

Unraveling Language Evolution: Medieval Spanish explored through a Cross-Linguistic Lens

In modern Spanish, the verb "haber" has two third-person present tense conjugations, "ha" and "hay", with distinct meanings. "Ha", as in "Él lo ha hecho" ("He has done it"), functions as an auxiliary verb that denotes a completed action. "Hay", on the other hand, functions like "there is/there are" in English, indicating the existence or presence of something. For example, "Hay mucha gente" means "There's a lot of people". Although there are some less frequently used divergent verb conjugations of the same meaning, such as "roo", "royo", "roigo" from the verb "roer", Spanish verbs rarely have two conjugations for the exact same tense that differ in meaning. So why does the ha/hay distinction exist? In brief: "hay" is now considered one word, but it was once two words: "ha" (has) and the medieval Spanish word "ý", roughly meaning "to there". To fully understand how it came to be, we can explore the grammatical and phonological evolution of medieval Spanish while drawing comparisons to features in modern French and English.

In modern Spanish, the pronouns "lo", "la", "los", "las" replace direct objects. A direct object would be things and ideas previously mentioned in sentences that verbs directly act upon, without the use of prepositions between the verb and direct object. For example, "I have a car" is "tengo un carro", where "tengo" is the verb "I have", and "un carro" is the direct object "a car". There are no prepositions between the verb and the object. On the other hand, "I have it" would be "lo tengo", where "lo" (it) refers to "carro" (car). In French, there are the equivalent pronouns "le", "la", "les". For example, "je le vois", literally "I it see", means "I see it". Beyond direct object pronouns, modern French and medieval Spanish share an adverbial pronoun which replaces the preposition-object pair in sentences that describe actions directed towards or occurring at a specific location, idea, or thing. In French, locations, destinations, and generally any grammatical object in sentence constructions containing the locative prepositions "à", "au", "aux", "en", meaning "to" or "at", can be substituted by the adverbial pronoun "y". For example: "I live in France" translates to "J'habite en France". After establishing the location, one could succinctly state "I live there": "J'y habite". In this sentence, "y" substitutes "en France" (in France). This also works when actions are done "on" or "at" something that isn't a location, as long as the mentioned locative prepositions are used. For example: "I paid attention to the lesson" would be "J'ai prêté attention à la leçon". To state "I paid attention to it" without explicitly mentioning the object of the sentence "the lesson", one could simply say "J'y ai prêté attention". Literally, this means: "I to-it had paid attention", where "y" is "to-it".

Like modern French, medieval Spanish had an adverbial pronoun of the same Latin origins ("hic" and "ibi") that was variously written as "ý", "y", "hi", or "i". It generally replaced a combination of locative preposition and object of a sentence, like its French counterpart "y". Its frequent use is apparent in medieval literature, like Alfonso X El Sabio's chronicle "General Estoria", where he writes:

"... et començó a andar muy sesudamientre en ello e dar ý muy buen recabdo ..."

"... and he began to engage wisely in the matter and give it great care ..."

This excerpt describes a prominent Jewish figure from the Torah who took on the position of the king's bailiff in Egypt and judiciously managed the king's affairs. In this example, “dar ý muy buen recabdo” literally means “give to-it very good precaution/care”, where “ý” is referring to the king's affairs. As in the previous French examples, this adverbial pronoun substitutes what would be a preposition-object pair if explicitly stated.

Shifting to another medieval work, “Libro de Buen Amor” by Juan Ruiz, the following is written:

“Mandó los colgar altos, bien como atalaya, e que a descolgallos ninguno ý non vaya”

“He ordered to hang them high, like a watchtower, and forbade anybody from going there to take them down”.

In this context, “Mandó ... que ... ninguno ý non vaya” literally means “he ordered ... that ... nobody to-there does not go”, where ý functions as “(to) there”. Note that in both modern and medieval Spanish, double negatives are standard in such statements.

With these snapshots of Spanish and French grammar in mind, the origin of the divergent third-person present tense conjugations of “haber”: “hay” and “ha” can finally be explored. As explained initially, in modern Spanish, “haber” functions both as an auxiliary verb and to indicate the presence of something. In contrast, in medieval Spanish “haber” also indicated possession, a simple example being “Él ha” (He has). This is a semantic niche (a word's particular meaning) now occupied by modern Spanish's verb “tener”. To reduce ambiguity between the two possessive and existential meanings of “haber”, there “ha” and “ý” were frequently used together in the fixed expression “ha ý”, meaning literally “it has there”, equivalent to “there is” in English. As the phrase “ha ý” came to take on a particular semantic niche in its associated state, it became lexicalized, or perceived as a lexeme (a word or unit of meaning). The immutability and brevity of “ha ý” as a fixed expression likely led to the two words compounding, or being unified, into the single word “hay”. This happening could be compared to the English contraction “there's”, which is frequently used instead of both “there is” and “there are” in informal English. Despite being composed of two word stems, “there” and “is”, it fulfills a unique semantic niche and was contracted, ultimately causing it to be perceived as a single word. Interestingly, French makes use of a similar construction “y a” to express existence much like Spanish's medieval “ha ý” and modern “hay”, though reversing the order of the analogous words. For example, “there are people” is “il y a des gens”, literally “it there-has people”, in modern French. Similarly to in English and Spanish, the fixed expression “il y a” (there is) shows signs of lexicalization and has the simplified pronunciations /i.ja/ (i-YA) and /ja/ (ya).

Examining linguistic phenomena cross-linguistically and diachronically, such as pronoun substitution, compounding, and lexicalization, illuminates how the not-entirely-sporadic process of language evolution helps fill semantic niches, reduce ambiguity, and express ideas succinctly. We saw a clear example of these mechanisms in the use of the adverbial pronouns “ý” and “y” in medieval Spanish and French, the distinct “ha” and “hay” conjugations in modern Spanish, the French construction “il y a”, as well as the use of the English counterpart “there's”. These linguistic innovations show the adaptive nature of language, where similar alterations are embraced across eras.