Uses of the preterit and the imperfect

The preterit and the imperfect are both simple past tenses, but each views the past in a different way.

Uses of the preterit

The preterit is used to describe an action, event, or condition seen as a completed single unit and may focus on the beginning or the end of an action, or on the entire action from beginning to end.

El escritor Valbuena habló ayer a las siete. (= comenzó a hablar)

Estuvimos en la biblioteca hasta bien tarde. (hasta points to end of action)

Trabajé demasiado. Trabajé desde las siete de la mañana hasta las ocho de la noche. (explicit beginning and end)

El fin de semana pasado fuimos a la tienda. (last weekend)

Uses of the imperfect

The imperfect is used to express the following:

A. An action in progress in the past (hence the name imperfect = unfinished). It usually corresponds to English was/were + an -ing form of the verb. [This use of the imperfect is equivalent to the Spanish estaba + -ndo construction.]

¿Qué hacías (=estabas haciendo) ayer como a las diez en el centro?

¿Acompañaba (=estaba acompañando) a un amigo al banco.

¿Qué coincidencia! Mientras tú estabas en el banco, yo hacía (= estaba haciendo) compras en la tienda de al lado.

What were you doing downtown yesterday around ten o’clock?

I was accompanying a friend to the bank.

What a coincidence! While you were at the bank, I was shopping at the store next door.

b. States/conditions in the past. The imperfect is generally used with verbs that express a mental, emotional, or physical condition or state in the past.

Anoche después del trabajo, estaba fatigado. Me dolía todo el cuerpo y tenía un ligero dolor de cabeza.

Last night after work, I was tired. My whole body ached and I had a slight headache.

c. Descriptions in the past. The imperfect is used to provide the background information or setting of an action or actions in the past. The time of day at which a past action occurred is considered background information and is always expressed in the imperfect.

Eran las dos de la tarde. Hacía calor. El conejo dormía plácidamente en su madriguera.

Soñaba con jugosos melones. (…)

It was two o’clock in the afternoon. The rabbit was sleeping peacefully in his lair. He was dreaming of juicy melons. (…)

d. Habitual actions in the past.

Antes nuestra familia se reunía casi todos los domingos en casa de mi tío Alberto. Después de cenar charlabamos, mirábamos televisión o jugábamos a los naipes.

El semestre pasado venía a la universidad todos los días; ahora vengo sólo los martes y jueves.

Before, our family used to get together almost every Sunday at Uncle Alberto’s. After supper we would talk, watch TV, or play cards.

Last semester I came (used to come) to the university every day; now I come only on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

Nota gramatical: Note that the English form would is used in conditional statements (I would buy it if I had the money) and in habitual statements in the past (I would buy toy cars when I was a child). Spanish uses the conditional tense for the first statement and the imperfect for the second: Yo lo compraba si tuviera dinero; Yo compraba coches de juguete cuando era pequeño.