1-1-2005

Past, but Not Gone: The Past Temporal Reference System in Quebec French

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1 Introduction

The disappearance of the passé simple (simple past—shown twice in (1)) in oral French is believed to have caused an overhaul of the past-temporal reference system. Meanings assumed to be associated with this form have been reallocated to the imparfait (imperfect—shown in (2)) according to some (Imbs 1968, de Villers 1988) or the passé composé (present perfect—shown in (3)) according to others (Brunot 1936, Regula 1957, Arrive et al 1986, Riegel et al 2001).

(1) Tord-chênes priit la forêt avec le fusil et la munition pour aller à la chasse et Jean-Jelon resta au château. (XIX:44:471)

Tord-chênes left for the forest with a rifle and ammunition to go hunting and Jean-Jelon stayed at the castle.

(2) Bien nous autres on restait jamais assez longtemps à même place (XX:109:747)

Well, we never stayed long enough in the same place

(3) Bien, pas toujours, ils ont resté au lac Sainte-Marie... (XX:83:727)

Well, not always, they have stayed at the Lac Sainte-Marie....

For such a reallocation of functions to take place, past-time marked forms had to go through a transition phase, which could still be in progress or have achieved completion.

Before deciding whether the past-temporal reference system is characterized by change, it is imperative to look at what meanings are associated with each form. This paper will start by reviewing the grammatical tradition in the hope of defining all the functions assumed to constitute the domain of the imperfect, the present perfect and the simple past. Then, it will examine

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1 Codes refer to the corpus, the speaker number and the line number in the transcription. The abbreviation "XX" stands for the Ottawa-Hull French Corpus (Poplack 1989) and "XIX" for the corpus Récits du français québécois d'autrefois (Poplack and St-Amand 2002). All examples are reproduced verbatim from speaker utterances and translated to facilitate understanding.
Canadian French data from two age groups to see how these three forms are exploited in vernacular speech and to determine if usage parallels prescription. The oldest group will represent the speech of the early twentieth century, a period coinciding with the disappearance of the simple past, while the youngest one will represent the speech of the late twentieth century. If the constraints and hierarchies revealed by a variable rule analysis are the same for both generations, then the past-temporal reference system will be deemed stable. However, if any variation from one group to the other is found, then the system will show signs of change and the probabilities will serve to establish the direction of this change.

2 Grammatical Tradition

Grammarians generally claim that each verb form of the past-temporal reference system is used to express a different meaning, but there is little agreement as to what that meaning is. A survey of 23 influential French grammars dating from 1569 to 1980 revealed that much of what has been prescribed is vague, convoluted, overlapping or downright contradictory, thus indicating inherent variability in the past-temporal reference system.

For example, the imperfect was associated with 60 supposedly different meanings and particular uses. For the purpose of this analysis, three values were selected because they reappeared consistently with this verb form throughout the centuries and they could be operationalized into a factor group. These values include the presumed abilities to express habituality (4), duration (5) and simultaneity (6).

(4) On regardait tout le temps la télévision en anglais (XX:109:676)
We were always watching TV in English

(5) elle avait fait des feuilles puis elle poussait un petit arbre.
It had grown leaves and now it was growing a little tree

(6) Je me suis mariée à 31 ans puis j’avais-je pesais quatre-vingts livres.
I got married at 31 and I had- I weighed eighty pounds.

The situation of the present perfect and the simple past is no clearer. Some grammarians say that there are generally no distinctions between these two verb forms, but then proceed to list exceptions to their claim (Brunot 1936, Sternon 1954, Sensine 1977); others go to great length to contrast them and to warn speakers against some apparent frequent misuses (Arnauld and Lancelot 1660, Beaufée 1767, Girault-Duvivier 1853), a sign that usage does not
follow prescription.

Up until the nineteenth century, one of the distinctions (cited in particular in Arnauld and Lancelot 1660, Antonini 1753, Girault-Duvivier 1853) between those two forms was the "twenty-four-hour rule" invented by Estienne (1569). This rule stipulated that any event since the previous night had to be reported using the present perfect. In contrast, all events prior to that time had to be put in the simple past.

At the end of the nineteenth century, this formulation was replaced by another invoking that the present perfect should be used for events that happened in a period of time of which a part remains unexpired, and the simple past for events from a time entirely elapsed (Bescherelle et al 1852, Girault-Duvivier 1853, Brunot 1936, Sensine 1977, among others). Of course, explanations are invariably accompanied by a long list of special nuances and cases that make it impossible to get a clear and definite picture of the respective features associated with each form.

So, if grammarians failed to agree on the uses of the imperfect, the present perfect and the simple past amongst each other and across the centuries, then how will we know what the actual structure of the past-temporal reference system is, and where meanings associated with the simple past have been reallocated?

3 Corpus and Variable Context

To answer this question, I analyzed 1,517 verb tokens with references to past time contained in the Ottawa-Hull French Corpus (Poplack 1989), which is housed at the Sociolinguistics Laboratory at the University of Ottawa. This vast and unique corpus of vernacular French contains speech data from a representative sample of 120 native speakers of the national capital region of Canada.

For the purpose of this analysis, I selected sixteen speakers living in Hull, Quebec, and divided them into two age groups, as explained before. The eight oldest speakers were born between 1893 and 1918, and the eight youngest were born between 1957 and 1965. This distribution serves a dual purpose: it will be useful to assess whether change is in progress over apparent time and to determine the direction of this potential change.

Given the impossibility of circumscribing a precise semantic domain for each verb form, following Poplack and Tagliamonte (1996), I simply defined the variable context to include past temporal references, but limited the variants to the three described in the literature as the most robust ones: the imperfect, the present perfect and the simple past. This last variant was included to test whether any occurrence would be found in real speech data.
4 Factor Groups

4.1 Sentential Aspect

This study treats aspect from a sentential point of view and distinguishes among three different types: habituals (7), duratives (8) and punctuals (9).

(7) j’ai toujours dit c’était un gars manqué celle-là. (XX:119:707) 
I’ve always said she was a tomboy.
(8) mon petit garçon a été malade bien longtemps. (XX:119:721) 
my small son was sick for a long time.
(9) il a cassé, puis il a tombé sur l’arbre (XX:85:682) 
it broke and it fell on the tree

Herein, habituals include all situations that took place more than once or that were repeated, and duratives encompass all situations that lasted for at least a certain moment in time. As indicated before, grammarians (Maupas 1632, de Fivas 1883, Académie Française 1932, Brunot 1936, Sternon 1954, Grevisse 1964, Sensine 1977, among others) prescribe the imperfect for durative and habitual situations, but some also recommend the simple past for the latter (Maupas 1632, Antonini 1753), a clear violation of the one form-one function principle.

Punctuals include all situations that occurred only once and for a brief moment. So by definition, they are opposed to habituals and duratives, and should disfavor the imperfect and should, according to many (Académie Française 1932, Sternon 1954, Grevisse 1964 and 1980, Sensine 1977), favor the simple past.

4.2 Temporal Relationship

The temporal relationship refers to the expression of simultaneity (10), anteriority (11) or sequentiality (12) with the preceding reference verb.

(10) Pendant une saison j’avais une carabine puis, bien il s’était rien passé [SIMULTANEITY] (XX:98:747) 
For one season I had a gun, but nothing happened.
(11) au gouvernement, que ça soit du Québec ou fédéral, ils prennent pas quelqu’un qui a fait [ANTERIORITY] de la prison (XX:109:724) 
in the government, whether the Québec one or the federal, they don’t take people who have done time in jail
As indicated before, a large number of grammarians argue that the notion of simultaneity is inherently contained in the imperfect (Maupas 1632, Beauzée 1767, Bescherelle et al 1852, de Fivas 1883, Académie Française 1932, Regula 1957, among others), although Beauzée (1767) attributes it also to the simple past, which indicates variability in the past-temporal reference system. Beauzée (1767), Bescherelle et al (1852) and Sensine (1977) claim that events anterior to the present should be expressed with the present perfect. Finally, Brunot (1936), Sternon (1954), Regula (1957), Grevisse (1964 and 1980) and Sensine (1977) argue that sequentiality is distinctive of the simple past.

4.3 Subject Type

Certain forms of speech are said to require more frequent use of certain subject types, but are certain subject types correlated with certain verb forms? Togeby (1982) and Arrive et al (1986), for example, say that conversations call for the present perfect and require mostly the first two persons. Meanwhile, Bescherelle (1997) and Riegel et al (2001) argue that the simple past is used mostly in the third person.

To test whether there is some relevance to this claim, a detailed coding system was originally used to categorize all subjects. However, a preliminary analysis revealed that three main distinctions were relevant: impersonal subjects—including both “tu” and “il” in their impersonal form (13), first and second persons both singular and plural (14), and third person also singular and plural (15).

(12) Parce mon grand-père lui, Eddy Scott, a été baptisé à l’âge de 14 ans, puis c’est là qu’il a pas eu droit à l’héritage (XX:107:774)

Because my grand-father, Eddy Scott, was baptized at the age of 14, and it’s after that that he didn’t have the right to the inheritance

(13) Puis là tu te promenais dans le corridor puis elle te suivait (XX:110:704)

And then you would walk in the hallway and she would follow you

(14) Moi je suis venue au monde pour mourir (XX:85:646)

Me, I came into this world to die

(15) Elle le battait à part de ça. (XX:119:726)

and she would also beat him up.
4.4 Parallelism

Parallelism, also referred to as priming, persistence or repetitiveness, stipulates that the choice of a variant is affected in a way such that “the use of a specific variant [...] will make it more likely [...] that the same variant will be used again” (Szmrecsanyi 2005). This effect has already been the object of numerous linguistic studies. According to the given definition, it is expected that the presence of an imperfect in the previous clause will favor the use of that same form in the following clause.

4.5 Other Factors

Several other factors were also considered, but some were impossible to operationalize categorically, like perfectivity, or not significant after a preliminary analysis, like verb class, clause type and polarity. The famous “twenty-four-hour rule,” later slightly modified and renamed to become the “elapsed-period rule,” was also examined, but it turned out to be almost impossible to code with certainty if an action had occurred during a most often implicit reference period or outside this period. Given this, I tried to code simply for remoteness, not taking into account the presence of an overt reference period. This did not turn out to be significant either. This finding is interesting because this rule is used in grammars since at least Estienne (1569), thus giving it an air of validity. However, the data examined show that it plays no role in the selection of a variant, thus indicating once more that usage is departing from prescription in both the early and the late twentieth century speech.

5 Results

5.1 Overall Distribution

Table 1 displays the overall distribution of all three variants in apparent time. At first glance, it is obvious that the simple past is completely absent from the data, thus confirming its extinction from the spoken language.
Table 1 shows that the older generation used the imperfect twice as frequently as the present perfect (67% compared to 33%). The younger generation, however, used both variants in almost equal proportions (52% and 48% respectively). These numbers indicate that while the imperfect was the favored past-temporal form in the early twentieth century, it barely accounts for more than half of the data in the late twentieth century.

On the other hand, the use of the present perfect has gone from 33% of the data to 48%. This increase of 15% of the present perfect associated with a proportional decline of the imperfect means two things: all the meanings associated with the simple past were not reallocated to the same form since both productive variants are changing, and changes in the past-temporal system have not gone to completion.

### Table 1: Overall distribution of variants of the past-temporal reference system in French

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variants</th>
<th>Early 20th century (speakers born between 1893 and 1918)</th>
<th>Late 20th century (speakers born between 1957 and 1965)</th>
<th>TOTAL N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imperfect</td>
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<td>67</td>
<td>392</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present perfect</td>
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<td>33</td>
<td>356</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simple past</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL N</td>
<td>766</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>751</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 presents the results of a multivariate analysis of the factors contributing to the occurrence of the imperfect as opposed to the present perfect according to the two age groups defined. This will serve to draw a picture of how the two verb forms are actually used in speech and to determine whether usage follows prescription in the past temporal reference system of French.

It should be noted that a first examination of the data revealed a close association between the imperfect and the verb être “to be.” In fact, 91% of the occurrences of this lexical verb (N=129/142) for the older generation and 93% (N=131/140) for the younger generation were found with this form. This marks a lexicalization of the imperfect that seems to have eluded grammarians. Therefore, this lexical verb will be excluded from the rest of my analysis.
5.2.1 Sentential Aspect

An inspection of the different ranges in Table 2 shows that sentential aspect is by far the strongest contributing factor to the selection of the imperfect, regardless of age. This means that, despite all the different functions that grammars try to associate with one form or the other, aspect will be the first intervening factor in the selection of a variant.

Within this category, the habitual aspect favors the imperfect the most, with probabilities of .95 for the older generation and .97 for the younger generation. Recall that the ability to express habituality was one of the three main features characterizing the imperfect, but was also attached by some to the simple past. Table 2 shows with no doubt that if this function was ever marked by the latter form, it is now almost completely owned by the imperfect.

Punctuality is found to disfavor the imperfect, with probabilities of .02 and .13. According to the literature, this aspect should be marked by the simple past, but this function is now shown, by default, to be carried by the present perfect.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Early 20th century</th>
<th>Late 20th century</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(speakers born between 1893 and 1918)</td>
<td>(speakers born between 1957 and 1965)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corrected mean</td>
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<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total N</td>
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<td>245/595</td>
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<td><strong>Sentential aspect</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Habitual</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>85/95</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.51</td>
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<td></td>
<td>16/29</td>
<td>8/33</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>57/124</td>
<td>29/114</td>
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<td>51</td>
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<td><strong>Subject type</strong></td>
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<td>Impersonal</td>
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<td>41/55</td>
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<td>95</td>
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<td>3rd person</td>
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<td></td>
<td>173/297</td>
<td>110/255</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>58</td>
<td>43</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
### Table 2: Factors contributing to the occurrence of the imperfect as opposed to the present perfect in Quebec oral French

What is unexpected in Table 2 is that older speakers disfavor the imperfect to mark duration (.44). This goes against all grammars consulted as far back as the sixteenth century, which have said this function is the prerogative of the imperfect. We have seen that this variant is believed to inherently express duration (the second of its three main features). What is even more surprising is that the younger speakers do carry the notion that this form is a vehicle for the durative aspect (.68). For the time being, the only explanation for this observed phenomenon could be the sparse data found with this aspect as opposed to the other two.

Sentential aspect shows no change in the conditioning between the two generations since both have the same order of probability for all factors in this group. However, it does reveal a wide gap between prescription and usage in terms of the durative aspect.

#### 5.2.2 Temporal Relationship

Temporal relationship is the second-most important factor group influencing the selection of the imperfect variant. Table 2 reveals that both old and young speakers chose the imperfect to mark simultaneity (with respective probabilities of .90 and .78). This finding correlates with the third of the three main functions widely associated with this verb form, namely to express simultaneous actions.

The other two temporal relationships work differently for the two age groups, indicating that change is taking place. The factor that inhibits the selection of the imperfect the most in the older generation is sequentiality (.39), but that place is held by anteriority (.27) in the younger generation.
This reversal between old and young marks a growing detachment between anteriority and the imperfect, in favor of the present perfect, thus confirming the claim of Beauzée (1767), Bescherelle et al (1852) and Sensine (1977) seen earlier.

At the same time, Table 2 shows that the responsibility to mark sequentiability attributed to the simple past, as claimed by Brunot (1936), Sternon (1954), Regula (1957), Grevisse (1964 and 1980) and Sensine (1977), fell on the present perfect in the speech of the early twentieth century (since the probability of using the imperfect was only .39), but seems to be shared quasi-equally between the imperfect (.47) and the present perfect (by default .53) in the speech of the late twentieth century. In other words, while it was claimed to be marked by the simple past, the meaning of sequentiability was expressed through the present perfect in the early twentieth century and now seems to be on its way to being transferred to the imperfect.

5.2.3 Other Factor Groups

After sentential aspect and temporal relationship, two other factor groups were selected as significant by the variable rule analysis, but their ranking is different in the different generations. For the older speakers, subject type and parallelism carry the same weight in the selection of the imperfect (range of 43). The younger speakers are also sensitive to these two factor groups, but parallelism (range of 44) exerts a stronger influence than subject type (range of 32). These numbers show that the constraints are not the same for the two groups of speakers. A closer examination of each factor group separately will shed some light on the nature of these constraints.

5.2.4 Subject Type

An initial analysis of the data revealed that impersonal subjects favor the imperfect. The older speakers used 60 of their 63 impersonal subjects with this form, resulting in a probability of .87. For this generation, this is the only subject type favoring the imperfect. The younger speakers also prefer to use this form with impersonal subjects, but with a somewhat lesser probability of .70. This and the decrease in range between the old and young speakers for this factor group indicate that the influence of impersonal subjects on the selection of the imperfect is regressing.

Interestingly, this decrease in the weight of impersonals could be correlated with the increase of the role played by 3rd pers. subj, a subject type associated with the simple past. While this type disfavors the imperfect in the older generation (.44), it favors this form in the younger generation (.59).
As for first and second persons, they disfavor the imperfect in both age groups, with respective probabilities of .44 and .38. By default, this could be interpreted as support for Togeby (1982) and Arrivé et al (1986) who argued that the first two persons are used mostly with the present perfect. However, their claim is valid only for the younger speakers since the older ones disfavor the imperfect also with third person subjects. The contrast between first and second persons on the one hand and third person on the other hand was therefore not present in the early twentieth century speech.

5.2.5 Parallelism

Table 2 shows a parallelism effect whereby the presence of an imperfect calls for the use of another imperfect in the following clause, with a probability of .69 for older speakers and .75 for younger speakers. This finding was expected given the definition of parallelism. What is interesting though is that, for the younger generation, the pluperfect bumped out its close cousin for the first position of verb forms triggering the use of the imperfect. This can be interpreted as a pooling of meanings between these two forms rendering them almost equally effective in regard to the parallelism effect observed.

By default, it was assumed that the lowest probability of choosing the imperfect would occur when a present perfect was used in the previous clause. Table 2 shows that this is the case for both age groups, with probabilities of .26 and .33.

6 Conclusion

By using references in prescriptive and descriptive literature as well as spoken data from two different generations of speakers, this paper has showed that the past-temporal reference system of Quebec French is marked by change. Given that change is the product of variability and that the review of the grammatical tradition has revealed long-standing variability, it can be assumed that the disappearance of the simple past did not by itself cause an overhaul of this system. It is now obvious that change was at work well before this variant became obsolete and that it persisted after its assumed meanings were transferred to other forms.

Results presented in this paper also shed some light on where those functions were reallocated. This paper has established that, contrary to some belief, all meanings were not transferred to one single form. Rather, values associated with the simple past examined herein have been taken on by the imperfect in certain cases (namely the ability to express habituality and si-
multaneity) and by the present perfect in others (as for the punctual aspect and sequentiality).

Moreover, this paper has showed that usage does not necessarily follow prescription. A good example of this can be found in the famous twenty-four-hour rule prescribed for centuries as the main distinction between the simple past and the present perfect, but actually never applied in oral speech, at least in the twentieth century. Also, the fact that one of the three main features of the imperfect, that is, the ability to mark duration, is not inherent in older speakers shows another large gap between prescription and usage.

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