

## CERTAIN CHOSEN PERIPHRASTIC FORMS OF EXPRESSING TEMPORAL RELATIONS IN THE PAST

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We are going to deal with certain (the most frequent) periphrastic forms in Spanish and English that express temporal relations in the past. As for the principles taken into account, we are going to concentrate on indicative (not subjunctive or conditional) examples, and sequence of tenses is not included either. A pair of periphrases (one English and one Spanish of the same or similar meaning) will be compared and described as for their function and employment. We would also like to find out in which grammatical tenses it is possible to use them.

The primary importance of expressing temporal relations is laid upon the verbal tenses. Nevertheless, periphrastic expressions of time can sometimes change the expected resulting meaning of a clause to certain extent.

According to Veselá, Reska & Jašek (2004: 47), verbal periphrases, sometimes also called verbal phrases (Sánchez, 1980: 130) or semi-modals (Biber, 1999: 73), consist of two or more elements but together they act as a whole. The parts of verbal periphrases normally are: an auxiliary verb, some element of enlacement such as a preposition (not necessarily), and a lexical verb (impersonal). The auxiliary verb partly or completely loses its original semantic meaning and acquires a new one in accordance with the particular impersonal forms to which it is linked. Verbal periphrases can consist of a gerund, an infinitive or a participle.

Seco defines verbal periphrases in relation to what verbal tenses cannot stand for. "En este caso se determina el predicado fundamental por medio de otros verbos o formas verbales auxiliares, resultando de este modo perífrasis muy dignas de notar, y que podremos llamar frases verbales, en correlación con las frases sustantivas, adjetivas, adverbiales, prepositivas, conjuntivas, etc." (Seco, 1996: 187)

Now, we can proceed to the periphrastic forms themselves. First, let us look closely at the periphrastic form *ir a + infinitive (to be going to + infinitive)*.

In English, *to be going to + infinitive* was first attested between 1400 and 1650 (Biber, 1999: 487).

It is quite understandable why in Spanish the verbal form of the verb *ir* is a simple one, unlike in English. Spanish tends to simplify its grammatical tenses a lot. Even in casual speech (in most cases) they would not say *Estoy yendo a Praga*, though the action is happening right now. They would definitely use *Voy a Praga*, which is inadmissible in English, where the norm is much stricter in this respect.

However, the interpretation of these periphrastic expressions seems to be the same in English and Spanish, alike. As Quirk argues (Quirk et al., 1972: 88), *to be going to +*

*infinitive* expresses an intention and future. It has two specific meanings. One is future of present intention.

Example: *When are you going to get married?* (Quirk et al., 1972: 88)

The other meaning is to denote future of present cause.

Example: *It's going to rain.* (Quirk et al., 1972: 88)

Likewise, Sánchez, Martín & Matilla (1980: 132) certifies more or less the same. "Expresa una acción futura inmediata y contiene matiz de decisión."

As far as Hewings (2005: 18) and his perspective is concerned, he goes into more detail. "...and *be going to* for decisions about the future that have already been made." It also symbolizes a plan or some kind of determination.

Example: *I wasn't going to say anything about the exams, but the students asked me to.* (Hewings, 2005: 28)

*También ella iba a hacer sus observaciones sobre aquel tema, pero en el mismo instante despartó la Nela.* (Pérez, 1995: 782)

*I was going to have a few comments about John Edwards...* (www1)

Also, something that can hardly be changed will be expressed in this way.

Example: *Iban a casarse.* (García, 1992: 247)

*Florentino Ariza era así, como lo iba a ser con todas por el resto de su vida.* (García, 1992: 254)

Further on, it is employed in situations when an action in future is very certain to happen (soon), if we have some evidence of it (Leech, 1996, p. 164). "*Be + going to* is also used for something in the future for which we have present evidence." (Leech, 1996: 158)

Example: *I think it's going to rain. Can you see how cloudy it is? = Creo que va a llover. ¿Ves lo nublado que está?* (Translation mine)

We should now concentrate on the first example above. The language textbook *Language to Go* (Crace & Wileman, 2002, p. 9) explains the difference between *will* and *going to* in a too simple way. It literally states that if we use the expressions *think* or *don't think*, we should never use immediate future, which is in contrast not only with the previous example but also with many others. Hence, it always depends on the particular speaker and his volition. (Biber, 1999: 495)

Example: *I think I'll call her that.* (Crace & Wileman, 2002: 9)

*I don't think I'll call her that.* (Crace & Wileman, 2002: 9)

*I think I'm going to die.* (Biber, 1999: 490)

*I don't think there's going to be a lot of theft.* (Biber, 1999: 1006)

It is often called the immediate, close future (Sweet, 1966: 106) or even near future (Leech, 1996: 163).

Example: *...construyeron en la planta alta un dormitorio para los esposos y otro para los hijos que iban a tener.* (García, 1992: 223)

*Everyone was excited because the new theatre was going to be opened the next evening.* (Leech, 1996: 345)

*¿Iba a venir?* (Vargas, 2000: 172)

*It was in the summer holidays and Matthew was going to start school.* (Biber, 1999: 456)

Most authors argue that this verbal form is very frequent in the colloquial language and, moreover, some of them claim that it can be generalized for any future. (Hamplová, 1998, p. 246) "Tato vazba je velmi rozšířená, zvláště v hovorovém jazyce, a někdy se jí užívá i k označení jakéhokoli budoucího děje."<sup>1</sup>

It is also used if we want to camouflage some mental pressure upon somebody.

Example: *Well, if you are not going to have any more wine...* (Sweet, 1966: 107)

In English it is typically used in its present or preterit forms but it is actually possible in any tense (Leech, 1996: 164). The next sentence has made use of present perfect progressive because the people have been planning to do something for a longer time.

Example: *For the past ten years they have been going to mend the bridge. Now at last they are doing the job.* (Leech, 1996: 164)

The next two examples, though in accordance with the phrase *ir a + infinitive*, do not always express an intention or a plan but rather a mere description of something that was happening in the past when another event interrupted it. It can result in a bit ambiguous explanation. We have to bear in mind that the verb *ir* always takes a before another verb. That is why it might look similar to the periphrastic form.

Example: *Después cuando él estaba yendo a ver al Buddha, y se encontraba quizá a unos pocos metros del Buddha, Sakka, el rey de los Devas, se le acercó y le dijo...* (www2)

*Un día estaba yendo a buscar a mi hija, venía un auto atrás también apurado...* (www3)

Dubský et al. (1999: 123) state that *ir a + infinitive* in its imperfect version mainly expresses an intention in the past that was not fulfilled, though this is not a strict rule.

Example *...donde a principio iba a quedarme sólo un año.* (Dubský et al., 1999: 123)

<sup>1</sup> This is in a sharp contrast to e. g. Hewings (2005: 18).

*Iba a salir cuando llegó el cartero.* (Hamplová, 1998: 246)

If we use past simple instead of imperfect, the meaning of the sentence is changed. Past simple describes a mere action. What somebody went to do. It can also describe an attempt or a try in the past. (Veselá et al., 2004: 53)

Example: *Después, cuando su madre murió, fue a enterrarla y a buscar a Miguel, que era todavía una criatura en pañales.* (Allende, 1990: 209)

*Una noche no aguantó más y fue a golpear la puerta del dormitorio de Clara.* (Allende, 1990: 215)

In the above examples, the sentences would be translated into English as *Then, when her mother died, she went to bury her...* and *... went to bang the door...* because there is no intention or plan, it is a description of (a series of) past actions, for which we typically use past simple.

Similarly, in the following examples, also in past simple, the sentences acquire the meaning of an attempt.

Example: *El cachorro, incrédulo, fue a avanzar, pero Prince le mostró los dientes.* (Quiroga, 1981: 46)

*Cuando fui a hablar me interrumpieron.* (Gili y Gaya, 1966: 108)

*Fue a decir la verdad, pero la emoción cortó sus palabras.* (Gili y Gaya, 1966: 108)

*En cuanto fui a comenzar mi explicación noté que estaban distraídos.* (Gili y Gaya, 1966: 108)

It might seem that the next sentence pictures the periphrasis being discussed here. However, it is just on the contrary. The meaning of the sentence is *I wanted to modify...* It represents a simple past action, a try.

Example: *He ido a modificar mi web y no me deja, ¿por qué?* (www4)

Contrary to it, in the following examples, there is an intention, some plan depicted.

Example: *Iba a responderle que si se empeñaba, cada vez que yo volviera las espaldas...* (Vargas, 1997: 17)

*Iba a encenderla, pero ella le detuvo el brazo.* (García, 1992: 205)

Here, we could point out that exceptions to the rule and norm occur in periphrases, too. It can be demonstrated on the following example where we should, in accordance with grammatical rules, use past simple or imperfect (with a change in meaning, of course). This should be done due to the fact that there is an exact point in the past determined and it happened only once. In spite of this, present perfect was used.

Example: *Cuando he ido a contestar me han atajado.* (Gili y Gaya, 1966: 108)

According to Veselá et al. (2004: 53), in Spanish *ir a + infinitive* always appears only in its present and imperfect form. However, when searching on the Internet, we have found examples of this periphrastic form in past perfect, too, though it is very rarely used. Of course, sometimes the meaning of a sentence can be confusing due to the fact that it may be an example of sequence of tenses or something that happened before another past action.

Example: *La tarde del domingo en que los soldados la atacaron, había ido a recoger a sus borregos, como todos los días, pero ya no regresó.* (www5)

However, in English it is quite common and the intended meaning of close future is clear in the following sentence.

Example: *That was not what the original BBC report had been going to say...* (www6)

As for frequency, *to be going to + infinitive* is more frequent in American English than in British English and far more common in conversation than in fiction. Actually, *to be going to + infinitive* (including *gonna*) is the most frequent semi-modal in conversation. (Biber, 1999: 487) On the other hand, it hardly ever appears in news or academic style.

The expression *gonna + infinitive* without *to* is frequently used in informal English, especially American English, instead of the periphrasis *to be going to + infinitive*. It is also more employed in conversation than in written language.

This colloquial expression can be used with any person and in both singular and plural. We should note that in its interrogative form, the form *are* is left out in second person singular and first and second person plural.

Example: *What we gonna do now? = What are we going to do now?* (www7)

As for the grammatical tenses it can be used with, the Internet has helped a lot because otherwise this topic is not profoundly dealt with in literature. Apart from examples expressed in present, we have found this informal periphrastic form in past but not past perfect.

Example: *We were gonna have a baby, but we had an angel instead.* (www8)

*I was gonna do one more – make it an even 50.* (www9)

*9/11: Five years later change was gonna come.* (www10)

Unlike in English, there is no such phonetic contraction in Spanish.

Another periphrastic expression we are going to focus on is *estar a punto de + infinitive* (*to be on the point of + ing*).

Interestingly, both the previous and these periphrases are formed on the same basis. Here, also, the auxiliary verbs are the same, in English and Spanish alike. They are both used for forming progressive tenses.

Moreover, the elements of enlacement are the same here, too. *Punto* and *point* have both the same connotations. The only difference lies in lexical words. In Spanish it has the form of infinitive while in English it is a gerund. However, the meaning of the two phrases is identical.

Statistically, they are not as frequently employed as the previous two periphrastic forms, yet they are definitely worth mentioning.

Although Sweet (1966: 106) distinguishes only an immediate future represented without any differences by *to be going to*, *to be on the point of* and *to be about to*, and the *will* future, most authors argue there is a difference. Thus, according to Sweet, the following examples do not show any differences in meaning.

Example: *I am afraid it is going to rain. = It is about to rain. = It is on the point of raining.* (Sweet, 1966: 106)

Unlike Sweet, Dubský believes there is a difference in use between *ir a + infinitive* and *estar a punto de + infinitive*. *Estar a punto de + infinitive (to be on the point of + ing)* expresses an action that will immediately follow. (Dubský et al., 1999: 121) "Této opisné vazby se užívá k vyjádření bezprostředního záměru." While *ir a + infinitive* is used to describe a close future. (Dubský et al., 1999: 123)

Example: *Felipe II estuvo a punto de conquistar el trono.* (Dubský et al., 1999: 121)

As we can see in the next examples, this Spanish periphrastic form can be found, talking about the past time level, in its present perfect simple, past simple, imperfect simple and past perfect simple forms.

The following example expresses some kind of experience; therefore, present perfect simple has been applied.

Example: *¿Alguna vez has estado a punto de ahogarte?* (www11)

Relying on the above-described explanation of various grammatical tenses, *estar a punto* in past simple may seem to be used in simple statements where there is no further continuation or specification to it made by another clause. In reverse, if we want to emphasize there was an action going on in the past interrupted by another one, we use the imperfect form. Examples will demonstrate.

Example: *Dicen que Lindsay Lohan estuvo a punto de morir.* (www12)

*Controlan el fuego que estuvo a punto de entrar en la población.* (www13)

*AMD estuvo a punto de comprar NVIDIA en 2006.* (www14)

*Cuenta Angelina Jolie que estuvo a punto de ser secuestrada.* (www15)

In all the above examples, the sentences are finished without being accompanied by another clause that would specify the conditions under which an event happened. We do

not want to describe any background situation or action in progress, unlike in the following sentences.

Example: *Estaba a punto de merendar cuando los bomberos tiraron la puerta abajo...* (www16)

*Cuando estaba a punto de finalizar mi formación como ingeniero de montes, allá a principios de los ochenta, asistí...* (www17)

The two last examples represent situations in the past where there is an action in progress interrupted by another one. Consequently, the former is always expressed by the imperfect form and the latter by the past simple form.

The last grammatical tense that can be linked with this periphrastic form in Spanish is past perfect simple. It could simply be replaced by past simple. Nevertheless, if we want to emphasize something occurred before another past event, past perfect is the best possibility.

However, we have not been successful in finding a sentence with this phrase in past perfect in English, though it seems quite logical there should be an analogical construction to the Spanish one in past perfect. This area probably deserves more attention and investigation.

Example ... *su camioneta en forma errática y había estado a punto de atropellarlo...* (www18)

*Pronto quedó sólo una especie de funda plumífera con pico, apenas unos despojos de lo que había estado a punto de producirle una muerte espantosa.* (www19)

*Había estado a punto de ser rey consorte de Inglaterra, y siguió manejando los asuntos de Estado de ese país, donde era respetadísimo.* (www20)

The last observation that has been made in connection with this periphrastic form is that in English, there is something that could be called the formal version of *to be going to*. It has the form of *to be on the verge of + ing/ noun*. (www21)

Example: *I'm on the verge of closing escrow.* (www22)

*Saying the Israeli regime was inherently a threat, and was on the verge of disappearing Haniyeh praised the support...* (www23)

*Norwegian hospitals were on the verge of a nurses' strike.* (www24)

*Experts say that at the time, Mr. Hussein's scientists were on the verge of building an atom bomb, as little as a year away.* (www25)

Nevertheless, if we look at it closely, it rather reminds us of the English form *to be on the point of + ing/noun*. Not only due to its morphological form but also because of the fact that *point* and *verge* have similar semantic connotations. The following definition supports this theory. "*Close to, on the brink of, as in I was on the verge of calling the*

*doctor when he suddenly got better, or Sara was on the verge of tears when she heard the news, this term uses verge in the sense of the brink or border of something.*" (www26)

This phrase has not been investigated and examined sufficiently enough for us to decide for sure which possibility is more probable. The only explanation Biber et al. (1999, p. 653) give us is that the phrase *to be on the verge of + ing* belongs to less common head nouns, occurring over five times per million in at least one register.

We have found examples of this phrase in past simple, which are mentioned above, but also in past perfect, bellow.

Example: *According to Dr. Spence's research, Trenholm had been on the verge of bankruptcy.* (www27)

*... a scientist who had been on the verge of winning the Nobel Prize on three ...* (www28)

*Now the bear is in Austria, where he runs fewer risks - German authorities had been on the verge of deciding to kill it for security reasons.* (www29)

Of course, it can be employed in present perfect, too, if it is somehow related to the present point. Let us demonstrate it.

Example: *Well, the Syrian regime has been on the verge of implosion for quite a while now...* (www30)

*Nottingham's Bent have been on the verge of making it big for the last couple of years.* (www31)

We can conclude that the phrases *ir a + infinitive* and *to be going to + infinitive* are very nice parallels. It has been observed that their employment is the same. They express intention, determination, and future of present cause or simply state a close future. They are the most frequently used periphrastic forms in conversation, in case of English, preferably in America. As for time levels, in English the periphrastic form *to be going to + infinitive* can actually be used in any tense. Contrary to it, in Spanish the phrase *ir a + infinitive* is supposed to be used in its imperfect form only (in order to express the past time level). However, we have found examples of its preterit pluscuamperfect form, too. In this case *ir a + infinitive* can have the sense of a close future but it can also simply stand for anteriority. Nevertheless, as observed, if used in its preterit definite form, the paraphrase loses its meaning and changes into a mere description of a past action or a past attempt.

In case of English, the phrase *to be going to + infinitive* has a more informal relative, which is the periphrastic expression *gonna + infinitive*, used mostly in American English. Spanish does not have any formal means of expressing the same idea.

The periphrases *estar a punto de + infinitive* and *to be on the point of + ing* have shown that their use in English and Spanish is identical. They are both used to express some immediate intention, plan or event. Compared to *ir a + infinitive* and *to be going to + infinitive*, the nearness with the former expressions is even closer. It should be remarked that in English we can come across the form *to be on the verge of + ing*, which is



sometimes rather erroneously cited as a synonym of *to be going to*. It has been proven that the phrase *to be on the verge of + ing* tends to be the formal equivalent of *to be on the point of + ing*.

### Résumé

Článek se zabývá analýzou perifrastických forem vyjadřujících časové relace v minulosti v anglickém a španělském jazyce. Opisné vazby jsou porovnány z hlediska funkce, frekvence, místa výskytu používání a odchylek od normy.

El artículo tiene por objetivo analizar las perífrasis que expresan relaciones temporales en el pasado en inglés y en español. Las perífrasis han sido comparadas desde el punto de vista de su función, frecuencia, localización geográfica del uso y las desviaciones de la norma.

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