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# Habituals in Spanish\*

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*In this paper, we discuss two constructions that are used in the expression of habituality in Peninsular Spanish: one involving the Imperfecto verb form, the other the periphrastic construction consisting of the auxiliary verbs *soler* or *acostumbrar* (a) followed by the infinitive. After presenting the basic properties of these constructions, we address the question what determines the choice between the two strategies. We show that in habitual contexts the Imperfecto is used, unless the storyline is interrupted and a habit is presented as background information, or when pragmatic highlighting of the habit is involved. In these cases, the periphrastic construction is required. In non-habitual contexts the periphrastic construction is the only strategy available for the expression of habituality.*

## 1 Introduction

In this paper, we discuss the two basic grammatical strategies involved in the expression of habituality in Spanish. In this language there is a periphrastic construction which expresses habitual aspect, consisting of the auxiliary verb *soler* or *acostumbrar* and the infinitive. On the other hand, the verb forms in the *Imperfecto* are used in contexts that are habitual in nature already. If a language has two strategies that are involved in the expression of the same type of meaning, a question that presents itself is what then distinguishes these two strategies, either in their meaning or in their contexts of use. The main aim of this paper is to answer that question for the Spanish case. In addressing this question, we will first, in Section 2, present the basic properties of the two constructions. In Section 3 we compare sets of examples in context and discuss the differences between the constructions that show up in this comparison. In Section 4 we present our conclusions.

The variety of Spanish discussed here is the Peninsular one. Most examples are taken from the *Corpus de Referencia del Español Actual* (CREA, with text samples 1975 to 2004), the *PRESEEA Corpus Alcalá de Henares* (AdH, with text samples from 1991-1998), the *Corpus del Español del Siglo XXI* (CORPES, with

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text samples from 2001–2019), and a few other literary texts. All corpora are referenced at the end of this paper.

## 2 Habituality strategies in Spanish

In this section, we will first introduce the habitual and non-habitual functions of the *Imperfecto* (Section 2.1) and then present the properties of the auxiliary expressions of habituality (Section 2.2). We will discuss both the semantic and the syntactic properties of these two expression types.

### 2.1 *Imperfecto*

Spanish inherited the perfective / imperfective opposition from Latin, where the *Imperfectum* was used in habitual contexts already (Pinkster 2015: 416). Examples of such uses in Spanish are given in (1)–(4).<sup>1</sup> In all these sentences, a state of affairs is presented as habitually recurring. The examples “describe a situation which is characteristic of an extended period of time, so extended in fact that the situation referred to is viewed not as an incidental property of the moment but, precisely, as a characteristic feature of a whole period” (Comrie 1976: 27–28). Quantificational expressions may make the habit more explicit, as in (3), which contains the expression *tres horas diarias* ‘three hours a day’.

- (1) *A tu edad com-ía patatas fritas por las calles.*  
 at your age eat-PST.IPFV.1SG potatoes fried by the streets  
 ‘At you age I would eat fries in the street.’ (CREA – spoken)
- (2) *De niño le-ía tebeos.*  
 as child read-PST.IPFV.1SG comics  
 ‘As a child I would read comics.’ (CREA – press)
- (3) *Su madre camina-ba en Bolivia tres horas diarias.*  
 his mother walk-PST.IPFV.3SG in Bolivia three hours daily  
 ‘His mother walked three hours a day in Bolivia.’ (CREA – press)
- (4) *Le añora-ba cuando esta-ba ausente.*  
 her miss-PST.IPFV.3SG when COPLOC-PST.IPFV.3SG absent  
 ‘He would miss her when she wasn’t there.’ (CREA – fiction)

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<sup>1</sup> Given the length of some of the examples in this paper, the glosses will be simplified, containing only details in the habitual markings. In addition, as the imperfective / perfective distinction is relevant in the indicative only, the mention of *indicative* (IND) will be omitted in these contexts.

As there is no such imperfective / perfective dichotomy in the present tense, this discussion is restricted to past tense contexts. In the past tense the *Imperfecto* contrasts with the *Perfecto Simple*, which expresses a perfective past. In order to obtain a non-habitual reading in the past, either the *Perfecto Simple* or the imperfective use of the *Imperfecto* is used. The contrast between the use of the *Imperfecto* in a habitual context, and the *Perfecto Simple* is illustrated in (5) and (6), respectively:

- (5) *Antes, cuando trabaja-ba como funcionaria,*  
 before when work-PST.IPFV.1SG as civil.servant  
*compra-ba mi ropa con mi sueldo.*  
 buy-PST.IPFV.1SG my clothes with my salary  
 ‘Before, when I was working as a civil servant, I would buy my clothes using my salary.’ (CREA – press)
- (6) [about quitting smoking]  
*En la esquina del Paseo de la Estación,*  
 on the corner of.the Paseo de la Estación,  
*compr-é mi último paquete.*  
 buy-PST.PFV.1SG my last pack  
 ‘At the corner of the Paseo de la Estación, I bought my last pack (of cigarettes).’ (CREA – spoken)

In (5) the event of buying is presented as a recurring one: during the entire period of time that the subject worked as a civil servant, every time that she bought clothes, she paid them from her salary. In (6) the event of buying occurs only once: the subject describes the very last time he or she bought a package of cigarettes. The latter example shows that the *Perfecto Simple* has semelfactivity as part of its meaning, i.e., it expresses that a state of affairs happened a single time.

As mentioned above, the *Imperfecto* is not only used in habitual contexts. In an equally important use, it expresses imperfective aspect.<sup>2</sup> In this use it contrasts again with the *Perfecto Simple*, the perfective past. This is illustrated in the following examples:

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<sup>2</sup> We use the term ‘imperfective aspect’ for the aspect that makes reference to the internal temporal structure of an individual state of affairs, therefore not including habituality, as is done in Comrie (1976: 25).

- (7) *Aquí encontr-ó lo que busca-ba.*  
 here find-PST.PFV.3SG that which look.for-PST.IPFV.3SG  
 ‘Here he found what he was looking for.’ (Delibes)
- (8) *Cuando entr-é en casa esta-ba triste.*  
 when enter-PST.PFV.1SG in house COP-PST.IPFV.1SG sad  
 ‘When I entered the house, I was sad.’ (CREA – fiction)

In cases like these, the verb in the *Imperfecto* describes the background to the event described in the *Perfecto Simple*: the latter provides a perfective perspective, in the sense that the event is presented as a single whole, while the former provides an imperfective perspective, in the sense that the event is viewed from within, without attention for its initial and terminal points.

The imperfective and habitual use of the *Imperfecto* are contrasted in (9) and (10), respectively:

- (9) *Muri-ó mientras dorm-ía*  
 die-PST.PFV.3SG while sleep-PST.IPFV.3SG  
*en su residencia en California.*  
 in his residence in California  
 ‘He died while he was sleeping in his California residence.’  
 (CREA – oral)
- (10) *Por la noche dorm-ía en el palacio*  
 during the night sleep-PST.IPFV.3SG in the palace  
 ‘At night he would sleep in the palace.’ (CREA – oral)

In (9) *dormía* provides the background to *murió*, while in (10) the habit exists by itself, without being contrasted with bounded events. The opposition between a *Perfecto Simple* and an *Imperfecto* verb form often identifies the *Imperfecto* clearly as expressing imperfective aspect. The two verb forms need not be in the same sentence, as shown in the following lengthy example, in which the reference point provided by the *Perfecto Simple* forms in the first sentence (*anduvimos* ‘we walked’ and *volvimos a dormir* ‘went sleeping again’) is the one against which the *Imperfecto* forms in the second sentence (*esperaba* ‘he waited’ (2x), *estaba* ‘he was’, and *miraba* ‘he was looking’) have to be interpreted.

- (11) *And-uvimos mucho, a favor y en contra del viento,*  
 walk-PST.PFV.1PL a.lot in favour and in counter of.the wind  
*con el sol de cara y de espaldas. Después.de comer,*  
 with the sun of face and of back after eat  
*volv-imos a dormir, ya en nuestra nueva habitación,*  
 return-PST.PFV.1PL to sleep already in our new room,  
*desde cuya terraza se contemplaba el mar, al cabo de*  
 from of.which terrace REFL.3 watched the sea, at.the end of  
*una sucesión de blandas dunas amarillas. Entre las dunas,*  
 a succession of soft dunes yellow among the dunes  
*algún joven indígena espera-ba, sentado, que*  
 some young indigenous wait-PST.IPFV.3SG seated that  
*volv-iera su caballo o su amigo, o no*  
 return-SBJ.PST.3SG his horse or his friend or not  
*espera-ba nada, pero esta-ba allí, y*  
 wait-PST.IPFV.3SG nothing but COP-PST.IPFV.3SG there and  
*mira-ba a su alrededor con remota curiosidad.*  
 look-PST.IPFV.3SG to his surroundings with remote curiosity

‘We walked a lot, downwind and upwind, with the sun on our faces and on our backs. After having lunch, we went to sleep again, back in our new room, from the terrace of which one could see the sea, at the end of a range of soft yellow dunes. In the dunes, some indigenous boy was waiting, sitting, for his horse or his friend to return, or he wasn’t waiting for anything, but he was there, and was looking around him with slight curiosity.’ (Puértolas)

In contrast with the imperfective use, in habitual contexts the *Imperfecto* does not occur together with the *Perfecto Simple*. This is clear from sentences like the following:

- (12) *Ernesto, o se queja-ba,*  
 Erneste or REFL.3 complain-PST.IPFV.3SG  
*o habla-ba de pintura.*  
 or talk-PST.IPFV.3SG of painting

‘Ernesto would either complain or talk about painting.’ (Puértolas)

- (13) *Durante esos días se queja-ba de todo*  
 during those days REFL.3 complain-PST.IPFV.3SG of everything  
*excepto de lo que a él le pasa-ba.*  
 except of the whichto he him happen-PST.IPFV.3SG  
 ‘During those days he complained about everything except about what was happening to him.’ (CREA – press)

In (12) no reference point is available, and *se quejaba* ‘complained’ and *hablaba* ‘talked’ are interpreted habitually due to the disjunction of the two possible states of affairs. In (13), the extension of the habit is specified through *durante esos días*, but again no specific temporal reference point is provided, hence the habitual interpretation of *se quejaba* ‘complained’.

As we have shown in this section, the *Imperfecto* cannot really be claimed to express habitual aspect (or imperfective aspect) as such: whether an event description containing the *Imperfecto* is interpreted habitually or imperfectively depends on other elements in the linguistic context. A habitual interpretation requires a habitual context, an imperfective interpretation a non-habitual context, often provided by the presence of a *Perfecto Simple*. We have therefore been careful in this section in not claiming that the *Imperfecto* expresses habitual aspect, but have rather indicated that it is the past verb form used in habitual contexts.

## 2.2 Soler / acostumbrar + infinitive

There are two periphrastic constructions expressing habituality in Spanish, with one of the two verbs *soler* and *acostumbrar* combining with the infinitive of a lexical verb. Of these two, the one with *soler* is by far the most frequent: in the CORPES corpus there are 20,820 tokens of *soler*, against 78 tokens of *acostumbrar*. The latter verb is more typical of the written language: it is not attested in the spoken part of CORPES. In terms of their grammar and meaning, the two periphrases are equivalent, such that the distinction between them is merely stylistic. For this reason, they are dealt with in a single section here. *Soler* derives historically from Latin *solēre* ‘be accustomed, be in the habit’. *Acostumbrar* arose as an inchoative verbalization of *costumbre* ‘habit’ (Corominas 1990: 176; Pena 2019), first attested in the 13<sup>th</sup> century (Yllera 1980: 202).

We will start our discussion with the construction with *soler*, which is illustrated in the following examples:

- (14) *Suel-o*                    *levant-ar=me*                    *todas las mañanas a las siete.*  
 HAB-IND.PRS.1SG get.up-INF=REFL.1SG all the mornings at the seven  
 ‘I usually get up at seven every morning.’ (CREA – press)
- (14) *No sol-ía*                    *com-er mucho.*  
 not HAB-PST.IPFV.3SG eat-INF much.  
 ‘He didn’t use to eat a lot.’ (CREA – fiction)
- (16) *Cosa que nos ha*                    *sol-ido*                    *distra-er de lo esencial.*  
 thing that us PRF.IND.PRS.3SG HAB-PTCP distract-INF of the essential  
 ‘Something that has distracted us from the most important things.’  
 (CREA – press)
- (17) [about chocolate]  
*Este alimento es de alta densidad calórica, de ahí que*  
 this food is of high density caloric from there that  
*se suel-a*                    *elimin-ar de las dietas hipocalóricas.*  
 itself HAB-SBJ.NONPST.3SG eliminate-INF from the diets hypocaloric  
 ‘This food has a lot of calories, which is why it is usually excluded from  
 hypocaloric diets.’ (CORPES – press)
- (18) *De ahí que esa sensación, comúnmente, sol-iera*  
 from there that this sensation normally HAB-SBJ.PST.3SG  
*produc-ir=se con situaciones de carácter cotidiano.*  
 occur-INF=REFL.3 with situations of character daily  
 ‘That’s why this experience would usually occur in everyday situations.’  
 (CREA – fiction)

These examples show that the periphrasis with *soler* can be used in the indicative present (14), the *Imperfecto* (15), the indicative present perfect (16), the subjunctive non-past (17), and the subjunctive past (18). It should be noted that the last three uses are very infrequent,<sup>3</sup> and that the use of the subjunctive is restricted to a limited number of subordinate contexts in which the conjunction requires a subjunctive verb form. The construction is ungrammatical in the future tense:

<sup>3</sup> The Peninsular part of CORPES contains 20,820 tokens of *soler*, of which 29 in the indicative present perfect (approx. 0.1%), and 50 in the subjunctive (approx. 0.2%). The remainder consists of tokens in the present indicative (16,761) and the *Imperfecto* (4,017).

- (19) a. *Las comidas económicas ocurr-ía* *que*  
 the meals cheap happen-PST.IPFV.3SG that  
*sol-ían* *ser* *malas.*  
 HAB-PST.IPFV.3PL COP.INF bad  
 ‘It so happened that the cheap meals used to be bad.’ (CREA – oral)
- b. *Las comidas económicas suel-en* *ser* *malas.*  
 the meals cheap HAB-IND.PRS.3PL COP.INF bad  
 ‘Usually cheap meals are bad.’
- c. *Las comidas económicas \*soler-án* *ser* *malas.*  
 the meals cheap HAB-IND.FUT.3PL COP.INF bad  
 ‘Cheap meals are usually going to be bad.’

Olbertz (1998: 124–130) classifies the construction of *soler* + infinitive as a semi-auxiliary construction. An important property of the construction that shows it is an auxiliary is the fact that the infinitive construction is not an argument of *soler*, as a result of which it cannot be pronominalized, as illustrated in the following examples:

- (20) a. *No sol-ía* *com-er* *mucho.*  
 not HAB-PST.IPFV.3SG eat-INF much  
 ‘He didn’t use to eat a lot.’ (CREA – fiction)
- b. \**No lo sol-ía.*  
 not it HAB-PST.IPFV.3SG  
 ‘He didn’t use that.’
- c. \*¿*Qué no sol-ía?*  
 what not HAB-PST.IPFV.3SG  
 ‘What didn’t he use?’

Furthermore, *soler* may combine with verbs of different valencies, and thus does not seem to impose selection restrictions, another characteristic of auxiliary verbs. In (21) *soler* combines with a zero-place predicate; in (22)–(23) with a one-place predicate, both dynamic (22), and stative (23); and in (24)–(25) with two-place predicates, again both dynamic (24) and stative (25).

- (21) *En Andalucía suel-e* *llov-er* *bastante.*  
 in Andalucía HAB-IND.PRS.3SG rain-INF a.lot  
 ‘In Andalucía it usually rains a lot.’ (CREA – press)

- (22) *No suel-e dorm-ir demasiado bien*  
 not HAB-IND.PRS.3SG sleep-INF too well  
 ‘He doesn’t usually sleep very well.’ (CREA – fiction)
- (23) *La corbata [...] suel-e est-ar ausente.*  
 the tie HAB-IND.PRS.3SG COPLOC-INF absent  
 ‘The tie [...] is usually absent.’ (CREA – press)
- (24) *Lee novela histórica y fantástica y*  
 reads novel historic and fantastic and  
*suel-e compr-ar los libros.*  
 HAB-IND.PRS.3SG buy-INF the books  
 ‘He reads historical and fantasy novels and usually buys the books.’  
 (CREA – press)
- (25) *Este tipo de gente suel-e ten-er muy buena salud.*  
 this type of people HAB-IND.PRS.3SG have-INF very good health  
 ‘This type of people usually is in very good health.’ (CREA – press)

The reason for Olbertz (1998) to call *soler* a *semi-auxiliary* is that when the content of the complement is given in the immediately preceding context, it may be left unexpressed, as shown in (26). The fact that *soler* may be used independently in these circumstances shows that it is not fully grammaticalized.

- (26) *Vespasiano se levant-ó pronto*  
 Vespasiano REFL.3 get.up-PST.PFV.3SG early  
*como sol-ía.*  
 as HAB-PST.IPFV.3SG  
 ‘Vespasiano got up early as he used to do.’ (CREA – fiction)

Note that Olbertz (1998: 127–128) states that this independent use of *soler* is restricted to those cases in which the principal argument of the lexical verb is an animate agent. Example (27), however, shows that the requirement for the argument is to have a concrete referent, whether animate (26) or inanimate (27).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> One might be inclined to assume that the use of *soler* with inanimate referents is an innovation. However, there are also attestations of Latin *solēre* with inanimate referents. Cabré Lunas (2019: 36) provides the following example: *Necessitas plus posse quam pietas solet* (Seneca) ‘Necessity usually is more powerful than mercy’. The author also stresses that, although Latin

- (27) *Ni siquiera la puerta chirri-ó como sol-ía*  
 not even the door creak-PST.PFV.3SG as HAB-PST.IPFV.3SG  
 ‘Not even the door creaked as it used to’ (CREA – fiction)

We now turn to *acostumbrar*, which combines with either an infinitive preceded by the preposition *a* ‘to’ or a bare infinitive, and has the same properties as those listed for *soler*. The same restrictions apply as regards its use in the various tenses. It can be used in the indicative present (28), the *Imperfecto* (29), the indicative present perfect (30), the subjunctive non-past (31), and the subjunctive past (32). The latter three uses are again very infrequent.

- (28) *Dios acostumbr-a llev-ar-se a los mejores.*  
 God HAB-IND.PRS.3SG take-INF-REFL.3 DOM the best  
 ‘God usually takes the best.’ (CORPES – fiction)
- (29) *Muchos fines de semana acostumbra-ba ir a su pueblo.*  
 many ends of week HAB-PST.IPFV.3SG go-INF to her village  
 ‘Many weekends she used to go to her village.’ (CORPES – fiction)
- (30) *Olvidan también que una sociedad que ha*  
 forget.3PL also that a society that PRF.IND.PRS.3SG  
*acostumbrado a med-ir a sus miembros por las*  
 HAB-PST.PTCP to measure-INF DOM its members by the  
*propiedades que poseen [...] continúa menospreciando el ocio.*  
 properties which possess.3PL continues underestimating the leisure  
 ‘They also forget that a society that usually measures its members by their possessions [...] continues to underestimate leisure.’ (CREA – press)
- (31) *Y el Betis no es un equipo que acostumbr-e*  
 and the Betis not is a team which HAB-SBJ.NONPST.3SG  
 a perdon-ar.  
 to forgive-INF  
 ‘And Betis is not a team that usually forgives.’ (CREA – press)

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*solere* is an auxiliary, it also has properties that approach it to a lexical verb. See also Pinkster’s (2015: 210-215) discussion of the unclear status of *solere* and other auxiliaries.

- (32) *De ahí que en la calle, acostumbr-ara rode-ar=se*  
 from there that in the street HAB-SBJ.PST.3SG surround-INF=REFL.3  
*de mozalbetes marginados.*  
 of youngsters marginalized  
 ‘That’s why in the street he used to surround himself with marginalized youngsters.’ (CREA – fiction)

As in the case of *soler*, the infinitive construction following *acostumbrar (a)* cannot be pronominalized, which shows *acostumbrar (a)* is grammaticalized, as illustrated in the following examples:<sup>5</sup>

- (33) a. *Acostumbr-a exager-ar.*  
 HAB-IND.PRS.3SG exaggerate-INF  
 ‘He habitually exaggerates.’ (CORPES – press)
- b. \**Lo acostumbr-a.*  
 it HAB-IND.PRS.3SG  
 ‘He uses that.’
- c. \**¿Qué acostumbr-a?*  
 what HAB-IND.PRS.3SG  
 ‘What does he use?’

Like *soler*, *acostumbrar (a)* cannot be used in the future tense:

- (34) a. *Acostumbr-a desmenuz-ar pan en la sopa.*  
 HAB-IND.PRS.3SG crumble-INF bread in the soup  
 ‘He usually crumbles bread into his soup.’ (CORPES – fiction)

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<sup>5</sup> Note that the auxiliary *acostumbrar* is different from the more frequent lexical reflexive verb *acostumbrarse a* ‘get accustomed to’. When the lexical verb is followed by an infinitive, this infinitive has a clausal character and can therefore be pronominalized:

- (i) a. *Me acostumbré a esperar.*  
 REFL.1SG accustom.1SG to wait.INF  
 ‘I got accustomed to waiting.’  
 b. *Me acostumbré a eso.*  
 REFL.1SG accustom.1SG to that  
 ‘I got accustomed to it.’

In addition to the reflexive use, the lexical verb also has a transitive variant ‘have s.o. get accustomed to’; cf. Real Academia Española et al. (2009: 2162) for more details.

- b. ***Acostumbra-ba*** *desmenuz-ar pan en la sopa.*  
 HAB-PST.IPFV.3SG crumble-INF bread in the soup  
 ‘He used to crumble bread into his soup.’
- c. \****Acostumbra-rá*** *desmenuz-ar pan en la sopa.*  
 HAB-IND.FUT.3SG crumble-INF bread in the soup  
 ‘He will use to crumble bread into his soup.’

*Acostumbrar* (*a*), too, may combine with verbs of different valencies. In (35) it combines with a zero-place predicate, in (36)–(37) with a one-place predicate, both dynamic (36), and stative (37); and in (38)–(39) with two-place predicates, again both dynamic (38) and stative (39).

- (35) *En esta zona siempre acostumbr-a a hac-er buen tiempo.*  
 in this area always HAB-IND.PRS.3SG to make-INF good weather  
 ‘In this region it is always nice weather.’ (CORPES – fiction)
- (36) *Regina acostumbra-ba cen-ar a las nueve.*  
 Regina HAB-PST.IPFV.3SG dine-INF at the nine  
 ‘Regina used to have dinner at nine.’ (CORPES – fiction)
- (37) *Los ríos anastomosados acostumbr-an ser más estables.*  
 the rivers braided HAB-IND.PRS.3PL COP-INF more stable  
 ‘Braided rivers are usually more stable.’ (CORPES – press)
- (38) *¿Acostumbr-a le-er la Biblia?*  
 HAB-IND.PRS.3SG read-INF the bible  
 ‘Do you read the bible?’ (CORPES – fiction)
- (39) *Acostumbra-ban dej-ar el pelo largo.*  
 HAB-PST.IPFV.3SG leave-INF the hair long  
 ‘They used to wear their hair long.’ (CORPES – fiction)

Finally, *acostumbrar* (*a*) + infinitive is a semi-auxiliary construction just like *soler* + infinitive, as the infinitive may be left unexpressed when it is given in the immediately preceding context, as shown in (40)–(41), for both animate (40) and inanimate (41) first arguments:

- (40) *Se fue como acostumbr-a, sin desped-ir=se.*  
 REFL.3 went as HAB-IND.PRS.3SG without say.goodbye-INF=REFL.3  
 ‘He went as he usually did, without saying goodbye.’ (CORPES – fiction)

- (41) *Con la amanecida el mar no estaba azul o verde como*  
 with the dawn the sea not was blue or green as

**acostumbr-a:**

HAB-IND.PRS.3SG

‘At dawn, the sea was not blue or green as it usually is.’ (CORPES – fiction)

As will have become clear from the preceding examples, an important difference between the *Imperfecto* on the one hand and the periphrases with *solero* and *acostumbrar* on the other, is that the latter *express* habitual aspect, whereas the *Imperfecto* does not, but is rather a verb form that agrees well with a context that is habitual already.<sup>6</sup>

### 3 What motivates the choice between the two strategies?

In this section, we will deal in some detail with the use of the two strategies described in Section 2 in order to see the different ways in which they contribute to the expression of habituality in Spanish. We will first deal with the use of the *Imperfecto* in habitual contexts (Section 3.1), then discuss the use of the periphrastic expression of habituality in habitual contexts (Section 3.2) and then turn to its use in non-habitual contexts (Section 3.3).

With respect to the dedicated expression of habituality, this section will predominantly deal with *solero* for being stylistically unmarked and as such occurring more frequently than the synonymous *acostumbrar*.

#### 3.1 The Imperfecto in habitual contexts

Consider the following lengthy example:

- (42) [about the first half of the 1940s]  
 [...] *está-bamos muertecitos de hambre los de Alcalá... yo*  
 COPLOC-PST.IPFV.1PL dead of hunger the from Alcalá I  
*me acuerdo que era un chaval que yo*  
 REFL.1SG remember that COP.IMF.1SG a boy that I  
*i-ba al colegio [...] y empeza-ba*  
 go-PST.IPFV.1SG to.the primary.school and begin-PST.IPFV.1SG  
*en la esquina de Anselmo Herrero... a recoger todas las cáscaras de*  
 in the corner of Anselmo Herrero to collect all the rinds of

<sup>6</sup> We are grateful to Heleen Bos for suggesting this to us.

*naranja y todas las castañas podridas... y me las*  
orange and all the chestnuts rotten and REFL.1SG them  
*com-ía... hasta donde la esquina del Banco de Vizcaya ...*  
eat-PST.IPFV.1SG until where the corner of.the Banco de Vizcaya  
*eso yo lo hac-ía todos los días.*  
that I it do-PST.IPFV.1SG all the days

‘[...] we were starving to death in Alcalá ... I remember that I was a boy, I went to primary school [...] and at the corner of the Anselmo Herrero street I would begin ... collecting all the orange rinds and all the rotten chestnuts ... and eat them ... ending at the corner of the *Banco de Vizcaya* ... and this is what I would do every day.’ (AdH 50 P)<sup>7</sup>

In this example, from an oral narrative the speaker describes the post civil war situation as experienced by the community, which forms the background for the narrative about his habitual way to alleviate his hunger.

The following interaction describes the personal experience of climate change of one of the interlocutors:

- (43) – *Mucha gente dice que antes hac-ía más frío que*  
much people say that before do-PST.IPFV.3SG more cold than  
*ahora, ¿no?*  
now not
- *Más frío... en invierno no pod-ías salir sin*  
more cold in winter not can-PST.IPFV.2SG go.out without  
*abrigo, y yo este año no he gastado ni abrigo [...]*  
coat and I this year not have used not.even coat  
*cuando éramos pequeños, el agua que*  
when COP.PST.IPFV.1PL little the water which  
*ca-ía en la plaza... se hac-ía*  
fall-PST.IPFV.3SG on the square REFL.3SG make-PST.IPFV.3SG  
*charcos... ¿no?... y esta-ba helado completamente...*  
puddles not and COPLOC-PST.IPFV.3SG frozen entirely

<sup>7</sup> The original transcripts of the oral corpus faithfully reflect spoken language in marking, e.g., vowel-lengthening, different pause lengths, and largely avoids interpunction and uppercase. To enhance the readability of the data, the representation chosen here approaches the written standard.

- ahora tú no verás ni a un charco helado.*  
 now you not will.see not.even to one puddle frozen
- *Yo nunca los he visto [...] ¿y neva-ba?*  
 I never them have seen and snow-PST.IPFV.3SG
- *Neva-ba, claro.*  
 snow-PST.IPFV.3SG of.course
- ‘– Many people say that in the past it was colder than now, wasn’t it?  
 – It was colder. In the winter you couldn’t go outside without a coat, and this year I haven’t even worn a coat [...] When we were children, the water that fell on the square and made puddles, right, and they would be entirely frozen [...] nowadays you won’t ever see a frozen puddle.  
 – I have never seen one [...] and would it snow?  
 – It would snow, of course.’ (AdH 41 P)

These two examples of the *Imperfecto* used in habitual contexts show that this strategy is typical of longer stretches of narrative discourse that describe recurrent events characteristic either of a person involved in a past situation, as in (42), or of the past situation itself, as in (43), in which zero-place predicates are marked by means of the *Imperfecto*.

As we will see in the next section, in habitual contexts as marked by the *Imperfecto*, the dedicated marker of habituality can occur as well.

### 3.2 The periphrastic expression of habituality in habitual contexts

The following narrative, in which the *Imperfecto* is used in a habitual context, additionally contains an instance of the habitual marker *soler*:

- (44) [...] *en la plaza de Cervantes hab-ía un cine*  
 in the square of Cervantes EXIST-PST.IPFV a cinema
- que se llama-ba Pequeño[...] que era*  
 which REFL.3 call-PST.IPFV.3SG small because COP.PST.IPFV.3S
- un cine pequeño y lo llamá-bamos el Pipero*  
 a cinema small and it call-PST.IPFV.1PL the Pipero
- porque la gente lleva-ba pipas y com-ía*  
 because the people bring-PST.IPFV.3SG seeds and eat-PST.IPFV.3SG
- pipas, y ahí eran películas de sesión continua*  
 seeds and there COP.PST.IPFV.3PL films of session continuous

*y entonces í-bamos al cine, por la tarde [...]*  
 and so go-PST.IPFV.1PL to.the cinema during the afternoon  
*ya sab-ían cada vez que cambia-ban,*  
 already know-PST.IPFV.3PL each time that change-PST.IPFV.3PL  
*que sol-ían cambi-ar dos o tres veces a la*  
 because HAB-PST.IPFV.3PL change-INF two or three times at the  
*semana, pues ir dos o tres veces al cine.*  
 week so go two or three times to.the cinema

‘[...] in the Plaza de Cervantes there was a cinema, which was called *Pequeño* because it was small, but we called it *Pipero*, because people would bring sunflower seeds and eat sunflower seeds, and there were continuous session films, and so we would go to the cinema, in the afternoon [...] they would already know [we would come] every time they changed, they used to change two or three times a week, so two or three times to the movies.’ (AdH 36 M)

Within this fragment of a narration of habitual behaviour by the narrator and her friends, the section marked by *soler* interrupts her story, in order to provide more specific background information involving a referent other than the speaker, to help the interlocutor understand why it is two or three times a week that they would go to the movies.

The following example illustrates a similar case in a written narrative about an ETA prisoner who gets to know a Basque girl, who writes him letters. Interrupting the story about the prisoner and the girl, the following explanation is given:

- (45) *La cosa es que en los bares de la onda abertzale, las herriko*  
 the thing is that in the bars of the wave nationalist the people’s  
*tabernas y en otros sitios se exhib-ían de*  
 inns and in other places REFL.3 exhibit-PST.IPFV.3PL of  
*costumbre carteles con fotos de militantes de ETA*  
 habit posters with photos of militants of ETA  
*encarcelados. Y junto a las fotos sol-ían*  
 imprisoned and together to the photos HAB-PST.IPFV.3PL  
*figur-ar el nombre del preso y el del*  
 appear-INF the name of.the prisoner and the of.the  
*centro penitenciario donde lo ten-ían encerrado.*  
 centre penitentiary where him have-PST.IPFV.3PL locked.up

*Joxe Mari y sus compañeros recib-ían con cierta*  
 Joxe Mari and his mates receive-PST.IPFV.3PL with certain  
*frecuencia cartas de chicas para las cuales ellos*  
 frequency letters from girls for the who they  
*eran auténticos héroes.*  
 COP.PST.IPFV.3PL true heroes.

‘The thing is that in the bars of the Basque nationalist wave, the People’s Inns and other places it was customary to exhibit posters with photos of imprisoned ETA fighters. Together with the photos there used to appear the name of the prisoner and of the prison where they had him locked up. With a certain frequency Joxe Mari and his mates would receive letters from girls for whom they were true heroes.’ (CORPES – fiction)

In this example, there are two marked habituals, the first one is a lexical modifier *de costumbre* ‘habitually’ and the second one is the grammatical *solía figurar* ‘used to appear’. Similar to the example in (45), the habituals mark explicit background information, interrupting the story, that the speaker or writer deems necessary as a clarification of the situation described in the remainder of the narrative.

Now consider two somewhat different cases. In (46), theoretically, the grammatical marker of habituality could have been avoided:

(46) *Antonia ten-ía un amigo y pretendiente que la*  
 Antonia have-PST.IPFV.3SG a friend and admirer who her  
*había amado desde joven y aún espera-ba ser*  
 had loved since young and still hope-PST.IPFV.3SG COP.INF  
*correspondido, cuando ella ten-ía cuarenta.y.ocho años de*  
 corresponded when she have-PST.IPFV.3SG forty-eight years of  
*edad. Era Rafael, quien se había instalado a trabajar*  
 age COP.PST.IPFV.3SG Rafael who REFL.3 had installed to work  
*como fontanero en Sevilla, y también acostumbra-ba*  
 as plumber in Seville and also HAB-PST.IPFV.3SG  
*ir a Carmona, su pueblo, muchos fines de semana.*  
 go.INF to Carmona his village many ends of week

‘Antonia had a friend and admirer who had loved her since her youth and still hoped her to love him too when she was forty-eight years old. It was Rafael, who had established himself as a plumber in Seville, and also used to go to Carmona, his native village, many weekends.’ (CORPES – fiction)

If in this context the *Imperfecto* had been used, Rafael's habit of travelling to the village still would have been clearly understood. Nevertheless, the dedicated expression, perhaps simply for being longer and therefore "heavier", is more prominent from a pragmatic point of view than the analytic expression by means of the *Imperfecto*. A similar case is (47), which forms part of a detailed description of the habits of the protagonist, don Ubaldo Zamacois:

- (47) *Almorza-ba* *luego solo, o en compañía de Indalecio,*  
 have.lunch-PST.IPFV.3SG then alone or in company of Indalecio  
*alrededor.de las dos de la tarde. Después se*  
 around the two of the afternoon afterwards REFL.3  
*retira-ba a reposar un rato. [..]*  
 withdraw-PST.IPFV.3SG to rest a while  
*Se serv-ía la cena entre nueve y media y*  
 REFL.3 serve-PST.IPFV.3SG the supper between nine and half and  
*diez, nunca más tarde de las diez, incluso si falta-ban*  
 ten never more late of the ten even if miss-PST.IPFV.3PL  
*a la cena los dueños de la casa. A excepción del*  
 to the supper the owners of the house with exception of.the  
*desayuno y la de merienda, los otros dos consistentes*  
 breakfast and the of.the afternoon.tea the other two consisting  
*momentos de almorzar y de cenar ten-ían lugar*  
 moments of lunch and of supper take-PST.IPFV.3PL place  
*siempre en el gran comedor [...]. Cuando almorza-ba*  
 always in the large dining.room when have.lunch-PST.IPFV.3SG  
*solo sol-ía acompañ-ar=se don Ubaldo Zamacois*  
 alone HAB-PST.IPFV.3SG accompany-INF=REFL.3 don Ubaldo Zamacois  
*de un periódico, El Universal o El Excelsior, que*  
 with a newspaper El Universal or El Excelsior which  
*apoya-ba contra el frutero para leer con cada plato*  
 rest-PST.IPFV.3SG against the fruit-bowl to read with each course  
*y entre plato y plato, e impedir así que su atención*  
 and between course and course and impede thus that his attention  
*vagabundea-se por los peligrosos campos del no*  
 wander-PST.SUBJ.3SG through the dangerous fields of.the not

*tener nada en que pensar mientras com-ia*  
 have nothing of which think while eat-PST.IPFV.3SG

‘He then would have lunch on his own, or in the company of Indalecio, around two o’ clock in the afternoon. Afterwards he would withdraw to have a rest. [...] Supper would be served between half past nine and ten, never later than ten o’ clock, even if the owners of the house could not join the meal. With the exception of breakfast and afternoon tea, the other two meals consisting of lunch and supper always took place in the large dining room [...]. When he had lunch alone, don Ubaldo Zamacois used to accompany himself with a newspaper, either *El Universal* or *El Excelsior*, which he would rest against the fruit bowl in order to read it with each course and between courses, thus avoiding his attention to wander along the dangerous the paths of not thinking while he was eating.’ (CREA – fiction)

In this example, again, the explicit expression of habituality by means of *sol(er)* is not required from a grammatical point of view. Rather, it is probably introduced in order to draw the reader’s attention to a particular behaviour of the protagonist, for which, for the first time in this description, a motivation is given.

However, the next section will show that there are also clearly grammatical motivations for the use of the habitual periphrases.

### 3.3 *The periphrastic expression of habituality in non-habitual contexts*

In non-habitual past tense contexts, it is generally impossible to indicate habitual meaning by means of the *Imperfecto*. Consider the following example:

- (48) a. *A la caída de la tarde de aquel día de magnitud simbólica,*  
 at the fall of the afternoon of that day of magnitude symbolic  
*me acerqu-é al Carnaby. Le pregunt-é*  
 REFL.1SG approach-PST.PFV.1SG to.the Carnaby him ask-PST.PFV.1SG  
*al camarero por el poeta Veragua. Me dijo lo.que*  
 to.the waiter for the poet Veragua me tell.PST.PFV.3SG what  
*yo sab-ía: que sol-ía dej-ar=se*  
 I know-PST.IPFV.1SG that HAB-PST.IPFV.3SG let-INF=REFL.3  
*caer por allí pasadas las diez [...].*  
 fall about there passed the ten

‘At the fall of the evening of that day of symbolic magnitude, I went to the Carnaby. I asked the waiter for the poet Veragua. He told me what I knew: that he used to drop by after ten [...].’ (CORPES – fiction)

In this example, the substitution of *solía dejarse caer* by the imperfective past, *se dejaba caer*, would lead to a reading of the *Imperfecto* as an expression of imperfective aspect in contrast to the perfective expressions in the remainder of the example:

- (48) b. *Me dijo lo que yo sab-ía: que se*  
 me tell.PST.PFV.3SG the what I know-PST.IPFV.1SG that REFL.3  
*deja-ba caer pasadas las diez.*  
 let-PST.IPFV.3SG fall passed the ten

‘He told me what I already knew: that he passed by after ten.’

In (48b) the habitual meaning has disappeared: the arrival of the poet is no longer presented as being highly probable due to his habits, but as being certain.

This means that in non-habitual contexts, habitual readings can only be created by using the periphrastic expression of habituality. Obviously, this is also the case in present tense contexts, as the *Imperfecto* is restricted to the past tense.

- (49) *Mi mujer suel-e ser más amable que yo,*  
 my wife HAB-IND.PRS.3SG COP-INF more friendly than I  
*y su don de gentes es quizá su principal atractivo.*  
 and her gift of people is perhaps her main appeal

*Aquella tarde, en.cambio, no parecía muy comunicativa,*  
 that afternoon however not seemed.3SG very communicative

*y tuve que ser yo quien ultimara los detalles del contrato.*  
 and had to be I who finished the details of.the contract

‘My wife usually is more friendly than I am, and her social abilities may be her main appeal. That afternoon, however, she did not seem to be very communicative, and it was me who had to discuss the final details of the contract.’ (CORPES – fiction)

This example also illustrates the fact that the dedicated expression of habituality, particularly when used in non-habitual contexts, allows for clearly distinguishing habits as characteristic properties which need not necessarily obtain in concrete situations, a fact that has also been stressed by Boneh & Jędrzejowski (2019).

The following example produces a similar effect:

(50) [the speaker has been called to see his boss]

*Asom-é la cabeza sin llamar porque la puerta*  
 stick-PST.PFV.1SG the head without knock because the door  
*esta-ba abierta y el director no suel-e*  
 COPLOC-PST.IPFV.3SG open and the director not HAB-IND.PRS.3SG  
*ser amigo de formalidades.*  
 COP.INF friend of formalities

‘I stuck my head in without knocking because the door was open and the director is not usually a friend of formalities.’ (CORPES – fiction)

Whereas in example (49), the context shows that the characteristic property of the referent does not always obtain, in example (50) it is probably the negation preceding the habitual *soler* that produces the particular effect of “unreliability”: in the present case there is a conversational implicature that the boss may not always behave informally.

The situation is different when the referent is not a person but an event:

(51) [Husband and wife are fighting]

*Su tono es tan tajante que decide no discutir,*  
 his tone is so sharp that decide not discuss  
*ceder como en tantas ocasiones. Cuando ha bebido*  
 give.in like in so.many occasions when has drunk  
*un poco suel-e ser mejor darle la razón.*  
 a little HAB-IND.PRS.3SG COP.INF better give.him the right

‘His tone is so sharp that she decides not to insist, giving in as on so many occasions. When he has drunk a little it is usually better to say he’s right.’ (CORPES – fiction)

In (51) the eventive argument is *darle la razón* ‘be better to say he’s right’, which describes a specific situation.

However, particularly in present tense contexts, the eventive arguments marked for habituality sometimes are of a very general or even generic nature, which leads to a gnomic, i.e., law-like meaning of the totality.<sup>8</sup> Consider the following example.

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<sup>8</sup> On the relation between habituality and gnomic meaning cf. e.g. Bertinetto & Lenci (2012).

- (52) [the speaker wants to show some photos but she cannot find them]  
*Pues hija no, no te puedo enseñar, porque [...]*  
 so daughter not not to.you can show because  
*no sé las llevaré en otro bolso o algo*  
 not know them will.carry in other bag or something  
*así me extraña porque... yo pensaba que las llevaba*  
 so me seems.strange because I thought that them carried  
*aquí ... seguramente que cuando no las busque,*  
 here certainly that when not them look.for  
*como suele ocurrir siempre ... cuando no buscas*  
 as HAB-IND.PRS.3SG happen-INF always when not look.for  
*las cosas es cuando aparecen.*  
 the things is when turn.up  
 ‘So, love, no, I cannot show you [the photos] because I don’t know, they may be in a different bag or something like that; I find it strange because ... I thought I had them here ... certainly when I don’t look for them, as happens always, when you don’t look for the things is when they turn up.’  
 (AdH 17 S)

The utterance *como suele ocurrir siempre* ‘as usually happens all the time’ is a sort of general rule of life. Such usage of the habitual expression is not at all restricted to oral use, but expressions very similar to the one in (52) occur in writing as well:

- (53) *Como suele ocurrir, la verdad es menos interesante.*  
 like HAB-IND.PRS.3SG happen-INF the truth is less interesting  
 ‘As usually happens, the truth is less interesting.’ (CORPES – fiction)

As a final example of the same phenomenon consider (54), in which the argument of the construction with *soler* is the event of *intentar a dormir junto a alguien que ronca* ‘try to sleep next to someone who snores’ and, in addition, the second person experiencer has a non-specific reading.

(54) *Y, bueno, intentar a dormir junto a alguien que ronca*  
 and good try to sleep next to someone who snores

*suel-e pon-er=te cuerpo de homicida*  
 HAB-IND.PRS.3SG put-INF=you body of murderer

‘And, well, trying to sleep next to someone who snores usually turns your body into that of a killer’ (CORPES – fiction)

Summing up, non-habitual contexts, be they located in the past or in the present, require the use of the periphrastic means of expression of habituality. In present tense contexts, habituality may approach a gnomic meaning, particularly when the habitual expression takes an event as its argument.

#### 4 Conclusions

Our main aim in this paper was to establish what determines the choice for one of the two grammatical strategies involved in the expression of habituality in Pensinsular Spanish. We argued that the *Imperfecto* verb form is compatible with habitual contexts but does not express habituality as such, as it is also used to express imperfectivity. Periphrastic expressions with *soler* and *acostumbrar*, on the other hand, do express habituality themselves. After discussing the basic properties of these two constructions in Section 2, we discussed the factors determining the choice for one of them in Section 3. It turns out that the choice for one of either construction is far from arbitrary, but on the contrary highly predictable from the contexts in which they occur. The *Imperfecto* is used in habitual contexts with past reference, and in the only cases in which the periphrastic construction is used, this is because the storyline is interrupted and a habit is presented as background information, or because the habit is pragmatically highlighted. In non-habitual contexts only the periphrastic construction is available for the expression of habituality. With present reference, the periphrastic construction is the only option.

#### Uncommon abbreviations

COPLOC locative semi-copula  
 DOM differential object marking

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