

## Imperfectivity as progressivity. The French *imparfait*

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### 1 Introduction

① Intuitive notion of imperfectivity: internal viewpoint  $\approx$  the interior region of a state/event is considered.

② Two ways of marking imperfectivity in French. Periphrastic construction *être en train de* (lit. to be in the process of) or *imparfait* tense (a past tense).

- (1) a. *Marie est en train de courir*  
Mary is in the process of run-IMP  
(Mary is running)
- b. *Marie courait*  
Mary run-IMP  
(Mary was running)

③ Like the progressive, *être en train de* is incompatible with some states: *Mary is ??being parked in the street*, *Marie est ??en train d'être garée dans la rue*. Unlike the progressive, *être en train de* is restricted to the present and to the *imparfait* (marginally possible with future though<sup>1</sup>).

④ Two broad senses of 'aspect': aspectual viewpoint or aspectual class (*aktionsart*). Smith's (1991) approach: *imparfait* = imperfectivity + past, similar to (Guillaume, 1929).

- (2) **IMP** (first version)  
A sentence S in the *imparfait* denotes any past interior region (the subeventuality) of an eventuality (the main eventuality) described by S.

<sup>1</sup>Sentences like (a) are odd, in contrast with their English counterpart (a'). Sentences like (b) are more natural.

- a. Est-ce que tu seras ??en train de sortir ce soir?  
b. Will you be going out tonight?  
c. Demain, à cette heure-ci, il sera en train d'atterrir  
(Tomorrow, at this time, he will be landing)

Problems with (2)

- a. the def. is loose. Interior region = proper part or not? Must the part have the same type as the main eventuality, in what sense of 'type'?
- b. De Swart (1998) challenges the claim that the *imparfait* is neutral with respect to aspectual classes.
- c. Some constraints on *imparfait* noted in the literature (habitual reading, property-sensitivity, anaphor-like behavior) are not explained by (2).
- d. Does not account for the non-imperfective so-called *imparfait narratif* illustrated in (3).

- (3) a. *A huit heures Jean pénétrait dans mon bureau*  
At eight John entered my office

⑤ claim of the talk: Smith's proposal is on the right track but must be amended on some points.

1. Smith is right because: IF one takes into account recent approaches to the progressive and makes her definition tighter (point a), the *imparfait* has nothing special concerning aspectual types (point b). Some apparent counterexamples can be explained by progressivity.
2. Special values of the *imparfait* (point c) can be ascribed to semantic elaborations of the basic progressive value.
3. The *imparfait narratif* corresponds to the relaxation of a constraint on progressivity. The interior region need not be a *proper* part of the main eventuality.

Ignored uses: politeness *imparfait*, *imparfait* in conditional structures, etc.

### 2 Smith's analysis endangered

① Basic observation: *imparfait* possible with activities as in (4-a), but not always with true accomplishments or semelfactives/points (achievements without preparatory phase) unless they are iterative (4-c).

- (4) a. *Quand je suis arrivé dans le jardin, Marie lisait*  
(When I arrived in the garden, Mary was reading)
- b. *Quand je suis arrivé dans le jardin, Marie ??lisait le livre*  
When I arrived in the garden, Mary read-IMP the book  
*jusqu'au bout*  
to the end  
(When I arrived in the garden, Mary was reading the book completely through)
- c. *Quand je suis arrivé dans le jardin, Marie iter or ??sursautait*

(When I arrived in the garden, Mary started)

Such observations are consonant with De Swart's (1998) proposal, that the imparfait 'denotes states or processes' (1998:368) which have homogeneous (vs quantized reference).

$P$  is quantized iff, when  $P(o)$  and  $o' \sqsubset o$ ,  $\neg P(o')$  (cf. Krifka 1992, 1995, 1998). De Swart's proposal accounts for (4-b) and (4-c).

No proper part of a true accomplishment has the same type as its parent. Hence the oddity of (4-b).

Points have no part at all. Hence the oddity of (4-c).

② However, there are perfectly quantized constructs with which imparfait is appropriate.

- (5) a. *Marie a mangé la tarte ??pendant/en dix minutes*  
 Mary ate the pie for/in ten minutes  
 (Mary ate the pie for/in ten minutes)
- b. *Quand je suis arrivé, Marie mangeait la tarte*  
 When I arrived, Mary eat-IMP the pie  
 (When I arrived, Mary was eating the pie)
- (6) a. *Ils ont refait l'autoroute ??pendant/en huit mois*  
 They did up the highway for/in eight months
- b. *Quand je suis arrivé dans la ville, ils refaisaient l'autoroute*  
 When I arrived in the city, they [do up]-IMP the highway  
 (When I arrived in the city, they were doing up the highway)
- (7) a. *Caleb Carr a écrit L'Aliéniste ??pendant/en deux ans*  
 Caleb Carr wrote The Alienist for/in two years
- b. *Quand j'ai rencontré Caleb Carr, il écrivait l'Aliéniste*  
 When I met Caleb Carr, he write-IMP The Alienist  
 (When I met Caleb Carr, he was writing the Alienist)
- (8) a. *Marie a fait le tour du lac iter or ??pendant/en une heure*  
 Mary made the tour of the lake for/in one hour  
 (Mary walked round the lake for/in one hour)
- b. *Quand je l'ai rencontrée, Marie faisait le tour du lac*  
 (When I met her, Mary was walking round the lake)

E.g., in (7), if  $e$  is a subevent of the global event  $e'$  of Caleb Carr writing the Alienist,  $e$  does not entail that the Alienist has been written by Caleb Carr, while  $e'$  does (Kenny's observation).

③ De Swart's possible answer: coercion. If the imparfait demands states or processes, it coerces quantized eventualities into states or processes. This raises two questions.

– What independent evidence have we for the aspectual sensitivity of the imparfait, if we can resort to coercion?

– Does coercion make the right predictions? Problems with sentences like *Marie marchait ??pendant deux heures*: no process reading emerges (even in a conditional structure) and the sentence is habitual or strange.

De Swart's claim is too strong but draws attention to some weaknesses of imperfectivity-based theories.

### 3 Progressivity

① Capitalizing on the recent literature on the progressive (Dowty 1979, Asher 1992, Landman 1992, Glasbey 1996, Naumann & Piñon 1997, Bonomi 1997). Three factors influence the use of the progressive.

1. Mereology. The event in progress is a part of a global event.
  2. Perspective. The event in progress is related to the global event from a certain perspective (possibly different from that of the speaker).
  3. Inference. The setting/nature of the eventuality in progress makes it probable that it will go on until the global eventuality takes place.
- Roughly, the dominant intuition emerging from the literature is (9)

#### (9) Progressivity

Ingredients:  $e$  a subeventuality,  $e'$  the main eventuality,  $a$  the speaker,  $b$  the agent of  $e'$ .

A sentence  $S$  in the progressive form is appropriate only if, under some salient perspective  $\pi$  (generally that of the speaker  $a$  or of  $b$ ), it refers to an eventuality (subeventuality)  $e$  which is bound to culminate/continue into a main eventuality  $e'$  of the type described by  $S$  and  $e$  is a proper part of  $e'$ .

I see Mary walking  $\Rightarrow$  *Mary is walking*.  $e \sqsubseteq e'$  from my perspective and probably from Mary's one.

I see Mary walking on the track to the beach  $\Rightarrow$  *Mary is going to the beach*. From my perspective at least, Mary will reach the beach.

I see Mary walking on the track to the beach  $\Rightarrow$  *Mary is going to the beach, but she'll have to stop before*. From Mary's perspective, she is going to the beach, but I know that there is some hindrance.

I see Mary walking on the track to the beach  $\not\Rightarrow$  *Mary is swimming*. Even if, from my perspective and Mary's, Mary is bound to swim, walking is not a

part of swimming.

② How to account for examples like (4-b) which seemingly support de Swart's claim? Two different cases.

1. Some sentences are anomalous because the perspective  $\pi$  does not allow one to make a reasonable guess, contrary to def. (9). See Ogihara's example (quoted by Glasbey, 1996).

(10) Mary is drinking <sup>??</sup>three glasses of beer

If I see Mary drinking a glass of beer, I may not infer what she has already drunk or what she is likely to drink (other glasses of beer, orange juice, etc.). The sentence is better if one assumes that Mary intends to drink three glasses of beer. (11-a) also is better under an intentional interpretation.

(11) a. *Quand je l' ai aperçue, Marie marchait <sup>??</sup>jusqu'à la plage*  
When I her spotted, Mary walk-imp as far as the beach  
(When I spotted her, Mary was walking as far as the beach)

I see Mary walking  $\Rightarrow$  under certain conditions I may infer that she's going to the beach.

I see Mary walking  $\nRightarrow$  I infer she is walking to the limit of the beach (which corresponds to the sense of *jusqu'à* in French). Either Mary is going to the beach and I say *Marie allait à la plage* (Mary was going to the beach) or I know that, for some reason, she intends to walk to the limit of the beach.

Similar observations for temporal indications, limits and distances. The difference between the imparfait and the past progressive, if any, is extremely thin.

*When I arrived, Mary was reading the book <sup>??</sup>completely through*

*When I spotted her, Mary was walking <sup>??</sup>for two hours / <sup>??</sup>as far as the beach / <sup>??</sup>from 3 to 4 / <sup>??</sup>(for) two kilometers.*

*When I spotted her, Mary was reaching the beach <sup>??</sup>in five minutes.*

Parallel odd sentences in French with the imparfait.

2. For (at least) some speakers, a sentence like (11-b) cannot be redeemed by intentionality

(11) b. *Quand j'ai aperçu Marie, elle marchait <sup>??</sup>pendant deux heures, comme chaque samedi*  
(When I spotted Mary, she was walking <sup>??</sup>for two hours, as every Saturday)

③ Streamlining the facts.

In the two cases, the inference from the subeventuality to the main one is difficult.

The perspective  $\pi$  is a set of propositions from which the culmination of  $e$  into  $e'$  must be deduced, as in Attardi & Simi (1994, 1998):  $in(p, \pi) = p$  is true in (or derivable from) the perspective  $\pi$ , where  $\pi$  is a set of expressions.  $\pi$  can be partitioned into a set of direct observations  $R$  (reminiscent of Reichenbach's reference point) and independent knowledge  $K$  (facts + common sense rules).

Glasbey's (1996) analysis: common sense constraints  $\phi \Rightarrow \psi$ , where  $\phi$  and  $\psi$  are situation types.

In case 1, the observations can be matched with common sense constraints:  
WALKING  $\Rightarrow$  GOING SOMEWHERE

CONSUMING  $\Rightarrow$  CONSUMING A CERTAIN AMOUNT

These constraints describe the default aim/culmination of certain behaviours. But WALKING  $\nRightarrow$  WALKING FOR A CERTAIN TIME.

This is the difference between measuring out (Tenny, Jackendoff) and external boundedness.<sup>2</sup>

(12) **Observation Relevance**

Let  $\pi = R \cup K$ , then, for a progressive form or an imparfait,  $in(p, \pi)$  only if  $p$  is derived by matching  $R$  with constraints in  $K$ .

OR means that the observation must orient the inference and be somehow relevant to it.<sup>3</sup>

⑥ The imparfait and the past/present progressive have a simultaneity flavor. The viewpoint is not only on the interior region but is temporally parallel to the facts of the perspective.

Can be captured by adapting Reichenbach's reference point to the perspective-based approach. Difference between what an agent *knows* and what she *observes*.

The simultaneity is reflected by assuming that the subeventuality  $e$  is in  $R$  (the agent observes it) and that  $R$  does not extend temporally beyond  $e$  (it would not be a genuine reference point otherwise).

The imparfait is 'prone' to habitual readings. Observations entail persistence (inference would be blocked otherwise). If  $p$  is a proposition observed

<sup>2</sup>A difference curiously ignored in Depraetere (1995), who considers sentences of the form + duration type as telic.

<sup>3</sup>What about *Yesterday, Mary was painting all day* or *Mary had a wonderful afternoon. She was jogging for two hours*? They are not 'semantically' progressive. Must one put them in the same category as the imparfait narratif?

by  $a$ ,  $p$  is true ‘everywhere’ in the situation. Two possibilities.

Matter of fact observations, the observation window is narrow and the agent observes episodic facts.

The observation window is wide. The agent may observe tendencies.  $p$  is not strictly true everywhere in the situation. Rather, the situation is of type  $p$  (genericity, habituality, frequency, etc.).

The size of the observation window is the temporal span of  $R$ .

⑦ The definition takes into accounts OR, parallelism and the size of the observation window.

#### (13) IMP

A sentence  $S$  in the imparfait is appropriate w.r.t. a triple  $\langle a, (R, K), e \rangle$ , where  $a$  is an agent,  $(R, K)$  a perspective of  $a$  and  $e$  an eventuality such that:

- a.  $S$  refers to  $e$ ,
- b.  $(R, K)$  supports the culmination/continuation of  $e$  into  $e'$ ,  $C(e, e')$  and respects OR,
- c.  $e'$  is of the type described by  $S$ ,
- d.  $C(e, e') \notin R \cup K$ , and
- e.  $e \in R$  and the temporal size of  $R$  is that of  $e$  (Reichenbach condition).

Note that, if we assume that the progressive prefers *narrow* observations windows, habitual sentences should be marked: *He was borrowing money* should be episodic, *Il empruntait de l'argent* can be episodic or habitual.

*He was continually borrowing money* = *Il était tout le temps en train d'emprunter de l'argent*.

Structure: PAST(Q-ADVERB(PROG(he borrow money)))

#### 4 Special (?) properties of the imparfait

① Property-sensitivity. According to Ducrot (1979), the imparfait characterizes whole periods (short or long) and expresses a characteristic property.

- (14) a. *Cette année-là, Anne jouait souvent du piano*  
(That year, Ann often played the piano)
- b. *Cette année-là, Anne jouait du piano ??deux fois*  
(That year, Ann played the piano twice)

‘To play the piano twice’ cannot characterize a one year period (see also de Swart (1991) on the ‘mass-like’ nature of the imparfait). True, but it follows also from the simultaneity requirement:  $R$  (‘that year’) presumably

extends over the two episodes of Ann playing the piano. Same problem with *Ann is playing the piano ??twice*. Either Ann is playing on two pianos in parallel or she is playing and the agent unduly infers that she is going to play twice (Mary’s three glasses of beer, etc.) or the agent’s observation window extends beyond the two episodes of Ann playing the piano.

#### ② Anaphoricity.

French linguists emphasized the so-called *anaphoricité* of the imparfait: the imparfait is less natural than the passé composé or the passé simple when there is no salient temporal reference point.

- (15) a. *Marie ?ouvrait la porte*  
Mary open-IMP the door
- b. *Marie a ouvert/ouvrit la porte*  
Mary open-P.C./P.S. the door

A natural question with (15-a) is *When?*. But the anaphoricity property was also noted for the progressive form by Smith (1991:90). Selecting the interior region only makes sense when this region is temporally anchored (via the context, if only), maybe because there is an infinite number of possibilities (where is the subeventuality inside the main eventuality?).

#### 5 The imparfait narratif

① Ever since Guillaume, a stumbling block for imperfective theories of the imparfait.

3 main properties.

1. Denotes the main eventuality and not a proper part of it. For activities, it means that we observe the activity from the beginning to the end.

- (16) *A huit heures, les voleurs entraient dans la banque. Ils discutaient avec un employé puis se dirigeaient vers le guichet principal*  
(At eight, the robbers entered the bank. They discussed with a clerk, then they moved towards the main desk).

The observation spans the whole discussion and the whole movement.

2. As in narratives, states are not possible if they describe episodes.

- (17) *A huit heures, les voleurs entraient dans la banque. #Ils étaient nerveux et se dirigeaient vers le guichet principal*  
(At eight, the robbers entered the bank, they were nervous and moved towards the main desk)

Ok if ‘they were nervous’ describes the robber’s state of mind (a psycho-

logical background) and is not considered as a distinct episode of the narrative.

3. There is a special flavor of simultaneity: things are described ‘as they happen’, by a fictitious ‘direct witness’, etc.

② This suggests that the imparfait narratif is a *blend* in the sense of Fauconnier & Turner. It partially inherits from two mutually inconsistent sets of constraints.<sup>4</sup>

Constraints of narratives: no states in the foreground, default interpretation = sequence of complete events, etc. vs constraints in (13). Potential contradiction: the imparfait narratif describes complete events, so  $C(e, e') \in R$ , contrary to (d) of (13).

Necker cube effect: w.r.t. the (im)proper part criterion, the imparfait narratif is not an imparfait, in the sense of (13), w.r.t. the observation criterion, the imparfait narratif remains an imparfait and has the simultaneity flavor of the imparfait.

imparfait narratif  $\neq$  passé composé or passé simple. The difference can be explained in terms of Figure/Ground (Talmy 1978, Polinsky 1996).

	Imparfait	Passé Simple	Passé Composé
FIGURE	$e'$ (at $R < S$ )	$e$ (at $R < S$ )	$e (< R, R \circ S)$
GROUND	{ <u>          </u> $e$ <u>          </u> }	{ $e_1$ ... $e_n$ }	{ $e_1$ ... $e_n$ }

Contemporaneity or *in medias res* effect of the imparfait narratif comes from this basic configuration:  $R$  is viewed as spanning  $e$  or  $e'$ , not as pointing to an element of a set of eventualities (see Anscombe 1992 on the distinction between imparfait and passé composé).

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<sup>4</sup>If we arrange subsets of constraints into a hierarchy to preserve consistency, we have rather an example of a *mixed category* in the sense of Malouf (1998).

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