# A Comparative Study of German and Chinese Virtual Expressions from a Communicative Perspective

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## Abstract

Virtual expression is a significant component of language function, which is realized by non-grammatical structures in Chinese and grammatical structures in German. This research uses the comparative study method, compares the variances between Chinese and German virtual expressions from the communicative perspective, and finds that German virtual expressions are often realized with the help of verb conjugation, whereas in Chinese, they are realized with the help of phrases or intonational auxiliaries; besides, German virtual expressions have the function of polite expression, whereas Chinese does not have the function. Besides, German virtual expressions can be recognized at the syntactic level, whereas Chinese requires the analysis from the semantic perspective.

## 1. Background

Wilhelm Köller stated that language is a different feeling and reflection of different perspectives in *Perspective and Language* and perspectives are influenced by culture, geography, political system (Köller, 2004), accordingly, the differences between the different language systems are self-evident. Köller divided perspectives into two dimensions: communicative perspective and cognitive perspective, the communicative perspective, refers to the pragmatic perspective, which combines context, sentence, lexical and grammatical forms, and analyses how speakers express their subjective ideas more objectively through linguistic symbols for communicative purposes, and the cognitive perspective, which focuses on how

different cultural backgrounds and cognitive systems contribute to the establishment of a linguistic system.

Linguistic morphological changes are rare in Chinese, where verbs do not follow any changes in tense, person and sentence pattern. In German, on the other hand, morphological changes are an important part of realizing linguistic functions, and the forms of its verb conjugation are complex and varied. In general, Chinese does not emphasize fixed grammatical formal features, whereas German is a highly formal language. The use of the communicative perspective will be more easily recognizable in the formal language system (German) and will appear in a more imperceptible form in the non-formal language system (Chinese). Accordingly, we adopt the communicative perspective from Wilhelm Köller to analyse the differences between German and Chinese virtual expressions at the grammatical, chapter and pragmatic levels.

The virtual tense (Der Konjunktiv) is a common grammatical usage in German, which is mainly realized with verb conjugation. The Chinese do not have the grammatical structure of virtual expression, but they can express virtual content (Shi, 2010). German virtual expression is mainly used to express subjective attitudes such as wish, assumption, request, imagination, indirect paraphrase, and politeness, which are reflected in non-realistic conditionals, non-realistic wishes, non-realistic declarative and non-realistic comparative clauses. In Chinese, on the other hand, the function of the virtual expression is often realized through hypothetical conditional clauses with specific phrases or intonational auxiliaries.

Virtual expression is a vital component of grammar in both German and Chinese, however, there are limited studies on German grammar in China, as of 1 August 2024, there were only 116 academic journals and papers focusing on German grammar on CNKI, while most of them are scattered in terms of research points, and only three cases of research focused on German virtual expression (see Figure 1).

Among them, Xiu (2015) and Xu (2013) focused their research on the German first-virtual tense, and deeply analyzed the grammatical difficulties of the German
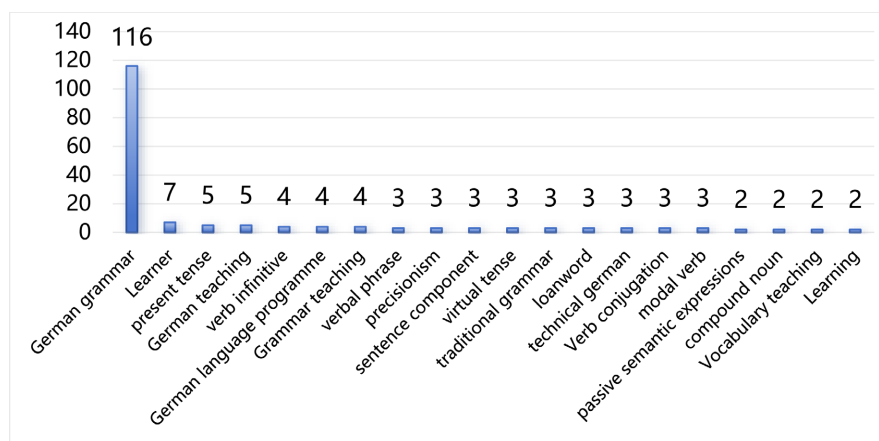


**Figure 1.** Distribution of subtopics in German grammar research on CNKI.

first-virtual tense. Shi (2010) compared the similarities and differences between German and Chinese virtual expression, and focused on the question of whether virtual tense exist in Chinese.

In Qian Wencai's *Chinesisch-Deutsche Kontrastive Syntax* (Qian, 2000), a Sino-German linguistic comparison of various common Chinese syntaxes was made.

*German Grammar Explained and Practised (3ʳᵈ Edition)* compiled by Zhou & Wang (2015) together with the *Standard German Grammar—Explained and Practised* (Dreyer & Schmitt, 2001) translated by Wang Fang, analyzed in detail the composition and usage of the German virtual tense (the first, second virtual tense) but does not compare it with the Chinese virtual expression.

On the whole, comparative studies on German and Chinese virtual expression were few and old.

The author tries to take the communicative perspective as an entry point to explore the differences between German and Chinese virtual expressions, so as to provide references and lessons for Chinese German learners' virtual tense acquisition.

## 2. Virtual Tense in German

The German virtual tense belongs to the verb tense. which is divided into two types, the first-virtual tense (Konjunktiv I, KI), that is, the indirect virtual tense, is often used to paraphrase the viewpoint of others, and plays the role of indirect quotation. The second-virtual tense (Konjunktiv II, K II), which also named restrictive virtual (or conditional virtual), usually occurs together with restrictive conditions, wishes, assumptions, and comparative clauses. The general pattern is:

Verb conjugation in the first-virtual tense:

Verb stem + virtual endings (-e) + personal endings (/,-st,/,-n,-t,-n)

Verb conjugation in the second-virtual tense:

Verb stem in past tense + virtual endings (-e) + personal endings (/,-st,/,-n,-t,-n)

It is worth noting that German verbs are divided into strong, weak and mixed verbs. Weak verbs, also known as regular verbs, are inflected in second-virtual tense according to the above rule, without a vowel change. On the other hand, strong verbs and some mixed verbs like denken (think), bringen (bring) that contain the vowels a, o, u in the verb stem will change to the vowels ä, ö, ü in the virtual tense conjugation.

The author takes the German verbs *fragen* (ask), *antworten* (answer), and the modal verb *können* (can) as typical examples, and their lexical changes in the first and second-virtual tense under different persons are shown in Table 1.

It is worth noting that due to the large number of cases in which German verbs need to be morphed, and the limited number of personal endings, there are sometimes cases of verb conjugation being duplicated, for example, the first-virtual

**Table 1.** Several verb conjugation under the German virtual tense.

| Person/verbal original | fragen | | antworten | | können | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | KI | KII | KI | KII | KI | KII |
| Ich (I) | frage | fragte | antworte | antwortete | könne | könnte |
| Du (You) | fragest | fragtest | antwortest | antwortetest | könnest | könntest |
| Er/sie/es/man (He/She/it) | frage | fragte | antworte | antwortete | könne | könnte |
| Wir (We) | fragen | fragten | antworten | antworteten | können | könnten |
| Ihr (plural You) | fraget | fragtet | antwortet | antwortetet | könnet | könntet |
| Sie (They/honorific You) | fragen | fragten | antworten | Antworteten | können | könnten |

tense conjugation of singular first-person verbs is the same as its general declarative tense, and the second-virtual tense conjugation of some verbs is the same as its past tense form; therefore, in German, the first virtual conjugation will be substituted by the second-virtual conjugation when it overlaps with the conjugation in other grammar forms; and the second virtual conjugation will be replaced by fixed collocation *würde + Inf* (the original form of the verb) when it coincides with other forms. Thus, in certain cases, the second-virtual tense form is not represented with the conjugation of verbs, but by the fixed collocation *würde + Inf*.

In summary, in most cases, German can realize virtual expression without expanding the sentence or changing its structure with the conjugation of verb:

General declarative tense:

Wenn ich groß bin, kaufe ich mir ein Auto.
我长大了就给自己买辆车。
When I grow up, I'll buy myself a car.

Virtual tense:

Wenn ich groß wäre, kaufte ich mir ein Auto.
我要是现在已经长大了，就给自己买辆车。
If I were grown up now, I'd buy myself a car.

The difference between the virtual tense and the general declarative tense in German can be further discerned from the above example, where the general declarative is a regular statement with no non-realistic conditions attached, and its verb changes according to the normal variation of the dominant first person *ich* (I), while the virtual tense is attached to a non-realistic condition (if I were to grow up by now), and expresses an unrealistic wish, and its verb changes according to the rules of the conjugation of verbs in the second-virtual tense.

## 2.1. First-Virtual Tense in German

The first-virtual tense is also known as the "tense expressing the opinion of another person" (Dreyer & Schmitt, 2001: p. 257). The functional scope of the first-virtual tense in German is mainly used in indirect quotations, i.e. the verbatim

recapitulation of information expressed orally or in writing by a person, with as little change as possible in the content of the recapitulation, e.g.: Der Richter sagte, er *glaube das nicht*. (the judge said that he didn't think so) (Dreyer & Schmitt, 2001: p. 257).

It is worth noting that there is room for choice as to whether or not to use the first-virtual tense in spoken German communication; Wilhelm von Humboldt (1999) argues that the use of the virtual tense depends on the speaker's confidence in the credibility of his/her paraphrase, and that the first-virtual tense is used to express subjective distance only if the speaker believes that the credibility of his/her paraphrase is in doubt, and conversely, the general declarative tense is used.

On a grammatical level, the use of first-virtual also depends on whether the predicate verb of the sentence is a fact-narrative predicate. Fact-narrative predicates refer to predicates that give rise to fact presuppositions. For example, *Er bedauert, dass das Wetter schlecht ist* (He lamented the bad weather), this sentence already presupposes "*Das Wetter ist schlecht*" (the weather is bad). In this case, clauses governed by the fact-narrative predicate verb "*bedauern*" (lament) cannot use first-virtual tense. Similar fact-narrative predicative verbs are "*Wissen*" (know), "*verstehen*" (understand), and so on. In contrast, if the sentence is governed by a non-fact-narrative predicate verb, the first virtual can be used, with non-fact-narrative predicate verbs such as "*denken*" (think), "*glauben*" (consider), and "*hoffen*" (hope).

## 2.2. Second-Virtual Tense in German

The use of the second-virtual tense is mainly used to express non-real behaviour or to indicate that an action is possible under certain conditions. The second-virtual tense can occur in both main and subordinate clauses, and has different meanings depending on the grammatical features of the sentence. The use of the second-virtual tense in German is as follows (see Table 2).

The use of conditional clause in the second-virtual tense is mainly used to indicate the conditions under which the behaviour or event described in the main clause will be realized, and is often guided by the conditional conjunctions "wenn" (if), "falls" (as long as), and "sofern" (if).

The non-realistic wish clause in second-virtual tense is similar to the conditional clause in that it is also usually preceded by the conjunction "wenn", but differs from the conditional clause which requires a subject-subordinate structure in order to build up the full meaning of the discourse, whereas the wish clause in second-virtual tense is mostly a single sentence and have specialized fictional words, such as "nur", "doch" and "bloß", which serve to emphasize the wishing tone, these fictional words are commonly found in wish clauses but rarely in conditional clauses in second-virtual tense.

Grammatically, the German virtual tense is the tense of verb. The pragmatic effects of the two German virtual tenses (KI indirect quotation, KII unrealistic

**Table 2.** Examples of the use of the second virtual tense in German.

| Non-realistic conditional clause | | |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Wenn ich groß wäre, kaufte ich mir ein Auto. | 我要是现在长大了，就给自己买辆车。 | If I grow up now, I'll buy myself a car. |
| Wenn ich jetzt in den USA wäre, wäre ich glücklich. | 我要是现在美国，一定很开心。 | I'd be happy if I were in America right now. |
| **Non-realistic concessive clause** | | |
| Auch wenn Napoleon das Jahr 1900 überlebt hätte, wäre er heute tot. | 即使拿破仑在 1900 年活过来了，现在也早死了。 | Even if Napoleon had survived 1900, he would be long dead by now. |
| Selbst wenn du Millionär wärst, wärst du immer noch ein Feigling. | 就算你是百万富翁，你也是个胆小鬼。 | Even if you're a millionaire, you're still a coward. |
| **Non-realistic wish clause** | | |
| Wenn ich doch fleißiger gewesen wäre! | 我要是能更勤奋一点就好了。 | If only I'd been more diligent. |
| Wenn er doch hätte kommen können. | 他要是能来就好了。 | If only he could come. |
| Wenn ich doch einen Laptop hätte. | 我要是有台手提电脑就好了。 | If only I had a laptop. |
| **Non-realistic declarative clause** | | |
| An deiner Stelle würde ich nicht hier wohnen. | 我要是你就不会住这里。 | I wouldn't live here if I were you. |
| **Polite expression** | | |
| Würden Sie bitte das Fenster öffnen? | 可以麻烦您把窗打开吗？ | Could you open the window, please? |

expression) are clearly distinguishable. Moreover, the role of the German virtual tense is both grammatical and semantic, so the researcher should not only analyse the conjugation of the verb from the syntactic level, but also analyse the use of the virtual tense from the pragmatic point of view, taking into account the speaker's intention and stance. In addition, there is a clear difference between the German second-virtual tense and the Chinese virtual expression.

## 3. Virtual Expression in Chinese

In the German context, speakers express subjective distance and perspective by making verb conjugation. However, Chinese, which is an isolated language, does not have the feature of verb conjugation, so there is no concept of virtual tense on the syntactic level, in other words, it is impossible to identify the use of virtual tense from the perspective of word inflection, but only from the use of certain specific Chinese words or syntax to show that the sentence expresses virtual semantics. This systematic difference is especially obvious when comparing with the German second-virtual tense.

Focusing on Chinese German learners' use of the German virtual tense, Kim & Heribert (2009) analogize the two ways in which the virtual expression is commonly conveyed in Chinese: 1) By means of words or phrases; 2) By grammatical means. They point out that, unlike German, which express the virtual content by making verb conjugation in virtual tense, Chinese expresses the virtual content

through the use of specific phrases or sentence structures, and that the use of the virtual expression in the Chinese system is not as strictly grammatically constrained as in the German system. In addition, it is sometimes difficult to determine whether a conditional hypothesis expresses a non-realistic condition in a single sentence, and it is necessary to use discourse and context to determine whether it does or does not express a non-realistic condition.

In this way, German virtual expression cannot find direct counterparts in Chinese under certain circumstances, and many German virtual expressions have to be translated with the help of Chinese semantic expressions. They are divided into the following three categories:

1. Non-realistic conditional clause

Wenn ich größer würde, könnte ich Basketball spielen.
如果我再长高一点的话，(我)就能打篮球了。
If I grow a little taller, I can play basketball.
Wenn ich mehr gelernt hätte, hätte ich die Prüfung bestanden.
如果我学的再多一点，(我)就能通过考试了。
If I had learn more, I would have passed the exam.

Chinese sentence structure：如果(If) + S1 + V1 + (的话 subjunctive)，S2 + 就 (nonsense adverb) + V2 + 了(nonsense auxiliary word)。

2. Non-realistic concessive clause

Auch wenn ich Geld hätte, kaufte ich die Kleidung nicht.
就算我有钱，我也不会买这件衣服。
Even if I had the money, I wouldn't buy this dress.
Auch wenn das Wetter schlecht wäre, machten wir eine Tour.
就算天气不好，我们也会去旅行。
Even if the weather is bad, we still travel.

Chinese sentence structure：就算/即使(even if) + S1 + V1 (的话 subjunctive)，S2 + 还是/也不(still/still not) + 会(will/can) + V2。

3. Non-realistic wish clause

Wenn sie doch hätte kommen können!
要是她能来该多好啊！
If only she could come.
Wenn ich doch einen Laptop hätte!
要是我能有台手提电脑该多好啊！
If only I had a laptop.

Chinese sentence structure：(要是 If) + S + V + 了(nonsense auxiliary word) + 该多好啊(How nice)！

As can be seen from the examples above: the German non-realistic wish sentence is a mono-clause form, because its main clause part is omitted, leaving only the subordinate clause part that expresses the non-realistic wish, and its omission can be inferred from the fictional words (doch, bloß, nur). As in "(Es ist

wunderbar), wenn sie doch hätte kommen können!" Which means "(How nice it would be) if she could come". The part in parentheses is omitted in German, whereas in Chinese, it is not possible to omit the main clause part, and in order to express non-realistic wishes in Chinese, it is necessary to refine the sentence meaning by means of phrases or intonational auxiliaries that express non-realistic wishes and give such phrases or intonational auxiliaries predicative status (Cheng, 2016).

In other words, virtual expressions in German are often realized with the help of their distinctive verbal inflections, whereas in Chinese, they are realized with the help of specific word combinations or intonational auxiliaries that indicate unreality.

Besides, a comparison of German and Chinese virtual expression shows that Chinese is unable to express the virtual content to achieve the communicative intention of politeness, Chinese mainly expresses politeness with polite phrases (address expression, greetings expression, thanks expression etc.) independent of the virtual expression, while the second-virtual tense is an important form of politeness in German. These different linguistic features are reflected in many scholars' articles (Wu, 2014; Zhang, 2012; Zhou, 2007; Chen, 1993; Peng, 1985; Han, 1984).

## 4. Summery

The virtual tense is a common usage in German, which is mostly realized with verb conjugation or *würde + Inf* (fixed collocation), whereas the Chinese virtual expression is more semantic in nature. Comparing Chinese virtual expressions with German virtual expressions, we can find that, firstly, virtual expressions in German are often realized with the help of verb conjugation, whereas in Chinese, they are realized with the help of specific non-realistic phrases or intonational auxiliaries. Secondly, the German second-virtual tense has the function of a polite language, expressing the subjective distance of the speaker, whereas the Chinese virtual expression has almost no such function. Thirdly, the German virtual-tense has an apparent form of verb conjugation, which can be recognized on a syntactic level, whereas the Chinese is an isolated language without inflectional forms, and the Chinese virtual expression needs to be recognized on a semantic level by linking it to the context more often.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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