Abstract

Comparison of the Tense Systems in Spanish and French: the Use of the Present Perfect and Past Simple

This paper is concerned with tenses in Spanish and in French. First they are analysed generally, from the theoretical point of view, and subsequently, the author focuses on comparing the use of two of them: the present perfect and the past simple. The author is building on the conviction that although the verb systems of Roman languages are nearly identical, and also that the basic values of their tenses are identical, their specific uses may differ.

First, she examines how tenses participate in the expression of time in language and how they can refer to extralinguistic time. As much attention has been paid to this topic, part one of the paper examines the theories that have been reflected the most in works on Spanish and French verbs. The fact that each of them emphasises a different aspect in explaining the meaning and function of each tense allows us to better understand the fundamental value of the tenses. One chapter is devoted to the diachronic view of the Roman system of verbs which allows us to see which features and development tendencies are common to all Roman languages, and which are only found in some of them. Here, the author points out primarily the fact that the loss of the resultative meaning in favour of the preterit meaning of a certain form, which can now be witnessed in the case of the French present perfect, is nothing new, as the original Latin perfect underwent the same development.

Part two of the paper first examines the basic meaning of the present perfect and past simple, building on the descriptions of the theories presented in part one. Then the author focuses on comparing the specific use of the two tenses in French and in Spanish, first comparing the types of use captured in French and Spanish grammar books. There, she finds that the basic meaning of the two tenses does not differ – the present perfect expresses events that took place or commenced before the time of speech, but are related to the present, whereas the past simple expresses events that took place or started in the past, but have no consequence for the present, or that consequence is irrelevant. Some of the uses described are, however, only found in Spanish or only in French. Subsequently, the author performs a comparative analysis, comparing originals and translations of journalistic and literary texts in the two languages.

The author holds that in contemporary French, two modes must be distinguished: one where both tenses are still used, and another, where the past simple has totally disappeared.
The earlier mode is examined in comparison with Spanish. The author notes that in that mode, two subgroups must be distinguished: one is formed by expressions where the past simple occurs only sporadically, and the other, where it is used regularly. She observes that the use of the present perfect and simple past in the latter subgroup is, to a large degree, the same as the Spanish usage. In spite of that, the author’s initial assumption was confirmed, that there are cases when usage differs between the two languages; first, in connection with certain specific verbs, and secondly also in connection with the fact that an identical situation is seen from a different standpoint in each of the languages.