

On tenses as speech act-level functions: Towards a novel analysis of the French 'narrative *imparfait*'

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Abstract

This paper aims at demonstrating the validity of a two-pronged hypothesis: (i) that the aspectual viewpoint content of the so-called 'narrative imparfait' (NIMPF) does not bear on the verb it marks (i.e., it does not combine with the event predicate denoted by said verb) but that, therefore, (ii) it must operate at a higher, discursive semantic level. To substantiate the above hypothesis, the paper first focuses on diachronic and synchronic evidence suggesting that the NIMPF does not contribute aspectual meaning at the sentence semantics-level – showing notably that it behaves like a 'viewpoint neutral' tense with respect to the verb it marks. The paper then discusses synchronic, discursive evidence supporting the view that the NIMPF actually indicates a partial, discourse-structurally incomplete, 'ongoing' narrative act. From these two facts, the paper concludes that NIMPF utterances refer to imperfectly viewed narrative speech act events, and constitute a separate speech act-level conventionalized reading of the imparfait, applying an imperfective viewpoint meaning to relational speech act functions, i.e., to rhetorical relations. It is argued that they should be endowed with a speech act event argument, and constitute an abstract type of event predicate which the viewpoint meaning of the NIMPF takes as its input.

Keywords: *imparfait*, speech act function, viewpoint aspect, discourse structure, temporality.

1. Introduction

The so-called ‘narrative *imparfait*’ (NIMPF, henceforth), to this day, still represents one of the most impenetrable puzzles for theoreticians of tense-aspect in French. As similar uses of the general imperfective inflection inherited from Latin can be found in most contemporary Romance languages, it constitutes an issue of some import for Romance linguistics in general (see e.g., Bertinetto 1980 and Mauroni 2013 on the Italian *imperfetto narrativo*, or Morgado Nadal 2015 on the Spanish *imperfecto narrativo*). In French, although its first occurrences were documented in literary texts, it has become a major temporal staple for more ordinary written genres such as crime novels, since at least the early 20th century (Gosselin 1996:236), cf. example (1). It is now widely used in the sports (Labeau 2007, Egetenmeyer 2021) and crime (Peeters 2008) columns of contemporary newspapers. It is also very commonly found in amateur online texts reporting on any kind of event, regardless of the domain.

(1) French, Souvestre & Allain (1987:404)

Juve était revenu	tout	naturellement	vers	la	fenêtre,	
Juve return.3SG.PQP	very	naturally	towards	the	window	
il dépliait		le grand drap	blanc,	il	l’	
he unfold.3SG.IMPF		the big sheet	white,	he	it	
étendait	sur	le sol,		il	l’	
spread.3SG.IMPF	on	the ground,		he	it	
examinait		avec un soin	extrême. [...]			
examine.3SG.IMPF	with	a care	extreme. [...]			
Brusquement, une	idée	lui venait		à	l’esprit.	
Abruptly	an	idea	him	come.3SG.IMPF	at	the mind.

‘Juve had naturally returned to the window, he unfolded the large white sheet, laid it on the floor and examined it with extreme care. [...] Suddenly, an idea occurred to him.’

What sets apart NIMPF uses from standard, imperfective viewpoint-readings of the IMPF, is that (i) they associate with a ‘forward shifting’ of the temporal location of the current topic/reference time, and that (ii) they let us perceive the entirety of the events they express (i.e., the entire runtime of said events is encapsulated within the topic time – the latter claim remains a matter of debate though, as we will see). This conjunction of properties has prompted many scholars to treat the NIMPF as near synonymous with the *passé simple*, i.e., as denoting a perfective aspectual viewpoint function (Smith 1991).

According to this widespread theoretical intuition, the NIMPF is so semantically close to the *passé simple* (PS, henceforth), that it can be substituted with it. But we will show that this is in fact only partially true, particularly from the point of view of discourse coherence – so this is at best a case of semantic overlap. Describing, as well as explaining, this only partial similarity constitutes at once a key empirical and theoretical challenge for the present paper.

Based on the general empirical intuitions stated above, I will propose the following provisional theoretical characterization of the semantics of the NIMPF:

(2) Tentative, provisional semantics for the NIMPF:

The discursive meaning of an NIMPF utterance should be narrative in that it requires a sequence-of-event (SOE) type of context, with a ‘temporal update’, forward shifting anchoring of the topic time (Klein 1994), as it progresses; it anchors the entire runtime of the event it refers to within the topic time interval (in neo-Reichenbarian terms, we have $E \subset R$), very much as perfective viewpoint tenses do.

If we adopt a SDRT-style (Segmented Discourse Representation Theory, cf. Asher & Lascarides 2003)¹ approach to discourse structure, ‘SOE context’ refers to a sub-context involving two (or more) discourse units, such that each novel segment β was introduced into the model of the discourse context by attaching to the previous segment α via a narrative discourse relation (*Narration*, *Occasion* or *Result*) imposing strict temporal ordering $e_\alpha < e_\beta$.²

The main goal of this paper will be to verify (or invalidate) two tightly dependent hypotheses, by proceeding in a two-step argumentation. Going against mutually contradictory claims made in the literature, I will surmise that the NIMPF neither denotes a sentence semantics-level perfective aspectual viewpoint function, nor an imperfective one – and that this precisely explains why scholars have so far failed to establish the superiority of one view over the other. I will then hypothesize that notwithstanding this apparent aspectual puzzle, the NIMPF is not viewpoint-vacuous, and that its imperfective viewpoint operates at a higher, speech act function-related level (i.e., in the discourse semantics). Argumentatively, the paper will proceed as follows. After offering a critical review of past analyses of the NIMPF (§0), I will examine the sentence semantics-level effects of the NIMPF (§3). To that effect, I will present novel diachronic and synchronic evidence suggesting that the NIMPF does not really contribute any aspectual viewpoint function applying to a verb’s event predicate, due to its unusual Aktionsart selectional properties and aspectual selectional restriction effects (or lack thereof) – although admittedly, its aspectual effect on event predicates denoted by the verbs it marks is closer to that of a perfective tense than to that of an imperfective tense. In §0, I will finally discuss synchronic, discursive evidence supporting the view that the NIMPF actually serves the communicative purpose of indicating a partial, incomplete, ‘ongoing’ narrative act. In other words, I will suggest that NIMPF utterances convey *imperfectively viewed* narrative speech act events. This explains why the aspectual viewpoint meaning of the NIMPF does not bear on the event predicate denoted by the verb it marks, while the viewpoint-independent SOE discursive properties of the NIMPF explain why it imposes a bounded reading of verbs found in NIMPF utterances.

¹ In what follows, I am taking the reader to be familiar with the SDRT framework. For a quick introduction to a SDRT-based treatment of tense-aspect in French, see Caudal (2012a).

² I am using here a standard SDRT notation, where e_π refers to the event variable of the main event predicate found in the DRS underlying segment π .

2. An overview of existing accounts and hypotheses

Let us start our investigations by assessing existing accounts of the NIMPF. I will classify them along what I believe are the most significant analytical parameters for the NIMPF, in particular by distinguishing approaches at the semantics/pragmatics interface (combining a sentence semantics-level hypothesis with a discourse semantics-level hypothesis, the latter also interacting with discourse pragmatics) vs. primarily pragmatic approaches.

2.1. Semantic accounts with a limited discourse-level dimension

The first class of accounts I identify, generally associate claims bearing on the sentence-level semantics of the NIMPF, with some less developed claims about its discourse-level semantics and the semantics/pragmatics interface.

A first group of essentially semantic accounts assume a ‘general imperfective’ sentence semantics for the NIMPF. See e.g., Bres (1999, 2005a,b), as well as Patard (2007) for well-developed analyses arguing that the NIMPF denotes an imperfective viewpoint meaning applying to the event predicate contributed to the verb. At the same time, Bres and Patard argue that some sort of ‘tension’ exists between this imperfective meaning, and the perfective-like, SOE discourse behaviour of the NIMPF (see my definition in (2)). Indeed, the NIMPF behaves very much like the PS at the discourse level according to these authors, in that it primarily associates with temporal progression (or ‘time updating’ in Egetenmeyer 2021b). It is a well-known fact since at least Kamp & Rohrer (1983) that perfective viewpoints tenses primarily (though not exclusively) associate with event succession (‘event foregrounding’, associated e.g., with the *Narration* discourse relation in the SDRT framework) in e.g., juxtaposed clauses, cf. (3) (with $e_{\pi_1} < e_{\pi_2}$), whereas imperfective viewpoint tenses primarily associate with event overlap (4) ($e_{\pi_1} \circ e_{\pi_2}$). The concept of ‘event backgrounding’ has often been used to refer to standard imperfective viewpoint readings of the IMPF. And of course, the SDRT discourse relation *Background* specifically capitalizes on this property of imperfective viewpoint tenses; cf. Caudal (2012a).

(3) Jean toussa (π_1). Max le regarda (π_2).
 Jean cough.3SG.PS Max him look.at.3SG.PS
 ‘Jean coughed, [so/then] Max looked at him.’

(4) Jean toussa (π_1). Max le regardait (π_2).
 Jean cough-3SG.PS Max him look.at.3SG.IMPF
 ‘Jean coughed [as/since] Max was looking at him.’

Bres and Patard argue that this ‘tension’ – or ‘rough interaction’ or ‘dissonance’ (their terms) – between an imperfective semantics, and a perfective-like, ‘foregrounding’ behaviour at the discourse level, is the interpretative blueprint of the NIMPF. According to these authors (cf. e.g., Patard 2007:147), this ‘tension’ is most visible in the distribution of the NIMPF with Aktionsart types. Indeed, it vastly favours telic utterances (especially achievement utterances) over atelic utterances, which is unexpected for an imperfective tense, normally selecting for the latter, not the former. Caudal & Bednall (2022) introduce the concept of ‘Aktionsart profile’ to refer to such

Aktionsart selectional preferences (or preferred combination) of tenses; these are crucially related to their viewpoint meaning. According to Bres, the NIMPF is difficult to parse for addressees, even highly competent ones, because of this very ‘tension’ (as we will see below, the NIMPF is highly context-sensitive, hence some possible interpretative difficulties; but *pace* Bres, it is not innately difficult to comprehend, especially in the presence of support expressions; this is obvious from sports reports, where it has become a run-of-the-mill tense use).

Another type of centrally semantic account assumes that although the NIMPF is semantically imperfective, syntactic constraints (as evidenced by the prevalent association of the NIMPF with e.g., certain aspectuo-temporal adverbs and adverbials) and discourse contextual constraints (as evidenced by the requirement of SOE contexts for NIMPF readings to arise) can determine semantic adjustments. These can be deterministic/destructive, i.e., type shift-like. Gosselin (1999, 2005) embodies such an account of the NIMPF. It can be seen as involving aspectual coercion à la de Swart (1998), but it is really closest to Moens & Steedman’s (1988) type shift-based approach to the contextual variability of tense meaning. Although Gosselin takes the IMPF to have a unique and monosemous imperfective viewpoint lexical entry, he argues that its interpretation can be shifted to perfective readings in NIMPF contexts – among other, type-shifting contexts.³ And yet, he argues at the same time that an imperfective viewpoint reading survives at a higher temporal domain – the runtime of an entire sequence marked with the NIMPF, which is taken to be imperfectively viewed. Gosselin essentially argues that the NIMPF can be likened to a ‘single event’ version of the iterative or habitual reading of the IMPF, where some series of events is in fact under the scope of an iterative or habitual inter-sentential/discursive operator. Such iterative/habitual contexts constitute what Gosselin (2015) calls ‘event agglomerates’, see e.g., (5), where adverbial *le matin* refers to a morning routine. It is worthwhile bearing the above hypothesis in mind, as I will come back to it in the conclusion of the present paper.

- (5) Dumas (1889:370), in Gosselin (2015:75)⁴
 De quelle façon chaque journée s’écoulait_{IMPF}-elle? Comme s’était écoulée la veille (...). Le matin, le comte arrivait_{IMPF} chez l’abbé; il lui tendait_{IMPF} silencieusement la main, le saluait_{IMPF} de la tête, ouvrait_{IMPF} la fenêtre, s’asseyait_{IMPF} sur un grand escabeau de chêne sculpté, et, assis, il montrait_{IMPF}, de sa longue main pâle et effilée, les vagues qui se soulevaient_{IMPF} sur la vaste plaine de l’Océan.

³ Gosselin (1996:201, 1999) argues that contextually perfective interpretations of the NIMPF derives from semantic conflicts between the normally imperfective meaning of the IMPF, and the typically perfective, SOE contexts in which the NIMPF must arise. He notably attributes those perfective adjustments undergone by the NIMPF, to overt syntactic material (cf. temporal connectives such as *puis* ‘then’, or adverbs and adverbials considered to associate with perfective readings of verbs, such as *pendant* (‘for’) + <precise duration>), as well as to discursive mechanisms, especially the ‘temporal update’ of the topic time which the NIMPF requires (as found with e.g., the *Narration* discourse relation).

⁴ I will eschew providing a detailed gloss of examples when they are too long, but will mark verbs in the *imparfait* with subscript IMPF – while subscript PS marks verbs in the *passé simple*.

‘How did each day pass? Like the day before (...). In the morning, the Count arrived at the Abbot’s house; he silently held out his hand, nodded in greeting, opened the window, sat down on a large, carved oak stepladder and, as he sat, he would point with his long, pale, slender hand to the waves rising over the vast plain of the ocean.’

2.2. Essentially discourse structural/contextual or pragmatic accounts

Let us now move to accounts putting the onus of achieving NIMPF interpretations squarely on extra-sentential parameters, at the semantics/pragmatics interface. The most ancient account of that type is Berthonneau & Kleiber’s ‘anaphoric’ approach of the NIMPF. While Berthonneau & Kleiber (1993, 1999) and Kleiber (2003) see the NIMPF as a conventionalized, perfective viewpoint tense meaning, different from the ‘standard’ imperfective viewpoint of the IMPF, they primarily argue that what unifies the various meanings of the IMPF is their anaphoric nature – very much in the sense advocated by Partee (1973). They essentially stress that the NIMPF is *meronymic*, claiming that an event described *via* a NIMPF utterance not only refers back to some other, previously uttered discourse unit (including a possible framing expression), but that it must denote a *part* of a greater eventive whole associated with this antecedent. This ‘meronymic’ intuition is key to understanding many discourse-structural effects of the NIMPF as we will see below (cf. also Peeters 2017).

Caudal, Veters & Roussarie (2003) and Caudal & Veters (2003) adopt a somewhat related approach. In these two very similar SDRT-based accounts, it is argued that NIMPF readings (a) involve an imperfective viewpoint reading in the sentence-level semantics, which (b) is semantically and pragmatically enriched in the discourse semantics because rhetorical relations impose a narrative, SOE, perfective-like reading. Both accounts claim that the NIMPF is aspectually elliptic: although its semantics involves an imperfective viewpoint, so that NIMPF utterances only convey part of the full development of an event in the sentence semantics (we neither access its culmination nor its associated result stage at this level), narrative discourse relations like *Narration* can resolve this ellipsis and provide the missing event subparts/stages (i.e., a full inner stage, and a subsequent result stage). They can ‘restore’ them in the discourse semantics, thanks to aspectuo-temporal axioms associated with such relations – those accounts do not resort to semantic type shifts à la Gosselin (1996, 1999). Under such an analysis, the IMPF is a kind of aspectually hybrid tense: it is imperfective at the sentence semantics level, but has perfective-like meaning triggered at the semantics/pragmatics interface due to its requiring narrative discourse relations. Such an analysis very much says that you can have an imperfective cake at the sentence semantics level, and yet perfectly eat it at the discourse semantics level – by filling up its missing bits due to an ellipsis resolution mechanism.

Other accounts of the NIMPF taking it to have a perfective reading on account of discourse structural effects exist, cf. e.g., Egetenmeyer (2021a,b), but they do not resort to discourse relation-based strategies at the semantics/pragmatics interface as discussed above. They rather adopt a contextual indexical approach of a more ancient type, à la Hinrichs (1986)/Kamp & Reyle (1993); I will not discuss them further here, but most (if not all) of the theoretical and empirical objections I will raise against e.g., Caudal & Veters (2003) or Caudal, Veters & Roussarie (2003) will also apply to such approaches.

Last but not least, an essentially pragmatic account of the NIMPF can be found in Saussure & Sthioul (1999, 2005), where it is assumed that the interpretative effect of the NIMPF is essentially similar to that of a free indirect speech use of the IMPF, and marks some sort of special perspective (‘focalization’) over the described event. Saussure & Sthioul argue that the NIMPF has an imperfective viewpoint semantics, and that completion of a NIMPF event is inferred in the pragmatics – this is somewhat similar to ‘event ellipsis’ in the Caudal/Vetters/Roussarie account. But the main point of the Saussure & Sthioul analysis is that they take the NIMPF to signal that some perspectival interval *P* is temporally embedded within the runtime of a NIMPF event, and that this is centrally connected to the NIMPF having a ‘focalization’ effect in the sense of Genette (1972). *P* is pragmatically indexed to a contextually-determined agent variable, by default corresponding to the speaker, or to some other agent in case e.g., of free indirect speech. With the NIMPF, *P* can involve a shifted utterance agent (it is then equivalent to a free indirect speech IMPF) – or if an ‘external’ speech origin is assumed, *P* should be seen as reporting on some events some contextual agent other than the speaker, personally witnessed – Saussure and Sthioul argue that this notably explains why the NIMPF is so prevalent in sport reports, cf. (6). Their proposal will be discussed in greater detail further down.

(6) *Auto-Hebdo*, 18.6.97, in Saussure & Sthioul (1999:176)

A 18h42, Soper regagnait_{IMPF} son stand. La voiture était_{IMPF} poussée à l’intérieur de son box et toute l’équipe s’empressait_{IMPF} d’enlever les éléments arrière de la carrosserie.

‘At 6.42pm, Soper returned to his pit. The car was pushed into its box and the whole team rushed to remove the rear bodywork components.’

2.3. NIMPF with and without support material: from syntax to discourse structure

I will now conclude my review of past literature by evoking the importance of syntactic licensors or facilitators for the NIMPF in several existing accounts. In his review of Bres’s (1999) typology of overt linguistic markers supporting the establishment of the NIMPF, Caudal (2024) observes that Bres’s corpus of NIMPF utterances (Bres 1999, 2005b) comprises different classes of overt markers:

1. aspectuo-temporal modifiers contributing to triggering a perfective-like interpretation of an utterance: temporal location adverbials (*à X heure* ‘at X o’clock’), forward shifting temporal adverbials (<temporal measure> *plus tard* = ‘<temporal measure> later’) and generally aspectuo-temporal modifiers; framing adverbials are by far the most frequent NIMPF type of support material, as according to Bres, they represent 26% of his corpus data points
2. temporal ordering or causo-temporal connectives (e.g., *puis* ‘then’)
3. syntactic constructions imposing temporal succession between two events (*quand* ‘when’ causo-temporal clauses, relatives with a temporal ordering effect...).

Note that aspectual verbs, and verbs denoting temporal or discourse ordering verbs (*ajouter*, ‘add’, (*se*) *succéder* ‘appear after (one another)’...) should be added to

this list. Following Danlos (2007), such verbs can be taken to inscribe narrative discourse relations in their semantic contribution. Thus, in (7), *finissait* denotes (or at least semantically contributes to establishing) the *Result* discourse relation, which is then contextually computed between π_2 and π_1 (the latter being attached to the event-introducing adverbial *non sans peine*); *Result* (π_2, π_1) holds.

- (7) Souvestre & Allain (1987:54)
 — Les imbéciles ! grommelait_{NIMPF}-il [...]. Le bandit, non sans peine (π_1), finissait_{NIMPF} (π_2) par trouver une place disponible dans l'un des wagons de première [...]. Il s'y installait_{NIMPF} (π_3), se plongeait_{NIMPF} (π_4) dans la lecture d'un journal [...].
 ‘— Fools! he grumbled (π_1) [...]. Not without some difficulty, the bandit finally found (π_2) an available seat in one of the first-class carriages [...]. He settled in (π_3), immersed (π_4) himself in reading a newspaper [...].’

It is highly empirically and theoretically significant that while some works argue that the NIMPF absolutely requires support material at the onset of a NIMPF-marked SOE context (Tasmowski-De Rijck 1985, Berthonneau & Kleiber 1993, Berthonneau & Kleiber 1999, Kleiber 2003), others argue that it is optional (Bres 1999, 2005a,b). The first view generally associates with the idea that the NIMPF denotes a perfective viewpoint tense, the second does not. In Gosselin's work, what I call 'support expressions' are in fact characterized as *aspectual type-shifting* expressions (cf. so-called aspectual operators in de Swart 1998). And indeed, they help events denoted by NIMPF utterances take on bounded, perfective-like interpretations (this is particularly obvious with temporal succession connectives, or framing adverbials).

Finally, I will conclude this brief review by suggesting that Caudal (2024) offers a crucial insight into the discourse structural mechanics of the NIMPF, when it argues that determining whether the NIMPF has a perfective or imperfective viewpoint reading matters less than studying how support material interacts with discourse structural parameters, and how it can increase discourse coherence – by notably helping construe what is known as a *discourse topic* (Asher 2004). This will appear more clearly in section §0.

3. The sentence semantics-level contribution of the NIMPF: neither perfective nor imperfective viewpoint

We can conclude from the previous section (especially §0) that there are widely diverging views in previous works as to what aspectual contribution should be ascribed to NIMPF utterances within the sentence-level semantics. To summarize our review, it appears that the following (synchronic) analyses of the aspectual content of the NIMPF have been explored – and very significantly, they can all be associated with different diachronic scenarios:

- (i) The NIMPF is a conventionally separate form-meaning pairing between an IMPF-looking form and a perfective aspectual viewpoint; homonymous to the

standard IMPF, it must therefore stem from a *completed* semantic evolution from the IMPF initial aspectual content ('switch context' à la Heine 2002).

- (ii) The NIMPF is another homonymous form-meaning pairing, but with an aspectually 'hybrid' semantics (differing from that of standard, imperfective uses of the IMPF); its sentence semantic-level aspectual meaning is underspecified/ambiguous, but not empty; this must stem from an *ongoing / partial* semantic change (a 'bridging context' à la Heine, 2002); the semantics of the NIMPF agglomerates imperfective and perfective elements of meaning, and context will help differentiate which interpretation should prevail.⁵
- (iii) The semantics of the NIMPF is imperfective; it does not reflect on any semantic change in its aspectual content.

This section will try and provide both synchronic and diachronic evidence to try and determine whether any of the three above options are possible; we will see that neither (i) and (ii) are acceptable, and that (iii) is only acceptable if we don't take it to mean that the NIMPF has a sentence-level imperfective contribution – in other words, (iii) is acceptable if it is paired up with a different kind of semantic change (plus some additional discursive developments at the semantics/pragmatics interface).

3.1. The diachronic perspective: is the 'narrative *imparfait*' in Contemporary French the by-product of an 'aoristic drift'?

To shed light on the diachronic evolution of the NIMPF, I conducted a corpus analysis on the Frantext Corpus (<https://www.frantext.fr/>) by randomly extracting 600 occurrences of IMPF marked utterances per century, from the 17th to the 21st century – i.e., a total of 2400 IMPF examples were extracted. I also annotated them for their contextual interpretation (NIMPF vs. other uses) and their Aktionsart parameters (see below).⁶ An attempt at applying the same sampling method to 17th century novels in *Frantext* (with 39 texts, totalizing 3 461 480 words) turned out to be (a) morphologically problematic, and (b) to yield only uncertain NIMPF occurrences among the 600 randomly extracted examples. A more focused research based on framing expressions did not yield convincing examples either for that same century. By and large, this quantitative foray demonstrated (Table 1) that the NIMPF saw its frequency quadruple over after the 18th century (from 0,5% to 2%), but remains on

⁵ Some variants of type 2 analysis assume that the purported evolution rather took place at the semantics/pragmatics interface, and that the NIMPF merely involves a 'soft', lexicalized pragmatic content pointing to perfective interpretation in the right context. See e.g., Caudal, Veters & Roussarie (2003); its semantics remains imperfective. See also relevance-theory accounts such as Saussure & Sthioul (1999, 2005).

⁶ The relevant data can be found in the form of spreadsheets at <https://cloud.llf-paris.fr/nextcloud/index.php/s/RzsT2YjSiN9Rb6b>, alongside with a file documenting the annotation process. As a reviewer correctly noted, this diachronic corpus only consists of literary narrative texts. This can be justified in part because the NIMPF was first found in innovative, formal narratives. While admittedly, it would be desirable to extend my diachronic study to other genres, for want of time and space, I must leave such an investigation to future developments.

average a rare use in formal narratives. This quantitative time line very much suggests that the NIMPF did not change substantially in formal, literary narratives after the onset of the 19th century.

Table 1. Rise in frequency of the NIMPF (600 examples extracted per century)

Frantext Corpus	Sub-	Text count	Word count	% NIMPF
Novels 18 th c.		187	11 561 089	0,5 %
Novels 19 th c.		369	27 722 542	2 %
Novels 20 th c.		707	47 443 095	2 %
Novels 21 st c.		210	14 257 409	2 %

However, as is well-known from independent quantitative work on the NIMPF, its overall frequency of use in non-literary texts really picked up at the end of the 19th century, and kept on progressing through the 20th c., particularly in certain journalistic genres (sport reports, crime columns) – see e.g., Labeau (2007). Far more enlightening is the fact that qualitatively, no major change was observable in observations made on non-literary data by other authors, nor in the data points I collected between the 19th and 21st century in non-literary sources. See the two following generalizations:

1. the IMPF, since its earliest instantiations to its most recent ones, has been continuously associated with the same types of support material: framing adverbials, temporal location adverbials, temporal subordinates and other temporal connectives are abundantly found in most sequences – as was observed in e.g., Peeters (2008) about contemporary French journalistic data. Similarly, in Bres’s corpus of NIMPF utterances in Contemporary French,⁷ framing adverbials remain very prevalent, as they mark 26% of the verbs
 2. complex SOE sequences involving right-node-raising (i.e., with an elliptical NP subject and coordinated or juxtaposed VPs) are already observable in the early stages of the NIMPF, cf. (8)
- (8) Frantext Corpus, Marivaux, *Le Paysan parvenu*, 1735 (p.247)
 Là-dessus, elle souriait_{IMPF}, me serrait_{IMPF} la main, et finissait_{IMPF} par demander presque en soupirant : quelle heure est-il ?
 ‘Then she smiled, shook my hand and finally asked, almost with a sigh: what time is it?’

⁷ This corpus of several hundred utterances is not publicly available, but it was constituted from 20th c. sources of various genres – literary narratives, non-literary texts and generally non-fictional texts. See Bres (1999, 2005b) for details.

Generalizations 1 and 2 suggest that diachronic scenarios (i) and (ii) above⁸ (the NIMPF exhibits a full or partial perfectivization/ ‘aoristic drift’) do not satisfyingly capture the development of the NIMPF. Its evolution very clearly diverges from the perfectivization path followed by the *passé composé* (PC) in Old/Middle French, and established in Caudal (2015). The latter reference showed that the PC got perfectivized in two very distinct steps. During the Old French period (11th-13th c.), like the NIMPF, SOE ‘narrative’ readings of the PC associated with support material, and never dispensed with it. Caudal (2015) argues that it then was a *narrative resultative present* use, not a ‘true’ perfective viewpoint tense use; such uses of the PC mostly alternated with the narrative present in texts. Then, from the Middle French period on (14th c.), the PC gradually started to appear without any support material in SOE sequences, and could mark more than two consecutive verbs in such sequences (see Treikelder 2006). Also, unlike what was found with the NIMPF, framing adverbials never played a key role in the narrative readings of the PC – instead, causo-temporal subordination did (e.g. *quant... si... ‘after... then...’* structures, cf. Caudal 2015). This suggests that the respective narrative uses of the PC and IMPF exhibited significant semantic differences from the get go, and only drifted further apart as time went by. If we follow Asher, Prévot & Vieu’s (2007) analysis that framing adverbials introduce discourse topics, then the NIMPF appears to have always been centrally connected with discourse topicality management, whereas the PC never was. This points to a vast *discourse structural* difference in the way the two narrative tense uses originated, and subsequently evolved – this issue will be further tackled in subsequent sections.

Overall, I conclude from the above diachronic contrast that the NIMPF is very unlikely to have undergone any significant perfectivization process (or ‘aoristic drift’, Squartini & Bertinetto 2000) – it seems to have not moved to the second, real perfectivization stage reached by the PC in Middle French, and to have remained akin to a past version of the narrative present. I will now show that synchronic evidence strongly supports the view that the NIMPF does not have a real perfective viewpoint capability in its compositional semantics.

3.2. Synchronic evidence: an unusual, skewed Aktionsart profile, and limited coercion capability with atelic utterances

It has often been observed (Gosselin 1999:27, 29, Bres 2005a,b) that the NIMPF has specific distributional properties in terms of Aktionsart. According to Patard (2007: 147), achievement-denoting utterances represent 81% of NIMPF propositions in Bres’s NIMPF corpus (Bres 2005a,b), whereas accomplishment utterances are fairly rare, with only 6% of utterances in said corpus. In contrast, atelic verbs, and even more specifically stative verbs, are much less frequently observed in NIMPF sequences (Gosselin 1999: 29, Bres 2005a,b), and only represent 11% of NIMPF utterances in Bres’s corpus (Patard 2007:147). An obvious conclusion is that whatever aspectual viewpoint meaning NIMPF utterances gives rise to, it only has limited capacity to combine with atelic utterances – this fact, compounded with its tendency to associate

⁸ Pragmatic or discursive semantic/pragmatic accounts of the NIMPF (cf. note (6)) are not affected by these observations; but as we will see, they cannot readily capture some important discursive facts exposed in §0.

with achievement utterances, makes it unlike an imperfective-viewpoint denoting tense.⁹ And *vice versa*, another natural conclusion would be that telic event types are maximally compatible with the aspectual viewpoint meaning associated with NIMPF utterances (whatever it is) – which points to aspectual selectional restrictions reminiscent of perfective viewpoint tenses, *prima facie*.

However, the NIMPF also differs from the PS with respect to its distribution with Aktionsart classes – though less so than with imperfective viewpoint tenses. After randomly extracting one hundred occurrences of the PS from the 20th century sub-corpus of Frantext, I classified them for their Aktionsart type. Table 2 reveals that the respective Aktionsart profiles of the PS and the NIMPF differ substantially. The most striking fact is that in the PS, telic (mostly achievement) and atelic types are evenly balanced; this is at odds with the NIMPF showing limited compatibility with atelic utterances.¹⁰

Table 2. Aktionsart profiles of the PS and NIMPF, 20th c.

Aktionsart	PS (Frantext sub-corpus)	NIMPF (Bres corpus)
Achievement	45%	81%
Accomplishment	5%	6%
Atelic event	50%	13%

Given that the NIMPF is distinctly closer to perfective tenses than to imperfective ones (the latter strongly disfavour telic utterances, especially achievements), its low compatibility with atelic verbs might well stem from a weaker than perfective capability to coerce atelic event predicates into change-of-state ones, especially through inchoative readings. This would explain why it contrasts with the PS in this respect, while contrasting even more with imperfective viewpoint tenses. Indeed, when a tense cannot easily coerce some Aktionsart class, then it is infrequent with it (Caudal 2020).

I will therefore suggest that the aspectual interpretation of the NIMPF (a) should naturally combine with telic events but (b) does not possess coercion capability on a par with that of the PS to handle atelic event predicate types.¹¹ It can (marginally)

⁹ *Bona fide* imperfective viewpoint tenses, whether past or present, are known to be skewed in favor of atelic utterances, as these naturally meet their aspectual selectional restrictions. See Caudal & Bednall (2022:21) for a discussion. In some languages, imperfective tenses even completely reject telic utterances – cf. e.g., the Murrinhpatha past imperfective (Nordlinger & Caudal 2012).

¹⁰ A similar foray conducted with the PR also yielded interesting results – namely a massive skewing towards atelic utterances, representing 93% of utterances, while telic verbs (almost exclusively achievement denoting utterances) only count for 7% of PR utterances – most of them with so-called ‘narrative present’ uses. Aktionsart percentages found with the non-narrative uses of the IMPF in the 20th c. Frantext corpus, are comparable to that of the present tense – again, massively unlike the NIMPF.

¹¹ Following Caudal (2020), I take inchoative readings of the PS to be part of its conventionalized readings; the relevant coercion function is a separate, conventionalized reading of the PS. In contrast, coercion functions encoding the inchoative readings of atelic

trigger inchoative readings with atelic utterances, but those are *de facto* found either with overt support material helping bringing about a coerced reading (e.g., with temporal connectives or framing adverbials, cf. *le soir même* ‘that very night’ in (9)), and/or in contexts with right-node-raising, i.e., VP juxtaposition, pointing to a strongly coherent causal referential chain. Such contexts evidently favour a change-of-state predicate, inchoative interpretation by integrating world-knowledge and discourse relations, which contrive to tell us that in (10), the stative verb *savait*_{IMPF} (‘know-3sg.IMPF’) must receive an inchoative reading.

- (9) Maupassant (1908:75)
Elle le vit_{PS}, se montra_{PS}, sourit_{PS}. Le soir même, il était_{IMPF} son amant.¹²
‘She saw him, showed herself, smiled.... That very night, he became her lover’
- (10) Tasmowski-De Rijck (1985:61)
Le soir même, l’ayant suivie, il pénétrait_{IMPF} derrière elle dans un coquet petit magasin, savait_{IMPF} ainsi qu’elle était_{IMPF} la fleuriste du bord et lui commandait_{IMPF} un bouquet d’œillets.
‘That same evening, having followed her, he entered a pretty little shop behind her, discovered [lit. ‘knew’] that she was the local florist and ordered a bouquet of carnations from her.’

From the above development we can conclude that the NIMPF has some perfective-like properties, but that it cannot possibly denote a full-fledged perfective viewpoint similar to that of the PS or PC: it has a lesser inchoative coercion capability.

3.3. Synchronic evidence (II): why the NIMPF does not involve any viewpoint function applying to the denotation of a verb

Let us now focus in greater detail on the so-far elusive aspectual contribution of the NIMPF. I will argue that in order to do so, we must resort to the concept of *event boundedness*. Following Caudal & Bednall (2022:4–55), I will define *bounded event predicates* as denoting an event whose runtime is comprised within (or identical to) the reference time interval (i.e., initial and final points are encompassed within the topic time interval) – cf. the rough Klein-Kratzer-style notation in (11) –¹³ and *unbounded event predicates* as denoting an event whose runtime strictly encompasses the reference time interval – cf. (12). (Un)boundedness is a lower level, event structural category than aspectual viewpoint, and can be construed in tenseless clauses where no viewpoint meaning is grammatically expressed, cf. (13).

NIMPF utterances are not conventionalized elements of the semantics of this tense use; they require some other material to introduce said coercion functions.

¹² This specific example has been argued to be ambiguous – with a possibly ‘standard IMPF’, non-inchoative reading of *était son amant*; cf. e.g. Berthonneau & Kleiber (1999:161).

¹³ In effect, such a notation is imperfect, see e.g., the notion of event maximality in Homer (2021); see also Altshuler (2019). Bounded utterances are maximal, in the sense that the onset and closure of their runtime correspond to the maximal interval coverable by the propositional content of the clause (under topic time); in other words, the event must have started and then ceased. Unbounded utterances are not maximal – their runtime is not expected to have an identifiable onset and closure.

- (11) $\lambda P\lambda x.e[\text{Bounded}(P)\leftrightarrow(P(e)(x)\wedge\tau(e)\subseteq t]$
- (12) $\lambda P\lambda x.e[\text{Unbounded}(P)\leftrightarrow(P(e)(x)\wedge t\subset\tau(e)]$
- (13) “The lover’s gaze”, *Chicago reader*, 27-04-2000, F. Camper, (<https://chicagoreader.com/film/the-lovers-gaze/>)
[...] Warhol watched him sleep for eight hours.

The boundedness vs. unboundedness distinction closely aligns with the perfective vs. imperfective viewpoint distinction, in that perfective viewpoints only apply to *bounded event predicate-denoting utterances*, whereas imperfective viewpoints apply to *unbounded event predicate-denoting utterances* – (un)boundedness is an aspectual restriction of perfective vs. imperfective viewpoint functions over the event predicates they apply to. However, the two sets of categories should not be confused, as (a) aspectual viewpoints also have a higher level meaning, encompassing discourse contextual effects, whereas boundedness is a low level category, by itself deprived of such functions¹⁴ (Caudal & Bednall 2022, Caudal 2024), and (b) semantic types of viewpoints do not boil down to a simple perfective/imperfective opposition. At least partially perfect/resultative viewpoints (e.g., the English perfect or the French PC, cf. Gosselin 1999b:31) have a more complex relation to boundedness than perfective/imperfective viewpoints, and some verbal inflections appear to be underspecified or even vacuous with respect to viewpoint (cf. e.g., future tenses, or conditionals). In other words, (11)-(12) are not *sufficient* properties to define the logical form (logical form being understood here à la Recanati 2010) of perfective vs. imperfective viewpoint functions.

Also, the respective temporal correlates of perfectivity vs. imperfectivity can help us understand why (un)boundedness also interacts with temporal anchoring. (14)-(15) spells out the temporal effects of perfectivity (present anchoring is ruled out) vs. imperfectivity (no restriction at all), and associates them with potential discursive constraints. Condition $\tau(e) < \text{now}$ in (14) indicates that perfectly viewed events must anchor to the past. This is a well-known effect of the so-called ‘perfective paradox’ (Malchukov 2009, De Wit 2016): an event must be past if its runtime is entirely validated (i.e., if the event is ‘seen’ in its entirety). If we take topic time t is set to the ‘now’ interval, then (14) implies that some event is *de facto* over (it is ‘seen’ in its entirety). Therefore, it must be past: t cannot refer to the ‘now’ interval in (14) (but it can refer to *future* intervals, though – as can some so-called ‘perfective’ derivational aspectual morphology in some languages, De Wit 2016).

- (14) $\lambda P\lambda x.e[\text{Perfective_viewpoint}(P)\rightarrow [\text{Bounded}(P) \wedge \tau(e) < \text{now} \wedge \text{discourse_conditions}]]$
- (15) $\lambda P\lambda x.e[\text{Imperfective_viewpoint}(P)\rightarrow [\text{Unbounded}(P) \wedge \text{discourse_conditions}]]$

¹⁴ As an aspectual parameter, boundedness can be exploited during the processing of discourse-level interpretations, but it does not automatically attach to such interpretations, unlike say, viewpoint aspect, which has innate discursive effects Caudal & Roussarie (2005).

Interestingly, in languages with viewpoint-vacuous syntactic domains – i.e. tenseless languages, or languages with so-called ‘zero-tenses’ (Caudal & Bednall 2022) – boundedness can determine past temporal anchoring, much like perfectivity (Caudal & Bednall 2022). However, (un)boundedness itself cannot impose the kind of discursive conditions found in (14)-(15).

Armed with the concept of (un)boundedness, we can first demonstrate that NIMPF utterances cannot contribute a *bona fide* imperfective viewpoint nor an unbounded meaning at the sentence level. As observed in many works (see e.g., Gosselin 1999, Caudal & Veters 2003, Caudal, Veters & Roussarie 2003, Bres 2005a, among others), the NIMPF can combine with adverbials denoting functions over bounded event predicates, e.g. *pendant* <+precise duration>, or any other precise duration adverbial, cf. *quelques instants* ‘for a few moments’ in (16). While such adverbials are generally considered to directly select perfective viewpoints (Molendijk 1990, Veters 1996), I will rather treat them as functions over unbounded event predicates, but yielding bounded event predicates – which of course, constrain what kind of viewpoint can apply to an utterance modified with such expressions. Thus in (16), if the NIMPF denoted an imperfective viewpoint, then definition (15) should apply to the result of the application of the denotation of *quelques instants* to the event predicate denoted by *les deux hommes erraient*. Which would cause a conflict: *quelques instants* must yield a bounded event, thereby triggering (11), whereas (15) requires (12) to apply (the event should be unbounded). As (16) can only denote a bounded event predicate, denoting a single event (an iterated, pluractional reading is ruled out in this NIMPF context), (15) cannot apply. This definitely suggests that a NIMPF utterance cannot involve an imperfective viewpoint function, nor denote an unbounded event predicate.

(16) Souvestre & M Allain (1987:68), in Gosselin (1999:23).

Les deux hommes erraient_{NIMPF} ainsi quelques instants, gênés, bousculés.

‘The two men wandered for a few moments, as fellow passengers jostled and got in their way.’

Bres (2005a:11) argues that utterances like (16) are frowned upon by most speakers, and at best, represent quasi-deviant readings; he takes this alleged property to be an indication that the NIMPF denotes an imperfective viewpoint operating at the sentence-level semantics. The argument does not sound very convincing, given that such combinations are found in completely mundane texts such as sport reports. And ‘parsing’ difficulties may merely signal some difficulty with a contextual accommodation (see e.g., the experimental literature on coercion, whether aspectual or other; cf. e.g., Piñango & Deo 2015, Paczynski, Jackendoff & Kuperberg 2014), not necessarily the kind of ‘dissonance’ Bres has in mind.

Let us now turn to the second (and more important) bone of contention concerning the viewpoint contribution of the NIMPF, namely its combination with the *déjà* adverbial particle. Utterances similar to (17) have been repeatedly claimed to involve an imperfective viewpoint reading, and to constitute a knock-down argument favouring the view that NIMPF utterances involve a sentence semantics-level imperfective viewpoint function (at least in such cases), cf. e.g., Saussure & Sthioul (1999), Bres (1999). As is intuitively visible in the translation provided in (17), these

observations are in fact at odds with the rather peculiar reading of *déjà* in NIMPF utterances.

Going against the Bres/Saussure & Sthioul analysis of such data, I will argue that in a NIMPF utterance such (17), due to *Narration* being established between π_2 and its attachment segment π_1 (and I take the use of such a discourse relation to be a necessary contextual feature of the NIMPF), *déjà* bears on a bounded event predicate, with a perfective-like reading – which is perfectly compatible with *déjà* conveying a sudden/quick temporal succession¹⁵. Note that under the Bres/Saussure & Sthioul analysis, e_{π_2} would be seen as unbounded, therefore it should be possible for e_{π_2} to overlap with e_{π_1} . But this is contradicted by our world-knowledge: Cottard started running after spinning round (he would otherwise have tripped and fallen).

(17) Camus (1947:253), in Bres (2005a:11)

Mais, de l'ombre du couloir, deux hommes avaient surgi_{POP}. Tarrou eut_{ANT.PST}¹⁶ à peine le temps d'entendre son compagnon demander ce que pouvaient_{IMPF} bien vouloir ces oiseaux-là. Les oiseaux [...] demandaient_{IMPF} en effet à Cottard s'il s'appelait_{IMPF} bien Cottard et celui-ci, poussant une sorte d'exclamation sourde, tournait_{IMPF} sur lui-même (π_1) et fonçait_{IMPF} (π_2) déjà dans la nuit sans que les autres, ni Tarrou, eussent_{SUBJ.IMPF}¹⁷ le temps d'esquisser un geste.
 'But two men had appeared from the shadows of the corridor. Tarrou barely had time to hear his companion ask what these birds wanted. The birds [...] were asking Cottard if his name was indeed Cottard and he, uttering a sort of muffled exclamation, spun round and immediately dashed off into the darkness, before the others or Tarrou had time to make a move.'

In NIMPF contexts like (17), *déjà* has a very different reading from its interpretation when combined with a *bona fide* 'standard', backgrounding reading of the IMPF, as found in (18). Within a NIMPF utterance (cf. (17)), the meaning of *déjà* can be rendered in English by e.g., 'immediately/suddenly/quickly', 'soon', 'before you knew it', but not by 'already'. Conversely, given a more mundane use of *déjà* with a standard IMPF utterance (18), it can be rendered by 'already', but not by 'immediately', *etc.*

(18) Frantext Corpus, Jean-Claude Izzo, *Total Khéops* (1995), p. 100

Quand je refis_{PS} (π_1) surface, il faisait_{IMPF} (π_2) déjà nuit.
 'When I regained my wits, it was already dark.'

Even more importantly, Bres/Sthiouhl & Saussure claim that since the denotation of *déjà* always select for an imperfective viewpoint function (including in NIMPF contexts such as (17)), it cannot combine with a verb in the PS, as the latter is

¹⁵ A strict temporal ordering $e_{\pi_1} < e_{\pi_2}$ holds and no imperfective viewpoint function is introduced by overt material, so a bounded reading of e_{π_2} must be inferred. I will take this to be an effect of the viewpoint-vacuous context this clause constitutes – see below.

¹⁶ ANT.PST indicates a past anterior (*passé antérieur*), double-past marking.

¹⁷ SUBJ.IMPF indicates a 'subjunctif imparfait', past counterfactual marking.

a perfective viewpoint tense.¹⁸ However, this empirical generalization is contradicted by observable combinations of the PS in corpus data, cf. (19)-(21). These examples reflect on the kind of interpretation *déjà* achieves in (17), which intuitively involves a quick succession of events (not just something like ‘sooner than expected’). Crucially, one can substitute the PS with the NIMPF in such examples – or with a present tense marking, which then receives a ‘narrative present’ interpretation (not an imperfective reading of that tense; this further suggests that the relevant event must have a bounded/perfective-like interpretation).

- (19) Frantext Corpus, René Grousset, *L'Épopée des croisades* (1939), p. 118
A hauteur de Lattaquié, ils se heurtèrent_{PS} déjà aux coureurs turcomans ‘When they reached Latakia, they suddenly came up against the Turkoman runners.’
[=immediately/suddenly/in no time]
- (20) Frantext Corpus, Dominique Arban, *Je me retournerai souvent... : souvenirs* (1990), p. 63
Pleine de colère je courus_{PS} vers eux, quelles fariboles cet homme racontait_{IMPF} il, faussant le vrai ? Et déjà j’entrevois_{PS} que nous avions été_{PQP}¹⁹ tous dupes [...].
‘Full of anger I ran towards them, what nonsense was this man telling, distorting the truth? And I immediately/suddenly realized that we had all been fooled.’
- (21) Frantext Corpus, William Faulkner, trad. Maurice-Edgar Coindreau - *Lumière d’août* (1935), p. 363
Ils s’approchèrent_{PS}, et on leur montra_{PS} divers endroits où le drap était_{IMPF} censé s’être trouvé, et quelques-uns qui avaient_{IMPF} leur revolver dans leur poche commencèrent_{PS} déjà à chercher une victime à crucifier.
‘They came too and were shown several different places where the sheet had lain, and some of them, having pistols in their pockets, immediately began to canvass about for someone to crucify.’

I take *déjà* to be a highly polysemous adverbial particle, whose semantic complexity has been somewhat descriptively overlooked in works dedicated to the NIMPF. I will propose that the above data illustrates two different uses of *déjà* (while others exist). The first use – certainly the most common – illustrated above in (18), is

¹⁸ See e.g., (Saussure & Sthioul 1999): “l’adverbe « déjà » [...] reste naturel avec l’imparfait narratif mais pas avec le passé simple.” In support of this claim, they propose the following minimal pair (acceptability judgement on (b) is theirs):

- (a) Le train quitta_{PS} Genève. Quelques heures plus tard, il entra_{IMPF} déjà en Gare de Lyon.
(b) Le train quitta_{PS} Genève. Quelques heures plus tard, il entra_{PS} ?déjà en Gare de Lyon.
‘The train left Geneva. Just a few hours later, it reached Gare de Lyon. [= earlier than expected/suddenly]

In light of examples **Error! Reference source not found.**-(21), their above judgement of (b) seems questionable, and so does the subsequent empirical generalization.

¹⁹ PQP here indicates a ‘plus-que-parfait’ marking.

most clearly rendered with ‘already’ in English. I will therefore refer to it as *déjà_{ALREADY}*. Here adopting Krifka’s (2000) analysis of the semantically similar English *already* (at least for this use of *déjà*), I will assume that *déjà_{ALREADY}* has an indirect (presuppositional or implicative) contrastive function, essentially conveying that the currently holding imperfective or imperfective resultative event (with a ‘present perfect’-like resultative reading of the PC in (24))²⁰ was validated unexpectedly early. The same propositional content should have held true at some alternative, subsequent world-time pair. In (22), the speaker is thus feeling hot earlier than she expected; in (23) the subject referent is forty ‘earlier than expected’, i.e., before becoming a father (the expectation was that he should be forty *after* becoming a father, not *before*), and in (24), the subject-referent was sated before she was expected to (i.e., had an early meal).

- (22) J’ai_{IMPF} déjà chaud.
‘I’m already feeling hot’.
- (23) Il avait_{IMPF} déjà quarante ans quand il est devenu père_{PC}.
‘He was already old when he [first] became a father.’
- (24) Elle a déjà mangé_{PC}.
‘She has already eaten’.

It must be stressed that the at-issue content of *déjà_{ALREADY}* is really aspectuo-temporal. According to Michaelis’s (1996) analysis of *already*, it can be described in (18) and (22)-(24) as conveying that some currently holding event started before the topic/reference time interval, i.e., it is ongoing/imperfectively perceived. And most importantly, the location of the onset time of the denoted event (whether imperfective or resultative imperfective) is left completely unspecified; it does not need to be in the vicinity of the topic/reference time interval. I.e., when exactly the subject agent started feeling hot in (22) or turned forty in (23), or ate/started being sated in (24) is a pure matter of world-knowledge. As a result, this use does not convey any notion of a quick, or relatively quick, succession of events.

The latter semantic characteristics of *déjà_{ALREADY}* is capital, as the other, different use of *déjà* illustrated above in (17) and (19)-(21), indicates on the contrary that the described event (a) is involved in a quick succession of events (the topic time and the runtime of the event must be close to one another) and (b) that its runtime is either incorporated in the topic/reference time interval or at least aligns reasonably well with it. Hence the ability of *déjà_{QUICKLY-SOON}* to surface with perfective viewpoint utterances in the PS – and I will argue, with NIMPF utterances (as well as e.g. ‘narrative present’ utterances). Such SOE-context uses of *déjà* are routinely translated by ‘quickly’, ‘immediately’, ‘suddenly’ and in French, it can be paraphrased by *aussitôt, derechef, soudain, bien vite...* I will refer to this use as *déjà_{QUICKLY-SOON}*.

A possibly identical use can be found with standard imperfective viewpoint interpretations of the IMPF, see e.g., (25). It generally appears within biclausal structures, for instance correlative-contrastive constructions meaning something like

²⁰ I am here following Caudal & Roussarie’s (2006) analysis of the PC as a mixed resultative-perfective tense, where its resultative uses are indeed partly imperfective in nature – much like the English present perfect in standard British English.

‘as soon as’, ‘no sooner than’ – *et* cannot be omitted in (25), nor can *déjà* appear in a different syntactic position; this is a correlative construction. Its meaning is often either inchoative, or near inchoative, in the sense that the described event must have started either at the onset of the current reference time interval, or only shortly before its onset.²¹ It might therefore be regarded as an imperfective variant of *déjà*_{QUICKLY-SOON}.

(25) Example adapted from <https://www.linguee.fr>

Je partis_{PS} donc à la recherche de sponsors, j’en trouvai_{PS} quelques-uns et déjà, il était_{IMPF} temps pour moi de reprendre le travail.

‘So, I searched for sponsors, and no sooner had I found some than it was time for me to go back to work.’

*Déjà*_{QUICKLY-SOON} is often found with *déjà* in left-dislocated positions (25), i.e., a position naturally associating with a higher semantic scope.²² I believe this is in line with its strong contrastive status, i.e., an information structure-level type of function²³. Such a position can also be occupied by temporal framing expressions, then endowed with a stronger contrastive function as well. *Déjà*_{QUICKLY-SOON} seems in effect to behave like a framing temporal adverbial, both semantically and syntactically. Conversely, *déjà* meaning *déjà*_{ALREADY} cannot always occupy such a position, cf. (26)-(27), as a contrastive reading can then be more difficult, or impossible to accommodate.²⁴

(26) #/?Déjà, j’ai chaud.²⁵

(27) #/?/?Déjà, elle a mangé.

²¹ Biclausal structures associating with this use of *déjà* can be found with overt subordinate temporal correlative markers (*à peine ... que déjà...* ‘no sooner... than...’), or indeed concessive/contrastive connectives such as e.g., *mais* ‘but’, *pourtant* ‘yet’, *cependant* ‘however/nevertheless’, or other concessive expressions (*malgré/en dépit de cela* ‘in spite of this’). All of these bi-propositional structures directly exploit the contrastive, information structure-level meaning here attached to *déjà*.

²² A precursor of this idea can be found in Gosselin (1999), where it is argued that *déjà* in NIMPF utterances scopes at the utterance level, not the clause level. Bres (2005a) strongly rejected such a view (“comment *déjà* pourrait-il avoir pour incidence syntaxique non le verbe, ou la phrase, mais l’ensemble de l’énoncé ?”), but I believe the present analysis vindicates Gosselin’s intuition.

²³ Unsurprisingly, *déjà* with a similar reading can be combined with temporal framing expressions to mean something like ‘as early as’ (cf. *hier déjà* ‘as early as yesterday’), or to durative expressions corresponding to *since / for* structures in English, with an ‘earlier than expected’ mirative meaning (cf. *depuis longtemps déjà*, *depuis hier déjà*, etc.) – all expressions with a potentially contrastive function when used in the left periphery.

²⁴ Left-dislocated *déjà* within these two utterances is only compatible with another distinct use of this particle. It is an even higher level, i.e., illocutionary/argumentative kind of use, commonly rendered in English by ‘first’, or ‘to begin with’. It signals an initial (and partial) response to some question or objection previously uttered by the addressee.

²⁵ Using an IMPF marking would definitely improve this example; however, in such a case, it would distinctly entail that the speaker had just started feeling hot – i.e., we would be confronted with a *déjà*_{QUICKLY-SOON} interpretation.

Pre-formally, the semantics of *déjà*_{QUICKLY-SOON} can be characterized as involving a short temporal distance²⁶ between the runtime of the relevant event, and the runtime of some prior (not subsequent – this is an extensional, not intensional use of *déjà*) contextually determined anchoring event. In SOE contexts, the anchoring event is determined by the attachment site of e.g., *Narration* (for instance, $e_{\pi 1}$ anchors $e_{\pi 2}$ in (17)). With imperfective uses, the anchoring interval will typically be part of the runtime of a pre-state à la Asher & Lascarides (2003), corresponding to the negation of the currently holding event, e.g., a previous state of the subject referent not having to go back to work in (25); *déjà* indicates a (relatively) quick transition into the novel state.

Let us now take stock and conclude section §0. It appears that although the NIMPF seems to associate with bounded readings of events (which makes it similar to the PS, or a narrative use of the present), it does not possess a full-fledge perfective viewpoint meaning – its diachronic and synchronic semantic properties distinguish it from e.g., the PS and PC in some important respects. Most notably, its ability to give rise to inchoative readings is too limited for it to associate with an actual perfective viewpoint. On the other hand, it cannot denote an imperfective viewpoint either, as its Aktionsart profile is at odds with such tenses, and it does not appear to combine with imperfective-viewpoint adverbial modifiers (it was shown that its alleged combination with *déjà*_{ALREADY} was most likely some analytical red herring). We are therefore just left with the notion that the NIMPF requires a bounded event reading, which makes its aspectual effects somewhat akin to those of a perfective viewpoint ...but without being quite like one. To put it short, the NIMPF determines event boundedness without involving a perfective viewpoint.

Now these semantic properties of the NIMPF are oddly reminiscent of so-called ‘zero tenses’, i.e., aspectuo-temporally vacuous tenses. Let us consider for instance the Anindilyakwa zero-tense Caudal & Bednall (2022). Under its past interpretation, it has an Aktionsart profile very similar to that of the NIMPF (it is massively skewed towards achievement utterances; inchoative readings of stative utterances are possible, but remain marginal and require additional material, i.e., a strong SOE context), while its present interpretation is akin to the Aktionsart profile of an imperfective tense, as its present readings must involve unbounded events, and achievement utterances are excluded.²⁷ This is due to the fact that in the absence of specific viewpoint information, boundedness determines the aspectual (and temporal) meaning of this tense. I will argue that at the sentence-level semantics, the NIMPF

²⁶ Of course, what counts as a short temporal distance is highly context-dependent, and involves world knowledge-based, granularity effects, sensitive to our temporal expectations (canonical duration, typical temporal distances in causal chains/scripts...) about the relevant event predicate.

²⁷ One can also think of the aspectual ‘vacuousness’ of the French future (Smith 1991) – if we take the future to denote a modal anchored in the present, under the scope of a present imperfective viewpoint aspectuo-temporal function (see Caudal 2012b), then event predicates under the scope of the modal will be ‘sheltered’ from the viewpoint function denoted by the future. This is also a scope-related type of aspectual neutrality, caused by the following scope hierarchy: $\text{TEMPORAL}_{\text{function}} > \text{ASPECT.VIEWPOINT}_{\text{function}} > \text{MODAL}_{\text{function}} > \text{AKTIONSART}_{\text{function}}$. Note that Gosselin’s (1999) and Bonami’s (2002) analyses of iterative/habitual readings of the IMPF assume that its aspectual meaning does not scope directly over the event predicate – so in a sense, the present proposal is not isolated.

also exhibits viewpoint deficiency or ‘vacuousness’ – hence its more limited ability to coerce atelic utterances into inchoative ones, much like a zero-tense. In other words, I propose that the NIMPF cannot introduce any actual viewpoint function in the sentence-level semantics *via* the morphosyntax to semantics interface.

4. Why the NIMPF contributes an imperfective aspectual imperfective... at the discourse level

Yet, I will not suggest that the viewpoint meaning of the NIMPF has altogether vanished; the NIMPF is not truly viewpoint-less. I will instead hypothesize that (i) its imperfective viewpoint meaning applies at a higher interpretative level, namely, discourse semantics, and (ii) that the semantics/pragmatics interface explains why it nevertheless requires bounded readings of relevant event predicates at the sentence semantics-level (and therefore may be taken to resemble the PS to some extent – my position makes it like a special kind of imperfective viewpoint, with limited perfective-like features; its aspectual semantics is almost ‘dual’, or ‘split’). Section §0 will precisely aim at substantiating this hypothesis, by demonstrating that the imperfective meaning of the NIMPF is in fact part of an original conventional speech act-level contribution ascribed to this (conventionalized) tense use, thereby solving the ‘vacuous viewpoint puzzle’ of §0. But before proceeding to establishing this fact, I will introduce the SDRT theoretical notion of discourse topic, as it will underpin much of my argumentation.

4.1. SDRT topics: modelling discourse relations and framing adverbials

It is a foundational assumption of the SDRT framework that discourse structure, including in narratives, should crucially involve a notion of *discourse* topic; a concept to be distinguished from that of *sentential* topic. A discourse topic can intuitively be seen as a narrative correspondent of the dynamic concept of the QuD (*Question under Discussion*) (Roberts 2011). Within a narrative, a topic constitutes an ‘event sub-episode’ – a coherent referential chain of events, if you will. Although discursive topic vs. sentential topic are different concepts, they nevertheless interact, and several meaningful parallelisms should be drawn between them. Both can be sensitive to sentence-level or discourse-level expressions, notably those endowed with a *frame-setting function*, or those encoding a *contrastive* function (Hinterwimmer 2011). It is obvious that sentential topic information conveyed by e.g., nominal expressions (definite NPs vs. pronouns, deictics...) should contribute to the management of topical (disc)continuity, and interact with the specifically discursive concept of topic continuity, but I cannot explore this issue here for want of space.

The concept of discourse topic predates the SDRT understanding of it, and can be traced back to functionalists approaches to text structure. Kuppevelt (1995) introduces a notion of topic continuity vs. discontinuity, which I will use here for descriptive purposes, and which can be captured within the SDRT framework by treating discourse topics as discourse referents – these can form different discourse referential chains signalling referential ‘shifts’ in discourse (see Asher 2004; Vieu et al. 2005 for a discussion).

The SDRT framework treats discourse topics as abstract discourse referents to which one or several topically coherent discourse units should be subordinated, *via* a *Topic* discourse relation. Discourse segments related *via* the rhetorical relation *Narration* thus must constitute a narratively coherent sequence of events (SOE). To capture this fact, Asher & Lascarides (2003:163) first proposed that axiom (28) should apply in the Logic of Information Content component of the framework (by and large, the sentence-level, compositional semantics) whenever *Narration* is computed between two discourse segments α and β (with α being the attachment site for novel segment β). (28) indicates that the content of the underlying DRSs contingently has a non-empty intersection, as \sqcap calculates the common content of two formulas. Essentially, the idea is that the bigger this common content is, the more coherent *Narration* will be. (29) is a discourse structural axiom, applying within the Logic of Information Packaging (i.e., as the discourse semantics and pragmatics level). It rather proposes that a topic referent – here γ – is monotonically introduced by the *Narration* relation when it attaches some novel segment β to the discourse context τ , at the attachment site (= discourse segment) α .

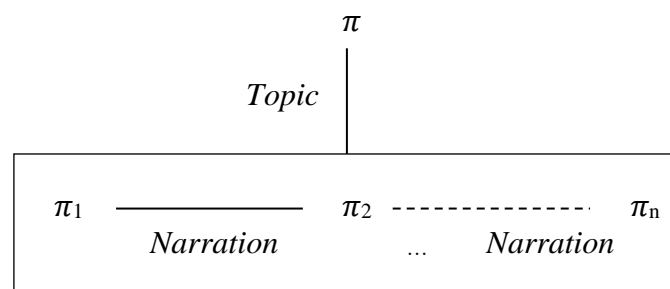
$$(28) \quad \phi_{Narration(\alpha,\beta)} \Rightarrow \neg \square(K_\alpha \sqcap K_\beta)$$

$$(29) \quad \langle \tau, \alpha, \beta \rangle \wedge Narration(\alpha, \beta) \rightarrow \exists \gamma (Topic(\gamma, \alpha) \wedge Topic(\gamma, \beta)) \text{ (Bras, Le Draoulec \& Vieu 2003)}$$

Note that while *Narration* is a coordinating rhetorical relation, *Topic* is a subordinating one – (29) indicates that both α and β are dominated by topic referent γ (which is a morpho-phonologically silent discourse referent, only belonging with the discourse structural representation).

See Figure 1 for a visual representation of a generalized topic structure π configuration encompassing n discourse segments: after the ‘bootstrapping’ discourse referent, namely segment π_1 , additional segments $\pi_2 \dots \pi_n$ are subsequently added to the same discourse topic by *Narration* (other relations may hold). I define the concept of ‘bootstrapping referent’ as the left-most discourse referent in a topic structure; as we will see, it can be elliptic at the onset of a narrative ‘in media res’. π itself can be implicit, or it can be linguistically realized by temporal expressions, framing adverbials in particular – they can induce either a complete topic change, or have a topical anaphoric function (they integrate the current topic within a previously introduced topic; see the concept of ‘topic pop’ in Vieu et al. 2005).

Figure 1. *Narration* and discourse topic



4.2. Forward shifting framing adverbials and the NIMPF: opening up a new narrative episode...or offering an open-ended narrative closure

Let us now turn to a review of empirical evidence supporting the hypothesis made above that the NIMPF scopes at a higher, discourse semantic level. As forward shifting temporal adverbials are one of the most commonly found types of NIMPF support expression, it makes sense to begin our discursive investigations with them. (30) (which repeats (9)) is a well-known example of NIMPF introduced by a framing adverbial. It has been argued in the literature²⁸ that segment π_5 can receive two distinct aspectual readings, here revealed *via* two different translations: translation #1 renders an inchoative-like NIMPF reading, whereas translation #2 (followed by metalinguistic comment [=already]) renders an imperfective interpretation ascribing it a standard, backgrounding reading.²⁹

(30) Maupassant (1908:75)

Elle le vit_{PS} (π_1), se montra_{PS} (π_2), sourit_{PS} (π_3). Le soir même, il était_{IMPF} son amant (π_4).

‘She saw him (π_1), showed herself (π_2), smiled (π_3). That very night...’

1. ‘...he became her lover (π_4).’ OR

2. ‘...he was her lover (π_4).’ [=already].

If e_{π_5} in (30) is taken to constitute a punctual, inchoative change-of-state event whose runtime is merely cotemporal with (not embedded within) the temporal interval denoted by *à six heures* (‘at six o’clock’), then π_4 receives a NIMPF reading and translation #1 prevails. If the framing adverbial *le soir même* (‘that very night’) is understood as temporally embedded within the runtime of e_{π_4} , then e_{π_4} is a backgrounded, imperfective event, and π_5 receives an IMPF reading. However, the latter reading seems less natural; the π_1 , π_2 and π_3 sequence indicates that Irma has actively sought to attract Epivent’s attention,³⁰ so that *il était son amant* conveys a change-of-state resulting from said seduction efforts. Additionally, the forward shifting framing adverbial *le soir même* (‘that very night’) reinforces a reading whereby e_{π_4} is a (temporally posterior) consequence of Irma’s previously described actions – we are looking at a continuous caudo-temporal chain. The most coherent interpretation has *Result* relating π_4 to the narrative topic encompassing π_1 , π_2 and π_3 . *Occasion*, *Result* or *Narration*-introduced event referential chains (as found in NIMPF or PS, or PC, or PR-marked SOEs) are known to impose caudo-temporal or scriptal³¹ event succession. If we assume that this a discursive requirement of NIMPF utterances, then this would impose a bounded reading on events they describe (an intuition at least partially shared by e.g., Bres, Gosselin and others in their work). In an example such as (30), a NIMPF interpretation obtains precisely because the framing, topic referent

²⁸ See e.g., Berthonneau & Kleiber (1999:161) and Peeters (2008).

²⁹ For the sake of clarity, the otherwise ambiguous simple past utterance in translation #2 is disambiguated with bracketed comment ‘[= already]’.

³⁰ (30) as a whole is of course is oddly reminiscent of Appian’s quotation of a phrase allegedly used in Caesar’s report to the Senate after his victory at Zela: *veni, vidi, vici*.

³¹ I am here referring to the SDRT *Occasion* discourse relation, involved in temporal sequences of events reflecting a causally contingent ordering – like preparatory steps in a world-knowledge-based procedure, cf. Asher & Lascarides (2003).

π_4 introduced by *le soir même* ('that very night'), and which encompasses π_5 , attaches to π_3 via *Narration* or *Result* – and these relations impose a strict temporal succession, and therefore an aspectually bounded reading of the novel discourse segment they introduce (though it is not associated with a perfective viewpoint *per se*, cf. §0) via relevant semantic axioms attached to narrative relations; see Caudal (2012a:285–286).

Such a configuration is extremely different from say (31), where, π_2 attaches to π_3 via a variant of *Background*. The communicative purpose of π_2 is not to emphasize the continuity of the current topical event chain; *deux heures plus tard* ('two hours later') introduces a discontinuity – the end of Jean's little outing. Darkness is a background state explaining why Jean decided to head back home at some point. As we can see, the discursive function of the 'standard' IMPF segment π_2 in (31) is quite different from that of the NIMPF segment π_5 in (30), even though both segments are introduced by a temporal framing adverbial.

- (31) Jean sortit_{PS} se promener (π_1). Deux heures plus tard, il faisait_{IMPF} déjà sombre (π_2). Jean décida_{PS} de rentrer (π_3).
 'Jean went out for a walk (π_1). Two hours later, it was already dark (π_2). Jean decided to head back (π_3).'

Let us now turn to the so-called 'open-ended' effect of the NIMPF at the end of a textual unit (paragraph, chapter, etc.).³² The last two lines of Maupassant's *Le lit 29* are reproduced in (32), but a variant – NIMPF utterance (b') departs from the original PS-marked (b) – is added. The discursive contrast between (33b) and (33b') is obvious: while the PS in (33b) can be taken to suggest that the novella is narratively complete, the NIMPF in (33b') clearly suggests that it is not. A similar datapoint is mentioned in Jahn (2022), cf. (33), where variant (b') in the PS could be read as indicating that the narrative episode at stake is complete, whereas NIMPF (b) clearly indicates an 'open ended' sequence.

- (32) Maupassant (1908:89)
 a. Il dégringola_{PS} l'escalier quatre à quatre (π_1), et courut_{PS} s'enfermer chez lui (π_2).
 b. Le lendemain, il apprit_{PS} qu'elle était_{IMPF} morte (π_3).
 b'. Le lendemain, il apprenait_{IMPF} (π_3) qu'elle était_{IMPF} morte.
 'He tumbled down the stairs four by four (π_1), and ran (π_2) into his house, where he locked himself. The next day, he learned (π_3) that she was dead.'
- (33) Zola (1868:283)
 a. Elle se laissa_{PS} frapper ainsi à en mourir (π_1).
 b. Le lendemain, elle faisait_{IMPF} une fausse couche (π_2).
 b'. Le lendemain, elle fit_{PS} une fausse couche (π_2).
 'She let herself be beaten to death. The next day, she miscarried.'

In (32), (π_3) seems to signal the onset of an series of events following from this ominous change-of-state, but leaves it open-ended, in a suspenseful manner – such uses have been dubbed *imparfaits de clôture* ('closure imparfait'). This contrasts with

³² Of course, whether said effect is auspicious or inauspicious depends on context.

π_4 – π_5 in (30), where the NIMPF introduces an open-ended event on which much of the rest of the novella will elaborate. When placed at the end of a sequence or text, a NIMPF utterance calls for further elaboration of the event it conveys. And this is why NIMPF utterances combined with forward-shifting framing adverbials are commonly found at the end of a narrative texts (32), or at least the end of a sub-episode within a narrative text (33), to achieve a ‘suspense’ effect, i.e., to trigger an expectation of continuation (cf. Peeters 2017 for a similar observation).

Vice versa, the PS can be used to mark the closure of a NIMPF sub-episode. Consider the following example, taken from a text recounting the semi-finals of the World Cup 1982 (France/Germany). Although (34) is in the PS, most PS inflections could be replaced with IMPF morphology, then receiving a NIMPF meaning. But strikingly, the last segment of the text cannot be a NIMPF – e_{π_3} is a long-distance, after effect of event chain $e_{\pi_1} - e_{\pi_2}$. π_3 must belong with a separate topic due to world-knowledge; but since a (N)IMPF marking requires it to be topically continuous with π_1 – π_2 , this causes a clear incoherence effect.

- (34) *Le Populaire du centre*, "1982 à Séville : Schumacher et Six, maudits à jamais", 03.07.2014 (https://www.lepopulaire.fr/limoges-87000/football/1982-a-seville-schumacher-et-six-maudits-a-jamais_11066884/)
En prolongations, [...] L'Allemagne égalisa_{PS} (π_1) grâce à Rummenigge et Fischer puis, aux tirs au but, Didier Six et Maxime Bossis ratèrent_{PS} (π_2) la cible. [Six] traîna_{PS} (π_3) ce raté comme un boulet jusqu'au bout de sa carrière. 'In extra time, Germany levelled (π_1) the score thanks to Rummenigge and Fischer, before Didier Six and Maxime Bossis missed the target in the shoot-out (π_2). Six dragged (π_3) that miss like a ball and chain for the rest of his career.'
- (35) En prolongations, [...] L'Allemagne égalisait_{IMPF} (π_1 ') grâce à Rummenigge et Fischer puis, aux tirs au but, Didier Six et Maxime Bossis rataient_{IMPF} (π_2 ') la cible. ?[Six] traînait_{IMPF} (π_3 ') ce raté comme un boulet jusqu'au bout de sa carrière.

Last but not least, the prevalence of framing and temporal forward shifting expressions as support material for the NIMPF further confirms the hypothesis that the NIMPF is tightly connected with the contextual management of discourse topics (cf. §0). The latter is evidently a key function of framing adverbials (Vieu et al. 2005, Asher, Prévot & Vieu 2007, Bras & Schnedecker 2013), as they can be used to either elaborate on an existing topic by introducing a novel sub-topic (cf. the concept of ‘topic pop’ in Vieu et al. 2005, which is at once a kind of *topic continuity* and *topic discontinuity*), or to introduce a completely novel topic (i.e. a ‘topic shift’ causing *topic discontinuity*). But it is evident from the above data, that the NIMPF by itself generally tends to emphasize topical continuity (including *qua* topic ‘pop’), even with framing adverbials. In contrast, the PS can more easily associate with a topic shift (but it does not always do so, of course). Caudal (2024) even goes as far as arguing that perfective viewpoint tenses differ from imperfective viewpoint tenses by their innate ability to introduce a discourse topic in the discourse structure; this hypothesis seems to at least relate to the present data and analysis – but I must leave a more detailed discussion of this question to future work.

4.3. ‘Headline’ NIMPF as a *narrative fragment* – a formulaic conventional usage to give readers/addressee a forestate of a larger narrative

Another frequent type of NIMPF configuration comes to mind, when considering how framing/temporal adverbials play the part of support material for the NIMPF – namely its widespread use in headlines of newspaper articles (Muller 1966, Tasmowski-De Rijck 1985, Vet 1996). Such articles systematically recount past events with some current relevance: anniversaries are obvious contexts (36), but any contextual link connecting the headline past event to some present situation can justify those uses. See (37), which entices readers to visit a museum recently opened inside a former WWII German base in France. But as observed in Gosselin (1999:31), headline NIMPFs can refer not only to an opening, topically ‘initial’ event (as in (37)), but also to a closing, final event (as in (36)), within a certain narrative episode. All such headlines are evidently based on a *pars pro toto* communicative strategy: the NIMPF denotes a sub-element of a larger topical episode.

- (36) *Le Monde*, 13.10.2017
https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/video/2017/10/13/panafricain-e-s-thomas-sankara-l-homme-integre_5200719_3212.html
 [Context: headline, followed by a subheadline]
 Thomas Sankara, l’homme intègre
 Le 15 octobre 1987, un commando assassina^{IMPf}, au Conseil de l’entente, le révolutionnaire burkinabé
 ‘Thomas Sankara: a man of integrity – On 15 October 1987, at the Conseil de l’entente, a commando assassinated the Burkinabe revolutionary’
- (37) *Ouest France – L’édition du soir*, 07.03.2024, p.11. (<https://www.ouest-france.fr/leditiondusoir/2024-03-07/il-y-a-80-ans-les-allemands-construisaient-cette-base-geante-pour-detruire-londres-depuis-la-france-dd5ecd34-2446-4f3b-95d6-0035450f8632>)
 Il y a 80 ans, les Allemands construisaient^{IMPf} cette base géante pour détruire Londres depuis la France. (*Ouest France*, 07-03-2024)
 ‘80 years ago, the Germans built this giant base to destroy London from France.’

In (36), the headline NIMPF signals that the global narrative topic of the paper is Sankara’s life achievements (leading up to his assassination), and the consequences of his premature death for his country. As an ‘opening’ NIMPF (onset of a new discourse topic), it indicates that further narrative segments expanding this narrative topic will follow – it is an intended signal for the addressee to expect subsequent narrative developments; see in particular Peeters (2017) for more on this idea. Such run-of-the-mill journalistic uses do not seem to have a testimonial or agent-perspective meaning; but they do signal how the addressee/reader should expect a particular narrative is going to unfold. They give a foretaste of the article’s narrative content.

It should be noted, as observed in Tasmowski-De Rijck (1985:65), that again, the PS cannot be substituted with the same interpretative effect in such utterances. If we use a PS or a PC in (36), the impression is that this example ceases to convey the topic of an article. It sounds like as self-contained aphorism in a timeline. Indeed, as

is stressed in Peeters (2017), the function of such opening NIMPFs (as in the title of a newspaper) is to *invite* the reader to read the article, by indicating (i) what the narrative topic of the following journalistic narrative will be, and (ii) letting it know that this is an *open-ended* topic-constituting speech act: in other words, that the addressee should expect a continuation of said speech act.

4.4. So-called ‘focalization’ or ‘vividness effect’ of the NIMPF, and narrative continuity

Given the data discussed in §0 and §0, it is hardly surprising that there is such a widespread agreement among linguists that the NIMPF signals continuity in discourse: see Gosselin (1999:28), Tasmowski-De Rijck (1985:67), Confais (1990:220), Bres (2005b:48), and Caudal & Veters (2003). Alongside with the latter reference, the clearest discussion of this phenomenon can be found in Jahn (2022:17–20). Jahn makes a crucial observation: whenever the NIMPF appears in combination with forward-shifting temporal (framing or not) adverbials,³³ this results (for the addressee) in a perception of a temporally fragmentary sequence of events, where some part of the overall SOE event chain is omitted. This is of course most salient at the onset of a NIMPF sequence, especially with a temporally forward shifting adverbial, and largely elliptic SOE, as in (38).

(38) Rolland (1967:200), in Caudal & Veters (2003)

Deux semaines après, on lui coupait_{NIMPF} (π_1) les deux jambes, et le deux février suivant, deux chevaux la menèrent_{PS} (π_2) au cimetière.

‘Two weeks later, both her legs were cut off, and on the following two February, two horses took her to the cemetery.’³⁴

(38) illustrates what is widely known as *narrative ellipsis*: the framing adverbials, by ‘forward shifting’ the narrative, leave out some events. But the respective effects of the NIMPF and the PS in such elliptic utterances are quite different: the NIMPF/adverbial combination results in a topic continuity effect in π_1 (it adds a subtopic to an existing, previous discourse topic, i.e., it’s a case of ‘topic pop’), whereas the PS results in a topic discontinuity in π_2 (the object referent has died in the meantime). There lies what I will refer to as the continuity paradox: it is all the more necessary to stress topical continuity in a narrative, that the narrative is elliptic. In other words, the more SOEs/sub-episodes are ‘patchy’ (because some causal relations are omitted, etc.), the more the association of the NIMPF with its support material comes in handy as a means of ‘bridging’ some temporal/narrative gaps, by actually signalling that continuity prevails (this contrasts with the constant possibility of a topic discontinuity with the perfective viewpoint meaning of PS³⁵).

³³ I believe this can also be true of other types of support material, but I will not discuss this issue here for want of space.

³⁴ Note the use of the PS in π_2 , which indicates that there is no ‘suspenseful’, open-ended closure to this sub-episode: the subject is well and truly dead, and the relevant discourse topic has no further continuation.

³⁵ I believe one can liken this discourse topic property of perfective viewpoint tenses, to that of referential expressions in sentence topic management; cf. e.g., Schnedeker (2005);

It is no accident the NIMPF has often been described as a past equivalent of the narrative *présent* (cf. e.g., Confais 1990:220, Gosselin 1999:31–32), as it shares with this use of the French present tense a number of important discourse contextual properties. Descriptively, most sequences of NIMPF (except those with certain past temporal adverbials, and so-called ‘closure’ instances of NIMPF with an ‘open ended narrative’ flavor, cf. (32)) can be substituted *salva veritate* with *narrative présent* (NPR, henceforth) sequences (cf. the discussion of examples (19)–(21) in §0). The *narrative présent* (NPR) is a much better equivalent of the NIMPF than the PS in many respects, and it exhibits the same degree of ‘temporal vividness’ – intuitively, ‘vivid’ narratives in the NIMPF and the NPR exhibit a troubling degree of aspectual ‘ongoingness’ of a narration (for the NIMPF) – hence an impression of greater proximity, sometimes (this goes hand in hand with an effect of quick sequence).

A notorious theoretical attempt at capturing this ‘vividness’ property can be found in Saussure & Sthioul (1999, 2005), treating the NIMPF as a case of *focalization* – a concept they borrow from Genette (1972), and which has been used in other accounts of the NIMPF (see Patard 2018:12–13 for a discussion). It is crucial to note that Saussure & Sthioul (1999, 2005) adopt the primarily deictic/logophoric, agent perception related dimension of Genette’s original concept. As a perspectival concept, it is most clearly illustrated by free indirect speech uses, to which Saussure & Sthioul (1999, 2005) essentially liken NIMPF interpretations.

Saussure & Sthioul’s (1999, 2005) analysis requires that the NIMPF either (i) signals a shift in the ‘origo’ of speech acts – i.e., it cannot be the agent or controller of an NIMPF verb –, perceptions or thoughts (in which case a specific subjective perspective can be reconstructed from textual cues, and the focalization is ‘internal’) or (ii) if it doesn’t, the NIMPF signals a so-called ‘external focalization’, i.e. as an ‘objective’ perspective external to that of textually salient agents/characters (this is notably how Saussure & Sthioul explain its use in sport reports). I will exclude the latter concept from the present discussion, treating it instead as a case of non-focalization (Patard 2018:12 also lumps together ‘external’ focalization and non-focalization) – it is often empirically difficult to distinguish from non-focalization.³⁶

For want of space, I cannot present here a detailed critique of their view; but I will refer the reader to prior works listing some empirical and theoretical difficulties encountered by such an approach, especially Bres (2003:60–62), Caudal & Vettors (2003:113–114) and Patard (2018:10–12). It is notably observed in those works that in fact, neither the PS nor the IMPF can be assigned specific functions in terms of ‘focalization’. In particular, it is clear that both the PS and IMPF can mark both focalization and non-focalization, and more generally, that the focalization / non-focalization distinction does not neatly align with tense uses. If the above references are correct in their critique (and I believe they are), the NIMPF can be at most regarded as contingently helping with establishing focalization effects, but it is not one of its essential interpretative effects. Rather, focalization *à la* Genette (1972) hinges on a

they can more readily serve the purpose of indicating some topic shift. See Caudal (2024) for further details.

³⁶ See Patard (2018:12). for a discussion, and some references making a similar point. Also, the very fact that the NIMPF has become the ‘go to’, default option for sport reports, suggests it cannot have such a marked, elaborate communicative function. The NIMPF is so prevalent in sport reports that its marking ‘external focalization’ seems rather unlikely.

myriad linguistic and extralinguistic cue; therefore, it should not be regarded as an essential question for a linguistic theory of the NIMPF.

Instead, I will suggest that it (grammatically) conveys the speaker's *meta narrative* intention to signal that a particular narrative sequence is 'ongoing', and that it is informationally incomplete.³⁷ Consider the following minimal pair, inspired by Ducrot (1979):

(39) L'année suivante, il déménageait.
The year following he move.out.3SG.IMPF.
'The following year, he moved to a new place'.

(40) L'année suivante, il a déménagé.
The year following he move.out.3SG.PC.
'The following year, he moved to a new place'.

As noted by Ducrot, (39) contrasts with (40) in a significant way, interpretatively, although English translations do not make this perceptible. Ducrot observes that contrary to (40), (39) does not convey a simple relocation event, but points to an implicit complexity in how it took place. There is a clear expectation that a series of related events are yet to be described, and that the speaker is going to elaborate: maybe works had to be done to prepare the subject referent's new lodgings, maybe this is alluding to some important follow up events. In other words, (39) is narratively and informationally presented as incomplete. As we have seen above, when appearing at the onset of a narrative episode, such uses have sometimes been dubbed *imparfait d'ouverture* ('opening *imparfait*'), cf. Gosselin (1999:30–32), Peeters (2017). This is clearly not so in (40), which can be perceived as narratively complete due to the PC marking (a PS marking would have exactly the same effect, of course).

4.5. A pre-formal theoretical proposal: the NIMPF as an imperfective viewpoint operating over speech act functions and their underlying speech act events

In light of the observations made in §0, §0, §0 and §0, and inspired by intuitions put forth in Peeters (2017),³⁸ I will hypothesize that the NIMPF denotes properties of (*narrative*) *communicative acts*, i.e. performs discourse-level operations intended for the addressee's benefit. The main discursive functions of the NIMPF I have identified in this section are the following:

- (i) Intuitions about so-called 'focalization', 'vividness' effects of the NIMPF, derive from it indicating that the speaker's perception of the flow of events is partial, it is immersed within an 'ongoing' narrative act

³⁷ I believe that this might largely account for the so-called 'vividness'/'focalization' flavour of some NIMPF utterances: an imperfective immersion into an ongoing speech act by the speaker can intuitively invite perspectival effects (although additional linguistic and contextual cues are needed in the first place for them to hold).

³⁸ Peeters (2017) stresses that what he describes as focalization effects in his analysis of the NIMPF, is not so much a perspectival matter, as one relating to the overt manifestation of the speaker's communicative strategy. I believe it is best captured by treating the NIMPF as a *speech act-level marker*.

- (ii) At the onset of an episode, or if it signals some initial event within a topical sequence in headlines (cf. (37)), the NIMPF calls for subsequent narrative elaborations – as if some narration act had just started, and was presented as being open, i.e., unbounded; this again, points to an ongoing narrative act
- (iii) At the closure of an episode, the NIMPF conveys an ‘open-ended’ narrative; this is a third configuration in which it signals an unbounded, and therefore unfinished, narrative act

I believe that all of the above discursive effects can be derived from a single technical move: I will surmise that NIMPF is a separate conventionalized use of the IMPF (homonymous to the standard IMPF, if you will), such that the imperfective aspectual viewpoint it contributes operates over a speech act-level event predicate. It never takes at its input the event predicate denoted by the verb it marks – hence the ‘viewpoint vacuousness’ effects of the NIMPF at the sentence semantics-level (cf. §0). I will argue that rhetorical relations à la SDRT are an obvious candidate for implementing this idea. However, within the SDRT framework, discourse relations are taken to be functions over speech act referents. They have canonical form $R(\alpha, \beta)$, where R is some yet unknown discourse relation, α the attachment segment, and β the novel segment to be attached to α via R (within some context τ). They do not associate any event variable with a speech act function – i.e., R is not an event predicate. I will argue that there lies an obvious addition we should make to their denotation: rhetorical relations should rather be functions with form $R(e, \alpha, \beta)$. *Narration* would thus constitute a speech act function conveying something like ‘speaker introduces a narrative, SOE speech act event-denoting function between novel segment β and segment α , and this speech act is spatiotemporally realized by event e ’. And intuitively, if we take the NIMPF imperfective to somehow bear on the event predicate dimension of a speech act function, then this neatly captures its ‘ongoing/informationally incomplete/vivid/open-ended narrative’ meronymic effects. This is tantamount to shifting its ordinary ‘part-of’ aspectual function from the sentence semantics-level (Altshuler 2014) to a higher, illocutionary level.

Following Caudal (2024), I will hypothesize that the topic continuity effect of the NIMPF originates in its being an imperfective tense lacking the ability to introduce a topic referent directly – cf. the classic intuition found in Partee (1973) that imperfective tenses are *anaphoric* expressions, whereas perfective viewpoint tenses are more like *referential* expressions. Such a discursive update can only be performed by topic-denoting expressions such as e.g., framing adverbials, in connection with axioms attached to narrative discourse relation. See for instance example (29), where support material precisely aims at facilitating their computation by reinforcing SOE coherence; this is why they are especially needed at the onset of a NIMPF sequence as ‘topping setting’ enabling expressions³⁹ – contrary to perfective tenses, which can initiate SOE contexts without any support material due to their innate ability to introduce novel topic referents (admittedly, not every perfectly-marked utterance will introduce a novel topic referent; but it can do so, unlike a NIMPF utterance).

³⁹ Again, I believe this context-sensitivity (and indeed, potential coherence issues) might explain Bres’s claim that the NIMPF is difficult to parse; see. §2.1.

And finally, following Caudal & Vetters's (2003) idea that NIMPF interpretations crucially require some kind of contextually construed transition/change-of-state, and inspired by Caudal's (2012a) SDRT approach to the contextual interpretation of tenses, I will propose that SOE discourse relations such as *Result*(e, α, β) and *Narration*(e, α, β) have some semantic axiom attached to them, requiring that e_β should be aspectually bounded, rather than endowed with a perfective viewpoint (Caudal 2012). If we assume that the NIMPF imposes a narrative discourse relation (Caudal 2024), then this indirectly enforces a bounded reading of event predicates denoted by a NIMPF verb at the sentence semantics level, even if the NIMPF applies an imperfective viewpoint meaning operating at a higher, discursive level (ultimately bearing on speech act event e , not on verbal event e_β).

Note that there are independent reasons for the technical modification to the SDRT framework I am here proposing. The fact that speech act verbs (*say, tell, ask, affirm, refute*, etc.), adverbs/adverbials (cf. French *complètement/tout à fait!* meaning 'you're completely right!', cf. Caudal & Nicolas 2005), and discourse particles (cf. Abraham 1991) can lexicalize speech act functions, or second-order functions over speech act functions (i.e., they are modifiers of speech act functions) suggests that speech acts functions must have an event argument (and a degree argument too for some of them), and not just bear on abstract types of discourse referents à la Asher (1993). (See e.g., Danlos (2007) for an SDRT implementation of a number of speech act-level lexical items). Moreover, this is hardly a novel idea, and has received substantial independent grounding in the literature. Technically closest to the above suggestion is the DRT concept of *conversational event* in Poesio & Traum (1997). There is also a longstanding tradition in formal semantics for analysing utterances as spatiotemporally located events, originating in Barwise & Perry's (1983) Situation Semantics; see e.g., Poesio & Muskens (1997) and Ginzburg & Cooper (2004:298) for a discussion.

5. A conclusion and some formal perspectives

The present paper has established that the so-called 'narrative *imparfait*' (NIMPF) could not contribute a viewpoint function directly bearing on the event predicate denoted by the relevant IMPF-marked verb. I first showed (§0) that there is no diachronic evidence for an alleged 'aoristic drift' towards a perfective viewpoint reading of the NIMPF; this makes it contrast with how the *passé composé* developed perfective readings in Old and Middle French. Synchronically (§0), it was demonstrated that the NIMPF associates with Aktionsart types of utterances differing from the Aktionsart preferences of either a perfective viewpoint tense or an imperfective viewpoint tense – it is closer to the former than to the latter, as it requires utterances denoting bounded event predicates, but it lacks a perfective tense-like coercion capability. After defining event boundedness as a lower level aspectual category than viewpoint, section §0 established that the NIMPF combines with aspectual adverbials denoting functions yielding bounded event predicates (e.g., durative phrases in *en* or *pendant*), but not with those denoting functions yielding unbounded event predicates (*déjà* was shown not to yield an unbounded event predicate, imperfective-like reading of NIMPF verbs, contrary to works claiming that it should combine with a sentence semantics-level imperfective aspectual viewpoint

reading or unbounded event predicate reading). I then argued that the NIMPF exhibited surprising aspectual analogies with so-called ‘zero-tenses’, a crosslinguistically common class of viewpoint-vacuous tenses (Caudal & Bednall 2022). It notably shares with such tenses a limited ability to perform e.g., inchoative aspectual coercions over atelic utterances.⁴⁰ Finally, in section §0, I suggested all of the above facts are consistent with the hypothesis that the NIMPF does not contribute a viewpoint function at the sentence semantics-level, but rather at some higher discursive level. I established that the NIMPF presented various striking discourse structural effects, but that all of them are amenable to a single analysis: the NIMPF possesses an imperfective viewpoint meaning bearing on (narrative) speech act functions (i.e., *Narration, Occasion, Result*), which I claimed to involve an event referent. As such, they can be seen as *speech act event predicates* – a semantic type the imperfective viewpoint meaning of the NIMPF can combine with.

Of course, the present study leaves many important and difficult questions unanswered. How did this particular illocutionary force-level reading of the IMPF arise? How did it conventionalize? Although this must obviously be left to future research, I would like to tentatively suggest that this is in fact (yet again) related to aspectual coercion issues – which I essentially take to be conventionalized, ‘entrenched’ readings of tenses (see Caudal 2020 for diachronic arguments supporting this view). Given the fact that the vast majority of NIMPF utterances denote achievement predicates, and that imperfective viewpoints are least compatible with this particular Aktionsart class, then aspectual coercion must have been involved in their becoming so tightly associated. In fact, I would like to propose that NIMPF readings arose from narrative contexts where IMPF marked utterances denoted single bounded event predicates due to e.g., temporal framing adverbials, with a predominance of achievement-denoting utterances. For these are the most frequent bounded utterance type in narrative discourses, see Caudal & Bednall (2022). From a mismatch between the conditions spelt out in (11) and in (15), arose the need for a speech act-level coercion function, modelled in Asher (2011) as a conventionalized *bridging function* between two formerly incompatible types (cf. Caudal 2020) – a bit like conventionalized, type-shifting aspectual operators account for iterative/habitual readings in Bonami (2002): although ‘silent’, these operators must be part of the morphosyntax to semantics interface representation of the IMPF. I furthermore surmise that the prior existence of iterative/habitual readings of the IMPF paved the way for the development of the NIMPF, as they were also discourse-level readings⁴¹ – except that NIMPF readings involve single events, not iterated/habitual events. The above tentative hypothesis would of course need to be substantiated by conducting detailed as well as extended diachronic work. It should also receive a precise formal implementation, which cannot be envisioned here for want of space.

⁴⁰ Cf. Caudal (2024:56) for an explicit formal proposal along these lines.

⁴¹ Indeed, such readings of the IMPF bear over more than one segment, and never actually cause the verb thus marked to denote a ‘partial’ event – all individual events involved in such iterated series are bounded; what is unbounded (and in fact, imperfectively viewed) is the iterated series itself. Gosselin (1996, 1999) has a similar intuition that the iterative SOE reading of the IMPF has some important semantic analogies with the NIMPF. In many respects, Gosselin’s analysis of the NIMPF comes closest to the speech act-level approach developed here, and my analysis owes much to his thought-provoking ideas.

Overall, and most importantly, the main, two-pronged hypothesis explored in this paper, if correct, has far-reaching consequences for theories of the interaction between the aspectual viewpoint content of tenses, and Aktionsart parameters (taken as another dimension of aspectual meaning, à la Smith 1991). Indeed, it suggests that while the latter only operates at the sentence semantics-level, the latter can scope well out of it, as high as speech act-level expressions, and directly impact the semantics/pragmatics interface. This contributes to supporting Caudal & Roussarie's (2005) idea that tenses (or at least can be) illocutionary force-level expressions, contrary to some other types of lexical of temporal and/or aspectual lexico-grammatical expressions. It might also contribute to disproving 'unidimensional' models of aspect construal – i.e., approaches claiming that both Aktionsart aspect and viewpoint aspect should be modelled using the same basic categories in a semantic ontology of aspectual meanings, regardless of whether they are lexical, lexico-grammatical or grammatical, from Kamp & Reyle (1993) to Dessì Schmid (2019). But all these issues must be left to future investigations, of course; much like some NIMPF datapoints discussed here, this paper must finish on an open-ended note.

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