

## Re: Past Tenses in Western Europe

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*Source:* <http://sci.tech--archive.net/Archive/sci.lang/2005-11/msg00514.html>

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- *From:* "Neeraj Mathur" <[neemathur@xxxxxxxxxxxx](mailto:neemathur@xxxxxxxxxxxx)>
  - *Date:* Sat, 12 Nov 2005 03:29:21 -0000
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"Dik T. Winter" <[Dik.Winter@xxxxxxx](mailto:Dik.Winter@xxxxxxx)> wrote in message  
[news:IptMK3.4rx@xxxxxxxxxx](mailto:news:IptMK3.4rx@xxxxxxxxxx)

> In article <[dl3enp\\$mi\\$1@xxxxxxxxxxxxxx](mailto:dl3enp$mi$1@xxxxxxxxxxxxxx)> "Neeraj Mathur"  
> <[neemathur@xxxxxxxxxxxx](mailto:neemathur@xxxxxxxxxxxx)> writes:  
> > How comparable is  
> > the  
> > German development – I'd be grateful if somebody could summarise it for  
> > me –  
> > to the Romance ones? What other languages does this extend to – is it in  
> > Dutch?

[snip Dik's summary of Dutch past tenses]

> All four tenses are still common in Dutch. And in addition we have also  
> four future tenses, also all four still common.)  
>  
> Apparently you have been talking with Germans from Southern Germany.

Thank you for the summary of Dutch, and the Wikipedia site. My friend, the first one who called me out, is from the area near Dusseldorf; he went to school at Salem however. I don't know where the others are from, although I think one at least was from Munich. Is there any consensus in broadcast or political German? I know that stage/musical standards seem to be based on more southerly forms of speech.

Having looked at the info on Dutch, I am struck by how similar it is to English and the more southerly types of Romance. I'm now envisaging two stages here:

1) In the wake of the fall of Rome, as mass migration and mobility take over Europe, a first Sprachbund-type effect occurs (very roughly anchored around 1000 AD, give or take a few centuries), in which Romance and Germanic broadly develop together a system of tenses featuring a preterite and a compound perfect tense. These differ by reference point alone. Also formed are a past perfect (pluperfect) and possibly a future perfect (does this last exist in Germanic apart from English?). Imperfects may also develop (Germanic?), differing from the preterite in aspect. Morphologically, the perfects are all marked as compounds (whose theory was that?) because of the separation of the reference point from the moment of the action; the

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Germanic tongues, which started with only two tenses (present and past), make the past the preterite to accord with this. Romance makes its imperfect with the Latin morphology of the same tense/aspect; English (and other Germanic?), lacking the morphology, do it periphrastically (Eng. 'I was doing..' etc.). Some areas are too remote to take part in this fully; thus Portuguese's tense–aspect system is slightly different.

2) After this process has stabilized the tense systems of the Romance and Germanic tongues, a second innovation takes place, beginning in the centre (with a focus somewhere around Switzerland), in which the preterite is discarded and the compound past takes on its functions. This change having started only a few centuries ago, it has not really reached far beyond North Italy, France, and South Germany. (What about Catalan and Provençal in this regard?) The outer languages conserve the structure achieved at the end of Stage 1, thus seeming more conservative – Spanish, Italian, Northern German, Dutch, British English.

I can see the second stage as being consistent with a general movement towards higher analysis in the languages in question: the preterite is abandoned because of its 'synthetic' morphology.

Does this sound reasonable? If so, what do we make of American English: is its development completely unrelated? (The aspect system of English is, of course, significantly different from anything on the continent; when does this develop?)

Neeraj Mathur

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### • *Follow-Ups:*

- ◆ ***Re: Past Tenses in Western Europe***

◇ *From:* Nath Rao

- ◆ ***Re: Past Tenses in Western Europe***

◇ *From:* Ruud Harmsen

### • *References:*

- ◆ ***Past Tenses in Western Europe***

◇ *From:* Neeraj Mathur

- ◆ ***Re: Past Tenses in Western Europe***

◇ *From:* Dik T. Winter

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