

Italian meets the fourth dimension: tense and time

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1 Introduction

Most European languages (all, as far as I know) use specific verb “tenses” to distinguish past, present and future. However, the tenses don’t match as neatly with the times as one might hope. Both English and Italian, for example, frequently use the present tense to indicate future events. Both languages even use the past tense to indicate the future, although not in the same way, and Italian can use the future tense to indicate the past (see “Back to the future” below). And then there is the peculiar English use of the present progressive for the future, made even more peculiar when it incorporates “to go” (e.g. the self-contradictory “tomorrow I’m going to stay in bed”). In any case, the obvious corollary is that the tenses of the two languages usually don’t align neatly with each other. In this chapter I’ll consider some of the more interesting ways in which time and tense differ.

It seems to be generally true that the past tense has the greatest variation from language to language. In Hungarian, for example, there is essentially only one past tense, and I’ve been told that the many past tenses in English are confusing to Hungarians. English speakers have a similar difficulty with Italian, which has variants of the past tense that either don’t exist at all in English, or correlate inconsistently with their English counterparts. The most obvious example is the distinction between *passato remoto* and *passato prossimo* in Italian, a dichotomy which has no analog in English, but this isn’t the hard case. The trickiest by far is the choice between *passato remoto* and *imperfetto* (mainly in writing), or equivalently between *passato prossimo* and *imperfetto* (mainly in speech). The trouble is that the *imperfetto* corresponds to at least four different constructions in English: depending on the context. For instance *dormiva* could be used in the Italian equivalents of “he slept”, “he was sleeping”, “in those days he would sleep until noon”, or “I saw a cat sleeping in the middle of the road.” (In the last case “un gatto che dormiva”; in a sense English useage no. 4 is equivalent to no. 2, except that we are lazy and contract “a cat that was sleeping” to “a cat sleeping”. This can’t be done in Italian; see below.)

In any case, I find the system of (passato remoto) + (imperfetto) quite elegant and indeed it's probably my second favorite part of Italian grammar, after the subjunctive. For this reason, the bulk of this chapter is devoted to analyzing the puzzle of passato remoto versus imperfetto, especially the cases in which both would be translated by the simple past in English. This two-to-one mapping causes little trouble in reading, but to write you have to invert it, and therein lies the challenge.

Other topics considered include expressing the simultaneity of events, the order of events (after X, then Y) and certain cases—dubbed “semantic mutations”—where the imperfetto and passato remoto/prossimo differ in meaning as well as in time.

2 Past conditional

One of the most striking features of Italian is that it uses the past conditional where the other Romance languages would use the present conditional, as does English. Neither French, Spanish, Portuguese nor Romanian follow the Italian system. Since the difference can lead to considerable confusion, it ought to be pointed out forcefully in textbooks. To date, however, [Maiden-Robustelli] is the only source I've found that gives it the emphasis it deserves, putting it on page 1 of their chapter on “uses of the verb forms”. Here's a typical example, from the short story *I poveri* by Carlo Cassola:

La signorina promise che ci avrebbe messo una buona parola.

In English this would be translated with the present conditional: “The signorina promised that she would put in a good word.” But Italian uses the past conditional: literally, “promised that she would have put in a good word”. Another example from *La bella estate*:

Si lasciarono così male che si capiva che Amelia non gliel'avrebbe perdonata. Ma Ginia che da principio alzò le spalle, un bel momento ebbe paura all'idea che Amelia l'avrebbe presa in giro con Guido e Rodrigues...

“They parted on such bad terms that it was clear Amelia wouldn't forgive her [literally, would not have forgiven her]. At first Ginia shrugged it off, then for a moment panicked at the thought that Amelia would make fun of her [literally, would have made fun of her] with Guido and Rodrigues...”

In certain constructions the past tense occurs in English, but without the “would”. The following is from the short story *I passi sulla neve* by Mario Soldati (where in this case I've borrowed the translation from [Trevelyan]; see the book reviews):

Passeggiò sotto i portici senza proporsi una meta. Quando si sarebbe sentito stanco, sarebbe entrato in un caffè: ecco tutto. Ma tornare in albergo, rivedere sua moglie, no, non ancora.

“He strolled aimlessly along under the arcades. When he felt tired he would turn into a café: that was it. But to go back to the hotel and see his wife again—no, not yet.” Literally: “When he would have felt tired he would have entered a café”.

The confusion (for English speakers) is compounded in the past conditional form of the *periodo ipotetico*, i.e. *se* + Congiuntivo Trapassato + Condizionale Composto, which has three different interpretations depending on the context. The first runs exactly parallel to English, as in the following from *I passi sulla neve*:

Se non fosse stato per le musiche, i canti, le risate, le berciate e gli applausi che venivano dai televisori delle case lungo le quali stava camminando, avrebbe pensato di attraversare un paese abbandonato.

“If it hadn’t been for the music, the songs, the laughter, the bawling and the applause coming from the televisions of the houses next to which he was walking, he would have thought he was passing through an abandoned village.”

However, the same form is also used where English would again use the present conditional. An example from *L’eretico* by Carlo Martigli:

Non era un caso che gli fosse toccato il nome Cesare, un nome cui avrebbe dato nuovo lustro. Sarebbe stato Cesare non solo di nome ma anche di fatto. Un giorno, se fosse stato necessario, avrebbe varcato il Rubicone.

“It wasn’t by chance that he had been named Caesar, a name to which he would give new glory. He would be Caesar not only in name but also in fact. One day, if it should prove necessary, he would cross the Rubicon.”

Note that the literal translation e.g. (*) “if it had been necessary, he would have crossed the Rubicon” changes the meaning completely. The interesting point is that the Italian can also be interpreted this way. In another context, *se fosse stato necessario, avrebbe varcato il Rubicone* could in fact be translated by (*) above. In the present context, however, it is clear that the nefarious Cesare is imagining his future rise to power.

Surprisingly, the past form above can also be used for the future. According to a textbook example, one can say:

Se domani avessi potuto, sarei venuto to mean “If I could come tomorrow, I would”. Literally, “If tomorrow I could have, I would have come”.

In any case, every Italian textbook—at least those written with speakers of English or of other Romance languages in mind—ought to emphasize the divergent uses of the past conditional.

3 Back to the future

As in English, the present tense is often used in place of the future, if the future aspect is already understood: “Tomorrow we go to the zoo” or *Domani andiamo allo zoo*. One peculiar feature of English is the use of the present progressive “to go” for future actions: “tomorrow we’re going to the zoo”, the redundant “tomorrow we’re going to go to the zoo”, or even the illogical “tomorrow we’re going to clean the house” (in which case we’re not going anywhere). As far as I know, the Italian present progressive *stare* + gerund is never used in this way.

Most strikingly, Italian uses the future perfect (future auxiliary + past participle) to indicate conjectural past events, as in *avranno perso il treno* e.g. as a response to someone failing to show up for a meeting. In English this could be variously translated as “they must have missed the train”, “they probably missed the train” and so on. At any rate the logical structure is clear, and makes sense: “They will have missed the train” is short for “In the future, when we find out what happened, it will probably turn out that they missed the train.” On the other hand, there is no one systematic way to translate this useage into English. Consider the following example from *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* by Calvino, with five occurrences of the future perfect (Pin is a young boy who has fallen in with an anti-fascist partisan nicknamed “Red Wolf”):

Pin si scuote di soprassalto: quanto avrà dormito? Intorno a lui è notte fonda. E Lupo Russo perché non è tornato ancora? Avrà incontrato una pattuglia e sarà stato preso? Oppure sarà tornato e l'avrà chiamato mentre dormiva e se ne sarà andato credendo che lui non ci sia più.

“Pin shakes himself with a start: How long has he been asleep? Around him it is the dead of night. And why hasn’t Red Wolf returned yet? Could he have run into a patrol and been captured? Or he could have returned and called to him while he was sleeping, and then left thinking that he wasn’t there anymore.”

After certain time conjunctions such as “when”, English always uses the present or even the past tense for the future, whereas Italian requires the future or the futuro anteriore. The following example, from Calvino’s short story *L’aria buona* is fairly typical. The doctor has recommended fresh air for Marcovaldo’s sick kids. Marcovaldo suggests that the best place to send the kids is “per la strada”, prompting the following response from his long-suffering wife:

“Aria buona la prenderemo,” concluse la moglie, “quando saremo sfrattati e dovremo dormire allo stellato.”

“We’ll have fresh air alright,” concluded his wife, “when we’ve been evicted and we have to sleep under the stars.” Literally, “when we will have been evicted and we will have to sleep under the stars”.

Other textbook examples:

Io canterò mentre tu suonerai.

“I’ll sing while you play [literally, while you will play].”

Te lo dirò appena lo saprò.

“I’ll tell you as soon as I know [literally “as soon as I will know”].

4 Past tenses in narration: An empirical study

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4.1 Introduction

Italian novels are most often narrated in a combination of *passato remoto* and *imperfetto*, where these two tenses are employed in a way that has no parallel in English. As discussed below, there are several uses of the *imperfetto* that very closely parallel the past progressive or other habitual-action forms in English, but in Italian it can also be used where English would use the simple past. Thus Italian effectively has two past tenses where English has one, and it is an interesting challenge for an English speaker to figure out when to use which, and why. To some extent the choice appears to be up to the author, and is decided more by guidelines than by any strict rule. So I won't even attempt to formulate such rules. Instead I'll take the approach of a naturalist observing wildlife in the field, and report what I can of the nature of the beast.

The above remarks notwithstanding, *some* conceptual framework is essential. Mixing my metaphors a bit, the following proposed pairings should be viewed in mathematical lingo as first-order approximations only. The pairs are supposed to correspond to *remoto/imperfetto*.

- discrete/continuous
- bounded/unbounded
- closed/open
- external/internal

The first three are motivated by a combination of everyday English and mathematical terminology. The last item, external/internal, is taken from [Maiden-Robustelli]. All will be illustrated in context below. At the end of the day, however, the choice of metaphor is highly personal; my suggestion for other Italian learners is to find one that works for you.

Other aspects of time include simultaneity—while A, B—and sequencing—after A, then B. Here too there are interesting differences between Italian and English. Finally I discuss “semantic mutation”, i.e. the fact that certain verbs change meaning between the *imperfetto* and the *passato remoto/prossimo*.

4.2 Habitual action use of the imperfetto

In principle, habitual action use of the *imperfetto* is exactly analogous to the English “would + infinitive” or sometimes “used + infinitive”: “Every Sunday he would go to church”, “when I was younger I used to go climbing every week”, etc. As with the English past progressive, however, continuous repetition of “would” or “used” every time in a long paragraph becomes tedious, and one tends to switch to the simple past to avoid monotony. In Italian one

can simply switch back and forth between imperfetto and passato remoto. Here's a pretty example from Pavese's *La luna e i falò*:

Così venne l'inverno e cadde molta neve e il Belbo gelò—si stava al caldo in cucina o nella stalla, c'era soltanto da spalare il cortile e davanti al cancello, si andava a prendere un'altra fascina—o bagnavo i salici per Cirino, portavo l'acqua, giocavo alle biglie coi ragazzi. Venne Natale, Capodanno, l'Epifania; si arrostitivano le castagne, tirammo il vino, mangiammo due volte il tacchino e una l'oca. La signora, le figlie, il sor Matteo si facevano attaccare il biroccio per andare a Canelli; una volta portarono a casa del torrone e ne diedero all'Emilia. La domenica andavo a messa in paese coi ragazzi del Salto, con le donne, e portavamo il pane a cuocere. La collina di Gaminella era brulla, bianca di neve, la vedevo in mezzo ai rami secchi di Belbo.

“So winter came and much snow fell and the Belbo froze—one would stay warm in the kitchen or in the stable, one only had to shovel the yard and in front of the gate, one would go to get another log [for the fire]—or I watered the willows for Cirino, carried water, played marbles with the boys. Christmas, New Year, and Epiphany came; they would roast chestnuts, we pulled wine, we ate turkey twice and once a goose. The *signora*, the girls, and the signor Matteo would have the biroccio [a small horse-drawn carriage] hooked up to go to Canelli; one time they brought home some torrone [a kind of nougat] and gave some to Emilia. On Sundays I would go to mass in the village with the kids from Salto, with the women, and we would bring bread to bake. The hill of Gaminella would be bare, white with snow, I would see it in the middle of the dry branches of the Belbo.”

In this translation I chose to use the “would” form for the imperfetto almost everywhere except in the phrase beginning “...or I watered...” It could have been used there, too, but one does begin to tire of would, would, would over and over again.¹ The Italian approach is more elegant: imperfetto for the habitual actions, with passato remoto inserted to indicate discrete events such as *una volta portarono a casa*, “one time they brought home”.

The previous example is a self-contained scene of daily life in winter. The imperfetto is also used, sometimes at length, in establishing background for a story. (This is not the same as “scene-setting”, to be described later.) Consider for example the short story *La madre* by Natalia Ginsburg. It begins with six and a half pages of imperfetto before the first, rather abrupt occurrence of passato remoto: *Un giorno ch'erano andati a fare una passeggiata..., al ritorno videro la madre in un caffè di periferia*. From there on the narration takes place in the usual mix of passato remoto and imperfetto. But the English translation of the long imperfetto section (for example the translation in [Trevelyan]; see the book reviews) uses mainly the simple past, and necessarily so: the only alternative is the habitual-action “would” form, which once again is too tedious. I like the way the translator (Isabel Quigley) uses the “would” form, but only sparingly. For example, simple descriptions such as *La madre al mattino andava a fare la spesa* are best rendered as “In the morning their mother went to do the shopping”, not “would go to do the shopping”. On the other hand in a few well-chosen cases the latter works well: *certe volte rientrava molto tardi, i ragazzi si*

¹For the same reason, Italian novels and even short stories shouldn't be written in the passato prossimo. The constant repetition of auxiliaries is too monotonous.

svegliavano allora “sometimes she came in very late, and the boys would wake up”, or *Li prendeva sulle ginocchia e diceva nel suo dialetto delle parole tenere e come un poco pietose*, “She [the grandma] would take them [the boys] on her knee and say tender and slightly pitiful-sounding words in dialect”.

Or in Pratolini’s novel *Il Quartiere*, Chapter 1 sets the scene in the imperfetto, while Chapter 2 begins *Un giorno Arrigo prese a pugni Carlo...* In English the opening phrase “One day...” by itself signals the beginning of the action, just as in the Ginzburg example; in Italian this is neatly reinforced by the switch to passato remoto. In contrast, Chapter 1 is an introduction to life in the Quartiere di Santa Croce, for instance:

Si usciva dal lavoro dopo le sei di pomeriggio; e non esisteva vera vita, società vera, calore, se non quando eravamo delle nostre strade e piazze...Anche coloro che lavoravano nelle fabbriche della periferia, pedalavano veloci sui viali per raggiungere il Quartiere e godere la serata che gli apparteneva.

“One left work after six in the afternoon; and true life, true society and warmth didn’t exist until we were in our own streets and plazas...Those who worked in the factories of the suburbs also pedaled fast through the streets to reach the Quartiere and enjoy the evening that belonged to them.”

Here again one could say “one would leave work”, but this certainly isn’t necessary.

4.3 Scene-setting

The imperfetto is often used to “set the scene” for subsequent action. Here English uses either the simple past or the past progressive, with the choice between them sometimes a matter of taste. In Italian there is no grammatical difference between “background” as in the previous section and “scene-setting”; both use the imperfetto. In English this is only true if one sticks to the simple past; the habitual-action “would” and the past progressive are not interchangeable.

The following example is from *L’Eretico* by Carlo Martigli:

Un uomo di poco più di vent’anni sedeva in fondo alla taverna del Sole, situata in uno dei vicoli più scuri e stretti di Firenze, a pochi passi dal mercato. Beveva a lunghi sorsi, e le gocce che cadevano dal boccale di peltro rigavano di viola l’uniforme gialla di guardia della repubblica. Vide entrare un altro giovane...

“A man a little over twenty was sitting in the back of the Sun Tavern, situated in one of the darkest, narrowest alleys of Firenze, a short way from the market. He was drinking in long gulps, and the drops that fell from the pewter mug left purple lines on the yellow uniform of a republican guard. He saw another young man come in...”

Thus the imperfetto sets the scene, up to the passato remoto *vide* where the action begins. The only difference in the English translation, at least as I would render it above, is that in English the constant repetition of past progressives “was sitting, was drinking, were falling, were leaving purple lines” quickly becomes tedious. “He was drinking in long gulps” already establishes the progressive nature of the action, and there is no need to repeat it.

Alternatively one could use the gerund directly in the form “...and the drops falling from the pewter mug...” (One has to be careful, however, with the Italian gerund; see below.) One could also use the simple past: “A man...sat in the back” and “He drank in long gulps...”, although I prefer the past progressive version as above.

In the next example, the opening of Calvino’s short story *L’avventura di un lettore*, I prefer to use the simple past:

La strada litoranea, sul capo, passava alta; il mare era laggiù a strapiombo e dappertutto intorno, fino all’orizzonte alto e sfumato. Anche il sole era dappertutto, come se il cielo e il mare fossero due lenti che lo ingrandivano. Là sotto, contro il frastagli irregolari degli scogli del capo, l’acqua calma batteva senza spuma. Amedeo Oliva scese una rampa...

“The coastal road ran high along the cape; the sea was below the overhang and everywhere around, fading finally into the high horizon. The sun too was everywhere, as though the sky and the sea were two lenses that magnified it. Below, against the irregular indentations of the rocks of the cape, the calm water lapped without foam. Amedeo Oliva descended a ramp...”

I’ve taken some liberties with this non-literal translation, but for present purposes the relevant point is the choice of tense. The Italian sets the scene with the imperfetto up to *scese*, while in my version of the English, everything is in the simple past. “Magnified” and “lapped” could conceivably be put in the past progressive, but I prefer the translation as is. Once again, I find the Italian system elegant and attractive.

4.4 Scene-framing

Some authors use a technique similar to scene-setting that I’ll call “scene-framing”. Whether it is really a conscious technique, or just something they do automatically, I have no idea. Here the closed/open analogy is particularly apt; the action is narrated in a long “open interval” in the imperfetto, bounded at both ends by the remoto to form a “closed interval”. I’ll give two examples; the passages are too long to quote in full so I’ll quote only enough to give the idea. The remoto is given in boldface; everything inbetween is in imperfetto. The first example is condensed from two long paragraphs in *La Bella Estate*.

*Quel pomeriggio **fu** il più bello che Ginia avesse mai passato. Aveva solo paura che arrivasse Amelia...Guido e Rodrigues discutevano sempre e ogni tanto Guido la guardava ridendo...Era una discussione di pittura e Guido parlava con furia...Rodrigues...stava zitto o rideva come un galletto...quando [Guido] diceva qualcosa, faceva piacere sentirlo.*

*Fuori, sui tetti, faceva ancora un po’ di sole...Ginia...pensava che sarebbe stato bello, nascosta là dietro a insaputa di tutti, spiare qualcuno che si credesse solo nella stanza. In quel momento Guido **disse**: —Fa freddo. Ce n’è ancora del tè?*

Summarizing: “That afternoon **was** the nicest that Ginia had ever experienced....[long description of Guido and Rodrigues conversing about painting, Guido flirting with Ginia, the view from the upstairs window, Ginia daydreaming, etc.]...Just then Guido **said**: ‘It’s

cold. Is there any more tea?” ” The external/internal metaphor suggested by [Maiden-Robustelli] also works well here. Within the “open interval” of the imperfetto we’re seeing the internal view, Ginia’s view. At the boundary points of the “closed interval”, the external world intrudes (quite literally at the end, interrupting Ginia’s reverie). In the imperfetto section an English translation could include many past progressives and habitual actions, e.g. “...Guido and Rodrigues were constantly discussing and every so often Guido would look at her laughing...” But in many places English would use the simple past, e.g. “...[Ginia] thought how nice it would be...”

An example from *Il cavaliere inesistente*, again with much of the “scene” omitted:

Il giovane prese per gli accampamenti. Era l'ora incerta che precede l'alba. Si notava tra i padiglioni un primo muoversi di gente...Incontrava paladini già chiusi nelle loro corazze lustre...Ma i due che egli stava seguendo...erano certo due grandi comandanti. Il giovane corse a presentarsi a loro...

“The young man [Rambaldo] headed for the encampment. It was the uncertain hour that precedes the dawn. Among the pavilions one could discern the first stirring of people...He encountered knights already enclosed in their shining armor...But the two that he was following...were certainly two great commanders. The young man ran to to introduce himself to them.”

Thus the action verbs *prese* and *corse* frame the descriptive scene.

As a side note I point out that immediately following the scene quoted above, Calvino switches abruptly to the present tense for a while. I find this technique to be contrived and annoying in any language, but it seems to be a common practice among Italian authors (see 4.7 below).

4.5 “Fu” or “era”?

The verb *essere* is a particularly interesting case, because with only occasional exceptions the English translation of the remoto *fu* and imperfetto *era* is simply “was”. (Constructions such as “he was being obstinate” or “on winter days, she would often be sad” are certainly possible, but comparatively rare in practice.) The discrete/continuous model applies reasonably well here: *fu* refers to a discrete event or state, *era* to the continuous case. The “discrete event” model is perfectly illustrated in the following example from the short story *L'avventura di un viaggiatore* by Calvino:

Per un attimo, Federico V. fu colto dal sentimento d'invidia che gli avevano sempre ispirato le persone dall'aria più pratica e vitale della sua; ma fu un'impressione istantanea, che subito cancellò...

“For a moment, Federico V. was seized by the feeling of envy that people with a more practical, vital manner than his had always inspired in him; but it was a fleeting impression, that he immediately erased...”

A similar example from *I passi sulla neve*:

Quando fu in un viale del parco, si fermò...

“When he reached [was in] an avenue in the park, he stopped...” See also the example above *Quel pomeriggio fu...*

These uses of *fu* should be contrasted with the much more common *era*, used for general descriptions, ongoing states, habitual actions and the like. Some random examples from *I passi sulla neve*:

C'era un caffè ancora aperto...La villa era a pochi passi...Il parco era molto grande...

To conclude, here's an interesting example from *La luna e i falò*. A group of boys who are supposed to be working sneak down to the river to goof off and go swimming.

Era qui che mi vantavo del mio soprannome di Anguilla, e fu allora che Nicoletto per l'invidia disse che ci avrebbe fatto la spia e cominciò a chiamarmi bastardo.

“It was here that I would boast about my nickname “the Eel”, and it was then that Nicoletto, out of envy, said that he would tell on us and started calling me a bastard.”

4.6 Relativity theory: expressing simultaneity

According to Einstein's theory of relativity, not only is it difficult to decide whether or not two events are simultaneous; worse, the concept of “simultaneity” is not even well-defined. However, for practical purposes this is only a problem when two observers—Italian speakers, let's say—are moving relative to each other at a velocity near the speed of light. In my experience, this situation rarely arises, so we will assume that simultaneity makes sense and consider how it is expressed in Italian.

A variety of constructions are used to indicate the simultaneity of two events, and although there are some similarities with English, there are significant differences as well. The principal constructions are:

1. the imperfetto, used as a past progressive as in English
2. the imperfetto of *stare* + gerund, as in *stava parlando*
3. the gerund, used as in English but with one key restriction: the subject-agreement rule (explained below).
4. the imperfetto, used where English would use a gerund (filling the gap left by item 2)
5. the infinitive, used where English would use a gerund or a past progressive

Since the five types are often found together in various combinations, rather than go through them one by one I'll proceed by example. Consider first the following, from Pavese's *La bella estate*:

Mentre bevevano, Guido le raccontò che quelle tazze erano un regalo di una ragazza come lei, che veniva a trovarlo per farsi fare il ritratto. “È dov'è questo ritratto?” chiese Ginia. “Non era mica una modella,” disse Guido ridendo.

“While they were drinking, Guido told her that the cups were a gift from a girl like her, who used to come see him to have her portrait done. “And where is this portrait?” asked Ginia. “She wasn’t exactly a model”, said Guido laughing.”

Here the imperfetto *mentre bevevano* fits well with “while they were drinking” (although “while they drank” is also possible); the combination “*mentre* + imperfetto” is very common and illustrates type 1. The gerund *ridendo* functions as in English to indicate that the saying and the laughing occur together. (On the other hand, the imperfetto *veniva* is certainly not a past progressive; it has to be rendered differently. Thus the interpretation of the imperfetto is heavily context-dependent, but this is typical of language in general.)

In contrast, the Italian form (imperfetto of *stare*) + (gerund) is used only as a past progressive, as far as I know. In particular, types 1 and 2 are generally translated identically in English, which makes the inverse problem a little tricky. It isn’t clear to me when the choice between types 1 and 2 follows a rule, and when it is just a matter of taste; my impression is that type 2 serves to emphasize the progressive nature of one action occurring simultaneously with another. One common instance of type 2 is in sentences of the type “X was doing Y, when Z”. Here’s an example from Calvino’s short story *La cura delle vespe*, one of many amusing tales of the hapless Marcovaldo. Here Marcovaldo has discovered that wasp stings seem to cure certain ailments, and has opened his own “wasp cure” business. His son Michelino has gone to get more wasps, but accidentally breaks the nest, with disastrous results.

Marcovaldo stava dicendo ai suoi pazienti: “Abbiate pazienza, adesso arrivano le vespe,” quando la porta s’aperse e lo sciame invase la stanza. Nemmeno videro Michelino che andava a cacciare il capo in un catino d’acqua: tutto la stanza fu piena di vespe...

“Marcovaldo was saying to his patients: “Be patient, the wasps will arrive shortly,” when the the door opened and the swarm invaded the room. They didn’t even see Michelino running to stick his head in a basin of water: the whole room was full of wasps...”

Here I’ve tried a non-literal translation of the second sentence, an alternative being “...Michelino, who went to stick his head...” The main point I want to make with this translation is that one can *not* say *videro Michelino andando* or *videro Michelino correndo*, as this would imply that the patients are going/running, not Michelino: the gerund has to agree with the subject; this is the subject-agreement rule of type. Similarly if I want to translate “I saw a snake slithering across the road”, the literal *Vidi un serpente strisciando attraverso la strada* would mean that while I was slithering across the road, I saw a snake. As in the wasp story, the gerund has to be replaced by *che strisciava* (type 4).

The next example, from Pratolini’s *Il Quartiere*, is of a slightly different character:

“Sì, è d’oro” rispose Giorgio. “Un regalone!”

Gino si stava voltando verso lo sposo col bicchiere alzato, forse con l’intenzione di un brindisi, ma il suo gesto fu brusco, non fece in tempo ad evitare Maria che gli passava di lato.

“Yes, it’s gold,” replied Giorgio. “A grand gift!”

“Gino was turning toward the groom with his glass raised, perhaps intending a toast, but the gesture was sudden and he didn’t react in time to avoid Maria who was passing beside him.”

The interesting point here is the use of *si stava voltando* to indicate one point of simultaneity, and the simple imperfetto *passava* for another. As I interpret it, the form *si stava voltando* serves to express the simultaneity of the turning with Giorgio’s exclamation *Un regalone!*. Meanwhile, Maria was passing behind him: *passava*. (Note also the passato remoto *fu* and *fece*, both of which fit the “discrete event” model.)

The next example is of item 5, taken from *Le perfezioni provvisorie* by Carofiglio.

Uscendo dalla libreria, con l’idea di prendermela comodo ancora per una mezz’ora, vidi arrivare il signor Ferraro...

“As I was leaving the bookstore, with the idea of taking it easy for another half hour, I saw the signor Ferraro arriving...” Or literally, “I saw to arrive the signor Ferraro”, a use of the infinitive that doesn’t work in English.

Finally, here’s an interesting example from *Il cavaliere inesistente*, one that puzzled me for some time when I first saw it. The young Rambaldo is complaining to Agilulfo, the non-existent knight, that in the early morning his muscles are sometimes sluggish and cold.

“Succede anche a voi?” [chiese Rambaldo.]

“A me no”, disse Agilulfo, e già gli voltava le spalle, se ne andava.

As far as I can see there is no way to translate *gli voltava le spalle* and *se ne andava* with actual verb *conjugations* in English. I expected *se ne andò* here, but if a simple “he left” was intended, then surely Calvino would have used it. And attempts to use past progressive yield only a muddle such as “already he was turning away, and he was leaving”. And yet one wants the saying, the turning away and the leaving to be simultaneous. Better, I think, is to use gerunds:

“Does it happen to you too?” [Rambaldo asked.]

“Not to me,” said Agilulfo, turning away and leaving.

An alternative is something like “as he turned away and left”, or, taking some liberty with the translation, “as he turned away and rode off”.

4.7 In the eye of the beholder: the remote, the recent, the present

The existence of *two* past perfect tenses, *passato prossimo* and *passato remoto*, is problematic for English speakers since we have only one: *andai* and *sono andato* are both simply “I went”. The problem is compounded by the unfortunate choice of terms “prossimo” and “remoto”. To quote from [Maiden-Robustelli], §15.16:

“The terms *prossimo* and *remoto* are rather misleading, for what is relevant in choosing between these two forms is not ‘nearness/remoteness’ in time, but the degree of ‘psychological involvement’.”

Hence in narration, and especially in informal narration, the choice of *passato remoto* versus *passato prossimo* appears to be up to the speaker. As far as I can tell, there are few—if any—genuine “rules”. Furthermore, the past can even be narrated in the present tense, especially in speech. This mixing of past and present is common in English as well: “So I’m walking up the trail, just daydreaming, when all of a sudden a bear explodes out of the bushes and runs away. I just about jumped out of my shoes!” An Italian narrator, on the other hand, has four degrees of “past-ness” to choose from: remote, recent and present—plus the imperfetto, although this is a different kind of choice. Moreover, the choice may have no relation whatever to the actual time scale of the events, reflecting instead the particular way the speaker wishes to present them.

Here’s an interesting and fairly typical example from *La fine è il mio inizio* by journalist Tiziano Terzani, illustrating all four possibilities. The book is in the form of a conversation between Terzani and his son Folco (see the book reviews for more background); here Terzani talks about smoking opium in Cambodia, during the Vietnam war before the Khmer Rouge seized power. The opium house he frequents is run by a certain Madame Chantal.

Quando la sera uscivo dall’Hotel Le Phnom, dopo aver scritto il pezzo o finito la mia giornata prendendo appunti, c’erano già tutti questi cyclopousse [bicycle-taxis] pronti, che chiamavano “Monsieur Moustache! Monsieur Moustache” perchè tutti sapevano dove andavo. La cosa divertente fu quando la Mamma venne per la prima volta a Phnom Penh e io le volli presentare questo mondo mio. Arriviamo con il solito cyclopousse, lo sportellino si apre, Chantal guarda e fa “Ah, Monsieur Moustache et...Madame Monsieur Moustache!”

La Mamma era diventata Madame Monsieur Moustache!

Sono andato lì per alcuni anni, durante tutta la guerra.

“When I would go out in the evening from Hotel Le Phnom, after having written a piece or having finished my day taking notes, there were already all these cyclopousse ready, calling “Monsieur Moustache! Monsieur Moustache!” because they all knew where I was going. The funny thing was when your mother came to Phnom Penh for the first time and I wanted to introduce her to this world of mine. We arrive with the cyclopousse as usual, the little door opens, Chantal looks and says “Ah, Monsieur Moustache et...Madame Monsieur Moustache!”

Your mother had become Madame Monsieur Moustache!

I went there for several years, throughout the war.”

The fact that the episode starts in the imperfetto and then switches to *passato remoto* with *fu* fits our earlier model, transitioning from “continuous” background to a “discrete” event. Then Terzani switches to the present tense, exactly as an English speaker might do when telling such a story. Finally “I went” is rendered in the *passato prossimo* *sono andato*, and herein lies the novelty for English speakers. What governs this choice is not entirely clear to me, but the key point to note is that *it has nothing to do with how long ago the events took place*; all of the events in the excerpt took place about thirty years before the time of the interview.

This jumping around the tenses is common in novels as well. For example, to take one sequence from Pratolini’s *Il Quartiere*, chapter 11 is in the *passato remoto*, chapters 12-14

are in a combination of present and passato prossimo, and chapter 15 returns to the passato remoto. Once again it's clear that the choice has little or nothing to do with the actual distance in time separating the narrator from the events, but is rather a style choice on the part of the author. *Il Quartiere* is narrated in the first-person but Pratolini switches tenses in a similar way in *Le ragazze di Sanfrediano*, which is in the third person.

Pavese's *La luna e i falò* provides another interesting example. Here the first-person narrator is dealing with several principal time periods: (i) reminiscences of his childhood and adolescence; (ii) adult years in America; (iii) his return to his childhood haunts after the war. Again the passato remoto, passato prossimo and present tense are used, but it's not easy to find any correlation between these three tenses and the aforementioned time periods. Period (i) is usually in the passato remoto, but often period (ii) is as well, even though (if I understand correctly) this is the period from which the narrator is telling the story. It all depends on how the author wants to present it, not on how recent or remote the events may be.

4.8 Ex post facto: the order of events

By “order of events” I mean constructions of the form “after A, then B” or “having done A, then B”. There are at least two interesting differences between Italian and English in this regard. First of all, Italian uses a past participle by itself in a way that isn't allowed in English, as in the following example from Cassola's *I poveri*:

Arrivata in chiesa, guardò subito verso il primo banco a sinistra...

“On entering the church, she immediately looked around at the first row on the left...” (Translation from [Trevelyan].) Literally “entered the church...”, which could be translated as “having entered the church”. But in this case “on entering” is better.

Second, Italian uses an infinitive where English does not, as in the following from Silone's *Vino e pane*:

Dopo aver riflettuto, egli aggiunse in tono impacciato...

“After reflecting, he added in an embarrassed tone...” Alternatives include “after reflection” or “having reflected”, but of course not the literal “after to have reflected”.

One other difference of note is that the literal translation of “having reflected”, *avendo riflettuto*, cannot be used as above, i.e. to indicate “after”. It is only used in the sense of “since” or “because”, as in the following example from the grammar text [Kinder-Savini]: *Il magistrato, non avendo riscontrato prove concrete, chiuse l'indagine.* “The magistrate, having found no concrete evidence, closed the investigation.” In other words, *because* he found no such evidence, he closed the investigation.

4.9 Semantic mutation

Sometimes the passato remoto (or prossimo) and imperfetto of a verb have different meanings; I call this “semantic mutation” (just for fun, really). In fact the mutations are rather

mild, and in one way or another fit with the remoto/imperfetto metaphors given in the introduction. As far as I know, mutations of this type occur with only a handful of verbs, but they are very common ones.

4.9.1 Sapere

Sapeva usually means “knew”; *seppe* usually means “found out”, “learned”, “heard”. The following example from *La luna e i falò* is instructive on several counts:

Con me attaccò discorso civilmente; sapeva di dove venivo; mi chiese se ero stato anche in Francia, e beveva il caffè scostando il mignolo e piegandosi avanti.

“He politely struck up a conversation with me; he knew where I came from; he asked me if I had also been to France, and drank his coffee sticking out his little finger and leaning forward.”

Contrast this with the following from *Vino e pane*, by Ignazio Silone:

Poi seppi che, su denuncia del consolato italiano, egli era stato espulso dalla Francia.

“Then I learned that, having been denounced by the Italian consulate, he was expelled from France.” To some extent this contrast fits with the discrete/continuous model, since ‘to find out’ is a discrete instance, i.e. localized in time, of the continuous “to know”. As usual, the passato prossimo differs from the imperfetto in exactly the same way, e.g. (again from *Vino e pane*):

“Novità di Bianchina?” disse Cristina.

“Una notizia curiosa,” disse don Paolo, “Ho saputo di una relazione amorosa tra quella ragazza e suo fratello Alberto.”

“Any news of Bianchina?” said Cristina.

“Some curious news,” said don Paolo, “I heard [found out, learned] about a love affair between that girl and your brother Alberto.”

4.9.2 Conoscere

A similar semantic mutation occurs with *conoscere*: In the passato remoto/prossimo it usually means “to meet” (i.e. a person, usually) and in the imperfetto “to know”, in the sense “to be acquainted with” a person or thing. Again this fits loosely with the discrete/continuous model, since to meet someone is to know them for the first time, a discrete event. The following example is from the same conversation between don Paolo and Cristina (the latter is speaking).

In quanto a Bianchina mi permetto solo di ricordarle le circostanze un po’ speciali in cui lei l’ha conosciuta.

“As far as Bianchina, I’ll only allow myself to remind you of the rather special circumstances in which you met her.”

Contrast this with the following example from Ginzburg's *La madre*:

La madre aveva posato sul tavolo la sua sciarpa scozzese e la vecchia borsetta di cocodrillo che conoscevano bene.

“The mother had put on the table her scottish scarf and the old crocodile-skin purse that they [her children] knew well.”

On the other hand, the passato remoto/prossimo can also be used for “to know” in the sense of “to experience”, as in “it was then that he knew real hunger”, or more famously as in the King James Bible when a man and a woman lieth together and “know” each other. Here's an example from *La ragazza di Bube*, by Carlo Cassola:

“Bube caro,” disse lei appoggiandogli la testa sulla spalla. E di nuovo conobbero le dolcezze dell'amore tenero e affettuoso.

“Bube darling,” she said, resting her head on his shoulder. And once more they knew [experienced] the sweetness of tender, affectionate love.”

In this instance the reference is not to actually knowing each other in the biblical sense: *No Bube, no...Non bisogna farlo...Non siamo ancora sposati.*

4.9.3 **Dovere**

The auxiliary verbs *dovere* undergoes a somewhat different semantic mutation. According to [Proudfoot-Cardo], the imperfetto form *doveva* is equivalent to *avrebbe dovuto*, and therefore correspond at least approximately to English “should have”, whereas *dovette* means “had to”. But these interpretations are oversimplified and not supported by the empirical evidence. Many other interpretations are possible; it depends on the context.

Consider first the following example from *Vino e pane*:

Dopo una pessima annata, in cui tutto il raccolto andò perduto, mio padre dovette vendere una vigna che sta dietro il castello del paese.

“After a bad year, in which the entire harvest was lost, my father had to sell a vinyard that lies behind the town castle.” This is a typical use of the remoto/prossimo, with the meaning of “had to”. But sometimes a slightly different English translation is needed. For instance, in *Il Quartiere Pratolini* frequently uses *dovere* in the following way:

Ebbi un colpo al petto, umiliato dei miei calzoni corti, del mio volto quindicenne con appena la peluria nera sulle labbra. Dovetti accendermi in volto.

“I felt my chest tighten [better translation?], humiliated by my short pants and my fifteen-year old face with only a little black fuzz on my upper lip. I must have turned red.” In this case “I had to turn red” definitely doesn't work; “I had to have turned red” is possible but too clumsy.

Now consider the following excerpt from Calvino's short story *L'avventura di un soldato*.²

Doveva lui, Tomagra, rispettare questo sonno, vero o finto che fosse, e ritrarsi? O era un espediente di donna complice, ch'egli avrebbe dovuto già conoscere, e di cui doveva in qualche modo mostrare gratitudine?

“Should he, Tomagra, respect this sleeping, real or fake though it might be, and draw back? Or was it a ruse of feminine complicity, which he should have already recognized, and for which he should in some way show his gratitude?”

Here the “should” interpretation is certainly correct, but one has to pay attention to the tense. The two instances of *doveva* are definitely *not* translated as “should have” in English, despite the past tense. This is somewhat similar to the tense-shifting in the past conditional discussed in §2, except that now the English and Italian past conditionals *avrebbe dovuto* and “should have” line up perfectly, and the tense-shifting occurs between “should” and “doveva”. If we follow the model given in [Proudfoot-Cardo], *doveva* above could be replaced by *avrebbe dovuto*, thereby making an exact analogy with §2, but I doubt that this would be correct.

It appears that the “must have” interpretation of *dovette* can, at least in some cases, be achieved by *doveva*. Here are two examples from *Vino e pane*:

1. *...ma dove erano i ciliegi? Dove il noce? Lo zio che aveva in consegna la vigna, doveva averli fatti abbattere.*
2. *Di quell'arrivo alla locanda don Paolo non serbò altro ricordo. Doveva essere stordito e stanco morto.*

1. “...but where were the cherry trees? Where was the walnut tree? The uncle who had custody of the vinyard must have chopped them down.”

2. “Don Paolo retained no other memory of his arrival at the inn. He must have been dazed and dead tired.”

Comparing these two examples with *dovetti accendermi in volto* above, the difference can be explained using several of the metaphors from the introduction. The “turning red” is a discrete, or bounded, or closed event. Don Paolo's being dazed and tired is a more continuous, less bounded, open event. Similarly the chopping down of the trees, even if it was a discrete event at the time, cannot be so construed because of the speculative nature of the statement. Or perhaps these tense choices are just personal choices by the writer, but it certainly is not true that *doveva* in itself implies “should”. It depends on the context.

4.9.4 Potere

Here [Proudfoot-Cardo] translate *poté* and *poteva* as “was able to” and “could have” respectively, and say that *poteva* can be replaced by *avrebbe potuto*. As with *dovere*, this isn't always true; it depends on the context. An example from *Vino e pane*:

²This belongs to a collection of stories entitled *Gli amori difficili*. They're very clever and fun to read.

Don Paolo manteneva gli occhi chiusi; ma dal rumore delle ruote egli poté riconoscere quando la carrozzella fu sull'acciottolato della piazzetta di Orta.

“Don Paolo kept his eyes closed, but from the noise of the wheels he was able to recognize when the little carriage was on the cobblestones of the small square of Orta.”

Of course, in English one can often use “could” interchangeably with “was able to”, and sometimes the former seems better for its brevity. Consider the following from *L'avventura di un soldato*:

...a ogni modo lei non si tirò indietro, almeno per quel che poté capire lui!

“...in any case she didn't shrink back, at least as far as he could tell!” Here “was able to tell” is also possible.

Turning to *poteva*, we encounter the same tense-shifting difficulty occurring with *doveva*, plus the fact that “could” and “might” are often used interchangeably in English. From the same Calvino story we have:

A pensarci, però, quel suo non far caso alla mobile mano di Tomagra poteva voler dire che veramente credesse ad una vana ricerca in quella tasca: d'un biglietto ferroviario, d'un fiammifero...

“On second thought, however, her not paying attention to the wandering hand of Tomagra could mean that she really believed it was a fruitless searching in that pocket: for a train ticket, a match...”

Here “might mean” is an alternative. The past conditional “could have meant” is certainly grammatically possible, but in this passage Tomagra is still fiddling around in his pocket, and I think “could mean” is better. On the other hand, *poteva* can also mean “was able to”, as in the following from *Vino e pane*:

Don Paolo poteva riconoscere ogni casa, ogni camino, ogni finestra, ogni orto.

“Don Paolo was able to recognize every house, every chimney, every window, every garden.” Here “could have recognized” would clearly be wrong, and we see that “was able to” is not exclusive to *poté /ha potuto*. The choice of imperfetto here surely just corresponds to the usual “continuous action” model, as opposed to the more discrete events of the *poté* examples above.

4.9.5 Volere

Here there is a different kind of mutation. The remoto/prossimo usually imply that the thing wanted was in fact obtained, whereas in the imperfetto it was not or may not have been obtained. I think of this as fitting with the bounded/unbounded model: In the former case the wanting comes to end, in the latter maybe not. An example from *Il quartiere*:

Gino volle restare per vedere il film ancora una volta; e siccome anche Giorgio ci lasciò perché sua madre aveva bisogno di lui, eravamo rimasti i due avversari pacificati ed io.

“Gino wanted to stay and see the film one more time; and since Giorgio left us because his mother needed him, there remained just the two pacified adversaries and me.”

As the context makes clear even in the English version, Gino not only wanted to stay; he did. In the Italian this is also implied by the conjugation *volle* rather than *voleva*. The imperfecto tends to imply that the thing wanted was not obtained, e.g. from *Vino e pane*:

Mio fratello voleva ricomprare la stessa vigna, a causa di essa fece omicidio e finì all'ergastolo.

“My brother wanted to buy the vinyard back, and because of it committed murder and received a life sentence.” He wanted to, but it never happened.