

Aspects of virtuality in the meaning of the French *imparfait**

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Abstract

Most traditional approaches to the French imparfait characterize this tense by combining notions of past reference, imperfective aspect, and/or anaphora. Typically, the imparfait may refer to a past situation, present this situation as unbounded, and, in narratives, as simultaneous to a situation previously reported in the passé simple. This article argues that a unified definition of the imparfait, taking into account all of its uses, cannot be based on these notions alone. It is proposed that the imparfait presents a situation as part of a mentally construed reality which does not coincide with the speaker's, and which is not to be considered as actual for that reason. In particular, it construes the viewpoint (ground) from which a designated situation is conceived as distinct from that of the speaker at the time of speaking. This shift of viewpoint in the meaning of the imparfait, away from the speech event, effectively sets up a virtual locus of viewing that is treated as a given or known reference point in the construction of an alternative conception of reality. This alternative, virtual reality may, but need not, correspond with the conception of an actual situation in the past, depending on contextual licensing. It is the virtual nature of the viewpoint — or, in other words, its modal (epistemic) import — that sets the use of the imparfait apart from that of other French simple tenses, and notably from that of the passé simple.

1. Introduction

Most traditional approaches to the French *imparfait* characterize this tense by combining notions of *past reference*, *imperfective aspect*, and/or *anaphora*. Their relevance is illustrated by the discourse in (1):

- (1) *Paul entra. Tout le monde **applaudissait**.*
'Paul came in. Everybody was applauding.'

In this example, the *imparfait* refers to a past situation and presents this situation without its starting point or endpoint (people already applauded before Paul came in and may have continued to do so afterwards) and as simultaneous to the one reported in the first sentence in the *passé simple*.

I will argue that a unified definition of the *imparfait*, taking into account all of its uses, cannot be based on these notions alone. Rather, the *imparfait* presents a situation as part of a mentally construed reality which does not coincide with the speaker's and which is not to be considered as *actual* for that reason. I will first present some arguments showing that traditional temporal or aspectual accounts of the *imparfait* as an imperfective past tense cannot as such explain all of its uses, including nontemporal (modal) ones. Next, I will advance an alternative definition based on previous work by Damourette and Pichon (1911–1936), Doiz-Bienzobas (1995, 2002), and Cutrer (1994), integrating their proposals in the framework of Langacker's Cognitive Grammar (CG). Using the notion of *virtual reality*¹ as proposed by Langacker, I will define the *imparfait* as signaling that a designated situation is presented as seen from a virtual ground, which does not include the speaker's here and now. This virtual ground functions as a viewpoint that is compatible, in certain contexts, with an impersonal, nonindividuated perspective on an equally virtual situation.

The first aim of the present analysis is to demonstrate the strengths of a nontemporal and cognitive approach to tense, and especially to tenses, like the French *imparfait*, which do not seem to be about temporal location alone, or in the first place. In particular, I propose a modal analysis, following the general claim in CG that clausal grounding predications, including tenses, schematically mark the epistemic status of a designated situation in relation to the speech event or ground. In this, the proposal departs from, and does not merely complement, previous attempts to unify the analysis of the *imparfait* solely on temporal-aspectual grounds. Notably, it goes beyond Vet's (1980) comprehensive account of the tense system in French, since the present analysis does *not* rely directly on temporal relations between a designated situation and the speech event and instead puts forward a shifted *plane* or conception of reality and an associated alternative point of reference as set up by the *imparfait*. This is the epistemic import which is argued to lie at the core of all of the meaning types that are associated with the use of the *imparfait*, and it thus constitutes the most schematic definition of this tense. The *imparfait*'s modal characteristic, in my view, follows directly from its particular temporal (past) and aspectual (imperfective) profile: an internal perspective imposed upon a nonpresent situation necessarily conjures up a

simultaneous viewpoint with a distinct epistemic quality, viz., *nonactuality*, even if the situation at issue is at the same time felt to be *real* (i.e., part of the speaker's model of reality). This important modal difference with the simple present in French (present + imperfective, and thus allowing an actual viewpoint) is not followed up on by most advocates of an account based strictly on time and aspect, while proponents of an exclusively modal account generally do not explain how the modal value of nonactuality (called virtuality here) derives from a specific combination of temporal and aspectual values (cf. Wilmet 1997: 385–386, where these two traditional approaches are indeed presented as unconnected). In the present analysis, it is the obligatory presence of a virtual reference point, together with the implication of its simultaneity with the designated situation, which effectively reflects the grammatical imperfectivity of the *imparfait* (i.e., its aspect). Finally, in this article I will also indicate the role of so-called space builders in building the shifted plane or space evoked by the *imparfait*, thereby suggesting that much work in interpreting the concrete (temporal or modal) values of this tense depends on pragmatic inferences on the basis of contextually provided information and is, as such, not to be attributed to the semantics of the *imparfait* proper.

Other nontemporal and cognitively oriented approaches to the *imparfait* do exist, of course. For one, much of the inspiration for any psychological account of the French tense system may be found in Damourette and Pichon's (1911–1936) early moves in this direction, and in Section 3.1 I will present a fuller picture of the affinities between theirs and a cognitive (CG) analysis. Furthermore, more recent suggestions by Janssen (1994, 2002) and particularly Le Goffic (1986) reinforce the plausibility of assuming that the analysis of at least certain tense forms, because of their close association with modal elements of meaning, could benefit from an abstract, less temporally oriented characterization of the semantics involved. I follow this line of thinking and propose that what is perceived as the prototypical meaning of the *imparfait*, viz., its reference to a past situation, derives from a combination of a schematic (modal) meaning with specifically temporal space builders present in, or to be inferred from, the surrounding context. That is to say that, even with reference to a past situation, I suggest that the *imparfait* triggers the construal of a coincident viewpoint that is not simply situated in the past but also, and crucially, mentally available or given at the time of speaking, if only virtually. I believe that the latter element specifically has not yet been sufficiently explored in the literature and thus represents the main theoretical contribution of this article to the analysis of the *imparfait*. In fact, I would submit that all forms, in any language, which can be described

rightfully as imperfective past tenses by definition evoke the conceptual architecture suggested here for the French *imparfait*, but obviously this lies beyond the scope of the present study.

It follows from this approach that the *imparfait* will be presented as a modal construction, whose many meanings instantiated in discourse share the configuration proposed in the analysis in Section 4.2 (specifically in Figure 6). Crucially, this is not to say that the *imparfait* is not regarded here as part of the French tense system, as I would maintain that it is one of the regular tense forms available in this language to refer to past situations — again, it prototypically has this past value in actual use. Only, it does not just refer to a situation in the past (i.e., it does a bit more than that) and, moreover, not all of its uses can be called temporal (these two features in contrast with the *passé simple*, which presents a past situation from a present and actual viewpoint). Both temporal and modal types are seen as meaning extensions in different domains, emerging in interaction with context. In the analysis, these extensions are all treated on a par (a-historically, so to speak), not favoring one of the temporal or modal uses attested as in some sense being more basic than the other, so that there is no real conflict between the relevant meanings in determining the *imparfait*'s semantic core: concrete usage types, in other words, are described here as being derived from a common schema, not from one another (though links between them can of course also be specified in the resulting network or “map”). That this core itself is modal in nature is in line with one of CG's main theoretical claims with respect to the semantics of tense, viz., that all tenses are ultimately to be characterized as epistemic predications which express the speaker's conception of a given situation's reality status. The bigger question, therefore, is not whether or not the *imparfait* has a modal semantics, but how tense forms on the whole may be analyzed in such modal terms.

2. The *imparfait*: Anaphoric or imperfective?

Since Kamp and Rohrer (1983: 253) it has been widely argued that the French *imparfait* is anaphoric, and that this property explains the difference between the *imparfait* and the *passé simple* or French preterit. The contrast between both tenses can be illustrated by comparing Examples (1) and (2):

- (2) *Paul entra. Tout le monde applaudit.*
 ‘Paul came in. Everybody applauded.’ (i.e., he came in *and then* they applauded)

Contrary to the *passé simple* in (2), the *imparfait* in (1) does not express temporal succession. Kamp and Rohrer (1983: 253) propose the following rule for constructing the discourse representation of a sentence in the *imparfait* such as in (1):

- (i) the sentence in the *imparfait* introduces a new discourse state *s*;
- (ii) this state *s* lies before the speech point;
- (iii) *s* contains the last event *e* (introduced by a sentence in the *passé simple*, an adverb of time, etc.).

Adopting Reichenbach's notion of reference point, Kamp and Rohrer (1983: 254) conclude that the French simple past moves the reference point forward, whereas "the imperfect sentence covers a period which includes the reference point" and thus expresses a relation of simultaneity. In other words, the simple past introduces a new reference point, whereas the *imparfait* can only be used when the context furnishes an already accessible reference point; for that reason, it is said to be anaphoric. This analysis of the *imparfait* is supported by a number of arguments, and some that have been most frequently advanced are listed in Berthonneau and Kleiber (1993: 57–60).

- As observed by Ducrot (1979: 7), a sentence like (3) cannot be used to start a story, if the context does not allow the hearer to find a definite past moment which identifies the specific temporal location of the situation expressed:

(3) ? *La France s'appelait la Gaule.*
'France was called Gaul.'

In this respect, Tasmowski-De Ryck (1985: 69) has remarked that in the beginning of a class, one could say *Donc, Messieurs Dames, la France s'appelait la Gaule* 'So, ladies and gentlemen, France was called Gaul', where *donc* 'so' is supposed to establish a relation with the previous class, which thus functions as a temporal antecedent.

- The absence of a past interval makes utterance (4a) pragmatically unacceptable, when produced out of the blue, contrary to (4b), in which the *passé composé*, the French present perfect, is used felicitously:

(4) a. ? *Jean mangeait de la choucroute.*
'John ate sauerkraut.'
b. *Jean a mangé de la choucroute.*
'John has eaten sauerkraut.'
(Berthonneau and Kleiber 1993: 57–60)

The *passé composé* can be used here because it signals that the designated situation is relevant to the time of speaking, which thus functions as the implied point of reference. The *imparfait*, on the other hand, cannot be used, because it does not furnish a reference point of its own (and, out of context, none can be accommodated, either).

- Finally, as pointed out by Tasmowski-De Ryck (1985: 69), a question which combines the *imparfait* with *quand* ‘when’, as in (5), seems rather strange when asked abruptly, since the moment that should serve as the antecedent or reference point is explicitly presented as unknown:

(5) ? *Quand Jean épousait-il Marie?*
 ‘When did John marry Mary?’

The exact nature of the anaphoric relation expressed by the *imparfait* has been the subject of a long-standing debate. It has been observed that the *imparfait* does not necessarily express simultaneity (Molendijk 1993), that the reference point is not really a point in time but rather an antecedent situation, and that the relation between the situation expressed by the sentence in the *imparfait* and the antecedent situation (sometimes expressed by a sentence in the *passé simple*) is not exclusively temporal: in addition, there must be a conceptual or coherence relation between the two situations (Berthonneau and Kleiber 1993, 1994, 1998; Irandoust 1998a, 1998b; Kleiber 1993; Molendijk and Vet 1995; Tasmowski-De Ryck and De Mulder 1999: 176–177). The latter idea is illustrated by the contrast between (6) and (7):

- (6) *Jean se mit en route dans sa nouvelle Mercedes. Il attrapa une contravention. Il **roulait** trop vite.*
 ‘John drove off in his new Mercedes. He was fined. He was driving too fast.’
 (Molendijk 1993: 174)
- (7) *Jean se mit en route dans sa nouvelle Mercedes. Il attrapa une contravention. * Il **roulait** avec plaisir.*
 ‘John drove off in his new Mercedes. He was fined. He enjoyed driving.’
 (Berthonneau and Kleiber 1993: 65)

However, such accounts of the *imparfait* as an essentially anaphoric expression with past-time reference can be criticized on at least two counts:

- i. As has been pointed out by several authors — most recently by Salkie (2000) — it is not clear whether the anaphoric theory offers a more adequate explanation of the facts than a traditional aspectual one. According

to the latter, the *imparfait* expresses imperfective aspect, whereas the *passé simple* expresses perfective aspect. In other words, the *imparfait* focuses on a subpart of a situation, ignoring its boundaries (Salkie 2000: 255), while the *passé simple* presents the situation as a whole, including its boundaries. Since the boundaries of the designated situation are not treated as relevant with the *imparfait*, this situation is presented as ongoing, as already initiated with respect to some reference point, and as potentially continuing for some time afterwards; thus, the aspectual analysis always implies the search for a reference point as well. Moreover, the aspectual analysis is needed anyway, for instance to explain the reinterpretation (or coercion) taking place in utterances such as (8), (9), and (10):

- (8) *Son arrivée surprenait Pierre.*
'His arrival surprised Peter.'
- (9) *Marie atteignait le sommet.*
'Mary reached the top.'
- (10) *Jean plantait un arbre.*
'John was planting a tree.'

Out of context, these utterances express bounded past events that are more canonically compatible with the perfective value of the *passé simple*. The use of the *imparfait* gives rise to special interpretations, as pointed out by Vet (1994: 9): the achievement in (8) is construed as referring to the state resulting from the process of transition directly expressed by the utterance, and the achievement in (9) as well as the accomplishment in (10) are construed as referring to the processes that take place before the transition directly expressed by the utterance. Now, of course, if one needs the aspectual analysis to account for such phenomena as these and if this aspectual analysis always implies the need to look for a reference point, then it is not clear why an independent analysis of the *imparfait* in terms of a past anaphoric value would also be needed. Berthonneau and Kleiber (1993: 69) retort that an aspectual analysis does not explain the contrast between (6) and (7), since it says nothing about the conceptual relationship between the situation expressed in the *imparfait* and the antecedent situation. The question is, however, whether the *imparfait* is even supposed to express this relationship to begin with. The idea that there should be a coherence relation between two subsequent units in a discourse seems to be a rather general requirement, which can be expressed in terms of Gricean maxims or relevance conditions as formulated, e.g., by Sperber and Wilson (1995). Thus, the unacceptability of (7) is strictly speaking not to be attributed to the semantics of the *imparfait*, as this discourse would be awkward regardless of which tense figured in the final clause.²

ii. Does this mean that an aspectual analysis can explain all uses of the *imparfait*? An answer to this is not self-evident if one takes into account those uses of the *imparfait* where it does not refer to a past situation. I list them following Vetters (2000):

a. The commercial *imparfait* (*imparfait commercial* or *forain*)

- (11) *Qu'est-ce qu'elle voulait, la petite dame?*
 'What did she want/like, the little lady?'
 (Berthonneau and Kleiber 1994: 60)

b. The *imparfait* of politeness (*imparfait de politesse*)

- (12) a. *Je voulais vous demander d'intercéder en ma faveur.*
 'I wanted to ask you to intervene on my behalf.'
 b. *Je venais vous prier d'intercéder en ma faveur.*
 'I came to ask you to intervene on my behalf.'
 (*Grammaire du français contemporain*, cited by Vetters 2000: 182)

c. The hypocoristic use (*imparfait hypocoristique*)

- (13) a. *Alors, on n'était pas sage? On avait faim?*
 'Well, haven't we been good? Were we hungry?' (meaning: aren't we ... / are we ...)
 (Arrivé et al. 1986, cited by Vetters 2000: 183)
 b. *Il faisait bon mon chien, auprès du feu?*
 'Was it nice, my doggy, near the fire?' (meaning: is it nice ...)
 (Wilmet 1997: 384)

d. The pretend-game *imparfait* (*imparfait pré ludique*)

- (14) *Moi, j'étais le gendarme et tu avais volé une voiture.*
 'Me, I was the cop, and you had stolen a car.'
 (Grevisse 1986: 1292)

e. The hypothetical *imparfait*

- (15) a. *Si par hasard il **venait**, vous lui diriez ...*
 'If by chance he came, you would tell him ...'
 (Simenon, *La fenêtre des Rouet*, cited by Touratier 1996: 136)
 b. *Si vos parents **vivaient** encore, ils vous feraient de grands reproches et ils auraient raison.*
 'If your parents were still alive, they would scold you and they would be right.'
 (Duhamel, *Cécile parmi nous*, cited by Touratier 1996: 137)

f. The *imparfait* expressing a desire or wish

- (16) *Ah, si j'avais une fortune!*
 'Oh, if I only had a fortune!
 (Arrivé et al. 1986, cited by Vetters 2000: 183)

In all of these uses, the *imparfait* does not refer to the past, but to objectively present (11)–(14), future (16), or possible or unreal situations (15). In this context, and in defense of an aspectual approach, it is useful to refer to Fleischman's (1995) observation that, since the *imparfait* does not give any information concerning the boundaries of a situation, it presents this situation as (epistemically) incomplete or open-ended. It could thus be interrupted before it reaches its end, as shown in the following example from Leeman-Bouix (1994: 149–150):

- (17) *Paul sortait tout juste quand Marie le retint pour lui dire que ...*
 'Paul was just leaving when Mary held him back to tell him that ...'

or in uses expressing thwarted imminence (*imminence contrecarrée*):

- (18) *Elle mit la main sur le loquet ... un pas de plus, elle était dans la rue.*
 — *Sergeant, cria-t-il, ne voyez-vous pas que cette drôlesse s'en va?*
 'She put her hand on the latch ... one step further, and she was out on the street.
 — Sergeant, he shouted, can't you see that this hussy is leaving?'
 (Hugo, cited by Vetters 2000: 182)

As the verb's imperfective aspect implies that the endpoint of a situation is not specified and can remain unrealized (Mellet 1988), this may explain why the *imparfait* is also used to indicate thwarted imminence (18) and unreal or potential situations (15).

This value of incompleteness associated with imperfective aspect can only be part of the explanation, though, since it is not, strictly speaking, a property of the *imparfait* as a tense marker. For one, the French *indicatif présent* is equally capable, in certain circumstances, of expressing the same idea of incompleteness and associated notions of potentiality, due to its imperfective aspect: from *En ce moment, il fait l'ascension du Cervain* 'at this moment, he's climbing Mount Cervain', one cannot conclude that the subject will have climbed the mountain, since any incident may intervene to suspend the subsequent full realization of this event, so that here the end of the climb may be said to be only potential.³ This implies that the crucial element in explaining (nonpast) uses of the *imparfait* is not incompleteness in itself. In Section 3, I will suggest that the situation is not

only presented as imperfective or ongoing, but that it is presented as ongoing in a world (a reality) which is not the speaker's actual one. Indeed, the recognition of the *imparfait*'s imperfective aspect is vital to this account, since any explanation — be it temporal, aspectual, or modal — is bound to consider the relation of simultaneity or inclusion between the designated situation and some conception of viewpoint as semantically relevant and consequential. But this focus on aspect alone does not reveal the nonactual or shifted nature of this viewpoint, i.e., its epistemic status. In what follows, I will say that the use of the *imparfait* triggers the construction of a mental space that is distinct from the base space of actual reality, *even when a real past situation is being referred to*. This is also the main difference between the *imparfait* and the *indicatif présent*, which evokes a viewpoint coinciding with the actual speaker's. The discursive alignment of actual and other mental spaces, each with its own typical epistemic qualities, is work that is done partly on the basis of indications supplied by tenses, among other forms, and about which an aspectual analysis has nothing to say in principle. It would be an interesting generalization to show that any nonpresent type of simultaneity with a designated situation of necessity calls for the construal of a virtual plane of representation (in the speaker's subjective present) including its own viewpoint, as I will argue for the *imparfait*. This virtual construction would then have to be considered independently from the epistemic (real or unreal) status of the designated situation itself. The French *imparfait* (in its temporal uses) and *passé simple*, for instance, do not so much differ in the assumption of a past reality attributed to a given situation, but rather in the construal of that situation in terms of its inclusion in the speaker's base space (i.e., as looked back upon from the ground; *passé simple*) or of its coincidence with a shifted, virtual viewpoint (*imparfait*).

Finally, contrary to what holds for the *passé simple*, the temporal feature of pastness also attributed to the *imparfait*, over and above its aspectual qualities, cannot provide the necessary basis for a unifying account either. It has been claimed generally, with respect to past tenses that lend themselves to nontemporal readings, that a metaphorical mechanism is responsible for this type of semantic extension. Such nonpast uses of past tenses are then called modal or modally remote pasts, and the underlying idea is that the use of a past tense in such contexts constitutes a metaphorical mapping from the temporal domain, resulting in a modal reinterpretation of the remoteness typically expressed by these forms. The same might conceivably be proposed for the analysis of the French *imparfait*, with its numerous nontemporal usage types. Nevertheless, such an account would be at once too coarse (e.g., to differentiate between non-

temporal uses of past tenses and of other markers that indicate temporal remoteness, like future tenses) and too vague to specify exactly which characteristics of the *imparfait*'s meaning configuration will be exploited in nontemporal contexts. Concretely, a metaphorical explanation could not motivate why, even in purely temporal contexts, the *imparfait* conjures up a virtual viewpoint from which to conceptualize a given situation as simultaneous (in contrast with the *passé simple*, which also marks temporal remoteness). Nor does it explain why that situation, despite its virtual construal, can still be considered to be part of the speaker's (past) reality, instead of, for instance, as an unreal projection, epistemically distal, from virtually given premises (as with a marker like the French *conditionnel*). In sum, the mere observation of a shift in domains, or a mapping, from the temporal to the nontemporal in certain usage types of the *imparfait* does not sufficiently motivate a metaphorical approach to the meaning of this tense form *in toto*. I will now proceed to present an analytical alternative, based on previous work on the psychology of time in grammar. I do not wish to argue, in contrast with some of the authors mentioned, that the *imparfait* is not a past tense, but I will retain the modal characterization that is, in my view, needed to provide a comprehensive account of this tense's meaning.

3. *Imparfait*, viewing, and mental spaces

3.1. *Damourette and Pichon's psychological theory*

In view of the nonpast uses of the *imparfait* listed above and of some additional ones,⁴ Damourette and Pichon (1911–1936: V, Section 1709, 177) conclude that the *imparfait* is not a real past tense at all. Its function is, rather, to locate the situation expressed by the verb in a reality other than that of the speaker at the time of speaking. Whereas speakers most naturally construe the world on the basis of their own “here-and-now” (*moi-ici-maintenant*), the *imparfait* signals that situations are presented from a point of view different from this here-and-now:

Ce qu'il faut retenir, parce que cela va être le caractère commun de tous les emplois du toncal pur, c'est que ce tiroir marque ici le placement du fait verbal dans une autre sphère d'action, une autre *actualité*, que celle où se trouve le locuteur au moment de la parole. La position naturelle et fondamentale de l'esprit, c'est de centrer le monde des phénomènes sur le locuteur se concevant lui-même dans l'instant présent: le “moi-ici-maintenant”. Ce mode d'aperceance des phénomènes constitue l'actualité noncale. Toutes les fois, au contraire, que l'esprit fait l'effort de se reporter dans un monde phénoménal autrement centré, on est dans

une actualité toncale, et il apparaît dans la phrase soit le saviez [imparfait], soit, selon les nuances nécessaires, le tiroir toncal approprié. [What we need to keep in mind, because it will be the common element of all the uses of the pure *toncal* [Damourette and Pichon's term for markers that are not present or *noncal*], is that this tense marks the location of the verbal fact in another sphere of action, another *actuality*, than the one where the speaker resides at the time of speaking. The natural and fundamental position of the mind is to center the phenomenal world around the speaker, who conceives of herself in the present moment: the "here-and-now". This mode of perceiving phenomena constitutes *noncal* actuality. In contrast, every time the mind makes an effort to transfer itself into a world of phenomena centered otherwise, one resides in *toncal* actuality, and either the *saviez* [imparfait] or another appropriate *toncal* tense is used.]⁵ (Damourette and Pichon 1911–1936: V, Section 1709, 177; emphasis in the original)

The notion that the *imparfait* presents situations as unfolding (*dans leur déroulement* 'in the train of events', Damourette and Pichon 1911–1936: V, Section 1730, 208) before a perceiving mind, though not the actual speaker's, allows the authors to address a problem frequently raised by their opponents (see, e.g., Gosselin 1999: 31–32): if the *imparfait* locates the situation in an actuality other than that of the speaker, then why would this other actuality, as presented in (19) for instance, need to be situated in the past, rather than in the future?

- (19) *Mardi, il pleuvait.*
'On Wednesday, it was raining.'

According to Gosselin (1999), this "default" interpretation of the *imparfait* shows that it is really a past tense. However, Damourette and Pichon suggest the following answer:

[L]e passé et l'avenir, au point de vue psychologique, ne sont nullement symétriques. Le passé a eu une vie. Il a laissé des traces. On peut par le souvenir se reporter à lui et en retrouver en quelque sorte la durée actuelle. Dans l'avenir, au contraire, un pareil transport n'est possible que par l'imagination. [The past and the future, from a psychological point of view, are by no means symmetrical. The past has had a life. It has left traces. One can transfer oneself to it through memory and recover, in a way, its actual duration. In the future, in contrast, such a transfer is possible only by means of the imagination.] (Damourette and Pichon 1911–1936: V, Section 1730, 206)

In other words, if the *imparfait* construes a designated situation as unfolding, that situation is presented as actually lived or experienced. This is compatible with the notions of present or past (both perceptually *given*, and together making up reality), because of the link with some sensorial substance or impression associated with them, but not with the future,

which is perceptually empty and thus epistemically indeterminate (*non-given*). According to Damourette and Pichon (1911–1936: V, Section 1703, 168–169), the (French) future tenses present a situation either as immediately developing from an existing situation in the present (*je vais faire*, involving a periphrastic ‘go’ future) or as projected from, i.e., non-simultaneous with, a viewpoint in the present and, thus, as a future counterpart of the *passé simple* (for the synthetic future tense). In this respect, Damourette and Pichon refer to the well-known phenomenological distinction between the present and the past on one hand, which can be represented as having been or being experienced, and the future on the other, which has yet to be experienced.

Damourette and Pichon (1911–1936: V, Section 1808, 347) interpret the semantic differences between the tenses in general as psychological in nature: when various tenses can be used in a language to designate the same objective situation, the semantic contrast between them must relate to the way in which that situation is construed or presented subjectively. Correspondingly, their psychological definition of the *imparfait* in particular allows them to explain straightforwardly some of the nonpast uses introduced in Section 2:

- In its hypocoristic use (13), the *imparfait* signals that the speaker does not fully endorse her own words and adopts another point of view, for instance, that of the children addressed in (13a) (Damourette and Pichon 1911–1936: V, Section 1746, 241). As pointed out by Le Goffic (1995: 145), following Guillaume (1974: 105), the speaker expresses what the children or animals concerned are supposed to have “thought” or “said” (to) themselves.
- In its hypothetical uses (15), the *imparfait* also presents situations as belonging to a reality other than the one the speaker is actually engaged in (Damourette and Pichon 1911–1936: V, Section 1743, 238). Whether this reality is interpreted as counterfactual or not will depend on the nature of the reference world in which the situation is included (and is thus a matter of context rather than of the meaning of the *imparfait*). Le Goffic (1995: 140) also observes that an utterance like (20) allows two interpretations, a counterfactual one, according to which the train has not in fact gone off the tracks, as well as a factual one:

(20) *Un instant plus tard, le train déraillait.*
 ‘A moment later (and) the train derailed.’

The fronted position of the temporal adverbial (*un instant plus tard*) signals that another world is constructed, while the use of the

imparfait has the effect of presenting the situation at issue as a fact in this world (Le Goffic 1995: 140); *le train déraillait plus tard* ‘the train later derailed’, without fronting, cannot have a fictive or counterfactual interpretation.

Damourette and Pichon’s analysis can also be applied to the other uses discussed above:

- In the pretend-game (14) and the thwarted-imminence (18) uses, just as in the hypothetical use, the *imparfait* may be held to signal that the situations expressed are not part of the speaker’s conception of what constitutes actual reality. The propositions involved are in some important sense validated (true) at the time of speaking, merely by uttering them, but only virtually so (i.e., only within the virtual reality evoked).
- The same goes for the commercial use (11), where a situation is explicitly presented from the point of view of the ‘little lady’. Even the *imparfait* of politeness indicates that situations are not part of a phenomenal world centered around the speaker’s here-and-now: sentences as in (12) can be seen as answering an implicit question on the part of the hearer concerning the speaker’s intentions. This is done indirectly, by describing what the speaker was doing when the hearer first perceived her presence. The speaker thus refers to a situation that does not directly belong to her own actuality at the time of speaking, since it is presented and interpreted from a point of view that is really the (past) hearer’s.⁶

The points made with respect to these last few usage types come close to a position defended by, among others, Bres (2003, 2004, 2005) vis-à-vis certain nonpast uses of the *imparfait* (see also De Mulder and Brisard 2006: 104, 109–111). Consider the following examples:

- (21) *Conversation téléphonique:*
Ami d’Éric — bonjour, est-ce que je peux parler à Éric?
Père d’Éric — attends, je vais voir, parce que je viens de rentrer et il
était sous la douche.
 ‘Telephone conversation:
 Eric’s friend — Hello, can I speak to Eric?
 Eric’s father — Wait, I’ll go see, because I just got back and he
 was in the shower.’
 (Barceló and Bres 2006: 47)
- (22) *Ton avion partait/?est parti à 16h30?*
 ‘Your plane left at 4:30 pm?’ (said when looking at the departure

board, after the hearer has remarked that his plane is supposed to leave at 4:30 pm)
(Barceló and Bres 2006: 54)

Barceló and Bres (2006) analyze these examples and others (e.g., the hypocoristic and hypothetical uses) in terms of an instruction [+past] which does not refer to the designated situation itself, but rather to an implicit point in time at which a description of that situation was or might have been uttered: not the fact of being in the shower in (21), but the point at which Eric was seen by his father to take a shower; and not the actual leaving of the plane (this is what the *passé composé* would suggest), but the hearer's previous utterance in (22). In such cases, it is maintained, the invariant feature [+past] of the *imparfait* continues to apply, viz., to a real, anterior act of perception or utterance, both entailing a past viewpoint. But what about hypotheticals, then, which are equally analyzed as presupposing an anterior utterance by another (fictive) speaker: the protasis, which serves as the basis for asserting the apodosis (Bres 2005: 27)? It would seem that such an anterior utterance need not have actually been produced, and thus that the feature [+past] (for a protasis in the *imparfait*) does not in fact refer to an actual past reality in all instances. Consequently, even in the examples discussed by Bres there is at least one usage type which would motivate a broadening of this feature to something coming close to the definition proposed here, requiring a viewpoint associated with a situation conceived as real *either* in the past *or* in some imaginative space. Otherwise, I fully endorse the important insight that many instances of the *imparfait* evoke an illocutionary source which is not the current speaker (it may be the same speaker in the past), and that this distance is responsible for possible pragmatic effects engendered by the lack of a direct epistemic commitment on the part of the speaker (a speech-act analysis). All of this would still be compatible with an analysis of the *imparfait* as a past tense, as Bres has it, be it that the simple temporal instruction [+past], effectively defining the viewpoint on a designated situation, needs to be decomposed into a more complex modal feature [+real in a nonactual space], or [virtually real], according to the present account. This account then has the empirical advantage of also explaining in a straightforward way modal uses of the *imparfait*, which are generally disregarded by Bres as not semantically relevant.

Damourette and Pichon's psychological observations certainly pave the way for a cognitive analysis of the *imparfait*. Next, I will first point out analogies with the analysis of the Spanish *pretérito imperfecto*, as presented by Doiz-Bienzobas (1995, 2002), before developing an alternative account based on Langacker's (1999) notion of virtual reality.

3.2. Cognitive Grammar and mental spaces

In CG, the verb category is treated as a fundamental and universal grammatical class (Langacker 1991, 2002b); in many languages, the inflected verb forms the head of a higher-order constituent, the finite clause. In the finite clause, a verbal process is related to the *ground*, that is, the (time of the) speech event, its participants, and its immediate circumstances. Tense morphemes are used to indicate at which point/interval in time the designated situation is to be located with respect to this ground.⁷ Thus, “PAST indicates the occurrence of a full instantiation of the profiled process prior to the time of speaking” (Langacker 1991: 250). In English, this implies that any lexically perfective (dynamic) or imperfective (stative) verb can take a simple past-tense ending (Figure 1a), in contrast with the paradigm of the present.⁸ For the English present tense (Figure 1b), there is a strong grammatical requirement that the profile of the verbal process coincide fully and exactly with the interval representing the time of speaking, excluding all perfective forms in contexts where reference is made to actual ongoing events (barring a number of special contexts, such as performative uses; Langacker 2001a: 21–30, 2001b: 263, 2003: 15–17). However, the latter condition is irrelevant for characterizing the past tense, for conceptual reasons: a past situation, when looked back upon from the present, is not immediately associated with the ground and thus not held to a direct correspondence/coincidence with the time of speaking. Its aspect or internal temporal profile, in other words, is not at issue in the context of past-time reference, contrary to what goes in the present. As a result, English imposes no *prima facie* restrictions on the type of verb, imperfective or perfective, that may take the past tense, and its schematic representation in Figure 1a is therefore neutral with respect to the profile’s boundedness.⁹ Incidentally, if the profiling of a “full instantiation” in the past invites the inference that the profiled process is completed and no longer ongoing in the present, as suggested in Figure 1a, this is an inference that can of course be canceled, as in *He worked hard in his life and still does*; nevertheless, the actual ref-

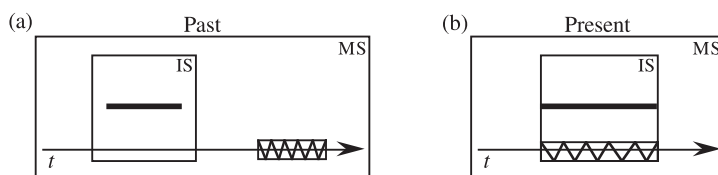


Figure 1. *The English (simple) past and present tense* (Langacker 2001b: 260)

erence in *he worked hard* is to such a full and past instantiation of “working hard” only, without taking into account any possible extensions of this profile.

This “naïve” account is worked out in CG to maintain the strongest possible claim, viz., that English past-tense morphemes always mean “past” in a very narrow sense (cf. Bres’ instruction [+past] discussed in the previous section). This does not imply that the English past tense cannot be used for conveying other, possibly nontemporal meanings, only that such meanings should be explained as cognitively motivated extensions of a basic temporal one, and more specifically that they too will involve some aspect of pastness or epistemic *nonimmediacy*, if not always at the level of the designated situation (the situation may, for instance, be objectively present, but presented with the typical properties of a past one; again, see the examples provided by Bres, among others).¹⁰ Tense predications define an objective scene or onstage region that confines the general locus of attention. The notion of onstage region refers to the structure of conceptualization events, which largely resembles that of the canonical viewing situation (Langacker 2000, 2002a). In this situation, the viewer has a maximal field of vision, which contains a locus of attention called the viewing frame (the inner rectangle in Figure 2). This frame in turn comprises in its focus the situation that is the target of perception. Within the scope of the conceptual onstage region that is defined by the tense predications in Figure 1, the tense profile itself is semantically schematic, indicating only that it is processual (i.e., that the tense combines with a verb). In the case of French, with two past tenses, a tense profile may further specify more detailed conditions on the nature of the verb it combines with. For instance, the *imparfait* (like the English past progressive) may be said to require lexically imperfective verbs or

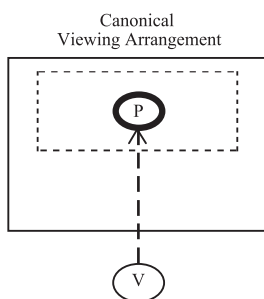


Figure 2. *The canonical viewing arrangement (P = Perceived entity, V = Viewer; Langacker 2002a: 16)*

imperfectivize perfective ones — cf. Vet (1994) and De Swart (1998) and the analysis of Examples (8), (9), and (10) above.

In order to propose an adequate analysis of the *imparfait*, I will supplement the CG account of tense predications with an account in terms of *mental spaces* as formulated by Doiz-Bienzobas (1995, 2002).¹¹ She analyzes the Spanish imperfect using Langacker's notions of viewing and viewpoint (as defined in relation to the canonical viewing situation), and argues that the *pretérito imperfecto* signals the transfer of a conceptual viewpoint (but not necessarily of the designated situation) to the past.

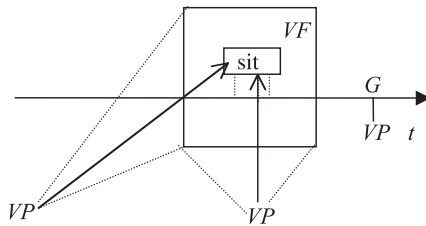


Figure 3. *The Spanish pretérito imperfecto* (Doiz-Bienzobas 2002: 306; G = Ground, VF = Viewing Frame, sit = situation, VP = Viewpoint)

Following Fauconnier's (1984) theory of mental spaces, Doiz-Bienzobas proposes that the use of the Spanish imperfect has the effect of signaling that the speech event no longer acts as the center of conceptualization — in Langacker's terms: the ground —, and thus that this center of conceptualization has shifted: “The role of the imperfect is to render accessible a space ‘M’ different from the speaker's reality space ‘R’ for the interpretation of the proposition it modifies.” (Doiz-Bienzobas 2002: 323)

This analysis of the Spanish imperfect can be compared with Damourette and Pichon's definition of the French *imparfait*, as signaling that situations must be located in a phenomenal world that is centered around a here-and-now different from the speaker's. Such a “center of apperception” (*apercevanche*, Damourette and Pichon 1911–1936: 177) corresponds to the viewpoint or locus of viewing featuring in the canonical viewing situation. This is suggested, among other things, by the fact that it can be identified with a concrete psychological substance, as in indirect discourse (Damourette and Pichon 1911–1936: 177):

- (23) *La vieille, interrogée par le brigadier, répondit qu'elle connaissait le Nacarro.*

‘The old woman, questioned by the sergeant, answered that she knew the Nacarro.’

(P. Mérimée, *Carmen*, I, p. 10)

But the center of apperception associated with the use of the *imparfait* can also be identified with a concrete protagonist in other types of discourse, such as free indirect speech or *discours indirect libre*, where this tense marks situations that are presented from the point of view of one of the characters in a narrative (cited and translated by Fleischman 1995: 531–532):

- (24) *Jamais Frédéric n'avait été plus loin du mariage. D'ailleurs, Mlle Roques lui semblait une petite personne assez ridicule. Quelle différence avec une femme comme Mme Dambreuse! Un bien autre avenir lui était réservé! Il en avait la certitude aujourd'hui.*

‘Frédéric’s thoughts had never been further from marriage.

Besides, Mlle Roques struck him as a somewhat ridiculous little thing. What a difference with a woman like Mme Dambreuse! A very different future was awaiting him! He was certain of that now.’

(Flaubert, *L'éducation sentimentale*, Pt. 3, Ch. 2, p. 350)

These examples suggest that the French *imparfait* signals that the designated situations are to be interpreted in a mental space different from the speaker’s immediate reality space. Yet whereas, according to Doiz-Bienzobas (1995: 53), the Spanish imperfect has the effect of shifting the viewpoint to the past, I submit that the French *imparfait* either shifts the viewpoint to the past, thereby virtualizing it (making viewpoint and situation virtually available at the time of speaking), or shifts it to another space than the actual one, also virtual (which may then be interpreted in context as hypothetical etc.). As such, this alternative space may or may not have the same reality status as that which is directly associated with the speaker, depending on whether or not the actually designated situation is taken as part of (the speaker’s model of) past reality. In any case, the use of the *imparfait* always implies a conceptual shift and, consequently, creates an epistemic distance, which explains why this form may express potentiality and unreality in conditional contexts. Note that the shift involved still presents a situation as real, if only virtually so. That is to say that, even in its hypothetical uses, the *imparfait* proper construes a situation (i.e., the protasis of a conditional) that is objectively potential or unreal as real within the hypothetical space set up by the conditional construction. The protasis then serves as the given (virtually available) premise for evaluating the likelihood of the apodosis, which itself does not take

the *imparfait* because the information contained in it cannot be construed as given or real, not even within that hypothetical space. This is why the *conditionnel* is used in an apodosis related to a protasis in the *imparfait*, expressing a projected hypothetical reality much like the *futur simple* expresses a projected future reality (i.e., unreal from the immediate viewpoint of the ground). The *imparfait*, in contrast, is so tightly linked to the expression of past rather than future situations, because, out of all conceivable nonpresent situations, only past ones have the reality status that is required by the semantics of this tense form.¹²

A mental-space analysis of hypothetical uses of the *imparfait*, as a prime example of one of its nontemporal meanings, can now be envisaged. *Imperfective*, as an aspectual category, defines a focus space N (a profile) that coincides with, or generates, the viewpoint (Cutrer 1994: 93). This viewpoint may coincide with the speech event, as in the case of the English present progressive, but when it is different from that of its parent space, R (for reality), it necessarily leads to the construction of an alternative mental space in which the viewpoint may be anchored. Context will help determine the exact epistemic status of this alternative, virtual space. It may be identified as (that is, made to correspond with) a portion of the past, including its own nonactual viewpoint, or it can just as readily be interpreted in terms of a hypothetical reality. Within that alternative space, then, the *imparfait* sets up the (shifted) ground for situating other (projected) situations. For instance, in conditionals such as (25), the protasis, containing an *imparfait* form, creates, i.e., establishes as locally given, the premises for evaluating the reality status of the apodosis (a *conditionnel*), which is assessed relative to the shifted ground and only indirectly to the original ground. Inside the hypothetical space, the protasis is presented as *known* vis-à-vis the new (in the sense of nongiven) conclusions that may be drawn from it:

- (25) *Si Boris venait demain, Olga serait heureuse.*
 ‘If Boris came tomorrow, Olga would be happy.’

The use of the *conditionnel* in hypothetical contexts is in fact almost entirely analogous, except for the interpretation assigned to the shifted space, to the use of that same form to indicate a future in the past, with a past viewpoint serving as the given basis (what is known at that time) on which a projection to an unknown reality is made. In both cases, the future element in the form of the *conditionnel* conveys the notion of a projection and hence nonreality, as with the *futur simple*, these two forms differing in the kind of basis they accept for this projection (an actually vs. virtually real viewpoint). If one wishes to construe a future situation as a given fact in the present (and thus choose to ignore its projected char-

acter), then the only option available in French is to select the present indicative form: *au troisième top, il est exactement neuf heures* ‘at the third pip, it’s exactly nine o’clock’ treats the predicted state as holding at the time of speaking (note the adverbial space builder defining the space in which this future state is a fact), while the same sentence with *sera* retains the suggestion of a present projection even if objectively speaking the probability of the anticipated state is the same (i.e., very high). According to Fauconnier (1984: 144), a sentence like (25) can be used if the givenness of the protasis is underdetermined, or if its negation has been established (counterfactual). However, it cannot be used if the validity of the proposition in the protasis has been established, or is known, in actual reality, because in that case the proposition is part of the speaker’s base space, the ground, and, accordingly, the present tense is required for the protasis and the future tense for the projected apodosis.

Generalizing these observations, the most important analytical point to note so far is that the other mental space set up by the *imparfait* is not presented from a viewpoint that is distal vis-à-vis this space. It is not, in other words, as if a present perspective is maintained on a distal/past situation, as with the *passé simple* (which does not require the construction of such an alternative space to begin with); rather, the past situation conjured up in this space comes with its own distal viewpoint, recreated in the speaker’s subjective present and engendering the special effect of vividness associated with the *imparfait* in past narratives. This idea of a coinciding distal viewpoint and situation corresponds roughly to Damourette and Pichon’s concept of actuality, i.e., the construal of events as “actually unfolding” in their “living duration” (which can occur in perceiving a present situation or in replaying a past one as if it were actually perceived). It explains why the *imparfait* is anaphoric in the sense mentioned in Section 1, because for a conceptualizer to be able to construe a (nonpresent) viewpoint that coincides with a designated situation, that viewpoint must be treated as a given reference point (and is, linguistically, provided by an antecedently specified point in time or inferable from context, exactly as with cases of nominal anaphora). It also follows from Doiz-Bienzobas’ cognitive definition that an imperfect(ive) past tense construes a situation as seen “from the inside”, and this internal point of view may in turn lead to a feeling of incompleteness associated with its use. Imperfective situations lacking boundaries are, moreover, mass-like¹³ and tend to be seen as background elements, contrary to clearly bounded events, which tend to appear in the discursive foreground (Leiss 1992: 120; Mitko 2000: 115, 120). As pointed out by Mitko (2000: 115), a scene-setting use of the *imparfait* creates certain expectations, precisely because the notion of backgrounding that is involved only makes sense

interactionally relative to a situation occurring in the foreground, such that (26), felt to be incomplete, typically elicits a reaction like (27):

- (26) *L'année dernière, je passais mes vacances en Suisse.*
 'Last year, I spent my holidays in Switzerland.'
 (27) *Et qu'est-ce qui s'est passé alors?*
 'And what (has) happened then?'

Finally, an analysis of the *imparfait* as indicating a transfer to another reality space, with its own internal viewpoint, still needs to address the (intuitively privileged) relationship of this tense with the expression of situations that have passed/are past from the viewpoint of the present, with which they do not coincide. Berthonneau and Kleiber (1994: 75) point out in this regard that, upon hearing a sentence such as *Paul était intelligent* 'Paul was intelligent', one will normally infer that Paul is no longer intelligent, unless one has good reasons to believe the contrary. This final qualification is quite revealing, though, since it shows that the *imparfait* marks past reference by default, so to speak: pragmatically, the *imparfait* signals reference to a completely past event unless there are indications to the contrary (e.g., as provided by nonpast space builders in the surrounding discourse). In a Gricean line of thinking, one could say that, *ceteris paribus*, the speaker's selection of a past-tense form only implicates that the designated situation no longer holds in the present (via the argument that she should have used a present-tense form if it did), but that, crucially, does not mean that this element is part of the semantics of such a past tense, not even if we accept that past reference constitutes its prototypical value. (Note that this reasoning does not hold for the French *passé simple*, which is a perfective tense and therefore semantically entails completion.) The latter (past reference as the *imparfait*'s prototype) is compatible with a proposal made by Langacker (1991: 250), who distinguishes between the schematic characterization of tenses — their abstract meaning — and more concrete values instantiating the schema. In this view, the prototypical value of a tense is a temporal one (past for the *imparfait*, with aspectual qualifications about how the viewpoint should be construed), but this value need not be its schematic meaning, which is best described by claiming, as before, that the *imparfait* locates the designated situation in a reality space other than that centered around the speaker's here-and-now. In other words, what a CG account of the *imparfait* can offer is a monosemous analysis at the semantic level, which prefers a schematic characterization of this tense's meaning in terms of mental-space construction work and, above all, an epistemic (i.e., modal) definition in terms of the virtual-reality status attributed to both viewpoint and designated situation. By the same token, the analysis can also

specify how different temporal and modal usage types (the *imparfait*'s attested polysemy in discourse) derive their meanings from contextual cues elaborating the tense's semantic schema, which is neutral as to the final interpretation attributed to the virtual reality. This is the level of pragmatic analysis. One of the central usage types, then, is the past-time use of the *imparfait*, which elaborates the schematic conception of a non-actual viewpoint coinciding with a real situation by specifying that the designated situation is referentially past and, consequently, that the viewpoint coupled with it must be past as well.

4. A CG account

4.1. *The imparfait as a grounding predication*

In Section 3, I developed an initial approach to the *imparfait* that combines elements of CG with the theory of mental spaces. In this part, I present an analysis that is wholly situated within CG. It is based on Langacker's (1999: 78) suggestion that Fauconnier's notion of mental spaces can be formulated in CG in terms of different planes informing our models of the world (cf. Figures 4 and 5 below). I first take up the starting point adopted in Section 3.2, namely, that tenses are grounding predications, whose function consists in relating a designated process to the ground. The resulting finite verb form does not profile (or designate) this grounding relationship itself, but a grounded instance of the verbal process type, typically a situation located in time (Langacker 2002a: 13–14). Consequently, all grounding predications are said to bear elements of subjective meaning in their semantics.

In this context, the terms *subjective* and *objective* pertain to the roles of *subject* and *object of conception*. An entity is said to be *objectively construed* to the extent that it is put "onstage" as an explicit, focused target of conception. Conversely, it is said to be *subjectively construed* to the extent that it remains implicit as an aspect of the conceptualizer or the conceptualizing activity; an entity construed with maximal subjectivity is wholly "offstage", having only a tacit presence at the locus of consciousness. (Langacker 2003: 3–4; emphases in the original)

Following these definitions, grounding predications construe the grounded process with a high degree of objectivity, while the ground itself and its relation to that process are construed with a high degree of subjectivity. If the ground is implicit and subjectively construed, it serves as the locus of viewing, or viewpoint, from which the speaker and hearer direct their attention to the profiled entity onstage (cf. the canonical viewing situation

in Figure 2 above). The specific nature of this viewing constitutes the grounding relationship, and this is what distinguishes one grounding predication from another. For a perfective past tense like the *passé simple*, for instance, it can be postulated that the speaker views a completed situation as preceding the time of speaking, i.e., that she looks back from the present upon an onstage situation that is wholly part of known reality yet not immediately coinciding with her own position. When a language also features an imperfective past tense, it may be expected that this alternative form will symbolize another semantic configuration to do what looks the same referentially speaking, i.e., locate a situation in the past.

We have seen that the *imparfait* presents the designated situation from an internal perspective, as if the process were actually occurring, in some reality space other than that defined by the speech event. For such a feeling of a nonimmediate reality to arise, the notion of a conceptualizer/experiencer, and thus of a (secondary) viewpoint, is called for. Since the mental processing involved (causing the reality of the experiencing) necessarily occurs at the time of speaking but pertains to virtuality, i.e., a different reality than the speaker's here-and-now, the conceptualizer at hand must also be different from the actual speaker — which is not the same as saying that speaker and virtual conceptualizer may not referentially correspond (e.g., when the speaker conjures up a past representation of herself). More generally, the perspective that is being set up by the *imparfait* represents a “weak” viewpoint (Cutrer 1994), in that it may but need not be identified with a concrete individual, onstage or offstage.

As the use of the *imparfait* is readily compatible with the construction of an impersonal, nonindividuated (past) perspective, this element of its meaning represents an extreme form of subjectification (in the CG sense) that seems to be characteristic of this tense.¹⁴ In fact, it is typical of highly subjectified expressions to feature a viewpoint that is dissipated and not always reducible to individual positions in space and time (Langacker 2000: 299). For tenses, this viewpoint, which figures as an implicit reference point for accessing the profiled process, should be interpreted as the abstract instance that reflects, or may be held accountable for, the epistemic evaluation of a proposition. The fact that it need not be identified with either the speaker or some other, possibly fictive, character onstage points to the highly subjective status of this viewpoint in the meaning of the *imparfait*, in any case more so than with standard uses of the *passé simple*. For this reason, we can expect uses of the *passé simple* to reflect almost exclusively the epistemic position of the speaker (or another prominent element from the ground). That is why it is possible to interpret the *imparfait* in the subclause in (28a), as well as the epistemic adverbial *sans doute* ‘probably’, as rendering the position of the main-clause subject,

whereas in (28b) the reality of the embedded proposition in the *passé simple* is implicitly accepted by the speaker and no other possible reading is available (Landeweerd and Vet 1996):

- (28) a. *Marie a dit que Claire **voulait** sans doute venir.*
 ‘Mary has said that Claire probably wanted to come.’
 b. *Marie savait qu’Einstein **fut** un grand savant.*
 ‘Mary knew that Einstein was a great scholar.’

It is noteworthy to find that the *imparfait* exhibits many usage types that are not, strictly speaking, referential or veridical, in that they do not designate a temporal object that may be identified in real time. This lack of an actual counterpart in reality to the virtual process profiled by the *imparfait* (say, a real past situation) reinforces the suggestion that the prime import of this tense form is a modal one. That is to say that identifying a process as past is not what primarily motivates its use (within the present-day tense system of French). Rather, and unlike the *passé simple*, the *imparfait* focuses on the conception of a situation that may or may not correspond with an actual one in known reality, but that is itself conceived of as being virtual. The recognition of that other reality, evoked as a specific kind of mental space, is left to pragmatic enrichment, with the help of grammatical prompts and space builders (cf. the analysis of Example [20]). This schematic characterization of the semantics of the *imparfait* is taken to be immanent in all the contextually informed readings that this meaning gives rise to. As a consequence, even in pure past-time uses we must account for the relevance of this schematic definition, and demonstrate how the past-time reference associated with the use of the *imparfait* follows from drawing a correspondence (or identity relation) between a real past situation and its associated viewpoint on one hand, and the virtual reenactment of that situation-cum-viewpoint at the time of speaking on the other. All of this is in line with the explicit aim of unification marking the present analysis.

4.2. *Virtual reality*

In order to show how the virtual elements in the meaning of the French *imparfait* can be represented in CG, I want to introduce Langacker’s (1999, 2001a, 2001b, 2003) analysis of the futurate use of the English present tense, which profiles a perfective process but where no reference to an actually ongoing event is made. This is discussed in terms of a conceptualizer’s mental ability to extrapolate information about future situations on the basis of her knowledge of past and present ones, and of the

structure of the world generally. Likewise, with reference to historical uses of the present tense (i.e., the narrative use of a present tense to recount situations from the past) we may postulate a conceptualizer's ability to relive real episodes from the past by taking recourse to some form of replay, thereby re-actualizing the contents of such past experiences by evoking them directly in the present (without a shift of ground being involved). In these cases a situation is marked as virtual, because for the conceptualizer the episode that is relived is distinct (of a different quality) from what goes on in actuality, even if it is felt as representing a real experience. For the French *passé simple*, the crucial difference with such historical uses of the present tense resides in the fact that there is no need to have the past situation at issue coincide with the present ground. With the *passé simple*, the viewpoint is identified with the current ground, but the designated process should be seen as separated from that ground (though still residing in the same actual plane), as coarsely depicted in Figure 1a. In short, there is nothing significantly virtual about a *passé simple*, neither in the viewpoint nor in the construal of the past situation.

The *imparfait* will combine elements of the historical present, evoking a feeling of vividness in the description of past situations, with properties of a simple past tense, yet its meaning cannot be reduced to either paradigm. It constitutes a third, imaginative way of conceptualizing past and, by extension, hypothetical and other situations that may be treated as locally real (i.e., saying something true about *a* reality) but nonactual. Now let us first examine how its meaning compares to the configuration involved in futurate uses of the English present tense, as in (29):

(29) *Their plane arrives at noon.*

As pointed out by Langacker (2001b: 267), the present tense can be used here because the event is part of a mental schedule that predicts its certain occurrence; this is suggested by the fact that the futurate use favors an explicit time adverbial (30), as well as by the oddness of a sentence such as (31), which refers to an event that cannot in principle be scheduled:

(30) ?? *Their plane arrives.*

(31) ?? *An earthquake strikes next week.*

Figure 4 sketches the evocation of a virtual script, as this notion is instrumental in explaining how a present tense comes to refer to a nonpresent situation. The figure presents one usage type of the English present tense and is thus an elaboration of the more schematic meaning of this tense — the schematic meaning being what remains if one suppresses all references to a virtual level of representation, as well as to situations projected into the future (cf. Figure 1b).

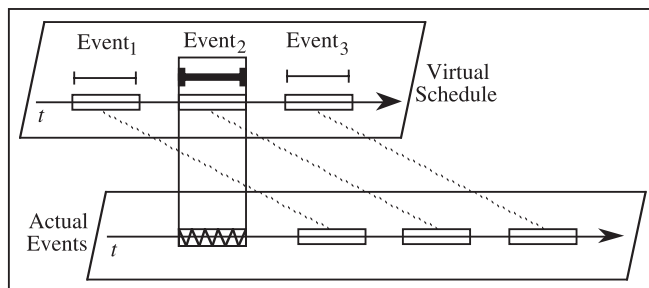


Figure 4. *The English futurate present tense* (Langacker 1999: 94, 2001a: 31, 2001b: 268, 2003: 22)

In the virtual script, which is a kind of schedule available to the speaker at the time of speaking, representations are included of anticipated actual events occurring in a certain order. The correspondence lines in the diagram indicate that each event thus conceived in virtuality has a counterpart in actuality (or at least that this is to be expected, given the normal course of events), and that the temporal organization of successive events is identical between both planes. What is profiled as the object of designation, however, is merely that one virtual event which fully coincides with (is mentally available at) the time of speaking, as required by the semantics of the present tense. The time it takes to conceive of that specific event is treated as coextensive with the time needed to produce its linguistic description, and it is this act of conception that counts as a *virtual occurrence* of the profiled event. While the virtual event naturally takes place in the subjective present, motivating the use of the present-tense form, the correspondence between this event and one projected to take place in a removed actuality motivates its futurate meaning.

Note that the English present tense has other nonpresent-time uses that are not captured by the diagram in Figure 4. For instance, general validity uses of this tense, comprising both generics and habituals as in (32) and (33), also implicitly refer to a virtual level of representation but do not construe this level as a specific script of successive situations (Langacker 2003: 17–21):

(32) *A kitten is born with blue eyes.* (generic)

(33) *John drinks a lot.* (habitual)

Instead, one virtual instance of a situation type is profiled, with this profile exhibiting a correspondence with such instances as actually remembered and anticipated by the speaker/conceptualizer. The profile is virtual and construed as epistemically given, and so referring to it at any

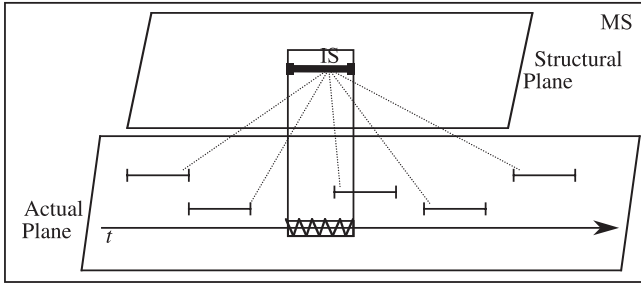


Figure 5. *The general-validity reading of the English present tense (Langacker 2003: 19)*

arbitrary point in time does in principle not depend on an actual instantiation at that very moment of the generic truth or habit to occur (moreover, it is also real in the sense of: part of known reality). The kind of virtual plane in which it is located should be seen as a model of the speaker's conception of what reality is necessarily, not actually, like and might accordingly be called structural. This model, like that of the actual world, is dynamic and will change in time through experience. The entire configuration is represented in Figure 5, which will be helpful in addressing habitual readings of the *imparfait* below.

If we now wish to adapt Figure 4 in order to capture the semantic properties of the *imparfait*, we first need to specify in which circumstances a referential correspondence between the profiled virtual situation and some actual counterpart (in the past) is considered relevant. It is obviously relevant with past-time uses of the *imparfait*, and to capture these uses the correspondence relation between the virtual and the actual plane in the diagram needs to be reoriented: from present to a past, remembered situation, instead of to a future, anticipated one. A second, more consequential change concerns the aspectual nature of the virtual process, which is by definition imperfective with the *imparfait*, and therefore represented without its boundaries in immediate scope. This entails, for one thing, that there are no immediate grammatical restrictions on the type of process that is profiled, whether it is lexically perfective or imperfective. If the process is perfective, the use of the *imparfait* will impose an imperfective construal — see the analysis of Examples (8), (9), and (10). And finally, the most important adaptation relates to the position of the viewpoint from which the profiled process is construed. If we retain the actual ground as the viewpoint, as in Figure 4, we still end up with a description of a present form referring to imperfectively construed situations (with their own internal viewpoint) in the past, which would be something of a semantic oddity. We have seen that with all uses of the *imparfait* the

viewpoint itself is also to be construed as virtual vis-à-vis the virtual profile. This feature correlates with the *imparfait*'s aspectual value and is in fact motivated by it: if imperfectivity calls for an internal viewpoint and none can be provided by the current ground (because the reference does not concern a present situation), then a shifted ground must be accommodated. The feeling of a nonimmediate reality evoked in the subjective present by the *imparfait*, and directly attributable to this aspectual setup between viewpoint and profile, is rendered diagrammatically by having (a duplicate of the past) profile and shifted ground coincide in the virtual plane. It is the condition that a simultaneous viewpoint has to be created for a nonactual situation that triggers the construction of a separate mental space or plane in the present, a virtual one, in which the relation between *its* internal ground and the target profile is worked out in the way described. In the other French past tense, the perfective *passé simple*, there is no such virtuality involved because it requires the conception of a retrospective instead of a simultaneous viewpoint, for which the current ground then will do.

The possibility (but not necessity) of having the profiled virtual process correspond to an actual situation in the past, whereby the latter is fully located within the speaker's base space of reality, should be explicitly acknowledged in the resulting diagram for the *imparfait*, given the prototype status of this particular interpretation, but the exact nature of this virtual space remains undecided on the basis of the tense semantics alone. Hypothetical and other nonprototypical/nontemporal interpretations are compatible with its meaning as pragmatic elaborations lacking the default status of the past reading. The shifted ground for viewing the process should be virtual as well, for only then can we speak of a virtual plane providing its own viewpoint. As observed above, this viewpoint is not always identifiable in terms of concrete (actual or fictive) individuals or groups: the shifted ground may represent an abstract epistemic viewpoint from which the reality of a proposition can be gauged. It may be linked with an actual participant in the original ground of the speech event (e.g., the speaker in the past), or with an objectively profiled participant in a narrative, but it need not be. Regardless of whether the shifted ground contains any material that it shares with the original ground, it remains conceptually linked to the actual speech event by virtue of its anchoring in speech/processing time, i.e., the shifted ground needs to be construed simultaneously with the real ground for it to have any claim to making available, at the time of speaking, representations that have a purely mental status and are not retrieved from actual perception.

The resulting diagram in Figure 6 combines a schematic characterization of the semantics of the *imparfait* with one of its more notable

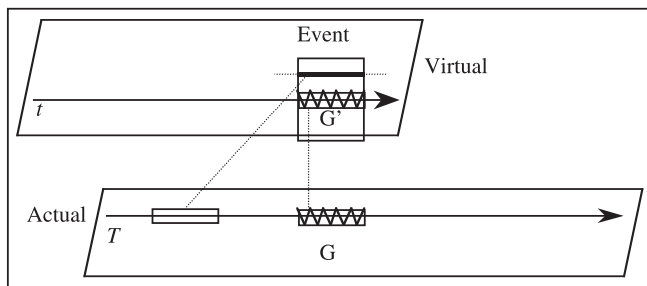


Figure 6. *The French imparfait*

properties in context, viz., the designation of past situations.¹⁵ This property is a direct consequence of the situation's epistemic assessment as real — or, in Cutrer (1994), as *fact* — within the virtual space. If the context allows this, the situation and its viewpoint will be interpreted as corresponding with a point in the past by default. Figure 6 differs from Doiz-Bienzobas' (2002) analysis of the Spanish *imperfecto* (cf. Figure 3), because it does not put the shifted viewpoint in a temporal relation with the ground, i.e., one of precedence. I agree with Doiz-Bienzobas that the essence of imperfective past tenses should be sought in their characterization of the viewpoint, instead of in the temporal location of the profiled situation, because this is what differentiates a perfective and an imperfective past tense. Thus, for the French *imparfait* the viewpoint itself does not necessarily stand in a relation of temporal precedence with the actual ground. It can also be completely virtual without any correspondence relation with a past situation, which would make it hypothetical etc. (creating its own reality), and hence bear no temporal relation to the current ground at all. In modal uses, in other words, time is irrelevant to the relation between the ground and the shifted viewpoint. Alternatively, the *imparfait* can be used to virtualize certain real elements from the current ground, that is, refer to a present situation in a *mitigated* way, as in contexts of politeness and pretend games etc. (Examples [11–14] above). In this respect, compare the present characterization of virtual reality and its function in the meaning of the *imparfait* with Sbisà's (2007) discussion of “aetioloated speech acts”, whereby the speaker is “pretending” or “doing as if” through concealing, suspending, shifting, or weakening/mitigating various aspects of a speech act, among which the relation of the speech act to its deictic origin — see also Fraser (1980) and Caffi (1999). Sbisà (2007: 471) herself explicitly indicates that the features involved are likely “to admit of fictional or virtual entities, which exist but, so to say, in weakened ways”. Notice that this descrip-

tion stresses the status of such entities as both virtual and real, as in the present analysis.

The anaphoric nature of the *imparfait*, in referring to the past, is explicitly represented in Figure 6 by virtue of the presence of a virtual ground, which serves as a reference point or antecedent to access the profiled situation. It must therefore be contextually given or inferable. This explains why the *imparfait* cannot generally be used unless a (discursively relevant) definite past moment is provided to anchor its temporal reference, as noted in Section 2 (Examples [3–7]). Tense forms that do not involve a virtual ground (but only the conception of a virtual situation, as with the present-tense uses mentioned above) do not have this problem, because there the current ground is always available as a reference point.

Finally, the habitual reading of the *imparfait* as featured in (34) is also covered by the diagram proposed in Figure 6, or at least by its more schematic version (i.e., *without* a correspondence line between the profile and an actual situation in the past):

- (34) *Paul allait à l'école à pied.*
 'Paul used to go/went to school on foot.'
 (Kleiber 1987: 103)

This *imparfait d'habitude* is explicitly to be distinguished from uses of the *passé simple*, which never refers to past habits. The *imparfait* can, of course, because it does not have to refer to one particular actual situation (in the past). Instead, it builds on the conception of a virtual situation, which in the case of habituals is then located in a structural plane, as with the general-validity uses of the English present tense (cf. Figure 5). The profiled situation, with its coincident virtual viewpoint, is understood as projecting to (corresponding with) indefinitely many actual occurrences of the same situation type, yet holding in a bounded portion of the actual past. It is the virtual nature of the ground that ensures this *past* habitual reading, for if the ground were not virtual but actual, then we would be dealing with an unqualified and unbounded general-validity statement, i.e., with a virtual present-tense construal as in Figure 5.

5. Conclusion

The French *imparfait* has been analyzed as marking a kind of virtual reality. In particular, it construes the viewpoint (ground) from which a designated situation, real or fictive, is conceived as departing from that of the actual speaker. This shift of viewpoint away from the actual speech event is what sets the use of the *imparfait* apart from that of other French

simple tenses, and notably from that of the *passé simple*. Although it presents situations as wholly cut off from the present — in contrast with the *passé composé* —, the *passé simple* suggests a viewpoint that still coincides with the speech event, and with the corresponding (temporal, epistemic) positions of the speaker.

It is necessary now to show in greater detail how this analysis explains the various uses of the *imparfait* in discourse. Moreover, as a marker of virtuality, the *imparfait* seems on a par with other French tense and/or mood markers, such as the *conditionnel* (sometimes called future in the past) and the subjunctive. It seems useful to analyze the meanings of those markers as well and thereby specify how they differ from that of the *imparfait*. This would then amount to setting up a typology of different virtualities that may be distinguished in the (French) verb system, whereby the link with actual situations in reality is progressively weakened, until the notion of time itself, which still plays in certain favored uses of the *imparfait* and *conditionnel*, becomes altogether irrelevant, as the subjunctive mood seems to suggest. In each of these case, moreover, one would expect a different epistemic interpretation of the virtual space or plane that is evoked (as with the use of various modal verbs), with the status of reality reserved for the *imparfait* as discussed here, and others (“projection” and “nonreality”, respectively) assigned to the remaining forms.

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Notes

* The research for this paper was carried out in the context of the ‘Grammaticalization and (Inter)Subjectivity’ project (Belgian Federal Government — Interuniversity Attraction Poles P6/44). This article results from a collaboration with Walter De Mulder on the subject, which started around 2003 and led to a number of joint presentations at various conferences. The first version was written in 2004, after which numerous and substantial revisions have been made. The central ideas of the analysis presented here are also reported in De Mulder and Brisard (2006), which offers a synthesis of the present account and focuses on the *imparfait*’s nontemporal uses. Correspondence address: Dept. of Linguistics, University of Antwerp, Prinsstraat 13, 2000 Antwerp, Belgium. E-mail: frank.brisard@ua.ac.be.

1. A virtual object is one that is not actually and objectively instantiated (perceived) in reality at the time of speaking. It is conjured up mentally by the speaker (hence, abstract and subjective), often, but not exclusively, for the purpose of describing a significant aspect of reality. Virtual thus does not contrast with real (only with actual), since many expressions evoking virtual objects are meant by the speaker as true statements about a past, present, or projected reality. Any kind of generalization, for instance, in-

cluding of course generic utterance types, involves virtual entities which individually may stand for an indefinite number of actual instantiations that do not happen to be available at the time of speaking (Langacker 1999). Whether a virtual object corresponds to one in reality or is part of a nonreal (hypothetical, fictive, etc.) space is what determines this object's epistemic status. The more specific notion of a virtual reality as it is used here, finally, is expressly not identified with what is merely potential (the future or things that could have happened), which is virtual by definition but not real, nor with the simulated worlds created in AI research, even though virtuality is crucially seen as the product of a creative intelligence which relies on the capacity of simulating past experiences. A virtual reality is construed by the speaker as a representation sanctioned as real by that same speaker, but one that is not seen (again, by the speaker) as currently instantiated in actuality. Concretely, past realities, given premises in hypotheticals, and fictive truths all qualify as virtually real according to this definition.

2. For a detailed analysis of Berthonneau and Kleiber's arguments, see Salkie (2000: 256–259), who ascribes the requirement that successive units in a discourse have a relevant connection to “independent pragmatic considerations”. For a recent defense of the idea that the *imparfait* is an anaphoric tense, see also Kleiber (2003).
3. I thank one of the anonymous reviewers for bringing this to my attention. See also Dowty's (1979) “imperfective paradox” in this regard. Berthonneau and Kleiber (1994: 72) point out that, for the same reason, imperfective aspect and the associated notion of incompleteness cannot explain the politeness uses of the *imparfait*: if one replaces the *imparfait* in (12a) or (12b) by a present-tense form, which also expresses imperfective aspect, the resulting questions, *Je veux vous demander d'intercéder en ma faveur* / *Je viens vous demander d'intercéder en ma faveur*, are no longer polite.
4. Damourette and Pichon start their discussion from such uses of the *imparfait* in indirect speech as the following:

(i) *Vous avez dit que j'étais là?*

‘Did you say that I was here?’

(Courteline, *Coco, Coco et Toto*, “M. Félix”, cited by Damourette and Pichon 1911–1936: V, Section 1709, 176)

They point out that the speaker in this example addresses his maid when he is still at home, with Mr. Félix, the visitor to whom the maid has been talking, still waiting in the next room. Interestingly, they also show that, in certain instances of indirect discourse, the *imparfait* refers to future situations and can even be accompanied by the deictic adverb *demain* ‘tomorrow’, as in:

(ii) *Qu'est-ce qu'elle a dit qu'on mangeait demain, Jeanne?*

‘What did Jeanne say that we would eat tomorrow?’

(“M. P”, 23 September 1929, cited by Damourette and Pichon 1911–1936: V, Section 1709, 176)

Even though the action of eating is situated in the future, the speaker explicitly inquires about what is on the menu through the past indications given by Jeanne. The *imparfait* thus refers to a future situation that is construed from a point of view which is not the actual (present) speaker's.

5. Following Damourette and Pichon, several authors have defended the same idea that the *imparfait* expresses nonactuality rather than past reference; see e.g., Cornu (1953), Coseriu (1976, 1980), Herslund (1987), Le Goffic (1986, 1995), and Touratier (1996, 1998).

6. This interpretation is inspired by a short passage from Berthonneau and Kleiber (1994: 82–83), who present another analysis based on their own anaphoric definition of the *imparfait*.
7. The relationship between the designated situation and the ground is not always, nor primarily, assumed to be of a purely temporal nature in CG. Indeed, Langacker (1991: 242–243) proposes two cognitive models for analyzing the clausal grounding systems in a language. One is the *basic epistemic model*, which defines the conceptualizer's representation of reality at any given instant. The concepts of reality, known and unknown, and irreality constitute regions and subregions within this model that all have distinct epistemic properties. The other is the *timeline model*, incorporating the notion of time as the axis along which reality evolves, as well as the notion of the ground (i.e., that region which is defined by an actual speech event) as the moving center of what is called *immediate reality*. The timeline model also offers a canonical division of time into three basic realms: present (the ground), past, and future. Bearing in mind that tenses, including past ones, do not invariably indicate the temporal realm corresponding to their nomenclatures, the epistemic and the timeline model combined offer the possibility of an integrated analysis of tense meaning that posits distinctly modal concerns at a schematic level of characterization (covering all usage types for a tense form), and temporal ones at the prototypical level.
8. I will use the terms perfective and imperfective for both lexical and grammatical aspect. In CG, imperfectivity is defined as a property of states that are unbounded within the immediate scope of predication *and* whose component states are presented as identical (conceptual homogeneity). Perfectivity relates to events that are bounded *and* internally heterogeneous, involving a change of state. Since the speaker construes a situation as (im)perfective in function of communicative needs, calling a process one or the other in defining a verb's lexical profile (or predicate type) boils down to identifying that verb's expected grammatical behavior, which can always be deviated from in specific circumstances and with specific constructions, including aspect and tense markers, imposing higher-order construals of (im)perfectivity. The very test for making out lexical aspect in English, for one, involves a grammatical criterion, viz., a verb's behavior in the present-tense paradigm: does it take the simple or the progressive form in referring to an actual processual instance going on right now? Many verbs also have a more flexible aspectual profile depending on which argument types they combine with (think of posture verbs like *lie*, for example). All in all, the basic claim in CG, and in the present paper, is that the tense system of languages like English and French may be described on the basis of such binary oppositions as perfectivity/imperfectivity, seen as an element of the meaning of grammatical constructions, in combination with a number of conceptual features that are entailed by these categories, such as the necessary availability of a coinciding viewpoint in mentally representing grounded imperfective situations (regardless of their temporal location). Other classic concepts like telicity/atelicity or Vendler's fourfold distinction between kinds of Aktionsart only figure in the present discussion insofar as they are subsumed by the more general contrast between imperfectivity and perfectivity. Note, finally, that I make no claims here with regard to lexical aspect types in French and tests for discovering them, since I assume that, as with the English past tense, the *imparfait* does not impose any relevant restrictions on the verb types that it may be used with.
9. This figure represents the conceptualization of a situation. MS refers to the maximal scope of conceptualization, the full array of content invoked to conjure up the meaning of an expression; IS refers to the more specific knowledge necessary to construe that

meaning. The heavy line represents the designated process, which is presented as neutral with respect to its bounded or unbounded status. It constitutes the profiled element of the conceptualization, that is, the one that attracts most attention. Importantly, observe that the figure suggests that it is only the grounded element, and not the grounding relation, that is profiled (the box with squiggly lines represents the ground or speech event).

10. In my view, any strictly temporal definition of a tense marker is of necessity to be complemented by an epistemic component, in line with CG's schematic characterization of the grounding system as "purely one of modality" (Langacker 1991: 244). Tense marking gives information about the (perceived or constructed) status in reality of a situation, on top of its temporal specifications: its actuality or virtuality, and within actuality (always implying a present viewpoint), its (non)immediacy with respect to that viewpoint. (Nonindicative moods and modals place the situation outside of the speaker's conception of reality.) It is in fact possible to see the temporal information conveyed by tense markers as inferentially derived from more basic modal categories, but this is a theoretical matter that will not be pursued.
11. For more details on Doiz-Bienzobas' analysis, see also De Mulder and Vettters (2002) and De Mulder (2003).
12. If it were proposed that the *imparfait* merely expresses virtuality/nonactuality, it would be difficult to explain why this tense is only used to refer to past and not to future time, which is as nonactual as the past. But the *imparfait* expresses a nonactual *reality* (that is mentally available right now), thereby excluding futurate readings. Consequently, even strong contextual information cannot in principle produce such a futurate reading with an *imparfait* form. A sentence like *La semaine prochaine, je partais pour New York* 'Next week I went off to New York' does indeed seem quite infelicitous under all conceivable circumstances (even in free indirect speech), and is perhaps strictly ungrammatical.
13. Mass nouns and imperfective verb forms share a number of crucial semantic features, such as their internal homogeneity, i.e., the notion that no further relevant structure can be distinguished inside the mass or imperfective state (cf. Note 8). As a result of this internal homogeneity, both categories also share the feature of contractibility, or the idea that any subpart can be treated as representative of the mass or state in its entirety (e.g., any arbitrary collection of water, no matter how small, is still water; and any arbitrary subinterval of a particular state of knowing still counts as the same knowing).
14. What typically happens in the shift from more objective to more subjective elements of meaning (as in many cases of grammaticization) can be described as a conceptual realignment of what CG refers to as a process's "locus of potency". With lexical verbs, this locus of potency is canonically identified with the objectively featured subject, which is the origin of a "physical or mental force that, when unleashed, tends to bring about an occurrence of that process" (Langacker 1991: 270). With grammatical predications, as with tense markers like the *imparfait*, the potency concerned "is no longer anchored by an objective participant (the subject), but rather by a reference point construed more subjectively (the default case being [the ground] itself)" (Langacker 1991: 270). In addition, this potency is conceived more abstractly as reflecting the general evolution of the world, so that "[i]mpetus toward realization of the designated process is not provided by any specific force, but rather by the generalized force consisting in the fact that the world has a certain structure and reality is unfolding in a particular way" (Langacker 1991: 273). The viewpoint referred to in the present analysis of the *imparfait* is a special instance of the same notion of locus of potency, in that it

establishes the mental space from which a designated situation is conceptualized, together with the relation to the actual ground of the virtual reality the situation and viewpoint find themselves in.

15. In this respect, the present discussion diverges, e.g., from Cutrer's (1994) mental-space analysis of the *imparfait* in that it does not assume a grammatical category 'past', whose meaning is spelled out exclusively in terms of temporal anteriority/precedence. Again, the past-time reading is seen here as a pragmatic elaboration and not a semantic primitive for this tense.

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