Not aspect, but tense:
a morphological argument for the old analysis of the Spanish imperfect
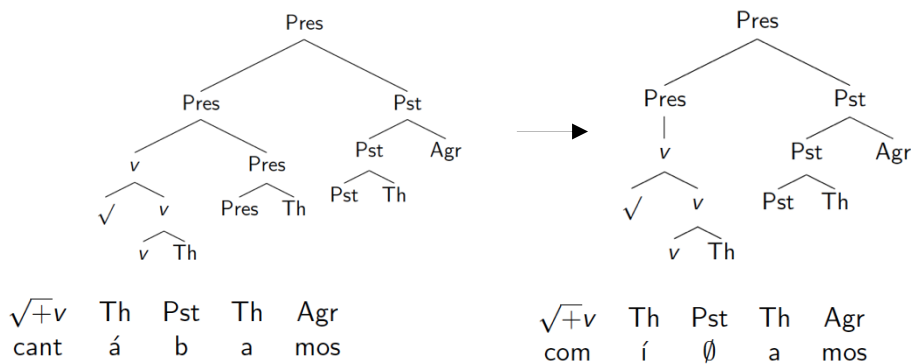
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The Spanish imperfect past was analyzed by grammarian Andrés Bello (1841) as a relative tense, denoting simultaneity of the event or situation with a reference point prior to the utterance time (*Juan cantaba el himno*/'Juan sang the hymn'). Simply put, the imperfect was analyzed as the present of the past, and aptly named *co-preterite*. Thus, for Bello, the imperfect contrasted with the simple past or preterite on the temporal dimension, the preterite being an absolute tense encoding direct reference to a time before the utterance time.

The XX Century saw a new analysis of the imperfect-preterite contrast not as a contrast in tense, but a contrast in grammatical aspect (perfective-imperfective), an analysis that became standard in descriptive, theoretical and experimental works alike. More recently, a small number of works have opposed the aspectual analysis from various perspectives (Rojo & Veiga 1999; Cowper 2003, 2005; Soto 2014; Markle LaMontagne & Cuervo 2015), whose arguments we review.

We develop an analysis of the imperfect past in Spanish which reconciles the view of the imperfect as a complex tense expressing two temporal relations—the present of the past—with recent developments in the morphological analysis of simple verbal forms as consisting of a hierarchical structure containing a root and a series of functional heads (as in Distributive Morphology, Hale & Marantz 1993). In particular, we follow Arregi's (2000) and Oltra-Massuet & Arregi's (2005) analysis of Spanish verbal inflection as the expression of various syntactic heads (e.g., *v*, Tense, (person & number) Agreement), with a theme vowel position added in the Morphological Component to each functional head.

We propose that simple forms in the Spanish verbal paradigm can hide complex temporal reference and structure (one or two heads expressing a relation of anteriority, posteriority or simultaneity). In parallel to Oltra-Massuet & Arregi's analysis of the conditional as comprising two temporal nodes, future and past, we propose that the imperfect consists of a present node, a past node, and an agreement node.

First conjugation *cantar* 'to sing'   Second conjugation *comer* 'to eat'

In this analysis, present tense is null (or Pres is deleted in the Morphological Component), and the b-a/ø-a morpheme is the spell-out of the (Past) Tense head and its theme vowel. The extra structure in the imperfect is responsible for the fact that the imperfect is longer than the preterite (*cant-á-ba-mos; com-í-a-mos* vs. *cant-a-mos, com-i-mos* 'we sang'; 'we ate'), and that in the

preterite, the past and agreement morphemes are fused, facts that were left unaccounted for in previous morphological analyses, including Oltra-Massuet & Arregi's approach.

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