

# Hablando de gramática

por Señor Conner

Señor Conner is the author of the popular language series BREAKING THE SPANISH BARRIER. Each month he will feature a grammatical topic of interest to our readers. Do you have ideas of topics you would like to see covered? E-mail Señor Conner at: [john@tobreak.com](mailto:john@tobreak.com). You can also visit his website: [www.tobreak.com](http://www.tobreak.com).

## El pretérito y el imperfecto

One of my very first columns for *Think Spanish* a couple years ago was about the preterite and the imperfect. I think it might be time to revisit this topic as it is one that often can prove a little vexing to new (and old!) students of the Spanish language.

This time, I am going to present a little chart that you may find useful when making a decision between these two tenses in Spanish.

| <u>PRETÉRITO</u>                           | <u>IMPERFECTO</u>           |
|--|-----------------------------|
| *Single, complete event                    | *Incomplete, ongoing action |
| *The conclusion of ending point of a story | *Description                |
| *When you tell how long an action lasted   | *Habitual Actions           |
|  | *Telling time in the past   |

Remember, if you are describing a COMPLETED action – one with a clear beginning or ending point or one that went on for a specific amount of time – stick to the **PRETERITE**.

If, on the other hand, you are describing an action that is NOT COMPLETE, or if you are DESCRIBING something or someone, or if you are TELLING TIME in the past, or if you are relating HABITUAL actions, use the **IMPERFECT**.

In the following sentences, you will find examples of both the preterite and imperfect. In the parentheses following each sentence, an explanation is offered for the choice of tense.

**Examples:** *Juanes sólo **cantó** por media hora.* (*cantó* – preterite – clear ending point)  
Juanes only sang for a half an hour.

*Vi el nuevo musical In The Heights tres veces durante las vacaciones. ¡Es increíble!*  
(*Vi* – preterite – completed action ... it's a countable number of times as opposed to a habit!)  
I saw the new musical *In The Heights* three times during vacation. It's incredible!

*Yo **hacía** mi tarea mientras mi novia **tocaba** la guitarra.*  
(*hacía/tocaba* – imperfect – two ongoing actions)  
I was doing my homework while my girlfriend was playing the guitar.

*Mi abuelita siempre me **hacía** una torta de chocolate para mi cumpleaños.*

*(hacía – imperfect – habitual action)*

My grandmother always used to make me a chocolate cake for my birthday.

**Eran** las diez y media cuando Gwen Stefani **comenzó** a cantar. *(Eran – imperfect – telling time; comenzó – preterite – completed action .. Gwen did, in fact, BEGIN to sing .. the beginning is completed!)*  
It was ten-thirty when Gwen Stefani began to sing.

Manny Ramírez **estaba** frustrado cuando el reportero lo **insultó**.

*(estaba –imperfect – description; insultó – preterite – completed action)*

Manny Ramírez was frustrated when the reporter insulted him.

**Mirábamos** el último episodio de *American Idol*, cuando **sonó** la alarma de incendio.

*(Mirábamos – imperfect – action in progress; sonó – preterite completed action)*

We were watching the final episode of *American Idol* when the fire alarm went off.

## PRUEBA DE REPASO

Choose between the preterite and the imperfect in the following sentences. Think carefully – is the action described in the sentence complete? Is there a clear ending point? If so, use the preterite. If not, go with the imperfect!

- El año pasado, mi familia y yo \_\_\_\_\_ tres semanas en Maine. (pasar)
- \_\_\_\_\_ las cinco de la tarde cuando Roger Clemens \_\_\_\_\_ a Yankee Stadium para lanzar contra los Tigres. (Ser/volver)
- La chica \_\_\_\_\_ una blusa roja y me \_\_\_\_\_ el ojo una vez al entrar en la tienda. (tener/guiñar)
- El cielo \_\_\_\_\_ azul y todos nosotros \_\_\_\_\_ sorprendidos cuando \_\_\_\_\_ a granizar. (estar/estar/comenzar)
- El ladrón nunca \_\_\_\_\_ el crimen y \_\_\_\_\_ a la edad de ochenta años en la cárcel. (confesar/morir)
- Mis hermanos y yo siempre \_\_\_\_\_ al ajedrez cuando \_\_\_\_\_ jóvenes. (jugar/ser)
- Algunos creen que los dinosaurios \_\_\_\_\_ en la Tierra por millones de años. (vivir)
- La puerta \_\_\_\_\_ cerrada con llave y aunque yo \_\_\_\_\_ de abrirla varias veces, no \_\_\_\_\_. (estar/tratar/poder).
- Nosotros \_\_\_\_\_ al cine ayer para ver Shrek 3, pero no \_\_\_\_\_ entradas. (ir/haber)\*

(\*Hint for the very last fill-in-the-blank: “Haber” in the preterite means “there occurred an event,” e.g., *Hubo una fiesta ...* There was (occurred) a party. “Haber” in the imperfect simply means “there was, there were,” e.g., *Había un coche en la calle ... Había tres vacas cerca de la casa.* Do you see how the preterite of “haber” makes sense for an event? It reports a completed action! The last sentences about a car in the street or a cow near the house can’t be considered completed actions!)