

# Tenses as discourse topic functions: evidence in Old and Modern/Contemporary French

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(Labex EFL project, Axe 2, MEQTAME op.)



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# Introduction

- Aspectual meaning is a known key parameter in the semantic evolution of Romance tenses; cf. the so-called ‘aoristic drift’ (Squartini & Bertinetto 2000) in the evolution of Romance compound pasts:

*Latin resultative constructions > periphrastic perfects > perfectivized perfects*



**Purely resultative viewpoint**



**Mixed resultative+  
perfective viewpoint**

- Two key evolutions:
  - a) Combination with perfective reading-inducing modifiers (‘for two hours’, ‘the following day’, etc.)
  - b) Use in sequence-of-event contexts (so-called ‘narrative’ uses)

# Introduction

- A parallel, but more recent aspectual evolution affects some Romance imperfective viewpoint tenses – e.g. ‘narrative’ *imperfetto* and *imparfait*
- E.g., the so-called ‘narrative *imparfait*’ in French can be found with modifiers requiring a perfective viewpoint reading, and of course appears in sequence of event-contexts, cf. (1)

(1) Deux semaines après, on lui coupait ( $e_1$ ) les deux jambes, et le deux février suivant, deux chevaux la menèrent au cimetière ( $e_2$ ). (M. Rolland, *La pipe en sucre*, Edmond Nalis, p. 200, *ibid.*)

‘Two weeks later, both her legs were amputated<sub>IMPF</sub>, and on the following two February, two horses took<sub>IMPF</sub> her to the cemetery.’

- **Again, the same two key evolutions:**
  - a) Combination with perfective meaning-inducing modifiers
  - b) Use in sequence-of-event (SOE) contexts (so-called ‘narrative’ uses)

# Introduction

- Two systematic key evolutions for Romance compound past tense and imperfective:
  - a) Combination with perfective reading-inducing modifiers
  - b) Use in sequence-of-event contexts (so-called ‘narrative’ uses)
- **Research question: to what extent are a) and b) correlated or distinct in these two parallel changes? how do they relate / influence one another?**
  - **Spoiler alert: (a) corresponds to boundness requirement and (b) to the ability t**

# Introduction

- Paper will focus on the French *passé composé* and the French *imparfait* – especially the latter
- **Roadmap**
  1. The ‘narrative imparfait’ in prior works
  2. Empirical observations about support material
  3. Analogies with the Old French PC
  4. Perfectivization: viewpoint vs. discourse topic
  5. Conclusion

# The 'narrative imparfait' in prior works

- Two main types of accounts in the previous literature w.r.t. aspect:
  - (i) **Formally constrained accounts, with homonymy:** necessary or common syntactic preconditions (Tasmowski-De Rijck 1985, Berthonneau & Kleiber 1999, Kleiber 2003, a.o.), esp. framing adverbials, and strict temporal ordering adverbials (e.g., *une heure plus tard* 'an hour later'; **AND discourse structural meaning is key** – e.g. K&B 'meronomic' ('anaphoric') tense; **like standard IMPF in that respect**
  - (ii) **Formally unconstrained accounts, with monosemy (NARR IMPF is semantically imperfective):** Imparfait remains purely imperfective semantically, and SOE uses is a purely contextual matter; Bres (1999, 2005), de Saussure & Sthioul (1999), Caudal & Veters (2003); additional expressions serve to help trigger SOE readings; IMPF remains semantically imperfective (but not pragmatically so for Caudal & Veters 2003: locus of divergence is displaced)

# The 'narrative imparfait' in prior works

- **My account at a glance: homonymy based**, but (i) does not assume that NARR IMPF has 'full perfective viewpoint meaning' nor that (ii) discourse structural meaning of NARR IMPF is that of standard IMPF
  - Two nuances: sentence-level semantics, and discourse-level contribution
- Assumption: NARR IMPF is a (relatively novel, and still developing), separate use of the IMPF
  - Case of homonymy
- Not syntactic constraints, BUT not purely discourse contextual either
  - Hypothesis: support material arises as a 'crutch' for some (lingering) non-perfective properties of the IMPF, and will become redundant/unnecessary when its perfectivization is complete

# Empirical observations about support material

- **Classification of *imparfait* narratif structures in Bres (1999)**
    - Based on a corpus of 700 occurrences in literary texts
    - No data provided w.r.t. sampling methodology, quantitative measurements...
  - Typology of NARR IMPF structures:
    - Temporal anchoring adverbials (framing adverbials), relative or absolute (*le lendemain, une heure après...*) – most common type for Bres (26%) (FADV)
    - Causo-temporal connectives (*puis* ‘then’...) (CTCO)
    - Temporal duration modifiers (*pendant deux heures* ‘for two hours’...), (2) (DUR ADV)
- (2) *La jeune fille marchait ainsi pendant une bonne heure, peut-être plus* (Souvestre/Allain, *Le train perdu*, in Gosselin (1999, 109))
- ‘The girl walked<sub>IMPF</sub> thus for a good hour, maybe more.’



# Empirical observations about support material

- Subordination with conventionalized temporal ordering: *quand/lorsque A, B* ('when A,B'), *à peine A,B* ('no sooner A,B') causo-temporal structures, or relative clauses (antecedent = object in matrix) with a strict temporal ordering meaning (TEMP SUB)
- Sequences of coordinated or juxtaposed VPs or clauses; 'serial verb' feeling (VSEQ) – (NOTE: generally achievement-denoting/always telic verbs)
- **“BOOTSTRAPPING FUNCTION”**

Example (3) illustrates both of the above types: TEMP SUB & VSEQ

- (3) *M. Chabot **retirait** son pardessus **qu'il accrochait** au portemanteau, **pénétrait** dans la cuisine et **s'installait** dans son fauteuil d'osier.*  
(G. Simenon, *La danseuse du Gai-Moulin*, Paris, Fayard, 1965:56, in Tasmowski-De Rijck 1985:75)  
'Mr Chabot took off his overcoat, which he hung on the coat rack, entered the kitchen and sat down in his wicker armchair.'

# Empirical observations about support material

- Ongoing literary corpus study (*Frantext*), with six diachronic stages; 600 randomly extracted examples for each stage

| Period    | Completion | Corpus size              |
|-----------|------------|--------------------------|
| 1500-1649 | partial    | 15 millions (14 914 134) |
| 1650-1799 | partial    | 43 millions (43 635 170) |
| 1871-1900 | ✓          | 13 millions (12 991 272) |
| 1901-1920 | ✓          | 5,5 millions (5 621 872) |
| 1951-1970 | partial    | 10 millions (10 344 262) |
| 1980-2023 | ✓          | 27 millions (27 817 582) |

Total: 3000 IMPF forms verbs out of 115 millions (115 324 292) words

- Complement with ongoing corpus investigation using the Europress corpus (for contemporary French)

# Empirical observations about support material

- Some partial results:

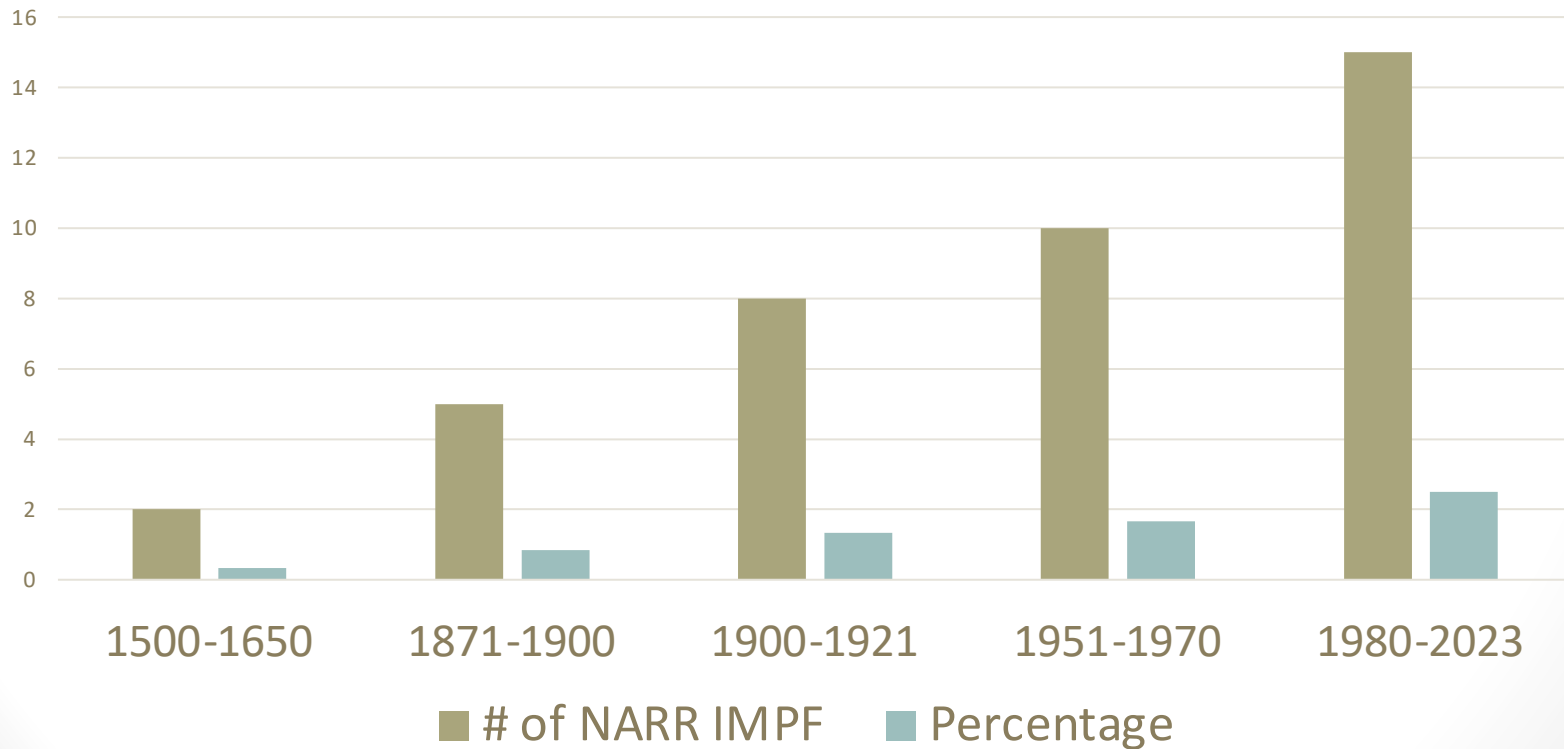
| Period    | Number of NARR IMPF | Types                      |
|-----------|---------------------|----------------------------|
| 1500-1650 | 2                   | 2 FADV                     |
| 1871-1900 | 5                   | 2 FADV, 3 TEMP SUB         |
| 1900-1921 | 8                   | 6 TEMP SUB, 2 VSEQ         |
| 1951-1970 | 10                  | 8 VSEQ, 2 FADV             |
| 1980-2023 | 15                  | 13 VSEQ, 1 FADV, 1 DUR ADV |

- **Overall: an extremely rare to rare use of the IMPF**
- But with a **steady increase** through time!
- **Remarquable fact:** increase mostly located on VSEQ (coordinated/juxtaposed VPs and utterances)

# Empirical observations about support material

- Very clear trend:

Evolution of NARR IMPF in FRANTEXT fiction



# Empirical observations about support material

- Earliest attestations of *imparfait narratif* in the Frantext corpus involve framing adverbials

(4) ... à grant paine et à grant meschief vint frere Nicolle à Gouxe , car il sambloit que le vent l' en vouxist pourter. **Le lendemain chantait messe à l' abaïes de x Gouxe** . Le capitenne avoit envoiet ces verlet pour savoir c'il estoit venus, et furent lesdit verlet tous du loing de sa messe pour atendre qu'il eust fait ; puis luy dirent que leur maistre le mandoit querir qu' il venist parler à luy. (Philippe de VIGNEULLES, *Mémoires*, 1522, p. 137)

‘ ... Brother Nicolle came to Gouxe with great difficulty, for it seemed that the wind wanted to drive him away from there. **The following day he sung<sub>IMPF</sub> mass** at the abbaye of Gouxe. The captain had sent his servants to check whether her had come, and they attended his whole mass to see what he would do; then they told him that their master had sent them to fetch, so that he may come and talk to him [the captain]. ‘

# Empirical observations about support material

- **Frantext-based study revealed that**

(a) frequency of narrative imparfait rises over time

(b) it remains a rare type of use, in spite of this evolution

(c) results do not seem to reflect Bres's (1999) observations w.r.t. the frequency of certain structures – i.e., sequences of coordinated VPs, in particular, become increasingly predominant over time (Bres's corpus may be historically biased against them)

# Empirical observations about support material

- **Novel empirical generalization:**

In contemporary literary French, VSEQ represent over 86% of occurrences of the NARR IMPF

- Discrepancy is less marked in press material, where framing adverbials seem to still represent a large part of the data
  - Muller (1966) already observed that framing/temporal adverbials were the predominant pattern in press texts
  - Aligns with assumption that press is more conservative?

# Empirical observations about support material

- **Europress corpus – work in progress**

(5) Le lendemain, le chargement partait en direction de l'île de Batz.  
'The next day, the load left<sub>IMPF</sub> for the island of Batz.'  
(Ouest-France, 07.06.2023; Europresse corpus)

(6) En mai, l'Organisation mondiale de la santé (OMS) appelait «à la prudence dans l'usage des modèles de langage pour protéger et promouvoir le bien-être humain et préserver la santé publique».

'In May, the World Health Organisation (WHO) called<sub>IMPF</sub> for "caution in the use of language models to protect and promote human well-being and safeguard public health".'  
(Libération, 20.06.2023; Europresse corpus)



# Analogies with the Old French PC

- At this stage, important and useful to go back the PC, and in particular to Caudal (2015)
- Based on a limited corpus study of Old French texts, Caudal (2015) suggested that
  - Up to the 12th c., narrative uses of the Old French PC tended to also involve support material (TEMP SUB type)
  - Sequence-of-event uses (VSEQ) without support material tended to become more frequent from the 14th c. onwards

# Analogies with the Old French PC

- Most frequent support material for narrative uses of the PC according to Caudal (2015): causo-temporal biclausal structures, e.g. *quant*  $\alpha$ , (*si*)  $\beta$  with  $e_\alpha$  causing and preceding  $e_\beta$

(7) *Quant la reïne voit le roi* ( $\alpha$ ), / . . .  
When the queen see-pr.3sg the king,  
*Si s'est contre le roi dreciee* ( $\beta$ ).  
then refl-be-pr.3sg against the king stand\_up-pp.  
'When the queen saw the king . . . , she stood up in defiance.'  
(*Chevalier*, 3955–7) (OF, 12th c.)

- Caudal (2015) argues that such data are not compatible with the PC having retained an imperfective resultative viewpoint content – it must have developed some perfective viewpoint content
- Support material became increasingly unnecessary over time to give rise to such narrative uses

# Analogies with the Old French PC

- Time line for distribution of Old French PC with perfective adverbials and SOE contexts, based on Caudal (2015) and Martin (1971)

|   | Perfective adverbials                                 | SOE contexts                                      |
|---|---|---|
| 11 <sup>th</sup> to 12 <sup>th</sup> c. | rare  | rare; support material necessary                  |
| 13 <sup>th</sup> to 14 <sup>th</sup> c. | Increasingly frequent and almost free(* <i>hier</i> ) | Increasingly frequent; support material preferred |
| 15 <sup>th</sup> to 16 <sup>th</sup> c. | frequent and almost free(* <i>hier</i> )              | Increasingly frequent; support material optional  |
| 17 <sup>th</sup> c. onwards             | frequent and free                                     | frequent and free                                 |

# Perfectivization: viewpoint vs. discourse topic

- Back to our research question:
- How can we connect it with all the facts identified so far?

# Perfectivization: viewpoint vs. discourse topic

- **Key observation:** both PC and IMPF appear to have developed a sentence-level semantic perfective-like viewpoint meaning prior to developing SOE, discourse-level uses
- Ties in nicely with several independent empirical observations and theoretical claims about (i) the discourse structural properties of the *imparfait* and (ii) the sentence level meaning of the *imparfait*, i.e. its viewpoint meaning

# Perfectivization: discourse topic

- **Theoretical claims (i):**

- Caudal & Vetters (2003) : NARR IMPF systematically triggers *Narration* or *Result*
- (Asher & Lascarides 2003:163): these discourse relations introduce **narrative discourse topics** (i.e. discourse referents encompassing a series of utterances), ensuring coherence for the SOE complex discourse unit at stake

- **Theoretical claims (ii):**

- (Bras, Le Draoulec & Vieu 2001), Caudal & Vetters (2006), Caudal (2012, 2023): some expressions, including adverbials, connectives and tenses, denote discourse structural conditions
- ⇒ Perfectly sensible to assume that some expressions can denote constraints on discourse relations (*puis*) or... discourse topics !

# Perfectivization: discourse topic

- **Independent result:** framing adverbials contribute discourse topics (Asher et al. 2007)
  - Framing adverbials and SDRT: cf. Aunargue et al. (2001)
- **Observation:** 'standard', non-narrative uses of imperfective viewpoint tenses (including the French *imparfait*) often co-occurs with 'framing' adverbials (Bres 1999, 2005, and my corpus data)
  - **Why?**
  - **Because IMPF lacks the ability to introduce a discourse topic referent**

# Perfectivization: discourse topic

## Hypotheses based on those independent proposals/results:

- Perfective and imperfective viewpoint differ w.r.t. their discourse structural denotations
  - **Perfective tenses introduce (existentially bind) a narrative discourse topic**, which (a) encompasses the described event (**PERFECTIVE:  $e \subset \text{TOPIC}$** ) and (b) is directly used by the set of SOE discourse relations they can introduce (*Narration, Result*)

**'NON-ANAPHORIC TENSE'**

- **Imperfective tenses do not introduce any discourse topic** (narrative or other); they attach to an independently discourse topic via *Background* (**IMPERFECTIVE:  $e \supset \text{TOPIC}$** )

**'ANAPHORIC TENSE'**

- **And NARR IMPF? It's a hybrid tense, both for viewpoint and discourse meaning**
  - NARR IMPF requires a narrative topic in its denotation encompassing the described event (**PERFECTIVE:  $e \subset \text{TOPIC}$** ), BUT cannot (yet) introduce (existentially bind) it
  - The role of support material is to introduce (existentially bind) the narrative topic NARR IMPF requires
  - Increase in VSEQ signals a recent evolution?



# Perfectivization: viewpoint

- **Turning to viewpoint, non-discursive meaning of the NARR IMPF...**
- **Key observation:** NARR IMPF does not seem to have (yet) developed a full perfective viewpoint meaning
- In particular, while inchoative readings with atelic utterances have become possible, they remain rarer and more constrained
  - The vast majority of examples in my corpus are telic (but it's small, so....)
  - When atelic, interpretation tends to be durative-bounded, not inchoative
  - Inchoative readings attested since the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century
  - They seem to require support material (less represented in VSEQ structures)

# Perfectivization: viewpoint

- Inchoative readings of NARR IMPF stative utterances:

(8) *Elle le vit, se montra, sourit. Le soir même, il était son amant.*  
(Maupassant, *Le Lit* 29, *Pléiade II* : 177), in Berthonneau & Kleiber 1999)

‘She saw him, showed herself, smiled. That evening, he became (lit. was<sub>IMPF</sub>) her lover’

(9) *Au bout d'une heure, il courait le pays en demandant partout des nouvelles de son soldat.* (Maupassant, *Saint-Antoine*, *Pléiade I* : 779, in Bres 1998:270)

‘Within an hour, he started scouring (lit. was scouring) the country, asking everywhere for news of his soldier.’

# Perfectivization: viewpoint

- Caudal (2020) observes similar diachronic restrictions with the PC concerning inchoative readings:
  - These were initially impossible; only bounded readings are attested with atelic (especially stative) utterances in 11-12th c. Old French, cf. ()-()

(10) *Set anz tuz pleins ad estet en Espagne*  
Seven year-pl all-pl full-pl have-PR.3sg be.loc-PP in Spain  
'He stayed in Spain for seven years' (Roland, v. 2)

(11) *Ensemble avum estet e anz e dis [...]*  
Together have-PR.1pl be.loc-PP and year-pl and day-pl  
'We've been together for a very long time' (Roland, v 2028)

# Perfectivization: viewpoint vs. discourse topic

- Hypothesis: perfectivization of a viewpoint function in three steps:
  1. Function requires a bounded event predicate as its input, but does not have any coercion capability – atelic verbs are OK with bounded readings due to additional material ; inchoative readings are blocked
  2. Function requires a bounded event predicate as its input, and starts developing limited coercion capability (support material is frequent, but less mandatory); e.g., inchoative readings can occur with framing adverbials
  3. Function requires a bounded event predicate as its input, and can freely derive inchoative readings
- Old Fr. PC = stage 1, Middle Fr. PC = stage 2 ; Cont. French PC = stage 3;
- Classical Fr. NARR IMPF = stage 1; Cont. French NARR IMPF = stage 2

# Conclusion

- How do combinations with perfective viewpoint adverbial relate with sequence-of-event context uses in the evolution of the imparfait and PC towards a perfective-like behaviour ?
  - Diachronic facts for the PC and imparfait: in both cases, first attested examples involve perfective adverbials, not sequence-of-event contexts
  - Perfective viewpoint meaning evolution seems to pave the ground for subsequent discursive evolution
  - So a perfective viewpoint evolution is a precondition for SOE uses

# Conclusion

- Perfective viewpoint meaning and topic introduction functions of the NARR IMPF are not truly independent
  - One started evolving before the other followed suit
  - Perfective viewpoint meaning seems to be a precondition on narrative topics (**PERFECTIVE:  $e \subset \text{TOPIC}$** )
    - Would explain the temporal gap
  - 'Dove-tailing', overlapping evolutions, with perfective viewpoint evolution paving the way to topic introduction capability

# Conclusion

- Evolution pattern connecting two parallel changes

| Stage | Perfective meaning  | SOE meaning                  |
|-------|---|------------------------------|
| 1     | <b>Partial; no coercion power (durative)</b><br><i>Old Fr. PC / Ren.-Class. Fr NARR IMPF</i>  | Non-existent                 |
| 2     | <b>Partial with limited coercion</b><br><i>Mid. Fr. PC / ≈ Mod. Fr NARR IMPF</i>              | Support material needed      |
| 3     | <b>Perfective with full coercion, but marked</b><br><i>Ren. Fr. PC / ≈ Cont. Fr NARR IMPF</i> | Support material optional    |
| 4     | Unmarked & unlimited<br><i>Mod. - Cont. Fr. PC</i>  | No support material required |

# Conclusion

- In contemporary French, NARR IMPF:
  1. Has advanced, but still somewhat incomplete perfectivized viewpoint meaning – cannot trigger inchoative readings on its own (support material needed)
  2. Has still fairly constrained (and rare) SOE uses; it has, at best, a limited ability to introduce narrative discourse topic; at worst, VSEQ structures should be regarded as (loose, but real) type of support material

**Its perfectivization is incomplete on both sentence semantics + discourse semantics fronts**

**...but its viewpoint perfectivization seems more advanced**



# Conclusion

- Literary uses are more innovative
- VSEQ not so predominant in press data (framing adverbials more prominent in such data)
- Need for a well-balanced corpus to mitigate genre effects

# Conclusion

- **Likely explanation:** full perfective viewpoint is a precondition for developing free topic introduction
  - Corroborated by independent, earlier findings on the evolution of the French PC, which developed e.g. compatibility with perfective adverbials before it developed full-fledge SOE uses (Martin 1971, Treikelder 2006, Caudal 2015, a.o.)
  - Reflects on a hierarchy between simplex (sentence-level) vs. complex (discourse structural-level) meaning?

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