
A note on the silent GO that underlies an instance of apparent suppletion in Spanish

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Abstract

The Spanish counterpart of English *go* shows apparently suppletive forms as follows. The alternation between *v-*, *f-* and *i-* seems not to be phonological. We can call it 'suppletion' as long as we recognize that doing so leaves questions open that we need to try to answer. In this paper, I will focus on the forms in *f-*. A familiar way of talking about the *f-* in question would be to say that it is inserted (late) as a realization of Spanish *go* in the context of preterite or imperfect subjunctive (or of what the preterite and the imperfect subjunctive have in common). I will, instead, try to throw some light on the identity of preterite and imperfect subjunctive forms across Spanish *go* and be by bringing in additional considerations that have nothing directly to do with verb morphology.

Keywords: suppletion; subjunctive; Spanish; morphology; syntax

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1. Introduction

The Spanish counterpart of English *go* shows apparently suppletive forms as follows. Present tense forms have an initial *v*- in both indicative:

- (1) *voy, vas, va, vamos, vais, van*
 go-1.SG go-2.SG go-3.SG go-1.PL go-2.PL go-3.PL

and subjunctive:

- (2) *vaya, vaya, vayamos, vayáis, vayan¹*
 go-1.SG go-2.SG go-3.SG go-1.PL go-2.PL go-3.PL

The preterite and the imperfect subjunctive forms, on the other hand, have an initial *f*-; in the preterite, the forms are:

- (3) *fui, fuiste, fue, fuimos, fuisteis, fueron*
 go-1.SG go-2.SG go-3.SG go-1.PL go-2.PL go-3.PL

and in the imperfect subjunctive:

- (4) *fuera, fuera, fuéramos, fuerais, fueran²*
 go-1.SG go-2.SG go-3.SG go-1.PL go-2.PL go-3.PL

In addition, there are forms of Spanish *go* with initial *i*-. The infinitive, for example, is *ir*, the past participle *-ido*, and the imperfect indicative has the forms:

- (5) *iba, ibas, iba, íbamos, ibais, iban*
 go-1.SG go-2.SG go-3.SG go-1.PL go-2.PL go-3.PL

Furthermore, the future and conditional, which are arguably built on the infinitive,³ have the *i*-initial forms:

¹ Many varieties of Spanish lack 2pl. forms, in a way that is not relevant to the present paper.

² There is also a(n obsolete - Roca (2010, 409, 422n)) future subjunctive with initial *f*-, as well as an alternative set of imperfect subjunctive forms with *-se-* in place of *-ra*.

³ Cf. Harris (1969, 92.); also Pollock (2006, 651) on French.

(6) iré, irás, irá, iremos, iréis, irán
 go-1.SG go-2.SG go-3.SG go-1.PL go-2.PL go-3.PL

and:

(7) iría, irías, iría, iríamos, iríais, irían
 go-1.SG go-2.SG go-3.SG go-1.PL go-2.PL go-3.PL

respectively.

The alternation between *v-*, *f-* and *i-* seems not to be phonological. We can call it suppletion,⁴ as long as we recognize that doing so leaves questions open that we need to try to answer.

2. How not to proceed

In this paper, I will focus on the forms in *f-*.

A familiar way of talking about the *f-* in question would be to say that it is inserted (late) as a realization of Spanish *go* in the context of preterite or imperfect subjunctive (or of what the preterite and the imperfect subjunctive have in common).

This would at first glance ‘get the facts’, though not in an ambitious way. In addition, it would miss the generalization that the *f-*initial forms for Spanish *go* are identical to the preterite and imperfect subjunctive forms of Spanish *ser* (‘be’).⁵ (Nor, it seems to me, would there be much insight to be gained by stating that Spanish *go* and *be* are syncretic in the preterite and in the imperfect subjunctive.)

3. How to proceed. Silent GO

I will, instead, try to throw some light on the identity of preterite and imperfect subjunctive forms across Spanish *go* and *be* by bringing in additional considerations that have nothing directly to do with verb morphology.⁶ Let me begin with English and in particular with English sentences such as:

(8) Have they been to Paris yet?

⁴ Cf. Harris (1969, 92); also Stockwell, Bowen and Martin (1965, 116), as well as Pensado (1999, 4433n).

⁵ Spanish has another verb *estar* that also in some cases translates English *be* (*estar* is not relevant to the present discussion, as far as I can see). For recent discussion of *ser* vs. *estar*, cf. Gallego and Uriagereka (2016), whose analysis may be a problem for Myler (2018).

⁶ To a large extent, the proposed analysis will carry over to Portuguese *f-*initial forms of *go*.

which contains a directional PP *to Paris* in the context of usually non-directional *be*. That *be* often rejects directional PPs is seen, for example, in:⁷

- (9) *The books are to the bookshelves.

The obvious proposal is that (8) contains a verb that is compatible with directional PPs, the simplest such verb presumably being *go*. This yields, for (8):

- (10) have they been GO to Paris yet?

in which the capitalized GO indicates a silent counterpart of overt *go*.

The existence of (10) and structures like it will in fact automatically be imposed by the language faculty if we adopt a key proposal by Collins (2007, 24), namely:

- (11) A directional PP is always the complement of the verb “go”, which may be covert in certain cases.

Given Collins’s proposal in (11), the presence of directional *to Paris* in (8) forces (8) to contain GO.

4. Back to Spanish

Let us now take a Spanish sentence with what looks like an *f*-initial form of *go*, e.g.:

- (12) Fuimos a casa
go-3.PST.PL to home
‘*Fuimos* to home’

Given (10), the following analysis comes to the fore. The form *fuimos* in (12) is not a form of *go* at all, but rather a form of *be* (*ser*) that, in (12), is accompanied by silent GO:

- (13) fuimos GO a casa
go-3.PST.PL GO to home
‘we-were GO to home’ (= ‘we went home’)

It is this GO that licenses the directional PP *a casa*.

If so, the form *fuimos* is in every case in Spanish a form of *ser* (‘be’). It is never itself a form of *ir* (‘go’); rather, Spanish allows such forms of *ser* to cooccur with silent GO.

⁷ This point was made for Slovenian by Marušič & Žaucer (2005), in the course of strongly arguing for instances of a silent GO in that language.

Consequently, to speak of *fuimos* as a suppletive form of Spanish *ir* ('go') would be misleading (and similarly for all the *f*-initial forms under consideration). Suppletion in the familiar sense of the term is not in the end appropriate for the *f*-initial forms in sentences like (12), if the present proposal based on silent GO is on the right track.

5. Challenges, as usual

English (10) and Spanish (13) have in common the presence of GO. Yet the corresponding sentences differ interpretively, in that while Spanish (12) can have the interpretation of *We went home*, English (8) is not interpretively equivalent to:

(14) Have they gone to Paris yet?

The difference can be brought out by pairs such as:

(15) The sailors have gone to sea.

(16) The sailors have been to sea.

in which *been* seems to suggest that the sailors have come back.⁸ Probably related to this is the following contrast:

(17) They've gone from New York to Boston twice this year.

(18) *?They've been from New York to Boston twice this year.

This interpretive difference is not surprising per se. Sentences (15) and (17) contain one verb *gone*, but (16) and (18) each contain two verbs, *been* and GO. The challenge is to understand why this particular interpretive difference holds. There may be a link to Charnavel's (2008) discussion of the French 'passé surcomposé' ('hypercomposite past tense'), an example of which is:

(19) Il a eu fumé.
He have-3.SG had smoked
'He has had smoked'

with one finite auxiliary and two (active) past participles, the first of which is also an auxiliary.⁹ According to Charnavel (note 2), the interpretation of (19) is essentially that of:

⁸ Cf. Huddleston (2002, 145) and Mittwoch, Huddleston and Collins (2002, 685).

⁹ Two active past participles in a row, with the first a participle of *have*, is something also found in Faroese; cf. Lockwood (1977, 141ff.). Similarly, Harris (1993, 159) gives, for some Irish English:

(i) I shoulda haven killed him

- (20) Il fumait et il ne fume plus.
 He smoke-IPFV-3.SG and he NEG smoke-3.SG no-longer
 ‘He used to smoke and he does not smoke anymore’

with the ‘no longer’ component of the interpretation of (19) now seen to recall the ‘come back’ component of the interpretation of (16).

The discussion so far has taken (16) to contain been and GO. The common point between (16) and (19) suggests a slight revision. Instead of GO, (16) may contain the (active) past participle GONE:

- (21) the sailors have been GONE to sea

and the same for (10), repeated here:

- (22) have they been GO to Paris yet?

which is now to be understood as:

- (23) have they been GONE to Paris yet?

In a way that will need to be spelled out further, the two active past participles in English (21) and (23) and in French (19) combine to provide the ‘no longer’/‘(come) back’ aspect of interpretation.¹⁰

6. Back to Spanish, again

This necessary ‘no longer’/‘(come) back’ aspect of interpretation of (19), (21) and (23) does not, as far as I know, hold of Spanish (13). Possibly, this is due to Spanish (13), repeated here:

- (25) fuimos GO a casa
 go-3.PST.PL GO to home
 ‘we-were GO to home’ (= ‘we went home’)

containing GO (as indicated) rather than GONE. If so, one will need to ask what exactly leads the learner of English to posit GONE rather than GO (and the learner of Spanish to posit GO rather than GONE).

A further interpretive question arises concerning the combination of ‘be’ and ‘go’ in (25). On the face of it, it appears that ‘be’/fuimos in (25) makes no interpretive contribution. If so, we would want to relate that to the more general question of what interpretive contribution ‘be’ (especially auxiliary ‘be’) makes in general, cross-linguistically,¹¹ as well as to the question of when non-contributing ‘be’ is allowed to appear.

¹⁰ For relevant discussion of tense and aspect, cf. Giorgi and Pianesi (1997).

¹¹ For relevant discussion, see Baker (2003).

Spanish allows silent GO in the presence of a(n uninterpreted) form of *be* only when the form of *be* is *f*-initial. If the form of *be* is *s*-initial or *e*-initial, the *go*-interpretation is not available, as in, for example:

- (26) Soy...
be-1.SG
'I-am...'
- (27) Eran...
be-3.PL
'they-were...'

Let me suggest that the generalization is not to be formulated directly in terms of the initial segment of the verb form. Instead, we should look in the direction of tense and/or aspect. The reason is that there is an intriguing parallelism here between Spanish and English.

Consider again an example akin to (8):

- (28) They've been to Paris twice this year.

English allows a *go*-like-interpretation in this sentence, but not in any of the following:

- (29) *They'll be to Paris next year.
- (30) *They hope to be to Paris next year.
- (31) *They're being to Paris next week.
- (32) *They were often to Paris in their youth.

Huddleston (2002, 114) takes the generalization to be that instances of what he calls 'motional' *be* (which from the present perspective contain silent GO) occur only with *have* followed by the past participle, as in (28).

My impression, though, is that in some varieties of English it is also possible to have:

- (33) They were to Paris twice last year.

The varieties of English in question are likely to be the same as those mentioned by Mittwoch, Huddleston and Collins (2002, 713) that allow the following:

- (34) Did they leave yet?

As a first approximation, let us say that a necessary condition for sentences such as (28) and (33) in English is past tense, perhaps necessarily of a perfective sort, given the impossibility of:

(35) *They were being to Paris when I last saw them.

(36) *They used to be to Paris a lot.

Taking this to be on the right track, we can now see that there is a point of similarity with the Spanish contrast between the well-formed preterite (25) and the ill-formed (in the ‘go’-interpretation) non-preterite (26)/(27).

Both in English and in Spanish, some notion (to be made precise) of preterite/past/perfect constitutes a necessary condition for these *be*+GO(NE) sentences.¹² (Future work will also need to make precise exactly how the Spanish imperfect subjunctive, whose *f*-initial forms are also compatible with GO, fits in.¹³) To the extent that Spanish (25)/(26)/(27) shares this significant tense/aspect property with English sentences that contain GO(NE), as in (28) and (33), the attribution of silent GO to Spanish (25) (and with it the importance of silent verbs to traditional questions of morphology) is strengthened.

7. Further challenges

The proposal I have been developing eliminates an instance of apparent suppletion in the Spanish counterpart of *go* by taking the relevant sentences to contain, rather than an irregular/suppletive form of *go*, a form of *be* that is accompanied by a silent GO. In effect, I have taken the *f*-initial forms that appear to be suppletive both in the paradigm for Spanish *go* (*ir*) and in the paradigm for Spanish *be* (*ser*) to belong entirely to the paradigm for *be* (*ser*). (Left for future work is the apparently suppletive paradigm of Spanish (and English) *be* itself.¹⁴)

Also left for future work is the question why, in the relevant Spanish sentences like (25), *go* must be silent, and similarly for English (28), which is not possible with overt *go*.¹⁵

(37) *They’ve been go(ne) to Paris twice this year.

¹² With the interesting twist that off licenses GO in:

(i) We’re *(off) to Paris.

¹³ Harris (1969, 77) notes that the imperfect subjunctive is also called past subjunctive; he tentatively takes it to be imperfective in aspect. As a reviewer notes, the Portuguese future subjunctive will also need to be fit in.

¹⁴ Cf. Postma (1993).

¹⁵ To what extent, if any, the *been* here has something significant in common with what Wolfram (2004, 120) calls the ‘remote (stressed) *been*’ of AAVE remains to be determined.

At the same time, one needs to allow for Huddleston, Payne and Peterson's (2002, 1303) colloquial example (24), repeated here:

(38) He's been and gone and told the teacher.

Possibly, overt *go* in English forces the pronunciation of an *and*, as in (38), that is present, though silent, in (28), too.

8. Further support; other instances of GO

The plausibility of Spanish having GO in (25) is enhanced, not only by the English examples with GO so far discussed, but also by other instances of GO, in English and in other languages. For example, Kayne (2019a) suggested for English sentences such as *They went home* the analysis shown in:

(39) they went GO home

The proposal in (39) rested in part on Collins (2007) and in part on van Riemsdijk's (2002) sustained argument for the presence of silent GO in certain contexts in Swiss German and other non-English Germanic languages. (For some other proposals favoring silent GO in (non-English) Germanic, cf. vanden Wyngaerd (1994, 66) (vs. Barbiers (1995, 150)), van Riemsdijk (2003), Noonan (2010), den Dikken (2010), and Bergstra (2019); for GO in Slavic languages, cf. McShane (2000, sect. 3) and Marušič & Žaucer (2005).)

9. Acquisition

With silent GO made available by the language faculty, the learner of Spanish will have available the analysis suggested in this paper. There remains the question why the learner chooses the silent-GO-based analysis over one in which the *f*-initial forms would be taken to be suppletive forms of Spanish *ir* ('go'), in addition to otherwise existing as forms of *ser* ('be'). The ideal answer is that the learnability choice doesn't arise in the first place, insofar as this sort of suppletion analysis is not available to the learner, i.e. not countenanced by the language faculty. As for why a suppletion analysis of this sort would be unavailable, it might be, in the spirit of Embick (2003, 156) and Kayne (2017; 2019b) that the language faculty strongly frowns on accidental homophony (within the functional subpart of the lexicon), in such a way that the learner of Spanish is prohibited from taking the *f*-initial forms in question to simultaneously be forms of *ser* and forms of *ir*.

The final question (for this paper) is why the learner of Spanish takes these *f*-initial forms to be forms of *ser* rather than forms of *ir*. The answer must be of the following type. A sentence interpreted as a sentence of

‘going’ can have overt (uninterpretable) ‘be’ accompanying GO. Whereas a sentence interpreted as a sentence of ‘being’ could not have overt uninterpretable ‘go’ accompanying silent BE, plausibly because ‘be’ lends itself to uninterpretability in a way that ‘go’ cannot.

10. Conclusion

Spanish *ir* (‘go’) has unexpected *f*-initial forms in the preterite and in the imperfect subjunctive. Rather than being suppletive forms of *ir* they are forms of *ser* (‘be’). The interpretative contribution of ‘go’ is provided by the presence of a silent GO. The syntax of silent verbs turns out to be of importance to what appear to be traditional questions of morphology.

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