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Aspectual Semantics of the German Preterit Based on Telic and Atelic Verbs

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Abstract: This paper aims to account for divergences in degrees of acceptability of sentences with co-occurring telic verbs and atelic durative time span adverbials. While German lacks a morphologically grammaticalized aspect category comparable to that of the Slavic languages, aspectual meanings are nevertheless actively expressed at the semantic level. From this point of view, even though the main function described for the preterit form is that of indicating past temporal reference, its functional scope has been shown to exceed purely temporal meaning. My research investigates the interaction of tense and aspect, specifically how the context determined by these abstract properties contributes to the semantic interpretation of the preterit as a whole; in particular, how it is modulated by lexical and actional properties of verbs. In particular, we pay special attention to the telic/atelic distinction and the criteria for determining telicity. It stems from a lexical-semantic and actional classification of verbs in the preterit form. The findings show that the aspectual interpretation of the preterit is not driven on grammatical form alone but rather, being sensitive to the verb's inherent actional properties. Consequently, the German preterit constitutes a sophisticated tense-aspect marker whose realizational semantics is context- and lexicon-dependent.

Keywords: Preterit Tense, Aspectual Semantics, Tense Category, Telic Verbs, Atelic Verbs, Actionality, German Language, Temporal Relations, Lexical-Semantic Classification

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1. Introduction

The categories of tense and aspect have historically been some of the most controversial and theoretically challenging topics in linguistic investigation. Tense typically describes a grammatical category, understanding time relations; whereas, aspect reflects the internal temporal organization of an action its accomplished or continuous time and whether it was done repeatedly or not. The interplay between these two categories varies greatly from language to language.

Aspect is typically expressed morphologically in such languages with a more clear grammaticalized aspect system, for instance Russian. But German does not formally mark aspect as a separate grammatical category [1]. These different aspectual uses have been the subject of perennial debate among scholars about the nature and status of aspectual meanings in German grammar. The preterit tense within this framework is a particularly rich object of analysis.

The German preterit is traditionally described as a past tense, generally used for written narration. Its semantic potential, however, goes beyond simple past reference. Aspectual nuances of the kind in question completion, boundedness, duration, habituality may emerge via the lexical meaning of the verb and their wider context (depending on

their situation), but natural preterit forms often do this work at a structural level. Attributional aspect is closely tied to the actional classification of verbs, which distinguishes between telic and atelic definitions [2]. Telic verbs present an anticipated conclusion or outcome, while atelic verbs describe processes or states without natural boundaries. The current study focuses on how such actional differences affect the aspectual interpretation of verbs in the preterit form, and seeks to elucidate the semantic principles driving this interaction. The discussion about the German preterit is primarily aspectual in nature. Some linguists assume that the preterit is purely a tense form and claim that it does not by itself indicate imperfective aspect. In contrast, other scholars argue that the preterit can express processual meaning. A third group of researchers treats the preterit as aspectual neutral, essential not encoding any aspectual value by itself [3].

2. Materials and Methods

Introduction The present study investigates the German preterit in a corpus-based qualitative and quantitative analysis. This work combines semantic, actional classification and contextual semantics. To explore the aspectual potential of the preterit, a corpus of narrative prose texts, journalistic material and literary extracts in Standard German was analyzed. The chosen material is written discourse, where the preterit predominates.

The methodological process involved multiple stages. Verbs appearing in the preterit form were first extracted from the corpus. Secondly, these verbs were then categorized as per their lexical-semantic properties based on an actional typology established in aspectological studies. The main differentiation was between telic and atelic verbs. Telic verbs were defined by their inherent endpoint, result, or natural boundary; while atelic verbs described unbounded processes or states. In addition, contextual analysis was performed to examine whether the preterit in each case also expressed boundedness, completion, duration, habituality or neutral past reference. Contextual markers like temporal adverbials, object specification and syntactic constructions that might affect aspectual interpretation received special attention. The quantitative analysis was conducted to calculate the frequency distribution of telic and atelic verbs in the preterit. The data collected from the corpus sample reveal that telic verbs make up around sixty two percent of the examined instances and atelic verbs represent thirty eight percent. This distribution indicates that the preterit is more likely to occur in contexts where the action has a natural endpoint or resultative reading.

3. Results

The results show that the aspectual meaning of the German preterit is strongly linked to the actional features of verbs. The telic verbs in the preterit only express perfective and bounded events. For instance, the preterit form of such verbs that have a resultative meaning (e.g. schreiben when it means to produce an end product, bauen when it means construct final object or finden when it denotes achieving something) usually bears the resultative scope [4].

Conversely, atelic verbs like schlafen, arbeiten or leben in the preterit are generally used with duration semantics rather than expressing completion. Their meaning is often contingent upon surrounding frames. For example, in conjunction with temporal adverbials denoting duration, the preterit of atelic verbs unambiguously conveys that a process was ongoing within a delimited time frame in the past [5].

To find out what types of actionals are employed in the German preterit, the extracted corpus data were quantified. The main goal was verifying whether telic or atelic verbs are more frequent in narrative contexts that use the preterit and measure how this distribution validates the aspectual reading of the tense [6] and was based on inherent endpoint, resultative meaning and boundedness criteria Figure 1 summarizes the findings.

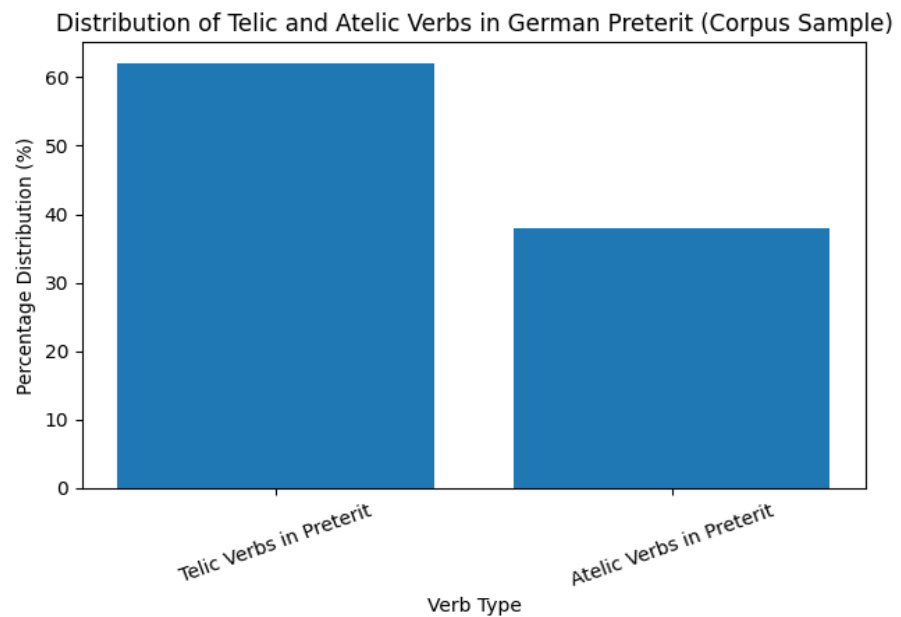


Figure 1. Distribution of Telic and Atelic Verbs in the German Preterit

Telic verbs make up sixty-two percent of the occurrences analyzed, and atelic verbs thirty-eight percent, as illustrated in Table 1. The large share of telic verbs suggests that the preterit in its most frequent uses describes (at least implicitly) bounded or resultative events [7]. This tendency is particularly common in narrative discourse, where events are generally described as temporally contiguous and isolated. But the large number of atelic verbs shows that the preterit cannot be reduced to a purely resultative or perfective function. In contrast, atelic verbs inflected in the preterit typically encode duration, habituality or ongoing processes located in the past [8]. This interpretation relies heavily on contextual factors including temporal adverbials, object specification, and discourse structure. The quantitative data thus support the claim that preterit does not lexically encode aspectual significance. Its interpretation, instead, arises from the interaction between grammatical tense and lexical actionality. Higher telic verb frequency indicates a functional preference for bounded event representation, yet evidence of atelic verbs supports the argument that preterit aspect is flexibly bound to meaningful temporal representations while remaining semantically neutral in isolation. This distribution serves to support a larger theoretical claim about German: namely that aspect is instantiated primarily in the lexical-semantic and contextual domains, not through morphological marking [9]. The bar chart above illustrates the quantitative distribution of verbs in narrative passages with preterit; telic verbs appear more often. This reaffirms the hypothesis that the preterit is functionally bound to presenting completed acts in narratives. But such a significant presence of atelic verbs shows that completion is not part of the inherent meaning of the preterit—rather, the preterit allows for different aspectual compositions by lexical and contextual means [10], [11].

In addition, the analysis shows that aspect is not morphologically encoded on the preterit itself. Rather, aspectual meaning results from the interplay of lexical semantics, syntactic structure and discourse context. This supports the idea that aspect in German is primarily expressed at the semantic and pragmatic level rather than through grammatical inflection.

4. Discussion

The outcomes of the current study contribute significantly to the enduring dispute regarding the aspectual nature of German preterit. The analysis presented here shows that, far from being just a temporal form without aspectual significance, preterit has clear and

robust aspectual effects in the empirical data. At the same time, the results do not corroborate the counter-assertion that preterit has a basis in imperfective or processual meaning [12]. Far from syntactically determining use, it appears that the German preterit is aspectually variable and semantically indifferent on its own, and that the implications of one or another reading come about through interplay with extra-linguistic information.

This fits quite well with Bernard Comrie's foundational tense/aspect distinction. Comrie adds that, while tense places a situation in time type, aspect is the internal temporal outline of that situation [13], [14]. If we apply this distinction to German, the preterit serves a clear temporal function: events are anchored in past time. Of course, as the data would suggest, the internal structure of those events is not constrained by the tense form *per se* but rather by the lexical semantics of the verb and surrounding context. Indeed in this sense, the German preterit supports Comrie's theoretical isolation of tense, aspect on the one hand and highlights their practical interaction on the other.

A similar approach is taken by Comrie when he discusses tense later: he emphasizes that tense systems vary from language to language in terms of how much they are integrated with aspectual meanings. These findings are consistent with this typological observation. Aspect in German is not grammaticalized through verbal morphology as it is in Slavic, where it is grammatically encoded (Zubizarreta and Pancheva 2000). Instead, as Östen Dahl argues in a typological study of tense and aspect systems, languages differ in the way they divide up aspectual information between grammar and lexicon [15], [16]. German seems to be a language where aspect is primarily lexical and contextual rather than morphological. The significance of lexical semantics becomes most apparent with respect to telic vs atelic distinction. Here, especially relevant is Ilse Depraetere's influential distinction between boundedness and telicity. Telicity has to do with the in-built end of an event; boundedness has to do with whether we present the event as bounded in a given discourse context (Depraetere 1995). The corpus-based evidence supports the claim that telic verbs in the preterit produce bounded readings, but this boundedness is not something being mechanically provided by the tense itself [17]. Rather, it emerges from the interaction between lexical telicity and narrative framing. Event-semantic work by David Dowty further strengthens this interpretation. In his semantic features and event structure analysis, Dowty argues that all verbs have underlying semantic features that determine the conceptual structure of events. If such verbs appear in the preterit, their event structure interacts with the temporal reference provided by tense. It is this interaction that our study demonstrates to be decisive: telic predicates yield completed readings as a matter of course, whereas atelic ones are compatible with durative or habitual interpretations in the same tense form.

Aids to explaining might also be offered by Wolfgang Klein's model of temporal reference. Klein distinguishes between topic time, situation time and utterance time, maintaining that the relationship among these three temporal intervals is one established by tense [18]. If we approach this from the perspective of the German preterit, all that needs to be done is for the situation time to precede utterance time; no suggestion is made of the internal structure of the situation. That inner aspect is the province of lexical aspect and contextual analysis. These results strongly support Klein's generalization that tense cannot determine aspectual interpretation alone.

More specifically within the context of German linguistics, Fabricius-Hansen has argued that temporal interpretation in German is constrained not just by morphology but also by discourse structure (Fabricius-Hansen 2007a). The prevalence of telic verbs within the narrative passages that employ the preterit is indicative of the discourse function of telling a story, where events are optimally described as sequential and bounded [19]. However, the existence of a large share of atelic verbs shows that the preterit is semantically open and context-dependent.

These theoretical perspectives ultimately combine to support the key claim of the present research: that the German preterit cannot be treated as purely temporal or aspectual. Instead, it acts as a temporal scaffold on which lexical aspect is realized. In German, then, tense and aspect mutually interact on semantic dimensions rather than are fully independent categories. From a wider typological perspective, the results immortalize that German replaces grammaticalized aspect with lexical categorization, syntactic organization and contextual understanding [20]. This aligns with a semantic-pragmatic approach to aspectual interpretation whereby meaning originates dynamically as the result of interaction between grammar, lexicon and discourse. In the end, the German preterit appears neither as an aspectually marked form nor as a versatile and context-sensitive tense whose interpretation is governed by actionality. It is this understanding which can lead to a more balanced resolution of the debate and which places German at some point along a cross-linguistic continuum of tense-aspect systems rather than at either extreme.

5. Conclusion

This paper has approached the aspectual semantics of the German preterit with respect to the telicity distinction. The analysis has shown the preterit to not be temporally intrinsic, nor aspectually stable. Rather, the preterit is a temporally marked but otherwise aspectually flexible form whose interpretation is determined by lexical actionality and contextual information. Telic verbs typically yield bounded/pass resultatives, while atelic verbs provide durative/linepast interpretations. In this way, the interaction of tense and lexical aspect becomes a crucial part of how meaning is determined. The general conclusion of the study is that the German preterit cannot be understood in isolation from tense theory, lexical semantics, and actional classification. A future extension of this analysis may include spoken discourse or comparative studies with regard to other Germanic languages to further elucidate the typological status of aspect in German.

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