

French Television Talk: What tenses for past time?

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Abstract

The present paper explores, on the basis of a transcribed French television corpus made of two news bulletins, two chat shows and one literary programme recorded in February 2003, the claim that *passé simple* (PS) may still be used in prepared oral discourse (Pfister 1974). Given that the corpus does not provide support for that use on television, a study of the morphological means used to offer a perfective presentation of past events is then carried. It shows that a series of tenses, both past and non-past, are used. First *passé composé* (PC), the traditionally accepted replacement form of the PS, proves ambiguous as its present perfect value (and sometimes its past perfect use in contrast with historic present) tends to dominate in the corpus where the moment of speech provides the main referential anchorage. Some occurrences of ‘narrative’ *imparfait* IMP also emerge but they prove to be a limited sophisticated resource. Although not a morphological past, historic present appears as a useful device thanks to its aspectual versatility and its ease of production in unplanned oral discourse. More surprisingly, future tenses (*futur simple*, *futur périphrastique* and *futur antérieur*) emerge as an alternative means to recall past events. There seems thus to be a shift from temporal to aspectual features in French television talk: a perfective presentation prevails on a past presentation. This new hypothesis would need to be confirmed by a larger television corpus, tested in other types of oral discourse and tested on written corpora.

Keywords

French past tenses – oral French – perfective aspect

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1. The French *passé simple* (PS): The weakest link?

The PS has been the focus of much scholarly discussion and the question of its survival has been debated throughout the 20th century. Some linguists advocated its disappearance and its redundancy in contemporary French; for example Schogt (1964:16) stated that the PS did not express anymore anything that could not be conveyed either by the *passé composé* (PC) or the *imparfait* (IMP). Van Vliet (1983: 92) explains how the other past tenses have taken over the PS domain, starting in spoken language, and shows that this disappearance fits within the general tendency of language to become more analytical:

First, as we have seen, the *passé simple* has lost its *raison d'être* to the more easily formed past tenses; in the spoken language, its preterit functions have been completely usurped by the *passé composé* (*j'ai chanté*) and its descriptive function by the imperfect (*je chantais*). Secondly, the morphology of the *passé simple* is suffixal in nature (*je chant+ai*), unlike the *passé composé* whose proposed structure is more in line with the phrase structures of the rest of the language (*j'ai+chanté*). Finally, the *passé simple* itself has become isolated and is difficult to form. It must be learned, unlike the *passé composé*, which is regular in its structure and can be heard in everyday speech.

Some of Van Vliet's positions are debatable (see Engel 1985 for a thorough discussion). First, if the PS can largely be replaced by the PC, there are cases where the substitution is not possible. Wilmet (1998: 370) quotes this excerpt from Malraux¹:

Je me suis évadé, en 1940, avec le futur aumônier du Vercors. Nous nous retrouvâmes peu de temps après l'évasion, dans le village de la Drôme où il était curé...

- Qu'est-ce que la confession vous a enseigné des hommes?

- Vous savez, la confession n'apprend rien, parce que dès que l'on confesse, on est un autre, il y a la Grâce...

Il leva ses bras de bûcheron dans la nuit pleine d'étoiles:

« Et puis, le fond de tout, c'est qu'il n'y a pas de grandes personnes... ».

'I escaped [PC] in 1940, with the future chaplain of the Vercors. We met again [PS]. Not long after escaping, in the village of the Drome, where he was [IMP] priest...

- What has confession taught [PC] you about mankind?

- you know confession does not teach anything, because as soon as you confess, you are an other, grace is there...

He left [PS] his lumberjack's arms in the starry night:

« But then the truth is that nobody ever grows up... »

In this example, a PC would provoke an ambiguity: *a levé* could be seen as a present perfect rather than as a perfectiveⁱⁱ past. Moreover, the difficulty of the PS formation could be a result of its rarefaction and not the cause of it.

However, although linguists generally agree on the decline of the PS, the position of Damourette & Pichon (1936, V, § 1819) questions the idea of the receding position of the PS:

... Henri Estienne nous apprend que, dès son époque, il était ridicule d'employer le priscal [PS] hors saison, mais qu'on pouvait très facilement employer à peu près toujours l'antérieur [PC] là où le priscal aurait semblé recevable, et dans les conversations que nous a transmises le théâtre, le priscal est rare, [...]. Dans ces conditions, il est permis de se demander si la fréquence du priscal a jamais été beaucoup plus grande qu'elle ne l'est aujourd'hui. La question est d'importance, car si la régression est un mythe, le pronostic de la mort prochaine devient injustifié. Il se peut que le priscal ait toujours eu un petit domaine, mais s'y soit toujours maintenu. Comme nos documents sur la conversation courante des siècles passés sont insuffisants, ce que nous disons là est une pure hypothèse. Nous souhaitons pourtant qu'elle empêche les linguistes de parler à la légère de la disparition et de la mort d'un tiroir qui appartient encore pleinement au français d'aujourd'hui.

They call into question the higher frequency of the PS form in earlier periods of the history of French and put forward the idea that the PS might always have had restricted uses and has retained them.

A third "middle of the road" position postulates the vitality of PS within specific contexts. Most linguists will limit the form to written communication:

This is this difference of perspective [between PS and passé composé (PC)] which explains why **the past historic has survived in the written language**. But in spontaneous French these nuances are lost, and only the compound past is productive. (Judge & Healey 1983:108)

Un comptage portant sur le dépouillement d'un certain nombre de journaux nous a convaincu qu'il [PS] était loin d'être moribond. Sa disparition serait un appauvrissement irréparable. Mais **ce tiroir est rejeté de la langue parlée**. (Martin 1971:111)

Pfister (1974:401) nonetheless extends this survival to varieties of oral such as presentations of all kinds, conferences and talks and in journalistic use:

Naturellement, dans le code parlé, on ne rencontre plus que l'opposition imparfait- passé composé. Mais d'un autre côté, le code écrit littéraire et soutenu utilise toutes les nuances stylistiques qui résultent d'une différenciation de ces trois temps du passé. **Dans des exposés oraux de toutes sortes, conférences et causeries**, on constate même actuellement une augmentation sensible de l'emploi du passé simple. La vitalité de ce temps dans le code écrit me paraît donc assurée. En tout cas, pour ce qui concerne **le français journalistique**, on ne peut pas encore parler d'un temps moribond.

This interesting statement is not supported by examples and would benefit from evidence from a corpus.

The aim of the present study is first to assess the actual use of PS in contexts that belong both to orality and journalistic useⁱⁱⁱ. A second research question explores what tenses convey the value of preterit (understood here as a combination of past tense and perfective presentation) in the corpus. A discussion finally tries to evaluate to what extent those can ‘replace’ the PS.

2. The corpus

The corpus studied consists of a selection of television programmes collected during a one-week period in February 2003. It is made of :

- (1) two lunchtime news bulletin of the 10th February^{iv} from TF1, presented by Jean-Pierre Pernaut, and from France 2 with Daniel Bilalian as a newsreader;
- (2) a literary programme, *Vol de nuit* from the 4th February, presented by Patrick Poivre d’Arvor;
- (3) two chat shows recorded on the same date: *Vis ma vie* (TF1) presented by Laurence Ferrari and *C’est mon choix* (France 3) hosted by Evelyne Thomas.

This selection aimed at capturing different levels of orality. The news bulletins were expected to be the most prepared variety and the closest to written use (they are delivered by newsreaders); moreover studies of the written press (e.g. Engel 1990, Wiberg 1995) show that newspapers still contain a fair proportion of PS. So, on those bases, the news bulletins were felt likely to contain PS^v. Similarly, the literary programme may have encouraged the use of the PS, that has often been described as a ‘literary’ tense. Finally the two chat shows were not expected to favour PS given their focus on personal experience^{vi} and the casual nature of the talks; they represent two degrees of informality: *Vis ma vie* is fairly structured thanks to interviews led by the presenter while *C’est mon choix* allows for freer discussion, the host sometimes losing control of the exchanges. All programmes were transcribed by students^{vii}, and checked twice by the researcher. All conjugated verbs were classified to give the following results:

Table 1: TF1 News Bulletin

PRES ^{viii}	PC	PS	IMP	PQP	FS	FP	FA	COND	CP	IMPER	SUBJ	SUBJP	Total
484	94	0	37	8	17	24	1	16	1	3	9	1	695
69.64	13.53	0	5.32	1.15	2.45	3.45	0.14	2.3	0.14	0.43	1.29	0.14	100

Table 2: France 2 News Bulletin

PRES	PC	PS	IMP	PQP	FPP	FS	FP	FA	COND	CP	IMPER	SUBJ	Total
492	96	0	46	9	4	16	11	3	15	1	4	7	704
69.87	13.64	0	6.53	1.28	0.57	2.27	1.56	0.43	2.13	0.14	0.57	9.94	100

Table 3: Vol de nuit

PRES	PC	PS	IMP	PQP	FPP	FS	FP	COND	CP	IMPER	SUBJ	Total
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922	277	1	127	17	2	10	21	29	2	10	9	1427
64.61	19.41	0.07	8.9	1.19	0.14	0.7	1.47	2.03	0.14	0.7	0.63	100

Table 4: Vis ma vie

PRES	PC	PS	IMP	PQP	FS	FP	COND	CP	IMPER	SUBJ	Total
293 ^{ixx}	100	0	68	18	18	23	5	1	11	8	545
53.76	18.35	0	12.48	3.3	3.3	4.22	0.92	0.18	2.02	1.47	100

Table 5: C'est mon choix

PRES	PC	PS	IMP	PQP	FS	FP	COND	CP	IMPER	SUBJ	Total
899	149	0	55	4	11	49	23	2	45	13	1250
71.92	11.92	0	4.4	0.32	0.88	3.92	1.84	0.16	3.6	1.04	100

Most of the programmes are anchored in the present, which is understandable with a medium such as television. In our corpus, the present (PRES) accounts for about two thirds of the conjugated forms except in *Vis ma vie*, where it amounts for only half of them. This can be attributed to the format of the programme where each guest is interviewed about a past experience shown in a clip, to which there is constant reference, hence the higher proportion of past tenses (especially IMP and *plus-que-parfait* - PQP) in that part of the corpus. The reference to the future is conveyed by both the *futur simple* (FS) and the *futur proche* (FP), the latter being more frequent in the chat shows, which indicates its more colloquial nature; indeed the high percentage of FP in TF1 news bulletin comes from interviews. An emerging form, that we have called “*futur proche du passé*” (*aller* in the IMP + infinitive) appears in the France 2 News bulletin and in *Vol de nuit*; it is still rarely acknowledged in grammars and is morphologically parallel to the FP. *Vis ma vie* contains a much higher proportion of future tenses than the other extracts and this is attributable to the format of the programme where the following report is announced before an advertisement break. Generally speaking, the range of tenses in chat shows is more limited than in other programmes, which is not surprising as the talk is less planned than in other genres.

Focusing now on PS that had spurred us into action, the corpus only contains 1 occurrence of the tense in the literary programme and this is an aborted verbal phrase:

- (1) Jacques Dormes était un Français, mais ce n'est pas le point de départ du livre, le point de départ du livre, c'est la Russie que vous avez bien connue, la Russie d'il y a 40 ans, la Russie qui était terrible, à ce moment-là, Stalinienne, ou il y **eut** dans les années soixante... où il y avait un orphelinat, un orphelinat très particulier qui recueillait les enfants de ceux qu'on appelait les pères héros, donc il faut que vous racontiez ce que c'est que cette étrange distinction en URSS...
- 'Jacques Dormes was a Frenchman, but this is not the starting point of the book, it is rather Russia as you knew [PC] it so well, Russia from forty years ago, A Russia that was frightful at the time, Stalinian, where there was [PS] in the sixties... where there was [IMP] an orphanage, a very

peculiar orphanage that welcomed [IMP]the children of the so called heroes fathers, so you need to tell us what was that strange distinction in USSR.’

As expected, there was no PS in the chat shows but against our predictions, that tense does not appear either in the news bulletins that had most been expected to contain PS. From our corpus, it seems that the PS is not used in that genre. However, another corpus of 19 news bulletins dating from 1993 (Lundqvist 2001^{xi}) contains 4 occurrences of PS:

- (2) Voilà trente-cinq ans qu'elle tient bon, trente-cinq ans qu'elle régente notre vie publique sans qu'on la mette véritablement en question. Le président de la république, soucieux de la vigueur des institutions et peut-être aussi du calendrier politique avait souhaité qu'à son propos on ouvrît un chantier - c'était l'expression consacrée - il y a un an et demi puis l'on **parla** de toit à l'étage et enfin, depuis le huit décembre dernier, depuis l'installation officielle d'un comité consultatif sous la présidence du doyen Vedel, il est ouvertement question de réforme. (C. Ockrent, France 3, 15 février 2003)

‘She has been holding on for thirty five years, thirty five years of ruling our public life without being questioned. The French President, in order to preserve thriving institutions and to keep the political calendar had wished [PQP] a year and a half ago that a ‘construction site’ – as it was called – be opened the one talked [PS] of a roof for the building and finally, since the 8th December of last year, since the official creation of a consultative committee under the direction of the most senior member, Vedel, one has talked openly about reforms.

- (3) Il y a eu en mille neuf cent vingt à Tours un congrès sous les auspices de Léon Blum qui **fonda** le parti socialiste en les séparant des communistes. (C. Ockrent, France 3, 17 février 1993)

‘There was [PC] in 1920 a congress in Tours under the patronage of Léon Blum who founded [PS] the socialist Party in separating them from the Communists.’

- (4) Après donc la cérémonie dans la cathédrale et cette émouvante évocation de la chanson de Lara extraite du Docteur Jivago et Gilles Boulot à l'instant rappelait que les parents de Pierre Bérégovoy étaient d'origine ukrainienne et que son nom signifie justement l'homme de la rive avec la charge émotionnelle que comporte ce mot. Il **y eut** bien sûr l'inhumation au cimetière de Nevers et entre temps un discours du Président de la République devant le palais ducal. Un discours qui fera date par la force de son propos. Ecoutez-le. (Patrick Poivre d'Arvor [PPDA], TF1, 4 mai 1993)

‘After the service in the cathedral and that moving reference to the song of Lara from Dr Zivago and Gilles Boulot was just reminding us that the parents of Pierre Bérégovoy were from Ukraine and that his name actually means the man of the bank with all the emotional weight the word carries. There was [PS] of course the burial in Nevers cemetery and in the meantime a speech from the President in front of the ducal palace. A speech that will be remembered for its strong words. Listen to it.’

- (5) Leila Saïd, seule femme diplomate de l'OLP **fut** aussi l'une des premières à engager un dialogue avec des pacifistes israéliens à la suite du voyage du pape en Lituanie. (PPDA, TF1, 6 sept. 93)
'Leila Saïd, the only female OLP diplomat was [PS] also one of the first to engage into a dialogue with the Israeli pacifists following the Pope's visit to Lithuania.'

Evidence from both corpora shows nonetheless that Pfister's statement about the importance of PS in oral prepared use seems overoptimistic. There might well have been a decrease of the use of PS in that context since 1974 (the time when Pfister wrote) and 2003, given that the 1993 data still contains some occurrences (4 out of 19 bulletins) and the 2003 corpus does not. However, the absence of PS from the 2003 corpus may also come from the limited number of news bulletins studied. There may also be differences due to idiolect, some newsreaders favouring the PS more than others^{xii}. All that can be deduced is that the PS is rare in televised news bulletins.

Having established that the PS is only marginally used in oral, we must now ask the question of how preterit is expressed in our corpus.

3. Who wants to be a... preterit?

The quantitative decline of a form such as the PS does not imply that its functions disappear. In this section, we will focus on the tenses used to a past perfective presentation of events.

3.1. The PC

The PC has traditionally been seen as the replacement form for the PS: originally a present perfect, it has started to assume from the 13th century (Pfister 1974:415) the value of a punctual past, encroaching on the territory of the PS. The competition led to the disappearance of PS in oral usage in the 19th century (Reid 1955). However, the survival of PC's original value makes it ambiguous and the value of present perfect is always available at the back of the language user's mind:

Mais jamais la valeur fondamentale du PC n'est rejetée dans l'ombre, jamais son profil de langue n'est remis en doute, même dans la langue parlée où il se substitue au PS dans tous les cas. Il reste au moins à l'esprit la possibilité, exclue sans appel par le PS, de rattacher l'action passée au moment actuel. (Martin 1971: 108ff)

Let us now see how the PC is used in television talk to refer to the past. As suggested by the quantitative analysis, this form is the most widespread "past" tense in all the genres gathered in our corpus. It is indeed a way of conveying a preterit in our corpus:

- (6) Les Allemands **ont conquis** en Russie un territoire quatre fois plus grand que la France, en la dévastant complètement. C'est la France, on oublie complètement la force de la France avant de rencontrer une résistance donc les Français **ont été écrasés** par une force, on oublie, mille fois supérieure. (*Vol de nuit*)

'The Germans conquered [PC] in Russia an area four times as large as France destroying it completely. It was France, one forgets completely the strength of France before meeting a resistance; thus the French people were crushed [PC] by a power – on forgets it - a thousand times superior'

- (7) Il **a été brûlé** mais y a pas de trace, disons il y **a eu** un message au Vatican, mais quand même le pape **a dit** qu'il **a été retrouvé**^{xiii} mort sur une plage et la seule source peut-être qu'il **n'est pas mort**^{xiv}. (*Vol de nuit*)

'He was burnt [PC] but there are no sign, let's say there was [PC] a message from Vatican but however, the Pope said [PC] that he was found [PC] dead on a beach and the only source maybe that he did not die [PC]'

However, this is not the only or the main function for the PC in our corpus: most occurrences appear in contexts linked to the moment of speech, a context in which PS is not acceptable in contemporary French (Engel 1990). Moreover, other variables identified by Engel as normally inducing the PC rather than the PS are found. To start with, the first and second persons^{xv} are much used in the corpus in chat shows that mix interviews and testimonies:

- (8) Non! Non. Déjà le sport à outrance, là, j'**ai eu** des courbatures pendant 48h. J'**ai été obligée** de mettre des anti-inflammatoires. Parce qu'on n'a pas tout vu: ils m'ont fait faire des tractions, ils m'ont fait faire des abdominaux des sphinx, des dips...des dips? mais il y avait des sphinx aussi quand même? Des sphinx, je m'en souviens bien. Non c'était amusant mais il y a des trucs que j'**ai réussis** mais on a montré surtout ce que j'avais raté. (*Vis ma vie*)

'No! No. With that overdose of sport there, I was [PC] stiff for 48h. I had [PC] to apply anti-inflammatory creams. Because you did not see [PC] everything: they made [PC] me do tractions, they made [PC] me do stomach exercises, sphinx, dips... dips? But there were [IMP] sphinx though? Sphinx, I remember it well. No, it was [IMP] entertaining but there are things I managed [PC] but they have mainly shown [PC] what I failed [PQP] to do.'

It is found in the discussion of books in the literary programme, where the writers describe the genesis of their work:

- (9) C'est moi qui **ai essayé** de rendre son histoire au fond supportable et c'est pour la rendre supportable que j'**ai voulu** la sortir d'une seule voix, et en faire ça, je m'en **suis rendue** compte après coup, j'**ai voulu** essayer de transformer et d'apporter la douceur du conte du, du conte qu'on raconte aux enfants, qui assume les grandes peurs et les grandes souffrances que peuvent... les enfants sont parfois confrontés d'une façon beaucoup plus violente que nous, adultes, à la mort et la violence des hommes. (*Vol de nuit*)

'In a way I have tried [PC] to make her story bearable and to do so I have wanted [PC] to have more than one voice and to make it what it is, I realised [PC] afterwards, I have wanted [PC] to try to

change and to bring the sweetness of tales that children are told, that take the big fears and the big sufferings that can... children are sometimes faced in a far more violent way than us, adults, with death and men's violence.'

The first person finally appears in the interviews of the news when personal testimonies are aired:

- (10) « Qu'est-ce que vous voulez faire? J'**ai** toujours **été** une femme comme ça. J'**ai** jamais rien **demandé** à personne, je **me suis** toujours **débrouillée** toute seule » (JT, TF1)

'What do you want to do? I have always been [PC] a woman like this. I have never asked [PC] anyone anything, I have always managed [PC] on my own'.

A second factor is the widespread use of adverbial referring to the 'here and now' (12.29%) this is particularly obvious in the news bulletins (37.23% and 31.25%) with adverbials such as *aujourd'hui*, *hier...*, phrases containing a demonstrative pronoun (*ce matin*), indicating a distance from the moment of speech (*il y a quelques minutes*) or a continuity up to the moment of speech (e.g. *toujours*). A table recapitulating the use of adverbials with the PC appears in the appendices.

Thirdly the PC is found to express a PQP in spontaneous storytelling: it is for example the case for learners of French but also native speakers in film retell tasks (Labeau 2002a):

- (11) Sa femme ne l'a pas supporté. Elle n'**a** jamais **travaillé** et c'était se remettre en question. (*C'est mon choix*)

His wife did not stand [PC] it. She never worked [PC] and it meant [IMP] taking a new look on herself'.

Finally, in addition to its value of past perfective and of present perfect, the PC is found to indicate anteriority to a historic present:

- (12) On se retrouve pour la seconde partie de « Vis Ma Vie ». Nous sommes toujours en compagnie d'Yves, pisteur secouriste de montagne et d'Axel qui, lui, **a**^{xvi} horreur du ski et de la neige. Axel **a** déjà **vécu** une première journée bien remplie. En ce moment, je vous rappelle, il **est** complètement seul, abandonné en pleine nuit tout en haut des pistes. Il est deux heures du matin pour lui. Il **a dû** se lever pour aller réparer un canon à neige avec Yves. Le seul problème, c'est qu'Yves **a disparu** et qu'Axel commence à trouver le temps long, on regarde la suite.

'We are back for the second part of "Vis ma vie". We are still with Yves, member of the ski patrol and mountain first aid-worker, and with Axel who loathes ski and snow. Axel has already experienced [PC] a full first day. At this moment, I remind you, he is completely isolated, abandoned in the night on top of the pistes. It is two in the morning. He has had [PC] to get up in order to go and mend a snow blower with Yves. The only problem is that Yves has disappeared [PC] and that Axel starts feeling bored. We watch what happens next'.

3.2. The IMP

While the PC was taking over functions of the PS, the IMP has also extended its uses throughout the history of French. The IMP made a modest debut on the French verb stage. Brunot (1905-53, I: 241) mentions that before the 12th century, this tense was «*assez rare* », and that at the time, the PS fulfilled most of the current roles of the IMP. The PS was indeed used in descriptions:

- (13) Un algeir tint ki d'or fut empenez (Roland, v.837)

and rarely (3 times in the first 500 verses of the Chanson de Roland) to express the contemporaneity with a past moment as in the present use (as in for example *je lisais au moment où il arriva*). Brunot mentions that the advance of the IMP was one of the big linguistic changes that occurred between the 11th and the 13th centuries. Foulet (1925: 206) claims that by the 16th century, the IMP was used in literary French to express states – its prototypical use in Contemporary French - and the PS had been ousted from those uses. However, the IMP has progressed not only in the expression of description and background that are favoured by its imperfective aspect, but also in the expression of the main events of narratives^{xvii}. There is much discussion on the aspectual status of that IMP that some see as a perfective (Gosselin 1999) and others as an imperfective in a perfective co(n)text (Bres, Labeau, forthcoming). This ‘*style artiste*’ illustrated by the Goncourts and others during the 19th century is often seen as the origin of the narrative function of the IMP but more ancient uses are given in Wilmet’s *Grammaire critique* (1998: 394):

- (14) Il m’est souvenu de la fable / du corbiau qui estoit assis / sur une croix de cinq à six / toises de hault, le quel tenoit / ung fromage au bec; la venoit / ung renard, qui vit ce froumaige... (Farce de Maître Pathelin [circa 1470], vers 438-443)
- (15) Puis il se remettait à chanter l’ouverture des Indes galantes et l’air Profonds Abîmes, et il ajoutait... (Le Neveu de Rameau [1762])

Larthomas (1980) also provides examples from Le Neveu de Rameau by Diderot gathered as well as from the Contes by Marguerite de Navarre [1st half of the 16th century], first quoted in Buffin^{xviii}. If the form did not appear with the ‘*style artiste*’, it has nonetheless developed especially from the 19th century onwards. Engel (1990: 112) mentions this role of IMP:

... since the naturalist movement in the nineteenth century French novels, the use of I[MP] as a past punctual (‘imparfait pittoresque’) has been a fairly common stylistic device.

We will now examine for what purposes the IMP is used in our corpus and if it does indeed replace a preterit. The uses of the IMP have been classified in modal and temporal uses (Wilmet 1998) and the latter are far more widespread than the former in our corpus with only 4 examples of IMP in conditional clauses introduced by ‘si’. There is also one instance where an IMP stands for a *conditionnel passé* to indicate that the event did not actually take place^{xix}:

- (16) Heureusement, à cette époque, j'ai compris le mot 'tuer' ou sinon j'étais capable de dire 'oui'. (*Vol de nuit*)

'Fortunately at that time, I have understood the word 'tuer' otherwise I could have said [IMP] 'yes'.'

Then, a usually marginal use of the IMP, the *imparfait de politesse*, appears fairly often in the programmes involving dialogues. It consists, out of politeness, of relegating in the past a present request and that form is often used with *vouloir* and *venir* as reinforcement (Wilmet 1998:394). It has an ambiguous status as, although Wilmet classifies it in temporal uses, it could be replaced by a conditional:

- (17) Je **voulais** savoir si vous vous dites pas des fois que les hommes sont juste là pour s'amuser avec vous. (*C'est mon choix*)

'I wanted [IMP] to know if you don't tell yourself sometime that men are just there to have fun with you?'

Our corpus contains 3 such occurrences in *Vis ma vie*, 9 in *C'est mon choix* and 1 in the France news bulletin; there are all with *vouloir*. As Saussure and Sthioul (forthcoming) rightly note, the form does not need to be in the first person but can also be found in questions in the second person^{xx}:

- (18) Vous **vouliez** ajouter un petit mot avant que... (*Vis ma vie*)

'You wanted [IMP] to add something before...'

It does not need to be restricted to *vouloir* and *venir* either and *Vol de nuit* seems to contain a couple of examples of less prototypical *imparfait de politesse*:

- (19) Oui, c'est-à-dire, en fait, ce qui m'intéressait c'est que ce personnage, qui est plutôt un personnage de solitaire n'a que deux respirations possibles [...]

'Yes, well in fact what I was interested in [IMP] was that that character who is rather solitary only has to possible ways of living'

Then, as for uses where the IMP replaces another past tense, our corpus offers the following occurrences:

- (20) Les enfants nous parlaient de la Star Academy et vraiment pour eux, je pense que **c'était** un grand bonheur de la rencontrer, et je crois qu'elle a été à la hauteur en plus. (*Vis ma vie*)

'The children were talking [IMP] to us about Star Academy and really for them, I think that it was [IMP] a great source of happiness to meet her and I think she was [PC] up to it.'

- (21) A Malte il a créé un nouveau scandale tellement... (Il ne peut pas s'en empêcher?)... tellement grave, on ne sait pas..., on n'a pas mentionné la cause de l'acte, il **était emprisonné**, il s'est évadé... (*Vol de nuit*)

'In Malta, he provoked [PC] a new scandal so... (he cannot control himself ?)... so serious, one does not know, the cause of the act was not mentioned [PC], he was put [IMP] in prison, he escaped [PC]

- (22) Alors, moi, il m'est arrivé un truc exceptionnel, c'est que moi, j'**avais** un bug *pendant dix ans*, c'est-à-dire de 18 à 28 ans, j'ai pas lu (*Vol de nuit*)
'Something exceptional happened [PC] to me, I had [IMP] a bug for ten years, between 18 and 28, I did not read [PC]'.
- (23) "Quand la Chine s'éveillera", **disait** Alain Peyrefitte. (id)
'When China wakes up' said [IMP] Alain Peyrefitte'.
- (24) Ce Fokker de la présidence ivoirienne était très attendu. Il **amenait enfin** en Côte d'Ivoire Seydou Diarra, le Premier ministre de consensus nommé dans la foulée des accords de paix de Marcoussis. (id.)
'That Fokker of the president of Ivory Coast was eagerly awaited [IMP]. It finally brought [IMP] in Ivory Coast Seydou Diarra, the Prime Minister of consensus chosen in the wake of the peace agreements in Marcoussis'.
- (25) *En juin dernier* la marine, poumon de la cité charentaise durant plusieurs siècles, **quittait** Rochefort. (id.)
'Last June, the marine, the lung of that town in Charentes for many centuries, left [IMP] Rochefort'.

Example (25) is a prototypical narrative use of the IMP, known as *imparfait pittoresque* (for more details, see Labeau, forthcoming a), which involves a temporal complement preceding the verb. In most examples, the narrative interpretation of the IMP is due to a conflict between the aspectual nature of the tense (imperfective, which means that the focus lays on the unfolding of the event without considering its initial and final limits) and the presence of a temporal complement that imposes limits on the event. This is the case with *pendant dix ans* in (22) that emphasizes both limits and *enfin* in (24) that focuses on the final limit. In (23), a PC would be expected and the use of IMP gives a special perspective to the utterance, Peyrefitte is staged as pronouncing the words. In (21), *a été emprisonné^{xxi}* would logically follow the series of PC; in (20), the resultative state (happiness felt by the children) would usually encourage the use of PC. The fact that the combination of *être* + IMP is a prototypical formula (see Labeau 2005) may explain the ease with which the IMP is inserted in a list of PC.

From the two sections above, it seems that traditional past tenses such as the PC and the IMP fail to replace the PS inasmuch as they possess their own connotations and it would be worth investigating which other tenses may be used as preterit in our corpus. We are now embarking on this.

3.3. Role of other tenses

The PRES is also a common means to refer to past events; it is not new and Brunot (I:239) mentions that it was already the case in Old French:

En ancien français, le présent [...] s'emploie au lieu du passé dans les récits et cela avec une grande liberté.

This tendency to « localiser les péripéties de leur récit en connivence avec le lecteur »^{xxii} (Wilmet 1998: 348) was popular with 19th century novelists and it seems that the writing of full novels in that PRES emerged at the turn of the 20th century. Judge (2002) gives Diamant noir (1896) by Jean Aicart as the first example of this technique.

In our corpus, the use of PRES referring to past events is common in *Vol de nuit* as the means to tell the storyline of the books under scrutiny. Indeed, in the midst of his interview where he is evoking his childhood in the past, Jean-Marie Le Clézio refers to a book he likes and tells the story in the present. Similar storytelling conventions have emerged in narrations of films (Salaberry 2000, Labeau 2005). In the other extracts, it generally appears as a stylistic device and give a dramatic dimension to the extract reported: a focus on Axel's trial (26), the resolution of some social conflict (27) or the story of an alleged rapist (28):

(26) On se **retrouve** pour la seconde partie de « Vis Ma Vie ». Nous **sommes** toujours en compagnie d'Yves, pisteur secouriste de montagne et d'Axel qui, lui, **a** horreur du ski et de la neige. Axel **a** déjà **vécu** une première journée bien remplie. En ce moment, je vous **rappelle**, il **est** complètement seul, abandonné en pleine nuit tout en haut des pistes. Il **est** deux heures du matin pour lui. Il **a dû** se lever pour aller réparer un canon à neige avec Yves. Le seul problème, **c'est** qu'Yves **a disparu** et qu'Axel **commence** à trouver le temps long, on **regarde** la suite. (*Vis ma vie*)

'We are back for the second part of "Vis ma vie". We are still with Yves, member of the ski patrol and mountain first aid-worker, and with Axel who loathes ski and snow. Axel has already experienced [PC] a full first day. At this moment, I remind you, he is completely isolated, abandoned in the night on top of the pistes. It is two in the morning. He has had [PC] to get up in order to go and mend a snow blower with Yves. The only problem is that Yves has disappeared [PC] and that Axel starts feeling bored. We watch what happens next'.

(27) La défense des matelas n'entamera pas la détermination des forces de l'ordre pas plus que quelques lancers de chaises plus symboliques qu'autre chose. Il **est** 21heures, l'évacuation du gymnase occupé depuis la veille **commence**. Négociations, la préfecture de police **accepte** finalement de laisser partir les sans-papiers sans interpellation à la sortie à la condition que l'évacuation **se passe** dans le calme. A l'image de cette mère par exemple, délicatement accompagnée par les CRS, pour aller chercher la peluche de son bébé oubliée près du ring de boxe mais le meilleur des mondes **se fissure** : il y **a** dissension parmi les occupants du gymnase. Si la majorité **accepte** de sortir dans le calme, quelques leaders du mouvement **veulent** les obliger à faire bloc contre la police. Alors forcément la sortie sera plus brutale pour certains. (JT, France 2)

'The protection from mattresses will not deter the police as won't the symbolic thrown of chairs. It is 9 p.m., the evacuation of the gymnasium occupied since the previous day, starts, Negotiations, the police authorities finally accept to let all the people without immigration cards go as long ad they leave quietly. like that mother for example who is nicely led by the VRS to go and collect her baby's soft toy forgotten near the box ring but the best of all worlds is collapsing, there is a disagreement among the people inside, Although most of them accept to leave quietly, some of the leaders want to force them to stand firm against the police. Therefore, the exit will be more brutal for some'.

- (28) Trois semaines de prison pour un viol qu'il *n'a* jamais *commis*. Six mois après les faits, Stéphane Blaubomme **redescend** pour la première fois dans la station Colbert. C'est là qu'il **est arrêté** le 5 juin dernier, âgée de 14ans la victime d'une agression sexuelle dans le métro Lillois le **reconnait** formellement. Un mois plus tard, un test ADN **innocente** le jeune homme. (JT, France 2)

'Three weeks in prison for a rape he never committed [PC]. Six months later, Stéphane Blauhomme goes down for the first time to the Colbert station. He was arrested [PRES] there on the 5th June last year. The 14 year old victim of a sexual attack identified [PRES] him. A month later, an DNA test proved [PRES] him innocent'.

Finally and quite surprisingly, future tenses are also a device found to refer to past events. In her analysis of written press reports, Facques (2002:170) mentions the use of "*futurs historiques*" to express posteriority to events in historic present. Similar combinations are found in our corpus:

- (29) La défense des matelas **n'entamera** pas la détermination des forces de l'ordre pas plus que quelques lanciers de chaises plus symboliques qu'autre chose. [...] Alors forcément la sortie **sera** plus brutale pour certains. (JT, France 2)

The protection from mattresses will not deter the police as won't the symbolic thrown of chairs. [...] Therefore, the exit will be more brutal for some'.

Futures appear when the presenter introduces the clip of a guest past's experience, adopting the viewpoint of the viewer who is discovering the story^{xxiii}. This allows to give an impression of suspense to maintain viewers' attention:

- (30) Alors, Emma vous avez donc passé deux jours au sein de ce service pour les enfants malades, une expérience très riche en émotions, pour vous et pour nous aussi, et il y **aura** des larmes, aussi des fous rires, qui ont rythmé votre aventure à côté de Marianne et Rami et bien sûr de tous les enfants de l'institut Gustave Rossi. On va regarder le reportage.

'So Emma you spent [PC] two days in that department for sick children, an experience full of emotions for you and for us too, and there will be [FS] tears, but also giggles that accompanied your adventure alongside Marianne and Rami and of course all the children of the Gustave Rossi. We are going to watch [FP] the report'.

Interestingly, (31), that introduces the third report of *Vis ma vie*, combines the use of both FP and FS. Facques (2002:171) suggests that the nuance between the two tenses is the proximity with the moment of reference. However, it seems that, in our example, FP is used to address one of the guests and FS to refer to another person and one may wonder if those tenses will not evolve towards preferential person associations (as it has been the case for PS and PC): third person with the FS and first and second with the FP:

(31) Et bien il **va** vous **falloir** de la condition puisque vous **allez courir** pendant cette garde de 36 heures dans la caserne de Christelle ; le rythme est soutenu, alors Christelle **arrivera**-t-elle à vous convaincre qu'une femme **a** bien sa place au coeur d'une brigade de pompiers ? Démonstration en pleine action, c'est parti.

'Well you are going to need to be fit as you are going to run during that 36 hours call in Christelle's fire station' the rhythm is quick, so will Christelle manage to convince you that there is room for a woman in firemen squad ? Demonstration in action, it's on'.

In the following example, yet another future tense, not mentioned in Facques' written reports, the FA, expresses a past event and it seems that aspect (perfectivity) is taking the prominence over time (past) :

(32) De ces deux jours d'entretien, les Irakiens **n'auront** rien **su** ou presque. La presse, la télé sont restées muettes, occupées à préparer le retour des pèlerins de la Mecque. Les gens de Bagdad ne se font aucune illusion sur ce qui les attend.

'Iraqis have not heard anything or not much from those two days of discussion. Newspapers and television did not mention anything, busy as they were to prepare the return of the Mecca pilgrims. In Bagdad, people do not entertain false hopes about what is ahead'.

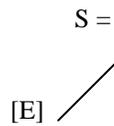
In the first section of this paper, we have concluded that the PS was not used anymore to narrate a past event, even in prepared oral discourse. We have just seen that a variety of tenses were used for that purpose in our corpus. The present system proposes a series of competitors: PC, IMP, PRES and even futures. In the last section, we will evaluate the aptitude of all these tenses to take over the past perfective value of the PS.

4. Discussion Time

We now describe the tenses found in our corpus according to those features, using a formalism inspired by Reichenbach for temporality and distinguishing between S (the moment of speech), R (the moment of reference) and E (the moment of event). As for aspect, we have devised our own way (Labeau 2005) of representing it with open (indication of imperfectivity) or close (indication of perfectivity) square brackets. Each of the tenses found in our corpus to express preterit are now described according to those parameters.

The PS could be presented as follows:

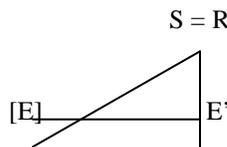
Figure 1



The event is presented as anterior to the moment of speech, taken as reference. It has a perfective aspect : it is shown as a whole without any focus on the internal unfolding.

For the PC, the representation would be the following:

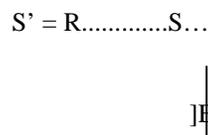
Figure 2



E would represent the past participle that carries a perfective aspect and E' the auxiliary in the PRES that is aspectually unmarked. According to co(n)textual clues, the emphasis would either be on E, provoking a past perfective reading or on E' which provokes the understanding of the form as the present perfect.

Aspectually speaking, the IMP differs from the first two tenses as it presents the event 'from the inside', as it is developing which is shown by the vertical line. Therefore, it could be illustrated as follows:

Figure 3



When using the IMP, the event is presented as it is unfolding, recreating, like the PRES, an impression of concomitance with the moment of reference but this R is usually anterior to S. However, it must not necessarily be so; in uses such as the *imparfait de politesse* that was illustrated above, the moment of reference is present as the request is valid for the here and now. In other uses such as '*Qu'est-ce que Maman a dit qu'on mangeait demain?*' (Wilmet 1998) the reference can even be positioned in the future. This versatility of the IMP is shown by the dotted line.

As for the PRES, it simply indicates a concomitance of the event with the moment of speech, also taken as the moment of reference. As far as aspect is concerned, PRES is generally presented as imperfective (Wilmet 1998) however we prefer to follow Comrie (1976: 74) and to see narrative present as an unmarked aspectual form:

Figure 4

R = S



According to Wilmet (1998), the FS presents a global (perfective) aspect, like the PS, but the temporal anchorage is posterior to the moment of speech. However, this can be questioned. First there are occurrences of imperfective futures such as:

- (33) Pendant que je jouerai du piano, tu chanteras.^{xxiv}
While I will be playing the piano, you will sing.

FS and PS do not seem to be entirely parallel as they do not show the same restrictions on tense – adverbial combination. Jacques Bres gives me the pair :

- (34) Pierre dormira depuis 10 minutes quand Marie se lèvera.
'Pierre will have been asleep for 10 minutes when Marie will get up'.
(35) * Pierre dort depuis 10 minutes quand Marie se leva.
* Pierre slept for 10 minutes when Mary got up.

In (35), the use of an IMP, *dormait*, would be required. Given the absence of a perfective (global) / imperfective (secant) pair in the future, the aspectual profile of the future may be less marked than Wilmet suggests.

Figure 5

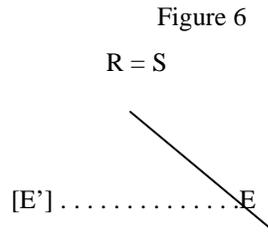
R = S



We must underline that this compatibility between FS and *depuis* depends on lexical aspect, as *depuis* (equivalent to 'for' in English) implies both duration and initial limit. Possible with stative verbs (36), it cannot be used with telic verbs:

- (36) Pierre règnera depuis 10 minutes quand Marie arrivera.
'Pierre will have been king for 10 minutes when Marie arrives'.
(37) ?Pierre écrira depuis 10 minutes quand Marie arrivera.
'Pierre will have been writing for 10 minutes when Marie arrives'.
(38) *Pierre terminera depuis 10 minutes quand Marie arrivera.
'Pierre will have been finishing for 10 minutes when Marie arrives'.

For (37) and especially (38), the FA would be expected as the duration is not permitted^{xxv} in order to recreate a perfective aspect, that is favourable to narration (Comrie 1976:66):



The FA may be anterior to a moment of reference that can be posterior or anterior to S:

(39) Dans un an, il aura fini sa these.

‘In a year time, he will have completed his PhD’.

(40) Entre 1900 et 1910, il aura visité cinq pays.

‘Between 1900 and 1910, he will have visited five countries’

As shown by these representations, none of the tenses used to express a preterit in this corpus is an exact equivalent of the PS. Although the PC may represent a preterit, it leads to ambiguity because of its perfect value. The aspect of the IMP differs from the PS’ but because of the flexibility of the form both on the aspectual level (no limits on the event) and on the temporal level (mobility of R on the temporal line), it can in context be used to express a preterit; it is however a choice ‘difficilior’ and this is proven by the fact that this IMP is found in the most prepared part of the corpus: the news bulletins. The PRES is neutral as far as aspect is concerned and its use requires less contextual changes than the use of the IMP. The FS shares some aspectual features of the PS but typically implies a change of reference point; the FA however contains a dimension of anteriority and that tense may become a good replacement form for the PS^{xxvi}.

5. Conclusion : Back to the future ?

A few conclusions may be drawn from our corpus analysis. First, despite Pfister’s (1974) claims, the PS is a very rare form in prepared oral discourse, at least on television; other genres^{xxvii} may prove more open to that tense and further study would be needed.

Secondly, preterit in our corpus is expressed through a range of tenses: PC, IMP, PRES and futures. Although the PC is generally thought to have replaced the PS^{xxviii}, it has proven ambiguous in a corpus where the present anchorage favours its present perfect value. Saunders (1969: 161) saw in this ambiguity a direct cause of the expansion of the IMP but it was shown that narrative uses of that tense were limited in our oral corpus, compared with written corpora (Labeau 2004 and forthcoming b). It may be a ‘literary’ or at least written substitute. PRES seems a widespread way of expressing preterit in oral uses: this may be attributed on the one hand to the versatility of the tense on an aspectual level and on the other hand to the ease of use in unplanned discourse^{xxix}. More surprising was the use of future tenses to refer to past events; this tendency has also been noted in written sports reports (Labeau forthcoming b). It may be that in oral

discourse, the personal perspective on the event, expressed by aspect^{xxx}, appears more important than temporal information. Therefore the fact that the FA offer a perfect aspect may favour their use, especially given that it has a dimension of anteriority, in contemporary French... but that hypothesis will need verification in large corpora of texts of television talk but also conversational talk and should be checked against written press corpora.

ⁱⁱ This excerpt was first found in Saettele, H. (1971) *Das französische Passé Composé, Funktionsveränderung eines Tempus*. Zürich

ⁱⁱ [...] perfectivity indicates the view of a situation as a single whole, without distinction of the various separate phases that make up that situation; [...] (Comrie 1976:16)

ⁱⁱⁱ This question provided the basis for a research project in a second year elective on Contemporary French at Aston University. I would like to express my gratitude to my students for their input and enthusiasm that made the project so stimulating.

^{iv} All programmes were initially recorded on the 4th February but recording problems forced us to use news bulletins aired on a different day.

^v One reviewer of this paper questioned this point and wrote : « ... as news are aimed at a very general audience, one could think that the speakers are unlikely to use the level of language in which the PS is used ». This is obviously a fair comment but PS is found in popular genres such as detective novels, which undermines the point.

^{vi} PS tends to combine with 3rd persons (Engel 1990).

^{vii} The TF1 news bulletin was transcribed by Claire Guy and Debora Corlett, the France 2 news bulletin by Elisabeth Franklin-Johnson, and Katy Armistead ; Natalia Garland, Debbie Hartill and Eleanor Letek worked on *Vol de Nuit* ; Rebecca Hunter transcribed the interviews of *Vis ma vie* ; Daniel Pratt and Nancy Whitehouse worked on *C'est mon choix*.

^{viii} PRES = présent ; PC = passé composé ; IMP = imparfait ; PQP = plus-que-parfait ; FPP = future proche du passé ; FS = futur simple ; FP = futur proche ; FA = futur antérieur ; COND = conditionnel ; CP = conditionnel passé ; IMPER = impératif, SUBJ = subjonctif ; SUBJP = subjonctif passé.

^{ix} 16 *est-ce que*.

^x 39 *est-ce que*.

^{xi} A table in the appendices shows the distribution of tenses in that corpus.

^{xii} One of the reviewers suggested that while my two news bulletins were aired at lunchtime, the examples quoted came from *Le 20 heures*, that, as the day's main diffusion, might present a higher level of sophistication, hence the PS.

^{xiii} One would expect here a PQP to mark anteriority to a past reference point. The spread of the PS in that use has been mentioned in Ayres-Bennett & Carruthers (2001).

^{xiv} Given that the storyline is told in the PC and refers to a 17th century painter, it makes more sense to take *est mort* as a past rather than as a present perfect.

^{xv} The proportion of PC in the first and second persons is shown in a table in the appendix. Verbs in the third person but including an object in the first or the second person are also listed as they also build a bridge with the moment of speech.

^{xvi} One of the reviewers suggests that *a* could be “interpreted as a general present referring to the ‘here and now’, rather than a historical present”. We share that position; however later on in the example, we have hints of the fiction recreated: “ **en ce moment**... il est seul” (Axel is sitting in the studio while those words are uttered” and above all “il est deux heures du matin **pour lui**” (the programme is aired in the evening and may have been recorded at any time).

^{xvii} Narratives refer to texts in which « the speaker relates a series of real or fictive events in the order in which they took place » (Dahl 1984 :116).

^{xviii} Buffin, J.M. (1925) *Remarques sur les moyens d'expression de la durée et du temps en français*. Paris: PUF: 110.

^{xix} This utterance was pronounced by a non native speaker of French from a low socio-cultural background and his use of tenses may be questionable as shown by the use of *j'ai compris* where native speakers would use *je comprenais*.

^{xx} There are 3 such occurrences in *C'est mon choix* and 1 in *Vis ma vie*.

^{xxi} Jacques Bres, who kindly agreed to read my first draft and whom I would like to thank for his feedback, had not understood, at first sight, *était emprisonné* as a narrative use of the IMP but as a state. This shows how cotext and context are vital in meaning construction.

^{xxii} 'Locate the main events of their narration from the reader's point of view'.

^{xxiii} Facques (2002 :172) suggests a different explanation : historic futures narrate the story from an omniscient narrator's point of view, which gives the narration an ineluctable dimension.

^{xxiv} This example in *pendant que* seems more obvious than the example of 'Imperfective Future' found in Comrie (1976 :69) : *Quand je chanterai, tu pleureras*.

^{xxv} With telic verbs, the form in the past would be a PQP rather than an IMP, as in (b) :

(e') Pierre avait terminé depuis 10 minutes quand Marie arriva.

^{xxvi} In a longitudinal study of written sport reports, Labeau (forthcoming b) notes an emergence of the FA since the mid-eighties.

^{xxvii} The PS seems also limited in political speeches. I am thankful to Chantal Gagnon for giving me access to the four Quebecois crisis speeches (dated 1942, 1970, 1980, 1995) she studies for a PhD in traductology. Only the oldest speech contains 3 occurrences of PS but the sample is obviously too small to allow drawing conclusions...

^{xxviii} Hence the disappearance of the PS in most language learning methods.

^{xxix} Labeau (2005) and other studies of language acquisition mention the natural tendency for native speakers to tell a past story in the present tense.

^{xxx} This may also account for the development of narrative IMP where the imperfective aspect of the form allows a more personal account, from within.