

A COMPARISON OF THE TENSES EXPRESSING PAST TIME IN SPOKEN
FRENCH: IMPARFAIT VERSUS PASSÉ COMPOSÉ

by

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(Under the direction of Dr. Diana L. Ranson)

ABSTRACT

This thesis presents a discussion of the functions of two French tenses expressing past time, *imparfait* (*IMP*) and *passé composé* (*PC*), as presented in three textbooks and by scholars followed by an analysis of their use in a corpus of spoken French. The corpus consists of five personal narratives told by native speakers of French which were audiotaped and then transcribed orthographically. The main purpose of using the corpus was to test the hypothesis that the major difference between *IMP* and *PC* is that *IMP*, expresses time-consuming actions and is used for qualitative descriptions, whereas the major function of *PC* is to indicate a fully terminated action that implies a result. It was found that the temporal factor indeed corresponds to the use of these tenses by native speakers, while all other factors traditionally imputed only to a specific tense proved to be interchangeable and thus unreliable.

INDEX WORDS: Passé Composé, Imparfait, Past Tense Forms in French

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INTRODUCTION

To find the best characterizations for the three major past tenses in French, *imparfait (IMP)*, *passé composé (PC)* and *passé simple (PS)*, has long been an objective for grammarians and linguists. The *PC* and *PS* pair does not cause much difficulty since these two tenses, which share most of the same features, are found in almost complementary distribution; *PC* is used primarily in the spoken register and *PS* in literary style. Their opposition to *IMP* appears to be more problematic and creates many problems for students of the French language. The efforts of grammarians to describe the essential functions of these three tenses, especially of *PC* and *PS* as opposed to *IMP*, have largely been unsuccessful. Many of their numerous rules and words of advice concerning the usage of *IMP* and *PC* in the spoken style have given rise to criticism. Most of these rules rely on concepts such as ‘complete’, ‘incomplete’, ‘continuous’, ‘simultaneous’, ‘repetitious’, ‘unique’, and ‘momentary’ for describing past actions (Gardes-Tamine 1998:95), yet it is difficult to apply such terms in actual practice, since the use of the past tenses by native speakers can deviate from the proposed rules (Dansereau 1987).

Thus, even though according to this or that rule a certain tense is required in a specific situation, one may find the opposite tense in actual speech, the one that theoretically has nothing to do with the situation and is not visibly appropriate for the context. Language learners find this especially frustrating, since it breaks down their confidence in the rules and undermines their hope of ever understanding the French past tense forms, which in turn interferes with their progress toward the mastery of French.

Such a problem may arise because textbooks tend to explain the qualities of *IMP* and *PC* to students by going from the grammatical form to the meaning instead of

choosing the reverse method of going from the meaning to the form. I believe students would more easily understand the uses of *IMP* and *PC* if they were told, as Pulgram (1984:243) suggests, that they should use *IMP* when they are personally interested in emphasizing the continuous aspect of an action that was taking place at a certain moment in the past and they are not concerned about whether that action was actually terminated or when it started. By contrast, we should encourage students to use *PC* if the actual accomplishment of an action does matter to them and to their listeners. Again, the primary focus should be made on the meaning and not on the form.

For example, if the students' goal is to let someone know that they were busy at a certain moment in the past because they were cleaning their car, then the best way to do it would be to put the verb in *IMP*: *Je nettoiais ma voiture*. In this case, the present condition of the car is not important, i.e. they do not provide any information as to whether the car is presently clean or not, but simply represent the circumstances. However, if they are determined to tell their interlocutor that the car is now clean, their choice would be *PC* so as to show that the result of the effort was eventually achieved: *J'ai nettoyé ma voiture*. This is the difference between *IMP* and *PC* that has been discussed by Dansereau (1987) and Pulgram (1984). They both stress that the function of a verb in *IMP* is to serve as background to a verb in *PC*. In the words of Dansereau, *IMP* is used "to set the scene, create an atmosphere, relate what conditions were as background to a verb in the *passé composé*, which answers the question: *and so, what happened?*" (Dansereau 1987:37).

It is difficult to propose valid distinctions among the past forms in question, since in most of the cases the choice of the tense depends fully on the users, that is, on their own perception of the action and how they wish to present it. It is the way in which the speaker perceives the present and past reality and not the nature of the reality itself that predetermines the use of this or that past tense. Bres (1997:78) summarizes this idea by writing that "time is not the effective succession that I would confine myself to recording;

it is born from my relationship with things” (my translation), therefore, *I* will be the one to format it. Similarly, Pulgram (1984:239) points out that “the same reality can be stated by either the ‘imperfect’ or the ‘past’, depending on whether the speaker wishes to have the hearer contemplate what goes on as a picture . . . , or whether he wants to report to the speaker the occurrence of the event, or of a series of the events.”

With this idea in mind, I will argue that the use of tenses expressing past time cannot be defined by a list of adjectives or adverbs that would direct students to choose one tense over the other. On the contrary, the issue consists of presenting to the students the real life situations in which speakers, depending on their viewpoint, present an action in a way that, in their opinion, would be the most successful in order for the hearer to get the most exact information. Therefore, it is never enough simply to state, for example, that the *PC* is used when reference is made to a precise moment in the past, as in:

- (1) *Ma tante m’a téléphoné à 4 heures de l’après-midi.*¹

Under different circumstances the same verb can appear in *IMP*, as in:

- (2) *Ma tante me téléphonait à 4 heures de l’après-midi, mais je n’ai pas entendu le téléphone sonner.*
- (3) *Hier, quand je suis rentrée à 4 heures de l’après-midi, ma tante téléphonait à ma cousine.*

Students can become confused by textbooks’ explanations when they are difficult to apply. For example, it can be confusing for language learners to speculate as to whether a given action has ties to the present or remains in the past, whether it is complete or incomplete, or continuous or momentary, in order to use a verb in the past tense. They are especially frustrated when they do not clearly understand how to determine whether an action should be considered to be completed or not (e.g. *The movie was good*), or whether it is unique or not (e.g. *I always liked sunflowers*), etc. Another

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all examples are of my own invention.

problem is that students can get greatly discouraged when they come across real-life examples that contradict an explanation they learned from a textbook. Thus, in order to minimize our students' confusion and discouragement, it is very important to define clearly the nature of the past tenses and state clearly the functions that distinguish the *IMP* and *PC* and determine the speakers' choice between them. For example, is it the semantic value of the verb or the context in which the speaker places the verb that is responsible for the speakers' distribution of past tenses? If it is the context directed by the speaker and not by the semantic structure of the utterance², what primary objective do the speakers try to attain by using one verb in *IMP* and another in *PC*?

In this thesis, I will seek a possible answer to this question by eliminating all the features that *IMP* and *PC* have in common and by concentrating on the few that are unique to one tense and thereby serve to distinguish these two past tenses.

In this study I will not address the peculiarities of *PS*, since over time this tense has disappeared from the spoken language and is presently found mostly in literary prose and journalistic style (Lombard 1984, Boyer 1979). Consequently, knowledge of *PS* is no longer an expected part of a student's competence, especially at the novice level. The priority is given entirely to *PC*, since it is the distinction between *IMP* and *PC* within a speech act that appears to be so troublesome for learners. Therefore, I will focus on the comparison of *IMP* and *PC* in the spoken French language, first by analyzing a set of prescribed rules found in several textbooks and among different scholars and, second, by testing these rules in their application to a corpus of spoken French.

My hypothesis is that the basic distinction between *IMP* and *PC* consists in the adherence of *IMP* to the temporal discursive space (*espace discursif temporel*), a term proposed by Anscombe (1992), which presupposes reference to the past and provides the qualitative description of a being, event, or situation, and of *PC* to timeless discursive

² Sometimes the rules of syntax require the use of a particular tense in which case the speaker is not free to make a choice, e.g. *Nous venions de prendre le dîner quand quelqu'un a frappé à la porte.*

space (*espace discursif intemporel*) to indicate the occurrence of fully terminated actions that imply a result. I will base my arguments on the assumption that the notion of *description*, typically associated with *IMP* and rather important for defining this tense, should presuppose the existence of some time needed for this description to take place. According to this proposal, it is entirely the speaker's decision whether to express an action in *IMP* or *PC*, depending on how he or she wishes to present it to the audience.

The coexistence of *IMP* with *PC* in the same context, but not just one sentence, is of great importance since *IMP* and *PC* supplement each other. Therefore, I will also suggest that even though *IMP* is dependent on *PC* and cannot be used in "isolation", *PC* is in a certain sense dependent on *IMP*, though for a different reason. It is true, that *IMP* by itself might not indicate what happened and we probably would never be able to inform somebody about something with a single utterance in *IMP* unless the subject had been previously discussed, yet a verb in this tense "clearly serves to indicate why the reader or listener should care about the story at all" (Di Vito 1997:40). Using just *IMP*, the speaker would never be able to develop a narrative and provide the new facts, which might be of interest of the listener. On the other hand, the isolated use of *PC* might appear very monotonous and thus boring for the listener to keep track of the events:

- (4) *Hier, j'ai rencontré mon ancienne amie à l'arrêt d'autobus. Cela a été une surprise parce que je l'avais vue pour la dernière fois il y a 3 ans. On n'a pas parlé longtemps. J'ai dû partir parce que mon autobus est arrivé.*

In the above example the speaker provides a lot of information but it all sounds very blunt with no obvious interest from the speaker's side to develop the conversation. It may also appear hard for the hearer to react properly to such a direct introduction of facts. On the other hand, if we add more surface information in *IMP* as in (5), then the speaker's personal interest in the story would be better expressed and the hearer would more easily maintain interest in the subject of the conversation.

- (5) *Elle n'avait pas du tout changé. Elle gardait son sourire habituel. Malheureusement j'ai dû partir parce que mon autobus est arrivé et je devais me dépêcher d'y monter.*

Apparently, the best way to organize a narrative would probably be to let *IMP* and *PC* coexist in the story, although it should not necessarily exclude the possibility of the occurrence of either tense as an isolated unit, that is, in a separate sentence, within the discourse.

To test whether the previous suggestions concerning the functions of *IMP* and *PC* are relevant, I audiotaped five personal stories on the same subject told by native speakers of French. After the discussion of the functions of *IMP* and *PC* most frequently found in textbooks and scholarly articles, presented in the Chapter 1, Chapter 2 presents the analysis of the past tense distribution in these narratives and discusses whether or not the data support the hypotheses I have proposed above. The final chapter presents a summary of results of this research.

CHAPTER 1
EXPLANATION OF IMPARFAIT AND PASSÉ COMPOSÉ PROPOSED BY
TEXTBOOKS AND SCHOLARS

1.0 Introduction

This chapter presents two sets of qualities most frequently attributed to the *IMP* and *PC* by French textbook authors and linguists. First, I will discuss these sets function by function and then I will look for similarities and differences between them by comparing the functions proposed by textbooks and those proposed by scholars. At the end of this chapter, I will suggest possible reasons of the differences.

1.1 Explanations of the *IMP* and *PC* in textbooks

I chose three different textbooks, *Chez Nous*, *Bravo!* and *Interaction*, as representative of pedagogical explanations of *IMP* and *PC*.³ *Chez Nous* is an introductory text, whereas *Bravo!* and *Interaction* are textbooks at the intermediate level. We can therefore expect the explanations in *Chez Nous* be shorter and more accessible to beginning students. Indeed, the difference in the organization of these explanations is more pronounced between *Chez Nous* and the other two texts, *Bravo!* and *Interaction*, than between *Bravo!* and *Interaction*. Already familiar with the basic differences between *IMP* and *PC*, an intermediate-level learner can process more diverse and in-depth information regarding the features of the two tenses by studying texts which are typically designed to help him or her use the past tenses freely in discourse.

³ There are two reasons for selecting three textbooks, one at the beginning level and two at the intermediate. The first is to demonstrate the difference in the set of functions attributed to *IMP* and *PC* that are given priority at each level. The second is to compare the two sets of explanation provided at the intermediate level.

At the same time, by carefully studying the rules that the textbooks have to offer to facilitate our understanding of the functions of *PC* and *IMP*, we find that quite a few of them coincide regardless of the level at which the students may function in the language. Thus, out of twelve properties of *IMP* and *PC* that were presented in the three textbooks, five are mentioned in all three of them (see Table 1). Out of the remaining seven, three are shared by *Bravo!* and *Interaction*, two by *Chez Nous* and *Bravo!*, one is found in *Chez Nous* and *Interaction*, and, finally, of the remaining two, one is mentioned only in *Chez Nous* and another only in *Interaction*.

Table 1: Occurrence of Functions of *IMP* and *PC* in French Textbooks

<i>IMP</i>	<i>PC</i>	Textbooks
Background description (situations and settings)		<i>Chez Nous</i> (318, 348); <i>Interaction</i> (149); <i>Bravo!</i> (142)
	Completed in the past	<i>Chez Nous</i> (346); <i>Interaction</i> (132); <i>Bravo!</i> (145)
Habitual actions and enduring states		<i>Chez Nous</i> (318); <i>Interaction</i> (149); <i>Bravo!</i> (143)
	Point in time, length of time and number of times is specified	<i>Chez Nous</i> (346); <i>Interaction</i> (132); <i>Bravo!</i> (145)
Stative verbs		<i>Chez Nous</i> (348); <i>Interaction</i> (149); <i>Bravo!</i> (143)
	Isolated actions	<i>Interaction</i> (132); <i>Bravo!</i> (145)
	A series of actions	<i>Interaction</i> (132); <i>Bravo!</i> (142)
	Change in state or condition	<i>Interaction</i> (133); <i>Bravo!</i> (145)
Ongoing actions		<i>Chez Nous</i> (346); <i>Bravo!</i> (143)
	Moves the narrative forward	<i>Chez Nous</i> (348); <i>Bravo!</i> (145)
No indication of beginning or end of action		<i>Chez Nous</i> (346); <i>Interaction</i> (149);
	Clear indication of beginning or end of action	<i>Interaction</i> (132);

All three textbooks refer to *IMP* as a tense used with stative verbs (Example 6), which provides background description for settings and situations (Example 7) and which expresses habitual actions and/or enduring states in the past (Example 8).

- (6) *Tout ce que je voulais faire, c'était me reposer. (Bravo! 143)*
- (7) *Pendant qu'ils buvaient leurs boissons, les gens allaient et venaient dans la rue. (Interaction 149)*
- (8) *Tous les week-ends nous faisions une randonnée dans les bois. (Chez Nous 318)*

On the other hand, *PC* is defined by all three texts as the tense that expresses actions completed in the past with specific reference to a point in time (Example 9), length of time (Example 10), or number of times of their occurrence (Example 11).

- (9) *Elle est née jeudi, le 9 mai 1991. (Chez Nous 346)*
- (10) *J'ai passé une semaine dans une station de ski. (Bravo! 145)*
- (11) *Il a vu le même film deux fois. (Interaction 132)*

Such features of *PC* as the ability to be used in isolation (Example 12), to represent the succession of completed actions (Example 12) and to indicate the abrupt change in state or condition (Example 13) are pointed out only in the intermediate-level books, *Bravo!* and *Interaction*, while the function of *IMP* to characterize an ongoing action (*Chez Nous*, *Bravo!*) (Example 14) of which the beginning or end is unknown (*Chez Nous*, *Interaction*) (Example 15) is mentioned in the textbooks of both intermediate and novice levels.

- (12) *Le dernier jour de mes vacances je suis montée sur le télésiège comme d'habitude. Une fois arrivée, j'ai respiré à fond; je me suis mise en position de départ; je me suis concentrée; j'ai pris mes bâtons de ski; et je suis partie. (Bravo! 145)*
- (13) *Quand j'ai vu l'examen, j'ai eu peur. (Interaction 133)*
- (14) *Sylvie regardait la télé quand sa marraine a téléphoné. (Chez Nous 346)*

(15) *Mon père finissait son travail tous les jours à cinq heures. (Interaction 149)*

Interaction also presents the tendency of *PC* to designate actions where the beginning or end can easily be visualized in contrast to *IMP*: *J'ai regardé la télé pendant deux heures. (132)*

Finally, it is important to point out that *Chez Nous* and *Bravo!* touch upon the function of *PC* to drive the narrative forward, which will be discussed in the following section of this chapter: *Bernard a terminé ses études en juin. Il a quitté la fac. (Chez Nous 348)* *Chez Nous* also presents the notion, discussed in the Introduction to this thesis, that the use of either tense in discourse “depends entirely on the context and the speaker’s view of the action or situation” (*Chez Nous* 346), even though this textbook provides a set of rules at the disposal of the students as to when this or that tense should be applied.

There are two other cases that require the use of *IMP* that were found in the textbooks but are not included in our table:

(a) After si in order to:

- invite somebody to do something (*Bravo!* 143; *Interaction* 151; *Chez Nous* 316): *Si nous dînions ensemble? (Bravo! 143)*
- soften commands (*Chez Nous* 316): *Si tu allais à la pêche?*
- express a wish or regret (*Interaction* 151; *Bravo!* 143): *Si j'avais le temps de lire le journal! (Interaction 151)*

(b) With venir de + infinitive to describe an action that had just occurred (*Bravo!* 143; *Interaction* 151):

- *Je venais de l'atteindre quand j'ai vu un requin. (Bravo! 143)*

Even though these two categories of the use of *IMP* seem to be quite popular among textbook writers, they were eliminated from our principal discussion of the properties of past tenses, since the occurrence of *IMP* there is purely syntactical and automatic; it does not presuppose any variations on the part of any speakers.

1.2 Explanations of IMP and PC by scholars

The difference between the explanations of *IMP* and *PC* found in textbooks and those presented by linguists consists in the complexity of the arguments which the latter provide in support of the functions they introduce. However, the contents of the discussions in both sources seem to have the identical objective of discovering the best way of defining the aspects of *IMP* and *PC*, even though no one can yet claim undisputed success in having done so.

As a matter of fact, it turns out that many linguists do not support most of the explanations of the two past tense forms typically found in textbooks. Dansereau (1987:34-35), for example, strongly criticizes such definitions. She argues that the use of words such as *duration*, *continuity*, *description*, *incomplete* and *repetitive action* when referring to *IMP* is as inappropriate as the use of *unique* and *complete* when talking about *PC*. To reinforce her point of view, she proposes several examples that obviously contradict the typical explanations, like *Il est souvent venu me voir*. Here, the phrase *est venu me voir* expresses a repetitive action, a feature normally attributed to *IMP*, yet *PC* is used. On the other hand, in the sentence *Il tombait quand il a vu l'hélicoptère*, the act of *falling* took place only once and so is a unique action, nevertheless *IMP* is used.

Dansereau (1987:37) proposes that the functions of *IMP* and *PC* can be summarized as the answer to a single question. For *IMP*, which expresses conditions, the question is *Quelles étaient les conditions?* (What were the conditions?), whereas for *PC*, which expresses what happened, the question is *Qu'est-ce qui s'est passé?* (What [has] happened?). In Example (16) one observes that the verb in *IMP*, *j'avais*, sets the conditions while the verb in *PC*, *j'ai bu*, tells what happened.

(16) *J'avais soif, donc j'ai bu de l'eau.*

Dansereau based her ideas on those of Pulgram (1984:239) who stated that *IMP* is used when the utterance is intended to answer the question “What were the circumstances and/or the conditions? What was going on?”, as in *J'avais une lettre*, while the *PC*

provides an answer to the implied question: “What happened?” or “What has happened?”, as in *J’ai eu une lettre*.

It is evident that the sentences *J’avais une lettre* and *J’ai eu une lettre* present the same action albeit from a different perspective. Therefore Pulgram (1984:259) stresses that it is “the question that causes the speaker to select, at a given occasion, one tense rather than another and that the hearer comprehends, or is intended to comprehend, on the basis of that selection”. Once again, we come across the idea that most often “it is the manner in which reality is *felt* by the speaker, and the manner in which he [or she] wants the hearer to perceive it, and not the objective reality as such, that determines the use of one or the other past tense” (Pulgram 1984:243).

Di Vito (1997) focuses on the semantic status of verbs, while refraining from proposing characterizing key words normally associated with the past tenses in question. She points out that there are textbooks that refer to the “aspectual qualities inherent in a verb” (Di Vito 1997:29), which implies that the use of a verb in a certain past tense could be predetermined by its semantic features. So, for example, the stative verbs *être*, *avoir* are typically linked to *IMP*, whereas the verbs of action like *dire* are linked to *PC*. According to Di Vito (1997:30), such an assertion is reinforced by numerous studies that have demonstrated that native speakers associate instantaneous verbs, such as *casser*, *jeter*, *exposer*, with *PC*, and the durative verbs that do not mark the result, like *marcher*, *être*, *avoir* whose continuity is presupposed, as well as the verbs of state and feeling, with *IMP*. However, Di Vito (1997:30) claims that those observations are not always true, and that, in fact, the frequency of *IMP* and *PC* with the verbs like *être* and *avoir* to a great extent depends on the discourse genre. She found that in conversational French (spoken data), as well as in detective stories, fairy-tales and folklore (written data), over 70% of past tense occurrences of *être* and *avoir* are in *IMP* because of the semantic value of these verbs. At the same time, in genres containing little dialogue, such as official correspondence, travel guides and magazines (written data), the percentage of the use of

IMP with *être* and *avoir* declines noticeably. The phenomenon is also marked by Di Vito in spoken data, where the frequency of *IMP*, compared with conversational style, decreases to 47% in news broadcasts when the context of the discourse becomes less interactive and reflects oralized written speech (Di Vito 1997:30).

The data evoked by Labelle (1987:7) demonstrate that a high percentage of the occurrences of stative verbs to refer to past events appear in *IMP* (67.3% or 107 verbs out of 159) whereas a very low percentage of their occurrences are in *PC* (5.3% or 5 out of 95). Based on her research she concludes that stative verbs tend to appear in *IMP*, whereas punctual verbs are more likely to appear in *PC*.

Andrews (1992:287) addresses the semantic (or lexical) aspect of verbs as an essential feature distinguishing *IMP* and *PC*. He defines a stative verb as one “referring to a continuing, non changing situation” and a non-stative or dynamic verb as one referring to a situation “that will only continue if it is continually subject to a new input of energy” (Comrie, cited by Andrews 1992:287). Yet he does not provide any evidence that stative verbs favor *IMP* and non-stative *PC*; on the contrary, he talks about stative verbs being compatible with *PC* (Andrews 1992:289) and active verbs with *IMP*, depending on whether the speaker intends to indicate complete or continuous action:

(17) *Nous sommes restés là une heure* (Andrews 1992:289)

(18) *Il trouvait enfin un moyen de sortie de cette inaction pleine de remords où nous tournions depuis trois heures* (Andrews 1992:290)

Anscombe (1992) approaches the opposition *IMP/PC* from a different angle. He bases his analysis on Ducrot, who introduced the notion of the temporal theme to describe *IMP*, where *theme* is the subject of the discourse. “...Une indication temporelle concerne le thème si elle sert à préciser la tranche de temps dont on parle ou à l’intérieur de laquelle on considère l’être dont on parle...” (Ducrot, cited by Anscombe 1992:45). However, Anscombe argues that the statement appears to be rather ambiguous, because in the phrase: *A vingt ans, j’avais déjà plusieurs milliers d’heures de vol à mon actif*, the

phrase, *à vingt ans*, which serves as a point of reference on the temporal axis (“the temporal theme” according to Ducrot), is not, in fact, the theme of the phrase, but a piece of information that contributes to a better transference of the intended message. The actual theme here, i.e. something that the speaker is mostly concerned with at this point, is the fact that he or she is presently quite an expert as a pilot. Since the qualities that determine the theme are relevant to it throughout a discursive space that encompasses the whole message of communication, Anscombe (1992:45) substitutes the notion of “temporal discursive space” for Ducrot’s temporal theme and discusses the fundamental distributional properties of *IMP*, mentioned by Ducrot. According to the latter, an utterance in *IMP* always refers to the temporal discursive space, which implies the presence of a precise time reference. This assertion makes an example such as *La France s’appelait la Gaule* impossible, if we intend to describe *la France* as a timeless entity. So, it is necessary to provide an additional indicator, such as *autrefois* (Anscombe 1992:46), unless the indicator as such is insinuated by the context in order to stress the relevance of the action at a specific moment in the past.

Similarly, Berthonneau (1993) and Molendijk (1985) talk about the incapacity of *IMP* to appear without any specific reference to a temporal interval in the past, since *IMP* by itself does not introduce a new referential point. In the words of Berthonneau,

L’imparfait ne localise pas lui-même la situation qu’il introduit: (i) il ne peut être utilisé s’il ne renvoie pas à une entité temporelle du passé, déjà disponible dans le contexte antérieur ou accessible dans la situation immédiate, (ii) en l’absence d’un tel élément, l’imparfait est jugé ininterprétable. (Berthonneau 1993:57).

Interestingly, Di Vito (1997:41) also speaks about temporal discursive space, but unlike Ducrot she calls it “temporal indefiniteness” or “continuity”. As opposed to *PC* and *PS* which “express events and actions bounded in time”, the function of *IMP*, in her words, is to “denote events and conditions that are *temporally indeterminate*” (Di Vito 1997:29). However, in her interpretation, this temporal indefiniteness can be coded not

only in the adverb or in the time indicator, but also in the verb itself (Di Vito 1997:41), so for instance the verb *connaître* changes its meaning when used in *PC*:

(19) *Je l'ai connue au restaurant* 'I met her in the restaurant'.

Labelle (1987:21) also refers to the research of Ducrot and his notion of temporal theme in her discussion of *IMP*, though she does not replace the term with temporal discursive space. Like Anscombe and Di Vito she points out the important function of *IMP* to present actions characterizing a clearly defined temporal theme:

(20) *Jean avait les yeux bleus* (Labelle 1987:21)

In this example the temporal theme *Jean* implicitly defines a determined temporal space – the duration of *Jean*'s life.

According to Anscombe (1992:47), an utterance in *PC* always refers to timeless discursive space, so that it is not necessary to give the precise temporal interval. One can say simply *La France s'est appelée la Gaule*. It is timelessness that determines the essential function of this tense, so the subjects described by *PC* tend to denote permanent entities.

The temporal discursive space, relating to the utterance in *IMP*, is entirely contained in the past so that *IMP* indicates that there is no connection between the action expressed by a particular verb and the present. Anscombe (1992:46) emphasizes that a native speaker of French would not respond to a request for information as to what caused the present event with a verb in *IMP*. If someone asked, *Pourquoi est-ce que tu ris?*, then one would answer, *J'ai lu une blague*, not *Je lisais une blague*. In the same way, it would also not be appropriate to characterize an entity existing in the present by a statement in *IMP* (Anscombe 1992:46). This argument correlates with the above-mentioned temporal discursive space contained in the past that requires the use of the imperfect:

(21) *Parmi les hommes politiques actuels, seul le premier ministre n'a jamais raconté (*ne racontait jamais) de balades.* (Anscombe 1992:46)

- (22) *Je te parlerai de mon amie qui a toujours eu peur (*avait toujours peur) des araignées.*

In these examples only the form of *PC* is used because it, unlike *IMP*, does not break up the connection between the past and the present.

It is worth adding that in the majority of cases a single indication of past time is sufficient to recognize the temporal reality and make the use of *IMP* possible. Thus, in the sentence *Les Français étaient les Gaulois*, the usage of the verb *être* in *IMP* may be questioned by many, since the substantive *Les Français* denotes the presently living beings and does not represent a temporal entity of the past. At the same time, a slightly modified sentence, *Les premiers Français étaient les Gaulois*, is not likely to cause any debates, because now the required temporal reference to the past is made.

PC by contrast indicates that the consequences of an action are still present in the moment of speech, for example, in:

- (23) *Je peux vous emmener à l'aéroport; hier j'ai réparé ma voiture.*

In other words, the temporal period corresponding to realization of the process represented by an utterance in *PC* is embedded in the past but can still have links to the present (Anscombe 1992:48).

De Both-Diez (1985) supports Anscombe's idea of a link between *PC* and the present. She claims that in discourse *PC* is used in contexts containing the idea of present time. Moreover, the processes expressed by *PC* refer to a past which is so closely tied to the present that its limits and those of the present are frequently confused (De Both-Diez 1985:11). Pfister (1974:417) also recognizes the links of *PC* to the present: "Le passé composé en français moderne est rarement caractérisé par le stade accompli. Il représente en français moderne un temps du passé qui conserve une connexion plus ou moins étroite avec le présent."

The habitual *IMP* that attributes to the action the value of repetition is totally incompatible with indications of number, according to Anscombe (1992:47). For

example, a native speaker of French would not insert *3 fois* in the following sentence: *La semaine dernière je dormais (*3 fois) jusqu'à 11 heures*. Anscombe (1992:46) also claims that the presentation of the intrinsic qualities of a being, if expressed in the past, is always made in *IMP*: *Louis XIV avait (*a eu) le nez bourbon*.

Labelle (1987:20) mentions this property of *IMP* by referring to characteristic features of the temporal theme typically described by this tense, as in: *L'année dernière à Paris il faisait chaud*, where *IMP* characterized the intrinsic feature of *l'année dernière*.

Anscombe (1992:47) observes that *PC* is generally used in biographies, even though a person may not still be living. Here, in contrast to *IMP*, *PC* does not characterize or describe an individual, but rather identifies him or her as an entity and recounts specific events in his or her life, as seen in the following example:

- (24) *Issu d'une famille de musiciens, Mozart a manifesté (manifestait) très tôt des dons musicaux hors du commun.*

Despite the fact that *IMP* is not completely absent in bibliographical narration, *PC* is nevertheless more favored in *curricula vitae* than *IMP*, as in:

- (25) *Jean Dupon: est né en 1925 à Plougastel. A étudié à la Sorbonne, où il a obtenu son diplôme en 1949. Est entré chez Olida en 1950 comme expert comptable.*

Anscombe (1992:46) observes that *PC* is also used to express the general realities expressed as aphorisms:

- (26) *L'homme a toujours été (*était toujours) un loup pour l'homme.*
 (27) *Le monde n'a jamais manqué (*ne manquait jamais) de charlatans.*

It is clear that the beings evoked in these statements are of a non-temporal quality.

Maingueneau (2000:96), who approaches the *IMP/PC* distinction from a discourse perspective, proposes a further function of the *PC*, that of advancing the narrative. *PC* puts a period in the temporal space, indicating the total accomplishment of a certain action, which gives space for another action to take place, to be accomplished in

its own turn, thus indicating the advancement of the narrative. *IMP*, on the other hand, “permet d'évoquer des faits qui ne contribuent pas à faire progresser l'action (détails, descriptions, commentaires...), qui en sont une partie, au sens large” (Maingueneau 2000:96).

Grobe (1967) also suggests this distinction between *IMP* and *PC*, but in referring specifically to *PS* rather than *PC*. He mentions that a past action in a chain of serial actions “often receives a distinctive restrictive aspect from its position” (Grobe 1967:349). In other words, in a sequence of actions the appearance of each new member within one series of events tends to mark a terminal point of the preceding action (Grobe 1967:349). This quality of *PS* also applies to *PC*, which is used instead of *PS* if the action is temporally or physically close to the speaker and/or narrator (Grobe 1967:345; Maingueneau 2000:93-95).

Maingueneau (2000:96) also points out that a verb in *IMP* cannot be employed in isolation since it does not contribute to the advancement of the narrative, but always has to lean on a verb in *PC*. Labelle (1987:20), however, does not single out *PC* as a unique supportive element of *IMP* when she points out the importance of the implicit (or explicit) time indicator in a sentence in order for *IMP* to be justified. She stresses the function of *IMP* to describe the events or situations relevant to a specific moment which, consequently, has to be determined by the context. This context may include a separate verb in *PC*, an adverbial time indicator, or any other element that has a past-time connotation:

(28) *A six heures Jean écrivait encore* (Labelle 1987:21)

If this context is present, then *IMP* can be used without being supported by a verb in *PC*.

The functions of *IMP* and *PC* proposed by scholars are summarized below in Table 2.

Table 2: The functions of *IMP* and *PC* proposed by scholars

<i>IMP</i>	<i>PC</i>	Authors
Conditions, circumstances	Result (occurrence of the event)	Pulgram (1984:259-61); Dansereau (1987:37)
Stative verbs	Verbs of action	Labelle (1987:7); Andrews (1992:287); Di Vito (1997:29);
Temporal discursive space (continuity)		Labelle (1987:21); Anscombe (1992:45); Di Vito (1997:41); Berthonneau (1993:57)
	Timeless discursive space	Anscombe (1992:47)
No connection with the present		Anscombe (1992:46)
	Links to the present	Pfister (1974:417); De Both-Diez (1985:11); Anscombe (1992:48)
	Number of times is specified	Anscombe (1992:47)
Intrinsic qualities		Labelle (1987:27); Anscombe (1992:46-47)
	General realities	Anscombe (1992:46)
	Advances the narrative	Grobe (1967:349); Maingueneau (2000:96)
Cannot be used in isolation from <i>PC</i> or <i>PS</i>		Labelle (1987:21); Maingueneau (2000:96);
	Biographies	Anscombe (1992:47)

Table 3: The functions of *IMP* and *PC* coinciding in textbooks and among scholars

<i>IMP</i>	<i>PC</i>	Sources
Background description/ conditions, circumstances		<i>Chez Nous</i> (318, 348); <i>Interaction</i> (149); <i>Bravo!</i> (142); Pulgram (1984:259-261); Dansereau (1987:37)
	The completed actions that show the result	<i>Chez Nous</i> (346); <i>Interaction</i> (132); <i>Bravo!</i> (145); Pulgram (1984:259-261); Dansereau (1987:37)
Stative verbs		<i>Chez Nous</i> (348); <i>Interaction</i> (149); <i>Bravo!</i> (143); Labelle (1987:7); Andrews (1992:287); Di Vito (1997:29)
	Number of times is specified	<i>Chez Nous</i> (346); <i>Interaction</i> (132); <i>Bravo!</i> (145); Anscombe (1992:47)
	Advances the narrative	<i>Chez Nous</i> (348); <i>Bravo!</i> (145); Maingueneau (2000:96); Grobe (1967:349)

1.3 Comparison of the explanations proposed by textbooks and scholars

Table 3 (see p.19) shows the five functions of *IMP* and *PC* mentioned by textbook authors and linguists alike. The remaining thirteen functions do not appear to match at first sight. However, we may assume that certain properties of *IMP* and *PC* were simply omitted in this or that source. Thus, the fact of the textbooks' not mentioning the inability of *IMP* to refer to the present or to be used in isolation, or the function of *PC* to express general realities, does not necessarily mean that the textbook authors disagree with these functions. They may simply leave them out in order to avoid imposing too much information on students or they may not consider them to be consistent functions of the two tenses. Indeed, by saying that *PC* refers to timeless discursive space, a textbook may confuse students when they see a sentence like, *J'ai fait la vaisselle pendant une heure et demie*. Similarly, mentioning the intrinsic qualities of *IMP* may appear totally meaningless in *Hier, j'étais malade*. In any case, there is nothing to indicate an opposing view of the textbook authors toward the omitted features.

Linguists may choose not to mention the categories specified in textbooks for a different reason. One possibility is that they do not approve of the terminology used in textbooks. Thus, for example, Dansereau (1987:33-37) refers to the ambiguity of the comment according to which *PC* is supposed to be used when a certain event is “repeated a specified number of times within a limited time frame” (*Interaction* 132). In Example (29) the exact number of times is given and the time frame is determined, yet *IMP* is used.

(29) *Cet été-là, ils ne mangeaient que deux fois par jour* (Dansereau 1987:35)

Anscombe, nonetheless, denies the possibility of the occurrence of *IMP* with indications of number as shown in Example (30).

(30) *L'année dernière, pour se distraire, Pierre allait (*cinq fois) au cinéma.*
(Anscombe 1992:47)

IMP is possible in Example (29) because of the specification *par jour*. One could not say that eating twice was habitual, yet eating twice a day can in fact be. In Example (30), it would also be possible to say *Pierre allait au cinéma cinq fois par semaine*. These authors do not disagree on what native speakers of French might say, but on the best way to describe these possibilities to students. The solution for such clashes of opinion can often be found in slight differences in the utterances that explain apparent deviations from the established norms, as well as in the diversity of contexts such that prescribed rules will never be able to take all the options into account.

In order to refine the explanation of the functions of *IMP* and *PC* according to the actual use of these tenses in speech, the next chapter presents a comparison of such explanations with the appearance of these tenses in a corpus of spoken French. I seek to demonstrate how the functions proposed by textbook authors and linguists do or do not apply to authentic material.

CHAPTER 2
TESTING THE EXPLANATIONS OF IMPARFAIT AND PASSÉ COMPOSÉ
PROPOSED BY TEXTBOOKS AND SCHOLARS

2.0 Introduction

The present chapter tests the functions of the *IMP* and *PC* proposed by textbooks by analyzing the incidence of these two tenses in a corpus of spoken French. After an introduction of the corpus, I provide for each of twelve functions the criteria for analysis in the corpus, the results of this analysis and a discussion of these results. The chapter concludes with the summary of the findings.

2.1 Corpus

The corpus consists of audio recordings of five native speakers of French from France, four females and one male, ranging in age from 25 to 35 years old. I met with the participants on a weekday in a location and at a time of their choosing. They were informed in advance that they would be recorded and that the topic of the story would be their last trip to France. I did not interrupt the narratives at any time during the recording. The recordings, therefore, present short narratives in which they discuss their last trip to France, which occurred less than two months to one and a half years before the moment of the recording. Upon completion of the recordings, I made an orthographic transcription of the tapes, which serves as the basis for my analysis (see Appendix). In these transcriptions, to facilitate the analysis, I chose to italicize the verbs in *IMP* and to italicize and put in boldface the verbs in *PC*².

² The identical verbs that appeared in false starts are not italicized but are put in round brackets.

Table 4 presents the total number of verbs in each narrative and an overview of the distribution of *IMP* and *PC* in the corpus. It is interesting to note that two narratives, D and E, are much shorter and longer, respectively, than the average length of 34 verbs per story. One also notes that *PC* appears on average twice as often in the sample as *IMP*, with the percentage of total past tense verbs in *PC* ranging from 58% in Story C to 86% in Story A.

Table 4: Distribution of *IMP* and *PC* in the corpus

Story	Total verbs	Verbs in <i>IMP</i>	Verbs in <i>PC</i>	Ratio <i>PC/IMP</i>
A	28	4 (14%)	24 (86%)	6.0
B	25	8 (32%)	17 (68%)	2.1
C	33	14 (42%)	19 (58%)	1.4
D	15	4 (27%)	11 (73%)	2.7
E	69	25 (38%)	44 (62%)	1.6
Total	170	55 (32%)	115 (68%)	2.1

2.2 Analysis, results and discussion of the functions of *IMP* and *PC*

In this section I will test the functions attributed to *IMP* and *PC* by textbooks and scholars with specific examples from my corpus to see whether the data support or refute the proposed functions for each tense. I will at the same time test the hypothesis according to which the major difference between *PC* and *IMP* is that *IMP* is used for qualitative descriptions whereas *PC* is used to establish a fact.

2.2.1 Conditions and circumstances versus result

In order to determine whether a verb expresses circumstances or conditions, it is first necessary to define what is meant by these terms. According to Webster's Dictionary (1981:201, 233), *circumstances* are a subordinate fact or detail, accompanying another, while *conditions* are something essential needed for the occurrence of something else.

Example (31) demonstrates that a verb in *PC* can provide information serving as a condition or a circumstance for another action³:

- (31) *J'ai raté (EP4) ma correspondance, donc j'ai dû (EP5) attendre pendant 3 ou 4 heures pour un autre avion qui allait (EI2) sur Nice.*

In the above example the act of missing the connection is a necessary condition for the speaker's having to wait, since, if the participant had not missed the connection, she would not have had to wait for another plane. Perhaps the condition in this example is expressed in *PC* because the two events can be placed in chronological order and there cannot be any doubt about the sequence in which these actions occurred. As such, they can be defined as actions explicitly advancing the narrative. Similarly, we may assume that many of the actions expressed in *PC* that can be put in a chronological order of occurrence serve as a condition, since subsequent events could not have taken place without the fulfillment of these events in a certain order, as in (32):

- (32) *Quand je suis arrivée (EP34) à l'aéroport, je n'avais (EI17) pas de visa, donc, [...] je suis rentrée (EP36) chez moi et j'ai fait (EP37) une demande de visa par internet...*

Given the high number of examples of verbs in *PC* that could be considered to be conditions for other verbs according to the definition mentioned above, this understanding of conditions was probably not what was meant by the scholars who claimed that conditions or circumstances were a characterizing function of *IMP*.

Another definition of conditions and circumstances is “states of affairs” or “states of being” (Webster's Dictionary 1981:233) at a given moment. This definition will be adopted here to see whether verbs expressing states of being or states of affairs occur in *IMP* or *PC* in the corpus. This definition is preferred to the first one because it is more

³ All the verbs in the examples taken from the corpus are coded by the letter corresponding to the story (A, B, C, D, E), the tense in which the verb is used (I for *IMP* and P for *PC*) and the ordinal number of the verb in the story. So, by AI2 it should be understood that the verb appears in text A and that it is the second verb in *IMP* found in the story.

likely to be the one given to conditions and circumstances by Dansereau and Pulgram when they offered a question such as: *Quelles étaient les conditions/circonstances?* (Pulgram 1984:295; Dansereau 1987:37).

In Story A, all four verbs used in *IMP* can be classified as expressing conditions or circumstances according to the definition adopted:

- (33) *C'était* (AI1) *il y a un an et demi*
- (34) *Il faisait* (AI2) *très chaud à Francfort*
- (35) *C'était* (AI3) *certainement la partie la plus intéressante de mon voyage*
- (36) *C'était* (AI4) *pas vraiment des vacances*

The clause about the weather, *Il faisait très chaud à Francfort*, represents the climatic state at an implied moment: *quand je suis arrivée à Francfort*. In this example, we can view the occurrence of the action expressed by *faisait* as specifying the conditions that accompany the implied event. In this case it is possible to interpret the message as: *Quand je suis arrivée à Francfort, il faisait chaud*. The same thing happens when the speaker specifies the time when a series of different actions occurred: *C'était il y a un an et demi*, thus referring the listener to the state of affairs relevant to a year-and-a-half-ago or when she characterizes her trip or part of her trip as: *C'était pas vraiment des vacances* or *C'était vraiment la partie la plus intéressante de mon voyage*. However, the last three sentences do not answer the English version of the question proposed by Dansereau and Pulgram, 'What was going on...?', but only the French version of it: *Quelles étaient les conditions/circonstances?* So, if we accept that Examples (33), (35) and (36) denote the circumstances (states of affairs) in the same way, in which Example (34) denotes the conditions (states of being), we can propose a more general and also more accurate way of presenting a question answered by verbs in *IMP*: *What states or actions were developing at a specified moment in the past?*

In texts B and D, all the verbs in *IMP* fall under the category of actions expressing conditions/circumstances:

Story B:

- (37) *L'avion avait (BI2) du retard, donc, j'ai attendu (BP5) pendant un certain temps;*
- (38) *J'étais (BI3) assise [dans l'avion], j'ai mangé, j'ai lu, j'ai dormi;*
- (39) *Quand j'étais (BI5) à l'hôtel je me suis dit (BP15) "Je vais rester un peu plus longtemps";*

Story D:

- (40) *L'hiver dernier je suis allée (DP1) en France avec J et c'était (DI1) absolument génial;*
- (41) *Nous nous sommes promenés et c'était (DI3) le rêve.*

However, in Story C one encounters a verb in *IMP* that does not appear to present any sort of state:

- (42) *C'était (CI3) la première fois que mon amie allait (CI4) voir un match de foot.*

In my opinion, the use of the verb *allait* does not demonstrate any actions or states that would be developing at a specified moment in the past. According to the same principle, the following example of *IMP* is also excluded from the category of verbs marking conditions and/or circumstances:

- (43) *J'ai dû (EP5) attendre pendant 3 ou 4 heures pour un autre avion qui allait (EI2) sur Nice.*

Thus, the data demonstrate that in the overwhelming majority of cases, *IMP* does indicate the conditions or circumstances, if these are considered to be states of being, with only a few exceptions when *IMP* fulfills its function to transpose the present into the past (Gardes-Tamine 1998:95).

As for *PC*, not a single example of a verb in *PC* was found that would answer the question: 'What states or actions were developing at a specified moment in the past?' All the actions denoted by *PC* appear to be already terminated, marking the result, and do not presuppose any further development. The possible exception to the function of *PC* for

expressing result is the use of *IMP* in *C'était* (CI3) *la première fois que mon amie allait* (CI4) *voir un match de foot*. This action appears to be the same as that expressed later in the same narrative by *On a été* (CP7) *voir PSG/Benfica*, and thus denotes a completed event. Table 5, which summarizes the data for these functions, shows that all the verbs in the corpus expressing states of being occur in *IMP* while all the verbs but one verb expressing a result occur in *PC*.

Table 5: Incidence of verbs in *IMP* and *PC* with conditions/circumstances and result

FUNCTION	<i>IMP</i>	<i>PC</i>	TOTAL
Conditions/ circumstances	54 (100%)	0 (0%)	53
Story A	4	0	4
Story B	8	0	8
Story C	13	0	13
Story D	4	0	4
Story E	24	0	24
Result	1 (1%)	115 (99%)	116
Story A	0	24	24
Story B	0	17	17
Story C	1	19	20
Story D	0	11	11
Story E	0	44	44

2.2.2 Stative verbs vs. verbs of action

The degree to which the use of *IMP* and *PC* may depend on the semantic value of a verb can be tested quantitatively, by classifying all the verbs in the sample as either stative or active and then calculating the incidence of each type of verb with each of the tenses. The verbs considered to be stative are those expressing states, that is, those that do not entail any motion, especially when the activities accompanying these states cannot be seen, as in the case for the verbs *être*, *faire* (in weather expressions), *souffrir*, *avoir*,

attendre, passer (with indicators of duration), *s'amuser, pouvoir, devoir*. All other verbs were treated as active, such as *aller, manger, dire, and partir*.

In story A the speaker uses only two different verbs in *IMP*. Of the four occurrences of verbs in *IMP*, three are with the verb *être* and one is the verb *faire* which, although it would be classified as a verb of action, in the expression *faire chaud* I have classified it as a stative verb. Thus, all four occurrences *IMP* are with stative verbs. As for stative verbs used in *PC*, we find the verb *être* in *Elle a été (AP9) très malade* and the verb *souffrir* in: *Elle a beaucoup souffert (AP11)*. Both these verbs are used to indicate the termination of the sickness and the suffering by the specific moment of death: *Et elle est morte (AP12)*. All other verbs in *PC* in this narrative are the verbs of action.

In Story B we find twice as many stative verbs used in *IMP* than in story A, even though the total number of verbs used by the speaker is smaller. Out of ten stative verbs in the story, eight are used in *IMP* and two (*avoir* and *attendre*) in *PC*. Again, all other verbs used in *PC* appear to be verbs of action.

Story C seems to differ somewhat from the previous two texts in terms of the quantity of stative and non-stative verbs used in *IMP*. Out of fourteen verbs in *IMP*, twelve are stative verbs (including the verb *faire* in *il faisait (CI11) un peu froid*), whereas the remaining two verbs, *allait* and *disais*, are verbs of action. Contrary to expectations, there are eight stative verbs used in *PC*, which is the highest number of this type of verb employed in this tense among all five texts.

In Story D the only four occurrences of verbs in *IMP* are of the verb *être*, which resembles the situation in Story A. Of the eleven occurrences of verbs in *PC*, eight are verbs of action and three are stative verbs (*pouvoir* and *être*).

Story E, the most detailed story of the five, displays the largest variety of verbs. Despite the greater wealth of information provided by the speaker and the great variety of verbs used in *IMP*, this story does not have the highest percentage of the verbs in *IMP*. Of the occurrences of stative verbs in this story, twenty-three are in *IMP* while three are

in *PC*. Out of 43 verbs of action, forty-one occur in *PC* and two in *IMP*. Table 6 shows the quantitative distribution of *IMP* and *PC* with stative verbs and verbs of action. One can conclude that this function corresponds less well to *IMP* and *PC* than conditions versus result considered in the previous section. It is likely not the verb itself that determines the tense in which it occurs, but rather the way the action is presented.

Table 6: Incidence of *IMP* and *PC* with stative verbs and verbs of action

FUNCTION	<i>IMP</i>	<i>PC</i>	TOTAL
Stative verbs	51 (74%)	18 (26%)	69
Story A	4	2	6
Story B	8	2	10
Story C	12	8	20
Story D	4	3	7
Story E	23	3	26
Verbs of action	4 (4%)	97 (96%)	101
Story A	0	22	22
Story B	0	15	15
Story C	2	11	13
Story D	0	8	8
Story E	2	41	43

2.2.3 Temporal discursive space vs. timeless discursive space

The next two functions, temporal discursive space and timeless discursive space present problems in their analysis because of their visible facility, on the one hand, and their ambiguity, on the other hand. In order to approach this question, it is very important to understand what is meant by discursive space being temporal or timeless.

As discussed in Chapter 1, scholars have proposed that *IMP* is used to describe temporal entities, while timeless entities are referred to primarily by *PC*. This means that the actions expressed in *IMP* refer to temporal discursive space since they emphasize that some duration of time, even though it is unlimited time, is involved in their accomplishment. *PC*, by contrast, refers to timeless discursive space, since it

automatically marks the completion of actions and does not speculate on how much time it may have taken to process this or that action. In discourse, therefore, one predicts that a verb in *IMP* will always be supported by a precise past-time marker, explicitly or implicitly determined, in order to limit the effect created by the verb to a specific period of time. Otherwise, the actions in *IMP*, since this tense implies no temporal boundaries, would be absolutely unidentified in the discursive space and would therefore transfer no meaning. By comparing the following three examples, we observe that only (46) contains a precise indication of past time to indicate the exact moment at which the action was in progress and so would be preferred by native speakers.

- (44) *Je regardais la télé* (no time indicator);
- (45) *Je regardais la télé à 7 heures* (general time indicator);
- (46) *Je regardais la télé à 7 heures hier* (past-time indicator).

PC, on the other hand, does not require any past-time indicators in order to refer to a specific moment in the past in order to make the actions it presents meaningful. The tense itself contains the notion of a punctual past-time point of reference, unless otherwise indicated, as in *Il est souvent venu me voir* (Dansereau 1987:35). Therefore, if the speaker does not recognize the development of the action as significant but is rather concerned with it as a terminated unit, *PC* will be used instead of *IMP*.

Compare, for example, two versions of an answer to the question: *Qu'est-ce qui s'est passé hier de 3 à 4 heures?*:

- (a) *J'ai téléphoné à mon amie de 3 à 4 heures.*
- (b) *Je téléphonais à mon amie de 3 à 4 heures.*

In both cases we know the exact hour of occurrence of the action. Whether *PC* or *IMP* is used, there is no doubt that the act of calling was in process at some time between three and four o'clock. What we cannot know for sure, though, is the exact duration of the phone call in the sentence with *IMP*. So, the difference between these two cases consists in the amount of information provided by the speaker. If we imagine a case

where both utterances are pronounced in court, we will discover that by using *PC* the speaker displays more precise information concerning the exact period of time within which the action was completed. With *IMP*, the message is not so straightforward. Obviously, the action lasted for at least one hour, but we have no information regarding the time of its beginning or end. It may have started a while before three o'clock and finished shortly thereafter or it may have taken exactly one hour. With the verb in *IMP*, this detail remains unspecified, while *PC* clearly marks the beginning and the end of the action.

I will illustrate this theory on two most vivid examples from my corpus. By pure coincidence two speakers both told of the death of their grandmothers. In both cases, the speakers referred to the idea of the grandmother's being sick:

- (47) *Ma grand-mère est morte (AP8). Elle a été (AP9) très malade, ça s'est très mal passé (AP10), elle a beaucoup souffert (AP11), et elle est morte (AP12);*
- (48) *Nous sommes allés voir (EP8) ma grand-mère. Elle était (EI5) très malade... A minuit moins le quart ma tante a téléphoné (EP21) que ma grand-mère était (EI13) morte.*

Both examples would translate into English as: *She was very sick*. However, the first speaker uses *PC*, whereas the second one selects *IMP*. Apparently, we cannot consider these sentences in isolation from their contexts. It is clear that the chosen tenses are compatible with the surrounding elements. Thus, speaker A, unlike speaker E, embeds her *PC* in a simple series of events and confines herself to a single mention of the fact without focusing on the progress of the illness. She neither specifies details concerning the sickness nor does she talk about other things happening in the meantime. She excludes time as a factor necessary for the event to occur, even though it is implied by the use of a stative verb. Her narration does not slow down at this point, yet we cannot say the same about the speaker E. The latter does sound more deliberate about the matter. She mentions a few events that happened between the moment when we find out about

her grandmother's sickness and the moment she passes away. In other words, the continuation of the action is observed throughout the whole time. Indeed, from the context it is clear that the action was taking place when the following events occurred: *nous sommes allés* (EP8) *voir ma grand-mère; j'ai vu* (EP9) *toute ma famille, nous sommes rentrés* (EP10) *à Antibes; j'ai dû* (EP12) *faire opérer mon chien*, and others, until the moment indicated by: *Ma tante a téléphoné* (EP21) *que ma grand-mère était* (EI13) *morte*. All these actions mark the temporal period within which the action was developing, whereas with *PC* no such indication is traced. Apparently, the speakers' choice between *IMP* and *PC* is indeed influenced by whether or not they want to set up the limits for the event. If they do set up such limits, then they are likely to express the event in *PC*. If not, the action is likely to be expressed in *IMP* accompanied by a past-time indicator.

Table 7: Incidence of *IMP* and *PC* with temporal and timeless discursive space

FUNCTION	<i>IMP</i>	<i>PC</i>	TOTAL
Temporal discursive space	55 (83%)	11 (17%)	66
Story A	4	2	6
Story B	8	2	10
Story C	14	5	19
Story D	4	1	5
Story E	25	1	26
Timeless discursive Space	0 (0%)	104 (100%)	104
Story A	0	22	22
Story B	0	15	15
Story C	0	14	14
Story D	0	10	10
Story E	0	43	43

The outcome of the quantitative analysis of this function (see Table 7) shows that all 55 verbs in *IMP* from all five stories refer to the temporal discursive space, i.e. they

are all explicitly time-consuming. There was not a single case where an imperfect action would reveal an inclination towards the timeless aspect. By contrast, temporal discursive space was represented by 11 of the 115 verbs in the sample in *PC*.

2.2.4 No connection to the present vs. links to the present

In Chapter 1 we learned that several scholars mention the tight connection of *PC* to the present, while only Anscombe emphasizes that *IMP* is fully restricted to the past. We recall his example:

(49) *Pourquoi est-ce que tu ris?*

J'ai lu une blague. (Anscombe 1992:46)

In this situation, Anscombe rejects the possibility of occurrence of *IMP* in the second sentence, because it provides the reason for the action's presently taking place: *Tu es en train de rire*. Indeed, if we accept the idea that *PC* does indicate the termination of the action and presents the occurrence of the event as an established fact in the above-mentioned situation, a native French speaker will be more likely to use the verb *lire* in *PC* in order to demonstrate that the effects of having read a joke are still felt in the present. If we replace *j'ai lu* with *je lisais*, the act of laughing will not be justified because the response will not seem relevant to the present moment.

Naturally, the relationship of *IMP* and *PC* to the present may be recognized only if a verb in one of these two past tenses bears a relationship to a verb in the present tense or to an act immediately following the action expressed by the past tense. Example (50) offers another illustration of a link between a verb in *PC* and the present moment.

(50) *J'ai loué le film « Amélie ».*

Regardons-le, alors

In this case, *PC* connects to the present by specifying that one action was completed in the recent past and that its completion contributed to the development of another action that is currently taking place or will take place in the near future.

In the sample the speakers did not relate any past events to the actual present, so this category cannot be tested through their examples. From this we may conclude that the possible function of *PC* of having a direct relationship with the present is not relevant for these particular narratives.

2.2.5 Does not advance the narrative vs. advances the narrative

The purpose of our discussion about advancement vs. non-advancement of the narrative is to define what is normally understood by advancement of the narrative and to determine whether this feature is regularly attributed to *PC* as has been claimed by Grobe (1967:349) and Maingueneau (2000:96). In fact, this quality is often used to explain the dependence of *IMP* on *PC*, since *PC* advances the narrative and *IMP* does not. The function of advancing the narrative also relates to the tendency of *PC* to indicate the occurrence of a completed action. By pointing out that the action was fully terminated and that its development is no longer in existence, the verb in *PC* advances the narrative to the next step where the realities turn out to be slightly different from those just a moment ago. Let us consider the following example, which expresses a chain of events:

- (51) *Quand je suis arrivée (EP3) à Paris, j'ai raté (EP4) ma correspondance, et, donc, j'ai dû (EP5) attendre pendant 3 ou 4 heures pour un autre avion qui allait (EI2) sur Nice.*

First, the speaker arrived in Paris, then she missed her connection and as a consequence she had to wait for some time for another train. At the end of the sentence we find ourselves three steps further on in the story than at the beginning. If we substitute *IMP* for *PC*, though, the affect will not be the same:

- (52) *Quand j'arrivais à Paris, je ratais ma correspondance, et, donc, je devais attendre pendant 3 ou 4 heures pour un autre avion...*

Even though, the actions could still be viewed as occurring one after the other, we do not consider them to be separate units as we would when they are presented in *PC*. We

tend to treat them as habitual actions referring to one particular period of time and in this case we do not observe the advancement of a narrative, because no action goes out of the limit of the indicated time frame.

In order to advance the narrative, it is not necessary for the actions expressed in *PC* to occur in a chronological order and, as a matter of fact, they frequently do not. To accomplish the function of driving the story forward they just have to denote the events that obviously could not have occurred simultaneously on the temporal scale. Thus, in (53) we do not find any indication that the actions expressed by the verbs *manger*, *lire* and *dormir* took place in exactly the same order they were presented.

(53) *Une fois dans l'avion j'ai fait (BP6) ce que tout le monde fait: j'étais (BI3) assise, j'ai mangé (BP7), j'ai lu (BP8), j'ai dormi (BP9).*

Yet, we recognize the advancement of the narration, because these actions taken together move forward the time of the narration.

If we consider the speakers' stories carefully, we will notice that some of the verbs do not seemingly push the time forward. Normally, these are the repetitive verbs or the verbs denoting the actions mentioned as flashbacks in the narrative:

(54) *Je n'aime pas tellement aller en France ou en Europe pour les vacances, surtout cette année-là, parce que je suis allée (AP7) en Avignon pour travailler, donc, c'était (AI4) pas vraiment des vacances et puis ma grand-mère est morte (AP8) tout à fait au début. Elle a été (AP9) très malade et ça s'est très mal passé (AP10) et elle a beaucoup souffert (AP11), et elle est morte (AP12) et...(Story A)*

In the whole episode, the only two verbs which advance the narrative are *je suis allée* and *ma grand-mère est morte*. The other four verbs in *PC* provide the subordinate information concerning the facts preceding the grandmother's decease.

Stories B, D and E, by contrast, serve as good examples of texts that consist exclusively of verbs in *PC* that advance the narrative, if we exclude the false starts, as in: *j'ai pris... j'ai récupéré mes bagages* (Story B).

As a result, it turned out that we should refrain from insisting on the fact that *PC* necessarily advances the narrative, because this argument may occasionally have its deviations, depending on where the speaker might choose to direct the story. However, we can be certain that *IMP* can never be considered to advance the narrative.

Table 8: Incidence of *IMP* and *PC* according to whether the verb advances the narrative

FUNCTION	<i>IMP</i>	<i>PC</i>	TOTAL
Does not advance the narrative	55 (81%)	13 (19%)	68
Story A	4	7	11
Story B	8	1	9
Story C	14	5	19
Story D	4	0	4
Story E	25	0	25
Advances the narrative	0 (0%)	102 (100%)	102
Story A	0	17	17
Story B	0	16	16
Story C	0	14	14
Story D	0	11	11
Story E	0	44	44

Actually, whether or not we consider *PC* to drive the narrative forward depends on whether we understand the advancement of the narrative as consisting simply of completed actions in general, or as encompassing actions that can be placed in temporal sequence. In (55) the verbs in *PC* may be considered as advancing the narrative if we assume that the two events can be placed in a temporal sequence, that is, that Marie first played the piano and then Pierre sang a song. However, if we believe that the two events

occurred simultaneously, then we have less certain grounds to claim that they have advanced the narrative.

(55) *Marie a joué du piano et Pierre a chanté une chanson.*

Thus, for the quantitative analysis of the corpus, I classified only verbs that could be placed in a temporal sequence as advancing the narrative and excluded all repetitive verbs and flashbacks from this classification. Table 8 above shows clearly that verbs in *IMP* never advance the narrative. Most verbs in *PC* do advance the narrative, but some do not. Therefore, the sole function of advancing the narrative would not be sufficient to describe the use of *PC*.

2.2.6 Intrinsic qualities vs. general realities

This section discusses briefly the ability imputed to *IMP* of describing intrinsic qualities and the tendency of *PC* to present the general realities. The difference between the two is determined by the fact that the general realities expressed by *PC* are shared by a group of people and are passed from one generation to another, while intrinsic qualities imputed to an object or a person are generally subjective.

Unfortunately, none of the five stories in the corpus provides any evidence as to how these features of both tenses work in authentic speech. However, I would assume that should an aphorism involving the past and the present time occur in spontaneous speech, it would more likely be used in *PC* in order to emphasize its relevance to the present:

(56) *Les gens ont toujours dit des mensonges.*

As for the tendency to describe intrinsic qualities attributed to *IMP*, I will avoid making any comments without being able to support them with examples. It does seem, though, that such a discussion could turn out to be more complicated than that regarding *PC*, since intrinsic qualities described by a past tense may sometimes belong not only to

people living in the past but also to those still alive in the present, as seen in the following examples.

(57) *Louis XIV avait le nez bourbon.* (Anscombe 46)

(58) *Mon ami, qui habite la maison voisine, a toujours eu?/avait toujours? le nez aquilin.*

2.2.7 Cannot be used in isolation vs. can be used in isolation

In the introduction to this study I mentioned my disagreement with the argument that *IMP* cannot be used in isolation from *PC*. Indeed, if we consider a verb in *IMP* used in a sentence without *PC* as an isolated unit, we will find quite a few examples of this phenomenon in the corpus:

(59) *Il faisait (AI2) très chaud à Francfort; C'était (AI3) certainement la partie la plus intéressante de mon voyage*

(60) *C'était (CI2) bien; C'était (CI3) la première fois que mon amie allait (CI4) voir un match de foot*

(61) *L'avion était (EI1) en retard; A Nice mes parents m'attendaient (EI3) depuis des heures; Il avait (EI7) des boules de graisse; C'était (EI9) amusant*

Apparently, within a sentence *IMP* does occur by itself without leaning on any action in *PC*. Moreover, there are cases when the utterance with an isolated verb in *IMP* is not supported by any verb in *PC* within the entire context. It is also noteworthy to point out that it does not only concern the sentences where the speakers make comments on the story, but also those presenting events within the story.

Thus, if in *Il avait* (EI7) *des boules de graisse*, the verb *avait* is bound with the verb *j'ai dû* from the previous *j'ai dû* (EP12) *faire operer mon chien*, the verb *était* in *L'avion était* (EI1) *en retard* appears to be totally independent from any of the surrounding verbs in *PC*.

Consequently, the assertion that *IMP* cannot be found in isolation from *PC* may not be considered to be reliable, because the percentage of all verbs in *IMP* found in isolation in all five texts is 41% (16/55) while the percentage of those in *PC* is 62% (71/115) (see Table 9). This shows that despite the fact that in a single sentence *PC* is more likely to occur separately from *IMP*, *IMP* can, nonetheless, appear as a separate unit.

Rather than saying that *IMP* cannot occur in isolation, it would be more accurate to refer to *IMP* as a tense which is incapable on its own of conveying a complete message or advancing a narrative, since it does not introduce any events. It is important within a narrative that *IMP* relates to the verbs in *PC*, but it does not have to be syntactically linked to them and such a relationship does not necessarily have to occur within each complete sentence.

Table 9: Incidence of *IMP* and *PC* when used in isolation

FUNCTION	<i>IMP</i>	<i>PC</i>	TOTAL
Cannot be used in isolation	39 (47%)	44 (53%)	83
Story A	2	5	7
Story B	8	10	18
Story C	7	5	12
Story D	4	5	9
Story E	18	19	37
Can be used in isolation	16 (18%)	71 (82%)	87
Story A	2	19	21
Story B	0	7	7
Story C	7	14	21
Story D	0	6	6
Story E	7	25	32

2.3 Summary

Based on the examples from my corpus of spoken French consisting of five narratives, I have demonstrated that many of the functions proposed for *IMP* and *PC* by textbook authors and scholars have a considerable number of exceptions that may confuse French language learners. Yet, the data strongly suggest that only *IMP* is used in order to present the states or actions developed at a certain moment in the past, thereby describing the conditions or circumstances for other actions. *PC*, in turn, is used to express the result of a completed action, to advance the narrative, and in most cases to refer to timeless discursive space.

We can clearly see that even though stative verbs appeared most often in *IMP*, they were still used quite frequently in *PC*, requiring, however, a certain amount of time for their fulfillment. Out of the total number of 170 past tense verbs in the five narratives, speakers used 69 stative verbs (40%) and 101 verbs of action (60%), therefore, approximately one and a half times as many verbs of action as stative verbs. Table 6 above showed that of the total number of verbs in the sample only 22 (13%) did not follow the prediction of *IMP* with stative verbs and *PC* with verbs of action. Four verbs of action occurred in *IMP*, while 18 stative verbs appeared in *PC*. Using this evidence, one can conclude that in the spoken narratives: 1) *PC* outnumbered *IMP*; 2) the overwhelming majority of stative verbs appear in *IMP* and the verbs of action in *PC*; 3) within a narrative stative verbs are more likely to be used in *PC* than verbs of action in *IMP*, which is proved by the presence of 26% of all stative verbs occurring in *PC* and only 4% of all verbs of action appearing in *IMP*.

The outcome of the quantitative analysis of this function shows that all 55 verbs in *IMP* from all five stories refer to the temporal discursive space, i.e. they are all explicitly time consuming. There was not a single case where an imperfect action would reveal an inclination towards the timeless aspect:

- (62) *C'était (AI3) certainement la partie la plus intéressante de mon voyage [i.e. Le temps que j'ai passé à Francfort].*
- (63) *L'avion avait (AI2) du retard.*
- (64) *Il faisait (CI11) un peu froid.*
- (65) *[Le voyage] était (DI1) absolument génial.*
- (66) *À Nice mes parents m'attendaient (EI3) depuis des heures*

The actions in *PC*, as was seen above, did not demonstrate such uniformity in adherence to timeless discursive space. There were cases when the verbs in *PC* were used with the time indicators expressing duration:

- (67) *J'ai attendu (BP5) pendant un certain temps.*
- (68) *On y est resté (CP3) à peu près pendant un mois.*
- (69) *On a rigolé (EP20) beaucoup, etc.*

Other examples of the verbs in *PC*, which clearly suggest a certain time frame, are the stative verbs, such as the ones in:

- (70) *Elle a été (AP9) très malade; Elle a beaucoup souffert (AP11)*
- (71) *Il y a eu (BP4) pas mal de problèmes.*
- (72) *On a eu (CP11) du bon temps*
- (73) *Je n'ai pas été (DP10) malade.*

Thus, we may conclude that the argument that *PC* always expresses the actions of timeless discursive space did not prove to be accurate. Our data suggest that there is, in fact, a certain number of occurrences of verbs in *PC* that favor temporal discursive space. In the corpus, these all were stative verbs used in affirmative sentences. In the negative sentences, on the other hand, they changed their stative aspect into that of modal verbs: *On n'a pas eu (CP12) à se plaindre/We couldn't complain*, and referred to timeless discursive space.

Finally, one finds concerning stative verbs that on certain occasions the stative verb *être* in *PC* was used in the function of the active verb *aller*, e.g., *On a été (CP6) voir*

un match de football/We went to a football game (Story C). In such cases it did not reveal any presupposition of the temporal space, but followed the tendency of the active verbs to conceal the time taken on their accomplishment.

Interestingly, according to the data, of the total number of verbs that could not be used in isolation, 44 (53%) of these occurred in *PC* and 39 (47%) occurred in *IMP*. This can be explained in part by the greater number of verbs in *PC* in the sample. If we consider the 55 verbs in the sample in *IMP*, we find that only 16 (29%) appeared in isolation versus 71 (62%) of the 115 verbs in *PC*. Even though it did not prove to be true, as Maingueneau (2000:96) claimed, that verbs in *IMP* could not be used in isolation, it was in fact the case that the majority followed this tendency.

Table 10: Summary of incidence of *IMP* and *PC* according to the functions tested

Functions	<i>IMP</i>	<i>PC</i>
Conditions/circumstances	53 (96%)	0 (0%)
Result	1 (2%)	115 (100%)
Stative verbs	51 (92%)	18 (15%)
Verbs of action	4 (7%)	97 (84%)
Temporal discursive space	55 (100%)	11 (9%)
Timeless discursive space	0 (0%)	104 (90%)
Cannot be used in isolation	39 (71%)	44 (38%)
Can be used in isolation	16 (29%)	71 (61%)
Does not advance the narrative	55 (100%)	13 (11%)
Advances the narrative	0 (0%)	105 (91%)
Total verbs in the sample	55 (100%)	115 (100%)

Table 10 summarizes in one table the distribution of the different functions presented this time as a percentage of the total number of occurrences for each tense rather than as the percentage of verbs with this function as shown in the separate tables above. The figures show clearly the tendency of verbs in *IMP* to express conditions and circumstances (96%), to be stative verbs (92%), to belong to temporal discursive space (100%) and not to advance the narrative (100%). At the same time, at least 90% of all the verbs in *PC* express the result, refer to the timeless discursive space, and advance the narrative.

On the other hand, less than 5% of verbs in *IMP* mark the result (if any at all) or are semantically active, functions which appear to characterize *PC*. *PC*, however, shows a higher percentage of verbs interfering with the functions attributed to *IMP*. Of all verbs in *PC*, 9% belong to temporal discursive space and 11% do not advance the narrative. We therefore can conclude that some of the proposed functions have been strongly supported by the data, while others have been found to be less adequate in describing actual speech.

CONCLUSION

The hypothesis stated at the outset of this thesis was that qualitative description which implies continuation of an action is the major function of *IMP* whereas the major function of *PC* is to express a fully terminated action that implies a result. The other functions proposed by textbook authors and scholars for these two tenses are only occasionally relevant and depend on a particular case, so, in my view, they cannot formulate the basic functions for *IMP* and *PC*.

Indeed, the analysis of the corpus established for this study demonstrates that the majority of functions typically associated with a specific tense are not, in fact, limited to a unique tense and are to a certain degree interchangeable. Thus, of the ten functions of *IMP* and *PC* tested in this research, only half were proved to apply exclusively to one of the tenses. It turned out that *IMP* was in fact never used to advance the narrative and was the only tense that the speakers used to express the conditions and circumstances in their stories. The verbs in *IMP* answered the question *What states or actions were developing at the specific moment of time in the past?* while the verbs in *PC* did not.

This function of *IMP* was stressed in quite a few sources mentioned in the first chapter of this research: *Chez Nous* (318, 348), *Interaction* (149), *Bravo!* (142), Pulgram (1984:259-261) and Dansereau (1987:37). However, most sources refer to conditions and circumstances as background elements, yet I do not agree with this characterization for all the verbs used in *IMP* in the corpus. If we compare, for instance, the following sentences, we see that the information presented in the first sentence is valuable by itself in stating the condition of the plane at a particular moment:

(74) *L'avion était (EI1) en retard*

(75) *Quand je suis (EP6) arrivée en France il faisait (EI4) très froid*

The speaker does not make any reference to anything else that might have happened during this time, which is exactly what she is doing in the second case, as illustrated in (76), where (•) is a marker of the punctual occurrence of the action:

- (76) *Il faisait froid*
 ───────────
 • *Je suis arrivée*

So, theoretically, we have no reason to consider the verb *était* as the one creating the background for something else, because nothing else happens. Therefore, I would not recommend using the term background for pedagogical explanations of the functions of *IMP*, but would prefer instead the terms conditions and circumstances.

We found in the corpus that *IMP* never specifies the result or the terminal point of an action, and therefore occurs with a specified or implied time designation, so that it can be said to occur in temporal discursive space. Without such a designation an action expressed in *IMP* would seem to be floating in timeless space thereby progressing at no particular moment. In other words, actions in *IMP* are always viewed as developing in time and the presence of a particular time frame is an important accompaniment to the occurrence of an action in *IMP*. In fact, this time designation is a major difference between *IMP* and *PC*, which, in its turn, usually occurs in timeless discursive space by stressing the total completion of an action. As such, *PC* can present a sequence of events where one action can be placed before or after another and thus advance the narrative.

A verb in *IMP* may refer to a completed action, as in the following question directed to a person who has just come out of the bathroom, but it does not present the action as complete:

- (77) *Qu'est-ce que tu faisais dans la salle de bains?*
Je me lavais les mains.

In this specific situation the verb *lavais* obviously refers to a completed action, but it presents this action as the answer to ‘What was the situation?’ rather than ‘What happened?’

There are many examples of verbs in *PC* which clearly advance the narrative, yet the sources do not specify whether this should be true of all verbs in *PC*. We have already observed that two actions in *PC* could have occurred simultaneously rather than in temporal sequence, as in (78):

(78) *Marie a joué du piano et Pierre a chanté une chanson.*

In such cases, where two actions cannot be placed in chronological order, we cannot say that each verb advances the narrative, but the two taken together can be seen as one event that advances the narrative.

A similar situation may arise with verbs in *IMP*. Since the actions *IMP* expresses are not marked with by temporal boundaries, one generally believes that they cannot be placed in any particular order and therefore cannot drive the narrative forward. Yet, if we add one more action to the Example (77) above, we will have to assume a sequential order of the two actions: *lavais*, then *brossais*, or *brossais*, then *lavais*, since it is unlikely that the two took place at the same time:

(79) *Je me lavais les mains et je me brossais les dents*

These observations call into question the traditional belief that *IMP* never implies the total completion of an action and that *PC* advances the narrative. As it turns out, both tenses, *IMP* and *PC*, can fulfill most of the functions marked as the property of a particular tense. With this in mind we have to be careful while explaining the distinction between *IMP* and *PC* to our students in order to refrain from making statements that do not apply to actual usage of the two tenses by native speakers of French. At the same time, it would not be useful to inform students that, since both tenses are capable of expressing most any function, the student is free to use any tense, because these tenses do

offer a different perspective on the actions they express and invite the hearer to view them a certain way.

Consequently, we have been trying to determine the functions that indisputably distinguish *IMP* and *PC*. According to the data from the five narratives, we may identify the temporal factor as the one that directs native speakers in their choice between *IMP* and *PC*. Indeed, all actions seem to be bound by the presence or absence of the durative time that is important to the speaker. Whether the verb in *IMP* presents a completed action or not, the original purpose of using it is to put forward the ongoing time that the action required. It does not matter whether the action actually resulted in anything, but it does matter that it was in progress for some period of time in the past.

By contrast, it is the fact of completion that provides some sort of result or consequences for the future that determines the speaker's use of *PC*. Again, regardless of the amount of time that it might have taken to accomplish the action, the speaker stresses that it was eventually terminated and the result of its result may be identified.

To summarize the findings, we determined that the functions of *IMP* and *PC* which are true for over 90% of the verbs in each tense are the following:

IMP:

- operates in temporal discursive space (100%)
- does not advance the narrative (100%)
- expresses conditions or circumstances (96%)
- stative verbs appear in this tense (92%)

PC:

- expresses a result (100%)
- does not express conditions or circumstances (100%)
- advances the narrative (91%)
- operates in timeless discursive space (90%)

All functions of *IMP* are clearly marked with a temporal designation that presupposes the presence of the ongoing time, as has been illustrated by the data, within which the action develops. In other words, as a time bearer, *IMP* dwells on the progression of the actions or situations it represents, while the major feature of *PC* is to indicate the completion of the actions.

In learning to use *IMP* and *PC* in a way that approximates their use by native speakers of French, students of French will need to develop some understanding of the key functions of these tenses, i.e., conditions vs. results and temporal and timeless discursive space. In other words, it has to be emphasized to students that most frequently they will be using *IMP* when their goal is to stress the presence of an ongoing action at a certain point of time, and the boundaries of an action are not of primary importance to them and/or their listeners. On the other hand, they have to use *PC* if they particularly intend to indicate that an action was terminated. Learners at the beginning level will need time to develop this understanding, since they are not used to associating the actions they picture with one of these two tenses. Ultimately, how well they are able to communicate their view of different actions in the past will depend entirely on their making certain choices between these two past tenses.

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APPENDIX

INTERVIEWS ON THE TOPIC “MY LAST TRIP TO FRANCE”

STORY A

La dernière fois que je *suis rentrée* (P1) en France, *c’était* (I1) il y a un an et demi, *j’ai pris* (P2) l’avion jusqu’à... pas jusqu’à la France, *j’ai pris* (P3) l’avion jusqu’à Francfort en Allemagne. Il *faisait* (I2) très chaud à Francfort, *c’était* (I3) certainement la partie la plus intéressante de mon voyage. Ensuite, je *suis rentrée* (P4) en voiture. Ma mère *est venue* (P5) me chercher à Francfort et nous *sommes rentrées* (P6) en voiture chez mes parents. Je n’aime pas tellement aller en France ou en Europe pour les vacances, surtout cette année-là, parce que je *suis allée* (P7) en Avignon pour travailler, donc, *c’était* (I4) pas vraiment des vacances et puis ma grand-mère *est morte* (P8) tout à fait au début. Elle *a été* (P9) très malade et ça *s’est* très mal *passé* (P10) et elle *a* beaucoup *souffert* (P11), et elle *est morte* (P12) et...

Qu’est-ce qu’on *a fait* (P13) encore? Je suis... *j’ai* pas beaucoup *vu* (P14) mes parents. *J’ai vu* (P15) mes parents deux jours au début des vacances et puis je *suis retournée* (P16) chez mes parents, peut-être pour 3 ou 4 jours vers la fin de mon séjour en Europe et puis ensuite je *suis retournée* (P17) en Allemagne. Qu’est-ce que *j’ai fait* (P18) en France? *J’ai* beaucoup beaucoup *travaillé* (P19) pour le programme d’Avignon, *j’ai* aussi... je *me suis promenée* (P20), *j’ai fait* (P21) pas mal de randonnées en France, chez mes parents et puis en Allemagne je *suis restée* (P22) chez ma soeur, *j’ai rencontré* (P23) mes amis allemands et *j’ai visité* (P24) Francfort.

STORY B

Je vais parler de mon dernier voyage en France. Ça fait un certain temps que *je suis pas rentrée* (P1) donc je me rappelle pas très bien, mais... *C'était* (I1) en juillet 2000, donc, je *suis partie* (P2) de Athènes... *J'ai pris* (P3) un shuttle pour aller à Atlanta. Il y *a eu* (P4) pas mal de problèmes... l'avion *avait* (I2) du retard, donc, *j'ai attendu* (P5) pendant un certain temps. Ensuite, une fois dans l'avion, donc, *j'ai fait* (P6) ce que tout le monde fait: *j'étais* (I3) assise, *j'ai mangé* (P7), *j'ai lu* (P8), *j'ai dormi* (P9). Ensuite, arrivée à Paris, *c'était* (I3) le matin, alors, *j'étais* (I4) assez fatiguée, donc, *j'ai pris* (P10)... *j'ai récupéré* (P11) mes bagages à la consigne, en fait pas la consigne, le bagage... *baggage claim*... je ne sais plus comment dire en français... et je *suis allée* (P12) dans l'ensemble de Paris. Je *suis allée* (P13) à l'hôtel, *j'ai réservé* (P14) une chambre pour pouvoir dormir toute la journée avant de reprendre mon voyage dans ... vers le sud de la France pour retrouver ma famille. Et puis une fois que *j'étais* (I5) à l'hôtel je *me suis dit* (P15) je vais rester un peu plus longtemps. *J'ai visité* (P16) Paris, puis *j'avais* (I6) quelques amis là-bas, donc, je *me suis dit* (P17) que (*c'était*), *c'était* (I7) l'occasion pour les voir...

STORY C

La dernière fois que je *suis retourné* (P1) en France *c'était* (I1) en mai dernier. On *est arrivé* (P2), je crois, au début mai, on y *est resté* (P3) jusqu'au début juin, on y *est resté* (P4) à peu près pendant un mois. Qu'est-ce qu'on *a fait?* (P5) (On a été)... La première semaine on *a été* (P6) voir un match de football au Parc des Princes. On *a été* (P7) voir PSG/Benfica. *C'était* (I2) bien. *C'était* (I3) la première fois que mon amie *allait* (I4) voir un match de foot. Autrement on *est resté* (P8) sur Paris la plupart du temps. Et une semaine avant de revenir aux Etats-Unis on *est allé* (P9) voir ma grand-mère à Charleville-Mézières, dans les Ardennes et on y *a passé* (P10) 4 ou 5 jours et *c'était* (I5) bien amusant. Ça *c'était* (I6) bien de voir la famille et (on *a eu* du beau

temps), on **a eu** (P11) du beau temps, on **n'a pas eu** (P12) à se plaindre. **C'était** (I7) bien, **c'était** (I8) intéressant. On **a été** (P13) faire le bateau-mouche sur la Seine. On **est retourné** (P14) sur les Champs-Élysées, c'est la grande avenue entre l'Arc de Triomphe et la Concorde, **c'était** (I9) bien ça... **C'était** (I10) bien. Comme je **disais** au cas où **t'as pas compris...** (P15) On **a été** (P16) au Parc des Princes, c'est le stade à l'ouest de Paris et on **s'est bien amusé** (P17) et voilà, quoi. On **n'a pas été** (P18) à la mer par contre parce qu'il **faisait** (I11) un peu froid. On **n'a pas eu** (P19) le plaisir d'aller en Corse mais **c'était** (I12) bien, **c'était** (I13) intéressant, voilà.

STORY D

L'hiver dernier je **suis allée** (P1) en France avec J et **c'était** (I1) absolument génial. Mes parents avaient loué un refuge en Bourgogne et nous nous **sommes retrouvés** (P2) avec toute ma famille et J **a pu** (P3) rencontrer tout le monde. Et en plus il **a neigé** (P4), donc, ça, **c'était** (I2) génial, on **a fait** (P5) beaucoup de parties de boule de neige et après, pour le jour de l'an, nous **sommes allés** (P6) à Paris où nous **avons passé** (P7) un réveillon magnifique. Nous **avons visité** (P8) Paris, nous nous **sommes promenés** (P9) et vraiment **c'était** (I3) le rêve, surtout que pour une fois, je **n'ai pas été** (P10) malade et d'habitude j'attrape toujours un virus ou quelque chose, mais là vraiment, rien du tout. J'**ai pu** (P11) revoir tous mes amis de France et nous **avons fait** (P12) la fête et vraiment **c'était** (I4) inoubliable.

STORY E

Mon dernier voyage en France... Je **suis partie** (P1) le 17 décembre, à 2 heures de l'après-midi. J'**ai pris** (P2) l'avion à Atlanta avec mon chien. L'avion **était** (I1) en retard. Quand je **suis arrivée** (P3) à Paris, j'**ai raté** (P4) ma correspondance, et, donc, j'**ai dû** (P5) attendre pendant 3 ou 4 heures pour un autre avion qui **allait** (I2) sur Nice. A Nice mes parents m'**attendaient** (I3) depuis des heures. Quand je **suis arrivée** (P6) en

France, il *faisait* (I4) très froid, donc, je *suis tombée* (P7) malade au bout de 3 ou 4 jours pendant 2 semaines. Le premier week-end nous *sommes allés* (P8) voir ma grand-mère qui habite à Perpignan. Ma grand-mère *était* (I5) très malade, mais j'*ai vu* (P9) toute ma famille, mes cousins, mes cousines, mes oncles et mes tantes. C'*était* (I6) très amusant. Après, nous *sommes rentrés* (P10) à Antibes et nous *avons pas fait* (P11) grand-chose de spécial et quand je suis...

Au bout de 2/3 jours j'*ai dû* (P12) faire opérer mon chien. Il *avait* (I7) des boules de graisse. Nous *sommes allés* (P13) à Saint-Raphaël avec mon père. Le matin, pendant que E *se faisait* (I8) opérer nous *sommes allés* (P14) à Saint-Tropez et quand nous *sommes revenus* (P15) nous *avons mangé* (P16) avec le vétérinaire, parce que c'*était* un ami à mon père, et après nous *avons repris* (P17) E et nous *sommes rentrés* (P18) à la maison. Pour le 31 décembre, nous *sommes allés* (P19) fêter le réveillon avec mes parents, mon oncle et ma tante. C'*était* (I9) amusant parce que c'*était* (I10) quelque chose de typiquement français, c'*était* (I11) un réveillon cotillon. Il n'y *avait* (I12) que des vieux, alors, avec ma soeur on *a rigolé* (P20) beaucoup, mais à minuit moins le quart ma tante *a téléphoné* (P21) que ma grand-mère *était* (I13) morte. Donc, nous *nous sommes levés* (P22) en quatrième vitesse. Nous *sommes allés* (P23) chez mon oncle et ma tante où on *a discuté* (P24) un petit peu. Je *devais* (I14) partir trois jours après, le jeudi, donc, nous *avons décidé* (P25) de faire l'enterrement de ma grand-mère le mercredi. Le mercredi matin, quand on *s'est levé* (P26) à 5 heures du matin pour partir pour la Perpignan, je *me suis levée* (P27), j'*avais* un abcès. Donc, je *n'ai pas pu* (P28) aller à l'enterrement de ma grand-mère, je *suis restée* (P29) à Antibes et je *suis allée* (P30) au docteur, parce que le dentiste *était* (I14) fermé, il *m'a donné* (P31) les antibiotiques. Le lendemain, je *devais* (P32) partir à midi de Nice, je *devais* (I15) aller de Nice à New York, et de New York à Atlanta, mais il y *avait* (I16) la tempête de neige, mais j'*ai décidé* (P33) d'essayer quand même de partir. Quand je *suis arrivée* (P34) à l'aéroport, je n'*avais* (I17) pas de visa, donc on *m'a refusé* (P35) de monter l'avion, donc je *suis*

rentrée (P36) chez moi et j'*ai fait* (P37) une demande de visa par internet parce que maintenant ça ne se fait que par courrier et par internet et j'*ai dû* (P38) attendre plus de 10 jours pour que mon visa arrive. Quand j'*étais* (I18) à Antibes j'*ai revu* (P39) une amie d'enfance, mais je *n'ai pas fait* (P40) grand-chose. J'*ai* beaucoup *mangé* (P41), parce que la nourriture française est très bonne. Puisque... non, j'*étais* restée plus longtemps, je *suis retournée* (P42) à Saint-Raphaël pour faire enlever les points de mon chien. Voilà. Je *suis allée* (P43) faire du patin à glace avec mon petit neveu une fois. C'*était* (I19) amusant, mais bon, je *suis tombée* (P44), ça c'*était* (I20) pas très amusant. Qu'est-ce qui *s'est passé* (P45) encore? C'est tout. C'est fini alors, voilà! C'*était* (I21) pas les vacances très excitantes et ça ressemble à un soap-opéra, mais bon...