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Tense and Text

**A Study of
French
Past Tenses**

Dulcie M. Engel

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Preface

Within the field of French syntax, the study of the various past tenses has attracted many scholars throughout this century. There is, however, scope for further research, and this monograph presents just one line of enquiry.

It is hoped that the approach outlined will be of use to other researchers, as well as the findings being of interest to scholars in the field.

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The problem

1.1 The status of PS/PC in the French tense system

In Robbe-Grillet's novel *Djinn* (1981), the narrator is asked to tell a story to a child. He begins in the present tense, but is interrupted: a story has to be told in the past. The narrator resumes, this time using the 'passé composé', but is stopped once more – a real story ('histoire') must be in the 'passé historique' (i.e. 'passé simple') (Robbe-Grillet 1981: 51, cited in Judge and Healey 1983: 119).

This highlights the central issue of this study, which could be summarized briefly as, 'Which past when?'

The relationship between the French 'passé simple' (PS) and 'passé composé' (PC) is one of particular interest. Historically, a difference in temporal and aspectual signification has given way to a difference in medium, but as the PC has still not completely ousted the PS in the standard written language, there is a tension between the two which would seem to be the foundation for the phenomenon of tense mixing, which is our concern here. By tension, we refer to the thought processes involved in the mechanism of choice before the production of any particular morpheme – the consideration of the system of morphemes from which the particular choice is to be made: 'C'est ainsi que l'emploi d'une seule forme verbale suppose une rapide évocation du système entier de la conjugaison du verbe' (Guillaume 1973: 139).

Furthermore, tense mixing is not necessarily avoided by native French speakers in their written performance, and certain factors, particularly when in combination, seem to have more influence on tense usage than others. The primary aim of this study is to demonstrate that the seemingly haphazard mixing of the PS and the PC in a variety of written texts, which is inadequately explained by most grammarians, and actively discouraged by most teachers of French as a foreign language, is in fact due to the occurrence in a particular context of one or more factors of varying degrees of

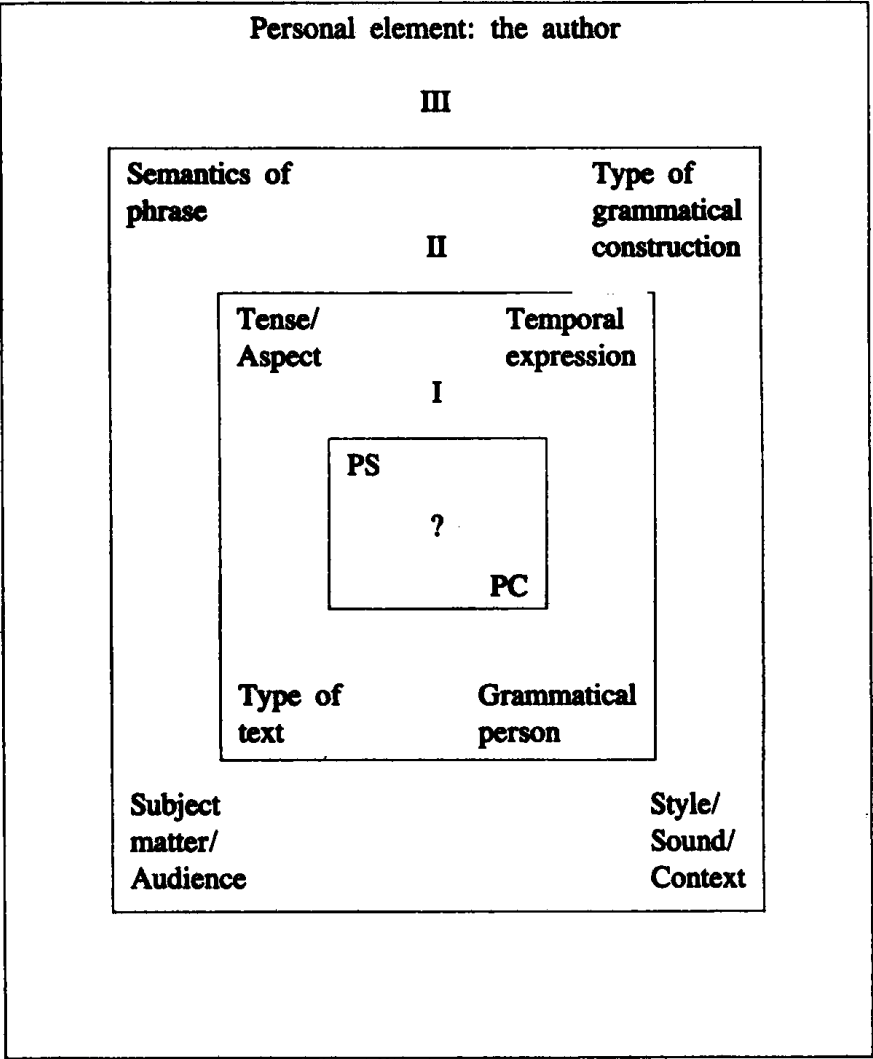


Figure 1.1 Passé simple or passé composé: hierarchy of possible types of factors

influence, some of which create an ‘obligatory’ environment for one or the other tense, others which create a ‘normal’ environment, and others which create a ‘variable’ environment.

A further aim is to classify such factors and establish linguistic rules on the basis of a combined quantitative and qualitative approach.

Figure 1.1 illustrates the possible hierarchy of factors which have been found to be influential. The factors in group I are more exact

and objective, and easier to quantify, than those in groups II and III, and are possibly the most influential. Group II lies in the middle, with the group III factor being the least exact, most subjective, hardest to quantify, and possibly least influential on tense choice.

The study of verbal forms in any detail requires a preliminary consideration of their place in the verbal system of the language as a whole, synchronically and diachronically, as verbal forms may replace each other paradigmatically – they can never be fully considered in isolation. Hence we present an overview of the various characteristics of the French tense system which impinge on PS and PC.

The finite verb form standing alone is all that is necessary for a minimal syntactic unit in French (Tukey 1967: 118–19). The most usual example of this type of unit is in the form of the imperative: 'Mange!' 'Portez!' 'Allons!' In larger syntactic units, the finite verb form is one of the key elements, along with the noun phrase.

The appellations of the different tense forms vary in French and in English translation, but *passé simple* (PS) and *passé composé* (PC) are the terms used most commonly in modern studies. It is important, however, to note some of the alternatives used for the two tenses which are our main concern here, because of their use in the literature:

PS: *passé simple*, *passé défini*, *passé historique*, *aoriste*, past historic, simple past, preterite, aorist, past definite.

PC: *passé composé*, *passé indéfini*, *parfait* (*présent*), (present) perfect, composed past, past indefinite.

Apart from their common function of past punctual, PC and PS have further roles: PC is frequently a present perfect, and PS is occasionally a past anterior. It is necessary to consider the place of PC and PS in the system as a whole, in all three of the above functions.

As past punctuals, PC and PS frequently occur with *imparfait* (I) and *plus-que-parfait* (PQP), and PS also occurs with *passé antérieur* (PA). Moreover, the past punctual function can in some contexts be taken over by other tenses. *Présent* (Pr) may be used for vivid, subjective narration (historic present); *futur* (F) may be used as an anticipatory past (more definite than *conditionnel* (Cond.) as a future past); I may be used for impressionistic, naturalistic, and vivid narration ('*imparfait pittoresque*'). It is important to distinguish between the customary use of I, contrasting with the past punctual PS and PC, and this narrative use of I. Usually the difference is clear from the linguistic context:

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Il *dormait* quand on *sonna* à la porte. (descriptive I; punctual PS)
Il *sonnait* à la porte, *entrait* et *disait* 'Bonjour!' ('imparfait pittoresque')

Il *sort* de la maison, *prend* sa canne et *s'en va*. Le lendemain il *arrivera* à Brest. (historic present and future)

With the frequent use of PC as past punctual, an anterior to this is sometimes needed to convey that an action is further back in the past. *Passé surcomposé* (PSC) fulfils this function, although it is normally restricted to spoken language and regional varieties. For example:

'Il *a été* (PC) soldat; avant il *a eu été* (PSC) facteur.'

In its present perfect function, PC occurs most frequently with Pr and F, and its function is mirrored by the relation to F of *futur antérieur* (FA). For example:

J'*ai réussi* (PC) à mes examens; je *prends* (PR) des vacances.
Quand j'*aurai réussi* (FA) à mes examens, je *prendrai* (F) des vacances.

In its occasional anterior function (often acting as anterior to PC), PS plays a similar role to PQP in relation to I and PC, and PA in relation to PS:

Quand il *eut bu* (PA) son vin, il *partit* (PS) avec des amis.
Il *but* (PS) son vin; après il *est parti* (PC) avec des amis.
Il *avait bu* (PQP) son vin; il *allait* (I) partir avec des amis.

We note also that the loss of PS from spoken language has entailed the loss of its morphologically related forms from active use: I subjunctive, PA, and PQP subjunctive.

Returning to the relationship between PS and PC, let us consider briefly the question of the historical evolution of the two tenses. Figure 1.2 is a diagrammatical representation of the change which has taken place. The PS evolved from the Classical Latin perfect *feci*, which had the values of a preterite and a present perfect. The PC evolved from the Vulgar Latin compound creation using the auxiliary and the past participle: *habeo factum*, with a primarily aspectual value (Harris 1982: 46-9).

In Old French (O.F.) the usage of the PS, PC, and I seems to have been rather haphazard. Foulet (1958: 218 ff.) claims all three were used concurrently to achieve stylistic variation. The PC had a preterite sense in verse, and a perfect sense in prose. The PS could be used in dialogue, and could convey duration. Einhorn (1974: 115 ff.) also stresses the fairly free tense usage, but feels that the PC was found more in prose and dialogue than in narration, and the PS was used for descriptions. The originally rare I mainly expressed habitual

MEDIUM:	WRITTEN	SPOKEN
Action:		
PRESENT	PC	PC
PERFECT		
Action:		
PAST	PS	PS
PUNCTUAL		

UP TO CLASSICAL FRENCH

MEDIUM:	WRITTEN	SPOKEN
Action:		
PRESENT	PC	PC
PERFECT		
Action:		
PAST	PS/PC	PC
PUNCTUAL		

MODERN FRENCH

Figure 1.2 Historical evolution of PS and PC in the standard language: type of action and medium of communication

actions in the past; continuous actions were conveyed both by the I and the PS. Anglade (1955: 202 ff.) dates the widespread development of the I to the twelfth century (as exemplified in the works of Chrétien de Troyes). The PA was far more common than the PQP up to the sixteenth century. The PS and the PC could be used interchangeably. Martin (1971: 383 ff.), however, claims that in 'moyen français' PC was used to express result, with PS as the past punctual, used even in direct speech and for past events with current relevance. Schogt (1968: 26 ff.) points out that the increase in the range of both the PC (from a free syntagm of 'avoir' plus past participle used adjectivally with terminative verbs, to a resultative tense) and the I (from use only with non-terminative verbs, to extension to the whole range of verbs), encroached on the territory of the PS (see also Schogt 1964).

In Classical French (C.F.) in the seventeenth century, prescriptivism in language led to the codification of grammatical usage, and the roles of the tenses were strictly defined. The 'unité de temps' was not merely a rule for the theatre, but also for the PC, which could only be used 'correctly' for events which had taken place within the last twenty-four hours. However, if more distant events were felt to be close to the speaker, the PC could be used in this subjective manner. The PS was the usual tense for more distant

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events (Gougenheim 1939: 208 ff.). The question of how rigid this distinction was is disputed, but it is clear that the situation in C.F. was far less confusing and haphazard than that in O.F.

In modern Romance, Harris (1982: 49–50) distinguishes four different patterns of usage for these two types of forms (derived from *feci* and *habeo factum* respectively). French belongs to the fourth category, in which *feci* is at its most restricted, used only in formal registers and facing ultimate loss, with *habeo factum* taking on both present perfect and preterite functions. The situation is similar in Northern Italian and standard Romanian. However, both forms still survive together in written standard French, and it is their interaction which is at the centre of this study.

1.2 The phenomenon of co-occurrence of the two tenses

We began this study with an example from Robbe-Grillet's (1981) novel *Djinn*, which illustrates the traditional function of PS as the tense of narration. This has been expressed most clearly by Barthes:

Retiré du français parlé, le passé simple, pierre d'angle du Récit, signale toujours un art; il fait partie d'un rituel des Belles-Lettres. Il n'est plus chargé d'exprimer un temps . . . un acte verbal pur . . . il vise à maintenir une hiérarchie dans l'empire des faits . . . il est le temps factice des cosmogénies, des mythes, des Histoires et des Romans . . . le passé simple est l'acte même de possession de la société sur son passé, et son possible.

(1965: 29–32)

PS is part of the system of the bourgeois novel. The use of PC in a novel therefore creates a certain startling effect. The most celebrated example is Camus's *L'Étranger*. Sartre made much of the contrast between the continuity and the 'verbality' of the PS as compared to the broken, divided nature of PC when discussing Camus's novel: 'C'est pour accentuer la solitude de chaque unité phrastique que M. Camus a choisi de faire son récit au parfait composé . . . il substitue l'ordre causal à l'enchaînement chronologique' (1947: 117–21).

Indeed, as Cellard (1979: 19) points out, even Camus did not classify *L'Étranger* as a novel precisely because it did not use the literary PS. Queneau (1947) explores the possibilities even further in his *Exercices de style*, in which the same episode is recounted in various styles, including different tenses.

In most modern literary works, however, co-occurrence of PS and PC is more frequent. The usual contrasts made are between 'discours' ('commentaire') and 'histoire' ('récit'); between recent

and distant past and tense mixing for stylistic effect. Examples abound in twentieth-century novels, plays, poems, and short stories.

Various corpus studies of the tenses in literature give quantitative indications of the separation of PS and PC functions (Millon 1936; Ullman 1938; Iejima 1951; Yvon 1963; Stavinohová 1969, 1973, 1974, 1978). We will discuss the findings of the latter scholar here.

In her 1973 article, Stavinohová gives a useful breakdown of contrasting PS/PC usage in eight modern plays and four modern prose pieces. When the 'récit' is in PS and I, PC is introduced most frequently in the following cases, by order of frequency: generalizations; remarks; reflections, monologue, narrator's asides to reader, and quotations of direct or indirect speech (1973: 54). In dialogues, the most frequent contrasts of PS with PC are (again by order of frequency): PS for acts detached from present, PC for acts linked to present; PS for historical acts, PC for recent past acts; particular use of PS (irony, jokes, affectedness) (1973: 55).

In the 1974 article, Stavinohová presents statistics for the frequency of different past tenses in nine plays and six prose pieces written between 1937 and 1965 by authors of varying ages. The order of frequency for the plays begins: PC, I, PQP, PS. . . . That for the prose pieces: I, PS, PC, PQP. . . . Such results reinforce the comments made so far in this section. On the use of PS and PC in this corpus, she finds PC being most commonly used to express anteriority to the present/future, result, successive actions, accomplishment. PS is used for narrative, successive actions, anteriority to other events in PS, and for insertions in dialogues referring to events with no link to the present.

Stavinohová's 1978 book brings together her previous shorter studies into an examination of all the French past tenses. Again she uses a corpus of literary works to establish relative frequency – here she uses a selection of fifteen modern works – plays and prose. There are similar results, with high frequency of PC in plays, and of PS in prose (1978: 139–40).

The frequency of PS/PC mixing in literary texts leads us to the opinions of grammarians on the subject, and to the related question of replaceability (can PC always replace PS, or vice versa?):

Le mélange inconsideré du passé composé et du passé simple dans un même contexte produit des incohérences choquantes. . . . Choisir une fois pour toutes entre le passé simple et le passé composé; dès qu'on a employé l'un dans un devoir, s'interdire d'employer l'autre.

(Bonnard 1950: 111)

We must bear in mind that Bonnard is giving advice to French

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schoolchildren rather than discussing what actually does occur. Harmer criticizes Bonnard's approach: 'this is one [attitude] that is completely belied by usage' (1965: 251).

Le Bidois and Le Bidois, after discussing the increasing use of PC in narrative, conclude: 'On peut . . . très bien faire alterner dans le récit des passés composés et des passés simples. Mais il y faut de la mesure' (1935: 444).

Similarly, Haden: 'There are a multitude of examples to be found in contemporary literature of the simple past and the perfect in close juxtaposition. I suggest that this is like a rapid switching of lenses of different focal length' (1967: 77).

Buffin is more cautious about mixing, but admits that it does exist, in particular cases, such as mixed objective/subjective narration, or 'les oeuvres des demi-lettrés' (1935: 45-7)!

The opinions about replacement are similarly divided: 'Dans un récit suivi réellement historique, sans aucun rapport avec le présent de celui qui parle, il ne serait pas possible d'employer le passé composé, à la place du passé simple' (Sensine 1926: 29).

Sten (1952: 95 ff.) says PS can replace PC for solemn style, but in general usage PC can replace PS and not vice versa (see also Cornelissen 1980).

Larochette says PS cannot replace PC in its anterior function, but can always replace PC in its preterite function - PS is: 'loin d'être moribond' (1980: II, 235 ff., 240).

On both these questions clearly a large amount of data must be examined before any definite answers may be given, if such answers exist.

However, any brief glance at a newspaper would indicate that PS/PC mixing within the same text is a fairly frequent phenomenon. On the question of replaceability, test results seem to show that substitution is not entirely random and depends on context.

1.3 The situation in newspaper language

The purpose of this section is twofold: first, to outline the characteristics of newspapers and their effects on newspaper language in general; and second, to discuss the status of French newspapers in particular.

The means of production, presentation, and distribution of newspapers determine to some extent the type of language used. Apart from the many similarities between newspapers, the fact that each paper has its own intended audience and own viewpoint also influences the house style of each publication. Furthermore, within each paper, a number of different journalists make contributions, and

a balance is struck between the language and style of the individual author and that which is determined by editorial policy. The end result, a printed collection of articles (interspersed with pictures, photographs, and advertisements), may be seen to be influenced at three different levels.

Level 1: Genre

The newspaper genre has certain in-built limitations – and advantages – as opposed to other written forms and other media forms. Newspapers have to be produced in bulk, quickly and regularly – daily papers may print more than one edition, and together with the weeklies, may have different regional editions or regional sections inserted. The aim (of the dailies) is to give the latest news in as much detail as possible. With the competition of radio and television in this domain, the newspaper has had to diversify, by turning more towards in-depth comment, scoops and ‘exclusive’ stories, special reports, leisure and information services. Speedy production restricts the relative size and importance of the various articles; even the wording of headlines is to some extent determined by the amount of space available. The layout is subject to last-minute alterations when a ‘big’ story arrives unexpectedly. Such factors require writers who can produce brief, pithy language when necessary, and work to deadlines. It is also a genre of enormous variety and richness – the range of material is vast, and modern printing techniques make excellent presentation easy – which is an advantage for a product which has to sell frequently, and in large numbers.

Level 2: Paper

Within each individual paper, the policy of the editor determines the general standpoint to which all articles must adhere. Papers develop their own particular patterns of presentation, type of approach, and type of language – from racy, relatively simple prose to heavy, elaborate stylization. Each story may be rewritten by the journalist, the sub-editor, and possibly the editor. The final version must fit in with the general tone and outlook of the paper, which after all is aiming at a particular audience who have certain expectations of that publication.

Level 3: Journalist

Among the articles, certain ones are signed (with the name or the initials of the authors); others give a vaguer source (‘De notre