

Pluscuamperfecto: The Spanish Tense That's Way Easier Than It Sounds

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Have you ever heard of dihydrogen monoxide?

Sounds like something that could kill you, right? Wrong. It's just water.

Often we see scary-sounding things and think they must be difficult. But don't make that assumption when you get to the Spanish *pluscuamperfecto*.

This article will give you a full crash-course on how, when and why to use the Spanish *pluscuamperfecto*—plus cool songs in which this tense is used.

Contents

What Is the *Pluscuamperfecto*?

The *pluscuamperfecto*—or the “past perfect” or “pluperfect” in English—is one of Spanish's many tenses used to talk about actions that happened in the past.

The *pluscuamperfecto* is a compound tense, meaning it uses two verbs conjugated differently. In this case, we use a conjugation of the auxiliary verb **haber**, plus a past participle. The conjugation of *haber* depends both on the subject of the sentence and on whether the sentence requires an indicative or a subjunctive verb.

Confused yet? Don't worry—conjugating the *pluscuamperfecto* is much easier than it sounds. First, though, we will need to learn when to use the *pluscuamperfecto*.

When Do We Use the *Pluscuamperfecto*?

Just like the English past perfect, we use the *pluscuamperfecto* when talking about two actions that happened in the past. To refer to the action that happened *further* in the past, use the *pluscuamperfecto*.

For example, take a look at this English sentence, paying particular attention to the verb conjugated in the past perfect.

John **had already left** when Sarah arrived.

This sentence deals with two actions, both of them in the past: John leaving, and Sarah arriving. Since John left *before* Sarah arrived, we must use the past perfect to talk about John leaving.

The Spanish indicative *pluscuamperfecto* works the same way. For example, the previous sentence translated into Spanish would read:

John ya **había salido** cuando llegó Sarah.

(John had already left when Sarah arrived.)

In this sentence, the verb **había salido** (had left) is an example of an indicative *pluscuamperfecto* verb.

The *subjuntivo del pluscuamperfecto* (past perfect subjunctive) is a little more complicated for English speakers. (Here's a quick run-down on when and how to use subjunctive verbs in case you need it.)

Here are the specific times when you'll need to use the subjunctive form of the *pluscuamperfecto*:

When talking about emotions, desires or other subjective feelings in the past.

Quería que **lo hubieras hecho** ya.

(I wanted you to have already done it.)

*Estaba triste de que ella **se hubiera ido** sin despedirse.*

(I was sad that she had gone without saying goodbye.)

With the phrase **ojalá** to express a desire that something would have happened in the past.

*Ojalá **hubiéramos ido**.*

(I wish **we had gone**.)

In “if clauses” used to describe impossible situations, paired with either the past conditional or present conditional.

*Si **hubiera sabido**, no habría dicho nada.*

(If I **had known**, I wouldn’t have said anything.)

*Si **no hubiera comido** tanto, iría contigo al restaurante.*

(If I **hadn’t eaten** so much, I would go with you to the restaurant.)

Note: In colloquial Spanish, you can frequently hear the conditional verb replaced with a second verb conjugated in the *pluscuamperfecto*. For example:

*Si **hubieras dormido** más, **no hubieras tenido** tanto sueño.*

(If you **had slept** more, you **wouldn’t have been** so tired.)

How to Conjugate the Spanish *Pluscuamperfecto*

To review, the *pluscuamperfecto* is a compound tense that requires two verbs: *haber* and a past participle. Before we start putting the two together, let’s review past participles.

Past Participles

In English, we use past participles in the present perfect, past perfect and passive tenses. For example, in the phrase “Andy had seen,” the past participle is “seen.” In the phrase “It was eaten,” the past participle is “eaten.”

In Spanish, we use past participles in the present perfect and past perfect tenses. Forming regular past participles is simple: Take the infinitive, chop off the *–ar*, *–er* or *–ir* ending, and add one of the following endings:

For *–ar* verbs: **–ado**

For *–er* verbs: **–ido**

For *–ir* verbs: **–ido**

Thus, from *hablar* we get the past participle *hablado*, from *comer* we get *comido*, and from *dormir* we get *dormido*.

Simple! Right? Well, kind of. Conjugating regular past participles is easy, but there are many irregular past participles to look out for. Unfortunately, you have no choice but to memorize these irregulars.

Many irregular past participles take on the endings **–to** and **–cho**. Here are some of the most common ones.

-to past participles

- *roto* (broken)
- *muerto* (dead)
- *escrito* (written)
- *abierto* (opened)
- *vuelto* (returned)

-cho past participles

- *dicho* (said)
- *hecho* (did/made)
- *predicho* (predicted)
- *deshecho* (undone)
- *satisfecho* (satisfied)

Some important irregular past participles end in **–sto**, such as **visto** (seen) and **puesto** (put).

Now that we have sorted out past participles, learning to conjugate the *pluscuamperfecto* in the indicative and subjunctive moods will be a breeze.

Indicative *Pluscuamperfecto*

In the indicative *pluscuamperfecto*, we conjugate *haber* in the imperfect tense, like this:

Yo **había**

Tú **habías**

Él/ella/usted **había**

Nosotros **habíamos**

Vosotros **habíais**

Ellos/ellas/ustedes **habían**

To form the indicative *pluscuamperfecto*, merely use one of these conjugations of *haber* plus the desired past participle.

Ellos ya **habían comprado** las entradas cuando se canceló el concierto.
(They **had already bought** the tickets when the concert was cancelled.)

Yo **había querido** pollo, pero me gustó la ternera.
(I **had wanted** chicken, but I liked the steak.)

Subjunctive *Pluscuamperfecto*

In the subjunctive *pluscuamperfecto*, conjugate the auxiliary verb *haber* in the imperfect of the subjunctive.

Yo **hubiera/hubiese**

Tú **hubieras/hubieses**

El/ella/usted **hubiera/hubiese**

Nosotros **hubiéramos/hubiésemos**

Vosotros **hubierais/hubieseis**

Ellos/ellas/ustedes **hubieran/hubiesen**

Si **hubiéramos llegado** tarde, no habríamos podido entrar.
(If **we had arrived** late, **we wouldn't have been able** to enter.)

Ojalá **me hubiese hecho caso**.
(If only **he had listened to me**.)

Using the *Pluscuamperfecto* in Context: Tips and Tricks

Pluscuamperfecto with Pronouns

When conjugating the *pluscuamperfecto*, remember to place direct, indirect and reflexive pronouns before the conjugated form of *haber*.

For example, the to use the reflexive verb **casarse** (to get married) in the past, you would have to conjugate it like this:

Ella **se había casado** antes de cumplir 19 años.
(She **had gotten married** before she turned 19.)

With direct or indirect object pronouns, the conjugations look like this:

Les había dicho la contraseña.
(I **had told them** the password.)

Alternatively, you could write an even shorter sentence: *Se la **había dicho***. (I **had told** it to them.)

*Todavía **no lo habían terminado*** cuando me fui.
(They still hadn't finished it when I left.)

***Pluscuamperfecto* Questions**

To ask questions in the *pluscuamperfecto*, remember to place the subject of the sentence after the verb.

¿Habían estudiado los estudiantes antes del examen?
(Had the students studied before the exam?)

¿Había dicho tu madre a que hora tenías que llegar?
(Had your mother said what time you had to arrive?)

***Pluscuamperfecto* Time Prepositions**

When dealing with *pluscuamperfecto* verbs, and particularly the indicative of the *pluscuamperfecto*, you'll often come across certain prepositions of time. Some of them are:

Ya — already

Ya lo había dicho dos veces.
(I had already said it twice.)

Antes/Antes que/Antes de/Antes de que — before

Lo habían visto antes.
(They had seen it before.)

Habíamos salido antes que ellos.
(We had left before them.)

Había comido una pizza antes de jugar al fútbol.
(He had eaten a pizza before playing football.)

Él había llegado antes de que lloviera.
(He had arrived before it rained.)

Cuando — when

Ya habíamos empezado cuando llegaron.
(We had already started when they arrived.)

Nunca — never

¡Nunca lo había visto!
(I had never seen it!)

Todavía — still

Todavía no había fregado los platos cuando llegó su madre.
(He still hadn't washed the dishes when his mom arrived.)

Cool Songs in Spanish to Practice the *Pluscuamperfecto*

Learning song lyrics can be a great way to hone your knowledge of Spanish grammar. I've found that singing and listening to Spanish-language music is especially helpful for nailing down those irregular verbs. Once you hear an irregular conjugation over and over again in a song, it'll stick in your mind forever. Here are some songs that'll help you master the *pluscuamperfecto*!

Indicative *Pluscuamperfecto*

Franco de Vita, “Ya lo había vivido” — This song contains a number of instances of the *pluscuamperfecto*, including a variety of irregular and regular verbs.

Jorge Rosas, “Me había olvidado” — The song title “*Me había olvidado*” provides an example of correct pronoun placement when using the *pluscuamperfecto*: always before the conjugation of the verb *haber*.

Subjunctive *Pluscuamperfecto*

Carlos Rivera, “El hubiera no existe” — This song's title at first appears to be a grammatical error (where's the past participle?) but it's really a play on the grammar. It translates approximately to “‘Would have’ doesn't exist.” Listen for a number of different examples of when to use the subjunctive *pluscuamperfecto* to express impossible situations in “if clauses.”

Christina Aguilera featuring Luis Fonsi, “Si no te hubiera conocido” — This lovely duet, whose title translates to “If I had never met you,” showcases a variety of situations in which to use the subjunctive *pluscuamperfecto*. Particularly, it showcases “if clauses” in which the subjunctive *pluscuamperfecto* is paired with a conditional verb.

Maybe after reading this article, you'll think, “*¡Vaya! ¡Nunca había aprendido el pluscuamperfecto!*” (Wow! I'd never learned the Spanish past perfect!) Perhaps, on the other hand, you're thinking, “*Qué aburrido, ya había aprendido todo eso.*” (How boring, I'd already learned all of that.)

Either way, after reading this post, you now have the tools to construct either of these sentences—and any other sentence in the *pluscuamperfecto* tense! (See, it wasn't as hard as the name sounds, was it?)

To keep practicing, you can use a book from the reputable Practice Makes Perfect series. “Practice Makes Perfect: Complete Spanish Grammar” and “Practice Makes Perfect: Spanish Verb Tenses” both include sections about the *pluscuamperfecto* and plenty of opportunities to practice using them.

For more informal practice, sit down with a big bowl of popcorn and watch a Spanish-language movie, listening for the *pluscuamperfecto* in speech. You could also use a virtual immersion platform. FluentU, for example, has annotated captions with nuanced definitions and context for all of its videos, which can help understand why a word is being used in a particular way.

Soon, my friends, your *pluscuamperfecto* will be simply *perfecto*!