The perfect French

A study of the *passé composé* in a bilingual context

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ABSTRACT
This article is the shortened version of a bachelor thesis on a corpus-based comparison of the English Present Perfect and the French *passé composé*. The goal is to see whether these two perfect tenses are (pragmatically) the same. Many theories have been developed for the Present Perfect and its interpretations; the present research has made a first step in the application of these interpretations to the *passé composé*. It does so by comparing 250 Present Perfect sentences with their French counterparts. In the majority of cases, the translation is indeed made with a *passé composé*; however, French also has many other ways to translate the Present Perfect. The discussion of the results will focus on the *passé composé* sentences to see if they can be interpreted in the same way as the Present Perfects in the English originals. The main result is that the *passé composé* does indeed lead to much the same interpretations as the Present Perfect. It is only the 'continuative perfect reading' that poses a problem for the *passé composé*; traditionally, the literature assumes that this reading is not available for the *passé composé*. The results of the present study only partially support this theory and provide possible counterexamples, thus inviting to reconsider what we know about the French perfect.

1. INTRODUCTION

Much has been written about the English Present Perfect, a tense which has a number of commonly accepted interpretations. In the semantic theories developed for the perfect tenses in French, the *passé composé* occupies quite a special place. Ambiguous between a perfect and a perfective, it describes an event in the past (hence *perfect*) without losing its connection to the present (hence *perfective*; this distinction will be discussed in more detail later on). Studies on this ambiguity have led to different points of view. The present article stands in this theoretical environment and presents a comparative, corpus-based analysis of French and English to see whether speakers use the past tenses in the same way, and what this might say about the similarity – or possibly dissimilarity – of these two languages.

1.1 KEY NOTIONS

Particularly relevant research is carried out by Nishiyama & Koenig (2010). These authors place their theoretical analysis of the Present Perfect (PP) entirely in the domain of pragmatics. This leads to a coherent explanation of the various interpretations commonly

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1   Thesis supervisors: prof. dr. Henriëtte de Swart and dr. Bert le Bruyn, Utrecht University; thesis submitted in August 2016.

distinguished for the PP.

Based on pragmatic inferences, the authors propose five 'readings' (interpretations) of the PP, illustrated in (1) below (examples taken from Nishiyama & Koenig 2010: 622-623; see their article for more detailed explanations). For the present research, these readings are important since the goal is to see whether they also exist for the French *passé composé* (PC).

(1)   a.   Entailed resultative reading
           "Ken has broken his leg"'(i.e. there now is a state in which Ken's leg is broken)

      b.   Conversationally implicated reading
           A: "Why are you so tired?"
           B: "I cleaned the entire house (today)" (i.e. cleaning the house made B tired)

      c.   Existential (non-resultative) reading
           "Ski jumps are difficult" (i.e. this is not an effect, but the cause of Ken breaking his leg)

      d.   Continuative reading
           "Ken has lived in London" (i.e. there is a state in which Ken still lives in London)

      e.   Non-continuative, implicated resultative reading
           "Ken has lived in London" (and therefore he knows good restaurants in this city)

1.2 The present research: aims and methodology

The main goal of this paper is to shed new light on the French *passé composé*; more specifically, if the theories developed for the English PP apply to the French data as well. The hypothesis is that most of the interpretations in (1) apply to French as well, with the exception of (1d). This problem will be addressed later on.

The methodology adapted here is twofold: it is both a qualitative and a quantitive analysis (albeit on a rather small scale). A corpus of 250 sentences, taken from the Dutch Parallel Corpus[2], was used to compare the two languages. Each English sentence was annotated with the interpretation of the PP; for each French counterpart, the tense used to translate the PP was indicated. Section 2.2 provides a more detailed account of the annotations made, before discussing the obtained results. This discussion is very qualitative, selecting a handful of exemplary translations to illustrate the use of the perfect tense in each language.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 is divided in two subparts. The first presents a theoretical introduction to the *passé composé* and compares various standpoints as to the exact interpretation of this tense, which is generally considered to be somewhat ambiguous. The second subpart discusses the results obtained from the corpus analysis, followed by a conclusion and discussion in section 3. Section 4 follows with a solely quali-

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2   See their website http://www.kuleuven-kulak.be/DPC for more information.

tative discussion of the continuous reading in French; section 5 concludes with some final remarks.

2. The French *passé composé*: theories and test results

Before getting to the results of the corpus analysis (section 2.2), section 2.1 gives a short theoretical introduction to the French PC in order to better understand this tense. Part A focusses on the 'double position' occupied by the PC, while Part B discusses the continuative reading (see example (1d) above).

2.1 A theoretical discussion of the PC
A. *The PC's 'double position'*

For English, the distinction between perfect and perfective past times is clear: the Present Perfect is perfect, the Simple Past is perfective (e.g. Cummins, 2002). In French, the *imparfait* partly fulfils the function of the Simple Past; the other part is fulfills by the PC. The PC however is not entirely compatible with the Simple Past: its use falls in between the two English tenses (see Cummins (2002) for a more detailed discussion).

According to a number of authors (e.g. Borillo et al., 2004), the PC is perfect and perfective at the same time. The perfect use is clear, because the PC can be used for past events with a specific relation to the present – for example in an oral discussion. However, the PC can also obtain a perfective character in written contexts, especially in a private journal; in this case, it reflects events that are entirely in the past (they precede the speech time and have no specific relation to the present). The most frequently used example of this is the novel *L'étranger* by Camus (see Borillo et al., 2004; de Swart, 2006). In general however, the PC is considered to be a perfect tense because of its orientation towards the speech time (e.g. Borillo et al., 2004).

De Both-Diez (1985) has a similar vision, distinguishing between a discursive and a historic use of the PC. The first is interpreted in the 'actual world', i.e. the present, whereas the second finds its meaning in the 'non-actual world', i.e. the past. This second instance of the PC can be replaced by a *passé simple*, a perfective time that has no connection to the present (de Both-Diez, 1985: 11-12).

Another point of view is represented by Cummins (2002), who reaches a contrary conclusion: the PC is a perfective time that can also take on certain perfect functions. Her main arguments for this claim are that the PC has no competition from other tenses linking the past to the present (therefore it can take up all related functions on its own), and that its meaning can be interpreted in the same way as the Simple Past, a perfective time.[3] While others state that the PC is still developing towards a fully perfective interpretation (cf. Borillo, 2004; de Swart, 2006), Cummins states that it is already there. Is it then safe to say that the Present Perfect and the *passé composé* convey the same meaning? The litera-

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3   This idea is based on the complementary use of the *passé composé* and the *passé simple*: the latter is used only in written contexts, never in oral language, whereas the PC is almost exclusively used in oral contexts. They occupy the same positions however: where in spoken language a PC would be used, a written context selects the *passé simple*.

ture seems to be divided on this matter, but comparative research such as presented in this paper could possibly shed some light.

B. *The continuative reading in French*

What is generally accepted though, is the intuition that the PC cannot obtain the continuative reading, contrary to the Present Perfect, for which it is quite a common interpretation. Nishiyama and Koenig (2010) propose an explication for this impossibility in French. In certain languages, like English, it is not obligatory that the whole event precede the reference point (*r*) of the utterance: sub-events can overlap with *r*, leading to a continuative interpretation of the event. In French, on the contrary, the entire event expressed by the PC has to precede *r* (Nishiyama & Koenig, 2010: 620). Cummins (2002) gives a similar vision: the PC imposes an end to the event (more so than the PP), thus blocking any continuative interpretation. The data used for the corpus analysis in this paper is expected to reflect these intuitions.

2.2 The Present Perfect translated in French: The results of a comparative analysis

This section presents the results from the corpus analysis performed in order to compare the English PP with the French PC. The main goal of the comparison is to see whether these tenses are comparable semantically (if they convey the same meaning) and pragmatically (if they are used in the same contexts). For these purposes, 250 sentences were randomly selected from various texts in the Dutch Parallel Corpus and annotated using the same categories as Nishiyama & Koenig (2010) (see also sections 1.1 and 1.2). It turned out that only three of these categories appeared in this (way smaller) corpus: the entailed resultative perfect (ERP), the implicated resultative perfect (IRP), and the continuative perfect (CP) (respectively (1a), (1e) and (1d), section 1.1). When it was unclear which category fit best, the sentence received the label 'uncertain (EN)'; when two categories were possible, the sentence was labelled 'double reading'. Four sentences contained a conditional structure (*might/could + have + participle*) and were excluded.

French translates the English PP in various ways. The label 'uncertain (FR)' may seem strange; the motivation for its use will be discussed in section 2.2.4. The label 'other' regroups translations that differ too much from the original to be analysed, in most cases because another structure was used.

Table 1 below cross-references the categories in the English sentences with the constructions/tenses used in the French translations. For the two biggest English categories, percentages are given for more clarity.

Table 1 shows that most PPs are interpretable as entailed resultative or implicated resultative perfects (210 sentences); the continuative reading occurred far less often (5 sentences). However, it could be that sentences classified under 'uncertain (EN)' will turn out to be continuative. This category will be discussed in section 2.2.4.

Table 1.

English categories (vertical) and their French translations (horizontal).

* Gérondif (du passé), adjective, noun, participle, plus-que-parfait, future

** Conditional structure

Reading in English	Translation in French								
	Passé composé	Présent	Imparfait	Passé Simple	Subjonctif	Uncertain (FR)	Other*	*Total*	(%)
ERP	83	12	3	4	1	6	43	*152*	60,8%
(%)	54,6%	7,9%	2%	2,6%	0,7%	3,9%	28,3%	*100%*	-
IRP	42	3	2	-	1	2	8	*58*	23,2%
(%)	72,4%	5,2%	3,4%	-	1,7%	3,4%	13,8%	*100%*	-
CP	3	2	1	-	-	-	1	*5*	2%
Double reading	9	1	1	-	-	-	1	*16*	6,4%
Uncertain (EN)	9	1	-	2	-	1	4	*15*	6%
Other**	-	1	-	-	-	-	3	*4*	1,6%
Total	*146*	*20*	*7*	*6*	*2*	*9*	*60*	*250*	100%

Just over half of the translations used the PC (146 sentences), which might indicate some similarity between the two tenses. However, 60 translations were made using some 'other' construction, which hints at some dissimilarity.

In the following sub-sections, each of the categories will be treated in more detail and illustrated with examples from the corpus. The discussion at the end of the section compares the results with those of Nishiyama and Koenig (2010).

2.2.1 *The entailed resultative (ERP) and implicated resultative (IRP) perfects*

The majority of the English sentences has received an ERP reading: 60,8%. The second group is that of IRPs: 23,2%. Together, they make 84% of all phrases analysed. A few examples:[4]

(2) a. Entailed resultative perfects
We **have drawn** up an ambitious five-year plan for De Post-La Poste.
*Nous **avons élaboré** pour La Poste un plan ambitieux de cinq ans.*

b. It is made by a cell that **has received** a gene (DNA), which makes it able to produce it.
*Elle est produite par une cellule qui **a reçu** un gène (ADN) la rendant capable de produire cette substance.*

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4   The Present Perfect and the *passé composé* are indicated in **bold**. The other tenses are indicated in underscore followed by an abbreviation; see also the list of abbreviations at the end of this paper.

(3)   a.   Implicated resultative perfects
            Patients who have, or **have had**, any blood clot disorders including (...
            (...) *qui présentent, ou **ont présenté**, des troubles associés à des caillots sanguins, dont*
            (...)

      b.   We **have looked** at present-day Flanders as the Dutch speaking part of Bel
            gium.
            *Nous **avons**, jusqu'à présent, **considéré** les Flandres actuelles en tant que région belge*
            de langue néerlandaise.

In both cases, some result follows from the event expressed by the verb, either directly (ERP) or indirectly (IRP), because of the verb's telicity.

When a verb is telic, it contains semantically an end, like in (2a-b). Past tenses like the Present Perfect and the *passé composé* reflect the end of one such telic event, leading to an ERP interpretation of the sentence. New states are introduced; in (2a), there now exists an ambitious plan, a direct result of the end of the action of drawing up; in (2b), the cell now contains a DNA-gene, a direct result of inserting the gene into the cell. Both the PP and the PC are responsible for the transition into a new state, and seem to function similarly in this context.

The verbs in (3a-b) are not exactly the same: these are atelic verbs without an inherent end semantically. They describe activities, which can continue during an unlimited period of time. However, the perfect tenses put an end to the activities, but no concrete, new state is introduced. Rather, it is the pastness of the activity that is implied; hence the label 'implicated resultative perfect'. In (3a) for example, there now is some abstract state in which the having of blood clot disorders is in the past, therefore implying that the patients are cured. In (3b), the PP implies that Flanders was always seen in a certain way, but that this way has changed. This change is not explicit however, it is only implied. The same line of reasoning applies to the French sentences, which use the PC. The two tenses seem to convey the same meaning in these contexts.

A surprisingly high number of translations had to be classified as 'other': roughly 28% of the ERPs and 14% of the IRPs. In the majority of cases, this was due to a non-literal trans-lation (see also Table 2 below), like in the following examples (PR = Present tense; INF = infinitive):

(4)   a.   Up to now, there **have** not **been** many results at this level.
            Pour l'instant, nous n'<u>enregistrons</u> PR *pas encore beaucoup de résultats à ce niveau.*

      b.   We are obviously delighted that Martine Durez **has succeeded** Pierre Klees
            Nous sommes bien entendu particulièrement contents de voir Martine Durez <u>succéder</u>
            INF *à Pierre Klees.*

In (4a), French changes the English passive into an active structure. In (4b), French avoids the embedded clause (introduced by 'that'), using an infinitive instead. The translations are correct (in the sense that they convey more or less the same information), but use another structure for unclear reasons; therefore, the group of 'other'-classifications will not be discussed further.

Table 2.
The category 'other' in French.
* Conditional structure

Reading in English	Translation in French							
	Gérondif	Adjective	Noun	Participle	Plus-que-parfait	Future	Non-literal	*Total*
ERP	7	4	1	1	1	1	28	*43*
IRP	1	1	-	-	-	-	6	*8*
CP	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	*1*
Double reading	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	*1*
Uncertain (EN)	-	-	-	-	-	-	4	*4*
Other*	-	-	-	-	-	-	3	*3*
Total	*9*	*6*	*1*	*1*	*1*	*1*	*42*	*60*

2.2.2 The continuative perfects (CP)
Only five sentences received the CP label. Despite this limited number of examples, it is interesting to analyse how French deals with a CP. One sentence is of particular importance, since the translation is made with a PC.

(5)   Small post offices will disappear, but our network will be augmented by more Post Points, a sales channel that **has been** well **received** by our customers from day one.
*De petits bureaux fermeront leurs portes mais cèderont la place à un plus grand nombre de Points Poste, qui **ont été** très bien **accueillis** dès le départ par nos clients.*

The main reason the English sentence has been labelled as continuous, is the presence of the adverbial phrase 'from day one'. This implies that the Post Points have been well received on the first day and continue to be so; there is no reason to assume this has come to an end. The same interpretation seems appropriate for the French sentence as well, despite the use of the PC (which is thought to block a continuous reading; section 2.1). The adverbial phrase '*dès le départ*' has the same effect on the meaning of the sentence as its English counterpart. Section 3 will investigate this in more detail.

2.2.3 The 'double reading' and 'uncertain (FR)' sentences
These groups together contain 31 sentences, out of which two will be discussed in more detail. A 'double reading' example is (6):

(6) a. For this small land bears the imprint of every important movement which **has shaped** European history for a thousand years.
*Car ce petit pays a subi l'empreinte de chaque mouvement important qui, depuis des siècles, **a formé** l'Europe.*

(6) is ambiguous between a CP-reading and an IRP-reading. This is because of the verb used: 'to shape'/*former* does not have an inherent end semantically. Because of the use of the PP/PC, some implicated result could be intended, like in the examples in (3). However, because of the adverbial phrase 'for a thousand years'/*'depuis des siècles'*, a continuative interpretation is possible as well, like in example (5). In both languages, it is not clear whether the process of shaping or the end of the shaping is intended. In French, the first reading would be surprising, because of the supposed incompatibility of the PC with the continuous reading. From examples (5) and (6), it seems that something is happening in the presence of certain adverbs. Sectin 3 offers a further analysis of this intuition.

Among the 'uncertain (FR)' sentences are those with temporal adverbs, such as (7):

(7) His wife **has** always **lived** in Italy, and **has** never **been employed**.
*Sa femme **a** toujours **habité** en Italie et n'**a** jamais **travaillé**.*

The adverbs 'always'/*'toujours'* make for a special case: they are so-called quantifiers (cf. de Swart, 1989). Quantifiers introduce a sort of perspective parting from the speech time, either towards the future, or, like in (7), towards the past. It implies some permanent state: that of the wife living in Italy only, never elsewhere, and always without employment. The atelicity of the verbs reflects this continuous character as well. The PP/PC seem not to target the end of the events of living and being unemployed, but rather some continuous state that took place in the past. Especially for the French sentence, it is more adequate to place the events entirely in the past, because of the PC; in English, a continuous reading into the present is possible as well.

3. Conclusion and discussion

The results from this small corpus study seem to indicate that the Present Perfect and the passé composé might not differ all that much from one another: in 58% of the cases, the PC is used to translate the PP, and often with a similar interpretation pragmatically. It became clear that the two perfect tenses can be used in much the same contexts. This conclusion however is not shared by all the authors discussed in section 2.1. Cummins (2002) states that the PC bears more similarity to the Simple Perfect and therefore has to be a perfective tense, contrary to the PP, which has to be a perfect tense. An important argument for this conclusion is the PC's incompatibility with a continuous reading, a statement for which examples (5) and (6) might be counterexamples. As announced before, section 3 will look at this in more detail.

The main motivation for this paper was an extension of the pragmatic theory proposed for English by Nishiyama and Koenig (2010), by using it on French data. The results were not quite comparable however. Their percentages of ERPs and IRPs were much lower (42%

and 13% respectively, against 61% and 23% respectively in the present research). On the other hand, they found many more CPs (40%, against 5% in the present research). One possible explanation for these differences in numbers is the type of corpus used. Only written texts have been taken from the Dutch Parallel Corpus for this study, while Nishiyama & Koenig (2010) also used spoken language. Written and spoken language often differ from each other, which could have led to the differences in numbers. Also, with only 250 sentences, the present research should be considered more as a pilot, testing the feasibility and usefulness of this kind of comparative research. This scale is far from comparable with the size of the corpus used by the cited authors; it could be pure coincidence that only so few CPs turned up. One last issue is that Nishiyama and Koenig (2010) are not entirely clear as to how they labelled their sentences. They identify five categories (see section 1.1, examples (1a-e)) and give some example identifications of sentences from their corpus, but they do not discuss how they dealt with more problematic cases. Therefore, the labelling of the 250 sentences in the corpus used here was done quite intuitively, and might turn out differently when done by someone else. When it comes to interpreting language in general, opinions may vary, hence leading to different interpretations of data. This aspect of research on language is difficult to rule out.

However, some interesting results turned up in the discussion of the handful of examples. Before it is possible to say with any certainty whether the Present Perfect and the *passé composé* are the same tense, semantically and pragmatically, more research is needed. Especially useful are translations in the other direction: French sentences containing a PC translated into English. There still are many research possibilities in the field of comparative linguistics.

4. Supplementary analysis: the *passé composé* as a continuative perfect
As announced, this section will further explore whether it is possible for the PC to get a CP reading. The focus lies on French sentences containing the temporal adverb *depuis*. The main motivation for this second analysis are the examples encountered in section 2, which seemed to go against the standard interpretation of the PC.

Section 4.1 gives a short introduction to *depuis* to familiarise the reader with its use. Section 4.2 discusses the interpretation of a handful of sentences containing a PC and *depuis*, followed by a conclusion and discussion in section 4.3.

4.1 A theoretical introduction to '*depuis*'
Section 2.1 discussed the ambiguous position of the PC: not entirely perfective, it is not only perfect either. De Both-Diez (1985) argued that the PC can be replaced by the *passé simple* (the tense only used in written contexts) if it is used in a historic sense (to describe an event in the past with no relation to the present). In the presence of *depuis* however, this replacement is blocked, because of the different temporal interpretations of *depuis* versus the *passé simple*. Where the tense is perfective with overtly or covertly known boundaries, the adverb introduces some temporal frame without internal boundaries, and can therefore get a continuous interpretation (de Both-Diez, 1985: 6-7). This clashes with Cummins's (2002) idea that the *passé composé* is perfective: if it were perfectly synonymous to the *passé*

simple (except for the context used), an incompatibility with *depuis* would be expected. This however is clearly not the case.

Lysebraate (1982) describes *depuis* as introducing a duration, the start being indicated by its complement, and abutting the reference time of the event. In (8) for example, the period during which the child plays with the balls starts the quarter of an hour before the reference time (which here coincides with the speech time):

(8) Il <u>joue</u> aux boules depuis un quart d'heure.
     He plays PR *with the balls since the quarter of an hour.*

(Lysebraate, 1982: 65)

According to Lysebraate (1982), the duration ends here: a period of time introduced by *depuis* is always inherent to the reference time and cannot be posterior. However, this does not block a continuous interpretation: the end boundary is not expressed. The question that remains is whether this is also true for the PC, a tense that expresses the end boundaries of its events (see 2.1).

4.2 The *passé composé* and '*depuis*'

All the examples come from Frantext[5]. The first two are (7a-b).

(9) a. (…) Depuis, ces champs **ont été remplacés** par un golf.
         (…) Ever since, the fields have been replaced by a golf terrain.

     b. Betty depuis lors **a divorcé** trois fois.
         Betty, since then, has divorced three times.

These sentences get an ERP reading: there now are a new state with a golf terrain and a state where Betty has three ex-husbands. A continuous reading however is not available for these examples: the eventualities in (9a-b) have already been accomplished and lead to a new 'post-event'-state. In this case, *depuis* does not lead to a CP interpretation.

Two sentences that elicit a sentiment of continuation are (10a-b):

(10) a. Je ne l'**ai** pas **vu** depuis quatre ans.
          I haven't seen him for four years.

      b. La pluie n'**a cessé** depuis ce matin.
          The rain has not stopped since this morning.

In these examples, the negation plays an important role: it introduces states. A state is static and not progressive, like activities or achievements (c.f. Vendler, 1957; Verkuyl, 1989).

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5   Frantext.fr is a database of French written text, accessible online at http://www.frantext.fr/. All English translations are done by the author.

A state cannot be continuative. In (10a-b), *depuis* marks the intervals in which the states hold true; therefore, they seem continuative.

That leaves one last sentence to contemplate:

>(11.i) Depuis cinq ans, elle **a choisi** les couleurs vives, le vert pomme, le jaune paille.
>   *Since five years, she has chosen bright colours, apple green, straw colours.*

Intuitively, the verb *to choose* has an inherent end (an implicated result) and can therefore not be interpreted as a continuative action. However, placed within a larger context (11.ii), it becomes clear that it is an activity:

>(11.ii) Elle <u>se tient</u> là, menue, fragile, souriant aux uniformes et vêtue de couleurs vives. Depuis cinq ans, elle **a choisi** les couleurs vives, le vert pomme, le jaune paille. Autrefois, elle <u>vivait</u> en sombre. Un beau matin, elle **a dû** se scruter dans la glace, se persuader que désormais sa vieillesse me <u>faisait</u> honte et qu'elle la <u>camouflerait</u> mieux sous du vif.
>   *She stands PR there, slim, fragile, smiling at the uniforms and dressed in bright colours. Since five years, she has chosen PC bright colours, apple green, straw colours. In former days, she lived IMP in the dark. One day, she has PC to have studied herself in the mirror, convinced herself that from then on her age shamed IMP me and that she had COP best hide it under brightness.*
>   PR = *présent*; PC = *passé composé*; IMP = *imparfait*; COP = *conditionnel présent*

In fact, *a choisi* is iterative here: it expresses an event that is repetitive, and it is this repetition that leads to a CP reading. The context gives reason to believe that 'she' still chooses bright colours, and thus that the PC must describe a repetitive habit. This intuition is reinforced by the usage of the determiner *les* instead of the general *des*;[6] she now chooses *the* bright colours, a choice that continuously repeats itself in the same way. In light of the context, the combination of '*depuis*' and the PC does effectively give a CP reading.

Sentences like these are interesting to study, but unfortunately do not occur often. The *passé composé* describes a habit here, that would normally be rendered by the *imparfait*; this could be out of stylistic considerations that will not be further discussed here.

4.3 Conclusion and discussion

This closer inspection of *depuis* has shown that it is possible, though difficult, to find a CP reading for the *passé composé*. Its co-occurrence with this adverb seems to render such an interpretation possible, but in a limited number of cases: the PC can be iterative (11), or the verb can be an activity (6). Otherwise, *depuis* simply serves as a frame for the period in which an event or a state take place.

Traditionally, the literature states that the PC blocks the continuation of an event at the speech time. However, examples like (11) could possibly open new doors. Naturally, before any solid conclusions can be drawn, it is necessary to look at a vaster corpus and to study

the semantics of the combination *depuis* and *passé composé* in more detail. Still, these results are an invitation to reconsider what is known about this tense, always ambiguous between the past and the present.

5. To conclude

This paper has presented a comparative analysis of the English and French perfect tenses. On the first, much has been said already; of the second, much can be discovered still. It appears that the languages are similar: often, the Present Perfect can be translated with a *passé composé*, even though French has many other ways to translate from English.

A surprising result is that the *passé composé* could possibly get a continuous reading, contrary to what is commonly stated in the literature. A small step is taken towards a reconsideration of this presumed incompatibility, most importantly in proposing that the *passé composé* can continue at the speech time when combined with the adverb *depuis*. It is nevertheless necessary to develop a theory on this intuition using many more examples.

The Present Perfect and the passé composé are similar, but are they (semantically/ pragmatically) the same tense? A more elaborated research is needed to answer that question. For one, it is indispensable to analyse a corpus in the other direction: English translations of the French passé composé, to see if this is done with a Present Perfect – or not. ◼

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