



The Imperfetto: Common Uses In Spoken Italian

The *imperfetto* is a tense that you need to use **to speak about the past in Italian**. Specifically, you can use it when you speak in the past to describe something, to talk about ongoing events, or about habits and repeated actions. In short, these are the most common uses of the *imperfetto*:

1) to describe something in the past

Ieri era una bellissima giornata, c'era un sole meraviglioso e faceva caldo (Yesterday it was a beautiful day, the sun was lovely and it was warm)

La casa era gialla e aveva un bellissimo giardino (The house was yellow and had a lovely garden)

2) to describe a person, a feeling, a status

Quando era giovane, mia mamma era bellissima (My mom was gorgeous when she was young)

Giovanna era molto triste e si sentiva sola (Giovanna was really sad and she was feeling lonely)

3) to describe a habit or a repeated action in the past

D'estate andavo sempre al mare (I would always go to the beach in the summer)

Quando ero giovane, leggevo molti libri (I used to read a lot of books when I was young)

4) to describe two ongoing actions, two actions happening at the same time

Mentre leggevo, mio marito guardava la TV (While I was reading, my husband watched tv)

I ragazzi chiacchieravano mentre il professore faceva lezione (The kids were chatting while the professor was teaching his lesson)

These are the most common standard uses of the *imperfetto* that you may already know quite well. But there are some more uses that you may not know, especially when it comes to spoken and colloquial Italian. These uses are a deviation from the norm of Italian grammar but they are now widely accepted in informal speech.

So let's see how the *imperfetto* is used in **colloquial Italian**.

1) It can be used **to express the future in the past**, to describe a future action while speaking in the past. The grammar says that the future in the past in Italian is expressed with the past

conditional, as in *Marco mi ha detto che sarebbe tornato presto* (Marco told me he would come back early). If we are in an informal situation, we can say *Marco mi ha detto che tornava presto*.

Here are some other examples:

Standard grammar: *Pensavo che saresti venuto alla festa* – Informal speech: *Pensavo che venivi alla festa* (I thought you'd come to the party)

Standard grammar: *Mi ha detto che si sarebbe sposato domani* – Informal speech: *Mi ha detto che si sposava domani* (He told me he would get married tomorrow)

2) In spoken Italian, the *imperfetto* can be used to ask a question or make a polite request. This is also a commonly accepted deviation from the grammar rule, which requires the use of conditional. For example, instead of saying *Vorrei un caffè, grazie*, you can hear Italian say: *Volevo un caffè, grazie*.

Other examples are:

Standard grammar: *Vorrei sapere a che ora parte il treno* – Informal speech: *Volevo sapere a che ora parte il treno* (I'd like to know when the train leaves)

Standard grammar: *Buongiorno, vorrei chiedere se è possibile rimandare l'esame* – Informal speech: *Buongiorno, volevo chiedere se è possibile rimandare l'esame* (Good morning. I'd like to ask if it is possible to postpone the exam)

3) Another use of the *imperfetto* in informal speech is **to talk about impossible or unattainable actions, which might have happened but did not happen**. To express this, the Italian grammar requires the use of the *periodo ipotetico dell'irrealità*, which is made of *congiuntivo trapassato* and *condizionale passato*. In informal speech, you can replace those tenses with the *imperfetto*. For example, instead of saying *se avessi saputo che c'era il sole, sarei andato al mare*, you could say *se sapevo che c'era il sole, andavo al mare* (if I had known there sun was shining, I would have gone to the beach).

Here are some other examples:

Standard grammar: *Se avessi vinto alla lotteria, avrei comprato una Ferrari* – Informal speech: *Se vincevo alla lotteria, compravo una Ferrari* (If I had won the lottery, I would have bought a Ferrari)

Standard grammar: *Se me lo avessi detto prima, non sarei venuto* – Informal speech: *Se me lo dicevi prima, non venivo* (If you had told me in advance, I wouldn't have come)

