional state whereas the imperfect signals ongoing mental/emotional states. Because this type of explanation stresses the underlying P/I principles, they were not counted as problematic.

Guitart uses the terms "recurrence" and "recurring situation" to characterize this type of action.

<sup>7</sup>The most common set presented in textbooks consists of: *saber, conocer, querer/ no querer, poder/ no poder, tener* and sometimes *tener que*. Solé and Solé (58) and Quilter (91) include *comprender*, rendering it in the preterite as "grasped" or "realized," respectively. Bretz, Dvorak, and Kirschner include *pensar*, translating it in the preterite as "it dawned on me" (98). Ramsey even considers *ser* a meaning change verb and cites the following example and translation: "*Rómulo fué el primer rey de Roma./Romulus became the first king of Rome*" (321).

<sup>8</sup>While it would have been possible to use the imperfect in this example, the focus would have been on the ongoingness of the desire, not on its completion.

<sup>9</sup>The focus here has been on the conventional uses of preterite and imperfect. Ramsey (326–28) and Lunn have excellent discussions of the literary subtleties achieved by novelists' choice of aspect.

<sup>10</sup>An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Indiana Foreign Language Teachers Association conference in Indianapolis, October, 1994. I would like to express my thanks to Gail Guntermann.

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Table

Textbooks' Use of Problematic Rules of Thumb, by Level  
(B=Beginning, I=Intermediate, A=Advanced)

Note: The following categories correspond to Rules of Thumb #1-6.

- 1 = Imperfect used for verbs of emotion or mental activity. (No explanation of "ongoingness.")
- 2 = "Repeated" used in imperfect explanation.
- 3 = "Would" used in imperfect explanation/examples.
- 4-P = List of words associated with preterite provided.
- 4-I = List of words associated with imperfect provided.
- 5 = "Special meaning" preterites.
- 6 = Imperfect used for simultaneous actions.

KEY: ✓/- = present/absent in textbook

Textbook	1	2	3	4-P	4-I	5	6
B-1	-	✓	-	-	-	✓	✓
B-2	-	✓	✓ <sup>2</sup>	-	✓	✓	✓
B-3	✓	✓	-	✓	-	✓	✓
B-4	-	✓	✓ <sup>1</sup>	-	-	✓	-
B-5	-	✓	✓ <sup>1</sup>	-	✓	✓	-
B-6	✓	✓	-	✓	✓	✓	-
B-7	-	✓	✓ <sup>2</sup>	-	-	-	-
B-8	-	-	-	✓	-	-	✓
B-9	✓	✓	✓ <sup>2</sup>	✓	✓	✓	-
B-10	-	✓	✓ <sup>3</sup>	✓	✓	✓	✓
B-11	-	-	✓ <sup>1</sup>	-	-	-	-
I-1	✓	✓	✓ <sup>2</sup>	-	-	✓	✓
I-2	-	-	-	-	-	✓	-
I-3	✓	-	-	-	-	✓	-
I-4	-	-	-	-	-	✓	✓
I-5	-	✓	✓ <sup>2</sup>	-	-	✓	-
I-6	-	-	-	✓	✓	✓	✓
I-7	✓	✓	-	-	-	✓	✓
I-8	✓	-	-	✓	✓	-	-
I-9	-	-	✓ <sup>1</sup>	✓	✓	✓	-
A-1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
A-2	-	✓	✓ <sup>1</sup>	-	-	-	✓
A-3	✓	✓	✓ <sup>2</sup>	-	-	✓	-
A-4	-	✓	✓ <sup>1</sup>	-	-	-	-
A-5	-	-	✓ <sup>1</sup>	-	-	-	-
A-6	-	✓	✓ <sup>1</sup>	-	-	-	-
A-7	-	-	-	-	-	✓	-
A-8	-	-	✓ <sup>3</sup>	-	-	✓	-
A-9	✓	-	-	-	-	✓	-
A-10	-	✓	✓ <sup>2</sup>	-	✓	✓	-

<sup>1</sup> "Would" used in imperfect explanation but no "warning" about conditional usage provided.

<sup>2</sup> "Would" used in imperfect explanation but "warning" about conditional usage not provided until conditional explanation.

<sup>3</sup> "Would" used in imperfect explanation along with "warning" about conditional usage. (Not considered problematic.)