walks in and says to me...') and it may sound unfortunate in serious English styles; but it is very common both in literary and spoken Spanish:

Por fin, distingüe a unos pasos, acuchillado, a un hombre con sandalias y sombrero de cuero (M. Vargas Llosa, Pe.)

Bueno, pues me llama y me dice que por qué no nos venimos? ¿Vemos? ¿Dónde? ¿Le digo yo. En cualquier sitio, me dice. Pero, ¿qué le digo yo a tus amigos?, le digo. Es que no son tan guapos como tu, me dice. A buenos horarios los has desechado, le digo (S. Puertolas, sp. dialogue; very colloquial).

This historical present is almost always used after por poco 'all but', and often after casi 'nearly': me esté por unas escaleras y por poco casi no me rompi el tobillo 'I fell casi 'nearly': me esté por unas escaleras and nearly broke my ankle', casi me mata, lo cual no era nada down a flight of stairs and nearly broke my ankle', casi me mata, lo cual no era nada down a flight of stairs and nearly broke my ankle'; 'she nearly killed me, which difícil por aquel entonces (A. Bryce Echenique, Pe.) 'she nearly killed me, which difícil por aquel entonces (A. Bryce Echenique, Pe.)'she nearly killed me, which difícil por aquel entonces (A. Bryce Echenique, Pe.)'.

Exceptions can be found on both continents: went crazy on opening the telegram. Exceptions can be found on both continents: went crazy on opening the telegram. Exceptions can be found on both continents: went crazy on opening the telegram.' rió al oir de la crihosa que es (M. Vargas Llosa, Pe., dialogue) 'she's so affectionate she nearly made me cry'.

14.3.4 Present tense used as an imperative

This is frequently used in everyday speech to make strong orders: te callas 'you just keep quiet'. All matters concerned with the imperative are discussed in Chapter 17.

14.3.5 Use of the present to ask permission

The present is much used when asking for someone's consent:

¿Te lo mandé? Should I send it to you?
¿Escribo a los abuelos para decírselo? Should I write to our grandparents to tell them?
¿Vamos al cine esta noche? Shall we go to the movies tonight?

14.3.6 Use of the present as a future tense

Spanish makes constant use of the simple present to refer to the future: mañana vovaste a California 'we're going to California tomorrow', te veo luego 'I'll see you later'. See 14.6.3.

14.3.7 Present in sentences like 'it's the first time I've seen you' and other expressions of time

English uses the perfect in sentences of the type 'this is the first time that...', and 'I've been... for n days/weeks', etc. Spanish uses the present:

Es la primera vez que lo veo
No es la primera vez que los noruegos entran en Nueva York (J. L. Borges, Arg.)
Hace tres años que no vengo
Desde hace días estoy tratando de comunicarme con el señor Morales (Press-Citizen, Guatemala, dialogue).

It's the first time I have seen her
It isn't the first time that the Norwegians have entered New York
I haven't been here for three years
I've been trying to contact Mr Morales for two days.

The past tense used in such constructions is the imperfect. See 14.5.3.

14.4 The preterite: general

The Spanish preterite describes events that were completed in the past or are viewed as completed in the past (see 14.4.1 for the reason for this distinction). Occasionally it highlights the fact that an event is beginning in the past: see 14.4.8.

English constantly fails to distinguish the preterite from the imperfect: 'I looked' may be used for 'just then I looked out of the window' or 'just then I was thinking out of the window'. This ambiguity of English is a recurrent problem for learners of Spanish.

It is easy to explain that the preterite is used for 'one-off' past events like Marco se rompió la pierna 'Marco broke his leg'. Marco se rompió una pierna 'Marco was breaking his leg' or 'used to break his leg' is unlikely (but see 14.5.8 for a rare exception). It is also possible to say confidently that the preterite is used for events that continue for the whole of a specified period or throughout a number of specified periods in the past: fue muy durante ocho años 'he was king for eight years', habló tres veces durante dos horas 'he spoke three times for two hours (each time)'. But a difficulty arises when the past event is habitual or prolonged, since one can then sometimes optionally use either the imperfect or the preterite, as in mi padre fumó a menudo cuando era joven en Funda mucho cuando era joven 'my father smoked a lot when he was young' or la Guerra Civil era un desastre 'Guerra Civil was a disaster'; see 14.4.3 and 14.4.4 for a discussion.

The preterite is often used in Latin-American Spanish where the perfect tense is used in Spain. See 14.9.8 for discussion.

14.4.1 Preterite for events occurring throughout a finite period

The preterite tense must be used for an event that continued throughout the whole of a finite period of time, regardless of whether the action then ended. By 'finite' is meant a period of time of a specific length, i.e. one whose beginning and end are stated or clearly implied:

Estuve destinado en Bilbao dos años
Para un instante pensé que me caía
Los dinosauros regresaron sobre la tierra durante millones de años
La ETA tuvo menos actividad durante el régimen de Franco que al instaurar la democrazia (M. Vargas Llosa, Pe.)
Durante años no pudimos hablar de otra cosa (G. García Márquez, Col.)

I was stationed in Bilbao for two years
For a moment I thought that I was falling
The dinosaurs roamed on earth for millions of years
ETA (Basque terrorists) was less active during the Franco regime than when democracy was introduced
For years we could talk of nothing else
14.4.3 Preterite used to distinguish narrative events from descriptive background

The preterite is sometimes used to show that an event is a part of a story, while the imperfect shows that it is descriptive background. This is clear for English-speakers in a sentence like tus tres niños 'they had (i.e. 'produced' /' gave birth to') three children', which is usually three separate events, and tuve tres niños, which is a state of affairs, not an event. Less obvious is the difference between quería hacerlo 'they wanted to do it', which is a state of mind, and quisiéron hacerlo, which is an event with an outcome, i.e. they wanted to do it and tried to, successfully or not (it usually implies failure).

English-speakers find this distinction most confusing with the verb ser. María Luz Gutiérrez Araus (1995), 32, cites an interesting example from García Márquez: un perro... moría a cuatro personas que se le atrevieron a oír canción. Tres eran exiliados suecos. La otra fue Sierra María 'a dog bit four people who got in its way'. Three were black slaves. The other was Sierra María. Luz Gutiérrez explains the difference between cruce and fue here as a difference between the 'non-active', i.e. 'descriptive', imperfect and the 'active' (i.e. 'narrative') preterite fue. The preterite brings Sierra María into the foreground—she is a major character in the novel. These sort-of examples are rare and literary; ordinary language would say era.

In the following example, the preterite presents the publication of the statistics as events while the imperfect paints the background:

En noviembre se registraron 851.320 desempleados, de los cuales 83.419 fueron indocumentados. Es decir, los cálculos han sido significativamente superiores a los datos del pasado año, que fue de más de un mil. El paro había caído en 157.444 personas desde noviembre de 1996, cuando la tasa de paro era del 14.04% (El País, Sp.)
14.4.4 Use of the preterite to denote habitual events

Habitual events in the past are usually expressed by the imperfect, as explained in 14.5.2. But the preterite can sometimes describe habitual or prolonged events in the past. The preterite views the event as having gone on for a finite period whereas the imperfect merely describes it as going on at the background, or as part of the background: for the present: as perfect: ‘preterite’.

In mi padre fumaba mucho cuando era joven ‘my father smoked a lot when he was young’, either tense is possible, whether or not he carried on smoking afterwards and whether or not he is still alive (it is this possibility that makes the linguistic terms ‘perfective’ or ‘imperfective’ or ‘non-complete aspect’ ‘unhelpful for learners of Spanish’). The imperfect tense views the event as in progress at the time, the preterite looks back on it as an event viewed as habit as in progress at the time. Since we cannot always know what is in the speaker’s or writer’s mind, it often happens that either the preterite or the imperfect can be used in Spanish with a difference of nuance that is virtually untranslatable in English:

- My childhood was happy
  - I remember it rained a lot when we lived in Ireland
  - Alonso got up every day at eight to go to work
  - When we lived together we had no problems
  - He always used to sleep as his father had slept, with his gun hidden in his pillowcase

Intrinsic characteristics are likely to be expressed by the imperfect since they tend to be part of a general background. Thus la casa en muy grande ‘the house was very big’, mi padre era indio/blanco ‘my father was Indian/white’. Use of fue in these cases is very unlikely since such descriptions are obviously not ‘events’, but cf. su padre fue un hombre muy alto, muy guapo, muy inteligente (A. Gala, Sp.).

Non-intrinsic characteristics can take either tense, but are more likely to appear with the imperfect if they refer to some more or less permanent attribute. However, a whole choice of tense depends whether we consider an event viewed as a whole, or whether we are focusing on what was true at the time (imperfect), or whether we are focusing on what was true at the time (preterite). Students in yo, de pequeño, fue tímido or en tímido ‘as a child I was used to be timid’. Students in yo, de pequeño, fue tímido or en tímido ‘as a child I was used to be timid’. Students in yo, de pequeño, fue tímido or en tímido ‘as a child I was used to be timid’.

14.4.5 Use of the preterite to denote an event that has reached completion

The preterite may indicate that a process has finally reached completion, as in:

- Once vez el dinero estuvo en mis manos, compré la casa
  - Estuve lloviendo una noche (G. García Márquez, Col.)
  - Cuando el café estuvo listo lo alcanzó una tranca (E. Sabato, Arq.)
  - La conversación se fue espaciando (ir + gerund indicates a longish process, for shows it ended)

14.4.6 Use of the preterite to indicate an event that actually happened

Sometimes the preterite clearly indicates that the event referred to happened, while the imperfect does not give us this information. Compare: llovimos que atrevimos dos desiertos para llegar al oasis ‘we had to cross two deserts to get to the oasis’ (and we did), and tentamos que atrevimos dos desiertos para llegar al oasis ‘we had (still) to cross two deserts to get to the oasis’. The second does not tell us whether we crossed it or turned back. Further examples:

- Fue un error decírtelo
  - Era un error decírtelo
  - Fue una preza fácil
  - Era una preza fácil
  - Costó trabajo conseguirlo
  - Costó trabajo conseguirlo

*Fue un error devolvérele el dinero, pero eso no lo hice* has the absurd meaning. ‘I committed the mistake of giving him back the money, so I didn’t: en un error... must be used.

14.4.7 Preterite to denote a rapid or short-lived event

The preterite can sometimes show that an event lasted only a moment. The imperfect would, in these cases, indicate an event that had not yet ended at the time referred to:

- Hube una nota de alarma en su voz
  - Cuando abrí el horno, se sintió calor
  - Estuve a punto de pensar que esos marines no eran vagos (C. Puentes, Mex., dialogue)
  - There was a (brief) note of alarm in his/her voice
  - When I opened the oven it heated up (i.e. there was a gust of heat)
  - (For a second) he was on the verge of thinking that those hands weren’t his own

- Supo el griego, el latín, el francés, el italiano y el español, y fue muy de los primeros hombres de letras que estudiaron anglófonos (J. L. Borges, Arg., more usually los primeros hombres de letras que estudiaron inglés) Sir Thomas Browne (1658–1682) knew Greek, Latin, French, Italian and Spanish, and was one of the first men of letters to study Anglo-Saxon’.
14.4.8 Preterite used to indicate the beginning of a state or action

The preterite may indicate the beginning of an action. Compare "mi hija habló a los once meses" (i.e., empezó a hablar) 'my daughter started talking at eleven months', and "mi hija hablaba a los once meses" 'my daughter was talking by eleven months'. Also:

Me cogió bien (cf., "me amat bien" 'I was getting on well with him/her')
Ana me gustó desde el primer momento
Fue niño y le pusieron Rita (M. Rodoreda, Castilian translation, Sp.)
Todo lo que había dentro me pareció lejano y ajeno (L. Sepúlveda, Ch.)
Desde 1953, cuando por primera vez estuve consciente de la Revolución Cubana (interview, Gomur, Cu.; Sp. fue consciente)

I took a liking to her/him
I liked ('took a liking to') Ana right from the start
It was a girl and we called her Rita
Everything inside (suddenly) seemed to me distant and alien since 1957, when I first became aware of the Cuban Revolution...

14.4.9 Preterite used to indicate certainties in the future

The preterite is occasionally used to indicate an absolute certainty in the future:

Cuando llegue, llegó
Cuando se acabe, se acabó

(S/he'll be here when (s/he) is here
(And that's that)
When it's finished, it's finished

This construction is more common in Latin America than in Spain. The following three examples are not heard in Spain:

Para las dos ya se acabó (Mex., from Lope Blanch, 1991; Sp. ya se acaba acabado)
Maravía ya llegó el día (L. Rafael Sánchez, Puerto Rico, dialogue; Sp. maravía en el día)
Nos faltan (colloquial La. Am.; Sp. nos faltan)

14.4.10 Special meanings of the preterite of some verbs

Some verbs require special translations when they appear in the preterite. This is especially true of the modal verbs deber, poder, quedar, saber, discussed in Chapter 21. Two other verbs affected are:

(a) Tener: the preterite may mean 'to receive' / 'to get', the imperfect means 'had in the sense of 'was in my possession':

tuvieron la impresión de que...
tenía la impresión de que...

I got the impression that...
I had the impression that...

When he got the chance to study, he graduated as an engineer from the Open University

This does not override the rule given at 14.4.1 that the preterite must be used for actions continuing throughout a specified period: "tuvieron durante tres días' (s/he had a fever for three days)...

14.5 The imperfect: general

The Spanish imperfect form indicates an event viewed as not yet complete at the past time referred to. It is therefore much used as a background tense to describe something that was already in progress when another event occurred (14.5.1), and to express habitual events in the past (14.5.2). Although the preterite can also sometimes describe habitual events, as explained at 14.4.4.

In colloquial language the Spanish imperfect may be a substitute for the conditional. See 14.5.4 and 25.5 for discussion.

14.5.1 Imperfect tense to denote past events in progress when something else happened

The imperfect is much used to indicate any state or event that was in progress when something else happened. It is thus the correct tense for background descriptions; the preterite is used for the events set against the background (imperfects in bold type):

Yo veía el cine cuando vi a Niso

Miré por encima del hombro para estar seguro de que nadie me acuchillaba

Cuando estuve en el cuarto noté que olía a quemado

Los monumentos y estatuas que adornaban los pueblos y las plazas fueron triturados

Entonces la señora, pero el yo no sabía

(M. Mastretta, Mex., dialogue; i.e., his absence was still continuing when I arrived)

I was coming back from the cinema when I saw Niso

She locked her shoulder to be sure that no one was lying in wait for her

When I entered the room I noticed there was a smell of burning

The monuments and statues that adorned the avenues and squares were pulverized

I went back to the living room, but he was no longer there

For the possible use of the continuous imperfect in some of these sentences, e.g., estaba acuchillando, instead of the non-continuous imperfect, see 14.5.5.

14.5.2 Imperfect used to denote events that continued in the past for an unspecified period

The imperfect can indicate that an event continued in the past for an unspecified period (and may or may not have continued). It is thus much used for characterisations:

Las catapultas romanas lanzaban piedras

Cade que veo no da loca (L. Aldecoa, Sp., dialogue)

Las cosinas me comieron comidas mexicanas de cuatro a cinco horas de duración

Roman catapults threw stones

He used to say it every time you met

These four- or five-hour Mexican meals exasperated him
14.5 The imperfect: general

- You only had to tell me and I'd have changed your plate.
- One more step and you'd have broken your neck.

The imperfect cannot replace the conditional when the latter indicates a guess or estimate (as explained at 14.72).

(d) In familiar Spanish, to express a wish:

- Ya le dije yo cuatro verdades
  - I wouldn't mind giving him/her a piece of my mind (lit. "telling him/her four truths")
- Tenías que hacer un monumento al tío que inventó el café (M. Delibes, Sp., dialogue)
- Yo ahora me tomaba un helado y me quedaba tan bien

14.5.5 Hablaba or estaba hablando?

If the action is not habitual and is truly past (e.g. 'I was leaving the next day' is in fact a future in the past), the difference between the continuous and non-continuous imperfect is often blurred, although modern Spanish prefers the continuous form in such cases if it is possible with the verb (see Chapter 15): yo hablabas/estabas hablando con los vecinos cuando llegaron los bomberos (esto hablando preferido) 'I was talking to the neighbors when the firemen arrived'.

However, the verbs ir and venir and a few others are not generally used in the continuous form: see 15.3c.

14.5.6 Imperfect in children's language

An interesting use of the imperfect is found in children's language (called the imperfecto lúdico or 'imperfect of play'): vamos a jugar a que yo era un indio 'let's pretend I'm a cowboy and you're an Indian'.

14.5.7 Imperfect to make courteous requests

The imperfect can be used to show courtesy in requests and enquiries:

- ¿Qué desean?
  - Perdona, quería hablar con el director
- What would you like?
  - Excuse me, I'd like a word with the manager

14.5.8 Imperfect used for preterite in literary styles

In literary styles, the imperfect is sometimes used as an alternative to the preterite for dramatic effect. Normally the sentence includes an adverb of time that shows that the action is a single completed event:

- Shortly after, the French police arrested a 56-year-old DM
- Un día antes, en Santiago de Cuba, era asesinada Frank País (Granma, Cu.)

Aunque no me gustara, me casaba con ella
- I'd marry her even if I didn't like her

A veces le daban el aire y la tierra que pisaba,
- el sol del amanecer, las cuencas de los ojos
- (A. Mastretta, Mex.)

The preterite must be used if a period of time is specified, as in 'she was (fue) president for eight years'; see 14.4.1.

14.5.3 Imperfect in phrases of time of the kind 'I hadn't seen her for years', 'it was the first time that...'

English-speakers should note the use of the imperfect in the following type of sentence where English uses the pluperfect tense (for the use of the present tense in sentences of this type see note to 14.3.7):

- Hacia años que no la veía
- Era la primera vez que la veía
- I hadn't seen her for years
- It was the first time I had seen her

14.5.4 Imperfect for the conditional

The imperfect is often used in familiar speech instead of the conditional. This most commonly occurs in four cases (the examples under b and c reflect European Spanish; we are not sure about the distribution of these constructions in Latin America):

(a) When the conditional would refer to an immediate future. In this case Spanish resembles English: one can say 'he said he would come' or 'he said he was coming':

- Promezieron que vendrían
- They promised they were coming/would come
- Jasó que lo hacía
- She swore (sh) he'd do it
- Pensaba que ya no vendrían
- I thought you weren't coming/wouldn't come any more
- Sabíamos que los refuerzos llegarían
- We knew the reinforcements were arriving/would arrive at any moment

This is not possible if the future is not immediate: juró que me amaría siempre (not juraba...) 'she swore (she) would love me for ever'.

(b) With deber and poder, in which case the imperfect is slightly more colloquial:

- Podía ser una solución, mira... (C. Martín
- It could be a solution, you know...
- Gaité, Sp., dialogue)

- Deberías deberías hacerlo ahora
- You should do it now

This usage is especially frequent with poder and deber to show that someone should or could have acted differently in the past, e.g. podías/podrías haberla hecho, ¿no?

(c) In 'remote' and 'unfulfilled' conditions in familiar Spanish (see 25.5 for details):

- Aunque no me gustara, me casaba con ella
- I'd marry her even if I didn't like her
- Sometimes the air and the ground she trod on hurt her; and the rising sun, and her eye-sockets

14. Use of indicative (non-continuous) verb forms

- Listó no tenía más que declinar y le cambiaba el plato (very colloquial for le había cambiado)
- Un poco más y te rompí el pescuezo (colloquial for le habías roto el cuello, but note)

You only had to tell me and I'd have changed your plate.

One more step and you'd have broken your neck.
14.6 Future tense: general

Spanish has several ways of expressing the future, and the so-called 'future tense' (hablar, verás) is not the most common in everyday speech (from which it is said to be disappearing except in its 'suppositional' role described at 14.6.5):

(a) Esta noche vamos al cine
(b) Esta noche vamos a ir al cine
(c) Esta noche iremos al cine
(d) Esta noche iremos de ir al cine

(ad) describes an event which is prearranged or scheduled.

b) is a foreshadowed or 'intentional' future and it is also often an informal substitute for the future tense proper (verás, serás, etc.

c) often excludes the idea of prearrangement or a scheduled event. Consequently it may sound rather uncertain or, depending on tone and context, may sound like an order or promise.

d) is discussed at 21.4.1. It is sometimes heard in Latin America with a future meaning, but in Castilian-speaking areas of Spain it usually implies obligation and is now old-fashioned, rather like the English 'tonight we are to go to the cinema'. But it has other, still current, uses, discussed at 21.4.1. It is common in Mexico as an alternative to deber. The latter is discussed at 21.3.2, the Mexican construction at 21.4.1b.

As was mentioned earlier, the future tense is gradually disappearing from spoken (but not written) Spanish, this decline being more advanced in Latin America than in Spain and more deep-rooted in familiar or popular styles. It is usually replaced by the simple present (e.g., llamarme 'I'll call you tomorrow' (see 14.6.3) — or by ir a + infinitive: ir a ver mañana 'I'm going to see her tomorrow' (see 14.6.4).

14.6.1 Uses of the future tense form to denote future time

Often, particularly in informal speech, the present and future tenses are interchangeable. However, the future is used:

(a) For provisional or less certain statements about the future, e.g., for forecasts, or for statements about the future when no other word makes it clear that the future is meant:

Si llueve se aplazará el partido
En el remoto futuro el sol se apagará
Para entonces todos estaremos calvos

Me has dado cinco euros. ¿Ya estás tan ricas, o te vas a tropezar con el futuro?

Es un poco tarde para pensar en el futuro, ¿no? (Vázquez, Sp., dialogue)

Nos veremos mañana en el parque, ¿no es cierto? (C. Fuentes, Mx., dialogue)

Nas veremos... (would imply more certainty)

(b) If it rains the match will be postponed
In the remote future the sun will go out
We'll all be bored by then (said of something that will take a long time)
She gave me 100 euros. I'll manage with that until next week, and then we'll see
When we get through the tunnel you'll see how the weather changes. It will be colder
We'll see you another tomorrow at the Palace won't we?

(i) The difference between sentences like te veo mañana and te veré mañana 'I'll see you tomorrow' may be merely one of tone. Some informants claimed they would use the present tense in te veo mañana (informal) and the future in le veré (austed) mañana (formal).

(ii) Acaso, tal vez, quizás, which mean 'perhaps', posiblemente 'possibly' and probablemente 'probably' may, when they refer to a future event, appear either with the future tense or the conditional, but much more usually with the present subjunctive. See 16.5.2 for details. Tal vez/quiza/quizás/quizás no sea mañana is not Spanish.