



Imperfetto o passato prossimo?

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VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

Imperfetto o passato prossimo? Questo è il dilemma! Se sia più nobile usare l'imperfetto o prender coraggio e tentare con il passato prossimo? È stata una triste storia, o era una triste storia? Morivo, dormivo... o ho dormito, sono morto? Dormivo, forse sognavo... ma no, ho dormito, forse ho sognato!

Andiamo, non fatela così tragica! Oggi sveleremo gli oscuri segreti di questi due tempi verbali! Su il sipario!

This lesson is our response to a dilemma that troubles many learners of Italian, including several of my students. How do I know when to use the passato prossimo or the imperfetto? What is the difference? To make the right choice, first of all we need to understand the nature of these tenses. Today I'm going to assume that you already know how to form them, so I won't talk about conjugation; instead, I'll focus on the factors that will guide us in our choice.

DIALOGO

Viola: Pronto!

Sandra: Ciao Viola, come stai? Ieri ti **ho chiamato** tante volte, ma non mi **hai mai risposto!**

Viola: Ciao, Sandra! Scusami, ma **ero** giù di morale e non **volevo** parlare con nessuno!

Sandra: Dimmi la verità, **eri** giù perché **hai litigato** con Marco? Puoi dirmelo!

Viola: Ma come fai a saperlo? Non ne **ho parlato** con nessuno!

Sandra: Mentre tu e Marco **litigavate** al telefono, io **ero** nella stanza accanto. **Ho sentito** tutto quello che **avete detto**. Poi **sei uscita** in fretta e non **sono riuscita** a parlarti. Scusami!

Viola: Non ti preoccupare, non ho segreti con te!

Sandra: Guarda che anche io e Paolo **discutevamo** spesso all'inizio, poi ci **siamo calmati** e le cose ora vanno bene.

Viola: Ora mi ricordo! La prima volta che **siamo andati** in vacanza tutti e quattro **sembravate** cane e gatto, **eravate** insopportabili! Ma **facevate** anche un po' ridere!

Sandra: Ma sì, ridiamoci su!

In this little exchange, Sandra and Viola have sometimes used the imperfetto and sometimes the passato prossimo; let's see why.

Imperfetto e passato prossimo

Differences between English and Italian

Let's get to the root of the problem! English speakers tend to think that the passato prossimo always corresponds to the English present perfect, and that the imperfetto corresponds to the past simple. Unfortunately, that's not the case, not always. Non è così, non sempre.

To understand the nature of these tenses, let us consider three shapes: a point, a circle, a line. We can associate a completed action with a circle, an action that took place at a precise moment with a point, and an action seen in its duration with a line.

In Italian, a completed action, our circle, corresponds to the passato prossimo:

Ho letto questo libro tre volte. I have read this book three times.

The point I want to make is the completed nature of the action; I don't care when exactly I read the book, or what happened while I was reading the book, I care about the fact that the action was completed. A circle.

You will tell me, ah, like the English present perfect! Yes, of course. But there's more to it than that.

The passato prossimo, unlike the present perfect in English, is also used to describe an action that took place at a specific time. A point.

Ieri ho letto il libro che mi hai consigliato. Yesterday I read the book you recommended.

And here we come to the first, important difference between the two verb systems: this aspect of the passato prossimo corresponds to the past simple in English.

Therefore, depending on the nature of the action, the passato prossimo corresponds to a circle, action completed, in general, or to a point, action completed at a specific time. And of course, the time frame is the past.



Here is the beginning of our little dialogue, let's listen to what Sandra says:

Ciao Viola, come stai? Ieri ti **ho chiamato** tante volte, ma non mi **hai mai risposto!**
Hi Viola, I called you many times yesterday, but you never answered!

In this case, we use the passato prossimo to indicate an action that occurred at a specific time in the past, the time frame is yesterday. *Hai chiamato, hai risposto.* In English, on the other hand, we use the past simple. I called you, you never answered.

Let's listen to Viola:

Scusami tanto, ma ieri **ero** giù di morale e non **volevo** parlare con nessuno!
I'm so sorry, but I was in a bad mood yesterday and didn't want to talk to anyone!

Ero, volevo are verbs in the imperfetto, used here to describe a situation, a state in the past: *ero triste, ero felice, ero allegra, la casa era gialla, il cibo era buono. Non volevo parlare* describes an intention in the past, which lasted, we can imagine, throughout yesterday.

And here we have a key concept for understanding the imperfetto: **duration**. The imperfetto describes an action or a state in the past seen in its duration, a duration that usually is not specified, which has no beginning and no end, because we are not interested in that: we are interested in the fact that the action or the state lasted for some time; we do not describe the action as completed, but in its development. That's why we can associate the imperfetto to a line:

IMPERFETTO

Sandra and Viola again:

Dimmi la verità, **eri** giù perché **hai litigato** con Marco? Puoi dirmelo!
Ma come fai a saperlo? Non ne **ho parlato** con nessuno!
Tell me the truth, were you upset because you had a fight with Marco? You can tell me!
But how do you know that? I haven't told anyone about it!

Eri giù?: were you upset, or sad. Imperfetto, Viola was sad for more than just a moment: duration.

Hai litigato: you had a fight. *Hai litigato*: passato prossimo, the action of litigare, to argue, to have a fight, is seen as completed. It has happened once, una volta.

Non ne ho parlato con nessuno: action completed, passato prossimo, negative form.

Now Sandra explains how she knows that Marco and Viola had a fight:

Mentre tu e Marco **litigavate** al telefono, io **ero** nella stanza accanto.

While you and Marco were arguing on the phone, I was in the next room.

The magic word here is **mentre**, while. *Litigavate* and *ero* are both imperfetto, we have two simultaneous actions described in their duration. *Mentre* can also be replaced by *quando*: *Quando litigavate, ero nella stanza accanto.*

STARE

If you want to describe what was going on at a particular moment in the past, you can use *stare* in the imperfetto or *stare* + gerund, that is the English past continuous:

Mentre tu e Marco stavate litigando al telefono, io ero nella stanza accanto.

These two sentences are more or less equivalent, in the second one slightly more emphasis is put on an action that was in progress at a precise moment:

Mentre tu e Marco litigavate al telefono, io ero nella stanza accanto.

Mentre tu e Marco stavate litigando al telefono, io ero nella stanza accanto.

Sandra again:

Ho sentito tutto quello che avete detto. Poi sei uscita in fretta e non sono riuscita a parlarti.

I heard everything you said. Then you left in a hurry and I couldn't talk to you.

Ho sentito, avete detto, sei uscita, sono riuscita, all passato prossimo, in this case used to express a sequence of actions, occurring one after the other.

Now, fast forward to the end of the dialogue:

Ora mi ricordo! La prima volta che siamo andati in vacanza tutti e quattro sembravate cane e gatto, eravate insopportabili! Ma facevate anche un po' ridere!

Now that I think about it, I remember! The first time the four of us went on holiday together, you looked like cats and dogs, you were unbearable! But you were also a bit funny!

La prima volta che siamo andati in vacanza: passato prossimo, a completed action that happened once.

Sembravate cane e gatto, eravate insopportabili, facevate ridere: imperfetto, used to describe states or actions that lasted in the past. Marco and Viola quarrelled all the time, not just at a specific moment, and they were unbearable for the entire holiday.

Thanks to Sandra and Viola, we are now ready to give an overview of the uses of these two tenses, adding some useful details:

The imperfetto emphasises the durative aspect of the action, the passato prossimo emphasises the momentary and precise aspect of the action.

If we want to describe something (*il campeggio era bello, lei era alta*) **or talk about a past habit** (*studiavo tanto, andavo in vacanza al mare*), **we use the imperfetto**. It's similar to the English form *used to*:

When I was young, *Quando ero giovane,*
I used to work as a plumber *lavoravo come idraulico*

If we talk about actions that we did once or more than once, but which were not habits, we use the passato prossimo: *Sono stato a Roma due volte.*

With the word *mentre* we use the imperfetto (*mentre mangiavo, mentre dormivo*) and **with a time period introduced by *per* we use the passato prossimo** (*ho viaggiato per un anno, ho dormito per due ore*). Here too we refer to a duration, *ho dormito per due ore*, but it's a definite duration, which has a beginning and an end. The imperfetto is usually used to talk about an action whose duration is not specified: *Quando lavoravo a Milano ero felice.*

The passato prossimo is used to describe a sequence of actions, occurring one after the other:
Carlo si è alzato, ha fatto la doccia, ha fatto colazione e poi è uscito di casa.

To help you understand and remember better, let's repeat with more examples:

The imperfetto is the right choice to describe a habitual, repeated action:
Prendevo l'autobus tutti i giorni.

We can also use it to describe an action seen in its progress:
*Mercoledì alle 15.00 studiavo in biblioteca. or stavo studiando in biblioteca.**

* Even if we have a precise time here, we still use the imperfetto because this sentence answers the questions: *What were you doing on Wednesday at 3 pm? I was studying in the library* - an ongoing action, past continuous.

The **imperfetto + imperfetto** is used to express two simultaneous actions:
Elena parlava e Marco beveva il caffè.

The passato prossimo is used to express a completed action:
Lunedì ho parlato con Michele.

If necessary, we can also add a precise duration:

Lunedì ho parlato con Michele per due ore.

Remember: the imperfetto usually indicates a duration whose beginning or end is unknown or unspecified.

Quando andavo a casa di Michele, parlavamo sempre di cucina.

To express an ongoing action interrupted by another action we use **imperfetto + passato prossimo**:

Mentre bevevo il caffè, ho telefonato a Paolo.

To express a series of consecutive completed actions we use **passato prossimo + passato prossimo**:

Ho chiamato Elena e siamo andate al cinema.

It is often possible to use both passato prossimo and imperfetto for the same sentence, but the meaning changes slightly:

1) *Quando Viola ha telefonato, ho fatto il caffè.*

2) *Quando Viola ha telefonato, facevo il caffè.*

3) *Quando Viola telefonava, facevo il caffè.*

In the first example we are dealing with two consecutive actions: first Viola phoned, then I made coffee. *Prima Viola ha telefonato, poi ho fatto il caffè.*

In the second example the action expressed in the present perfect interrupts the action expressed in the imperfect: I was making coffee, and then Viola phoned! *Facevo il caffè, or stavo facendo il caffè, ed ecco che Viola telefona!*

In the third example the two actions take place in parallel and for a certain period of time, giving the story the tone of a habit: every time Viola phoned, I made coffee. *Tutte le volte che Viola telefonava, io facevo il caffè.*

Beyond the rules, to use the Italian past tenses correctly, it is essential to analyse the sentence in its context, thinking about the type of information that we want to communicate.

Esercizio

Now let's do an exercise together! Tell me whether these sentences are right or wrong!

1. L'anno scorso siamo andati a Firenze due volte.

What do you think? Siamo andati a Firenze due volte. Passato prossimo. It's correct. We went twice, two separate completed actions.

2. Due anni fa andavamo a Genova tre volte.

Similar to the previous sentence. Does it sound correct to you? Andavamo tre volte. No, we wouldn't use the imperfetto here, it's passato prossimo. We went three times, we are talking about separate completed actions. Siamo andati a Genova una volta, e poi un'altra, e un'altra ancora.

Actually, we could also use the passato remoto here: *andammo a Genova tre volte*, but it's becoming increasingly uncommon, especially in spoken Italian, so I suggest you stick with the passato prossimo.

3. Ieri sera mangiavo la pizza.

Right or wrong? It doesn't sound right. I ate pizza yesterday night - it's a completed action: ieri sera ho mangiato la pizza. Passato prossimo!

4. Ieri sera ho mangiato la pizza quando mi hai telefonato.

Here we have two actions. I was eating pizza when you called. How can I express the past continuous? With the imperfetto: mangiavo la pizza, or even better, stavo mangiando la pizza... e tu mi hai telefonato.

5. L'estate scorsa andavo sempre a ballare il sabato sera.

Here the key word is *sempre* - always. It's a habitual action: Last summer I would always go dancing on Saturday night. So the imperfetto... is perfect here!

6. Paolo ha lavorato in fabbrica per due anni.

Per due anni, for two years. It's a completed action with a definite duration: Paolo *has been working** in a factory for two years. The passato prossimo is correct.

* Oops! Actually, the correct translation is 'worked'. Action completed. Paolo is no longer working in a factory now.

7. Due giorni fa incontravo Sandra per strada.

Again, a completed action that happened two days ago. Here we would use the passato prossimo: Due giorni fa ho incontrato Sandra per strada.

Come è andata? È stato difficile? To really absorb these concepts you need to put them into practice, so don't worry about mistakes! I hope that now you have a clearer idea of how to use these important tenses of the Italian language; download the transcript and look at the examples again.

And of course subscribe to this channel if you haven't already; you won't regret it ;) Ciao!