The Spanish preterit and imperfect opposition has been studied under the scope of SLA studies (Andersen & Shirai, 1996; Barlovi-Harlig, 1998; Hooper, 1979; Lubbers-Quesada, 2011; Montrul & Slabakova, 2003) as well as grammar analyses (Alicia & Blecua, 1980; Bybee et al. 1994; Silva- Corvalán, 1982; RAE, 1973, 2010). These investigations assume that these structures are stable, i.e. they do not show variation. However, Poplack and Dion (2009) found discrepancies between grammar analyses; in addition, they found that the grammars do not represent how speakers use the future tense in French. In light of Poplack and Dion’s (2009) study, the main goal of this study is to determine how representative Spanish preterit and imperfect grammar analyses are of spoken data.

The objective of this study was twofold: first, to contrast different grammars of the Spanish preterit and imperfect in order to identify if there is variation between them. The second objective was to determine which linguistic factors constrain these structures in native Spanish speakers; this will allow a baseline to be established in order to contrast with the different grammar analyses. In order to address the first goal, a total of 17 grammars were examined and divided into two categories: prescriptive (Alonso & Enriquez-Ureña, 1938; Bello, 1841; Gili & Gaya, 1961; RAE, 1973, 2010) and theoretical (Alicia & Blecua, 1980; Andersen & Shirai, 1996; Barlovi-Harlig, 1998; Bybee et al., 1994; Cipria & Roberts, 2000; Comrie, 1976; Hoover, 1979; Montrul & Slabakova, 2003; Reyes, 1990; Salas-González, 1996; Silva-Corvalán, 1982; Wienrich, 1968) As for the second objective, 12 native Puerto Rican speakers (6 males and 6 females) from the PRESEEA corpus were examined.

The results show that there are discrepancies between the different grammar analyses. Among the findings, it is worth mentioning that even RAE showed variability between the 1973 edition and the 2010 one. However, lexical semantics (Andersen & Shirai, 1996; Barlovi-Harlig, 1998; Cipria & Roberts, 2000; Montrul & Slabakova, 2003; RAE, 2010) and the type of information (Alicia & Blecua, 1980; Barlovi-Harlig, 1998; Bybee et al., 1994; Hoover, 1979; Silva-Corvalán, 1982) were the linguistic factors that were somewhat consistent throughout the different grammar analyses.

As for the second objective, a logistical regression using GoldVarb X was performed in order to identify the linguistic factors that predict the use of the preterit and imperfect in the spoken data. The analysis showed that lexical semantics, specificity of the event, temporal time reference and age were selected as predictors for these tenses. The imperfect was favored with states and activities, with unspecific events, and by the older generation. The preterit, on the other hand, was favored by achievements and accomplishments, specific events, and the younger generations. When contrasting the grammar analyses with the spoken data, it was found that the grammars do not necessarily represent how the speakers use these structures. Only the lexical semantics and the specificity of the event are mentioned in the grammars.

These findings may be explained in two ways: first, the grammars may contain dialectal variation (Delgado-Díaz, 2012). Furthermore, the grammars may be trying to represent a standard variety as pointed out by Poplack and Dion (2009). The other possibility is that the grammars reflect diachronic variation of the function (Poplack & Dion, 2009) of the preterit and imperfect. These findings imply that these structures are not as stable as stated by the grammars. In addition, there might be an envelope of variation regarding the Spanish preterit and imperfect that needs to be defined.