



THE USAGE OF TENSE FORMS OF GERMAN

Yarash Bozorovich Ruziev

Doctor of philosophy

Nafisa Mukhammadovna Aslonova

Master of English Linguistics in Bukhara State University

Abstract: *This article is devoted to the text characteristic of expression of tenses in German language. The special attention is allocated with the contextual use of present in the meaning of the future and its synonym use with other tenses.*

Key words: *present tense, past tense, subordinate clause, semantic, direct speech, reported speech.*

Generally, the correct use of grammatical tenses is one of the first and most important didactic goals of every foreign language curriculum, since it allows the understanding of every written or spoken text. The tense system of a language is, indeed, a vital part of communication, and “the language itself requires us to use tenses in every sentence and often, more than one time” (Weinrich 1964, 8). Because of their vital role in communication, grammatical tenses also occupy a special place in SLA research. According to Nicole Schumacher (2005), the use of the German Perfekt (present perfect) and Präteritum (simple past) is one of the most complex learning topics in DAF (Deutsch als Fremdsprache—German as a foreign language). The German past tenses are definitively a problematic issue for students in language classrooms, and the reasons for this are numerous. First, the didactic materials used at schools and universities do not offer adequate explanations; they often refer to the register (spoken vs. written) as the main difference between these two tenses. Second, linguistic research in this field still appears to be dominated by the tense model developed by Hans Reichenbach in 1947, in which grammatical tenses are viewed as a mere representation of the objective categories of the present, past, and future (Concu 2016). This model uses three different points to describe any given tense: point of speech, point of reference and point of event. The point of speech (S) is the moment in which the speaker or writer actually says or writes something, the point of event (E) refers to the exact moment in which the particular event took place, and the point of reference (R) is the time expressed by the conjugated verb form and is often specified by temporal adverbs. To describe the German present perfect, for instance, scholars such as Ehrlich (1992), Helbig & Buscha (1998), Schumacher (2005) and Rothstein (2007) claim that the point of speech is at the same point as the point of reference in the temporal axis, a feature that the present perfect shares with the present. The point of event is back on the same axis, since the past participle situates the action before the time in which the speaker or writer talks about it. Reichenbach’s parameters suggest that this tense is able to express a resultative and punctual meaning only, since the action, independently from the verb used, is situated before the moment of speech. However, this depiction fails to account for the frequent appearance of the present perfect with present and future temporal references, as shown in the following examples:

Er hat sich damit jetzt als Politgangster entlarvt. He has himself with that now as Politgangster revealed ‘He revealed himself now to be a politgangster’
Gleich habe ich es geschafft. Soon have I it achieved ‘I will achieve it soon’ (Schumacher, 2005, 158, 161)

Instances such as the ones in (4) and (5) indicate that questions addressing the meaning and the



functions of the present perfect are largely discordant.

As observed by Alessandra Lombardi (2008) in her work, *Tempus der Wissenschaft*, “die Ermittlung der semantischen Grundwerte der Tempa, von Anfang an im Mittelpunkt des Interesses deutscher und italienischer Tempusforschung, hat sich als echte wissenschaftliche Herausforderung erwiesen, welche zu inhomogenen und noch bis heute umstrittenen deskriptiven Ergebnissen (Tempusdarstellungen) geführt hat” (p. 142). [The representation of the German tenses, which was from the beginning the center of the interest of Italian and German tense’s research, became a real scientific challenge, which led to controversial and inhomogeneous descriptive results].

The large divergence in methodologies and frameworks around the use of the German Perfekt and Präteritum in written and spoken contexts, and the misleading representations of the tenses in DAF material influence the correct depiction of the meanings of these two tenses. This work seeks to address the issues related to the use of the two tenses in spoken language to gain a better understanding of their usage by German speakers. To achieve this goal, I will focus exclusively on spoken language and use a particular corpus of spoken texts: the recordings of the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials held in Frankfurt am Main, from December 20, 1963, to August 19, 1965, and available on the web page of the Fritz Bauer Institute. The decision to use this corpus for the current study was driven by several reasons. First, these recordings offer a large amount of spontaneous spoken language texts in which the interactions between the interlocutors are formal. Second, due to the nature of the trials, speakers are required to describe events in the past that happened almost twenty years before the trials. Third, the cultural and historical value of these trials makes it a unique corpus to work on. These reasons make this corpus the most suitable one for the aim of this research. Specifically, in this paper, I addressed:

- 1) the use of the German *Perfekt* and *Präteritum* in spoken language,
- 2) the relation between pragmatics and tense use. This paper is organized as follows. The first substantive section offers a review of the literature. The second describes the methodology used to collect data from the corpus. The third section presents and discusses the results. In the last section, the implications of this analysis will be discussed in terms of future research on the use of these tenses in spoken language.

The textual analyses on the corpus included in this study have successfully challenged the depictions of the tenses *Perfekt* and *Präteritum* in DAF (*Deutsch als Fremdsprache*—German as a Foreign Language), and the traditional beliefs about the use of the *Präteritum* in spoken language, which was supposed to be limited to a small number of verbs. Furthermore, this research provides support for the pragmatic categories of comment and narration described by Weinrich (1964). First, data from the first set of charts demonstrate that German speakers often utilize the *Präteritum* in their spoken interactions, even with a higher frequency than the *Perfekt*. Second, the data from the second set of charts showed how the same verbs tend to appear often in a tense instead of the other. For instance, the verb *sagen* was used with higher frequency in *Perfekt* than in *Präteritum*, *sehen* was used equally in both tenses, and the verbs *kommen* and *gehen* were often used in the *Präteritum*. The data of the last charts have shown how the use of the *Präteritum* in spoken language is not limited to verbs such as *sein* and *haben*, and the modals. German speakers use this tense with a very large variety of verb types. The results of this analysis are also in line with what Concu (2016) has found for the written language in her corpus. The communicative intentions of the speakers are the ultimate factors that determine the difference between both *Präteritum* and *Perfekt*. The forms of *Präteritum* found in this corpus suggest that this tense is widely used in the spoken language, especially when speakers are requested to narrate events in the past. Furthermore, the numerous examples in which both the



Perfekt and the *Präteritum* were used further reinforces Weinrich's claims on the close link between pragmatics and tense use. However, further research is needed to make even stronger claims about how the speakers' intention determines the use of the grammatical tenses. A bigger and, maybe, more recent corpus could, indeed, provide further evidence for Weinrich (1964), Schumacher (2005), Welke (2010), and Concu (2016).

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