

Important Differences Between the Preterite and Imperfect

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Past Tenses in Spanish

Preterite (Pretérito) vs. Imperfect (Imperfecto)

Not easily translated because in English there is no great difference between -- Preterite -- an action that was completed in the past versus -- Imperfect -- an action that was true in the past but it is ambiguous if it is still true.

Fue profesor de la universidad. (He/she was a professor of the university but no longer is. The action is completed)

Era profesor de la universidad. (He was a professor of the university at the time; however, it is not clear whether he is still a professor or not.) A classical example would be, Te quise versus Te quería. In English, they are both translated as I loved you. In Spanish, they do not mean the same thing, AT ALL. Te quise is said when the feeling that the person had, is DEAD. Te quería means that at that time I LOVED you; what is not clear -- and which, quite frankly, is not part of the equation -- is whether I still, in the present, love you.

Past Tenses in Spanish

Another reason to use the preterite versus the imperfect is to indicate the beginning of an action or state. **Hablé** español en México vs. **Hablaba** español en México. The sentence in the preterite (hablé) refers to when I began the action; the correct translation would be: I began speaking Spanish in Mexico. The correct translation of the imperfect (hablaba) is either: I used to speak/ would speak/spoke Spanish in Mexico.

Past Tenses in Spanish

The preterite is used to describe an event which has a specified beginning and ending; that is, an event that happened during a specified finite period, either implicitly or explicitly. An example would be the following: **Estaba** estudiando cuando entró. **Estuve** estudiando francés este semestre. The verb **estar** in the first sentence -- **Estaba** estudiando cuando entró -- is in the imperfect. It describes an action that was in the process -- read: incomplete -- when another action occurred. In the second sentence the verb **estar** -- **Estuve** estudiando francés el semestre pasado -- is in the preterite. It describes an on going action during a specified period of time. The opposite is the imperfect: A past action which is continuous during an unspecified time -- no clear beginning or end. It is also used for characteristic, situations and habitual actions: Juan **era** un hombre guapo. No **era** una niña obesa.

Past Tenses in Spanish

Preterite describes an action that was completed in the past versus the Imperfect expresses a past action that remained incomplete. Both **comí** and **comía** are both in the past. **Comí is the preterite**; it is translated as I ate -- the action began and ended in the past; it is most definitely over. **Comía is the imperfect**; it has several translation. Depending on the context, it could be translated as: I used to eat, I would eat, I was eating.

Past Tenses in Spanish

Because the Imperfect tense expresses a past action in progress, it is used for background description: **Hacía** mucho calor. **Había** mucho ruido en la sala. Las estatuas **adornaban** las plazas.

Past Tenses in Spanish

Colloquially, the Imperfect tense is used in place of the conditional when the conditional is the past of the immediate future. However, the Imperfect tense is NOT used to in place of the conditional when it is use for suppositions and the future is not immediate.

Juro que lo haré.

Juré que lo haría/ hacía.

Me dices que hablará.

Me dijiste que hablaría/ hablaba.

Past Tenses in Spanish

Preterite

(the action actually happened)

Fue un error.

Tuve que hablar ...

Fui a comer.

No le gustó ...

Estuve hablando ...

Lo creí.

vs.

Imperfect

(it may/may not have happened)

Era un error.

Tenía que hablar...

Iba a comer.

No le gustaba ...

Estaba hablando

Lo creía.

Past Tenses in Spanish

Some verbs change their meaning in preterite and imperfect

Verb	Preterite	Imperfect
tener	received/ to got	owned/ had/ in possession of
conocer	met for the first time	knew/ was acquainted with
poder	managed to	could, may
poder	could've happened but didn't	
deber	should've been done	should be done
querer	(negative) to refuse to	didn't want to (no information on whether it was done or not)