

walks in and says to me...') and it may sound unfortunate in serious English styles; but it is very common both in literary and spoken Spanish:

*Por fin, distingue a unos pasos, acuclillado, a un hombre con sandalias y sombrero de cuero (M. Vargas Llosa, Pe.)*  
*Bueno, pues me llama y me dice que por qué no nos vemos. ¿Vernos? ¿Dónde?, le digo yo. En cualquier sitio, me dice. Pero, ¿qué es lo que les pasa a tus amiguitas?, le digo. Es que no son tan guapas como tú, me dice. A buenas horas lo has descubierto, le digo (S. Puértolas, Sp., dialogue; very colloquial)*

Eventually he spotted (spots), a few paces away, a man in leather sandals and hat, crouching  
 Anyway, he rings me and asks me why we don't meet. 'Meet!?'  
 'Where?', I say to him. 'Anywhere,' he says. 'But what's happened to your lady friends?' I say to him. 'Actually they're not as attractive as you.' 'A fine time to discover that,' I say to him

This historic present is almost always used after *por poco* 'all but', and often after *casi* 'nearly': *me caí por unas escaleras y por poco/casi me rompo/me rompí el tobillo* 'I fell down a flight of stairs and nearly broke my ankle', *casi me mata, lo cual no era nada difícil por aquel entonces* (A. Bryce Echenique, Pe.) 'she nearly killed me, which wasn't at all difficult at that time', *casi enloquezco al abrir el telegrama* (ibid.) 'I nearly went crazy on opening the telegram'. Exceptions can be found on both continents: *por poco me hizo llorar de lo cariñosa que es* (M. Vargas Llosa, Pe., dialogue) 'she's so affectionate she nearly made me cry'.

#### 14.3.4 Present tense used as an imperative

This is frequently used in everyday speech to make strong orders: *tú te callas* 'you just keep quiet'. All matters connected with the imperative are discussed in Chapter 17.

#### 14.3.5 Use of the present to ask permission

The present is much used when asking for someone's consent:

*¿Te lo mando yo?*  
*¿Escribo a los abuelos para decírselo?*  
*¿Vamos al cine esta noche?*

Shall I send it to you?  
 Should I write to our grandparents to tell them?  
 Shall we go to the movies tonight?

#### 14.3.6 Use of the present as a future tense

Spanish makes constant use of the simple present to refer to the future: *mañana vamos a California* 'we're going to California tomorrow', *te veo luego* 'I'll see you later'. See 14.6.3.

#### 14.3.7 Present in sentences like 'it's the first time I've seen you' and other expressions of time

English uses the perfect in sentences of the type 'this is the first time that...' and 'I've been... for *n* days/weeks', etc. Spanish uses the present:

*Es la primera vez que la veo*  
*No es la primera vez que los noruegos entran en Nueva York (J. L. Borges, Arg.)*  
*Hace tres años que no vengo*  
*Desde hace dos días estoy tratando de comunicarme con el señor Morales (Prensalibre, Guatemala, dialogue)*

It's the first time I have seen her  
 It isn't the first time that the Norwegians have entered New York  
 I haven't been here for three years  
 I've been trying to contact Mr Morales for two days

The past tense used in such constructions is the imperfect. See 14.5.3.

### 14.4 The preterite: general

The Spanish preterite describes events that were completed in the past or are *viewed* as completed in the past (see 14.4.1 for the reason for this distinction). Occasionally it highlights the fact that an event is beginning in the past: see 14.4.8.

English constantly fails to distinguish the preterite from the imperfect: 'I looked' may be *miré* (*en aquel momento miré por la ventana* 'just then I looked out of the window') or *miraba*: *estuve pensando mientras miraba por la ventana* 'I was thinking as I looked out of the window'. This ambiguity of English is a recurrent problem for learners of Spanish.

It is easy to explain that the preterite is used for 'one-off' past events like *Marco se rompió la pierna* 'Marco broke his leg'. *?Marco se rompía una pierna* 'Marco was breaking his leg' or '...used to break his leg' is unlikely (but see 14.5.8 for a rare exception). It is also possible to say confidently that the preterite is used for events that continue for the whole of a specified period or throughout a number of specified periods in the past: *fue rey durante ocho años* 'he was king for eight years', *habló tres veces durante dos horas* '(s)he spoke three times for two hours (each time)'. But a difficulty arises when the past event is habitual or prolonged, since one can then sometimes optionally use either the imperfect or the preterite, as in *mi padre fumó mucho cuando era joven* or *fumaba mucho cuando era joven* 'my father smoked a lot when he was young' or *la Guerra Civil era un desastre/la Guerra Civil fue un desastre* 'the Civil War was a disaster'; see 14.4.3 and 14.4.4 for a discussion.

The preterite is often used in Latin-American Spanish where the perfect tense is used in Spain. See 14.9.8 for discussion.

#### 14.4.1 Preterite for events occurring throughout a finite period

The preterite tense must be used for an event that continued throughout the whole of a finite period of time, regardless of whether the action then ended. By 'finite' is meant a period of time of a specific length, i.e. one whose beginning and end are stated or clearly implied:

*Estuve destinado en Bilbao dos años*  
*Por un instante pensé que me caía*  
*Los dinosaurios reinaron sobre la tierra durante millones de años*  
*La ETA tuvo menos actividad durante el régimen de Franco que al instalarse la democracia (M. Vargas Llosa, Pe.)*  
*Durante años no pudimos hablar de otra cosa (G. García Márquez, Col.)*

I was stationed in Bilbao for two years  
 For a moment I thought that I was falling  
 The dinosaurs reigned on earth for millions of years  
 ETA (Basque terrorists) was less active during the Franco regime than when democracy was introduced  
 For years we could talk of nothing else

<i>En toda mi vida supe de dos casos</i> (D. Navarro Gómez, Sp.)	In all my life I've known of two cases
<i>La fiesta fue un éxito</i>	The party was a success (from start to finish)
<i>Fue un día magnífico</i>	It was a magnificent day (from start to finish)

The question is whether the period ended, not the action: *habló durante dos horas, y luego continuó hablando durante tres horas más* '(s)he talked for two hours and then went on talking for three more hours' is possible. For the optional alternative *estuvo hablando durante dos horas* see 15.2.3.

(i) Compare the last two examples in the columns with *cuando llegué vi que la fiesta era/estaba siendo un éxito* 'when I arrived I saw that the party was a success' (it wasn't over yet), and *como era un día magnífico, fuimos al zoo* 'as it was a lovely day, we went to the zoo' (but it may have rained later).

(ii) Words like *siempre* and *nunca* often indicate actions continuing throughout the whole of a period of time: *siempre procuré pasarlo bien* 'I always tried to have a good time', *nunca me hizo gracia ese hombre* 'I never really liked that man', *nunca Fermín Eguren me pudo ver* (J. L. Borges, Arg.) 'Fermín Eguren never was able to stand me' (i.e. throughout the time I'm referring to). But they may refer to habitual actions that occur over no specified period and therefore require the imperfect, as in *antes siempre ibas a masa* 'you always used to go to Mass', *nunca hacía tanto calor como ahora* 'it never used to be as hot as now'.

(iii) In sentences involving phrases like *todos los días*, *todos los años*, either tense may be possible, depending on whether we look at the action as complete or as going on at the time: *todos los veranos veraneaban en San Sebastián/veranearon en San Sebastián* 'every summer they spent their holidays/vacation in San Sebastián', *aquella semana regaba/regó el jardín todas las mañanas* 'that week he watered the garden every morning', but *cuando yo era pequeño yo lo/le veía pasar casi todos los días* (not *lo/le vi* since the period is too vague), 'when I was little I saw him pass nearly every day'.

(iv) Actions performed throughout a period of time can be habitual, in which case the imperfect is used, as in *hablaba durante tres horas* (or *solía hablar durante tres horas*) '(s)he used to speak for three hours', i.e. on an unspecified number of different occasions.

#### 14.4.2 Preterite used to indicate single events or sets of events completed in the past

A single completed past event, or a single set of completed past events, is expressed by the preterite:

<i>La Segunda Guerra Mundial empezó en 1939</i>	World War Two began in 1939
<i>Hubo una explosión</i>	There was an explosion (i.e. at that moment)
<i>Momentos después Pepe tosó</i>	A few moments later Pepe coughed
<i>Lo primero que escribí fue un cuento</i> (A. Grandes, Sp.)	The first thing I wrote was a short story
<i>Martín la abrazó cuatro veces</i>	Martín embraced her four times
<i>Lo escribió ochenta veces</i>	(S)he wrote it eighty times

(i) The preterite is used to describe a series of completed events that occurred separately (in whichever order), as in *di un paseo, fui a casa, sentí miedo, y aquí estoy* (L. Sepúlveda, Ch., dialogue) 'I went for a walk, went home, felt scared, and here I am'. In such lists of events, the imperfect tense suggests that they occurred simultaneously or habitually. Compare *lloraba, gritaba, se reía...* '(s)he was weeping, shouting, laughing' (simultaneously) or '(s)he used to weep', etc.

(ii) The imperfect is occasionally also used in journalistic styles for single completed events. See 14.5.8.

(iii) Compare *lo hicimos tres veces* 'we did it three times' and *lo hacíamos tres veces/solíamos hacerlo tres veces* 'we used to do it three times'. The latter does not refer to a specific number of events: we cannot count the total number of events.

#### 14.4.3 Preterite used to distinguish narrative events from descriptive background

The preterite is sometimes used to show that an event is a part of a story, while the imperfect shows that it is descriptive background. This is clear for English-speakers in a sentence like *tuvieron tres niños* 'they had (i.e. 'produced'/'gave birth to') three children', which is usually three separate events, and *tenían tres niños*, which is a state of affairs, not an event. Less obvious is the difference between *querían hacerlo* 'they wanted to do it', which is a state of mind, and *quisieron hacerlo*, which is an event with an outcome, i.e. they wanted to do it and tried to, successfully or not (it usually implies failure).

English-speakers find this distinction most confusing with the verb *ser*. María Luz Gutiérrez Araus (1995), 32, cites an interesting example from García Márquez: *un perro... mordió a cuatro personas que se le atravesaron en el camino. Tres eran esclavos negros. La otra fue Sierva María* 'a dog bit four people who got in its way. Three were black slaves. The other was Sierva María'. Luz Gutiérrez explains the difference between *eran* and *fue* here as a difference between the 'non-active', i.e. 'descriptive', imperfect and the 'active' (i.e. 'narrative') preterite *fue*. The preterite brings Sierva María into the foreground—she is a major character in the novel. The imperfect pushes the other three characters into the descriptive background. But such clear-cut examples are rare and literary: ordinary language would say *era*.

In the following example, the preterite presents the publication of the statistics as events while the imperfect paints the background:

*En noviembre se registraron 851.320 contratos, de los cuales 83.419 fueron indefinidos. Es decir, las colocaciones han caído significativamente respecto a la cifra récord del pasado octubre, que fue de más de un millón. El paro ha caído en 157.444 personas desde noviembre de 1996, cuando la tasa de paro era del 14,04% (El País, Sp.)*

851,320 job contracts were registered in November, of which 83,419 were long-term. In other words, the number of persons hired has fallen significantly compared with last October's record figure, which was more than a million. Unemployment has fallen by 157,444 persons since November 1996, when unemployment stood at 14.04%.

## 14.4.4 Use of the preterite to denote habitual events

Habitual events in the past are usually expressed by the imperfect, as explained at 14.5.2. But the preterite can sometimes describe habitual or prolonged events in the past. The preterite views the event as having gone on for a finite period whereas the imperfect merely describes it as going on at the time or as part of the background: compare English 'what were you doing in the garden yesterday?' (at the time: imperfect) and 'what did you do in the garden yesterday?' (looking back on it as completed: preterite).

In *mi padre fumaba/fumó mucho cuando era joven* 'my father smoked a lot when he was young', either tense is possible, whether or not he carried on smoking afterwards and whether or not he is still alive (it is this possibility that makes the non-linguistic terms 'perfective' or 'completed aspect' and 'imperfective' or 'non-complete aspect' unhelpful for learners of Spanish). The imperfect tense views the habit as in progress at the time; the preterite looks back on it as an event viewed as a whole, i.e. something that continued throughout whichever period of time the speaker has in mind, e.g. his youth, those years, that period I'm talking about, etc.

Since we cannot always know what is in the speaker's or writer's mind, it often happens that either the preterite or the imperfect can be used in Spanish with a difference of nuance that is virtually untranslatable in English:

*Mi niñez fue/era feliz*  
*Recuerdo que llovió/llovía mucho cuando vivíamos en Irlanda* (it still rains in Ireland!)  
*Alonso se levantó/se levantaba todos los días a las ocho para ir al trabajo*  
*Cuando vivíamos juntos no tuvimos/teníamos problemas*  
*Siempre dormía como durmió su padre, con el arma escondida dentro de la funda de la almohada* (G. García Márquez, Col.; ...durmió como dormía su padre would have meant roughly the same thing)

My childhood was happy  
 I remember it rained a lot when we lived in Ireland  
 Alonso got up every day at eight to go to work  
 When we lived together we had no problems  
 He always used to sleep as his father (had) slept, with his gun hidden in his pillowcase

Intrinsic characteristics are likely to be expressed by the imperfect since they tend to be part of a general background. Thus *la casa era muy grande* 'the house was very big', *mi padre era indio/blanco* 'my father was Indian/white'. Use of *fue* in these cases is very unlikely since such descriptions are obviously not 'events', but cf. *su padre fue un hombre muy alto, muy guapo, muy inteligente* (A. Gala, Sp.).

Non-intrinsic characteristics can take either tense, but are more likely to appear with the imperfect if they refer to some more or less permanent attribute. However, choice of tense depends whether we consider an event viewed as a whole (preterite) or whether we are focusing on what was true at the time (imperfect), as in *yo, de pequeño, fui tímido* or *era tímido* 'as a child I was/used to be timid'. Students are advised to use the imperfect in such cases, since use of the preterite for a more or less inherent characteristic can sound strange or very literary, as in *Sir Thomas Browne (1605-82) supo el griego, el latín, el francés, el italiano y el español, y fue uno de los primeros hombres de letras que estudiaron anglosajón* (J. L. Borges, Arg., more usually *sabía griego*) 'Sir Thomas Browne (1605-82) knew Greek, Latin, French, Italian and Spanish, and was one of the first men of letters to study Anglo-Saxon'.

## 14.4.5 Use of the preterite to denote an event that has reached completion

The preterite may indicate that a process has finally reached completion, as in:

<i>Una vez el dinero estuvo en mis manos, compré la casa</i>	As soon as the money came into my hands, I bought the house
<i>Estuvo lista a las once</i> (G. García Márquez, Col.)	She was ready by eleven
<i>Cuando el café estuvo listo le alcanzó una tacita</i> (E. Sábato, Arg.)	When the coffee was ready she handed him a small cup
<i>La conversación se fue espaciando</i> (ir + gerund indicates a longish process, <i>fue</i> shows it ended)	The conversation gradually petered out

## 14.4.6 Use of the preterite to indicate an event that actually happened

Sometimes the preterite clearly indicates that the event referred to happened, while the imperfect does not give us this information. Compare: *tuvimos que atravesar dos desiertos para llegar al oasis* 'we had to cross two deserts to get to the oasis' (and we did), and *teníamos que atravesar dos desiertos para llegar al oasis* 'we had (still) to cross two deserts to get to the oasis'. The second does not tell us whether we crossed it or turned back. Further examples:

<i>Fue un error decirselo</i>	It was a mistake to tell him (we committed it)
<i>Era un error decirselo</i>	It was a mistake to tell him (we may or may not have committed it)
<i>Fue una presa fácil</i>	(S)he/It was an easy prey (and was caught)
<i>Era una presa fácil</i>	(same translation, but the victim may have escaped)
<i>Costó trabajo conseguirlo</i>	It was hard work getting it (but we did)
<i>Costaba trabajo conseguirlo</i>	It was hard work to get it (we may or may not have done)

\**Fue un error devolverle el dinero, por eso no lo hice* has the absurd meaning 'I committed the mistake of giving him back the money, so I didn't': *era un error...* must be used.

## 14.4.7 Preterite to denote a rapid or short-lived event

The preterite can sometimes show that an event lasted only a moment. The imperfect would, in these cases, indicate an event that had not yet ended at the time referred to:

<i>Hubo una nota de alarma en su voz</i>	There was a (brief) note of alarm in his/her voice
<i>Cuando abrí el horno, se sintió calor</i>	When I opened the oven it felt hot (i.e. there was a gust of heat)
<i>Estuvo a punto de pensar que esas manos no eran suyas</i> (C. Fuentes, Mex., dialogue)	(For a second) he was on the verge of thinking that those hands weren't his own

## 14.4.8 Preterite used to indicate the beginning of a state or action

The preterite may indicate the beginning of an action. Compare *mi hija habló a los once meses* (i.e. *empezó a hablar*) 'my daughter started talking at eleven months', and *mi hija hablaba a los once meses* 'my daughter was talking by eleven months'. Also:

<i>Me cayó bien</i> (cf. <i>me caía bien</i> 'I was getting on well with him/her')	I took a liking to her/him
<i>Ana me gustó desde el primer momento</i>	I liked ('took a liking to') Ana right from the start
<i>Fue niña y le pusimos Rita</i> (M. Rodoreda, Castilian translation, Sp.)	It was a girl and we called her Rita
<i>Todo lo que había dentro me pareció lejano y ajeno</i> (L. Sepúlveda, Ch.)	Everything inside (suddenly) seemed to me distant and alien
<i>desde 1957, cuando por primera vez estuve consciente de la Revolución Cubana</i> (interview, <i>Granma</i> , Cu.; Sp. fui consciente)	since 1957, when I first became aware of the Cuban Revolution...

## 14.4.9 Preterite used to indicate certainties in the future

The preterite is occasionally used to indicate an absolute certainty in the future:

<i>Cuando llegue, llegó</i>	(S)he'll be here when (s)he's here (and that's that!)
<i>Cuando se acabe, se acabó</i>	When it's finished, it's finished

This construction is more common in Latin America than in Spain. The following three examples are not heard in Spain:

<i>Para las dos ya lo acabé</i> (Mex., from Lope Blanch, 1991; Sp. <i>ya lo tengo/tendré acabado</i> )	I'll have it finished by two o'clock
<i>Mañana ya llegó el día</i> (L. Rafael Sánchez, Puerto Rico, dialogue; Sp. <i>mañana es el día</i> )	Tomorrow's the day!
<i>Nos fuimos</i> (colloquial La. Am.; Sp. <i>nos vamos</i> )	We're going/We're leaving right now (lit. 'we left')

## 14.4.10 Special meanings of the preterite of some verbs

Some verbs require special translations when they appear in the preterite. This is especially true of the modal verbs *deber*, *poder*, *querer*, *saber*, discussed in Chapter 21. Two other verbs affected are:

(a) *Tener*: the preterite may mean 'to receive'/'to get', the imperfect means 'had' in the sense of 'was in my possession':

<i>tuve la impresión de que...</i>	I got the impression that...
<i>tenía la impresión de que...</i>	I had the impression that...
<i>Tuve una carta/Tenía una carta</i>	I got a letter/I had a letter
<i>Cuando tuvo ocasión de estudiar consiguió con la universidad a distancia el título de ingeniero</i> (Cambio16, Sp.)	When he got the chance to study, he graduated as an engineer from the Open University

This does not override the rule given at 14.4.1 that the preterite must be used for actions continuing throughout a specified period: *tuvo fiebre durante tres días* '(s)he had a fever for three days'.

(b) *Conocer*: contrast *conocí a Antonia* 'I met Antonia' (for the first time), *conocía a Antonia* 'I knew Antonia'.

## 14.5 The imperfect: general

The Spanish imperfect form indicates an event viewed as not yet complete at the past time referred to. It is therefore much used as a background tense to describe something that was already in progress when another event occurred (14.5.1), and to express habitual events in the past (14.5.2), although the preterite can also sometimes describe habitual events, as explained at 14.4.4.

In colloquial language the Spanish imperfect may be a substitute for the conditional. See 14.5.4 and 25.5 for discussion.

## 14.5.1 Imperfect tense to denote past events in progress when something else happened

The imperfect is much used to indicate any state or event that was in progress when something else happened. It is thus the correct tense for background descriptions; the preterite is used for the events set against the background (imperfects in bold type):

<i>Yo <b>volvía</b> del cine cuando vi a Niso</i>	I was coming back from the cinema when I saw Niso
<i>Miró por encima del hombro para estar segura de que nadie la <b>acechaba</b></i> (G. García Márquez, Col.)	She looked over her shoulder to be sure that no one was lying in wait for her
<i>Cuando entré en el cuarto noté que <b>olía</b> a quemado</i>	When I entered the room I noticed there was a smell of burning
<i>Los monumentos y estatuas que <b>adornaban</b> los paseos y las plazas fueron triturados</i> (E. Mendoza, Sp.)	The monuments and statues that adorned the avenues and squares were pulverized
<i>Volví a la sala, pero él ya no <b>estaba</b></i> (A. Mastretta, Mex., dialogue: i.e. his absence was still continuing when I arrived)	I went back to the living room, but he was no longer there

For the possible use of the continuous imperfect in some of these sentences, e.g. *estaba acechando*, instead of the non-continuous imperfect, see 14.5.5.

## 14.5.2 Imperfect used to denote events that continued in the past for an unspecified period

The imperfect can indicate that an event continued in the past for an unspecified period (and may or may not have continued). It is thus much used for characteristics, situations, habitual actions and other events that have no clear beginning and end:

<i>Las catapultas romanas lanzaban piedras</i>	Roman catapults threw stones
<i>Cada vez que os veáis lo decía</i> (I. Aldecoa, Sp., dialogue)	He used to say it every time you met
<i>Le exasperaban estas comidas mexicanas de cuatro o cinco horas de duración</i> (C. Fuentes, Mex.)	These four- or five-hour Mexican meals exasperated him

*A veces le dolían el aire y la tierra que pisaba, el sol del amanecer, las cuencas de los ojos*  
(A. Mastretta, Mex.)

Sometimes the air and the ground she trod on hurt her; and the rising sun, and her eye-sockets

The preterite must be used if a period of time is specified, as in 'she was ( *fue*) president for eight years'; see 14.4.1.

#### 14.5.3 Imperfect in phrases of time of the kind 'I hadn't seen her for years', 'it was the first time that...'

English-speakers should note the use of the imperfect in the following type of sentence where English uses the pluperfect tense (for the use of the present tense in sentences of this type see note to 14.3.7):

*Hacía años que no la veía*  
*Era la primera vez que la veía*

I hadn't seen her for years  
It was the first time I had seen her

#### 14.5.4 Imperfect for the conditional

The imperfect is often used in familiar speech instead of the conditional. This most commonly occurs in four cases (the examples under **b** and **c** reflect European Spanish: we are not sure about the distribution of these constructions in Latin America):

(a) When the conditional would refer to an immediate future. In this case Spanish resembles English: one can say 'he said he would come' or 'he said he was coming':

*Prometieron que venían/vendrían*

They promised they were coming/would come

*Juró que lo hacía/haría*

(S)he swore (s)he'd do it

*Pensaba que ya no venías/vendrías*

I thought you weren't coming/wouldn't come any more

*Sabíamos que los refuerzos llegaban/llegarían de un momento para otro*

We knew the reinforcements were arriving/would arrive at any moment

This is not possible if the future is not immediate: *juró que me amaría siempre* (not *amaba...*) '(s)he swore (s)he would love me for ever'.

NOTE: *Querer* means to love a person in all senses, as a friend, relative or lover. *Amar* is used between people who are passionately in love, and also for religious love: *amar a Dios* 'to love God', *ama al pecador* 'love the sinner'.

(b) With *deber* and *poder*, in which case the imperfect is slightly more colloquial:

*Podía ser una solución, mira...* (C. Martín Gaité, Sp., dialogue)  
*Debías/Deberías hacerlo ahora*

It could be a solution, you know...

You should do it now

This usage is especially frequent with *poder* and *deber* to show that someone should or could have acted differently in the past, e.g. *podías/podrías haberlo hecho, ¿no?* 'you could have done it, couldn't you?'; see 21.2.3d and 21.3.3 for details.

(c) In 'remote' and 'unfulfilled' conditions in familiar Spanish (see 25.5 for details):

*Aunque no me gustara, me casaba/casaría con ella*

I'd marry her even if I didn't like her

*Usted no tenía más que decírmelo y le cambiaba el plato* (very colloquial for *le habría cambiado*)

You only had to tell me and I'd have changed your plate

*Un paso más y te rompías el pescuezo* (colloquial for *te habrías roto/te hubieras roto*)

One more step and you'd have broken your neck

The imperfect cannot replace the conditional when the latter indicates a guess or estimate (as explained at 14.7.2).

(d) In familiar Spanish, to express a wish:

*Ya le decía yo cuatro verdades*

I wouldn't mind giving him/her a piece of my mind! (lit. 'telling him/her four truths')

*Tenían que hacer un monumento al tío que inventó el café* (M. Delibes, Sp., dialogue)  
*Yo ahora me tomaba un helado y me quedaba tan bien*

They ought to build a monument for the guy who invented coffee  
I'd (like to have) have an ice-cream now and I'd feel great

#### 14.5.5 *Hablaba* or *estaba hablando*?

If the action is not habitual and is truly past (e.g. 'I was leaving the next day' is in fact a future in the past), the difference between the continuous and non-continuous imperfect is often blurred, although modern Spanish prefers the continuous form in such cases if it is possible with the verb (see Chapter 15): *yo hablaba/estaba hablando con los vecinos cuando llegaron los bomberos* (*estaba hablando* preferred) 'I was talking to the neighbour(s) when the firemen arrived'.

However, the verbs *ir* and *venir* and a few others are not generally used in the continuous form: see 15.3c.

#### 14.5.6 Imperfect in children's language

An interesting use of the imperfect is found in children's language (called the *imperfecto lúdico* or 'imperfect of play'): *vamos a jugar a que yo era un vaquero y tú eras un indio* 'let's pretend I'm a cowboy and you're an Indian'.

#### 14.5.7 Imperfect to make courteous requests

The imperfect can be used to show courtesy in requests and enquiries:

*¿Qué deseaba?*

What would you like?

*Perdone, quería hablar con el director*

Excuse me, I'd like a word with the manager

#### 14.5.8 Imperfect used for preterite in literary styles

In literary styles the imperfect is sometimes used as an alternative to the preterite for dramatic effect. Normally the sentence includes an adverb of time that shows that the action is a single completed event:

*Poco después, la policía francesa arrestaba a DM, de 56 años* (El País, Sp.)  
*Un día antes, en Santiago de Cuba, era asesinado Frank País* (Granma, Cu.)

Shortly after, the French police arrested 56-year-old DM  
The day before, in Santiago de Cuba, Frank País was murdered

This construction is uncommon outside sensational journalism, but it is frequent in literary French (the *imparfait dramatique*).

#### 14.5.9 Imperfect used in reported speech and in stream of consciousness (*monólogo interior*)

In reported speech the present tense becomes an imperfect and the perfect tense becomes a pluperfect. The following is an extract from a letter in a novel written by Josefina Aldecoa (Spain). Annick writes to David: *Lo que ocurre es que tu carta me ha dejado inquieta. No hablo de tus planteamientos generales; sabes que los comparto. Pero estoy libre de emociones viscerales... Y me preocupo por ti. No se trata de tu seguridad sino de tu pérdida de rumbo. Temo que estás buscándote salidas nobles pero falsas, porque tío, no te engañes, eres un diletante, un señorito que juega a derribar tiranías.* The thing is that your letter has left me worried. I'm not referring to your views in general; you know I share them. But I'm not prone to gut reactions ... And I worry about you. Not about your safety but about your loss of direction. I'm afraid you're looking for a noble but false way out, because, don't fool yourself, you're a diletante, an upper-class boy playing at overthrowing tyrants'.

In reported speech, this would read: *Annick le decía en su carta que lo que ocurría era que su carta la había dejado inquieta. No hablaba de sus planteamientos generales; ya sabía él que ella los compartía. Pero ella estaba libre de emociones viscerales... Y se preocupaba por él. No se trataba de su seguridad, sino de su pérdida de rumbo. Temía que se estaba buscando salidas nobles pero falsas porque, no se debía engañar, él era un diletante, un señorito que jugaba a derribar tiranías.*

The following paragraph is an example of 'stream of consciousness' (*monólogo interior*): *sola en la tienda, Felicitas se quedó reflexionando. Vaya, al chico le parecía mejor que esperase la visita del director (...). Ella quería trabajar en el hotel y el director decía que quería una chica como ella (...). Ya no parecía fácil el acceso a la recepción del hotel, que hacía unos días se había abierto ante sus ojos como una visión prometedora, pero debía trazarse un plan de acción (S. Puértolas, Sp.)* 'alone in the shop, Felicitas was thinking. So the boy thought it was better for her to wait for the manager to come and see her. She wanted to work in the hotel and the manager said he wanted a girl like her. It didn't seem easy any more to get a job in the hotel reception, which a few days ago had seemed to her a promising possibility, but a plan of action had to be drawn up'.

### 14.6 Future tense: general

Spanish has several ways of expressing the future, and the so-called 'future tense' (*hablaré, vendrás*) is not the most common in everyday speech (from which it is said to be disappearing except in its 'suppositional' role described at 14.6.5):

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| (a) <i>Esta noche vamos al cine</i>       | Tonight we're going to the cinema                 |
| (b) <i>Esta noche vamos a ir al cine</i>  | Tonight we're going to go to the cinema           |
| (c) <i>Esta noche iremos al cine</i>      | Tonight we'll go to the cinema                    |
| (d) <i>Esta noche hemos de ir al cine</i> | Tonight we're to go/we're due to go to the cinema |

- (a) describes an event which is prearranged or scheduled.

(b) is a foreseen or 'intentional' future and it is also often an informal substitute for the future tense proper *iremos, seré*, etc.

(c) often excludes the idea of pre-arrangement or a scheduled event. Consequently it may sound rather uncertain or, depending on tone and context, may sound like an order or promise.

(d) is discussed at 21.4.1. It is sometimes heard in Latin America with a future meaning, but in Castilian-speaking areas of Spain it usually implies obligation and is now old-fashioned, rather like the English 'tonight we are to go to the cinema'. But it has other, still current, uses, discussed at 21.4.1. It is common in Mexico as an alternative to *deber de*. The latter is discussed at 21.3.2, the Mexican construction at 21.4.1b.

As was mentioned earlier, the future tense is gradually disappearing from spoken (but not written) Spanish, this decline being more advanced in Latin America than in Spain and more deep-rooted in familiar or popular styles. It is usually replaced by the simple present—*te llamo mañana* 'I'll call you tomorrow' (see 14.6.3)—or by *ir a* + infinitive: *la voy a ver mañana* 'I'm going to see her tomorrow' (see 14.6.4).

#### 14.6.1 Uses of the future tense form to denote future time

Often, particularly in informal speech, the present and future forms are interchangeable. However, the future is used:

(a) For provisional or less certain statements about the future, e.g. for forecasts, or for statements about the future when no other word makes it clear that the future is meant:

*Si llueve se aplazará el partido  
En el remoto futuro el sol se apagará  
Para entonces todos estaremos calvos*

If it rains the match will be postponed  
In the remote future the sun will go out  
We'll all be bald by then (said of something that will take a long time)  
(S)he gave me 100 euros. I'll manage with that until next week, and then we'll see  
When we get through the tunnel you'll see how the weather changes. It'll be colder  
We'll see one another tomorrow at the Palace won't we?'

*Me ha dado cien euros. Con esto tiraré hasta la semana próxima, y luego veremos (luego vemos is impossible here)  
En cuanto pasemos el túnel ya verás cómo cambia el tiempo. Hará más frío (I. Aldecoa, Sp., dialogue)  
Nos veremos mañana en Palacio, ¿no es cierto? (C. Fuentes, Mex., dialogue.  
Nos vemos... would imply more certainty)*

(i) The difference between sentences like *te veo mañana* and *te veré mañana* 'I'll see you tomorrow' may be merely one of tone. Some informants claimed they would use the present tense in *te veo mañana* (informal) and the future in *te lo veré (a usted) mañana* (formal).

(ii) *Acaso, tal vez, quizá(s)*, which mean 'perhaps', *posiblemente* 'possibly' and *probablemente* 'probably' may, when they refer to a future event, appear either with the future tense or the conditional, but much more usually with the present subjunctive. See 16.3.2 for details. \**Tal vez/quizá/acaso viene mañana* is not Spanish.