

# The Use of the Imperfect and Preterit Verb Tenses by Spanish Heritage Speakers in Monterey County

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California State University  
**MONTEREY BAY**  
Extraordinary Opportunity

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# Organization of This Presentation

- Objective of the study
- Structures
- Previous works
- The present study
- Results
- Discussion
- Suggestions for further research



# Objective of This Study

The objective of this study is to analyze the use of the imperfect and preterit verb tenses within narratives by speakers of Hispanic heritage in Monterey County.



# Structures

In Spanish, both the **preterite** and **imperfect** are used to express past events.

- The **preterite** is used to refer to completed actions or events and short completed actions in the past.
  - Example: “Caperucita Roja **llegó** a la casa de su abuela y **tocó** la puerta” (*Little Red Riding Hood arrived at her grandmother’s house and knocked on the door.*)



# Structures

- The **imperfect** is used to express past habitual or progressive actions, states or mental activity, and intentions or future actions/events.
- The imperfect progressive is used to express actions in progress, and it emphasized the progressive aspect of an action.
  - Examples:
    - “[Caperucita] **Continuaba** con su viaje y **estaba caminando** en el bosque”. (*Little Red Riding Hood **continued (progressive aspect)** with her trip, and she **was walking** in the woods.*)
    - “**Quería** llevar una canasta de comida para su abuelita que **estaba** enferma.” (*She wanted (intention) to take a basket of food to her grandmother because she was (state) sick.*)
    - “Su abuelita **vivía** cerca del bosque.” (*Her grandmother lived (habitual) close to the*



# Previous Studies

- Montrul (2002, 2009) investigated heritage speakers' use of preterite and imperfect in narratives.
- Montrul's most recent study (Montrul, 2009):
  - 65 heritage speakers in Illinois
  - Narratives of “Little Red Riding Hood” based on pictures
  - Results showed errors in the use of both tenses, with an error rate of 1.8% for the preterite and 3.8% for the imperfect.
- In her study of Spanish heritage speakers in Los Angeles, Silva-Corvalan (1994) reported similar results, with errors reported more in the use of the imperfect than the preterite.
- The purpose of this study is to investigate if similar errors to the ones reported in these three previous studies are found in the narratives of heritage speakers in Monterey County.



# The Present Study: Research Questions

In what semantic contexts do preterite and imperfect forms occur in the heritage speakers' narratives in Monterey County?

Do these forms reflect standard Spanish norms?

Are there any differences between the preterit and imperfect use in Monterey County with other Spanish heritage speaking communities in the United States?





# Participants

- 22 CSUMB students
- 8 men, 14 women. Average age: 21.45
- 21 subjects were born in the United States; 1 subject was born in Mexico, but moved to this country at the age of two..
- Cities of origin: 1 from Marina; 1 from Soledad; 1 from Hollister; 3 from Watsonville; 5 from Seaside 5; 11 from Salinas.



# Participants

- They all have been exposed to Spanish since birth.
- The majority of subjects come from monolingual (Spanish-speaking households) and use Spanish at home and in the community.
- The participants proficiency in English and Spanish was self-evaluated with a Lickert-type scale where 5 corresponded to native-like proficiency and 1 to almost no proficiency.
- The results from the self-evaluation reflected a high proficiency in both languages with a mean of 4.65 in English and 4 in Spanish which means they have outstanding competency in both languages, however they feel as though they are come confident in their English language abilities.



# Instruments and Data Analysis

- A biographic and linguistic online questionnaire
- Using 16 images as a guide, participants had to narrate the *Little Red Riding Hood* story.

## Analysis:

- The questionnaire data were analyzed using descriptive statistics.
- The participants' narratives were recorded and later transcribed by a research assistant.
- Data were analyzed by the researcher and another researcher to ensure reliability.



# Examples of Narrative Images



# Results: Preterite

- Preterite: 295 correct uses; no incorrect uses
  - perfect or complete actions: 89 correct instances (30%)

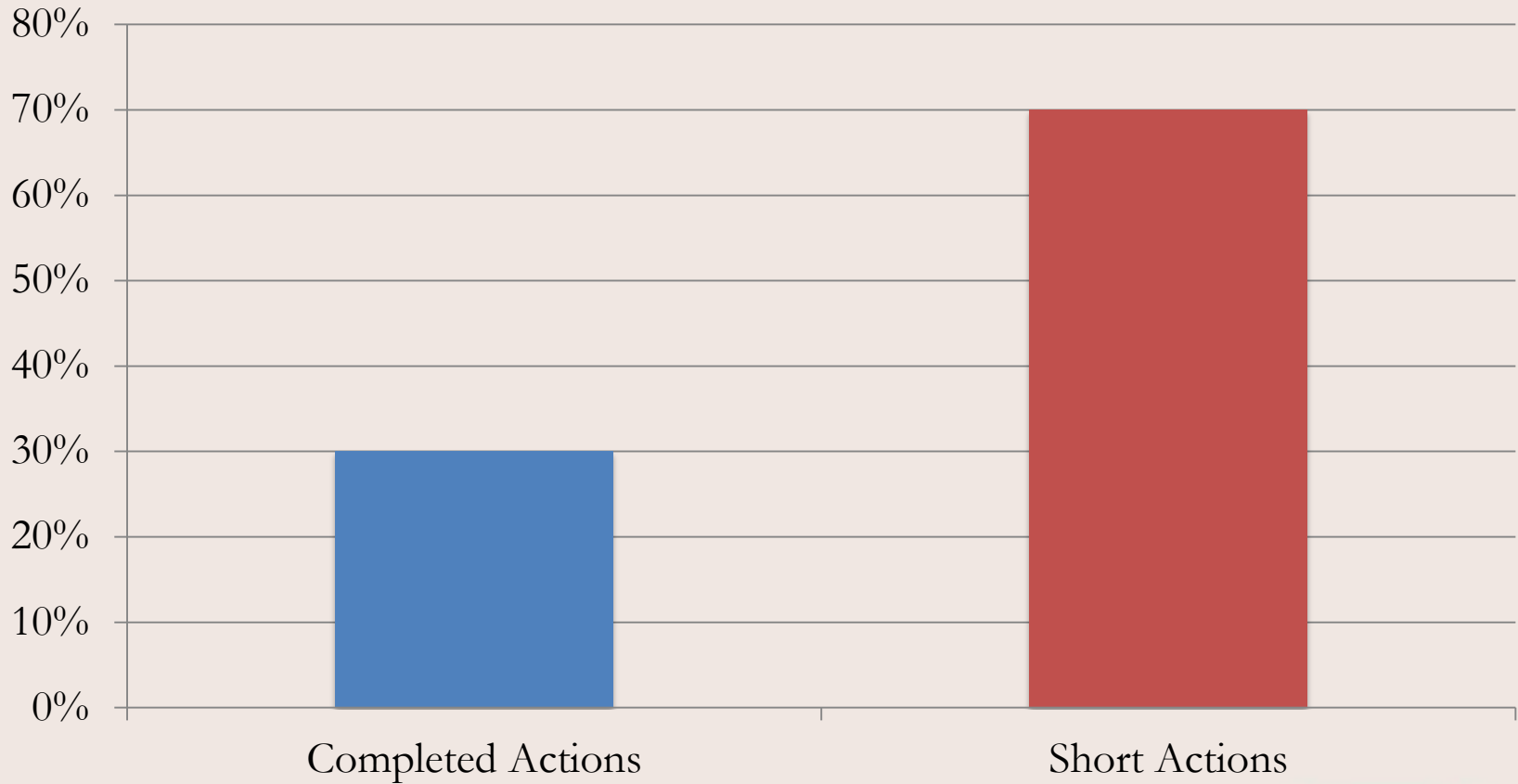
Example: “Durante su viaje o su caminata, [Caperucita] **se entretuvo** con unas flores porque le gustan mucho las flores.” (*During her trip, [Little Red Riding Hood] kept busy [looking] at some flowers because she likes flowers very much.*)

- short action verbs: 206 correct instances (70%)

Example: “De repente Caperucita Roja **empezó** a tocar la puerta.” (*Suddenly Little Red Riding Hood started knocking on the door.*)



# Results: Preterite (cont.)



# Results: Imperfect

**Imperfect: 114 correct uses; no incorrect uses:**

- Description of state or mental activity and action in progress: 84 instances (73%)

Example: “Entonces **iba** Caperucita Roja a la casa de su abuela pero el lobo le ganó...

Levantó la cobija para ver bien a su abuela y descubrió que **era** el lobo. Y Caperucita Roja...no **sabía** qué hacer.” (*Little Red Riding Hood was then going to her grandma’s house, but the wolf got there first...She raised the blanket, and she realized [her grandma] was the wolf. And Little Red Riding Hood...didn’t know what to do.*)

- Imperfect Progressive: 18 instances (16%)

Example: “El lobo **estaba esperando** a la Caperucita.” (*The wolf was waiting for Little Red Riding Hood.*)

- Intentions or future events: 8 instances (7%)

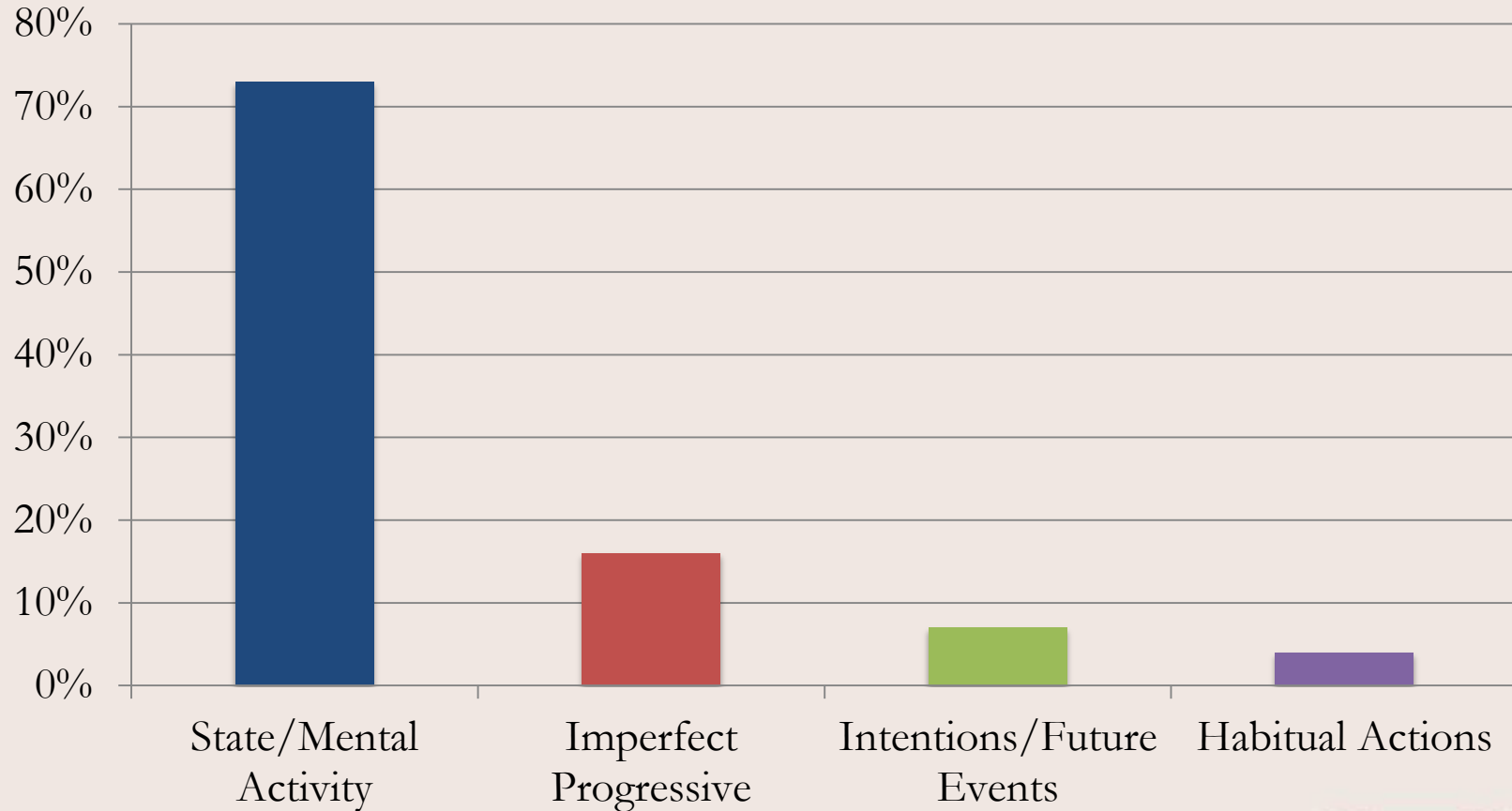
Example: El lobo feroz se levantó y se la **quería** comer. (*The wild wolf got up and she wanted to eat her.*)

- Habitual actions: 4 instances (4%)

Example: “A la niña le **decían** Caperucita Roja.” (*People used to call her Little Red Riding Hood.*)



# Results: Imperfect





# Discussion

- Unlike previous studies (Montrul 2002, 2009; Silva-Corvalán, 1994), the participants in this study did not produce any errors with the preterite or imperfect.
- We will now analyze the factors that might contribute to the stability of these forms in this population.



# Interpretation of Results

## Monolingual households

- Most of the participants in this study come from monolingual households. Previous studies have shown that this is a factor that can positively contribute to the maintenance of Spanish. For example, in their study of Spanish maintenance in four Mexican-American families in Texas, Bayley et al. (1996) and Schecter & Bayley (1997) reported that the most successful household for language maintenance was the one that was monolingual, where not only was Spanish the sole language spoken by the parents and children, but where there was prevalence of positive attitudes towards that language and preservation of cultural aspects related to the parents' cultural background.
- The importance of monolingual households has also been reported in other studies, such as those with the Japanese community in Hawaii (e.g., Kondo, 1998). In addition, Clyne (1982) also reported that the presence of monolingual grandparents and other extended family can be positively correlated with language maintenance.



# Interpretation of Results (cont.)

## Monolingual households (Cont.):

- In the personal interviews that were conducted with the participants in this study, they showed the strong positive attitudes that they had towards the maintenance of Spanish, and the respect they bestowed upon their parents' cultural heritage.
- In addition, participants mentioned the emphasis that their parents had put on the sole use of Spanish in the household, and most of them reported close contact with their monolingual grandparents and extended family members.
- All of these factors may contribute to the maintenance of their Spanish.



# Interpretation of Results (Cont.)

## Location:

- In their study of Spanish maintenance in four Mexican-American families in Texas, Bayley et al. (1996) and Schecter & Bayley (1997) also believed that another important factor for the maintenance of Spanish in the monolingual family was the rural location of the household, where there was no proximity to a large urban area and where contact was limited to other Spanish-speaking rural families.
- Most of the participants in this study come from households in which the main parent occupation is agriculture, and, in their interviews, they reported living in predominantly small rural communities in which they are in close contact with other Spanish speakers, and where Spanish is the majority language. In addition, we can say that the towns where the participants come from are not in close proximity to big urban areas where English is the majority language.
- Therefore, we could hypothesize that the location of the places where the participants come from could also be a factor that contributes to the maintenance of their Spanish.



# Interpretation of Results (Cont.)

## Close-knit community membership:

- Another important aspect that the participants mentioned in their interviews is their pride to belong to the Hispanic community in their area, and their wish to remain in their local area to contribute to their community.
- This is important because studies (e.g., Clyne, 1982; Kloss, 1966) have shown positive correlation between minority language maintenance and close-knit communities where there are important communicative purposes for the minority language and whose members exhibit positive attitudes towards the language and cultural inheritance.
- This is what Tossi (2011) describes as **community communication needs**, and it could be applied to the communities where the participants live because of the strong monolingual Hispanic presence brought about by members of the community who do not speak English fluently. The main language of communication then becomes Spanish, and this works positively for the maintenance of this language.



# Interpretation of Results (Cont.)

## Resilience of grammatical structures:

- Even though studies with heritage speakers have shown decline in their knowledge of the preterite and imperfect (Montrul 2002, 2009; Silva-Corvalán, 1994), existing studies on the grammatical knowledge of this population of bilinguals have also pointed to the resilience of grammatical structures to change (some of these studies are presented by Bullock & Toribio, 2007).
- This could explain why some vocabulary changes are reported in this community (addressed by my colleague, Pedro Guerrero), but grammatical structures such as the preterite and imperfect do not exhibit any changes and reflect the rules of standard Spanish.



# Suggestions for Future Studies

- Include more participants.
- Extend the investigation to participants of other ages.
- Explore other grammatical structures, such as the subjunctive, to see if they are undergoing change.
- Explore in more depth the social factors that might contribute to the maintenance of Spanish in this area.



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