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THE IMPERFECT TENSE

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Abstract

This article provides a comprehensive analysis of the imperfetto, one of the key topics in Italian grammar related to the past tense. The imperfetto is a past tense used to describe actions and situations that occurred in the past, as well as habitual or repeated actions in the past. The topic is examined in depth through detailed explanations, illustrative examples, and comparative analysis with other past tenses.

Keywords

imperfetto, past tense, passato prossimo, imperfetto with mentre

The imperfetto is a past tense used to describe situations and circumstances that occurred in the past. In this tense, the exact beginning and end of past events or situations are often unspecified. The imperfetto can be used in a variety of contexts. For example:

a) To describe an ongoing (unfinished) action in the past and its progression:

- Stamattina, quando sei arrivato, dormivo ancora.

This morning, when you arrived, I was still sleeping.

- Ieri, mentre pranzavo, ascoltavo il giornale radio.

Yesterday, while I was having lunch, I was listening to the radio news.

- Aspettavo l'autobus da pochi minuti quando ho visto passare Giorgio.

I had been waiting for the bus for a few minutes when I saw Giorgio passing by.

b) To express habitual or regularly repeated actions in the past:

- Tutte le domeniche andavo a trovare i nonni.

Every Sunday, I used to visit my grandparents.

- Di solito, mentre pranzavo, ascoltavo il giornale radio.

Usually, while I was having lunch, I would listen to the radio news.

c) To describe past situations or conditions (weather, physical state, emotional situations):

- La giornata era bella; splendeva il sole, ma faceva freddo.

The day was beautiful; the sun was shining, but it was cold.

- Arlo era alto e magro. Aveva i capelli e gli occhi scuri.

Arlo was tall and thin. He had dark hair and eyes.

- Ero sempre contento di uscire con Lucia.

I was always happy to go out with Lucia.

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d) To express an action that occurred simultaneously with another past action:

- Ho preso un'aspirina perché avevo la febbre.

I took an aspirin because I had a fever.

- Laura mi ha detto che aspettava una telefonata da Paolo.

Laura told me that she was waiting for a call from Paolo.

- Ho conosciuto Luca quando frequentavo l'università.

I met Luca when I was attending university.

- Ieri, mentre pranzavo, ho ascoltato il giornale radio.

Yesterday, while I was having lunch, I listened to the radio news. [1]

Just as verbs in other tenses are formed using three different suffixes, in this tense verbs are also divided into regular and irregular forms, and they are conjugated by adding past tense suffixes. In the **Imperfetto** tense, verbs ending in **-are** take suffixes beginning with **a**, verbs ending in **-ere** take suffixes beginning with **e**, and verbs ending in **-ire** take suffixes beginning with **i**. For example:

essere	
io	**ero**
tu	**eri**
lui/lei	**era**
noi	**eravamo**
voi	**eravate**
loro	**erano**

avere	
io	**avevo**
tu	**avevi**
lui/lei	**aveva**
noi	**avevamo**
voi	**avevate**
loro	**avevano**

The verbs conjugated in the following table are considered the principal verbs in Italian grammar, and in many past tenses, other verbs are formed using these verbs as the base. [2]
When conjugating verbs, they are classified into regular and irregular forms. For example, to form the **Imperfetto** of regular verbs, the endings **-ARE**, **-ERE**, and **-IRE** are removed from the infinitive form of the verb:

parl**are** = parl

prend**ere** = prend

sent**ire** = sent

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	PARLARE	PRENDERE	SENTIRE
io	parl**avo**	prend**evo**	sent**ivo**
tu	parl**avi**	prend**evi**	sent**ivi**
lui/lei	parl**ava**	prend**eva**	sent**iva**
noi	parl**avamo**	prend**evamo**	sent**ivamo**
voi	parl**avate**	prend**evate**	sent**ivate**
loro	parl**avano**	prend**evano**	sent**ivano**

After the stem of the verb has been isolated, the suffixes of the **Imperfetto** tense are added.

Furthermore, there are several irregular verbs, for example:

Esserci - c'ero, c'eri, c'era, c'eravamo, c'eravate, c'erano

C'era molto caldo in spiaggia.

Fare - facevo, facevi, faceva, facevamo, facevate, facevano

Il Dottor Mancini faceva sempre sorrisi strani. [3]

Additionally, there are modal verbs: **POTERE**, **DOVERE**, **VOLERE**. These verbs are conjugated like regular verbs and directly follow the infinitive form of the main verb.

As with other modal verbs and in other tenses, the modal verbs in the **Imperfetto** also express the following functions:

possibilitá/permesso – possibility and permission
necessitá/obbligo – necessity and obligation
volontá/desiderio – expressions of desire and wish

For example:

1) Carlo, aspettavo una tua telefonata per le dieci!
Mi dispiace, ma non **potevo:** ero dal direttore (This sentence serves as an example of the absence of possibility: although the person wanted to go, they could not do so because the director was present, i.e., the opportunity was not available)
2) Una volta si **poteva** fumare nel cinema, oggi é proibito. (In this sentence, the focus is on permission: the person wanted to smoke in the cinema but could not do so because smoking was prohibited there.)
3) All'universitá **dovevo** sempre studiare anche la sera. (This sentence expresses possibility, indicating that it is possible to study at the university even in the evening)

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4) Da bambini, io e mio fratello **dovevamo** sempre mangiare spinaci.(In this sentence, obligation is expressed, indicating that the person is required to eat every day)

5) Sono rimasti in ufficio fino a mezzanotte perché **volevano** assolutamente finire il lavoro. (In this sentence, desire is expressed, indicating that the person wished to stay in the office until midnight to finish their work.)

6) **Volevo** tanto andare in Egitto e finalmente l'anno scorso ci sono andato! (In this sentence, a wish is expressed, indicating that the person strongly wanted to go to Egypt and was able to do so last year)

Moreover, the **Imperfetto** can also indicate ongoing actions. That is, while one situation is occurring, another event happens simultaneously. This is expressed using the word **mentre**, meaning "during" or "while."

Additionally, it is used in two contexts:

- When two actions occur simultaneously, both the main clause and the subordinate clause are in the **Imperfetto** tense (**Imperfetto + Imperfetto**).
- When an ongoing action is interrupted by another action, the main clause is in the **Imperfetto**, while the interrupting action is in the **Passato Prossimo** (**Imperfetto + Passato Prossimo**) [4]

For example:

1) Mentre io guardavo la tv, mio fratello studiava – while I was watching television, my brother was studying. (That is, two actions were occurring simultaneously.)

2) Ieri pioveva e faceva freddo – last night, it was raining, and it was also cold. (That is, both the rain and the cold were occurring at the same time.)

3) Mentre guardavo la tv, ha telefonato Maria – while I was watching television, Maria called. (That is, my television watching was interrupted by Maria's call. One action is ongoing while the other interrupts it.)

4) Mentre dormivo, mio padre mi ha svegliato – while I was sleeping, my father woke me up. (That is, my father's action of waking me interrupted my sleeping.) [5]

This article provided explanations on the **Imperfetto**, a key topic in Italian grammar concerning the past tense. Through this tense, it is possible to describe past situations, actions with an unknown beginning or end, and to examine how these actions can be interrupted or continued using other tenses. A thorough and comprehensive study of the past tense not only enhances understanding of Italian grammar but also helps make communication in Italian more fluent, expressive, and meaningful.

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