

**CAN THERE BE A NONTEMPORAL DEFINITION OF
THE FRENCH *IMPARFAIT*?
A “NETWORK” APPROACH**

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0. Introduction

Traditional approaches to the French *imparfait* define it either as a past tense or as a tense signaling nonactuality. The aim of this paper is to show that this discussion can be solved if it is accepted that the meanings of the *imparfait* form a “network” (Langacker 1990). In such an approach, the use of the *imparfait* to express past-time reference constitutes its prototype, and the idea of nonactuality, duly defined, renders the schematic meaning of this tense.

In the present paper, I will first present the classical terms of the debate on the basic meaning of the *imparfait* and introduce a “psychological” definition of the tense, which can be reformulated in terms of mental spaces (Fauconnier 1984), following a hypothesis first proposed for the Spanish imperfective past tense or *pretérito imperfecto* by Doiz-Bienzobas (1995, 2002). According to this definition, the *imparfait* signals that the expressed situation must be represented as ongoing in a mental space different from the one associated with the speaker’s here-and-now. But if the meaning of the *imparfait* is defined in this way, it remains to be explained why most speakers do see it as a past tense. Consequently, I will propose that the meaning of the *imparfait* is to be presented as a network, where the past meaning represents its prototypical, central meaning, and the nontemporal meaning defined above is the schematic meaning.

I will argue that such a representation can integrate the values that are traditionally attributed to the *imparfait*: its imperfective aspect and its anaphoricity. I will moreover show how the different uses of the *imparfait* can be derived either from the prototypical past meaning or from the schematic meaning. But before doing so, I will first recapitulate the classic debate: is the *imparfait* fundamentally a past tense or not?

1. *The classic debate*

According to most classical grammarians, the French *imparfait* has past-time reference, as illustrated by example (1):

- (1) *Comme le soir tombait, l'homme sombre arriva.*
 'As the evening fell, the somber man came in.' (Grevisse 1993, § 851)

However, Damourette & Pichon (1911–1936, V: 174–256) have pointed out that in many of its uses, the *imparfait* does *not* refer to a past situation:

- (i) In indirect discourse, the *imparfait* can refer to present (2¹) or future (3) situations:
- (2) *Vous avez dit que j'étais là?*
 'Did you say that I was here?' (Courteline, *Coco, Coco et Toto*, "M. Félix", as cited by Damourette & Pichon 1911–1936, V: 176)

The subordinate clause in the *imparfait* refers to a present situation: the speaker addresses his maid when he is still at home and Mr. Félix, the visitor with whom the maid has spoken, is still waiting in the next room (Damourette & Pichon 1911–1936, V: 176).

- (3) *Qu'est-ce qu'elle a dit qu'on mangeait demain, Jeanne?*
 'What did Jeanne say that we eat tomorrow?' ("M. P", 23 September 1929, as cited by Damourette & Pichon 1911–1936: 176)

The action of eating is situated in the future, but the speaker can only know what she will eat through the indications given by Jeanne (Damourette & Pichon 1911–1936, V: 176). In both (2) and (3), the tense of the subordinate clause is not related to the moment of speaking, but to a reference point associated with the verb of the main sentence.

- (ii) In conditionals, the *imparfait* does not have past reference:

- (4) a. *Si Jean venait, je m'en irais.*
 'If John came, I would leave.'

¹ In indirect discourse, the *imparfait* can also occur in so-called eternal propositions that include the present moment: *Galilée soutint que la terre tournait autour du soleil* 'Galilei held that the Earth turned around the Sun' (Wilmet 1997: 384).

- b. *S'il y avait un Dieu, il te récompenserait.*
'If there were a God, he would reward you.'
- c. *Si Louis était venu, je l'aurais reçu.*
'If Louis had come, I would have received him.'

According to Damourette & Pichon (1911–1936, V: 238), the use of the *imparfait* rather has the effect of locating the situation in a universe other than the speaker's (and hearer's) here-and-now: in (4)a John's coming is presented as only possible upon a drastic change in the expected course of events; in (4)b the situation is presented as "erroneous"; in (4)c Louis could not have come without the speaker receiving him.

- (iii) As was first signaled by Brun-Laloin (1929), the *imparfait* is frequently used to refer to a present reality when speaking to children or pets. This is called the "hypocoristic" use of the *imparfait* (*imparfait hypocoristique*):

- (5) a. *Il faisait de grosses misères à sa maman, le vilain garçon.*
'He is really nasty to his mother, the naughty boy.'
(Damourette & Pichon 1911–1936, V: 241)
- b. *Il faisait chaud, Coco, près du feu?*
'Is it warm, Coco, by the fire?'
(Damourette & Pichon 1911–1936, V: 242)

In these utterances, the *imparfait* signals that the speaker does not fully endorse her own words and adopts a point of view which is not hers, for instance that of the children involved (Damourette & Pichon 1911–1936, V: 241–242).

Uses such as these lead Damourette & Pichon (1911–1936, V: 177) to conclude that the basic meaning of the *imparfait* is not to be defined in terms of past-time reference. In their view, its function is to locate the situation expressed by the verb in an "actuality" other than that of the speaker at the moment of speaking. The speaker most naturally construes the world and its events from an "egocentric" point of view, her own "here-and-now" (*moi-ici-maintenant*). The *imparfait*, however, signals that the events are presented from a point of view different from the here-and-now of the speaker:

Ce qu'il faut retenir, parce que cela va être le caractère commun de tous les emplois du toncal pur [Damourette & Pichon's term for the *imparfait*, as opposed to the present or *noncal*], c'est que ce tiroir marque ici le placement du fait verbal dans une

autre sphère d'action, une autre *actualité*, que celle où se trouve le locuteur au moment de la parole. La position naturelle et fondamentale de l'esprit, c'est de centrer le monde des phénomènes sur le locuteur se concevant lui-même dans l'instant présent: le "moi-ici-maintenant". Ce mode d'aperceance des phénomènes constitue l'actualité noncale. Toutes les fois, au contraire, que l'esprit fait l'effort de se reporter dans un monde phénoménal autrement centré, on est dans une actualité toncale, et il apparaît dans la phrase soit le *saviez*, soit, selon les nuances nécessaires, le tiroir toncal approprié. (Damourette & Pichon 1911–1936, V: 177; emphasis in original)

[What needs to be remembered, as it will be the common element of all the uses of the pure *toncal*, is that this tense here marks the location of the verbal fact in another sphere of action, another *actuality*, than the one where the speaker is at the moment of speaking. The natural and fundamental position of the mind is to center the world of phenomena around the speaker, who conceives herself in the present moment: the "I-here-now". This way of perceiving phenomena constitutes *noncal* actuality. In contrast, every time the speaker makes an effort to transfer herself into a phenomenal world centered in another way, one is located in a *toncal* actuality, and either the *saviez* [the *imparfait*] or another appropriate *toncal* tense appears.]²

The past value of the *imparfait*, then, is but a consequence of this "toncal" value: situating states and events in the past is one way of situating them in an actuality other than the speaker's here-and-now (Damourette & Pichon 1911–1936, V: 203). Because of the close relationship between its "toncal" and past values, however, the *imparfait* presents the past situation in a specific way:

1) It expresses duration (Damourette & Pichon 1911–1936, V: 208), because the situations are seen as actually ongoing³, but from a center of apperception (*aperceance*, Damourette & Pichon 1911–1936, V: 177)⁴ which is not the

² For comparable approaches, see, e.g., Cornu (1953), Coseriu (1976, 1980), Herslund (1987), Le Goffic (1986, 1995), and Touratier (1996, 1998).

³ Note that Damourette and Pichon do not hold that the *imparfait* expresses inactuality, as does Touratier (1996: 108–109), who uses the term "inactuel" to characterize the *imparfait*. According to Damourette and Pichon, though, the *imparfait* presents the events as actual, which means that they are presented as "unfolding", as having an "actual", "vivid" duration, just as with the present tense.

⁴ It can be seen in examples (2)–(3) that this apperception can sometimes be attributed to a "substance" or a "protagonist", as in indirect discourse, where this protagonist is frequently the subject of the main verb (Damourette & Pichon 1911–1936, V: 195). This also explains why the *imparfait* can be used in Free Indirect Discourse (Damourette & Pichon 1911–1936, V: 226–229) or to express perspective or viewpoint.

present one of the speaker: the center of apperception is now moved to the past. The actuality value of the *imparfait* also explains why the center of apperception is always moved to the past: events can only have an actual duration in the present or in recollection, when one remembers past events. By definition, future events can only have imagined duration (Damourette & Pichon 1911–1936, V: 206).⁵

2) It frequently signals a real separation from the present reality, as is illustrated by (6):

- (6) *Elle avait des yeux bleus que votre mari n'avait pas.*
'She had blue eyes that your husband did not have.'
(Damourette & Pichon 1911–1936, V: 223)

As the authors point out, the husband of the addressee is not dead, but the speaker considers him to be a person of the past, since he has divorced from her and she will never see him again.

In addition to the usage types distinguished by Damourette and Pichon, their theory can also explain other uses of the *imparfait* that seem to locate the situations referred to in an actuality other than the speaker's here-and-now:

⁵ Damourette & Pichon (1911–1936, V: 206):

[...] le passé et l'avenir, au point de vue psychologique, ne sont nullement symétriques. Le passé a eu une vie. Il a laissé des traces. On peut par le souvenir se reporter à lui et en retrouver en quelque sorte la durée actuelle. Dans l'avenir, au contraire, un pareil transport n'est possible que par l'imagination.

[The past and the future, from a psychological point of view, are by no means symmetrical. The past has had a life. It has left traces. One can transfer oneself to it through memory and recover, in a way, its actual duration. In the future, however, such a transfer is only possible by means of the imagination.]

The authors thus respond to an objection that is frequently formulated against their theory (cf., e.g., Gosselin 1999b: 31–32): if the *imparfait* locates the situation in an actuality other than that of the speaker, why would this other actuality have to be located in the past rather than the future?

- (iv) The “pretend game” *imparfait* (*imparfait préludique*):
- (7) *Moi, j’**étais** le gendarme et tu avais volé une voiture.*
‘I was the cop and you had stolen a car.’ (Grevisse 1993: § 851)
- (v) The *imparfait* expressing a desire or a wish:
- (8) *Ah, si j’**avais** une fortune!*
‘Oh, if I only had a fortune!’
(Arrivé, Gadet & Galmiche 1986, as cited by Vetters 2001: 183)
- (vi) The *imparfait* of “thwarted imminence” (*imminence contrecar-rée*):
- (9) *Elle mit la main sur le loquet ... un pas de plus, elle **était** dans la rue.*
- *Sergeant, cria-t-il, ne voyez-vous pas que cette drôlesse s’en va?*
‘She put her hand on the latch ... one step further, and she was on the street.
- Sergeant, he shouted, don’t you see that this hussy is leaving?’
(V. Hugo, as cited by Vetters 2001: 182)

2. *A cognitive analysis*

The analysis of Damourette & Pichon (1911–1936, V) can also be interpreted in cognitive terms.⁶ According to Langacker (1995, 1999, 2002), the conceptualization of a situation has a structure that largely resembles that of a viewing situation. In the canonical viewing situation (Figure 1), the viewer (V) has a maximal field of vision (represented by the outer rectangle), which contains a locus of attention called the viewing frame (represented by the dotted lines), comprising in its focus the situation (=perceived entity P) that is the target of perception.

⁶ For a more detailed presentation of this parallelism, see De Mulder & Vetters (2002) and De Mulder (2003).

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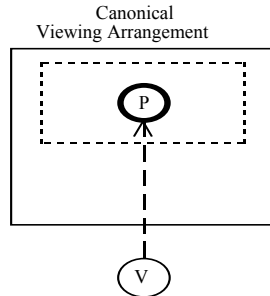


Figure 1. Canonical viewing arrangement (Langacker 2002: 16)

Doiz-Bienzobas (1995, 2002: 305) uses this schema to represent the meaning of the Spanish imperfect or *pretérito imperfecto*. In her view, this tense is not a past-time marker: whereas the Spanish preterit indicates distance of the situation with respect to the speech event, the imperfect indicates distance of the conceptualizer of the situation with respect to the ground, that is, the speech event, its participants, and its immediate circumstances (Doiz-Bienzobas 2002: 302, 304). In her own words:

Situations with the [Spanish] imperfect are conceptualized by a viewpoint which is *distal* or removed with respect to the ground. That is, the imperfect imposes a *past* viewpoint onto the situation it designates. Generally, the past viewpoint is located *at* the situation time or at a time *prior to* situation time, as represented in Figure [2]:

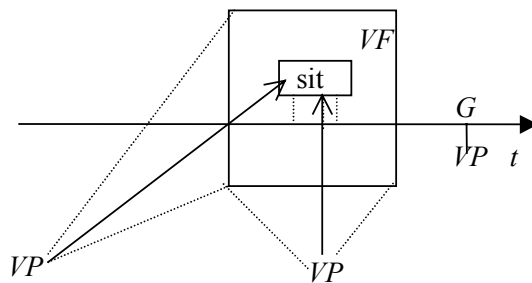


Figure 2. The imperfect and distal viewpoint (Doiz-Bienzobas 2002: 305–306)
(G = ground; VF = viewing frame; sit = situation; VP = viewpoint)

This analysis can be illustrated by the following two examples:

- (10) a. (*Este era el día de mi boda.*) ¡Este día era el día más feliz de mi vida!
'(This was the day of my wedding.) This day was the happiest day of my life!'

In this example (Doiz-Bienzobas 2002: 310), the speaker or conceptualizer describes her feelings on her wedding day as she felt them at that point in the past. The coincidence of the situation with the past viewpoint (or moment of conceptualization) is expressed by the demonstrative. The following example is intended by Doiz-Bienzobas as an illustration of a case where the past viewpoint is prior to the expressed situation:

- b. *Al año siguiente **había** fiestas, pero debido a la lluvia se cancelaron.*
 ‘The following year some festivities were going to take place, but due to the rain they were canceled.’

This is illustrated by Figure 3:

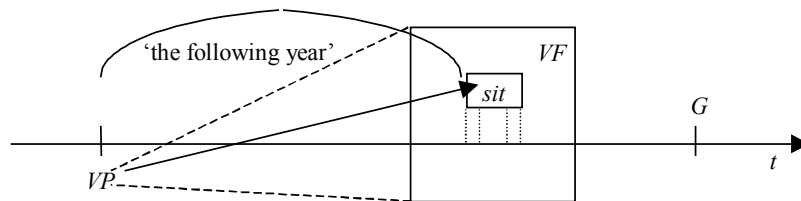


Figure 3. Example (10)b (Doiz-Bienzobas 2002: 309)

Doiz-Bienzobas’ analysis of the Spanish imperfect is largely parallel to Damourette and Pichon’s proposals concerning the French *imparfait*: stating that the *imparfait* signals that the situation is located in an actuality that is not centered around the speaker’s here-and-now, but around some other here-and-now, does not seem very different from stating that the *imparfait* evokes a viewpoint that is not the speaker’s, but that coincides with the situation expressed by the sentence in the *imparfait*. The analysis is confirmed, amongst other things, by the fact that the *imparfait* can be combined with deictic expressions such as *maintenant* ‘now’, whereas this is impossible with the French preterit or *passé simple*, as shown by the following examples (Banfield 1982: 240, 233):

- (11) a. *Elle voyait la lune maintenant.*
 ‘She saw the moon now.’

- b. *A Jules Verne, trop pondéré, je préférâi (*maintenant) les extravagances de Paul d'Ivoi.*
'To Jules Verne, too balanced, I preferred (*now) the eccentricities of Paul d'Ivoi.'

Moreover, Banfield (1982: 240) points out that (11)a has a different interpretation from (11)c:

- c. *Elle vit la lune.*
'She saw the moon.'

(11)c and (11)a describe the same situation, but (11)c presents it objectively, whereas (11)a construes it as a representation of someone's lived experience.⁷ The *imparfait* thus suggests that the situation is seen/conceptualized from a viewpoint which coincides with the conceptualized situation.

However, in my view, as far as the French *imparfait* is concerned, the viewpoint does not precede the situation in a way that is comparable to Doiz-Bienzobas' analysis of the Spanish imperfect in (10)b. In an example such as (12), the adverbial expression *dix minutes après* determines the location of the point of view, which is, as it were, moved forward by the adverbial phrase and is thus simultaneous with the expressed situation:

- (12) *Paul tomba de la falaise. Dix minutes après, on le ramassait avec deux jambes fracturées.*
'Paul fell down from the rock. Ten minutes later, they picked him up with two broken legs.' (Berthonneau & Kleiber 1993: 64)

Moreover, I do not think that the viewpoint necessary to interpret the French *imparfait* is always situated in the past: this does not really seem plausible with respect to the uses of the *imparfait* expressing pretend play, thwarted imminence or wishes (see also Vettters 2001: 185). Consequently, I would

⁷ Using notions from Fleischman (1991), Doiz-Bienzobas (2002: 307) describes the difference between these sentences: "In [11c], where the *passé simple* (similar to the Spanish preterit) is used, the speaker is detached from the situation and reports its occurrence from an external point of view. There is an external 'narrating self'. In [11a], the use of the *imparfait* (similar to the Spanish imperfect) implies that the event of looking at the moon 'has been experienced at some moment, and reports it by representing an experience of it' (Fleischman 1991: 31). There is an 'experiencing self' which apprehends the situation from the past time in which it occurred, as reflected by the use of the adverb 'now' to refer to a past time."

propose that the French *imparfait* signals that the situation must be conceived as seen from a contextually given viewpoint or reference point⁸ other than the here-and-now of the speaker. This idea can also be expressed in terms of Fauconnier's theory of mental spaces.

Fauconnier (1984) holds that the interpretation of discourse involves the construction of a series of mental spaces and of relations between them. These mental spaces contain partial descriptions of the situations expressed by the discourse, representing the elements of these situations and the relations between them. They are built up in accordance with instructions conveyed by the linguistic expressions. The speaker's mental representation of reality, called the base space R, normally functions as the starting point for this incremental space construction. Particular expressions, called "space builders", signal that spaces other than R must be set up to interpret certain stretches of discourse: for instance, *Max believes...* sets up a belief space where the contents of the beliefs in question will be represented, prepositional phrases such as *in this photo* set up a space where the content of the photo will be represented, and adverbs such as *probably* or *possibly* set up a probability or possibility space (Doiz-Bienzobas 2002: 322). Thus, in interpreting discourse, we build different spaces in which the different elements in the discourse are interpreted. The meaning of the Spanish imperfect can then be formulated as follows:

The role of the imperfect is to render accessible a space M different from the speaker's reality space R for the interpretation of the proposition it modifies. (Doiz-Bienzobas 2002: 323)

In my view, this definition of the basic value of the Spanish imperfect can also be used for the French *imparfait*: the *imparfait* signals that the situation expressed is to be interpreted as actual, ongoing, in a mental space that is different from the base space, the space related to the speaker's here-and-now. This definition applies to the nontemporal uses of the *imparfait* presented above; but does it also apply to the temporal uses of that tense?

⁸ The exact relation between the viewpoint and the reference point remains to be determined: can the notion of reference point be seen as a schematization of that of viewpoint (cf. Van Hoek 1997)? For more details, see De Mulder (2003).

3. *What about the imparfait's past-time reference?*

It must still be explained why the *imparfait* is most frequently — and intuitively — defined as expressing past-time reference.⁹ As pointed out by Berthonneau & Kleiber (1994: 75), the normal interpretation of a sentence such as *Paul était intelligent* ‘Paul was intelligent’, is that Paul is no longer intelligent, unless there are good reasons to believe the contrary.¹⁰ As is suggested by the last part of their remark (“unless there are good reasons to believe the contrary”), Berthonneau and Kleiber believe that the *imparfait* marks past-time reference “by default”. In other terms, past-time reference is its most salient, prototypical value.¹¹ This confirms Langacker’s (1991: 244, 250) idea that the temporal meaning is the prototypical one for tenses that have both temporal and nontemporal meanings. I would suggest, then, that the temporal meaning of the *imparfait* is its prototypical meaning and that the other meanings are derived from it. This seems to be confirmed by two other apparently nonpast meanings of this tense, the commercial *imparfait* and the *imparfait* of politeness:

(vii) The “commercial” *imparfait* (*imparfait commercial* or *forain*):

(13) *Qu’est-ce qu’elle voulait, la petite dame?*

‘What does she like, the little lady?’

(Berthonneau & Kleiber 1994: 60)

(viii) The *imparfait* of “politeness” (*imparfait de politesse*):

(14) a. *Je voulais vous demander d’intercéder en ma faveur.*

‘I wanted to ask you to intervene on my behalf.’

b. *Je venais vous prier d’intercéder en ma faveur.*

‘I came to ask you to intervene on my behalf.’

(*Grammaire du français contemporain*, as cited by Vetters 2001: 182)

⁹ For Doiz-Bienzobas (2002), this is a consequence of the fact that the viewpoint is to be situated in the past; however, as pointed out above, this cannot be accepted without difficulty for the French *imparfait*.

¹⁰ Berthonneau and Kleiber refer to the analysis of *Il travaillait chez Renault* from Martin (1987: 132).

¹¹ On the relation between prototypes and default reasoning, see Kleiber (1990: 110–111).

At first sight, the commercial use (ex. 13) seems comparable to the hypocritical use cited above: the *imparfait* is used because the speaker, who expresses his consciousness of a past situation where his client manifested some desire, adopts at least partly the point of view of his client. In other terms, the utterance act is de-centered, from the speaker to his addressee (Lebaud 1991).¹² Berthonneau & Kleiber (1994: 66) point out the weakness of these types of analysis:

- the use of *il* instead of *tu* or *vous* can indeed express a distance, since the third person presents the addressee as a nonspeaker/interlocutor; however, it is not clear why this distancing would have to be interpreted as expressing respect rather than contempt;
- moreover, why would the self-effacing act of the speaker and the attribution of the role of “enunciator” to the addressee be a sign of politeness?
- finally, the idea that such questions imply that the speaker does not take responsibility for the utterance seems counterintuitive, especially when the speaker is a shopkeeper trying to sell some goods.¹³

In my view, the difficulties faced by nontemporal “de-centering” approaches are even greater in the case of the *imparfait* of politeness. Indeed, in these uses, the verb is in the first-person; the pronoun thus refers to the speaker and Berthonneau & Kleiber (1994: 66) are certainly right when they claim that

¹² These are Lebaud’s (1991: 68) own comments on a) *Et la dame, qu’est-ce qu’elle voulait?*, as cited by Berthonneau & Kleiber (1994: 65): “[...] le locuteur ne s’adresse pas directement à la dame, par la conjonction de la 3e personne et de l’*imparfait*, il s’efface en tant que sujet: *il* ne s’oppose pas à *je* et l’*imparfait* [...] marque une absence de prise en charge de son dire. Disons que a) correspond à un décentrage radical de l’énonciation, de l’énonciateur vers le co-énonciateur.” [The speaker does not directly address the lady; through the combination of the 3rd person and the *imparfait*, he effaces himself as subject. *He* does not contrast with *I*, and the *imparfait* marks the absence of the speaker’s responsibility for his own speaking. Let us say that a) corresponds to a radical decentering of the utterance act, from the utterer to the co-utterer.]

¹³ Berthonneau & Kleiber (1994: 66) also formulate a more general criticism: the meaning attributed to the *imparfait* by nontemporal approaches is so general that it also seems to apply to other tenses, such as the *plus-que-parfait* (past perfect) or the *conditionnel présent* (conditional present). This is of course a serious question, which we will have to take up again in due time. In the meantime, we refer the reader to the articles in Dendale & Tas-mowski-De Ryck (2001) and the references cited in that work.

the speaker does not transfer her responsibility to the addressee in these cases.

Berthonneau & Kleiber's (1994) own analysis of these uses is based on the idea that the *imparfait* has past-time reference. In its commercial use, it signals that the speaker returns to the situation where the lady in question was looking for some goods, thus manifesting her desire to buy something. The use of the third person seems natural in this interpretation, since in the past situation, the lady was not an addressee. But if the *imparfait* refers to a past situation, how can the sentence have present relevance in its final interpretation? The answer is that the *imparfait*, as explained above, expresses past-time reference by default: it is interpreted as referring to the past if there are no contrary indications in the context. But since the client still manifests her desire to buy something when the shopkeeper asks his question, there are in this case sufficient contextual indications to overrule the default interpretation. This analysis implies that the shopkeeper's question is presented in continuity with the past situation, where the lady was waiting to be served. Thus, the shopkeeper signals to the client that her presence had been noticed before, since he uses the signs manifesting her temporary halt to formulate his question. This explains why the *imparfait* is expressing politeness here, but it also implies, according to Berthonneau and Kleiber, that the *imparfait* is anaphoric: it construes the situation in continuity with another one, which was already salient, i.e., the client's waiting. This situation then functions as a kind of antecedent, a reference point, allowing the conceptualizer to locate the situation in the *imparfait* somewhere in time.

In their analysis of the politeness uses of the *imparfait*, Berthonneau & Kleiber (1994: 79–85) first point out that these are expressed by indirect speech acts: the speaker does not directly formulate a question but expresses her intention to do so (*vouloir*) or refers to the movement she is effectuating (*venir*). Both the intention and the movement expressed can be seen as preparatory conditions for the act of asking the question itself. In order to ask a question, one must have an intention to do so and be in the presence of one's addressee (who is indeed the goal of the movement in (14)b). Consequently, these utterances can be interpreted as indirect ways of asking a question and, as is well known, indirectness can be interpreted as a means to express politeness. This analysis implies that in this situation, too, the *imparfait* expresses reference to a past situation, where the speaker conceived of her intentions or effectuated a movement. However, in its final interpretation, the sentence in the *imparfait* is seen as referring to the present, since the speaker is present when she asks her question and since her past intentions and/or

movements are relevant with respect to this present situation. Moreover, the *imparfait* again functions in an anaphoric way, referring to a past situation that is accessible from the present: the one where the speaker arrives before her addressee and is perceived as having some desires or intentions. In fact, the speaker seems to respond to an implicit question from her addressee, concerning the reasons of her presence. Her indirect demand thus functions in fact as an answer and this could also contribute to the effect of politeness.

Berthonneau and Kleiber clearly show that an analysis of the nontemporal values of the *imparfait* is only possible if one combines different parameters: the temporal value of the tense and elements of the context.¹⁴ Thus, they rightly reject, in my view, analyses that hold in general that politeness or attenuation values are due to a general metaphor that reinterprets temporal distance in terms of social distance.¹⁵ In French, such analyses are problematic because other past tenses do not have the same politeness effect. The *passé simple*, for instance, refers to past situations that are presented as separated from the speech point. This is why it cannot be combined with expressions referring to the moment of speaking or suggesting a relation between the past event and the moment of speaking:

- (15)a. ?? *Hier, ma voiture tomba en panne.* ‘Yesterday, my car broke down.’
 b. ?? *Avant-hier, une amie arriva de Lyon.* ‘The day before yesterday, a friend arrived from Lyon.’
 c. * *Tout à l’heure, il neigea.* ‘A moment ago, it was snowing.’
 d. ?? *Il y a deux heures, le facteur sonna.* ‘Two hours ago, the postman rang.’
 e. * *Il vécut en Afrique depuis des années.* ‘He lived in Africa since ages.’
 (Leeman-Bouix 1994: 157–158)

¹⁴ One of the many virtues of Berthonneau and Kleiber’s very detailed analyses is indeed that they show that one cannot say in general that the *imparfait* expresses politeness. As they point out themselves, it is not sufficient to change the tense of *je vous demande un service* ‘I am asking for your assistance’ into the *imparfait* to obtain an effect of politeness: *je vous demandais un service* ‘I asked for your assistance’ is not necessarily polite.

¹⁵ For this approach and more references, see e.g. Fleischman (1989) and, for French, e.g., Imbs (1960: 97) and Wilmet (1987: 172). For a systematic criticism, see Brisard (1999).

Since the *passé simple* marks the removal of an event into the past, it should be apt to express the modal values attributed to the distance metaphor. However, this is not the case: the *passé simple* does not have any modal values and is not used to express politeness.

This observation could be taken to suggest that the element that distinguishes the *imparfait* from the *passé simple* also lies at the basis of the former's nontemporal values. Most traditional approaches hold that the difference between the two tenses must be formulated in aspectual terms. The *imparfait* expresses imperfective aspect: the situation is presented from inside, as ongoing, without any boundaries. The *passé simple* expresses perfective aspect: it presents the situation referred to from outside, including its boundaries, as a complete whole. That the *imparfait* expresses imperfective aspect is established by the fact that its combination with telic situations, which imply by themselves an endpoint, gives rise to reinterpretations of these "bounded" situations that make them "unbounded". This phenomenon has been described recently by Vet (1994: 8-9) in his analysis of examples like (16), (17), and (18):¹⁶

- | | | |
|------|--|------------------------|
| (16) | <i>Son arrivée surprenait Pierre.</i> | |
| | ‘His arrival surprised Peter.’ | (telic/achievement) |
| (17) | <i>Marie atteignait le sommet.</i> | |
| | ‘Mary reached the top.’ | (telic/achievement) |
| (18) | <i>Jean plantait un arbre.</i> | |
| | ‘John was planting a tree.’ | (telic/accomplishment) |
| | (Vet 1994: 8) | |

According to Vet (1994: 9), the achievement in (16) is reinterpreted as referring to the state resulting from the transition expressed by the verb, and the achievement in (17) as well as the accomplishment in (18) are reinterpreted as referring to the processes that take place before the transitions expressed by the predicates.

Does the aspectual difference between the two tenses explain their modal values? Some authors have indeed argued that the *imparfait* signals that the situation is not fully actualized, since it does not by itself give any information concerning the boundaries of the situation and thus presents it as open-ended. This idea seems to be confirmed by the observation that a situation, when expressed in the *imparfait*, can be interrupted before it really reaches its

¹⁶ But see also Klum (1961), de Swart (1995, 1998), Mitko (2000), and others.

end, as is very clearly shown in the following examples from Leeman-Bouix (1994: 149–150):

- (19) *Paul sortait tout juste quand Marie le retint pour lui dire que...*
'Paul was just leaving when Mary stopped him to tell him that...'

Paul's action is interrupted and does not reach its endpoint. Since the imperfective aspect presents the endpoint as unspecified or virtual (Mellet 1988), this can explain why the *imparfait* is used to express unreal or possible situations, or cases of thwarted imminence as in (20) (= ex. 9):

- (20) *Elle mit la main sur le loquet ... un pas de plus, elle était dans la rue.*
- *Sergeant, cria-t-il, ne voyez-vous pas que cette drôlesse s'en va?*
'She put her hand on the latch ... one step further, and she was on the street.
- *Sergeant, he shouted, don't you see that this hussy is leaving?*
(V. Hugo, as cited by Vetters 2001: 182)

However, the aspectual value of the *imparfait* seems less apt to explain the other nontemporal values presented above. Mellet (1988: 10–11), for instance, also explains the politeness effect of the *imparfait* through its "open-endedness": since the event is presented as open-ended, the speaker does not fully assert her intention and creates the impression that the addressee can still intervene. Berthonneau & Kleiber (1994: 71–72) list some problems with Mellet's explanation:

- 1) if the imperfective aspectual nature of the *imparfait* explains this modal value, then why do other tenses with the same aspectual value, such as the simple present, not also express it?
- 2) when the *imparfait* is used to express politeness, what is expressed is not the fact of saying or asking something, but of wanting or coming to say or ask something (*je voulais/venais vous dire/demander* 'I wanted/came to say/ask you'), and it seems rather difficult to interrupt intentions to say or ask something or past events of 'coming' to say or ask something.

Thus it seems that these nontemporal uses of the *imparfait* cannot be directly derived from its aspectual value. Even the value of thwarted imminence (cf. 20) cannot be attributed to the use of the *imparfait* and its imperfective aspect

as such: whereas *une minute de plus, il dormait* ‘one more minute and he (would have) slept’ expresses thwarted imminence, an utterance like *il dormait une minute de plus* ‘he slept for one more minute’ does not, although the *imparfait* is used in both sentences. The sentence-initial position of the adverbial expression thus seems a crucial factor in the interpretation. Berthonneau & Kleiber (2003) argue that it suggests that some salient, accessible situation is prolonged, and that the situation expressed by the sentence in the *imparfait* occurs at the moment implied by the adverbial expression. However, since the speaker knows that the situation has not really been prolonged, the whole sentence is interpreted as indicating a possible but not actually occurring event. Again, the situation in the *imparfait* is interpreted with respect to an accessible mental space containing, e.g., frame-like elements (this is even clearer in their example *une seconde de plus, il était KO* ‘one more second and he was K.O.’); but as pointed out by Berthonneau and Kleiber, it is not the *imparfait* as such that expresses irrealis: that interpretation is a result of contextual elements.¹⁷

In fact, Berthonneau & Kleiber (1994: 78) argue that the *imparfait* expresses imperfective aspect as a consequence of its nonautonomous or anaphoric nature. The question, then, is whether this anaphoric nature of the *imparfait* is indeed more fundamental than the traditional distinction between perfective and imperfective aspect.

4. *The anaphoric value of the imparfait and aspect*

4.1. *The anaphoric value of the imparfait*

Since Kamp & Rohrer (1983), several authors have defined the *imparfait* as an anaphoric tense, meaning that the *imparfait* needs an element in its co(n)text which locates the expressed situation on the timeline and thus functions as its “reference point”, in the sense of Reichenbach. Kamp & Rohrer (1983: 253) give the following rules for setting up the discourse representation corresponding to (21):

(21) *Quand Pierre entra, Marie téléphonait.*
 ‘As Peter came in, Mary was making a phone call.’

¹⁷ Cf. also Le Goffic (1986, 1995) for the idea that it is not the *imparfait*, but the nature of the “world” in which the designated situation is interpreted, that determines how an utterance will finally be interpreted.

The rule for constructing the discourse representation for a sentence in the *imparfait* can be described informally as follows:

- (i) the sentence in the *imparfait* introduces a new discourse state *s*
- (ii) this state *s* lies before the speech point
- (iii) *s* contains the last event *e* (introduced by a sentence in the *passé simple*).

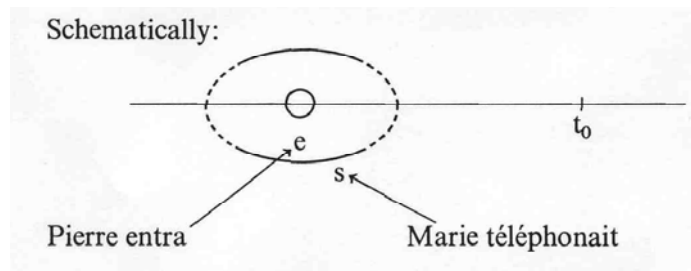


Figure 4. Kamp & Rohrer (1983: 253)

Berthonneau & Kleiber (1993: 57–60) list three arguments frequently advanced in favor of an “anaphoric” analysis of the *imparfait*:

- 1) As observed by Ducrot (1979: 7), a sentence such as (22),

(22)a. # *La France s'appelait la Gaule.*
 ‘France was called Gaul.’ (Ducrot 1979: 7)

cannot be used in the beginning of a story, if the context does not allow the audience to find a past moment which justifies the *imparfait*. Further confirmation is given by Vettors (1996), who has observed that (22)b is better:

b. *Donc, la France s'appelait la Gaule.*

Donc ‘so’ is supposed to make the link with a preceding class and provide the reference point.

- 2) The absence of a past interval makes (23)a incomplete, but not (23)b:

(23)a. # *Jean mangeait de la choucroute.*
 ‘John ate sauerkraut.’

- b. *Jean a mangé de la choucroute.*
'John has eaten sauerkraut.'
(Berthonneau & Kleiber 1993: 57–60)

Whereas the meaning of the *passé composé* (present perfect) implies a reference to the moment of speech, the meaning of the *imparfait* does not; therefore, the moment of speech can function as a reference point for the *passé composé*, but not for the *imparfait*.

- 3) Tasmowski-De Ryck (1985: 69) has pointed out that a question such as (24), which combines the *imparfait* with *quand* 'when', seems rather strange:

- (24) *Quand Jean épousait-il Marie?*
'When did John marry Mary?' (Tasmowski-De Ryck 1985: 69)

Indeed, such a question suggests that the moment that can serve as the antecedent is by definition not known by the speaker.

However, the anaphoric relation between the situation expressed by the sentence in the *imparfait* and its antecedent is different from that established between a pronoun and its antecedent. Kleiber (1993) and Berthonneau & Kleiber (1993) have shown that the antecedent and the situation in the *imparfait* are not only temporally, but also conceptually, related. This can be seen by comparing (25) and (26):

- (25) *Jean se mit en route dans sa nouvelle Mercedes. Il attrapa une contravention. Il roulait trop vite.*
'John drove off in his new Mercedes. He was fined. He was driving too fast.' (Molendijk 1993: 174)

- (26) *Jean se mit en route dans sa nouvelle Mercedes. Il attrapa une contravention. ? Il roulait avec plaisir.*
'John drove off in his new Mercedes. He was fined. He enjoyed driving.' (Berthonneau & Kleiber 1993: 69)

Example (26) is less acceptable than (25) because it is difficult to understand why one would be fined because one enjoys driving. Without going into de-

tails,¹⁸ I would like to propose that the conceptual relation between the situation which acts as a reference point and the situation expressed by the sentence containing the *imparfait* is not part of the meaning of the *imparfait*, but results from a combination of semantic and world knowledge with pragmatic principles of coherence. These principles show that part (iii) of Kamp & Rohrer's definition needs further refinement, but the discussion about their exact nature only confirms that the *imparfait* is indeed an anaphoric tense. Berthonneau & Kleiber (1994: 78) hold that this anaphoric nature of the *imparfait*, which makes it a nonautonomous tense, explains why it expresses imperfective aspect: since the *imparfait* has no referential autonomy, it does not by itself define the limits of its validity as a marker of past situations. Consequently, these can be inferred from the antecedent situation and they can even stretch up to the moment of speech, as shown by the examples of the commercial and politeness uses above. However, the relation between the anaphoric nature of the *imparfait* and its aspectual value can also be interpreted in the opposite direction: it has been proposed that the anaphoric nature of the *imparfait* and its absence of autonomy are a consequence of its imperfective aspect.

4.2. Imperfective aspect can explain why the *imparfait* has anaphoric value

Aspect has been defined by Comrie as “different ways of viewing the internal temporal constituency of a situation” (Comrie 1976: 3). The role of aspect can also be defined as reflecting the position of a viewer or a conceptualizer with respect to the situation “viewed” or conceived, as adopting a point of view from within the situation or from outside. The *imparfait* then expresses a perspective on the situation “from the inside” and this internal point of view leads to the feeling of incompleteness associated with the *imparfait*, for two reasons:

- 1) On one hand, situations seen from within, and thus without their boundaries, are typically events seen from nearby; therefore, the viewer or conceptualizer is felt not to have the distance necessary to introduce a temporal ordering relation between the events; moreover,

¹⁸ For an overview of the discussion aiming to define this conceptual relation and its relevance to the temporal relation between the antecedent situation and the situation expressed by the sentence in the *imparfait*, see, amongst others, Berthonneau & Kleiber (1994, 1998), De Mulder & Veters (1999), Irandoust (1998a,b), Molendijk & Vet (1995), Tasmowski-De Ryck & De Mulder (1999: 176–177), Vet (1999), and the references cited in those texts.

the absence of clear boundaries does not allow the construction of such an order either (see also Gosselin 1996: 86).

- 2) On the other hand, situations lacking clear boundaries are mass-like and tend to be seen as background elements, contrary to clearly bounded events, which are felt to be in the foreground (Leiss 1992: 120, Mitko 2000: 115, 120). As pointed out by Mitko (2000: 115), one can thus explain why the use of the *imparfait* creates a feeling of incompleteness and anaphoricity, since it only makes sense to speak of background situations when there are foreground situations,¹⁹ such that (27) elicits a reaction like (28):

(27) *L'année dernière, je passais mes vacances en Suisse.*

‘Last year, I spent my holidays in Switzerland.’

(28) *Et qu'est-ce qui s'est passé alors?*

‘And what happened then?’

Thus, according to some authors,²⁰ the imperfective aspect expressed by the *imparfait* can explain why it functions anaphorically, whereas according to Berthonneau and Kleiber, the anaphoric nature of the *imparfait* explains its imperfective aspect. The solution of this apparent paradox is, in my view, to consider that the *imparfait* is both imperfective and anaphoric.²¹ I would argue, moreover, that both elements are consequences of the same underlying value, which would be the value already defined above: the *imparfait* signals that the situation denoted by the sentence in the *imparfait* is conceived as ongoing in a mental space other than the base space, the one that corresponds to the speaker's here-and-now.²² This definition captures at once the idea that

¹⁹ Cf. also, for a related view, Hopper (1981) and James (1982).

²⁰ For other arguments, see Salkie (2000).

²¹ Indeed, there do not seem to be decisive arguments in favor of either of both analyses; cf. Kleiber (2003).

²² In conversations, where the speaker's and the hearer's here-and-now (the ground) functions as the deictic center for all spatial and temporal references, the *imparfait* has the effect of locating the situation in a past that is wholly cut off from the present, as shown by example (6) (for other examples and more references, see Touratier 1996: 120–121). If the speaker wants to say that the situation still has current validity, she has to do so explicitly:

Il portait la barbe l'an passé et la porte encore aujourd'hui.

‘He had a beard last year and still has one today.’ (Touratier 1996: 121)

the *imparfait* is imperfective, since the situation is seen from within, as ongoing, or as “actual”, to use Damourette and Pichon’s term, and the idea that it is anaphoric, since it does not by itself give us an indication of the mental space in which the situation in the *imparfait* has to be interpreted: this is decided by factors such as saliency²³ and discourse coherence²⁴. In other words, the situation expressed by the *imparfait* will be integrated into an already salient or accessible mental space, as can be seen in the examples of the commercial *imparfait*, where the situation is interpreted with respect to the already salient representation (or mental space) of the lady waiting to buy some goods. The same goes for a fragment such as (29):

(29) *Paul entra. Tout le monde applaudissait.*
 ‘Paul came in. Everybody applauded.’

Here as elsewhere, the *imparfait* signals that the situation is to be interpreted in an accessible mental space, which is not the one associated with the speaker’s here-and-now. The space that is set up by the preceding sentence in the *passé simple* is then liable to function as the “antecedent” situation, since it is accessible (or salient²⁵) and can be combined in a coherent way with the sentence in the *imparfait*. In this respect, the mental space needed for the interpretation of the *imparfait* respects the characteristics generally attributed to reference points, which also need to be more salient than the expressions that they allow to access.²⁶ But this also means that the situation in the *imparfait* is construed as less salient than that in the *passé simple*, or backgrounded, as

Berthonneau and Kleiber’s analysis of the commercial or the politeness uses of the *imparfait* seems to contradict this, since the situation expressed by the sentence in the *imparfait* is held to have present relevance. However, this is again not signaled by the *imparfait* itself: the tense locates the event in a mental space representing a past situation, but, as in the example above, elements in the context overrule this direct interpretation of the *imparfait*.

²³ For an analysis of the saliency factors involved, see e.g. Gosselin (1996, 1999a).

²⁴ The coherence relations involved have been described by different authors; for an overview, see De Mulder & Vetters (1999).

²⁵ The saliency of this situation is not only due to its proximity or to the fact that it has just been interpreted, but it is also related to the fact that the *passé simple* presents the events as finished and makes the story move forward.

²⁶ See e.g. Van Hoek (1997).

tradition would have it, a fact that is reinforced by the imperfective aspect of the *imparfait*.²⁷ Since the sentences in the *imparfait* need to be interpreted with respect to mental spaces that are already accessible in the discourse, the situations they express are seen as dependent on those more salient spaces and the events they represent; consequently, they tend to give background information, comments, or descriptions. As pointed out by Hopper (1981), this may also be one of the reasons why the information expressed by the *imparfait* is felt to be associated with a lesser degree of assertiveness.

If the basic value of the *imparfait* is to present the situation as ongoing (and thus seen from the inside) in some salient mental space that is not to be identified with the speaker's here-and-now, but that is set up by the context, it can be explained why this tense form may accommodate a nontemporal value. As was already noted above, however, this nontemporal value cannot be explained from its past reference as such (e.g. through the distance metaphor). Berthonneau and Kleiber show that some nontemporal values are generated by a combination of the *imparfait*'s default past value with elements of the context. This implies that the *imparfait* expresses both past-time reference and reference to another mental space: these two elements of its meaning may be combined if it is accepted that the meaning of the *imparfait* is represented as a network (Langacker 1990). In this conception, the semantics of lexical terms is to be represented as a network of different meanings linked to each other by different semantic relations. When one or more meanings that are part of the network are more salient than others, they can be considered as the prototypical meanings of the lexical expression. Moreover, when different meanings have elements in common, these can be united in a more schematic meaning. Langacker (1990: 267) gives the example of English *run*: the different meanings of this verb are related to one another by metaphor, metonymy, and other semantic relations; however, the meaning 'rapid two-legged locomotion of a person' can be considered the most salient and thus prototypical, whereas the meaning 'rapid motion' is common to all uses of *run* and can consequently be seen as its schematic meaning. The relation between this schematic meaning and the more concrete, contextually enriched meanings is one of instantiation or specialization: the more concrete meaning conforms to the specifications of the schematic one, but is characterized with more detail.

²⁷ Once more, there is disagreement: some authors think that the imperfective aspect of the *imparfait* explains why it is frequently used in sentences referring to background situations, whereas others (e.g. Hopper 1981) think that tenses that express background situations are imperfective for this reason.

The relation between the prototypical meaning and other nonschematic meanings is one of extension: when *run* is used to refer to the rapid four-legged locomotion of an animal, for instance, its interpretation is partly incompatible with the prototypical meaning, but there is, of course, still some kind of resemblance.

These ideas can also be used to analyze the meaning of a grammatical marker such as the *imparfait*. If past reference is the prototypical meaning of the *imparfait*, then the politeness and commercial uses of the *imparfait* can be seen as “extensions” from this prototypical meaning due to elements of the context, as described by Berthonneau and Kleiber. Moreover, it is possible to see the temporal and nontemporal uses of the *imparfait* as instantiations of a more abstract or schematic meaning, where the *imparfait* signals that the situation expressed is to be represented in a mental space other than the speaker’s base space. Since this schematic meaning is nontemporal, the *imparfait* can also express meanings that do not refer to a past situation.

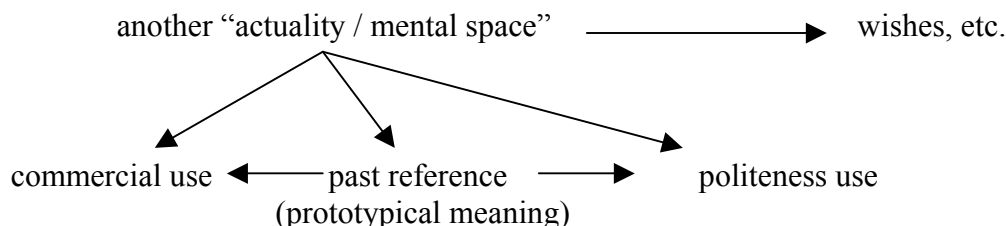


Figure 5.

As pointed out by Langacker (1990: 268), the more specific meanings are derived from the schematic meaning, but it is not really possible to predict them from the schema: a speaker must learn to some extent which meanings a language has developed from the schematic meaning. This explains why not all languages have developed the same range of nontemporal meanings from past tenses such as the *imparfait*, as pointed out by James (1982). In the case of the *imparfait*, it could explain why the pretend-game use is restricted to some areas such as Belgium, whereas the French do not use the *imparfait* in such a situation (they prefer to use the *conditionnel*, the conditional).

5. Conclusions

In the end, it appears that the meaning of the *imparfait* can be represented as a network, into which both its past meaning and its nontemporal meaning as defined above can be integrated, as respectively its prototypical and its schematic meaning. The other meanings can then be derived, either as con-

textually determined extensions from the prototypical past meaning or as instantiations of the schematic meaning. However, it is clear that this analysis is very powerful and may not be sufficiently restrictive, even if it is not predictability but motivation that is seen as the objective of analysis. What is needed, then, is to confront this analysis with detailed data, such as those presented by Berthonneau and Kleiber, and to elaborate the network representation by integrating the different meanings of the *imparfait*. But it is also necessary to have a closer look at its schematic meaning, in order to define it further, and to explain, for instance, why the fact of representing the situation in another mental space seems to be associated with imperfectiveness. One possibility is that the *imparfait* does not refer to events as such, but to representations of events, thus incorporating some kind of viewpoint. But again, this remains to be elaborated on. Other questions that have been raised concern the precise relation between the notion of reference point and that of viewpoint, as well as the nature of the difference between the *imparfait* and the *conditionnel*, which can also express nonactuality. But then, this work is still only meant as a first step towards a cognitive theory of the *imparfait*, to be continued.

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