ASPECTS OF SPANISH ASPECT:
A NEW LOOK AT THE
PRETERIT/IMPERFECT DISTINCTION

JORGE M. GUITART
State University of New York at Buffalo

This study is an attempt to outline what the Spanish speaker knows about the uses of the Preterit and Imperfect forms (henceforth referred to as PRET and IMP), usually identified in the literature as signaling perfective and imperfective aspect respectively.

My intent is not directly pedagogical, but I hope that it may serve eventually to aid students of Spanish as a second language in acquiring such a knowledge. In fact, the study was largely motivated by an analysis of the errors made by my American students when they thought they were applying faithfully the rules laid down in their textbooks.

In developing the views presented here, I have benefited greatly from the observations made by the Venezuelan grammarian Andrés Bello more than a century ago, which have reached us through successive editions of his justly famous Gramática de la lengua castellana (see Bello and Cuervo 1970). I have also profited considerably from observations made by Samuel Gili y Gaya (1961) and Dwight Bolinger (1963). I would like to regard my analysis as an attempt to integrate and expand on the insightful formulations of these noted grammarians.

1. What do we talk about? In discussing the PRET/IMP distinction, Hispanic linguists seem to have concentrated primarily on the uses of the forms for speaking of past occurrences or happenings. For instance, Bull (1965) is largely concerned with the reporting of what he calls ‘events’, meaning actually things that happened or were happening — what Comrie (1976) calls ‘dynamic situations’. Speakers, however, report other things for which the label ‘happening’ would be inappropriate. These are the situations that Comrie terms ‘static’, or simply ‘states’. Comrie (1976:49) provides the following distinction:

With a state, unless something happens to change that state, then the state will continue ... With a dynamic situation, on the other hand, the situation will only continue if it is continually subject to a new input of energy.

There are certain situations or experiences that we do not normally call states but which are not occurrences either. In this category fall perceived ‘properties’ or ‘qualities’ of beings or things. For instance, the utterances My name is Julio and Two and two are four are not normally thought of as referring to a state. On the other hand they are indeed static situations. By ‘state’ I mean here a static situation, whether it is a property or quality of a being or thing or the condition it is in.

All situations, whether static or dynamic, ‘take place’, they occupy a space of time, have duration. But the distinction between an occurrence—or something that happens—and a state—or something that is in effect—has important consequences for the interpretation of Spanish simple past predicates, as will become evident in the course of the discussion.

2. Type of states. The static situations that Spanish speakers talk about may be conveniently divided into the following categories and subcategories (examples are given):

   I. Identity:
      a. Individual:
         Me llamo Blas ‘My name is Blas’
         Soy el dueño ‘I am the owner’
      b. Class:
         Soy anarquista ‘I am an anarchist’
         Soy diabético ‘I am a diabetic’
II. Existence:
Hay gente que pasa hambre
‘There are people who go hungry’

III. Location:
Hay mucha gente aquí.
‘There are a lot of people here’
El está aquí ‘He is here’

IV. Condition:
Estoy enfermo ‘I am sick’
El radio está roto ‘The radio is broken’

V. Having:
a. Knowledge:
   Conozco a su hermano ‘I know your brother’
b. Ownership:
   Tengo dinero ‘I have money’
c. An intellectual, sensorial, or emotional frame of mind:
   Ella cree en Dios ‘She believes in God’
   Me siento bien ‘I feel fine’
   Me gusta Mahler ‘I like Mahler’
d. A potential:
   Puedo ir ‘I can go’
   Puede estallar ‘It may explode’
e. An obligation:
   Tengo que irme ‘I have to leave’
   Tiene que caer ‘It has to fall’
f. A relationship:
   Tengo dos hijos ‘I have two children’

3. Classes of occurrences. I will classify occurrences in a manner similar to the way Bull (1965) classifies ‘events’, but using what I believe are more mnemonic labels. Occurrences can be either ‘compleitive’ or ‘extendable’. A compleitive occurrence (cf. Bull’s ‘cyclic event’) can be described as follows: (1) it is not thought of as happening ‘totally’ until it is completed and (2) once it is completed, it is over. Me senté ‘I sat down’, Abrí la puerta ‘I opened the door’, and El tren paso por la estación ‘The train went by the station’ refer to compleitive occurrences. Not until the caboose has gone by has the train gone by, but once the caboose goes by, the train’s passing is over. An extendable occurrence (cf. Bull’s ‘noncyclic event’), in contrast, is one that is thought of as taking place the moment it starts and of continuing for some time afterwards. Once it takes place, it can be extended, thus the label. The phrases Caminar por el parque ‘to stroll in the park’, Mirar por la ventana ‘to look out the window’, and Ver televisión ‘to watch television’ refer to extendable occurrences.

For Bull the classification of occurrences into cyclic and noncyclic is essential for understanding the uses of PRET and IMP, and the pedagogical strategies that his analysis has inspired call for making the learner aware of such a distinction. The textbook Communicating in Spanish (henceforth referred to as CIS), by Lamadrid, Bull, and Briscoe (1974), contains a very explicit formulation of Bull’s theory of the uses of PRET and IMP (developed in Bull 1960, 1965). This formulation can be seen to coincide essentially with the formulations commonly found in discussions of aspectual distinctions in Spanish which state that PRET refers to either the beginning or the end of an event or to the whole event, while IMP refers only to the middle, or the event in progress. In CIS the formulation is specifically summarized for learners as follows:

At a point in the past the Imperfect states that any event was in progress. The Preterit states that a cyclic event reached its termination and took place. In contrast, the Preterit may say either that a noncyclic event began (and may or may not have come to an end) or that the whole event took place before the moment of speaking. (CIS:252)

This statement is inaccurate in several respects, I will now attempt to show.
4. Occurrences and the IMP/PRET distinction. Let us accept for the sake of discussion that any occurrence we talk about has a beginning (B), a middle (M), and an end (E). Let us accept also for the time being that IMP always states that an occurrence was in progress. Let us then concentrate on the statements made about PRET in the cited paragraph from CIS.

In my opinion Statement (1) is an inaccurate characterization of what the speaker knows:

(1) ‘The Preterit states that a cyclic event reached its termination and took place’ (CIS:252).

Suppose a newspaper reports the following completive (cyclic) occurrence:

(2) El tren presidencial pasó por la terminal de Buffalo
‘The presidential train went by the Buffalo terminal’

If (1) be true, what (2) reports is, essentially, that the caboose of the presidential train went by the station and therefore the passing of the train took place. It is clear, however, that (3) and (4) do not ‘refer’ to the same occurrence:

(3) El tren presidencial pasó por la terminal
‘The presidential train went by the terminal’

(4) El furgón de cola del tren presidencial pasó por la terminal
‘The caboose of the presidential train went by the terminal’

Of course, if the occurrence reported in (3) took place, then the occurrence reported in (4) took place, and vice versa. That is to say, I can make the (trivial) logical statement (5):

(5) ‘The train went by if and only if the caboose went by.’

But (2) obviously does not refer exclusively to the passing of the caboose, and so it would seem that PRET is stating something other than the termination of the cycle.

If PRET does not focus exclusively on E, does it focus then on the whole occurrence, i.e. on B, M, and E? This question is relevant only if we see IMP as ‘excluding’ some portions of the occurrence, i.e. if we regard IMP as meaning ‘already started and not yet completed’. But IMP does not mean that, as is evident in the nonsynonymity of (6) and (7):

(6) En ese momento ya había pasado la locomotora pero todavía no había pasado el furgón de cola
‘At that point the engine had already gone by but the caboose had not yet gone by’

(7) En ese momento pasaba el tren
‘At that point the train was going by’

So far as completive (cyclic) occurrences are concerned, the contrast between PRET and IMP is not ‘having reached termination versus not having reached termination’ because PRET does not mean ‘termination reached’ and IMP does not mean ‘termination not reached’. PRET actually means that the occurrence is anterior in time to the moment of speaking, and that is all it means. ‘Termination reached’ can be inferred from the completive nature of the occurrence. That is to say, if I state that the passing of the train occurred in the past, then anybody who cares to do so can say that the train is not going by anymore, because our knowledge of the way trains behave includes the fact that once a particular train goes by a station, that same train does not keep on going by. I will postpone until later the definition of what IMP means.

Using Bull’s own terminology, we can then make the following statement with respect to the use of PRET in talking about completive occurrences:

(8) The Preterit states that a cyclic event took place, from which it can be inferred (trivially) that it reached termination.

As regards the use of PRET in speaking about extendable occurrences (noncyclic events), I would like to show that (9) is not a correct characterization of what the speaker knows:
(9) 'The Preterit may say either that a noncyclic event began (and may or may not have come to an end) or that the whole event took place before the moment of speaking.' (CIS: 252)

Let us first consider the second part of (9), or the claim that PRET refers sometimes to the whole event. In CIS:251 the students are offered the following example:

(10) Ayer el presidente habló por televisión
    'The president spoke on television yesterday'

and they are told that in (10) habló 'he spoke' tells that 'the entire event took place yesterday'. Consider now the following example:

(11) El presidente habló por televisión esa noche
    'The president spoke on television that evening'

Presumably habló would tell that the entire event took place that evening. But what does habló tell in (12)?

(12) El presidente habló por televisión esa noche y a la mañana siguiente todavía seguía hablando por televisión.
    'The president spoke on television that evening, and he was still speaking on television the morning after'

Obviously PRET is not telling that the entire event took place that evening, for that would contradict the rest of (12); (12), however, is well formed.

Actually all that (11) is saying is that the president spoke on television that evening, and all that (10) is saying is that he spoke on television yesterday. Since hablar por televisión is extendable (noncyclic), the possibility is not ruled out in (10) that the president may still be talking this morning. Of course the normal interpretation of (10) is that the president's speech finished yesterday but that is due to the presence of the word ayer, not to the use of PRET. In (13), for instance,

(13) Ayer el presidente hablaba por televisión y...
    'Yesterday the president was speaking on television and...'

there is no reason to suppose that the President's speech continued until the next day and every reason to suppose that it ended yesterday.

Therefore it is not the PRET that states that an extendable (noncyclic) occurrence occurred entirely within a certain period of time, but rather the cooccurrence of a simple past form with the word or expression referring to that period of time.

Let us now consider the claim made by Bull that PRET is initiative in noncyclic event predicates. In CIS:283 it is stated explicitly that in (14) oyeron 'they heard' means 'they began to hear':

(14) Entraron en la casa y después oyeron los animales
    'They went in the house and afterwards they heard the animals'

If that were true, then (15) and (16) would be synonymous:

(15) Dijo adiós y corrió hacia el avión
    'He said goodbye and ran toward the plane'

(16) Dijo adiós y echó a correr hacia el avión
    'He said goodbye and took off running toward the plane'

But it can be shown that they are not synonymous. Compare the following:

(17) Dijo adiós y corrió lentamente hacia el avión
    'He said goodbye and ran slowly toward the plane'

(18) *Dijo adiós y echó lentamente a correr hacia el avión
    **'He said goodbye and slowly took off running toward the plane'
The expression *echar a correr* ‘to take off running’ is clearly initiative: it refers to the sudden movement that characterizes the start of running, the shifting to the mode of running. In contrast with (18), (19) is well formed:

(19) Dijo adiós y echó rápidamente a correr hacia el avión
‘He said goodbye and swiftly took off running toward the plane’

Since *echar a correr* is incompatible with *lentamente* ‘slowly’, it is obvious that in (17) *corrió* does not include *echó a correr* ‘he took off running’. Consequently in (17) *corrió* does not refer to B, i.e. *corrió* is not initiative.

But what does PRET refer to, then? Certainly not to E: we do not know from (16) whether he ran all the way or switched to walking or stopped. All that is left is M, but if PRET refers to M, then such a reference is irrelevant to the PRET/IMP distinction, since IMP also refers to M and only to M. That is to say, either PRET does not refer to any particular part of an extendable (noncyclic) occurrence or looking at those parts has no bearing on deciding whether PRET or IMP should be used in a certain context.

What is the contrast then between (20) and (21)?

(20) El hombre corrió hacia el avión
‘The man ran toward the plane’

(21) El hombre corría hacia el avión
‘The man was running toward the plane’

In (20) *corrió* expresses simply that the act of running toward the plane took place at a time anterior to the moment of speaking, without specifying which portions of such an act were witnessed. *Corrió* in (21) expresses that at a certain time anterior to the moment of speaking, the act of running toward the plane was taking place. The experience described in *corrió* is not specifically associated with any stretch of past time, while the experience described in *corría* is always associated with a particular stretch of past time, specifically that in which at least one other experience took place or was taking place. And this association is expressed by referring to the other experience as well, within the same verbal context. In other words, every time we use IMP in referring to a specific occurrence we always mention at least one other experience or situation that took place or was taking place within the same stretch of time. A sentence like (21) would not normally be uttered in isolation or within a context where it is clear that other situations mentioned do not cooccur at all with the act of running. For instance, the use of *corría* is anomalous in (22):

(22) *Corría hacia el avión y se ajustó el cinturón de seguridad*
‘He was running toward the plane and he adjusted his seatbelt’

The meaning of IMP can then be stated as follows:

(23) IMP tells that an occurrence was taking place at a time before the moment of speaking in which some other situation took place or was taking place.

I say ‘some other situation’ and not simply ‘some other occurrence’ because states may be involved, too. I shall return to the uses of IMP further on.

Returning to PRET in extendable (noncyclic) occurrence predicates, if all that it means is that the occurrence took place before the moment of speaking, there is no difference between that and what it means in completive (cyclic) occurrence predicates (cf. (8)). We can then formulate the following statement:

(24) PRET states that an occurrence took place before the moment of speaking.

This is, of course, the traditional view held by Bello, Gili y Gaya, and many others. Whether or not one can say that the occurrence took place totally at a time anterior to the moment of speaking depends of course on the nature of the occurrence. Completive occurrences that took place lie wholly in the past. Extendable occurrences may or may not be going on still. Since the contrast between PRET and IMP does not depend on what portions of the experience the speaker ‘intends’ to include or exclude—as I believe I have shown—the use of the forms follows the same criteria regardless of the type of occurrence one is telling about. That is to say, the contrast between PRET and IMP is the same in speaking of completive (cyclic) occurrences as it is in speaking of extendable (noncyclic) occurrences.
But even though Bull’s notion that PRET is terminative in cyclic occurrence predicates and initiative in noncyclic occurrence predicates is incorrect, still the distinction between cyclic and noncyclic—or between completive and extendable can be a useful pedagogical tool.

Bull’s distinction has probably done much to dispel the notion that PRET is only for things that are ‘over and done with’—a statement that has not entirely disappeared from textbooks. On the other hand Bull’s insistence on the initiative quality of noncyclic predicates has not contributed to dispelling the equally erroneous notion that anything that is ‘continuative’ calls for IMP. For instance, in wanting to say ‘I looked at her and told her I loved her’ students have used *La miraba instead of La miré for ‘I looked at her’, explaining that IMP is needed because ‘when you told her, you were still looking’. In cases like this it is useful to point out to the students that certain occurrences—extendable ones—keep on occurring once they occur—you do not stop looking the minute you are looking.

A definite shortcoming of many pedagogical treatments of the PRET/IMP contrast is their failure to distinguish clearly between dynamic situations and static ones. It is to the latter that we now turn.

5. States and the IMP/PRET distinction. Consider the contrast between (25) and (26):

(25) Pedro era comunista ‘Pedro was a communist’
(26) Pedro fue comunista ‘Pedro was a communist’

They do receive the same translation in English, which is perhaps a learning problem for the English-speaking. *Era* tells that at a certain point in the past and coinciding with some other situation (which would be mentioned in a larger context), Pedro was communist. The meaning of IMP in speaking of a specific state is then essentially the same as in speaking of a specific occurrence. *Fue* tells that Pedro was a communist in the past and that now he is not. The meaning of PRET then is not the same speaking of states as it is in speaking of currences, for in the latter case nothing is said about the present. In speaking of an extendable occurrence, for instance, I never tell by using PRET that it is no longer occurring.

The fact that a stative predicate in the PRET tells that the state is no longer in effect does not mean that PRET is basically terminative. For instance, (27) and (28) do not mean the same thing:

(27) Él estuvo preocupado ‘He was worried’
(28) Él dejó de estar preocupado ‘He stopped being worried’

Rather, PRET refers also to the time that the state was in effect, as shown in the fact that, in (29), (a) and (b) are roughly equivalent:

(29a) Él tenía dinero y ya no tiene ‘He had money and now he doesn’t’
(29b) Él tuvo dinero ‘He had money’

What I have said so far applies to stative predicates that are adverbially unmodified. Certain adverbial expressions change radically the meaning of stative predicates, as we shall see further on.

6. State-egressive predicates. In the foregoing examples of stative predicates in the PRET we are told that a state came to an end but no reference is made to how it ended. This is true of many stative predicates. There are other stative predicates, however, that make specific reference to the occurrence that constituted the end of a state. Consider the contrast between (a) and (b) in the following pairs:

(30a) El libro costó $4
     ‘The book cost $4’ [It was bought for $4]
(30b) El libro costaba $4
     ‘The book cost $4’ [It was for sale for $4]
(31a) Tuve que ir al aeropuerto
     ‘I had to go the airport’ [I went]
(31b) Tenía que ir al aeropuerto
     ‘I had to go the airport’ [I had not gone yet]

In (30a), until the transaction was completed the book cost $4. In (31a), on the way to the airport, I still had the obligation of going. The point is that the state that comes to an end when the purchasing of the book is completed or when I get to the airport is in effect ‘until then’. Therefore the (a) predicates (in
the PRET) refer at the same time to a static situation and to a dynamic situation in which such a static situation came to an end. In contrast the (b) predicates in the IMP refer only to the state as it was in effect.

Some might say that costó in (30a) refers only to an occurrence—the act of purchasing the book for $4—since, for instance, (32) and (33) might seem to be synonymous:

(32) El auto costó $5,000 ‘The car cost $5,000’  
(33) Compraron el auto por $5,000 ‘They bought the car for $5,000’

But they are really not synonymous, as seen in the following contrast:

(34) El auto costaba $6,000 pero lo compraron por $5,000 ‘The car cost $6,000 but they bought it for $5,000’  
(35) ¿El auto costaba $6,000 pero costó $5,000 ‘The car cost $6,000 but it cost $5,000’

While (34) clearly tells of a bargain, (35) is odd. The reason is that the normal interpretation of Costó $5,000 is ‘It was for sale for $5,000 and was bought for $5,000’. Hence (35) contains the contradiction ‘It was for sale for $6,000 but was for sale for $5,000’.

I will call ‘state-egressive’ or simply ‘egressive’ those PRET predicates which refer inseparably to a state and to the occurrence that brought it to an end, and will call ‘pre-egressive’ the associated predicates in the IMP which refer only to the state. The latter name does not indicate of course that the state must necessarily come to an end, only that it is expected to do so. The $4 book may never sell but the expectation is that it will.

7. State-egressive predicates. Certain stative predicates in the PRET are the mirror image of the state-egressive ones. They can be called ‘state-egressive’ or simply ‘egressive’ and they refer to an occurrence in which a state comes fully into effect. Their associated ‘post-egressive’ predicates in the IMP refer simply to the state and are no different in meaning from other stative predicates in the IMP. Three very common verbs that can enter into egressive predicates are gustar ‘to like’, saber ‘to know’, and conocer ‘to know, be acquainted with’. (Many other verbs which like gustar denote an emotional frame of mind—e.g. molestar ‘to bother’, aterrizar ‘to frighten’, complacer ‘to please’, etc.—can also enter into egressive predicates.)

Consider the contrasts in meaning between the (a) predicates in the PRET and the (b) predicates in the IMP in the following:

(36a) Me gustó el lugar y decidí quedarme  
‘I liked (came to like) the place and decided to stay’  
(36b) Me gustaba el lugar y decidí quedarme  
‘I (already) liked the place and decided to stay’  
(37a) Conocí a todo el mundo  
‘I met everyone’  
(37b) Conocía a todo el mundo  
‘I knew everyone’  
(38a) Supe lo sucedido  
‘I learned (came to know) what had happened’  
(38b) Sabía lo sucedido  
‘I knew what had happened’

In Bull’s theory me gustó, supe, and conocí are regarded as referring to the initiation of noncyclic events (see Bull 1965:170; CIS:251, 8). It is obvious, however, that (39) and (40) do not mean the same thing:

(39) Empezó a gustarme aquel cuadro  
‘I began to like that painting’  
(40) Me gustó aquel cuadro  
‘I liked that painting’
Ingressive predicates do not refer to the beginning phase of a state but rather to its coming fully into effect. This is supported by the fact that you can say (41) but cannot say (42):

(41) Lentamente empezó a gustarme aquel cuadro
    ‘I slowly began to like that painting’
(42) *Lentamente me gustó aquel cuadro
    ‘I slowly liked that painting’

Similarly one cannot say *Lentamente supo la verdad *I slowly learned the truth’ or Lentamente lo conocí ‘I slowly met (came to know) him’. Once you like something you like it, once you come to know someone or something, you know him, her, or it. The occurrence—reacting in the case of gustó, meeting in the case of conocí, learning in the case of supo—is inseparable from the state—liking in the case of gustó, knowing in both conocer and supo. Because states are extendable unless otherwise specified, gustó means ‘liked and continued to like’, and supo and conocer mean ‘I came to know and continued to know’.

At this point it is useful to introduce a distinction between ‘monomial predicates’, or those that refer solely to an occurrence or solely to a state, and ‘binomial predicates’, or those that refer inseparably to a state and an occurrence. Both ingressive and egressive predicates are of course binomial predicates, while their associated post-ingressive and pre-egressive predicates are monomial.

7. 1. BE-ingressive predicates. Perhaps of great interest are the ingressive predicates entered into by the two verbs, ser and estar. In the case of ser, reference is to the acquisition of a certain characteristic on the part of the subject and in the case of estar to the subject being in a certain state or condition in which it was not before. Consider the following examples:

(43) Velázquez fue el primero en utilizar esa técnica
    ‘Velázquez was the first one to use that technique’
(44) La cena estuvo lista y nos llamaron a comer
    ‘Dinner was ready and they called us to eat’
    [Dinner was not ready before]

As is the case in all ingressive predicates, (43) and (44) convey the notion of a change of state taking place. Like all ingressive predicates they refer to a new state (whereas egressive predicates, which also convey the notion of a change of state, refer to an old state and its ceasing to be). In this they differ from monomial ser/estar predicates, which refer to an old state and to the fact it is no longer in effect, without referring to the change (cf. (26) and (27)). I call predicates like (43) and (44) ‘BE-ingressive’.

Perhaps of interest also are the BE-ingressive predicates that refer to subjective perceptions, where ‘[Subject] was’ is really equivalent to ‘I perceived [Subject] to be’. Examples follow.

(45) Fue una experiencia inolvidable
    ‘It was an unforgettable experience’
(46) La fiesta estuvo muy divertida
    ‘The party was great fun’

Of course (45) does not mean ‘it was an unforgettable experience and is no longer so’, nor does (46) mean ‘the party was great fun and is not great fun anymore’. Rather, (45) conveys the notion that I perceived a certain experience as being of the unforgettable kind and continued to perceive it as such. And (46) tells that I perceived the party as being great fun and continued to perceive it as such. BE-ingressive predicates that refer to subjective perceptions are actually very similar in meaning to other ingressive predicates that refer to the acquisition of feelings. For instance, in (47), (a) and (b) are quite close in meaning if not equivalent:

(47a) El viaje fue muy placentero
    ‘The trip was very pleasing’
(47b) Nos gustó mucho el viaje
    ‘We liked the trip very much’

8. The case of quedarse(see) and other ‘timepartitioning’ verbs. Of interest also are those ingressive predicates entered into by the verb quedarse and its reflexive associate quedarse which are similar to BE-
ingressive predicates. In certain other (noningressive) predicates quedarse refers to an old state—one already in effect—as in (48):

(48) La puerta estaba abierta y así se quedó
    ‘The door was open and it stayed that way’

But in the following examples quedarse in the PRET refers to a new state:

(49a) La sesión quedó abierta
    ‘The meeting was called to order’
(49b) Luis quedó como tutor de sus sobrinos
    ‘Luis was appointed the guardian of his nephews’
(49c) Irma se quedó dormida viendo televisión
    ‘Irma fell asleep watching television’

Of course the meeting had not been called to order before, Luis was not the guardian before, and Irma was not asleep before. The verb quedarse has a property that is manifested both in (48) and in the examples in (49); it in effect divides all time into a ‘before’ and an ‘after’. In (48) and (49) quedarse has entered into what I call ‘time-partitioning’ predicates. Notice, however, that whereas in (49) the notion conveyed is ‘a state that was not in effect before was in effect after’ (i.e. it is a new state), the notion conveyed in (48) is ‘a state that was in effect before was in effect after’. That is to say, in the context (50):

(50) /OLD STATE __________

quedarse means ‘to stay’ while in the absence of such a context it means ‘to become’. The time dividing property of the PRET forms of quedarse in (51) is shared by the PRET forms of permanecer ‘to remain’, continuar ‘to continue’, and seguir ‘to continue’. (Continuar and seguir have different selectional restrictions, as will be apparent below.) These verbs are frequently used in contexts where one wishes to specify that, even though a certain subject ceased being in a certain state, a certain other subject did remain in that state, as in the examples in (51) and (52):

(51) Yo entré pero ellos
    se quedaron
    continuaron
    permanecieron
    {fuera
    ‘I came in but they
    stayed
    continued to stay
    remained
    outside’

(52) Ella se durmió pero yo
    me quedé
    continué
    permanecí
    {despierto
    ‘She went to sleep but I
    stayed
    continued to stay
    remained
    awake’

Quedar(se) also figures in contrasts in which one subject gets to be in a new state but another subject does not, with continuar, seguir, and permanecer excluded from the same context, as in the examples in (53):

(53a) La explosión no dañó la oficina pero el laboratorio quedó destruido
    ‘The explosion did not damage the office but the lab was destroyed’
(53b) A ella no le pasó nada pero él se quedó ciego
    ‘Nothing happened to her but he lost his sight’
There is a very important difference between quedarse and the other three verbs in (51) and (52). The latter effect a partition of time while at the same time expressing continuation. But quedarse does not express continuation: all it tells is that the state was in effect in the ‘after’ period. Moreover, the other verbs, continuar, seguir, and permanecer may express continuation without conveying time partition (by being in the IMP). These two differences, crucial to the rules that govern the use of PRET and IMP, are evident in the following example:

(54) El niño se durmió pero la niña se quedaba. despierta tres horas más tarde

'The boy fell asleep but the girl was still awake three hours later'

Either permanecer or seguir may be substituted for continuaba in (54) without any change in grammaticality; both would receive the same translation in English. Of course these verbs are not interchangeable (the difference is of no interest to us here) but they all express continuation.

9. Stative predicates and adverbial modifications. The time partitioning effect, intrinsic to quedar(se) and other verbs, can be achieved by the use of adverbial expressions that refer to the beginning of a new period (and, by implication, to the end of an old one), e.g. desde ese día ‘from that day on’, a partir de entonces ‘from then on’, desde aquel momento ‘from that moment on’, etc. The use of these expressions has the curious effect of having monominal stative predicates refer to a state that came into effect rather than to one that has come to an end. Compare:

(55a) Elllos fueron enemigos

'They were enemies’ [and now they are not]

(55b) Desde aquel día fueron enemigos

'From that day on, they were enemies’ [They became enemies]

(56a) Elllos estuvieron peleados

'They were not on speaking terms’ [but now they are]

(56b) Desde aquel momento estuvieron peleados

'From that moment on they were not on speaking terms’ [but they had been before]

Such adverbial expressions have also the effect of turning any egressive predicate into an ingressive one, as in (57):

(57) Desde aquel día tuvo que venir más temprano

'From that day on he had to come in earlier'

which tells that the obligation to come in earlier was imposed on him. A similar inversion occurs in (58):

(58) Desde aquella fecha costó un dineral ir a España

'From that date on it cost a mint to go to Spain’

which tells that a higher price went into effect. In passing, I would like to mention that based on examples such as (57) and (58), some Spanish textbooks state that PRET is for focusing on the beginning of ‘an event’. It is clear that the focusing here is being accomplished by the use of adverbial phrases, not by the use of PRET. Exactly the reverse of the inversion just described occurs when a normally ingressive predicate is modified by an adverbial expression that refers to the end of a period (and, by implication, to the beginning of a new one). The result is an egressive predicate, as in (59):

(59) Me gustó ese cuadro hasta aquel día

'I liked that painting until that day'

which tells both that I had a favorable feeling toward the painting and that my feeling changed. Again, focusing on the end is accomplished by the adverbial expression, not by the use of PRET, as some texts say.
10. Persitve predicates. Not all binomial predicates are either inressive or egressive. Consider, for example, the following contrasts:

(60a) Podía quedarme en el mejor hotel
'I could stay at the best hotel'
(60b) Pude quedarme en el mejor hotel
'I was able to stay at the best hotel'
(61a) No quería ir al cine
'I didn’t want to go to the movies'
(61b) No quise ir al cine
'I refused to go to the movies'

It should be clear that (60b) and (61b) are binomial but are not inressive. The fact that I was able to stay at the hotel—a dynamic situation—presupposes I had the potential to do so—a static quality. My refusal to go to the movies—a dynamic situation—presupposes I did not feel like going—an emotional state. But (60b) and (61b) are not egressive either: once I was lodged at the hotel my privilege to stay did not end; once I refused to go to the movies, I still did not want to go. Predicates such as these can be called ‘persitve’. They refer to an occurrence that is the manifestation of a certain state that does not come to an end upon being manifested. In contrast, the corresponding IMP predicates e.g. (60a) and (61a)—refer only to the existing state.

11. The PRET/IMP contrast in single-instance stative predicates. What I have said so far applies to the uses of PRET and IMP in speaking of single instances of situations (whether dynamic or static or having both dynamic and static characteristics) as opposed to their uses in speaking of situations that entered our experience at different times in the past, which we will discuss further below.

The contrast between PRET and IMP in predicates referring to single instances of static situations or states can perhaps be summarized as follows:

(62i) IMP tells that a state was in effect at a time before the moment of speaking in which some other situation took place or was taking place
(62ii) Depending on the meaning of the verb and the context in which it appears, PRET may tell either (a) that a state was in effect before the moment of speaking and is not in effect at the moment of speaking (IMP says nothing about the moment of speaking), or (b) that a change of state took place—either a new state came into effect or a state that was in effect came to an end (IMP cannot tell of such a change), or (c) that a continuing state was manifested without coming to an end (IMP cannot tell of such a manifestation), or (d) that a new period began and a state was in effect that was in effect before (IMP cannot tell of a state being in effect on both sides of a time partition).

12. The meaning of IMP in single instance predicates. When one compares the statements made in (23) and (62i) regarding the meaning of IMP in telling of occurrences and states respectively, one is struck by their similarity. We repeat them here as (63) and (64):

(63) IMP tells that an occurrence was taking place at a time before the moment of speaking in which some other situation took place or was taking place,
(64) IMP tells that a state was in effect at a time before the moment of speaking in which some other situation took place or was taking place.

It is obvious that IMP means the same thing in all single situation predicates: the duration of the situation being spoken of by using IMP coincided at some point anterior to the moment of speaking with the duration of some other situation. The cooccurring quality of IMP is a well-known fact. Bello had a name for IMP that is quite descriptive of its function in single situation predicates. He called it copretérito ‘copretérito’. Another noted nineteenth-century grammarian, Vicente Salvá, called it pretérito coexistente ‘coexistent preterit’ (cf. Suárez 1957). In its recent outline of the next edition of its grammar, the Real Academia (1973) uses both terms to describe this function of IMP, though still preferring the label Pretérito Imperfecto ‘Imperfect Preterit’ to refer to the forms.
To say—as Bull says—that IMP states that any event was in progress does not adequately describe its function in single situation predicates. For one thing, what is in progress, for instance, in the situations spoken about in (65)?

(65) El hombre estaba muerto ‘The man was dead’
No teníamos dinero ‘We didn’t have money’
El concierto era gratis ‘The concert was free’
La viuda se llamaba Elsa ‘The widow’s name was Elsa’

The crucial function of IMP in single situation predicates is not really to look at the middle portion of an occurrence or state but to talk about situations that cooccurred at some point. The use of IMP for establishing the background of narrations is well known. So strong is the sense of cooccurrence in the IMP that it is used stylistically to stress the relationship between two situations that took place within the same period of time, even though their duration did not coincide at any point. Such is the case in (66):

(66) Llegamos a Washington el 22 por la mañana. Esa misma tarde asesinaban a Kennedy en Dallas. La noticia nos dejó anonadados ‘We arrived in Washington the morning of the 22nd. That very afternoon they killed Kennedy in Dallas. The news left us in a state of shock’

The use of IMP in (66)—actually optional or stylistic—stresses the fact that our arrival in Washington and Kennedy’s assassination took place on the same day, even though the two situations did not coincide at any point in their duration.

13. Recurrences and PRET/IMP distinction. As is well known, the IMP/PRET contrast is used in speaking of a situation that entered our experience at different times in the past. This is what is normally referred to as speaking about a ‘series’. Since in my mind the term ‘series’ can refer to a set of dissimilar actions, I prefer the term ‘recurrence’ to describe such a situation. The use of IMP and PRET in speaking of a situation experienced at different times in the past can be stated as follows:

(67) In speaking of situations that entered our experience at different times in the past, IMP identifies a situation as something that recurred, while PRET refers to a set of instances of such a situation.

An example of this contrast is provided in (68):

(68a) Blas nunca faltaba a clase
‘Blas never missed class/used to never miss class/would never miss class’
(68b) Blas nunca faltó a clase
‘Blas never missed class’

While (68a) tells of Blas’s good habit, (68b) tells of his perfect attendance record. When I say that IMP identifies a situation as something that recurred, as a recurrence, I mean to say that the situation, having entered the speaker’s experience before, was expected to enter the speaker’s experience again, and this expectation existed before the moment of speaking. ‘Previous repetition’ and ‘expectation of subsequent instances’ are the components of a recurrence. PRET actually does not refer to a recurrence but to a collection of instances of the same situation. There is no expectation of subsequent instances and no direct reference to the iterative quality of the situation (though its iterative quality can be trivially inferred from the context, i.e. if I say that Blas never missed class, I of course mean he was present at more than one class). The point is that when it comes to iterative situations, IMP and PRET are not two different ways of looking at the same set of situations. In fact IMP is not looking at such a set at all. It does not refer to any particular instance of a situation but rather to ‘qualities’ a certain situation had, those qualities being precisely that it had occurred before more than once and that it was expected to occur again. I can say that (69a) is a synonym of (68a), and that (69b) is a synonym of (68b):
(69a) Blas tenía la costumbre de no faltar nunca a clase
   'Blas had the habit of never missing class'
(69b) Blas vino a todas las clases
   'Blas came to every class'

It is obvious that (69a) does not refer to Blas’s attending any class in particular, whereas (69b) does. It is equally obvious that (69b) does not refer to a habit of Blas’s. The two sentences are talking about different things.

The contrast between PRET and IMP is not ‘including the last case of the series’ versus ‘not including the last case’. In the first place IMP does not refer to any case. Secondly, PRET does not necessarily include the last case, let alone every case. The fact that (68b) includes not only the last case but every case is an outcome of the context provided by the word nunca ‘never’. Of course (70) is not possible:

(70) *Blas nunca faltó a clase en el verano, pero un día faltó
   'Blas never missed class in the summer (came to every class), but one day he missed class'

However, (71) is perfectly normal:

(71) Blas sí fue a clase en el verano pero el último día no estaba
   'Blas did go to class in the summer but he was not there the last day'

In short one can say that, even though PRET and IMP are used in speaking of situations that entered our experience at different times in the past, PRET is actually used for speaking collectively of a number of instances of a given situation, while IMP is used for speaking of a given situation as being a recurrence.

Because a situation that involves both dynamic and static characteristics can be seen to recur, binomial predicates, which are always in the PRET when they refer to single situations, are in the IMP when they refer to a recurring situation. The examples in (72) are all references to recurring situations, one single instance of which would instead be referred to in the PRET:

(72a) El almuerzo costaba menos que la cena
   'Lunch was cheaper than dinner' [at any given time]
(72b) A los turistas que llegaban, el lugar les gustaba instantáneamente
   'Arriving tourists liked the place instantly' [Different arriving tourists.]
(72c) Se quedaba desvelado cuando tomaba café
   'He would be up all night whenever he drank coffee'
(72d) Por la noche podíamos estudiar allí
   'At night we were able to study there'

The examples in (72) illustrate the fact that reference to a recurrence does not have to be overtly marked as such, i.e. it does not have to be modified by an expression such as cada vez que 'each time that'. Use of IMP is sufficient. The examples in (72) serve also to illustrate the fact that recurrences in English can be unmarked completely, with the context telling that I am not referring to a single situation. In contrast, in Spanish, recurrences are at least marked by the use of IMP.

Notice, however, that even though (b) and (c) in (72) are not ambiguous, for they can only refer to a recurrence, (a) and (d) can mean either a recurrence or one single static situation. Within a larger context, though, the ambiguity will disappear if there is a clear indication that there was no time overlapping at all between situations. For instance, (73) can only be a recurrence, for it is obvious that the two occurrences mentioned do not coincide at any point in time:

(73) Ella abría y cerraba los ojos
    'She would open and close her eyes'

This is so because in speaking of single situations IMP always indicate simultaneity or overlapping between at least two situations, the one referred to in the IMP and at least one other—also mentioned—which is spoken of in the IMP in case of simultaneity and in the PRET in case of overlapping, as shown in (74):
(74a) Cuando salía ella, entraba yo
‘When she was coming out, I was going in’ (simultaneity)

(74b) Cuando salía ella, entré yo
‘When she was coming out, I went in’ (overlapping)

Sentence (74b) is not ambiguous: it cannot refer to a recurrence since in speaking of recurrences we are not interested at all in particular instances. But (74a) is still ambiguous. It would not be so, however, within a larger context that contained a single situation seen to cooccur with both occurrences, as in (75):

(75) Cuando salía ella, entraba yo y chocamos
‘When she was coming out, I was going in, and we collided’

again because in speaking of recurrences we are not interested in instances, so that (75) would be unambiguously interpreted as a reference to a single situation.

Consider now the following interesting phenomenon. Sentence (76) is not ambiguous: it can only refer to a recurrence:

(76) Cuando salía ella, entraba yo y nos saludábamos
‘She would be coming out and I would be going in, and we would greet each other’

Obviously, the greetings are not simultaneous with the coming and going; for if it were so, then simultaneity would not suffice to have an IMP predicate be interpreted as a single situation. But it does suffice, as shown by the fact that (74a) can be interpreted as a reference to a single situation. Therefore in (76) the greetings are subsequent to the coming and going. On the other hand, since the coming and going had not terminated, the greetings overlap both. That is to say, in (76) we have a situation that overlaps other situations and is referred to in the IMP, and yet it is not interpreted as telling about a single situation, but rather as telling about a recurrence.

Notice, however, that the greetings are not overlapping any subsequent situation. And here is the crux of the matter; for in order for an IMP predicate to be interpreted as a reference to a single situation, the situation referred to —if it is not simultaneous with some other situation—must be overlapping a subsequent situation. Or, in other words, that the situation referred to in the IMP must be either simultaneous with another situation or must have started before another with which it overlaps.

Since in (76) the last predicate in the IMP refers to an occurrence that is neither simultaneous with another situation nor overlapping with a subsequent one, it cannot be a reference to a single situation. Therefore, it is a reference to a recurrence; and if it is, then the others logically are, too.

14. Recalling situations versus recalling predications. Bello observes that IMP is used for speaking of ‘eternal truths’ and offers as an example the sentence in (77):

(77) Copernico probó que la tierra giraba alrededor del sol
‘Copernicus proved that the earth rotated around the sun’

Bello mentions that gira ‘it rotates’ could be tolerated in that context; but he points out that in that case ‘we would not see within Copernicus’s mind the eternal rotation of the earth, as called for by the sense’ (see Bello and Cuervo 1970:221). I take Bello to mean that we would not see Copernicus asserting mentally (78):

(78) La tierra gira alrededor del sol
‘The earth rotates around the sun’

If that is what Bello meant, my agreement with him is total. I will elaborate on this further on.

For Bello, a sentence like (77) shows the ‘copreterit’ function of IMP: the earth’s rotation is anterior to Copernicus’s proof, in the same manner that raining is anterior to my coming in (79):

(79) Cuando vine, llovía
‘When I came it was raining’
There are, however, sentences such as (80):

(80) Son las tres y el me dijo que venía a las cinco
    ‘It’s three and he said he was coming at five’

Obviously his coming is posterior to his telling me. Of course, *venía* ‘he was coming’ can be replaced by *vendría* ‘he would come’ which is indeed posterior to his telling me; and this is quite in consonance with Bello’s theory. *Vendría* for him is a *post-pretérito* ‘post-preterit’ form, referring to something that is posterior to a past situation. The use of *venía* in (80) is normal, it is the past of present tense *viene* ‘he comes’ used in a future sense, in the same way that *vendrá* is the past of the future form *vendrá* ‘he will come’. In addition *había venido* ‘he had come’ — the pluperfect — is the past of PRET *vino* ‘he came’.

These relationships are exploited in so-called indirect discourse. For instance if someone says (81a), what he said is reported as (81b):

(81a) Ayer fui pobre, hoy soy pobre y mañana seré pobre
    ‘I was poor yesterday, am poor today, and will be poor tomorrow’

(81b) Dijo que ayer había sido pobre, hoy era pobre y mañana sería pobre
    ‘He said he had been poor yesterday, was poor today, and would be poor tomorrow’

It seems to me, however, that the relationship between IMP and PRET is different in (79) than it is in (77) or (80). In (79) I am establishing a relationship between two occurrences, but in (77) and (80) I am relating an occurrence to something else. In (77) and (80) I am not actually telling about an occurrence, but ‘telling about telling about one’, i.e. I am reporting a ‘predication’ (a true-false statement) not a situation.

This difference becomes clear in the case of performatives, or speech acts that do what they say and say what they do at the same time. One such act is *protest* ‘I protest’. If you say ‘I protest’ you are saying what you are doing and doing what you are saying. What happens when a performative is recalled? If it is recalled as an occurrence, PRET is used; but if it is recalled as a predication, IMP is used instead. Suppose that as a reaction to some unreasonable demand, I say *protest*. I can later be asked either of two questions about my reaction and they could be answered as follows:

(82a) ¿Qué hiciste? ‘What did you do?’
(82a’) Protesté ‘I protested’

(82b) ¿Qué dijiste? ‘What did you say?’
(82b’) (Dije) que protestaba ‘I said I protested’

The parentheses in *dije* indicates its optional character. It is normal to give as answer the truncated form *que protestaba* ‘that I protested’.

It is obvious that the relationship between *dijo* and *protestaba* in (82b) is the same as the relationship between *dijo* and *venía* in (80). In both cases I am talking about what someone said; but the use of IMP cannot be explained by appealing to temporal relationships in the case of the performatives since *dijo* and *protestaba* are simultaneous. (Some observant student might argue with the teacher that both should be in the IMP, given their simultaneity.) Therefore the function of IMP in (82b) must be ‘other’ than expressing the anteriority or posteriority of a situation with respect to an utterance made about that situation. What could that function be? Actually *Dijo que protestaba* ‘I said I protested’ and *Dijo que venía a las cinco* ‘He said he was coming at five’ have something in common in addition to reporting utterances: they report something that is either true or false. I may have been lying when I said *protest* but I wanted my audience to think that I was protesting and that is why I said it. Therefore, when I said *protest* it was like saying *protest* is true*. Protesto was an assertion. In *dijo que protestaba* I am speaking about that assertion. In the case of *Dijo que venía a las cinco* I can say the speaker is speaking about the assertion *Vengo a las cinco* ‘I’m coming at five’, which was made—or could have been made—by another person.

Does it not make sense, then, to say that in (77) I am speaking about Copernicus’s assertion—i.e. (78)—or an assertion that could have been made by Copernicus?

I would like to propose that the function of IMP in (77), (80), and (82b) is to speak of assertions that were made or could have been made using the Present tense. I would describe as follows the relationship between the form of an assertion and the form that is used to speak about it:

(83) Assertions made in the Present tense or the IMP are spoken about in the IMP, while assertions made in the PRET are spoken about in the Pluperfect
Suppose I receive a piece of information via someone's assertion—let me call it A—and I believe A is true. I may choose to do any or all of these three things with respect to A: (1) tell another person about it, (2) tell somebody else that I know it, (3) comment upon it. In Spanish I can do (1), (2), and (3) by subordinating the original assertion—after making certain changes—to a predicate that will indicate precisely which of those three things I am doing with respect to A. This is illustrated in (84):

(84a) Doing (1):
\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{Dice}\,\text{Anuncia}\,\text{Informa} \\
&\text{He says}\,\text{He announces}\,\text{He informs} \\
&\text{etc.}\,\text{etc.} \\
\end{align*}
\text{that A'}
\]

(84b) Doing (2):
\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{Sé}\,\text{Me doy cuenta}\,\text{Estoy consciente de} \\
&\text{I know}\,\text{I realize}\,\text{I am aware} \\
&\text{that A'}
\end{align*}
\]

(84c) Doing (3):
\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{Es fantástico}\,\text{Me gusta}\,\text{Encuentro mal} \\
&\text{It's fantastic}\,\text{I like it}\,\text{I find it objectionable} \\
&\text{that A'}
\end{align*}
\]

I am not interested here in (84c) since PRET and IMP do not appear in the corresponding past sentences (the subordinate takes the subjunctive). In past predicates of the type shown in (84a) and (84b), the use of the forms in the subordinate clause is as described in (83). This is illustrated in (85), where A represents the original assertion that was made or could have been made:

(85a) Dijo que tenía que esperar
'He said I had to wait'
A = Tiene que esperar 'You have to wait'

(85b) Anunciaron que se había muerto el dictador
'They announced the dictator had died'
A = Se murió el dictador 'The dictator died'

(85c) Oye, Julio, pensé que eras más listo
'Listen, Julio, I thought you were smarter'
A = Julio es más listo 'Julio is smarter'

(85d) Me di cuenta de que no había pan
'I realized there was no bread'
A = No hay pan 'There is no bread'

(85e) No sabía que había habido una huelga
'I didn't know there had been a strike'
A = Hubo una huelga 'There was a strike'

Notice that in the past there is the added possibility of telling that one did not know A, as is the case in (85e).

Consider (85c). I probably never had the exact thought 'Julio is smarter' but I am telling Julio that I did. I am telling him the equivalent of (86):

(86) Oye, Julio, yo pensé: 'Julio es más listo'
'Listen, Julio, I thought: "Julio is smarter"'
The point is that even though I may have never uttered, or thought, or heard someone utter, any of the assertions above, I speak ‘as if I had’. When I say (85d) I speak as if I had said or thought, looking at an empty bread box, No hay pan ‘There is no bread’.

Curiously, dreams are usually reported as if they consisted of a number of mental assertions, a phenomenon that warrants, perhaps, further investigation. In telling dreams, forms that would usually be in the PRET in a narrative, appear in the IMP, as in the following sample:

(87) Soñé que entraban el Murciélago y Robin y se sentaban a comer con nosotros
   ‘I dreamed Batman and Robin came in and sat down to eat with us’

Sometimes telling about assertions occur in independent clauses. For instance, a newspaper reporter may write (88), recalling the performative in (89):

(88) Quedaba abierta la sesión
   ‘They called the meeting to order’

(89) Queda abierta la sesión
   ‘The meeting will now come to order’

15. What does the speaker know? It should be obvious from the preceding that the rules that govern the use of PRET and IMP are different in at least four areas of discourse: (1) when speaking of dynamic situations, (2) when speaking of static situations or of situations combining both dynamic and static characteristics, (3) when speaking of situations that entered our experience at different times in the past, and (4) when speaking of assertions (real or imaginary) instead of situations. It seems to me that any serious attempt at making explicit those rules, either for the purpose of adequately characterizing the competence of the speaker or for the ulterior purpose of having non-natives acquire them must consider those four areas separately.

NOTE

1. I would like to thank Houghton Mifflin Company for their permission to quote from Communicating in Spanish (Copyright Houghton Mifflin Company 1974), and Cambridge University for their permission to quote from Aspect (Copyright Cambridge University Press 1976). I am indebted to Henry J. Richards and Kathleen N. March for their comments on various versions of this work. I thank also Dwight L. Bolinger and Maryellen Garcia for comments that reached me too late but from which I will undoubtedly profit in my future work. I am grateful to my wife, Sarah D. Guitart, and to David Lagmanovich for valuable stylistic suggestions. I am solely responsible for all errors.

REFERENCES


Suárez, Marcos Fidel. 1957 [1881]. Estudios gramaticales, 46 [under the editorship of Miguel Antonio Caro]. Bogotá.