Aspectual Semantics of the Preterite Form in German

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Abstract: *This article examines the aspectual semantics of the preterite tense in the modern German language. The main goal is to analyze various linguistic perspectives on the semantics of the preterite and to identify the reasons for the divergence of opinions among scholars. The study discusses how the preterite form can express both imperfective (processual) and perfective (resultative) meanings, as well as function as an aspectually neutral form.*

Special attention is given to the relationship between aspectual meaning and verb actional properties, contextual factors, and taxis relations. The analysis is based on the works of E. Koschmieder, Yu. S. Maslov, V. M. Pavlov and B. Kh. Rizaev. The findings indicate that the German preterite represents an aspectually neutral grammatical form combining features of process and completion, making it a multifunctional unit in the German verbal system.

Keywords: *preterite, aspectual semantics, perfectivity, imperfectivity, neutrality, taxis, actional features.*

Introduction

This article is to analyze the divergent views found in aspectological literature regarding the semantic properties of the German preterite form and to identify the factors that have led to the emergence of opposing theoretical approaches to this issue.

Debates surrounding the German preterite primarily concern its aspectual status. Some linguists regard the preterite exclusively as a tense form and argue that it does not inherently express imperfective aspectual meaning. Others, by contrast, maintain that the preterite is capable of conveying processuality. A further group of scholars interpret the preterite as an aspectually neutral form.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative, descriptive-analytical approach grounded in functional and semantic linguistics. The analysis is based on a critical review of classical and contemporary aspectological literature in German linguistics, with particular attention to works addressing tense–aspect interaction, actionality, and narrative temporality. Key theoretical positions proposed by Koschmieder, Maslov, Pavlov, Rizayev, Diewald, Fabricius-Hansen, and Thieroff serve as the conceptual framework of the study.

In addition to theoretical analysis, contextual examination of authentic German language examples is employed to illustrate the aspectual behavior of the preterite form. These examples are drawn from narrative and descriptive contexts, allowing for the observation of how aspectual meanings emerge in discourse. Special emphasis is placed on the interaction between the preterite and the inherent actional properties of verbs, such as boundedness, duration, and telicity.

The study also applies a comparative method to distinguish the semantic and functional differences between the preterite and other past tense forms, particularly the perfect. This comparison is carried out at the level of discourse function and narrative structure rather than purely morphological opposition. The concept of taxis and event sequencing is used as an analytical tool to evaluate the role of the preterite in structuring temporal relations within narrative texts.

Results and Discussions

The analysis shows that the German preterite cannot be adequately described as a purely temporal form. Instead, it exhibits a high degree of aspectual flexibility, allowing it to express both processual and completed actions depending on the lexical and contextual environment. The aspectual interpretation of the preterite is largely determined by the actional class of the verb and its interaction with surrounding elements in discourse.

The findings confirm that the preterite functions as an aspectually neutral form rather than a strictly imperfective or perfective one. This neutrality enables the preterite to accommodate different aspectual readings without encoding them as fixed grammatical features. In narrative contexts, the preterite plays a central role in organizing event sequences and establishing epic time, thereby contributing to the coherence and temporal structure of the text.

Furthermore, the comparison with the perfect reveals that the semantic distinction between these forms lies primarily in their discourse function. While the perfect tends to be associated with subjective relevance and proximity to the speech moment, the preterite is predominantly used for objective, retrospective narration. This functional opposition reinforces the role of the preterite as a key narrative tense rather than a marker of a specific aspectual meaning.

In German, there are two additional forms that express past time reference, namely the Perfekt and Plusquamperfekt. In order to illustrate the semantic difference between the preterite (ich schrieb) and the perfect (ich habe geschrieben), E. Koschmieder provides the following example:

"Als ich gestern die Ludwigstraße entlang ging, da fiel plötzlich ein Ziegel von einem Dach und hätte mich beinah getroffen".

("Yesterday, as I was walking along Ludwigstraße, a brick suddenly fell from a roof and almost hit me.")

Koschmieder emphasizes that the verbs ging and fiel in this example do not express iterativity (see: Rizayev 1999; Koschmieder 1960: 33).

According to B. H. Rizayev, the verb gehen in this context denotes an unbounded action and represents a single ongoing process, whereas fallen expresses a bounded and completed action (Rizayev 1999: 29). This analysis demonstrates that the preterite form can convey both imperfective (processual) and perfective (completed) meanings, depending on the actional properties of the verb.

V. M. Pavlov explains this phenomenon by referring to the bipolar nature of the preterite. He argues that the preterite simultaneously encompasses both the "middle phase" of an action and its "completion." According to Pavlov, the aspectual neutrality of the preterite does not arise from an opposition between processuality and totality; rather, it is based on the integration of these two features into a unified semantic structure (Pavlov 1984: 56).

At the same time, contemporary studies by G. Diewald (2006) and C. Fabricius-Hansen (2009) offer a revised interpretation of the preterite's semantic neutrality. They argue that the aspectual meaning of the preterite is not a fixed grammatical feature, but rather a dynamic semantic entity shaped by contextual and discursive conditions. R. Thieroff (2010) similarly evaluates the preterite as a functionally neutral form within the "tense–aspect–mood" system, emphasizing its semantic flexibility and context-dependent actualization.

These approaches corroborate the position advanced by B. H. Rizayev (1999), according to whom the preterite is capable of expressing both action-as-process and action-as-result. Modern research (Diewald 2006; Fabricius-Hansen 2009; Thieroff 2010) further develops this view by conceptualizing the preterite as a context-sensitive and variable aspectual unit.

➢ Taxis, Event Sequencing, and the Narrative Function of the Preterite

The concept of taxis occupies an important place in German aspectology, as it encompasses the means used to express temporal relations and event sequencing. For instance, the sentence "He went home and read a book" conveys sequentiality, whereas "It rained while he was returning home" expresses simultaneity. In this respect, the preterite is frequently employed in epic or narrative contexts, where the sequential organization of events carries significant semantic weight.

S.-G. Andersson (1978) interprets the notion of Verlaufsstufe from the perspective of taxis. According to him, this phenomenon does not reflect aspectual processuality, but rather temporal relations. Similar approaches can be found in the works of Thieroff (2010) and C. Gronemeyer (2014). Gronemeyer, in particular, highlights the semantic elasticity of the preterite in relation to actional properties, emphasizing that its meaning is not fixed or invariant but rather depends on context and the actional type of the verb. In other words, a verb's aktants and contextual environment determine its aspectual interpretation.

Epic Time and Narrative Temporality

The concept of "epic time" (episches Tunc), introduced by Yu. S. Maslov (1984), describes a specific textual function of the preterite. This type of time is detached from the real speech moment and refers instead to an internal narrative time.

Recent studies have further developed this concept. K. Ebert and S. Günthner (2020) introduce the term narrative temporality, interpreting the preterite not merely as a marker of past factuality but as a form that represents perceived time. According to their view, the preterite depicts an epic reality unfolding in the narrative "here and now." Consequently, the preterite is regarded as the central tense form structuring the cognitive organization of narrative texts.

As Maslov pointed out, epic time is linked not to real-world temporality but to the internal dynamics of the narrative. In this sense, the modern approach proposed by Ebert and Günthner can be seen as a cognitive-pragmatic continuation of Maslov's theoretical framework.

Semantic Differences Between the Perfect and the Preterite

The semantic opposition between the preterite and the perfect remains a central topic in aspectological debate. A. Dammel and W. Abraham (2018) distinguish these forms from a discourse-functional perspective: the perfect is subjective, closely tied to the speech moment, and grounded in personal experience, whereas the preterite functions as a narrative, objective, and retrospective form.

This view reinforces the ideas put forward by Yu. S. Maslov and B. H. Rizayev through a modern interpretative lens: while the preterite expresses epic time, the perfect conveys a time frame closer to actual reality. Thus, the preterite cannot be reduced to a purely grammatical tense form but should be understood as a multi-layered unit with narrative and aspectual functions.

The analysis demonstrates that within the German linguistic system, the preterite functions not only as a temporal marker but also as an aspectual and narrative device. By integrating features of processuality and completion, it operates as an aspectually neutral form.

Contemporary research in German linguistics (Diewald 2006; Fabricius-Hansen 2009; Thieroff 2010; Gronemeyer 2014; Dammel & Abraham 2018; Ebert & Günthner 2020) supports this conclusion, characterizing the preterite as a multifunctional, context-dependent semantic unit.

Therefore, the issue of the aspectual semantics of the preterite remains relevant not only within classical aspectology but also in the broader framework of modern cognitive and narrative linguistics.

Conclusion

The study demonstrates that the aspectual semantics of the German preterite extend beyond the boundaries of traditional tense classification. The preterite operates as a multifunctional grammatical form that integrates temporal reference, aspectual interpretation, and narrative organization. Its ability to convey both processuality and completion supports the view that it is inherently aspectually neutral and semantically adaptable.

The findings align with contemporary approaches in German linguistics, which emphasize the dynamic and context-dependent nature of grammatical meaning. By highlighting the interaction between tense, actionality, and discourse structure, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the preterite within the tense–aspect–mood system. Consequently, the aspectual semantics of the preterite remain a relevant topic not only in classical aspectology but also in modern functional, cognitive, and narrative linguistics.

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