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On the uses and functions of the Preterite and the Present Perfect in contemporary Argentinian River Plate Spanish

This paper discusses the use of the Preterite and the Present Perfect (PP) in contemporary Argentinian River Plate Spanish (ARPS) as presented in examples (1) and (2) below:

(1) Juan **vino** ayer.

‘John **came** yesterday.’ (Preterite)

(2) Juan **ha venido** esta tarde.

‘John **has come** this afternoon.’ (PP)

In general Spanish the Preterite is used to refer to actions that occurred in the past and have no relation with the present. Conversely, the PP is said to establish a connection between an action or state and a preceding situation therefore expressing ‘current relevance’ (Comrie 1985: 25). Findings from this study indicate that in contemporary ARPS the Preterite prevails over the PP and expresses canonical perfective meanings as well as most notions of current relevance customarily encoded through the PP in other Spanish dialects. The PP is reduced to encoding canonical resultative and experiential meanings in a number of very limited linguistic contexts. This study examines (a) over 3 hours of casual conversation among five pairs of ARPS speakers (b) twenty-one newspaper articles from Argentinean sources covering George W. Bush’s visit to the country in October 2005 for the *Summit of the Americas* in Mar del Plata, Argentina. All data were coded for Past verbal forms (N=860). The Preterit is widespread throughout (69.4% of casual conversation data; 84% of newspaper data) whereas the PP represents 0.81% of the casual conversation data and 4.8% of the newspaper data. Findings in this study run contrary to Comrie’s (1976) claim that in Romance the PP is forcing out the Simple Past, and challenge the concept of ‘current relevance’ as solely related to the PP. It is further argued that present relevance of an event is expressed through the Preterite form and the use of temporal adverbials, rather than through the PP, in this dialect of Spanish.

References

Comrie, B. 1976. *Aspect*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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