

# THE APPLICABILITY OF DESCRIPTION: EMPIRICAL RESEARCH AND TRANSLATION TOOLS\*

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## ABSTRACT

The gap between translation research and practice remains a central concern in contemporary Translation Studies (TS). Applied TS is not considered a “pure” branch of the discipline in empirical translation research, and the transition from descriptive findings to empirically-based ready-to-use applications has received little attention. It is the aim of this paper to show how application-oriented results can be obtained by means of descriptive principles used in conjunction with other methodologies such as contrastive analysis and corpus-based studies. Translation performance/training/assessment can benefit from tools derived from applied research of this type.

KEY WORDS: Applied TS, empirical research, description, corpus-based studies, contrastive analysis.

## RESUMEN

La separación entre la investigación y la práctica profesional es una cuestión clave en los estudios contemporáneos de traducción. Desde el punto de vista empírico los estudios aplicados no se consideran como una rama “pura” de la disciplina y no se ha prestado atención a la transición entre la descripción y las aplicaciones prácticas. Este artículo tiene como objetivo mostrar cómo obtener datos aplicables haciendo uso de los principios descriptivos en combinación con otras metodologías como el análisis contrastivo y los estudios basados en corpus. Las herramientas derivadas de este tipo de investigación aplicada serán de utilidad en la práctica de la traducción, la evaluación y la formación de traductores.

PALABRAS CLAVE: ET aplicados, investigación empírica, descripción, estudios basados en corpus, análisis contrastivo.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The gap between translation research and practice persists as a major problem for contemporary Translation Studies (hereafter TS) in spite of the progress<sup>1</sup> made. Among the reasons for this state of affairs are the different notion(s) of “applied translation studies” held by both researchers and practitioners and the stand each group takes on the issue of prescription. Many translation scholars see their





discipline as an empirical science, the objective being to describe translation phenomena and to establish principles whereby future phenomena might be explained and predicted (Toury 1). From the empirical view an applied branch is not considered on the same level as descriptive and theoretical studies —rather it is seen as “applied extensions,”<sup>2</sup> as research done within the scope of other disciplines. By contrast, the view of a majority of translation providers and of a growing number of dissatisfied trainees, is that the discipline should be a think-tank of solutions to practical problems. For them, the main disciplinary aim is providing tools to achieve high quality translation. In other words, they consider the discipline of TS as being eminently applied.

In addition to this essential disagreement “descriptive researchers” scorn any guidelines or prescriptive indications because of their strict empirical outlook. Whereas, on account of their very real problems, adherents to the applied view explicitly endorse prescriptive research outputs. An attempt to (partially) narrow the distance between the two positions has been made from within (empirical) TS (Chesterman, “Empirical”) and there are certainly proposals to achieve this from the “applied branch”<sup>3</sup> but for different reasons they do not respond directly to applied translation needs as they do not bridge the distance between the descriptive findings of other disciplines and a particular application to translation.

In this paper I will adopt an empirical view of applied TS. Contrastive analysis and descriptive techniques are combined with corpus-based research in order to facilitate the transition from “description” to useful applications. It is assumed that application building is part of the research process and therefore the duty of the researcher, not that of the user. The argument is that there is more required than the mere provision of the “bridging rules” for each particular application, and that finding ways to offer results ready to be used by a versatile multi-application tool is a legitimate research goal. In this paper, the passage from “description” to “application” starts by finding ways of utilizing the analytical tools of (different areas of) linguistics for the benefit of translation-oriented applied research. In practice, this means that state-of-the-art (descriptive) linguistic classifications are not necessarily valid and that (applied) cross-linguistic translation-oriented criteria will be required. The contrastive analysis yields “comparable” data which are in turn compared to “descriptive” translation evidence. The results are verified for “target language fit” (Chesterman, “Hypotheses” 6) and an “applicable” inventory of “des-

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed analysis of “progress” in the field see Andrew Chesterman, “What Constitutes.”

<sup>2</sup> Toury 17-19. Compare with J. S. Holmes’ assumption of “three fairly distinct branches of the entire discipline” (77-78).

<sup>3</sup> Notably from linguistics; among others, Elke Teich.

criptively correct” choices for a particular “problem-area” is put forward. By adopting these findings, applied tools aimed at improving translation performance, training or assessment can gain substantial problem-solving capabilities.

Since the conceptual and methodological issues have already been discussed in detail elsewhere (Rabadán, “Divisions”),<sup>4</sup> I will focus on the actual search of ready-to-use results. Our case study starts from a translation problem, looks into its cause(s), searches for relevant empirical evidence and finds solutions in these “descriptive” materials. The languages are English and Spanish, the “solutions” apply to directionality English into Spanish

## 2. CASE STUDY: *PRETÉRITO* OR *IMPERFECTO*? THE ENGLISH SIMPLE PAST INTO SPANISH

The obligatory choice between *pretérito* and *imperfecto* in Spanish creates an area of difficulty when translating English past tenses. The multiplicity of values that can be taken on by the *imperfecto* does not mean however that there is a clear equivalence between these values and those expressed by the English Simple Past. The way these tenses have been characterized by linguists does not offer much help in terms of translational applicability. Although this analysis does not claim adherence to any particular linguistic model, I adopt a “maximum flexibility” functional view. Studies done within theoretical approaches other than functional have provided valuable insights and the findings, whenever useful, have been integrated into the analysis. Familiarity with these linguistic models is not considered necessary.

### 2.1. THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The question posed here is when, and under what circumstances does the English simple past tense embody the semantic features of the Spanish *imperfecto*? What are the alternatives? In other words, when and why is an English simple past tense form translated by an *imperfecto* into Spanish? What are the items and/or conditions in the English ST that indicate that the simple past tense is to be interpreted as an *imperfecto* in Spanish?

### 2.2. THE PROBLEM

In Spanish, as in other Romance languages, a basic opposition exists between preterite and imperfect when expressing past time. Traditionally it has been

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<sup>4</sup> See also sections 2.4, 2.5 and 2.5.1 in this article.



considered an aspectual difference whereby preterite forms (*pretérito* tense) would indicate “finished, perfective” actions and the imperfect forms (*imperfecto* tense) would convey a variety of aspectual meanings all referring to “unfinished, non-perfective actions/events.”<sup>5</sup>

In English, the basic opposition in the past is between simple and continuous, which obviously does not mirror the Spanish tense dichotomy. Spanish also uses an aspectual periphrasis to indicate “progressive,” but its use is clearly restricted to a small number of contexts. Furthermore, it is not part of the central verb system and it tends to be seen as an extremely important but rather peripheral resource in terms of grammar (Fernández de Castro).

The English simple past is the non-marked past and it is the expressive choice available for all those situations where there is no overt marking for “progressive” or “past with repercussions into the present,” which would call for other formal selections on the part of the speaker. In other words, it is the “broad-spectrum” form of the past and it can convey meanings such as “unitary, absolute past,” “hypothetical past,” “narrative past,” “habitual past” or “polite past” (Leech).

The Spanish *pretérito* is an absolute, unitary tense, restricted to the expression of past events, definite or indefinite,<sup>6</sup> in a time sequence. The most obvious and defining feature of the *imperfecto* (as opposed to the *pretérito*) is the fact that it is a relative tense, whose use is linked to the existence of another action, fact or event to which it refers. This action, fact or event can be explicitly mentioned in the preceding text, or implied, or be part of the situation (Molendijk 30). In other words, the *imperfecto* is an anaphoric past referring to some simultaneous, co-occurring event in the past. The *imperfecto* is a plurifunctional tense, which can acquire different values and time perspectives. It is common to refer to the “primary” and the “secondary” values of the *imperfecto* (Gutiérrez Araús 41-56). First among the primary values is that of “present-in-the-past,” whose primary role is to express “embedded events” in that past (Giorgi & Pianesi 151-192). “Habit in the past” and “description in the past”<sup>7</sup> are also frequent primary values of the *imperfecto*. When there is “time displacement” (Rojo & Veiga 2897) we have the “secondary values” of the *imperfecto*. Most authors<sup>8</sup> offer taxonomies of “displaced” and modal uses that tend to reflect formal and/or situational distinctions and are often semantically redundant. A thorough review of these uses has revealed that it is possible to merge all in three meaning classes. The first is that of the “hypothetical past,” which comprises all those cases where the *imperfecto* is equivalent to a conditional tense or

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<sup>5</sup> See Luis García Fernández, “El pretérito.” Pages 31-50 are particularly relevant here.

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed review of the aspectual/aktionsart possibilities of this Spanish tense, see Alicia Cipria & Craige Roberts.

<sup>7</sup> This use refers to stative predicates, i.e., the expression of permanent characteristics. It could also be defined as the description of habitual features (Bertinetto 300-315).

<sup>8</sup> For different taxonomies, see Gutiérrez Araús, 41-56; Cipria & Roberts 322-27 and Manuel Pérez Saldanya 222-226.

a subjunctive, in situations where there is no direct confirmation by the speaker of the actual happening of what was planned, and to polite uses in the present. We can dub the second meaning “irrealis” —it indicates that the action/event was scheduled, but did not happen (Fleischman 539). The final label is “perfective *imperfecto*,” a contradiction in itself. It can appear as a “narrative past” in literary language and in a number of subordinate contexts.

This specialization of tenses implies an obligatory choice which is far from being random. To be able to decide which one to use requires understanding the reasons why Spanish offers this two-way option and the distributional (meaning) criteria it operates on. The search for answers to our research questions will start here by briefly looking at the implications for our “translation problem” of the obvious cross-linguistic differences.

### 2.3. COMMON GROUND

As mentioned above, it has been assumed that the difference between both tenses lies in their grammatical aspect specifications —the *pretérito* would indicate terminated, closed events and the *imperfecto* would signal open processes. However, there is abundant evidence that contradicts this common assumption: if the difference between the two tenses was just aspectual, then it would be impossible to use the non-perfective tense in sentences that refer to “completed facts,” and this is not congruent with empirical data for a number of languages, e.g. the “*imperfectos perfectivos*” discussed by García Fernández (72-89) or the argument by Molendijk (24) concerning the use of the French *passé simple* and the *imparfait*, which is perfectly applicable to Spanish.

Typologies established on the basis of (actionality) semantic features,<sup>9</sup> although helpful to understand the semantics of lexical aspect, have not been particularly successful either when it comes to explaining cross-linguistic differences. The failure to properly distinguish and acknowledge the interaction between verbal (grammatical) and lexical aspect (aktionsart) categories also adds to the confusion,<sup>10</sup> and when this is taken to a practical level, the regularities resulting from the interaction between verb semantics and grammatical aspect do not seem to explain cross-linguistic common ground very well (Maslov 11).

There is also the possibility that the difference underlying the choice between *pretérito* and *imperfecto* is not primarily aspectual, but rather has to do with

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<sup>9</sup> The classic work in this respect is Zeno Vendler’s *Linguistics in Philosophy*. Of particular interest here are Yuko Morimoto, *El aspecto léxico: delimitación*, and Susan Rothstein, *Structuring Events: A Study in the Semantics of Lexical Aspect*.

<sup>10</sup> Besides the “perfective-telic” confusion, other potentially misleading interactions are “perfective-dynamic,” in Pier Marco Bertinetto 195; and “perfective-prospective” in Gutiérrez Araus 55-59.



tense considerations. Recent proposals link it with the relative, anaphoric nature of the *imperfecto* and with its ability to assume “displaced” temporal reference. According to Molendijk, this anaphoric capability<sup>11</sup> is the only real sustainable difference between both tenses and most of the other (seemingly) discriminating features are not more than symptoms of this basic property. It is true that temporal anaphora underlies all the non-displaced uses of the *imperfecto*, but it is not clear how it can become on its own a sound basis on which to make translation-oriented distinctions. For the linguist it is highly desirable to keep the level of differential features to a minimum, so as to boost the systematization process. For the user of a linguistic application, however, it is all about accessibility and time-efficiency. Looking for the anchor of the anaphoric relationship does not lead necessarily and/or easily to a valid translational decision. Further characterizing features have to be brought into the picture if we are to gain accuracy and improve the analytical stage in real life situations. It is already clear that the aspectual “linguistic tools” available are not discriminating on their own either.

It is my hypothesis that the key to discriminate which of these features are involved in deciding whether the English past form is to be a *pretérito* or an *imperfecto* in Spanish lies in a combination of aspectual, temporal and modal meanings, and that a custom-made characterization is needed in order to establish translation-oriented criteria.

If “temporal anaphora” is the salient tense-related feature when choosing between *pretérito* and *imperfecto*, the aspectual component that can be said to influence the decision of choosing *pretérito* or *imperfecto* is whether there is an end-point in the span of the situation being referred to, i.e. the external closure of the event would call for a *pretérito*, whereas the *imperfecto* would be the choice if the end-point is not present in the context.

If we take this as a working hypothesis, the *pretérito* would be the choice for “absolute past” and express “absolute action/event in the past, with an end-point requirement.” *Imperfecto* forms would then correspond to “anaphoric past” and signify “anaphoric action/event with no end-point requirement.” This is the characterization for the “non-marked” uses of both translation solutions. But there are other more specialized “anaphoric” functions, such as “habit” and “progressive,” which add extra components to this basic distinction. Modal values also require a non-anaphoric interpretation which is offered below.

### 2.3.1. *Tertium Comparationis*: Cross-linguistic labelling

In order to be useful for translation, a semantic characterization of the different values of the simple past, the *pretérito* and the *imperfecto* has to meet at

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<sup>11</sup> For this author “temporal anaphora” implies “simultaneity” of the relative action /event indicated by the “imperfecto” with some other past action/event/ situation (Molendijk 21-30).

least three conditions: it must a) be cross-linguistically relevant, b) reflect translation “voids” and c) avoid redundancy. The following is an attempt at building such a tool.

“Absolute past” stands for the “default” value of signalling actions/events in the past showing an end-point. This is the “non-marked” meaning of the English Simple Past and the Spanish *pretérito*.

[AP/12] Arnie took the advice. He played the Memorial that year, an obvious exercise in one-upmanship.

[AP/2] Cuando leí el proyecto presentado para esta plaza, me acordé de Pompeyo Gener. El popular “Peius,” explicando sus fantásticos viajes.

“Anaphoric past” is a past for which no end-point closure is present in the context. This is one of the meanings of the English Simple Past and the “non-marked,” basic meaning of the Spanish *imperfecto*.

[ANP/21] Adam wondered, as he tried to keep his eyes shut against the burrowing grains, whether the engines would ever start again.

[ANP/57] Se apartó asustado y miraba al cura como a un aparecido.

“Habit” incorporates the feature “continuous, repeated action in the past,” as in

[H/3] Defence lawyer John Rees said Mr Stewart, who lived with Amos’s estranged wife, wanted to draw attention to domestic problems.

For some linguists, habit only applies to actions, and “typical characteristics” or “distinctiveness,” which are taken to be states/ inherent features, would be considered under a separate heading. Here both actions and states will be analysed as “habit.” This is one of the functions of the Spanish *imperfecto*.

[H/40] Desarmaba literalmente las cuestiones que le eran planteadas, miraba a su interlocutor con su característica mirada seria y escéptica y formulaba respuestas perfectas para la impresión.

“Progressive” stands for “ongoing occurrence of action/event in the past.” Spanish may use an *imperfecto* to convey this meaning. No instances of this function have been found in the English language corpus.

[PR/3] Al ver que los agentes se acercaban, numerosos jóvenes se añadieron a la pelea, algunos de los cuales salieron del interior de otra discoteca situada en la acera de enfrente.

“Hypothetical” indicates “unreal condition, intention” and its central expressive resources are “would + inf” constructions in English and the conditional tense or an *imperfecto* in the subjunctive in Spanish. No instances of this function have been found in the Spanish corpus.



[HY/21] According to the story, Neil reckoned Ravanelli wasn't fit and could lose Middlesbrough the cup if he played at Wembley.

"Irrealis." This semantic function stands for a number of values that non-applied linguists consider under different denominations.<sup>12</sup> In all cases, very fine distinctions can be made, but they do not contribute much to our translation goal, as the abstraction level relevant here is defined by one single discriminating component: whether there is direct confirmation that the scheduled action/event actually happened. If there is not, the *imperfecto* is the standard form to express it. Evidence of this meaning was not found in the English corpus.

[IRR/60] Los dos días y medio que pasé en la Dirección General de Inseguridad —¡y yo que **creía** que eso ya no existía!— fueron verdaderamente kafkianos.<sup>13</sup>

"Perfective imperfecto" is used to describe those uses of the Spanish *imperfecto* when it is employed as a narrative device in literary (and journalistic) language in order to focus on a specific action or event. As it is equivalent to a *pretérito* and does not contribute any particular semantic function, this use will be considered as "absolute past" here.

[AP/322] La Voz de Valencia. Diario de tendencia derechista, próximo a Calvo Sotelo, **aparecía** el 3 de agosto controlado por Esquerra republicana.

#### 2.4. EMPIRICAL RESEARCH: SOURCE(S) OF DATA

The empirical data for our cross-linguistic contrast are taken from three different corpora: The Bank of English for English language evidence, the CREA for Spanish, and the ACTRES bilingual translation corpus. The technical and statistical details of the two monolingual corpora have been described extensively in previous writings (Rabadán, Labrador & Ramón) and state-of-the-art information can be accessed at <<http://titania.cobuild.collins.co.uk>> and <<http://www.rae.es>> respectively. The ACTRES bilingual translation corpus mirrors the "internal architecture" and distribution of both CREA and The Bank of English. At its last update (February 2005) it contained over 700,000 words evenly distributed between the two languages.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> In this respect see, among others, Mario Squartini 309.

<sup>13</sup> This function is listed as "*imperfecto de sorpresa*" by some researchers, e.g. Gutiérrez Araús 52-54.

<sup>14</sup> Access to this corpus is restricted to team researchers due to stringent copyright regulations concerning the texts. A sample of materials can be accessed at <<http://helmer.hit.uib.no/~knut/noelia>>.

For both CREA and the Bank of English the subcorpora chosen for this study are those comprising written texts: newspapers, magazines, books and ephemera. In both cases the chronological span has been selected by default and the language variety is the European one. Following the usual practice in the ACTRES project, the size of the representative sample will be obtained by applying the formula:  $n = N / (N-1)E^2 + 1$  where  $n$  is the sample to be analysed and  $N$  the population, i.e., the total number of occurrences yielded by our searches, while  $E$  is the estimative error (5%). In the selection tables below, decimals under 0.5 have been rounded down, and those exceeding 0.5 have been rounded up to the next unit so as to always obtain discrete quantities, i.e., the number of examples to be analyzed. An additional source of empirical information is a team of 10 informants. Their role in the stages prior to semantic cross-labelling is invaluable.<sup>15</sup>

## 2.5. PROCEDURE: STAGES

Given the greater specialization of Spanish in this grammatical area, a common protocol has been imported from DTS: the target-based approach. Since problems of tense/aspect redistribution are not posed by the English source language but are encountered in the actual rendition into Spanish, the search for evidence of use of *imperfecto* and *pretérito* uses was conducted separately, while in English the data would correspond solely to the simple past tense. The progressive forms of the past will be considered separately.

Presented below are the stages of the contrast English-Spanish:

- i) search CREA for qualitative and quantitative evidence and analyze Spanish data in terms of the labels already proposed,
- ii) search The Bank of English and proceed as in Spanish,
- iii) search parallel ACTRES for “translation solutions,”
- iv) using the comparable data, verify degree of cross-linguistic overlapping and/or divergence in meaning functions-expressive means,
- v) using comparable and translation data, identify areas of deviation between non-translated uses and translation choices,
- vi) using both comparable and translation data, establish set of “descriptively correct” solutions available.

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<sup>15</sup> The informants sociolinguistic profile can be defined as “university educated speaker,” “middle class” and “28-45 years.” Five of them have some variety of European English as their first language; the other five are native speakers of Castilian Spanish. All the informants have had some training in linguistic analysis, although only two in each group are professional linguists. In each subgroup there is one person that has access only to his/her language whereas the other eight can communicate both in English and in Spanish.

### 2.5.1. Selection: Spanish and English

Ten high-frequency verbal lemmas among the top 100 were randomly chosen and used as search input in CREA. The restrictive query options offered by the corpus make it necessary to search for examples of all inflected forms. The distribution of these forms is reflected in the sampling proportionally. As shown in table 1 below *imperfecto* and *pretérito* forms were considered as different searches because the two tenses exist independently in the conjugation. Besides, they do different jobs and represent different values.

TABLE 1. SELECTION FOR SPANISH *IMPERFECTO* AND *PRETÉRITO*

SAMPLE	<i>PRETÉRITO</i>	VERB	<i>IMPERFECTO</i>	SAMPLE	TOTAL CASES
25	2583	<i>creer</i>	3921	74	6504
111	11616	<i>dejar</i>	4051	77	15667
43	4473	<i>mirar</i>	3601	68	8074
51	5304	<i>tomar</i>	1538	29	6842
43	4499	<i>perder</i>	1258	24	5757
27	2858	<i>acercar</i>	1144	22	4002
38	4008	<i>aparecer</i>	2433	46	6441
34	3583	<i>escribir</i>	1442	27	5025
4	425	<i>comer</i>	786	15	1211
20	2134	<i>acordar</i>	504	10	2638
396	41483	TOTAL	20678	392	62161

In English the procedure was rather different. As the starting point is target-based, a comparable “universe of analysis” was built using The Bank of English materials and following the same criteria: search for past tense forms using as query nodes ten high frequency lemmas. As it turned out that the quantitative volume of this first search was substantially lower than the outputs of the two Spanish searches combined, more querying nodes, selected among the top 100 as well, were used until the English data reached a comparable and representative size— 62,161 cases for Spanish and 62,108 for English (see table 2 below).

TABLE 2. SELECTION FOR ENGLISH SIMPLE PAST TENSE

VERB	CASES	SAMPLE
Saw	6672	43
Came	13074	84
Meant	1778	11



Called	5202	33
Tried	3928	25
Play	3450	22
Lived	1395	9
Held	2099	13
Began	5007	32
Led	2117	14
Lost	3059	20
Continued	1516	10
Spent	2453	16
Oponed	1768	11
Read	1382	9
Appeared	2306	15
Broke	2218	14
Received	1597	10
Understood	390	2
Cut	697	4
TOTAL	62108	397

The ACTRES translation corpus is used as a “prospection tool,” which means that the evidence obtained from this source is taken to be an indicator of whether the native usage and that of translated texts are consistent or translation practice departs from the central expressive resources in the target language. To this end, a hundred pairs were randomly selected using as querying nodes simple past tense forms of any (lexical) English verb. Our “prospection corpus” yielded 165 forms in English and their (varied) corresponding translations (table 3 below).

TABLE 3. ACTRES TRANSLATION CORPUS- 100 PAIRS			
ENGLISH	SPANISH		
165	165		
	118	71.51%	PRETÉRITOS
SIMPLE	27	19.39%	16.36% IMPERFECTO
PASTS	5		3.03% IMP. SUBJUNTIVO
	11	6.06%	OTHER TENSES
	4	2.42%	LEXICAL SOLUTIONS



### 2.5.2. Description: Spanish

Corpus evidence for the Spanish *pretérito* shows a remarkably homogeneous semantic behaviour in terms of our labels, with just one semantic value: “absolute past,” as in

[SiP/2] Cuando leí el proyecto presentado para esta plaza, me **acordé** de Pompeyo Gener. El popular “Peius,” explicando sus fantásticos viajes.

[SiP/26] Entre otras cosas, se podrán ver, por ejemplo, las cartas originales que los presidentes George Washington y Benjamin Franklin **escribieron** de su puño y letra al rey Carlos III de España.

However, in terms of linguistic analysis, this category is far from being homogeneous, as shown by the abundant literature on the topic. Yet, distinctions in terms of event semantics, aspectual categories, etc. do not seem to make any difference when it comes to choosing between *pretérito* and *imperfecto*. In the examples above, both verbs present a terminated action with end-point included; both [SiP/2] and [SiP/26] are durative in the past, but [SiP/26] can be seen as an accomplishment, whereas [SiP/2] qualifies as an achievement.

TABLE 4. SEMANTIC FUNCTIONS OF THE SPANISH “*PRETÉRITO*”

FUNCTIONS	CASES	%
ABSOLUTED PAST	396	100%

The analysis of corpus data shows that the “perfective imperfect” use of the *imperfecto* (5.61%) actually means “absolute past.” It tends to appear accompanied by a time adverbial in literary or journalistic contexts with a focus on narrative emphasis. *Imperfectos* with this meaning can be substituted by a *pretérito*.

[AP/342] El martes, día 5, en su columna “¿Miedo a ganar?” Joan Barril **escribía** que Felipe González “no debería esgrimir jamás” miedo a ganar. (=ESCRIBIÓ)

Most cases of *imperfecto* (65.56%) signal “anaphoric past,” i.e. it relates the action or event expressed by the *imperfecto* to some other “primary” action happening in the past as well, as in

[GS/14IMP] En aquella primera película se partió de un gran respeto por la novela; incluso la historia **aparecía** ambientada en Hungría, igual que en mi novela.

A further meaning conveyed by the Spanish *imperfecto* is that of “habit” (19.13%), as in

[H/7IMP] Más de 50 conductores de nacionalidad dominicana, cuya localización resultó muy laboriosa debido a que se trata de personas que cambiaban con

frecuencia de domicilio o **dejaban** direcciones falsas, han sido detenidos por utilizar los servicios de esta segunda red.

This function is also expressed by periphrasis “*soler + inf*” or other combinations of *imperfecto* and aspectually marked adverbials and/or prepositional phrases, as shown by evidence from the ACTRES translation corpus<sup>16</sup>

30P. And he talked about his holidays in expensive and remote places that other students wouldn't be able to travel to, at least not in vacations.  
También solía hablar de sus viajes a lugares remotos y caros que sus compañeros nunca podrían visitar, al menos en vacaciones.

“Progressive” in the past can also be indicated by an *imperfecto* (nearly 9% of all cases), independently of whether the verb follows the normal conjugation pattern or is part of an aspectual periphrasis (further proof that the English progressive form and the Spanish periphrasis *estar + gerundio* do not cover the same semantic terrain)

[PR/17IMP]Mientras el pelotón se lo **tomaba** con calma, los cuatro fugados se dirigieron hacia la meta, a la que llegaron con casi veinte minutos de adelanto sobre los favoritos.

The Spanish *imperfecto* can also acquire the modal value we have dubbed “irrealis” (0.51%) to signal that something expected to happen at a given time or in a particular way did not happen so, as in

[IR/61] Yo **creía** que esa señora estaba ya enterrada.

“Hypothetical” is represented by just 0.25% of the examples.<sup>17</sup> This use seems to be restricted to conditional contexts.

[HY/246]La diputada Rosa Martí anunció en abril pasado que el PSC presentaría un recurso si se **tomaba** una decisión de este tipo.

TABLE 5: SEMANTIC FUNCTIONS OF THE SPANISH “IMPERFECTO”

FUNCTIONS	CASES	%
Absolute Past	22	5.61
Anaphoric Past	257	65.56
Habit	75	19.13

<sup>16</sup> An extensive treatment of the expression of “habit” in Spanish in Martínez-Atienza 353-369.

<sup>17</sup> “Hypothecality” tends to be associated with the *imperfecto* in the subjunctive and with the conditional tense (Rojo & Veiga 2897, 2919).



Progressive	35	8.93
Irrealis	2	0.51
Hypothetical	1	0.25
TOTAL	392	100

### 2.5.3. Description: English

The main function of the English simple past is “absolute past” (76.07%), that is, past actions or events with an end-point.

[AP/8] Heartless thieves broke into a charity warehouse in Leven, Fife, and nicked chocolate that was destined for orphans in Eastern Romania.

“Anaphoric past” is the function of 21% of the examples in the English corpus, which again, as in Spanish, signals the “simultaneity” of the action/event conveyed by this tense with some other event somehow present in the situation. There is no explicit closure or end-point to what is conveyed by the verb.

[AP/26I] People who knew him saw him as a friendly braggart, someone always having a joke, and a family man.

A meagre 1.5% of the examples signifies “habit in the past.” This function is perfectly marked by the adverb “always,” which is also the key to the translated *imperfecto* in 81P below.

[H/47I] But then he started going to sea and it was a real strain. When he came back we always seemed to be having rows.

81P. Such letters always meant disciplinary trouble.

Cartas como aquella significaban problemas disciplinarios indefectiblemente.

Our corpus has yielded 1.5% of “hypothetical” cases, mostly in conditional contexts. This use of the English simple past may be conveyed in Spanish by a conditional tense [22P] or a subjunctive, as shown by “began-*empezara*” in [44P] below.

[HY/11] Deily left Lemonheads before Lick hit the shops, and issued a threat of legal action if Dando played a single not of any of his songs.

22P. It could set precedents that resulted in a proliferation of the unilateral and lawless use of force.

Podría sentar precedentes que tendrían como consecuencia la proliferación del uso de la fuerza unilateral e ilegal.

44P. I think I know why Father Martin suggested it would be helpful if I began writing again.

Entiendo por qué el padre Martin me aconsejó que empezara a escribir otra vez.



No evidence of “progressive” or “irrealis” uses has been found in the English simple past corpus.

FUNCTIONS	CASES	%
Absolute Past	302	76.07
Anaphoric Past	83	20.9
Habit	6	1.5
Progressive		
Irrealis		
Hypothetical	6	1.5
TOTAL	397	100

#### 2.5.4. Juxtaposition English-Spanish: The Comparable Data

The juxtaposition of the results obtained from both The Bank of English and CREA shows a clear difference in the distribution of meanings in English and in Spanish (see table 7). The Spanish *pretérito* is the non-marked form and always conveys “absolute past,” which poses no problem for translation. The *imperfecto* however is used in every possible situation: from the “absolute past” represented by the narrative “imperfecto perfectivo” to functions that have not been recorded as uses of the English past, such as “progressive” and “irrealis.” It makes sense to hypothesize that English has other, more central resources to express the low frequency functions of “habit” and “irrealis,” and that Spanish must also have other ways of expressing “irrealis” and “hypothetical,” as these are possible, but obviously peripheral values of *imperfecto*. What has become clear after the analysis is that “anaphoric past” can only be expressed in Spanish by means of an *imperfecto*.

ENGLISH %	FUNCTIONS	SPANISH %
76.07	Absolute Past	5.61
20.9	Anaphoric Past	65.56
1.5	Habit	19.13
	Progressive	8.93
	Irrealis	0.51
1.5	Hypothetical	0.25
100	TOTAL	100



### 2.5.5. Contrastive “Voids” and Translation Solutions: The ACTRES Corpus Evidence

Evidence offered by our 100 pair translation corpus (see table 3 above) indicates that the vast majority of English Simple Past Tenses (over 70%) are transferred into Spanish by means of a pretérito, which is consistent with the non-marked meaning of past event, as *llegó* and *regresamos* in

5P. We lived in South Africa during the war,” William Tembe explains, “but we moved back to Mozambique to farm when peace came.”  
Durante la guerra vivíamos en Sudáfrica, pero cuando llegó la paz regresamos a Mozambique para trabajar en el campo,” me cuenta William.

The imperfect is the translation solution chosen in nearly 20% of the cases when the meaning of the original departs from the basic “past event” and indicates finer distinctions, as *lived-vivíamos* above, which signals “simultaneous (with the war) events in the past.” The translation corpus sample also reveals a number of tense shifts in the Spanish translations. The figures indicate that this is not a central practice (just over 6%), but it still has to be taken into account. Some of these shifts obey Spanish tense sequence or situations of tense distinction neutralization, as in 22P above, but they do not cause changes in the meaning of the TT. There are cases, however, where it is difficult to envisage a translational and/or linguistic reason for the shift, which unnecessarily reduces the informativity of the Spanish text, as in 15P, or changes the perspective in the translation as in 28P,

15P. Inside one bull elephant, which eventually died of old age, Myberg dug out no fewer than 31 bullets.

En las entrañas de un elefante macho que había muerto de viejo, Myberg descubrió 31 balas.

28P. I knew that he wasn’t popular but I didn’t tell them that.

Sé que no era un joven popular, pero tampoco mencioné ese detalle.

A number of further translation solutions unveiled by our corpus data have been grouped under the heading “lexical solutions.” They are variegated and resist neat classification, but it can be said that all of them correspond to “modulation” in a broad sense (Salkie), as in 29P and 39P.

29P. The things he owned showed it too.

Sus posesiones lo demostraban.

39P. It was Father Martin’s idea that I should write an account of how I found the body.

Fue idea del padre Martin que yo pusiera por escrito mi experiencia del hallazgo del cadáver.

17P. I have become increasingly angry with myself for not convincing Blair of the damage he would do if he persisted in unilateral war.

Me he enfadado cada vez más conmigo mismo por no haber sido más persuasivo en las distintas reuniones a la hora de convencer a Tony Blair del daño que se haría a sí mismo y a su partido con una guerra unilateral.



Data obtained at the juxtaposition stage reveal that nearly a quarter of all cases (24%) of the English simple past convey meanings that would correspond to a Spanish *imperfecto*. ACTRES corpus data show that the use of the *imperfecto* and the subjunctive *imperfecto* together in translated language comes to 19.39% (see table 3 above)

The comparison of these two sets of evidence indicates that the *imperfecto* is underutilized in translation and that it never appears as *imperfecto perfecto*, meaning “absolute past,” a function which is clearly performed by the *pretérito* in the Spanish translations (see table 8). Two common uses of the *imperfecto* in non-translated usage, “progressive” and “irrealis” are not represented in the ACTRES sample as English simple pasts (the input in the translation) do not seem to convey these meanings.

TABLE 8. SEMANTIC DISTRIBUTION OF COMPARABLE AND TRANSLATION DATA ENGLISH-SPANISH

ENG_%	FUNCTIONS	SP_IMP%	TR_IMP/OTHERS%	TR_PRÉT%
76.07	Absolute Past	5.61		77.14
20.9	Anaphoric Past	65.56	16	
1.51	Habit	19.13	3.42	
	Progressive	8.93		
1.51	Hypothetical	0.51	3.42	
	Irrealis	0.25		
100	TOTAL	100	100	

The data also show that there is no systematic preference, either semantic or formal, in those cases where “other tenses” or “lexical solutions” have been favoured over other available translation solutions. Some of them would correspond to *pretéritos* (39P), others to *imperfectos* (17P), some convey the meaning of “absolute past,” others “anaphoric past” (29P). This means that not every example meaning “hypothetical” is translated by an *imperfecto* or that all cases meaning “habit” call for other translation solutions. The evidence obtained from both the comparable and the translation corpora shows that the inventory of “descriptively correct” translational choices available for the meanings displayed by English Simple Past forms is as follows:

TABLE 9. TRANSLATION SOLUTIONS AVAILABLE FOR MEANINGS OF ENGLISH SIMPLE PAST

FUNCTIONS	TRANSLATION SOLUTIONS
Absolute Past	<i>Pretérito</i>
	<i>Imperfecto</i> (Native Usage)
Anaphoric Past	<i>Imperfecto</i>



Habit	<i>Imperfecto</i>
Hypothetical	<i>Imperfecto</i>

Meanings such as “progressive” or “irrealis,” which are displayed by the Spanish forms are conveyed by other expressive resources in English. The analysis of these other forms will be undertaken separately and hopefully will help complete the picture of the cross-linguistic equivalences in the various areas of verbal meaning.

### 3. BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

These results can be used advantageously in different applied activities. Work in progress aims at “packing” them in an electronic tool capable of performing in three applied areas. Professional translators would benefit from an electronic format compatible with the usual translation aids to assist them during translating and/or revision. Being able to retrieve information already tested and verified will no doubt speed up the work and hopefully improve translation quality.

This tool can help systematize work in the classroom, it can be tested and verified using new cases, and it has proven to be a highly successful tool among trainees, as it is always possible to retrieve grammatical, semantic and pragmatic information at different stages of the process. Those involved in translator training will no doubt be interested in adding applications of this sort to their pool of resources.

Translation quality assessment (TQA) can certainly find a use for such a tool, either by singling out one problem area and examining the solutions adopted throughout the text against the “descriptively correct” possibilities, or by running the solutions to all the potentially “difficult” areas available in the application as an overall assessment strategy.

Different sets of data have already been tested as a “teaching tool” with excellent results, and performance in informal quality assessment trials is equally promising. Consultations with professional translators and with a small language services firm are already underway and will help define the final structure and appearance of the “tool package.”



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