

## Prescription vs. praxis: The evolution of Spanish imperfect subjunctive

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As has been shown by Poplack and Dion (2009), examining the grammars of different time periods can help our understanding of how languages evolve over time. Guided by this line of research the present study investigated the evolution of two morphological forms of the Spanish imperfect subjunctive by comparing their use to the grammars of that time period. Furthermore, an examination of Spanish grammar books provided clues to the linguistic factors that could condition the use of the two morphological forms of the imperfect subjunctive in Spanish. Thus, this study answered the following research questions: Do the patterns observed in the actual use of the imperfect subjunctive in Spanish correspond with what is discussed in the grammars? If they do not correspond, what do the differences reveal with respect to language change?

The data for this study was taken from two corpora, the *Corpus Diacrónico del Español* (CORDE) and *Corpus de Referencia del Español Actual* (CREA). A total of 1452 tokens of the –RA and –SE forms of the imperfect subjunctive in Spanish from 1580-1610, 1780-1810, and 1980-2010 were analyzed. The verbs analyzed were chosen from distinct semantic classes considering whether they were frequent or infrequent according to the Davies's (2006) Spanish frequency dictionary. Additionally, GoldVarb X (Sankoff, Tagliamonte, & Smith, 2005) was used to carry out three different logistical regressions, one per time period, in order to determine which linguistic variables condition the variation between –RA and –SE in the imperfect subjunctive in Spanish of each time period.

In the study, we expected to see the use of the –RA form of the imperfect subjunctive in its etymologic use in the pluperfect or imperfect tense in the indicative, while the –SE form was expected to be used in the pluperfect of the subjunctive (Nebrija, 1492; Valdés, 1535). However, the results demonstrated that linguistic factors that conditioned the use of the two forms of the imperfect subjunctive in Spanish are not the ones found in the grammars of the time periods examined. The results from the 16<sup>th</sup> century reveal a restructuring of the tense and mode systems in Spanish, which resembles the uses discussed in the grammars of later centuries (RAE, 1771; Josse, 1804). Additionally, the results suggest that the –SE form of the imperfect subjunctive in Spanish is not in free variation with the –RA form, but rather it has a stylistic use in the written and formal register. In conclusion, the results of this study confirm that the prescription described in grammars lags behind the current use (Poplack & Dion, 2009).

## References

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