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# On so-called ‘tense uses’ in French as context-sensitive constructions<sup>1</sup>

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The purpose of this paper is to establish that so-called ‘uses’ of verbal inflections such as the French *imparfait* can articulate a constructional, ‘entrenched’ dimension, with a context-sensitive, semantic/pragmatic enrichment dimension – i.e., that one type of modelling mechanism (lexical entrenchment vs. dynamic, context-sensitive semantic/pragmatic enrichment). In order to reveal the complexity of the matter at stake, I will here focus on two relatively well-known uses of the *imparfait*, namely the so-called ‘attenuative *imparfait*’ (also known as *imparfait de politesse*), which associates with utterance conveying polite requests, and the so-called ‘narrative *imparfait*’, which associates with sequence-of-events narrative discourses.

Until recently (cf. e.g. (Caudal 2017; Patard 2017; Caudal 2018a)), most existing accounts of so-called ‘tense uses’ put the stress on various kinds of productive, online, semantic and/or pragmatic strategies, to contextually adapt and/or enrich some underspecified ‘core’ meaning. This was achieved by various mechanisms (semantic composition, discourse structural parameters such as discourse relations or other contextual parameters in general, either purely pragmatic or at the semantics/pragmatics interface), the nature of which do not matter here. However, concerns were soon voiced that this might not a suitable explanation for at least some so-called tense uses. This was notably the case for both the ‘attenuative’ and ‘narrative’ uses of the *imparfait*: thus (Anscombe 2004; Abouda 2004) were the first to observe that the attenuative *imparfait* looked suspiciously close to a lexified, syntactically entrenched construction. In a similar vein, (Tasmowski-De Rijck 1985), highlighted the syntactic constraints licensing the appearance of so-called ‘narrative *imparfait*’ structures – thus suggesting they were conventionalized to some extent. This gave rise to a (still limited) number of novel constructional analyses of some tense uses, and resulted in *de facto* opposition between ‘uses’ modelled as being lexicalized constructions (and amenable to a static semantics, in formal terms; cf. e.g. (Patard 2017; Caudal 2018a)), whereas non-constructional uses remain treated as context-sensitive (i.e., non-amenable to a static semantics; they rather required a dynamic semantics/pragmatics approach, conceiving meaning in terms of *context update*). In this paper, I will question whether or not it is legitimate to view constructionalized ‘tense uses’ as falling squarely within the realm of static semantics – i.e., whether the above *de facto* dichotomy has a theoretical basis.

Although the present analysis will argue that ‘tense uses’ are generally the byproduct of some kind of conventionalization process, I will try and demonstrate here that it does not necessarily require all connections to be severed with context-sensitivity *qua* dynamic semantic and/or pragmatic mechanisms contributing to the interpretation of said ‘uses’. By studying the *attenuative* and *narrative* uses of the *imparfait* in turn, I will compare the manner in which context sensitivity plays a different part in each case. I will first (§2) show that although a lexified multidimensional semantics à la (Potts 2005; Gutzmann & McCready 2016) is required to model ‘attenuative uses’ of the *imparfait*, a dynamic pragmatic account of the notion of attenuation (*qua* attenuated directives) based on (Portner 2018)’s theory of commitment management in dialogue is also required to explain their contextual, ‘polite request’ effects. In contrast to this, discourse structural patterns (i.e. so-called rhetorical relations) will be shown in §3 to play a key role in the emergence of so-called ‘narrative *imparfait*’ sequences – even though these also require the presence of some manner of support syntactic markers (in effect, a construction network), as we will see. These different modes of contextualization, I will argue, suggests that the study of so-called tense uses calls for far more diverse and complex approaches at the morpho-syntax to semantics/pragmatics interface than hitherto assumed in the literature.

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# 1 A quick review of existing approaches to tense uses in context

The contextual interpretation of French verbal inflection has been a much debated topic among Romanists and semanticists/pragmaticists alike for a good forty years already, starting with seminal references such as (Vet 1980; Kamp & Rohrer 1983) on the theoretical & formal semantics front, or (Molendijk 1983) on the theoretical-descriptive front – although one should probably go as far back as (Weinrich 1964). The 1995-2005 period was truly the ‘golden decade’ for the semantic/pragmatic type of approaches, with countless papers converging w.r.t. the set of angles of attack they adopted in order to account for the seemingly endless variability of tense meanings in context. I will not say much about these here, as I am going to focus here on their successors, namely approaches concerned with formal, arbitrary constraints on so-called tense ‘uses’. I intend to highlight the joint necessity for:

- Conventionalization-based, constructional approaches, with various types of form/meaning pairing conventionalization mechanisms being at stake. I will claim that ‘attenuative’ uses of the *imparfait* derive from cross-linguistically common language change patterns, starting in the pragmatics of tenses, before becoming properly semanticized, albeit in a lexicalized, constructionalized fashion, and involve *conventionalized implicatures* in the sense of (Potts 2005; Potts 2007). In contrast, I will argue that the so-called narrative *imparfait* relies on a complex constructional network<sup>2</sup>, which acts as mandatory support material.
- Semantic and pragmatic contextualization mechanisms-based approaches. The need for such mechanisms, I will argue can be retained even by well-established constructions. I will show in this paper that some constructions can require dynamic pragmatic enrichment (as is the case with the attenuative *imparfait*), or be sensitive to discourse structural parameters (as is the case with the narrative *imparfait*).

In other words, I will and show here that it is desirable not to view as *a priori* exclusive, a constructional approach (which involves a conventionalized form/meaning pairing, and a static semantics), and contextual adjustment processes at the semantics/pragmatics interface (which involves a dynamic approach to meaning, *qua* a dynamic semantics or a dynamic pragmatics).

## 1.1 Semantic or pragmatic enrichment-based approaches to tense meaning in context

Until relatively recently, most literature dedicated to uses of French tenses in context assumed they possessed some kind of relatively adaptable nucleus of meaning, which could either be enriched by semantic and/or pragmatic means.<sup>3</sup> Analyses of the various known uses of the *imparfait* in (1)-(8) are no exception to this, and from (Molendijk 1990) to (Brisard 2010).<sup>4</sup>

- (1) (...) les Romains **adoraient** les baisers (...). (*Le Point*, 26/07/2018) (**generic/habitual**)  
‘Romans loved<sub>IMPF</sub> kisses.’
- (2) Ah, si j’étais riche... (optative/conditional/present counterfactual)  
‘Ah, if I were<sub>IMPF</sub> rich/I wish I were rich...’
- (3) Un mètre de plus et le train déraillait. (**past counterfactual**)  
‘Had it gone one meter further, the train would have derailed (lit. ‘the train derailed<sub>IMPF</sub>).’

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<sup>2</sup> On construction networks and language change, see e.g. (Timponi Torrent 2015).

<sup>3</sup> *Polysemy* or *monosemy*, depending on how one defines monosemy vs. polysemy, and how much a particular account relies on what kind of meaning extension mechanisms are at play, were thus frequently invoked when trying to account for the wild variety of so-called uses exhibited by French tenses. The distinction does not matter for the purpose of the present investigation, though.

<sup>4</sup> A partial list of relevant references would include (Molendijk 1990; Gosselin 1996; Bres 1999; Caudal 2000; Caudal, Vettters & Roussarie 2003; Saussure 2003; Saussure & Sthioul 2005; Patard 2006; Bres 2006; De Mulder & Brisard 2006; Patard 2007; Bres 2009a; Bres 2009b; Brisard 2010); most of them focus on only one of the above uses of the *imparfait*, plus its standard past imperfective reading.

- (4) Il y eut un choc sourd, un cri plaintif, puis le corps de Barzum **s'écroulait** en arrière. (Souvestre & Alain, *Le train perdu*, éd. R. Laffont, Paris, p. 264) **(narrative)**  
'There was a dull shock, a plaintive cry, and then Barzum's body collapsed<sub>IMPF</sub> backwards.'
- (5) [Context : entertaining video under tweet]  
Bonsoir @SNCF excusez moi pour le dérangement je **voulais** savoir vous pouvez mettre ça dans les gares en cas de train de supprimé ou retardé (<https://twitter.com/elhadjofficiel/status/818161841033580546>) **(attenuative/politeness)**  
'Good evening @SNCF excuse me for the inconvenience I wanted<sub>IMPF</sub> to know can you show this [video] in the stations when a train is cancelled or delayed'
- (6) On va jouer au papa et à la maman, hein! Moi j'étais le papa, et, toi, tu étais la maman. (Warnant 1966: 343) **(foreplay)**  
'We're going to play mom and dad, eh! Let's pretend I'm<sub>IMPF</sub> the daddy, and you're<sub>IMPF</sub> the mommy.'
- (7) Dans mon rêve, tu sortais de la photo et tu venais dans mes bras. (K. DeNosky 2013, *Délicieux souvenirs*, trad. T. Capron, Paris : Harlequin) **(oniric)**  
'In my dream, you came<sub>IMPF</sub> out of the picture and walked<sub>IMPF</sub> into my arms.'
- (8) Oh il avait mal à la papatte le chien-chien! **(hypocoristic/endearing)**  
'Oh poor doggy ! its little paw hurts<sub>IMPF</sub>!'

## 1.2 Constructional/lexicalist analyses of tense uses

However, not all analyses of 'tense uses' resorted to such strategies. Clearly lexicalist, i.e. non-meaning enrichment based accounts of tense uses, appeared for English with (Michaelis 1994). For French, (Anscombe 2004; Abouda 2004) offers the earliest lexicalist account of a 'use' of the *imparfait*. Syntax-minded, non-lexicalist accounts should also be mentioned, with (Tasmowski-De Rijck 1985). Overtly constructional analyses of tense uses followed those pioneering lexical/syntactic analyses – i.e. analyses effectively advocating the use of a construction grammar-based approach (cf. e.g. (Goldberg 1995)) or some other lexicalized formal syntax-based approach (e.g. (Pollard & Sag 1994; Ginzburg & Sag 2000; Dalrymple 1999; Dalrymple 2001)). For English, (Michaelis 2004; Michaelis 2011) paved the way for subsequent works; for French, a related line of analysis can be found in (Patard 2014; Patard 2017; Caudal 2017; Caudal 2018a), especially for the *conditionnel* and the *imparfait*.

According to such approaches, the relevant form/meaning pairings in (1)-(8) are not achieved by means of online, contextual meaning enrichments, but that many (or all) of these are either:

- cases of *homonymy/polysemy* (where polysemy refers to separately conventionalized meanings) (if one assumes that the relevant form/meaning pairings operate at the morphological exponent level, cf. (Patard 2017) – but see (Caudal 2018a) for a critique of such an idea)
- or just instances of separate constructions (i.e., involve entirely different forms extending well beyond the *imparfait* morphology).

One important limitation of such constructional approaches though, is that they are bound to treat separately uses which can be analyzed as constructions (and whose relation to context-sensitivity was either left unexplored, or set aside), and uses which cannot be legitimately analyzed as such (whose context-sensitivity is a legitimate analytical option). I will show below that such a clear divide may not be warranted by certain 'tense uses', which appear to straddle the boundary between 'pure' constructionalization (only requiring a static semantics), and context-sensitivity (requiring a dynamic semantics and pragmatics in order to construe their context-dependent interpretation). It is my intention to here lay the foundations for a theory providing a complex theory of 'uses of the *imparfait*' *qua* constructions in context, involving both a constructional

component, and a dynamic semantics / pragmatics component. However, syntactic concerns will be mostly set aside here for want of space to address them properly<sup>5</sup>.

The paper will proceed as follows. I will first focus on the so-called attenuative *imparfait* (§2), providing descriptive observations concerning its constructionalization patterns – forming in effect a small constructional network lexicalizing conventionalized implicatures. After formulating their (static) lexical meaning in a multidimensional semantic framework, I will suggest that the contextual interpretation of their attenuated meaning requires a dynamic pragmatic treatment. I will then move to a descriptive and formal study of so-called narrative uses of the *imparfait* (§3). Though associated with a large constructional network of support material, I will show them to be also crucially sensitive to *discourse structural parameters* (i.e. discourse relations and topics in the sense of (Asher & Lascarides 2003)).

## 2 The attenuative imparfait

### 2.1 Defining attenuative modality

For the label ‘attenuative’ to have some proper theoretical import, I will first try and attempt to define its semantic and pragmatic properties. Examples (9) and (10) will be my empirical starting point. They are non-attenuated uses of verbs in the present here expressing some form of deontic meaning; however deontic meaning is only one of the many modal categories for which attenuative readings are available, and deontic meaning is only one out of many possible meanings one can ascribe to *devoir* and  *falloir*. As will soon become apparent, non-dynamic root modal meanings will be of key importance to the present investigation. I will adopt (Portner 2007)’s concept of *priority modals* to refer to such modals, as they involve a notion of preference over possible worlds. The term can cover a wide range of meanings, covering notably both subject-internal and subject-external necessity (van der Auwera & Plungian 1998), i.e. both deontic and non-deontic uses of such modals, as well as teleological and bouletic modal meanings.

The first important empirical observation to ground the descriptive notion of modal attenuation, is that priority modals in (9)-(10) (indirectly) convey directives *qua* orders. They exhibit what is known as strong modal force – here strong *directive* modal force (Portner 2007). Quantificationally, if one adopts a formal analysis in the spirit of (Kratzer 1991), necessity modals will involve a universal quantifier over possible worlds (all accessible worlds must ratifying the choice imposed upon the addressee). In contrast, in (11)-(12), due to the presence of the conditional inflection on the modal verb, the speaker issues a mere request, and the quantificational force of the corresponding *possibility* modal is weaker, of an existential type (i.e., only some of the accessible<sup>6</sup> possible worlds will see the realization of the choice the speaker is prompting the addressee to make; it is much less directive).

- |      |   |                   |
|------|---|-------------------|
| (9)  | Vous devez<br>You NECESS-PR.2sg<br>‘You must go.’ | partir.<br>go.INF |
| (10) | Il faut<br>It NECESS-PR.3sg<br>‘We/you must go’   | partir.<br>go.INF |

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<sup>5</sup> Most existing approaches to the uses of the *imparfait* do not exhibit an explicit, formal constructional analysis, unlike e.g. (Michaelis 2004; Michaelis 2011). Due to size constraints, this paper, alas, will also be wanting in this respect.

<sup>6</sup> According to the relevant accessibility relation *R* attached to the modal at stake. Note that if we assume this relation to be lexically attached to the modal used, the modal strength difference between (9)-(10) and (11)-(12) cannot be modelled in terms of an accessibility relation *R*<sub>2</sub> yielding a subset of the worlds accessible via another, modally stronger accessibility relation *R*<sub>1</sub>, cf. e.g. (Portner 2009: 33–36).

- (11) Vous devriez partir.  
 You NECESS-COND.2pl go.INF  
 'You should go.'
- (12) Il faudrait partir.  
 It NECESS-COND.3sg go.INF  
 'We/you should go'

Of course, the proposed quantificational contrast between (9)-(10) and (11)-(12) also reflects on a difference in terms of social authority, i.e. the speaker holds such an authority when the present inflection is used, but she does not when the conditional inflection is used (or at least, she chooses not to overtly express this authority).

In formal terms, if one adopts a theory of modals & imperatives à la (Portner 2007), deontic modals contribute both to the COMMON GROUND (or CG for short) and a TO-DO LIST, associated with a richer structure involving participant-specific 'commitment slates' – see (Portner 2018), and below. Thus, the contribution of imperative sentence (13) to the latter discourse component consists in adding (14) to the addressee's TO-DO LIST.

(13) Sit down!

(14)  $\llbracket \text{Sit down!} \rrbracket =_{\text{def}} [\lambda w \lambda x : x = \text{addressee}_c : x \text{ sits down in } w]$

A related contrast can be found with special conventionalized uses of imperatives in the context of a social call, to convey e.g. invitations/permissions (see (15)). These differ from a more mundane and stronger priority/deontic interpretation found in (16). Thus, even if the addressee in (16) is a guest, this utterance conveys a strong request, i.e. one that cannot be directly dismissed – certainly not by answering *no*, *thank you*, as is possible in (15).<sup>7</sup>

(15) Have a piece of fruit / a seat! (OK invitation / #request: declining is costless)

(16) Leave your coat on the peg! (#invitation / OK request: declining is costly)

I will sidestep a more thorough formal definition of the standard Kratzerian approach to modality in terms of modal bases vs. ordering sources – these are two conversational backgrounds, i.e. functions from possible worlds to propositions, respectively pointing to propositions (information states or body of evidence) constraining accessible worlds (this is the modal base) vs. propositions ordering worlds in terms of the most desirable/best possible outcome (this is the ordering source). While a very worthwhile issue in its own right, this question is largely irrelevant to the matter at stake here, particularly as we will see that the modal readings at stake are not so much contextually than conventionally determined (i.e., they are largely constructionalized).

I will primarily define attenuated vs. non-attenuated uses of priority modals in terms of an opposition between *negotiable* vs. *non-negotiable* requests. Attenuation via a conditional marking of French priority modal verbs or constructions, is a conventional way of mapping a non-negotiable request expression onto a negotiable request expression.

## 2.2 A recent evolution: past conditionals as novel attenuated request markers

Before moving to the study of the so-called 'attenuative' uses of the imparfait, I would like to stress that the attenuative value of the *conditionnel présent* (present conditional, COND.PR for short) seems to be currently headed towards a much less attenuated meaning, as a novel marked

<sup>7</sup> (Portner 2007: 359–360) argues that such examples convey realistic (circumstantial) modal bases, with the ordering source – a set of desires in (15), vs. a set of requirements in (16) – providing the required 'invitation' vs. 'request' meanings. However, the division of modal meanings between these two sets of examples is clearly not a contextual, but a conventional matter – *have a N* conventionally expresses an invitation, regardless of contextual parameters; verbs capable of similar readings in the imperative pertain to a very limited class of meanings, and otherwise convey either orders or requests, i.e. have a deontic reading.

attenuation inflectional marking is on the rise, namely the *conditionnel passé* (past conditional, COND.PA for short), as was shown in (Caudal 2018a).

The advent of the COND.PA as a well-established past counterfactual/conditional inflection is relatively recent, and only dates back to the 16<sup>th</sup>/ 17<sup>th</sup> century (Patard, Grabar & De Mulder 2015). However, as the COND.PR becomes increasingly associated with priority modals in interactional contexts where politeness is the norm, it seems that its attenuative value is slowly eroding, and that a marked attenuation marking has become necessary with bouletic and teleological modals – though not with deontic modals. (Caudal 2018a: 58–59) gives two early examples of this novel construction, cf. (17)–(18).

- (17) Mme. DE ROSELLE. –Mais, entre nous, pourtant, j'aurais voulu savoir...  
 M. DE PLINVILLE. –Savoir ? quoi ? (J.-F. Collin D'Harleville, *L'Optimiste ou l'Homme toujours content*, 1788, p. 141)  
 'But just between you and we, I would like<sub>COND.PA</sub> (lit. 'would have liked') to know...'

- (18) Mon cher ami, Je vous ai apporté les épreuves, j'aurais désiré que Théo les lût. (Flaubert, *Correspondance* (1854-1857), p. 139)  
 'My dear friend, I have brought you the proofs, I would like<sub>COND.PA</sub> (lit. 'would have liked') Theo to read them.'

This lexical evolution results in an interesting contrast between utterances involving bouletic modals and deontic modals in the COND.PA: while the former have become semantically ambiguous between a 'productive', past counterfactual use (expressing an agent's regrets), and an 'entrenched' (strongly) attenuated request use, cf. (19), the latter only have a past counterfactual use, (20)

- (19) J' aurais voulu lui parler.  
 I have-COND.1sg WANT.PP OBL.3sg talk-INF.  
 1. 'I wanted to talk to her/him [but I didn't]'  
 2. 'I wish I could<sub>COND.PA</sub> talk to her/him (= let me talk to her/him, please).'
- (20) J' aurais dû lui parler.  
 I have-COND.1sg DEONT.PP OBL.3sg talk-INF.  
 'I should have talked<sub>COND.PA</sub> to her/him'

In the light of such data, it is clear that modal attenuation (i) is *gradable/scalar* in some way (attenuation in (19) is definitely stronger than in (21)<sup>8</sup>) and (ii) should be seen as a means of modulating priority modal meanings, be they deontic, bouletic or teleological (we will see instances of the latter when we start examining the attenuative *imparfait*) – not as a separate kind of modal interpretation.

- (21) Je voudrais lui parler.  
 I have-WANT-COND.1sg OBL.3sg talk-INF.  
 'I would like to talk to her/him.'

### 2.3 Attenuative uses of the *imparfait*, or attenuative structures in the *imparfait*?

In addition to bouletic modals in the *conditionnel*, attenuated priority meanings can also be conveyed by *imparfait*-marked structures in French. Treated as a lexification phenomenon as early as (Abouda 2001; Anscombe 2004), this so-called 'use' of the *imparfait* has been recently treated as a set conventionalized structures, forming in effect a network of constructions, in (Caudal 2017).<sup>9</sup> It is indeed limited to a handful of lexical verbs and constructions, in particular bouletic constructions (*vouloir* INF, *desirer* INF, *souhaiter* INF 'want/wish to INF') the motion-

<sup>8</sup> For a general discussion of scalarity in modal meanings, see e.g. (Lassiter 2010; Katz, Portner & Rubinstein 2012; Lassiter 2014). This closely relates to the function of the *ordering source* in a Kratzerian model of modality, as it must provide a ranking function ordering accessible worlds.

<sup>9</sup> Accounts based on meaning expansion can be found in e.g. (Patard 2007; Bres 2009a)

cum-purpose (teleological motion) construction *venir (pour) + INF* ('come in order to INF', i.e. it is a deictic variant of English *go and V*), and a couple of other constructions involving communication verbs (notably *écrire* ('write') *pour INF*, *téléphoner* ('give a call') *pour INF*).

- (22) Excusez-moi, je voulais vous parler.  
Excuse me, I want-IMPF.1sg you talk-INF.  
'Excuse me, I wanted [= would like to] to talk to you'.

According to (Caudal 2017), earliest members of this relatively small constructional-lexical network emerged in Old/Middle French, beginning with *vouloir+INF*; the network then recruited new members among other bouletic constructions (*désirer INF*, *souhaiter INF*). The motion-cum-purpose, teleological *venir pour INF* construction and 'communication-cum-purpose' teleological constructions (*appeler/écrire pour INF*) were recruited into the network at a later period. (Caudal 2017) notes that not all bouletic/teleological or motion/communication-cum-purpose constructions are capable of attenuative modal readings with the *imparfait*. Thus *#avoir<sub>IMPF</sub> l'intention de INF* ('intend to INF') or *#aller<sub>IMPF</sub> INF* ('go INF/go and V') cannot give rise to attenuated modal meanings, which suggests that the observed form-meaning pairings are lexicalized/constructionalized, cf. (23)-(24). Such facts seem to disqualify theories attempting to construe the interpretation of these structures solely from semantic and/or pragmatic contextual enrichment mechanisms tapping into the semantics of the *imparfait*.

- (23) #J' avais l'intention de vous parler. (only past desire)  
I have-IMPF.1sg the intention of you talk-INF  
'I intended to talk to you.'
- (24) #J' allais vous parler. (only past counterfactual meaning)  
I go-IMPF.1sg you talk-INF.  
'I was about to talk to you'.

As was independently proposed in a number of works, cf. e.g. (Hogeweg 2009; Patard 2014), many so-called tense uses appear to derive from former conversational implicatures – thereby illustrating a commonly proposed semantic change pattern, cf. e.g. (Traugott 1988; Palmer 2001). Attenuative structures in the *imparfait* appear to also fit this development path.

Very sketchily, what allowed such constructions to come into existence was the so-called 'super-interval property' of imperfective tenses, first identified by (Bennett & Partee 1978) about the English past progressive, cf. (25). Although this exact formulation leads to a number of undesirable correlates, it does capture correct and important intuition that some classes of past, imperfectively viewed events (i.e. atelic and durative events) *may* extend up to the present time.

- (25)[Imperfective  $\phi$ ] is true at interval  $I$  iff there exists an interval  $I'$  such that  $I \subset I'$ ,  $I$  is not a final subinterval of  $I'$ , and  $\phi$  is true at  $I'$ .

If a similar property holds true for a stative verb marked in the *imparfait*, then it follows from (25) that (26) describes a state of a baby being sick which although past, can extend up to the present interval. If we assume a neo-reichenbachian approach to tense along with event reification, the crude Lewis-style representation of (26) given in (27) says that the topic/reference interval  $t$  is anterior to the 'now' utterance interval, and  $t$  must be included in the temporal trace of  $e$ .

- (26) Le bébé était malade.
- (27)  $\exists e [\text{ Sick}(e, \text{baby}) \wedge t < \text{now} \wedge t \subset \tau(e)]$

Indeed, in the absence of specific information to the contrary, it is theoretically possible that  $\tau(e)$  could extend up to *now*. And in effect, (26) can be used to imply that the baby is still sick., cf. (28), where speaker B uses the *imparfait* to tentatively suggest that the baby might well be sick now. In other words, (26) can be associated with a conversational implicature that the baby is sick now.

- (28) A : Est-ce que le bébé va mieux ?



A : 'Is the baby doing better?'

B : Je ne sais pas, mais il y a deux heures il était (encore) malade.

B : 'I don't know, but two hours ago, he was<sub>IMPF</sub> (still) sick.'

This very conversational implicature certainly lies at the diachronic root of the so-called attenuative uses of the *imparfait*. The attenuative function of the *imparfait* is clear when combined with a teleological or bouletic construction; it is used by the speaker to try and affect an addressee's TO-DO LIST, while toning down the strength of the request thus formulated. It indicates that the addressee has full authority about whether or not the speaker's priority should be accepted. If one utters (22) using the *présent* as in (29), then the politeness effect altogether vanishes. The speaker believes her/his desire cannot be easily denied by the addressee, i.e. that s.he holds a clear position of authority (not so in (22)) – combining it with a polite address expression such as 'excusez-moi' sounds decidedly odd.

- (29) ( ??Excusez-moi), je veux vous parler.  
(Excuse me) I want-PR.1sg you talk-INF.  
'(Excuse me) I want to talk to you'.

In short, attenuative *imparfait* structures present the realization of the speaker's priority as subjected to ratification by the addressee, without any authority to impose it (on the contrary) – and this probably stems from a conversational implicature which suggested the speaker's (past) desire possibly extended into the utterance interval.

But there is no doubt that this former implicature has become conventionalized by now. Proof of this is that the sincerity of such utterances cannot be denied; they are *more* than the assertion of a bouletic verb, and behave like so-called performative structures (Condoravdi & Lauer 2011; Condoravdi & Lauer 2012); thus, the content of (22) cannot be straightforwardly challenged as in (30) – in contrast, an utterance like (23) can, as it contributes a mere past desire (not an attenuated, polite request).

- (30) No, you're lying. You do not want to talk to me, actually.

Unlike 'interrogative' conventionalized requests (cf. (Sadock 1974)'s concept of *whimperatives*) such as (31), attenuative *imparfait* requests have a declarative form. They do not necessitate an explicit move to grant or accept a question – but like (31), they can be followed by a polite rejection (though not one as simple negation of the request) or acceptance utterance. Note that the stronger (29) can also be rejected by the addressee – as can be any imperative – if s.he challenges the speaker's authority. So, again, while performative in nature, these structures are clearly subordinated to the addressee's willingness to ratify an update of her/his TO-DO LIST.

- (31) Puis- je vous parler?  
CAN-PR.1sg I you talk-INF?  
'May I speak to you?'

As was noted in (Anscombre 2004), it should be stressed that at least some elements of the original past at issue meaning of these structures is still available. Namely, (22) requires a context in which the speaker's desire must be anterior to the *now* interval. (Caudal 2017) observes a sharp semantic difference between the so-called 'attenuative *conditionnel*' and 'attenuative *imparfait*' in this respect. The former can be used to express a novel desire – i.e. one which the speaker just acquired, e.g. as a result of some commitment update – while the latter cannot, cf. (32) vs. (33).

- (32) [Context : speaker has just been rebuked by a retail employee]  
Puisque c'est comme ça, je voudrais parler à votre supérieur.  
'Given the way you're handling this, I'd like<sub>COND</sub> to talk to your supervisor.'

- (33) Puisque c'est comme ça, \*je voulais parler à votre supérieur.  
'Given the way you're handling this, \*I wanted<sub>IMPF</sub> to talk to your supervisor.'

Furthermore, as was noted in (Caudal 2017), not only is the attenuative *imparfait* incompatible with temporal modifiers referring to the present (34), but it also seems to lose its function as a request-conveying structure when combined with a past temporal modifier in the left periphery (35) ; nor can they combine with negation (contrary to *vouloir*<sub>COND</sub> attenuated requests),

- (34) Excusez-moi, \*maintenant, je voulais vous parler.  
Excuse me, now I want-IMPF.1sg you talk-INF.  
'Excuse me, \*now I wanted to talk to you'.
- (35) Excusez-moi, #hier, je voulais vous parler.  
Excuse me, yesterday I want-IMPF.1sg you talk-INF.  
'Excuse me, I wanted to talk to you #yesterday'.

All these facts very strongly suggests that attenuative *imparfait* structures are conventionalized structures, where the *imparfait* no longer has its 'normal' semantic role; their dual temporal dimension (i.e., both past and present) seems to be utterly entrenched. But how could we represent such complex meaning, bearing in mind it originated in conversational implicatures attached to verbs or constructions marked in the *imparfait*?

## 2.4 A multidimensional semantics and dynamic pragmatics-based analysis

(Caudal 2017)'s solution to this puzzle is to assign attenuative *imparfait* structures a multi-dimensional semantics in the spirits of (Potts 2005; Gutzmann 2015) corresponding to the lexification of a *conventionalized implicature*, combining an at issue dimension with a non-at issue dimension. This allows them to have a complex semantic contribution, partly anchored in the present – this reflects on their 'novel' attenuated directive meaning –, and partly anchored in the past – this reflects on their original past meaning; I will argue that said original meaning has become backgrounded, i.e. is now non-at-issue.

However, *contra* (Caudal 2017), I will not assume that attenuative IMPF constructions incorporate the standard past semantics of the *imparfait* in their non-at-issue part. Key evidence for this can be found in teleological, motion cum purpose attenuative IMPF structures such as (36), where *venir-imparfait* actually describes a coming event which has already culminated and whose goal has been fulfilled (the request has been issued). This contrasts with the contribution of 'standard' motion cum purpose constructions in the *imparfait* in (37), where the subject did not reach his destination and/or did not achieve his purpose. As for bouletic attenuative IMPF constructions such as (22), or communication cum purpose attenuative IMPF constructions such as (38), their backgrounded meaning describes an atelic event predicate extending up to the present time (a desire, or a call, in these examples), which also contrasts with standard *imparfait* uses of similar constructions in (39) and (23) – the latter describe events which do not extend up to the utterance interval.

- (36) Veuillez m'excuser, chef, de la liberté... Je venais vous demander un petit service... (P. Segonzac, *Mademoiselle*, in *La Presse*, 10-09-1900, p.4)  
'Chief, please forgive me for taking the liberty... I've come<sub>IMPF</sub> to ask you to do me a wee favour...'
- (37) L'avocat du chercheur français Roland Marchal, [a été] arrêté alors qu'il venait rendre visite à la chercheuse Fariba Adelhah...  
'The lawyer of the French researcher Roland Marchal, [was] arrested when he came<sub>IMPF</sub> to visit the researcher Fariba Adelhah.' (*Ouest France*, 28/10/2019)
- (38) J'espère que je ne vous dérange pas. Je vous appelais pour voir si mon rendez-vous de 16 heures pouvait me rendre admissible à la clinique dès aujourd'hui...  
'I hope I'm not disturbing you. I was calling<sub>IMPF</sub> to see if my 4:00 p.m. appointment could make me eligible for entering the clinic today?' (Cl. Schalck, *Accompagner la naissance pour l'adoption*, Érés, Toulouse, 2011, p.175)
- (39) (...) d'un geste las [il] lui désigna un siège pendant qu'il appelait quelqu'un au téléphone.

‘(...) with a weary gesture he pointed to a seat while he was calling<sub>IMPF</sub> someone on the telephone.’ (J.-L. Lambert, *Témoins à charge*, De Borée, Clermont-Ferrand, 2017)

Therefore, I will hypothesize that the contribution of the *imparfait* in such constructions has been altered during the conventionalization process they have undergone, and that attenuative IMPF structures possess specific aspectuo-temporal conditions which cannot be equated with those of a ‘normal’ past reading of the *imparfait*. Given the above observations, it seems that separate lexical entries are required for motion cum purpose attenuative IMPF constructions, as their aspectuo-temporal denotation is somewhat different.

Let us now turn to the at-issue, directive content of attenuative IMPF structures. Directive expressions are performatives in the sense that by uttering them, a speaker effectively prompts someone else to act according to their priorities, and that this update of somebody’s commitments cannot be denied (cf. (Condoravdi & Lauer 2011; Condoravdi & Lauer 2012), and (30)). *Bona fide* volitional expressions such as English *want* will treat the agent’s desires as foregrounded information, and their directive content will be indirectly produced in the pragmatics. This is also the case with *vouloir*<sub>present</sub> in (29). In contrast, imperatives express the speaker’s desire as backgrounded information (hence the impossibility to challenge its sincerity), and will have as their main contribution a performative directive meaning. Capitalizing on (but also departing from) the analysis presented in (Caudal 2017), I will claim that attenuative IMPF structures are hybrid ‘performative directive/volitional’ structures, combining a performative-directive at issue dimension of meaning, with a backgrounded volitional dimension of meaning. I will hypothesize that the attenuative *imparfait* structures has retained part of its original volitional meaning as a subpart of its non-at issue semantic content, while having come to mean something like ‘I wish the addressee to update her/his TO-DO LIST with a presently valid priority  $\phi$  of mine (= a desire of mine)’. *Wish* here reflects on the inherent lack of authority of the speaker over the addressee in such circumstances.

I will propose that such directive expressions pertain to the realm of use-conditional items or UCIs (Gutzmann 2015), i.e. have an inherently multi-dimensional semantics. According to the present analysis, they associate (a) an at-issue, directive meaning with (b) an underlying, non-at-issue implicated bouletic state meaning – in effect a conversational implicature, or CI-type of meaning – which I will call a ‘preference state’, inspired by (Condoravdi & Lauer 2011)’s notion of preference.<sup>10</sup> So, in contrast to other, hitherto known types of UCIs, attenuative IMPF structures convey use-conditional, non-deniable, *directive*, meaning in their at-issue dimension, and truth-conditional meaning in their CI, non-at issue dimension (which is also non-deniable, as it is non-at-issue).

For simplicity’s sake, I will here adopt (Gutzmann & McCready 2016)’s logic  $\mathcal{L}_{CI}^*$  for UCIs,<sup>11</sup> treating attenuative IMPF structures as ‘mixed type’ verbal expressions, i.e., as having both an at-issue and a non-at-issue contribution. Their  $\mathcal{L}_{CI}^*$  logical type is  $\alpha:\langle \sigma^c, \tau^a \rangle$ , where  $\sigma^c$  indicates (at issue) use-conditional meaning, and  $\tau^a$  indicates (non-at-issue) truth-conditional meaning. (40) gives the semantics of the diamond  $\blacklozenge$  operator, used in order to facilitate the notation of mixed types.

$$(40) \llbracket \alpha:\sigma^c \blacklozenge \beta:\tau^a \rrbracket^{Mi,g} = \langle \llbracket \alpha:\sigma^a \rrbracket^{Mi,g}, \llbracket \beta:\tau^c \rrbracket^{Mi,g} \rangle$$

<sup>10</sup> Note that the implicated, preference state meaning of imperative does not appear to be presuppositional, as it is affected by negation, cf. :

Sit down!	<i>Implicates</i> ‘It is a preference of mine that you sit down’
Don’t sit down!	<i>Implicates</i> “It is a preference of mine that you don’t sit down”

However, since negation cannot apply to attenuative IMPF structures, one cannot use this argument to demonstrate their implicated, preference state meaning is not presuppositional.

<sup>11</sup> Their logic for compositional multidimensionality  $\mathcal{L}_{TU}$  is not required to handle the compositionality of such cases. It could be potentially useful to offer a semantic explanation to the impossibility of adding temporal adverbials, but I believe this can (and should) be explained on different grounds – namely by the entrenchment of aspectuo-temporal meaning exhibit by such constructions.

(41) provides a tentative lexical representation for bouletic attenuative IMPF structures in  $\mathcal{L}_{CI}^*$ , as conveying a combination of a *directive subjected to the addressee's ratification* (a performative directive, akin to a polite request such as (21)) with a formerly past bouletic state having come to overlap with the now interval. Crucially, this construction is lexically inflected, i.e., has entrenched tense-aspect information – its event variables are lexically bound; tense-aspect is part of the lexical content of the construction; I have argued above that this aspectuo-temporal entrenchment blocks modification by temporal adverbials.<sup>12</sup>

**(41) Lexical semantic entry for attenuative IMPF<sub>BouleticV</sub> constructions:**

$\exists e_1[\text{AttenDirective}(e_1)(\text{Intend}) \wedge t \subset \tau(e) \wedge t = \text{now}] \blacklozenge$	[at-issue dimension]
$\lambda\phi\lambda x.\exists e_2[\text{Intend}(e_2)(x)(\phi) \wedge \text{Speaker}(x) \wedge \tau(e_2) <^o \text{now}]$	[non-at-issue dimension]

The above representation can be rendered in plain English as follows.

- In the non-at issue, preference meaning:  $\text{Intend}(e_2)(x)(\phi)$  corresponds to a past bouletic state, hinging on the present, as its run-trace while left-overlaps with the utterance interval  $(\tau(e_2) <^o \text{now})$ , i.e. (slightly) overlaps with its left-most part – it is past, yet is connected with the present. This state anchors a preference to which some agent is committed, i.e., it is part of her/his preference structure in the sense of (Condoravi & Lauer, 2011, 2012). I will therefore call it a *preference state*.
- In the at-issue, directive meaning:  $\text{AttenDirective}(e_1)(\text{Intend})$  lexicalizes a ‘polite’, attenuated directive emitted by the speaker, taking the *Intend* predicate (type  $\langle e, \langle e, \langle s, t \rangle \rangle \rangle$ )<sup>13</sup> contained in the CI dimension, as its argument.  $t$  is the reference time interval anchoring directive speech act event  $e_1$  into the present. Although I believe  $e_1$  needs to be accessible as a discourse referent, and should therefore be introduced in the above logical form, this does not make the associated directive meaning deniable; only assertoric speech acts are. Temporal conditions on  $e_1$  are metalinguistic, in a sense.<sup>14</sup>

Departing again from (Caudal 2017), I will hypothesize that (41) emerged in two diachronic steps:

1. A temporal implicature (‘past imperfective states can extend up to the utterance time’) was conventionalized and gave rise to a first non-at issue, preference state meaning  $\text{Intend}(e_2)(x)(\phi) \wedge t \subset \tau(e) \wedge t <^o \text{now}$ , which could at the time, be pragmatically enriched into a directive meaning, due to axiom (42)
2. This directive implicature became also conventional, and was promoted to at-issue status, while the preference state description meaning was demoted to non-at-issue status.

**(42) Pragmatic axiom on preference states:**

Given a preference state predicate *Intend*, an event  $e$ , a speaker  $x$  and a preference  $\phi$  such that  $\text{Intend}(e)(x)(\phi)$  holds, then some directive event  $e'$  must be accessible in the current context, such that  $\text{AttenDirective}(e')(\text{Intend})$ . Preference state  $e$  then grounds the attenuated directive event  $e'$ , and  $\tau(e') \subset \tau(e)$  – i.e.,  $e$  is the source of  $e'$ ; a weakly causal relation connects them.

The lexical entries for motion cum purpose (43) and communication cum purpose (44) attenuative IMPF construction only differ w.r.t. their non-at-issue contents – see below.<sup>15</sup> They

<sup>12</sup> An alternative route to explain this incompatibility would be to use (Gutzmann & McCready 2016)’s logic for compositional multidimensionality  $\mathcal{L}_{\mathcal{T}^n\mathcal{U}}$ . But I believe this would be missing the point that these expressions have an *entrenched* temporal meaning, i.e. one which cannot be further modified.

<sup>13</sup> I.e., the semantic type of these structures is identical to that of a modal auxiliary seen as a verbal predicate with a propositional complement (it requires an event variable for the relevant speech act – directive or not).

<sup>14</sup> It could make sense to actually remove them from (41), and introduce them via a dedicated pragmatic axiom: directive speech acts are present by virtue of their being performative.

<sup>15</sup> I believe these were recruited as novel patterns after bouletic IMPF constructions had already evolved full attenuative conventionalization; although I was able to find clear instances of *vouloir*<sub>IMPF</sub> constructions

essentially add a third event description, respectively a (past) itive motion event, or a (past and still ongoing) communication event – but they retain the same preference state element of meaning found with *bona fide* bouletic attenuative IMPF structures.

(43) ...◆ $\lambda\phi\lambda x.\exists e_2,e_3[\text{Intend}(e_2)(x)(\phi)\wedge\text{Speaker}(x)\wedge\text{Itive.Motion}(e_3,x)\wedge\tau(e_2)<^{\circ}\text{now}\wedge\tau(e_3)<\text{now}]$

(44) ...◆ $\lambda\phi\lambda x.\exists e_2,e_3[\text{Intend}(e_2)(x)(\phi)\wedge\text{Speaker}(x)\wedge\text{Communication}(e_3,y)\wedge\tau(e_2)<^{\circ}\text{now}\wedge\tau(e_3)<^{\circ}\text{now}]$

## 2.5 Interpretation of attenuative IMPF constructions within a dynamic pragmatics

We must now address a key pragmatic question: how, starting from (41), do we get the addressee's *tdl* updated? Given the lack of authority of the speaker in these structures, s.he leaves more room for the addressee not to ratify their priorities. Therefore, attenuated directive expressions must somehow differ w.r.t. the manner in which an expressed preference is managed in terms of mutual commitments – and there lies their main interaction with contextual parameters.

In order to account for a comparable phenomenon w.r.t. the management of commitment to preferences, namely weak vs. strong imperatives, (Portner 2018: 305) introduces a novel definition of dynamic pragmatic context, crucially based on the distinction between individual commitments (*IC*) (a function from individuals to information as commitment slates (*cs*) and preferences (*tdl*)), mutual commitments (*MC*), and projected commitments (*PC*) – projected commitments being the projected extensions of mutual commitments, i.e., anticipated future developments of the conversation. He defines context as follows (cg standing for *common ground*, *tdl* for *to-do list*, and *cs* for *commitment slate*<sup>16</sup>):

(45) A context is a tuple  $\langle \text{MC}, \text{IC}, \text{PC} \rangle$ , where:

1.  $\text{MC} = \langle \text{cg}, \text{tdl} \rangle$
2. For each participant *p*,  $\text{IC}(p) = \langle \text{csp}, \text{tdlp} \rangle$
3.  $\text{PC} = \langle \text{pccg}, \text{pctdl} \rangle$

Portner uses the distinction between the speaker's and addressee's committed preferences in his novel context model to capture the variation in strength between imperative clauses, i.e., to account for weak vs. strong imperatives, respectively with raising (46) vs. falling intonation (47).

(46) Have a seat!↑ (weak, polite imperative, of the 'have a cookie' type)

(47) Have a seat!↓ (strong imperative ; speaker does not care whether addressee wants to sit or not)

(Portner 2018) argues that both types of imperatives add an expectation to the projected to-do-list ( $\text{pc}_{\text{tdl}}$ ) of the addressee, that the imperative's underlying preference will be added to the addressee's *tdl*, i.e. an expectation that the interlocutors will come to a shared commitment about how to judge the addressee's actions (i.e., that the speaker's higher ranking of the worlds in which the addressee sits down, will become mutual). In addition to this, Portner argues that falling (strong) imperatives add the imperative's content to  $\text{tdl}_{\text{speaker}}(\text{addressee})$ , while rising imperatives add it to  $\text{tdl}_{\text{addressee}}(\text{addressee})$  – with the former conveying that it is the *speaker's preference* which

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in the Frantext corpus as soon as the 15<sup>th</sup> century, whereas I could not find clear instances with *venir*<sub>IMPF</sub> could before the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

'Mon bel prieur, je suis bien prest/De mon trespas et finement :/Je vouloie mon testament/Ordonnon en vostre presence.' (*Le Mystère de S. Bernard de Menthon*, 1450, Anon.)

'My beautiful prior, death and the end of my life are looming close; I would like to draw my will in your presence.'

<sup>16</sup> A commitment slate is essentially a set of commitments (assertions) and priorities (i.e. preferences, cf. (Condoravdi & Lauer 2011) ).

serves as a basis for establishing a novel shared commitment, whereas the latter convey it is the *addressee's preference* on which this novel shared commitment should rest.

I will here adopt Portner's dynamic pragmatic approach and claim that the at-issue meaning of attenuative IMPF structures (*AttenDirective*( $e_1$ )(*Intend*)) is akin to rising, 'weak' imperatives, i.e. are a type of directive expression updating  $tdl_{addressee}(addressee)$  rather than  $tdl_{speaker}(addressee)$ ; cf. (48). Indeed, they leave it to the addressee to accept  $\phi$  as a mutually shared preference with the speaker.

(48) The conventional effect of an attenuated directive trying to bring about some preference  $\phi$  in context  $C$  is:  $C + \phi = C'$ , where:

1.  $tdl'_{addressee}(addressee) = tdl_{addressee}(addressee) \cup \{\phi\}$
2.  $pc'_{ddl}(addressee) = \{c \cup tdl(addressee) \cup \{\phi\} \mid c \in pc_{ddl}(addressee)\}$

It should be noted that this type of request does not require an overt ratification by the addressee – contrary to e.g. (31). As (Portner 2018) suggests, the update of the addressee's commitment is therefore backgrounded in some sense; the ratification process is not 'put on the table' as in (31).

Though perfectly legitimate and useful, (Portner 2018)'s analysis is probably not sufficient to capture all the relevant properties of attenuated directives – and Portner himself acknowledges that his analysis does not preclude additional, complementary developments. I have highlighted above that all directives have an intrinsic volitional dimension, and must be grounded by an associated preference state. In a Kratzerian theory of modality, an agent's desires provide the relevant ordering sources for a priority modal; i.e., possible worlds will be ranked w.r.t. to their desirability. And crucially, it seems to me that non-attenuated directives vs. attenuated directives differ in an essential manner with respect to this ranking property. If one considers (49), the *conditionnel* marking clearly conveys that the 'target', desired worlds, are not absolutely desirable; they are mildly superior to worlds where the speaker's preference is not ratified. The set of worlds where the speaker's preference is ratified, and the complementary, alternative set of worlds where it is not, are not at odds w.r.t. this desirability property (i.e., desirable worlds are only mildly desirable, and undesirable worlds are only mildly undesirable). This is not so with the present-marked *devoir* in (50), where alternative worlds<sup>17</sup> are decidedly worse than the preferred, target worlds. A scalar model of modality such as (Lassiter 2014; Lassiter 2017) is obviously well-adapted to capturing such intricacies, and would be necessary in order to account for all the semantic properties of attenuated priority modals, or attenuated directive expressions in general. But for want of space to elaborate on it, I must set aside this issue here.

(49) Tu devrais partir.

'You should<sub>COND</sub> go/I'm urging<sub>COND</sub> you to go'

(50) Tu dois partir.

'You have<sub>PR</sub> to/need<sub>PR</sub> to/have<sub>PR</sub> to go'.

### 3 On so-called 'narrative' uses of the *imparfait*

Let us move now to the study of the so-called 'narrative uses' of the *imparfait*. As for the so-called 'attenuative *imparfait*', two main types of concurrent approaches are currently found in the literature. A classic, meaning enrichment approach argues that these uses can be derived from the standard past imperfective meaning of the *imparfait*; cf. e.g. (Gosselin 1999; Bres 1999; Caudal & Vetters 2003; Patard 2007). In contrast to those, syntactic/constructional approaches à la (Tasmowski-De Rijck 1985; Berthonneau & Kleiber 1999) claim that narrative *imparfait* sequences are always introduced by some kind of framing or temporal anchoring adverbial, or a temporal succession adverbial or connective, cf. (51)-(52). If true, this empirical generalization suggests a clear case of conventionalization, where a constructional analysis would be legitimate.

<sup>17</sup> Following an intuition formulated in (Ramchand 2014), I consider that modals crucially involve an *alternative set* in order to capture what is generally seen as a quantificational phenomenon.

- (51) Quelques instants plus tard, Maigret descendait l'escalier, traversait le salon aux meubles disparates, gagnait la terrasse ruisselante des rayons déjà chauds du soleil. (Simenon, *La nuit du carrefour*, LdP 2908, p. 61; in (Caudal & Vettters 2005))  
 'A few moments later, Maigret descended<sub>IMPF</sub> the stairs, crossed<sub>IMPF</sub> the living room with its disparate furniture, and reached<sub>IMPF</sub> the terrace dripping with the already warm rays of the sun.'
- (52) Deux semaines après, on lui coupait les deux jambes (...). (M. Rolland, *La pipe en sucre*, Edmond Nalis, p. 200, *ibid.*)  
 'Two weeks later, both her legs were cut<sub>IMPF</sub> off (...).'

To the best of my knowledge, only (Bres 1999) extensively argues against the above syntactic empirical generalization – but similar approaches dismissed it by claiming temporal adverbials or connectives were optional, and only played a reinforcing role. After examining a corpus of 700 examples of *narrative* imparfait sequences, (Bres 1999) claimed that they can perfectly arise without any temporal adverbial or connective. In fact, 74% of the occurrences he studied did not comprise such a marker, which seems to give credit to the meaning enrichment approach.

### 3.1 Why a constructional approach is legitimate

However, if we carefully review Bres's list of counter-examples, we are forced to draw a fairly different conclusion, once we realize this list comprises four distinct syntactic types of utterances.

The first type (53)-(54) consists of 'sequential narrative clauses' in the *imparfait* – a well-known type of syntactic structure enforcing strict temporal ordering, provided a *Narration*, *Occasion* or *Result* discourse relation attaches the relative clause discourse referent to the matrix clause discourse referent – I am here adopting an SDRT-based analysis of the interaction of tenses with discourse structural parameters; see (Caudal 2012) for a detailed discussion.

- (53) Il se jeta à ses genoux qu'il baisait éperdument à travers la robe de nuit (Maupassant, «Un Coq chanta», in (Bres 1999:6))  
 'He threw himself on his knees, which he kissed<sub>IMPF</sub> desperately through the nightgown.'
- (54) Rosalie approcha son front où Numa posait timidement les lèvres (Daudet, Numa Roumestan, *ibid.*).  
 'Rosalie approached her forehead where Numa shyly placed<sub>IMPF</sub> her lips.'

The second type of structure found in the corpus are *bona fide* causo-temporal subordinate clauses, encoding overt temporal succession in (55)-(58).

- (55) La course était achevée depuis 6 heures, lorsque le tour de France entamait l'étape la plus difficile de sa riche histoire (*Le Monde*, in (Bres 1999:6)).  
 'The race had been over for 6 hours when the Tour de France began<sub>IMPF</sub> the most difficult stage of its rich history.'
- (56) La malle de Saint-Omérois n'était pas au bout de la rue qu'Anatole sautait rue Lafayette (Goncourt, *Manette Salomon*, *ibid.*).  
 'Anatole jumped<sub>IMPF</sub> onto Lafayette street even before the Saint-Omérois stage coach reached<sub>IMPF</sub> the end of the street.'
- (57) A peine venaient-ils de frapper à la porte du véhicule que des coups de feu claquaient (Midi Libre, *ibid.*).  
 'No sooner had they knocked<sub>IMPF</sub> on the door of the vehicle than shots were fired<sub>IMPF</sub>.'
- (58) « Oh! il n'y a pas de danger ! » s'écriait avec une telle conviction le futur auteur dramatique que Bertrand faiblissait, lui accordait sa demande (Goncourt, *Journal*, in (Bres 1999))  
 "Oh, there is no danger! "the future playwright cried<sub>IMPF</sub> out with such conviction that Bertrand weakened, granted<sub>IMPF</sub> him his request

The third type involves temporal duration modifiers, entailing a perfective-like interpretation, and a strict ordering of events when combined with the *Narration*, *Occasion* or *Result* discourse relations (as is the case in (59)-(60).

(59) La jeune fille marchait ainsi pendant une bonne heure, peut-être plus (Souvestre & Allain, *Le train perdu*, p. 109 in Gosselin 1999)

'The girl walked<sub>IMPF</sub> this way for a good hour or more.'

(60) Les deux hommes erraient ainsi quelques instants, gênés, bousculés. (ibid, p. 68)

'The two men wandered<sub>IMPF</sub> around for a few moments, embarrassed, and jostled [by the crowd]'.  
'

The fourth and final type of *narrative imparfait* structure involves framing adverbials and temporal ordering adverbials and connectives – it is the most common type of used in Bres's corpus with 26% of overall occurrences. It also was the only type mentioned in (Tasmowski-De Rijck 1985; Berthonneau & Kleiber 1999), cf. (51)-(52).

Given the above typology, it actually appears that (Bres 1999)'s own corpus work provides clear evidence for not one, but four different types of seemingly obligatory syntactic patterns conditioning the possibility of a *narrative imparfait* sequence. Moreover, it does not offer a single example of *narrative imparfait* without any such overt support material. Two of these structures involve multi-clausal constructions, and two involve clause-level modifiers, but all qualify for being potentially conventionalized associations, i.e. collocations (Stefanowitsch & Gries 2003).

Some of these markers appear to enforce by themselves a caudo-temporal reading. This is notably the case of multi-clausal structures such as (56)-(58), but also of connectives imposing strict temporal ordering, such as <duration> *plus tard* ('<some time> later'), or *puis* ('then'). But many others – especially past temporal adverbials (either a durative adverbial, or a framing adverbial), relative clauses and ambiguous temporal subordinate markers such as *lorsque* or *quand* ('when/as') – are by no means sufficient to ensure that a *narrative imparfait* reading becomes available. Consider (51) again, and compare it with (61).

(61) Quelques instants plus tard, Maigret descendait l'escalier, quand un cri retentit.

'A few moments later, Maigret was coming<sub>IMPF</sub> down the stairs when a shout was heard.'

The same observation holds true about e.g., *lorsque* subordinates or relative clauses. Thus, the relative clause in (53) is interpreted as conveying temporal succession, and constitutes a *narrative imparfait* structure only because the caudo-temporal ordering imposed by world knowledge itself dictates the establishment of *Occasion* between the relative clause and the matrix clause.

This important fact demonstrates that a purely form-driven, constructional approach to this phenomenon (for instance à la (Michaelis 2000; Michaelis 2004; Michaelis 2011) is bound to fail given such datapoints. It is impossible to encode only in the lexicon (within some lexicalized morphosyntax) the licensing conditions for *narrative imparfait* structures. These require a combination of (i) form licensors (adverbials or other overt support syntactic structures) and (ii) specific discourse structural parameters (discourse relations imposing a strict temporal ordering) – which themselves require appropriate world-knowledge level conditions on caudo-temporal ordering between events. This is particularly true of calendar or absolute temporal reference expressions such as 'à X heures' ('at X o'clock'), cf. (62).

(62) A 17 h, nouvelle cannonade. A 22 heures, elle reprenait plus violente encore. Un obus atteignait l'aumônier, le cher P. Talabardon, qui était tué sur le coup. (<http://spiritains.forums.free.fr/defunts/talabardons.htm>, le 14/012/2018 à 22 :07)

'At 5 pm, we got shelled again. At 10pm, the shelling resumed<sub>IMPF</sub>, with even more violence. A shell hit<sub>IMPF</sub> the chaplain, our beloved Father Talabardon, who was killed<sub>IMPF</sub> instantly.'

Furthermore, in addition to world-knowledge based ordering conditions on events (e.g. script knowledge), *Occasion*, *Narration* and *Result* require further coherence-related discourse structural parameters, namely a common *discourse topic* in the SDRT sense (Asher, Prévot & Vieu 2007). Thus, the *narrative imparfait* sequence in (63) describes a character's careful approach.



(63) Dans l'alignement de la hampe en pin, il vit le chapeau du Navajo apparaître tandis qu'il progressait lentement sur la pente. *Puis* ses épaules, sa ceinture. Il s'arrêtait. Regardait l'arbre abattu, la touffe de jeunes pins. (Hillerman, *La voie de l'ennemi*, Rivages/Noir, p. 205)

'[Looking] in-line with the pine shaft, he saw the Navajo's hat appear as he slowly progressed<sub>IMPF</sub> down the slope. Then his shoulders, his belt. He stopped<sub>IMPF</sub>. He looked<sub>IMPF</sub> at the felled tree, the clump of young pine trees.'

This discursive topic condition is a structural condition <sub>IMPF</sub> by all the discourse relations associated with narrative *imparfait* sequences. It is a well-known property of narrative discourses analyzed using the SDRT framework, cf. e.g. (Asher & Lascarides 2003: 163). See the LIC (Logic of Information Content) axiom associated with the *Narration* relation, where  $\sqcap$  calculates the common content of two formulas; this condition roughly says that discourse segments  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  must have a contingent common content, i.e. must share a topic. The more extended this content is, the more coherent the topic thus formed will be.

$$(64) \quad \phi_{\text{Narration}(\alpha, \beta)} \Rightarrow \neg \sqcap (K_\alpha \sqcap K_\beta)$$

In the absence of such topical coherence, narrative *imparfait* readings cannot arise, cf. (65) (where given an empty context, it is impossible to find a correlation between the rise in temperature, and the addressee's sickness).

(65) Il fit soudain chaud lorsque tu étais malade.  
'It became suddenly hot when you were<sub>IMPF</sub> sick.'

We can now formulate a more precise empirical generalization for the formal and contextual conditions licensing narrative *imparfait* structures:

(66) Given a topically coherent, causo-temporally ordered sequence of discourse segments  $\beta, \gamma, \dots, \omega$  (possibly reduced to  $\beta$ ) attached to utterances in the *imparfait*, with appropriate discourse relations connecting them (*Occasion*, *Narration*, *Result*) and an attachment segment  $\alpha$ , such that  $e_\alpha < e_\beta < e_\gamma < \dots < e_\omega$  (due to general world-knowledge and common-sense reasoning about the current context, and/or due to the semantics of some overt marking), only the first discourse segment  $\beta$  of said sequence needs to bear an overt syntactic marker whose interpretation enforces temporal succession in this context – or the two first discourse segments  $\beta$  and  $\gamma$  *qua* clauses, if they pertain to a multi-clausal construction conveying  $e_\beta < e_\gamma$ .

In view of this novel generalization, it is hardly surprising that framing adverbials are so frequent with narrative *imparfait* sequences. Indeed (Asher, Prévot & Vieu 2007) convincingly argue that, especially in an IP-adjunct position, their primary function is to introduce a new structure comprising a Framing Topic. The compositional semantic content of the adverbial is then distributed over the events contained in the topic and the elaborating.

## 4 Conclusion

By sequentially analyzing here two different so-called 'uses' of the *imparfait*, I hope to have established that while they are rife with conventionalization processes (lexification/constructionalization), they can nevertheless retain a high degree of context-sensitivity – that is, they are not amenable to a mere static, non-context-sensitive, semantics. I conclude that the analysis of tense uses can require both a constructional, lexicalized meaning component, and a dynamic semantics / pragmatics component. In particular, I have shown that while both so-called attenuative and narrative *imparfait* structures obeyed clear formal constraints (cf. the bouletic/teleological constructional network for attenuative *imparfait* structures, vs. the typology of possible temporal ordering-inducing expressions for narrative *imparfait* structures), and could be regarded as conventionalized constructions in this respect, their interpretation remains

context-sensitive in an essential manner – so that their treatment cannot be couched in simple static semantic terms, as would be provided by a ‘pure’ constructional account.

As we have seen, although they have a very complex lexicalized static semantic content, here modelled in multi-dimensional semantic framework (which corresponds to the conventionalization of a conversational implicature, now lexified in a construction network), attenuative *imparfait* utterances must also interact with dynamic pragmatic contextual mechanisms (cf. my account of their impact on the management of commitment to preferences). Narrative *imparfait* sequences were shown to be almost worse, complexity wise, because they seem to require highly elaborate discourse structural conditions (topical coherence and world-knowledge-based/contextual-knowledge based causo-temporal ordering of events) together with form-related, syntactic conditions (i.e., they require a mandatory ‘temporal index advancing’ support expression, which can come in four different syntactic guises). They are instances of what I have called *discursive constructions* in (Caudal 2018b); namely, constructions sensitive to discourse-structural conditions. A proper implementation of such constructions obviously requires interfacing a lexicalized syntax (i.e., an appropriate framework for handling constructions) with a formalized semantics-pragmatics interface à la SDRT (based itself on a dynamic semantics and pragmatics).

I have suggested in (Caudal 2018b) that the HPSG framework would probably be a good candidate for providing an adequate syntax-semantics interface for both types of phenomena, if we pair it up with its LRS (Lexical Resource Semantics) (Richter & Sailer 2004) formal semantic extension. LRS naturally makes it possible to integrate within the HPSG lexicalized syntax (i) a classic Montagovian-style formal compositional semantics, (ii) a multidimensional semantics (LRS has already been used to model similar conventionalized implicature-based, two-dimensional semantic phenomena, cf. e.g. (Hasegawa & Koenig 2011)). But it can also be potentially used for (iii) helping with the semantics/pragmatics interface, e.g. by introducing into an HPSG entry dedicated semantic content which could interact with an SDRT-based discourse semantics, that is, act as constraints on discourse structural parameters. This could be achieved by introducing e.g., topic coherence conditions in the AVMs of certain markers (framing adverbials or complementizers used in multi-clausal constructions). However, formulating such a formal theory at the morphosyntax to semantics/pragmatics interface is well beyond the reach of this modest contribution, and must be left to future investigations.

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