



Three views of the past. One smart student!

Spanish Has Three Pasts— Aren't You Glad You Don't Have to Conjugate Them?

Spanish speakers have three important ways to talk about past events. You don't have to conjugate them today—just understand why Spanish needs them.

1 Preterite It happened.	2 Present Perfect It has happened.	3 Past Perfect It had already happened.
Used for actions that were completed at a specific time in the past. Ayer comí una pizza. Yesterday I ate a pizza. Visitamos Madrid el año pasado. We visited Madrid last year. María llegó a las ocho. María arrived at eight. Think: It happened. It's finished.	Used for actions that happened before now and are connected to the present. He comido. I have eaten. María ha llegado. María has arrived. Hemos visitado España. We have visited Spain. Think: It has happened—we see the connection to now.	Used for an action that happened before another action in the past. Había comido antes de que ella llegara. I had eaten before she arrived. Cuando llegué, Juan ya había salido. When I arrived, Juan had already left. Think: It had happened before something else in the past.

Timeline Example

Juan salió (he left) Yo llegué (I arrived) AHORA (NOW)

Juan's action is farther back in the past. That's why we use the past perfect.

AND ANOTHER PAST...

Spanish also has the **IMPERFECT**:

Cuando era niño, jugaba al béisbol.
When I was a boy, I used to play baseball.

The imperfect is used for habits, ongoing actions, descriptions, and background situations in the past. (We'll save that for another day!)

ONE MEAL, THREE PASTS

Preterite Cené. I ate dinner.	Present Perfect He cenado. I have eaten dinner.	Past Perfect Había cenado. I had eaten dinner.	Cuando llegaste, ya había cenado. When you arrived, I had already eaten dinner.
It happened. Finished.	It happened before now, and I connect it to the present.	Now I'm already talking about something in the past, and dinner happened before that.	Same stomach. Three different views of its history.

WHY DOES SPANISH DO THIS?

Actually, English does much the same thing: I ate. I have eaten. I had eaten. The concept isn't foreign. The difficulty comes when Spanish students have to learn all the verb forms that make these distinctions possible. Spanish verbs are very industrious little words. Many are irregular. Lots are irregular. Fortunately, this isn't a conjugation lesson.

THE THREE VIEWS WORTH REMEMBERING

Preterite – It happened.
Comí. – I ate.
Present Perfect – It has happened.
He comido. – I have eaten.
Past Perfect – It had happened before something else.
Había comido. – I had eaten.

A Shameless Plug from Your Friendly Tutor

If somebody is actually expecting you to conjugate those verbs, your friendly tutor, **Curtis Jerry**, would love to help you do the heavy lifting for those seven (yes 7!) verb tenses. See my Tutoring website link in the green footer of this page. I'd love to have you as a student.

¡Hasta pronto!

You might think the past would be simple. Something happened. It's over. Put it in the past tense and move along. Spanish has other ideas.

Spanish speakers have several ways to look backward in time, and three of the most useful are the **preterite**, the **present perfect**, and the **past perfect**. Before you reach for a conjugation chart, relax. We're not going to conjugate them. We're simply going to figure out **why Spanish needs all three**.

Past #1: The Preterite - It Happened

The preterite is the straightforward storyteller's past. Something happened, and the action is viewed as completed.

Ayer comí una pizza. - Yesterday I ate a pizza.
Visitamos Madrid el año pasado. - We visited Madrid last year.
María llegó a las ocho. - María arrived at eight.

The action occurred at a particular point or during a completed period in the past. Think: **It happened. It's finished.** That's the preterite.

Past #2: The Present Perfect - It Has Happened

Now suppose something happened in the past, but you're looking at it from the present. English does exactly the same thing when we say *I have eaten, she has arrived, or we have visited Spain*.

He comido. - *I have eaten.*

María ha llegado. - *María has arrived.*

Hemos visitado España. - *We have visited Spain.*

The action happened before now, but the speaker is connecting it in some way with **now**. Compare **Comí** (*I ate*) with **He comido** (*I have eaten*). They're both past, but they look at the past from slightly different angles.

And before anyone panics about those strange little words **he, has, ha, hemos, habéis, han**, we'll merely mention that they come from the helping verb **haber** and quietly move along. No conjugation quiz will follow.

Past #3: The Past Perfect - It Had Already Happened

Now Spanish takes us one step farther backward. Suppose you're telling a story about something that happened in the past, but you need to explain something that happened **before that**. English says, *I had eaten before she arrived*. Spanish does the same thing:

Había comido antes de que ella llegara.

I had eaten before she arrived.

Cuando llegué, Juan ya había salido.

When I arrived, Juan had already left.

The **past perfect**, also called the **pluperfect**, lets us establish two levels of past time.

Juan left - I arrived - NOW

Juan's departure is farther back in the past. That's what the past perfect does.

One Meal, Three Pasts

Let's make all three forms talk about the same important subject: dinner.

PRETERITE: Cené. - *I ate dinner.*

It happened. Finished.

PRESENT PERFECT: He cenado. - *I have eaten dinner.*

It happened before now, and I'm connecting that fact with the present.

PAST PERFECT: Había cenado. - *I had eaten dinner.*

Now I'm already telling you about something in the past, and dinner happened before that: **Cuando llegaste, ya había cenado.** (*When you arrived, I had already eaten dinner.*)

Same stomach. Three different views of its history.

Why Does Spanish Do This to Us?

Actually, English does much the same thing. We say **I ate**, **I have eaten**, and **I had eaten**. So the concept isn't particularly foreign. The difficulty comes when Spanish students have to learn all the verb forms that make those distinctions possible.

Spanish verbs, as we've already discovered, are very industrious little words. They change according to person, number, tense, and mood. Then there are irregular verbs. Lots of irregular verbs. Fortunately, this isn't a conjugation lesson.

And Another Past Is Lurking Out There

At this point, experienced Spanish students may be shouting, **What about the imperfect?**

Cuando era niño, jugaba al béisbol.

When I was a boy, I used to play baseball.

The imperfect is another major way Spanish talks about the past, especially for ongoing conditions, descriptions, habits, and repeated actions. So technically, our tidy little collection of three pasts isn't the whole story. Not even close.

But this is **Spanish Made Easy**, not **Spanish Made Me Cry**, so we'll leave that adventure for another day.

The Three Views Worth Remembering

You don't need to conjugate anything to understand the basic idea:

PRETERITE - It happened: Comí. - *I ate.*

PRESENT PERFECT - It has happened: He comido. - *I have eaten.*

PAST PERFECT - It had happened before something else: Había comido. - *I had eaten.*

Spanish isn't really trying to torture you. It's simply very particular about **where you're standing when you look backward in time.**

And if you're merely reading this article rather than studying for tomorrow's Spanish exam, you have an enormous advantage: **you don't have to memorize a single conjugation.**

¡Qué alivio! - What a relief!

A Shameless Plug from Your Friendly Tutor

If merely **recognizing** all these verb forms is enough for today, congratulations - you may stop here.

But if somebody is actually expecting you to **conjugate** those verbs, your friendly tutor, **Curtis Jerry**, would love to help with the heavy lifting. Those seven - **yes, seven!** - verb tenses become considerably less frightening when someone walks you through them one at a time.

See the link to my **Tutoring Website** in the green footer at the bottom of this page. I'd love to have you as a student.

¡Hasta pronto!