Tense in Latin

Some preliminary remarks. We use intervals rather than time points. An interval is characterized by two time points, the point where the interval begins and the one where it ends. In principle, intervals can include or not include these points. Verbs denote events, possible groups of events. Likewise nouns. For example,

(1)   People protested against increased prices in several cities.

(2)   Several car accidents happened last night.

are sentences that speak about groups of events. While each event lasts for an interval, the group can last for an unknown stretch of time, which may even be interrupted. In what is to follow we shall not deal with groups of events as this may further complicate matters.

Latin has 6 tenses: present, past, future I, perfect, pluperfect and anterior future (future II). The first three are formed from a different stem than the last three, which are formed from the perfect stem. So one would guess that their meaning can be composed into a sequence PERF+tense. However, facts are not that simple. We first review of tenses by themselves. There is a trichotomy into present, past and future tense: past tenses are perfect, imperfect and pluperfect. Future tense is both future I and future II.

Present   Denotes events that happen in the present. We take the time of an event to be an interval I. We also take the 'now' to be an interval (linguists call this 'generalized now') and write ν for it. Then present is used in particular if event time is included in the generalized now:

(3) $I \subseteq \nu :\Leftrightarrow (\forall t)(t \in I \rightarrow t \in \nu)$

Perfect   Singular events which happened in the past and are completed. So, perfect is used if

(4) $I < \nu :\Leftrightarrow (\forall ts)(t \in I \wedge s \in \nu \rightarrow t < s)$

Similarly, if one speaks of several events:

(5)   Omnes antiquae gentes regibus quondam paruerunt.
        all old people to.kings in.previous.times listened
        All people of ancient times were ruled by kings.

The difference is that the sentence involves a quantification over objects and therefore predicates over several events.

Other uses of the perfect include the **gnostic** perfect: rules of experience that can always repeat themselves; and the **resultative**, denoting the state that results from an action that happened in the past.

Imperfect   States and events that began in the past but are not finished. So, $I \cap \nu \neq \varnothing$ but $(\exists st)(s \in I \land t \in \nu \land s < t)$. Imperfect also is used for regularly occurring events. (In their case the verb denotes a set of events, some of which may be completed, but some of them not.) A third use is when the action is abandoned without being completed.

(6)   Helvetii flumen lintribus iunctis transibant.
        The Helvetians tried to pass the river on boats which they tied together.

Imperfect is used in a letter for an event that is present for the sender, but will certainly be past for the recipient.

(7)   Nihil habebam quod scriberem.
        I have nothing to write about.

Future I   Events that will take place.

(8)   Cras proficiscar.
        Tomorrow I shall leave.

Events that remain in the future:

(9)   Quamdiu hic manebis?
        How long will you stay?

Here it is the mirror image of the imperfect: the event is started in the extended now, but it lasts longer. Future is used also for regular events:

(10)   Nemo mortem effugiet.
        Nobody will escape death.

The difference with the perfect lies in the fact that it is not expressed as an empirical fact but as a general rule.

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An interesting use is this one:

(11)   Id non facies.
        Don't do that.

Future II This tense is used if the future event in question is known or certain to happen.

(12)   Tolle hanc opinionem: luctum sustuleris.
        Eliminate this opinion: you will make grievance disappear.

Some verbs have perfective morphology but the meaning is as if the perfect adds no meaning. Such a verb is odisse 'to hate'. Here, odi means 'I hate' (morphology: perfect tense), oderam 'I hated' (morphology: pluperfect), and oderim 'I will hate' (morphology: future II). We will ignore these verbs in the sequel.

Clause Chaining

The next set of rules concern the meaning of tenses when they are used in chaining clauses. If there are two clauses (or generally, two events) we are dealing with two event intervals, I_1 and I_2, which enjoy a certain position relative to each other. There is a three way split between $I_1 < I_2$, $I_1 > I_2$ and $I_1 \circ I_2$ (the latter means that they overlap, that is, $I_1 \cap I_2 \neq \varnothing$). In the main clause without chaining we have two time intervals: extended now and event time. In this case, story time may be either extended now or event time. Both options are plausible, but there is no way to distinguish them. However, we have also seen that in letters a third time interval may show up: there is 'recipient now', 'sender now' and event time. Thus, 'sender now' is taken to be story time.

Basically, every time a tense is used we need to establish whether or not the basic meaning is prevalent ('absolute tense') or whether some other interval plays the role of the extended now ('relative tense'). While the rules for subordinate clauses are pretty strict (and will be discussed below), chaining main clauses is less regimented.

Pluperfect   This tense is confined to chaining. It is used if some action was in the process when another started:

(13)   Pausanias prope aedem Minervae mortuus erat. Eodem loco postea est
      sepultus.

Pausanias had died near the temple of Athene. In that place he was
      later buried.

Notice that the pluperfect is used in the first clause, establishing an intermediate time point (interval) to which the perfect is hooked. (I called this 'story time', but the name is irrelevant.)

Interesting is the following. Letters were written from the temporal point of view of the recipient. In that case pluperfect takes over the role of the imperfect.

(14)   Nihil novi audiveram et ad tuas epistulas rescripseram pridie.

I heard nothing new [in between] and I answered your letters yesterday.

The use of pluperfect can be explained as follows. The extended now is set to recipient now, the story time is the now of the sender and the event time is in the past relative to story time.

Imperfect   In the following example, imperfect is used in the first clause because the event of the second event starts while the first is still going.

(15)   Librum legebam, tum tu intravisti.

I was reading a book when you entered.

The first interval, I_1 is set in imperfect, I_2 in perfect tense. This is because the second is completed, but it starts whithin I_1. This is a chaining use, because I_1 might already be completed in the extended now. Hence, I_2 plays the role of the extended now for I_1. Hence imperfect is used.

Rules of Chaining

Indicative Clauses

Let I_m be the event time of the main clause, I_s the event time of the subordinate clause.

Case 1. $I_m \circ I_s$. Then the tense of sentences is the same.

Case 2. $I_m > I_s$.

Main Clause	Subordinate Clause
Present	Perfect
Past	Pluperfect
Future I	Future II

Case 3. $I_m < I_s$. In this case the following table is given.

Main Clause	Subordinate Clause
Present	Present
Perfect	Perfect
Future I	Future II

This results in ambiguity, so Latin basically encourages the use of complementizers that make the temporal relations clear (for example, `antequam` 'before').

Subjunctive

For the tenses used in subjunctive subordinate clauses, the term 'consecutio temporum' is used. In what is to follow, the subordinate clause is in the subjunctive.

Tense	Subordinate Clause		
	$I_s < I_m$	$I_s \circ I_m$	$I_s > I_m$
Imperfect	Pluperfect	Imperfect	-urus essem
Pres/Fut	Perfect	Present	-urus sim

There are exceptions. (1) If $I_s \circ \nu$, present tense is used (absolute tense). (2) If the subordinate clause reports a historical fact, absolute tense is used (perfect). (3) Parenthetical remarks are not subject to the consecutio temporum.

Also to be noted is that intervening infinite forms (infinitives, participials, gerunds) do not reset the time of the main clause. Thus the subordinate clause looks up to the next clause with a finite verb.