

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

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Diachronic changes in the aspectual viewpoint meaning (Smith 1991) of Romance tenses have been extensively studied for (analytic) perfects evolving perfective viewpoint readings, cf. e.g. (Squartini & Bertinetto 2000; Schaden 2012; Howe 2013; Caudal 2015). I will here take ‘perfectivization’ processes to involve two distinct steps, as over time, some tense became increasingly capable of **(a)** combining with aspectuo-temporal modifiers requiring (past) perfective-viewpoint readings, before **(b)** marking utterances within sequence-of-event (SOE) discourse structures – as is commonly assumed in the literature (Nedjalkov 1988; Dahl 2000; Squartini & Bertinetto 2000). I will try and show how perfectivization processes **(a)** and **(b)** can be somewhat independent and semantically distinct, by studying the perfectivization of two French tenses: the *passé composé* (PC) (trying to renew our take on a well-known issue, from (Foulet 1920) to (Caudal 2015)) and the *imparfait* (IMPF). For the latter tense, we will of course examine its so-called ‘narrative’ uses – a much less well covered issue, except synchronically, cf. (de Saussure & Sthioul 1999; Gosselin 1999; Berthonneau & Kleiber 1999; Bres 2005), i.a.

Concerning process **(b)**, on the basis of a corpus study, I will demonstrate that (i) SOE uses of the IMPF in Modern/ Contemporary French (18th-20th c.), and of the PC in Old French (11th-12th c.) cannot appear on purely discourse contextual grounds, and share a common need for licensing/support expressions. I will then argue that all said support material seems to set a *narrative discourse topic* (i.e. to signal and set a topic referent meant to encompass a new (or additional) series of SOE discourse segments) to which the discourse referent denoted by the PC/IMPF-marked SOE utterance can attach (Asher, Prévot & Vieu 2007). Indeed, those support expressions seem to consist in framing and SOE-inducing expressions (e.g. framing adverbials (cf. (1)), causo-temporal connectives (cf. *puis* in (2)), bi-clausal causo-temporal constructions (*quant... si...* in (3)), etc.), with a narrative topic-introducing function; cf. (Tasmowski-De Rijck 1985) for the IMPF (*pace* (Bres 1999)), and (Caudal 2015) for the PC. Discourse topic referents and topic coherence are known to be key to modelling narrative discourses in the SDRT literature (Asher & Lascarides 2003: 163); to put it intuitively, narrative discourses (i.e., about past SOEs) must meet special requirements in terms of coherence and topic (dis)continuity. Moreover, discourse connectives as well as framing adverbials have been independently shown to have a topic setting function in discourse (Bras, Le Draoulec & Vieu 2001; Asher, Prévot & Vieu 2007). I will here capitalize on these prior results in my analysis of perfectivization process **(b)**, and will propose that discourse topic semantic conditions are involved in the denotation of SOE uses of the IMPF and PC, but cannot be set by the semantics of those tense uses alone, so that support expressions must intervene to satisfy their topic conditions.

- (1) *A 17 h, nouvelle canonade [sic]. A 22 heures, elle reprenait plus violente encore. Un obus atteignait l'aumônier, le cher P. Talabardon, qui était_{IMPF} tué sur le coup.* (CF)
‘At 17 :00, another cannonade. At 22:00, the cannonade resumed_{IMPF} again, even more violently. A shell hit_{IMPF} the chaplain, dear Fr. Talabardon, who was killed instantly.’
(<http://spiritains.forums.free.fr/defunts/talabardons.htm>; 14/012/2018 at 22 :07)
- (2) *Il y eut un choc sourd, (...) puis le corps de Barzum s'écroulait en arrière.*
‘There was a dull shock, (...) and then Barzum's body collapsed_{IMPF} backwards.’
(Souvestre & Alain, *Le train perdu*, éd. R. Laffont, Paris, p. 264)
- (3) *Quant la reine voit le roi, (...) si s'est contre le roi dreciee.* (OF) (*Chevalier*, 3955–7)
‘When the queen saw the king (...) , she stood_{PC} up in defiance.’

I will specifically claim that SOE, near-perfective uses of both the Old French PC and the Modern/Contemporary French IMPF (which I take to be then in the process of becoming conventionalized, separate uses of these tenses) semantically require, but are unable to

introduce, narrative discourse topics. I take this inability to associate with imperfective tense meanings – which, according to me, explains their so-called ‘anaphoricity’ (Berthonneau & Kleiber 1999): they require a narrative topic referent, but do not introduce (= existentially bind) one – unlike (*bona fide*) perfective tense meanings. Hence the need for support expressions identified for SOE uses of the (Old French) PC and IMPF – these are ‘crutches’ making up for the anaphoric discourse-level semantics of these tense uses, introducing the narrative discourse topics required (but not denoted) by said tense uses. Reinterpreting diachronic claims in (Caudal 2015), I will suggest that perfectivisation process (**b**) was completed for SOE uses of the PC by the pre-Modern French period, when they became capable of introducing (= existentially binding) a narrative discourse topic, thereby becoming fully-fledged perfective tense uses.

Finally, coming back to perfectivization process (**a**), and exploiting earlier empirical observations (Bres 2005: 126; Treikelder 2006: 75; Caudal 2015; Caudal 2020) that SOE uses of the IMPF / (Old French) PC could associate with past perfective adverbials (e.g. *pendant* (‘for’) + fixed duration), I will suggest that the non-discursive aspectual semantics of these SOE uses was already perfectivized, i.e. that the logical forms associated with these uses involve a perfective aspectual viewpoint function (vs. an imperfective viewpoint function for non-SOE uses of the PC/IMPF). In a nutshell, I will claim that SOE uses of the Old French PC and Modern French IMPF were already perfectivized w.r.t. their sentence-level aspectual semantics, but not their discourse-level semantics, where they retained imperfective features (anaphoricity). It seems to me that this might explain the abundance of conflicting opinions in the literature as to their aspectual sense: although no longer really imperfective, they were not fully perfective yet – an aspectually hybrid, highly discourse-sensitive type of tense meaning.

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