

Labelle, Marie. 2003. « Events, states & the French Imparfait ». Pérez-Leroux, A.M. and Yves Roberge (eds.). *Romance Linguistics : Theory and Acquisition*. 165-180. Amsterdam : John Benjamins.

EVENTS, STATES AND THE FRENCH IMPARFAIT

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1. **Introduction**

This paper addresses the following question: How can we account for sequences of verbs in the imparfait (IMP), where the events are understood as following one another, as in examples (1a) and (2a)?

- (1) Habitual sequence of events :
 - a. *Tous les jours, Paul allait à la piscine, nageait vingt longueurs, se rhabillait et allait travailler.*
“Every day, Paul went-IMP to the pool, swam-IMP twenty laps, dressed-IMP, and went-IMP to work.”
 - b. Every day, $e1 < e2 < e3 < e4$.

- (2) Narrative sequence of events :
 - a. *Le lendemain, Jean donnait sa démission et partait pour Paris.*
“The next day, John handed-IMP his resignation and left-IMP for Paris.”
 - b. The next day, $e1 < e2$.

As schematized in (1b), (1a) states that every day within an implicit period of time, Paul performed a sequence of four actions, in the order mentioned. The use of the imparfait in (2a) is sometimes referred to as “imparfait narratif”. As shown in (2b) the sentence is interpreted as saying that the next day, John first handed his resignation and then left for Paris. This latter use of the imparfait raises a subsidiary question which will also be discussed : What is the semantic difference between (2a) and the corresponding sentence in the passé simple (PS) in (3)? Both (2a) and (3) receive the same English translation, in the simple past.

- (3) *Le lendemain, Jean donna sa démission et partit pour Paris.*
“The next day, John handed-PS his resignation and left-PS for Paris.”

The main point of the paper concerns narrative sequences of events. Examples in the habitual (e.g. (1)) are discussed from this point of view, but the semantics of habituais will not be discussed in detail.

The paper is structured as follows. In the next section, I provide background information on the interpretation of events and states in a narrative discourse. Then, I explain the problems that (1a) and (2a) pose for current accounts of the imparfait, and, in section 5, I propose to treat the imparfait as introducing a predication on a temporal referent of discourse.

2. *Background information on events and states*

This section briefly summarizes relevant aspects of the interpretation of events and states in a narrative discourse (for more extensive discussions, cf. Kamp & Reyle 1993, Lascarides & Asher 1993). The examples of this section are in the future tense in order to avoid the confusing factor of the imparfait/passé simple distinction in the past.

2.1 *Events*

When an event (e) is introduced in a narrative discourse, it is interpreted as included in the reference time of the clause in which it appears. In (4a), the event of entering the kitchen is interpreted as occurring within the moment denoted by three o'clock (4b). Thus, sentence (4c) is odd because an event of building a house normally takes longer than a moment.

- (4) a. *À 3 heures, Paul entrera dans la cuisine.*
 "At 3 o'clock, Paul will enter (into) the kitchen."
 b. $e \subseteq 3 \text{ o'clock}$.
 c. *#À 3 heures, Paul construira une maison.*
 "At 3 o'clock, Paul will build a house."

Also, in a narrative discourse, events bring the narrative forward : verbs denoting events are interpreted sequentially, as shown in (5).

- (5) a. *Pedro entrera dans la cuisine. Il s'assoira sur une chaise.*
 "Pedro will enter (into) the kitchen. He will sit on a chair."
 b. $e_1 < e_2$.

Other rhetorical relations may lead to interpretations where two events are not interpreted sequentially, e.g. a causal relation ("Tom fell ; Peter hit him") or an elaboration relation ("They prepared the party. Tom bought the beer ;

Peter took care of the invitations”). However, the sequential interpretation may be considered the default interpretation in a narrative discourse, and this is the interpretation in which we are interested in this paper.

2.2 States

Sentences denoting states (s) contrast with sentences denoting events on the two properties mentioned in 2.1. First, they are interpreted as including the reference time (instead of being included in it) as shown in (6a), where the state of Nicole being available may extend over an interval of time longer than the moment denoted by 3 o'clock.

- (6) a. *À 3 heures, Nicole sera disponible.*
 “At 3 o'clock, Nicole will be available.”
 b. 3 o'clock \subseteq s.

Second, states do not bring the narrative forward. A sequence of verbs denoting states describes simultaneous or overlapping eventualities. Thus, (7a) is interpreted as saying that the state of hanging from the ceiling overlaps with the state of smelling good.

- (7) a. *Le jambon pendra du plafond et il sentira bon.*
 “The ham will hang from the ceiling and it will smell good.”
 b. s1 O s2. (O = overlap)

Also, when a state follows an event in a narrative, the event functions as reference time for the state and is interpreted as included in the state (8).

- (8) a. *Nicole entrera dans la cuisine. Elle sentira bon.*
 “Nicole will enter (into) the kitchen. She will smell good.”
 b. e \subseteq s.

Again, other rhetorical relations may lead to interpretations where two states are not interpreted as simultaneous, but the simultaneous interpretation may be considered the default interpretation in a narrative discourse. To summarize this section, in a narrative, the default interpretation for events is



that their update the reference time, and are interpreted sequentially; states don't.

3. *Problems with previous accounts of the French imparfait*

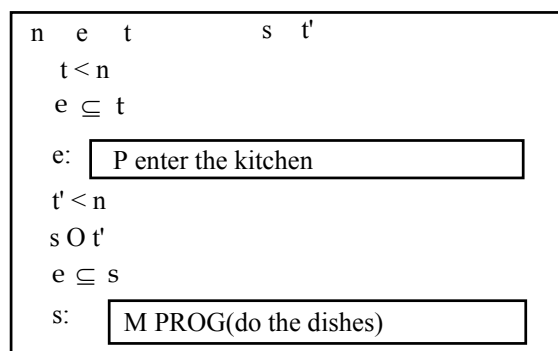
We now turn to the problem posed by (1a) and (2a) for two influential accounts of the French imparfait.

3.1 *Kamp 1981*

Most traditional accounts of the imparfait treat it as some kind of progressive marker (Curat 1991, Martin 1971, Molendijk 1983, Nef 1986, Vet 1980, Vet 1994). For some, the imparfait denotes an interval open at both ends; for others, the situation in the imparfait is claimed to cover the time of reference, so that the beginning and the end of the event are out of view. In each case, a similar account exists for the progressive. Reinterpreting these ideas within the framework of Discourse Representation Theory, Kamp (1981) proposed that the imparfait introduces a state in a discourse representation structure (DRS). Smith (1991) developed this idea further, and Kamp and Reyle (1993) extended it to the English Progressive. Since states cover their time of reference, the required temporal interpretation follows. For example, Kamp (1981:48) analyzes the second sentence of the fragment of discourse in (9) as a discursive state specified as temporally including the discursive event introduced in the discourse by the first sentence. This is illustrated in the partial DRS (10) using Kamp & Reyle 1993's notation (t is a temporal referent of discourse; n stands for 'now', the speech time; e stands for 'event'; s stands for 'state').

- (9) *Pedro entra dans la cuisine. Marie faisait la vaisselle.* (= Kamp 1981)
 Pedro entered-PS into the kitchen. Marie was doing-IMP the dishes.

(10)



In this account, the imparfait functions as an aspectual operator combining with an eventuality of any aspectual type (i.e. a state or an event) and always

yielding a state. When it combines with an event (activity, achievement, accomplishment), the imparfait yields the (progressive) state of the event being in progress.

The problem with the account illustrated in (10) is that it predicts that (1a) and (2a) should be interpreted respectively as in (11a) and (11b).

- (11) a. Every day, s1 O s2 O s3 O s4.
b. The next day, s1 O s2.

The event descriptions in the imparfait would denote states, and a sequence of states is interpreted as denoting overlapping situations. But (1a) and (2a) are interpreted respectively as in (1b) and (2b), as not as in (11).

3.2 Swart 1998 and Swart & Molendijk 1999

In two recent papers, Swart (1998 ; Swart & Molendijk 1999) proposes a refinement on Kamp's idea. She first observes that the imparfait and the progressive are different kinds of morphemes. The imparfait combines with a larger class of predicates than the progressive, namely, it combines most naturally with (all) states. The imparfait also leads to a wider range of interpretations, for example, a habitual interpretation. Finally, languages like Spanish and Portuguese have an imparfait as well as a progressive morpheme and the two can be combined on the same verb, an observation initially made by Comrie (1976:23-32).

Swart adopts the theory of tense and aspect proposed by Kamp and Reyle (1993) according to which the structure of a clause is as in (12), with tense markers having scope over aspect markers, which have scope over eventuality descriptions (the Kleene star stands for zero, one or more operations).

- (12) [Tense [Aspect* [eventuality description]]]

Eventuality descriptions denote sets of eventualities. Aspectual operators map sets of eventualities onto sets of eventualities of a possibly different type. Tense operators introduce closure over this set of eventualities and locate the eventuality in time.

Swart proposes that while the progressive is an aspectual operator, the imparfait isn't. In her account, the French Imparfait is an aspectually sensitive tense operator. It is a past tense operator in that it introduces the condition $t < n$ in the discourse. It is an aspectually sensitive operator in that it combines only with states (Swart & Molendijk 1999); or, homogeneous eventualities, i.e.



states & processes in Swart 1998. The passé simple is analyzed as combining only with (bounded) events.

The proposal is that an event must first be coerced into a state by a coercion operator in order for it to conform to the aspectual requirement of the imparfait. Thus, while in (13) the English progressive (prog) is an aspect morpheme, combining with a past auxiliary, the French imparfait in (14) encodes past tense, and there is an implicit coercion operator (C_{es}) taking the event of Jeanne writing a letter as argument and yielding (in one interpretation) the progressive state of the same event being in progress.

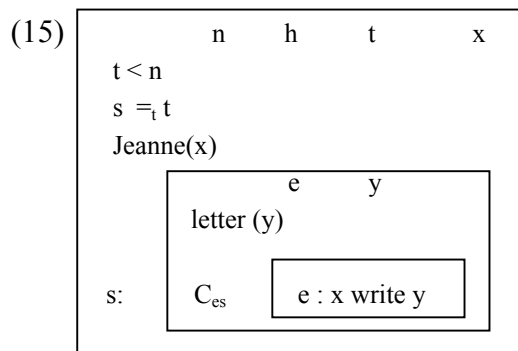
(13) English Progressive:

- a. Jeanne was writing a letter.
- b. $[_{state} PAST [_{state} PROG [_{event} Jeanne \text{ write a letter}]]]$

(14) French Imparfait:

- a. *Jeanne écrivait une lettre.*
- b. $[_{state} PAST [_{state} C_{es}(PROG) [_{event} Jeanne \text{ write a letter}]]]$
IMP

The value taken by the coercion operator is pragmatic, context-dependent. The result of applying C_{es} may be a progressive (PROG) or a habitual (HAB) state for example. The DRS corresponding to (14) is illustrated in (15), from Swart & Molendijk 1999:23 ($s =_t t$ indicates that the state is coextensive with its location time, a condition similar to but stricter than $s O t$).



While very interesting, this proposal doesn't account for (1a) and (2a). Given that events are coerced into states in order to combine with the imparfait, clauses in the imparfait denote states in this account, and the

eventualities in (1a) and in (2a) should be interpreted as overlapping, contrary to fact.



The aspectual nature of clauses in the imparfait

The two accounts discussed assume that sentences in the imparfait denote states. In this section, it is shown that this is not always the case. In particular, a bounded event in the imparfait may retain a bounded event interpretation.

In many run-of-the-mill contexts, a sentence in the imparfait is interpreted as denoting an eventuality included in the reference time. One such example is (16), a typical history-book sentence. This sentence is not interpreted as in (17a), with the time of reference included in some progressive state of Columbus discovering America, but as in (17b), where the event of Columbus discovering America is properly included in the year 1492.

(16) *En 1492, Christophe Colomb découvrait l'Amérique.*
 “In 1492, Columbus discovered-IMP America.”

(17) a. $1492 \subseteq [\text{state Columbus discover America}]$
 b. $[\text{event Columbus discover America}] \subseteq 1492.$

Another context is provided by (18) (Ducrot 1979:9), quoting a newspaper article. Again, the interval of time denoted by hier ‘yesterday’ properly includes the events mentioned. The sentence is true if the first bank was vandalized between 11:00 and 11:30 A.M. and the second one between 1:30 and 2:00 P.M.

(18) *Les iraniens s'en prennent maintenant aux intérêts américains. Hier, deux banques américaines étaient saccagées.*
 “The Iranians are now attacking American interests. Yesterday, two American banks were ransacked-IMP.”

Similarly the imparfait narratif in (19) asserts the end of the event, as shown by the fact that it cannot be followed by a sentence saying that he called his wife to his bedside (20a) because the first clause implies the death of the father. By contrast, the progressive yields the state of being in the preparatory phase of dying and the continuation is possible (20b).

(19) *Trois jours plus tard, son père mourait.*
 “Three days later, his father died-IMP.”

- (20) a. *Trois jours plus tard, son père mourait. #Il appela sa femme à son chevet et lui demanda de prendre soin de ses fils.*
 b. “Three days later, his father was dying. He called his wife to his bedside and told her to take good care of his sons.”

Another indication that, in the above examples, the events are interpreted as bounded is the fact that the imparfait could be replaced by the passé simple (a perfective tense) without changing the situation to which it applies truthfully (an observation made by Guenther, Hoepelman & Rohrer 1978:33 and Tasmowski-De Ryjck 1985 for the imparfait narratif).

Moreover, the imparfait may appear with an adverb modifying events, like suddenly, as shown in (21) and in (22).

- (21) *Un an plus tard, l'ancien président réapparaissait soudainement, sans donner d'explications (pour sa disparition).*
 “A year later, the former president reappeared-IMP suddenly, without giving any explanation (for his disappearance).”
- (22) *Les choses se passaient toujours de la même façon. Lorsqu'on commençait à manger, Jeanne se mettait soudainement à tousser.*
 “The events happened-IMP always in the same order. When we started-IMP to eat, Jeanne suddenly started-IMP to cough.”


Consider first (21), featuring an imparfait narratif. It is interpreted as in (23a), where the event of the president reappearing suddenly is included in the interval denoted by the temporal adverbial. The interpretation predicted by Swart's account, illustrated in (23b), would require the event of reappearing suddenly to be coerced into some kind of progressive or habitual state covering the interval of time denoted by the adverbial ‘a year later’. This is clearly not the appropriate interpretation. Similarly, (22) is interpreted as in (24a), and not as in (24b).

- (23) a. [_s IMP [_e president reappear suddenly]] \subseteq a year later
 b. not: a year later \subseteq [_s IMP [_s C_{es}? [_e president reappear suddenly]]]
- (24) a. [_s HAB... [_{e1} IMP [_{e1} we start to eat] [_{e2} IMP [_{e2} suddenly J. start to cough]]]
 b. not: [_{s1} IMP [_{s1} C_{es/HAB} [_{e1} we start to eat]] [_{s2} IMP [_s C_{es/HAB} [_{e2} suddenly [_{e2} J. start to cough]]]]]

The conclusion is that the French imparfait may introduce in the discourse events interpreted as bounded and as included in the interval of reference. This shows that the imparfait is not an aspectual operator yielding a state when applied to events, nor is it an aspectually sensitive tense operator combining only with states and requiring events to be coerced into states in order to combine with it.

5. *Predication on a temporal referent of discourse*

In this section I propose that the imparfait introduces a predication on a temporal discourse referent (see also Labelle 2002).

 Time-denoting adverbs like at three o'clock or on Sunday introduce a temporal referent in the discourse and add a condition on it, as illustrated in (25) for on Sunday :

(25)

t
Sunday(t)

A temporal referent of discourse may be the subject of a predication. The worst day of my life in (26a) is a property of the time denoted by Sunday (26b).


- (26) a. Sunday was the worst day of my life.
b.


t
Sunday(t)
worst-day-of-my-life(t)

I propose that the structure of a clause in the Imparfait is as in (27). The imparfait selects an eventuality description (ϵ) as internal argument and a past temporal referent of discourse t as external argument.


(27) [t [IMP [ϵ]]]

The imparfait establishes a relation of predication between ϵ and t : ϵ is a characteristic function on the time denoted by t (an idea already present in Ducrot 1979). Thus, a sentence in the imparfait is true if ϵ is a member of the set of eventualities characteristic of t . More specifically, the proposal is that IMP carries the following instructions :

- (28) a. Introduce a temporal referent of discourse t in the discourse model, with the condition $t < n$.
- b. Pick an accessible temporal discourse referent t' and add the condition $t = t'$.
- If there is a time-denoting sentence adverb α in the clause, introducing the condition $\alpha(t')$, t' is the most accessible temporal discourse referent.
 - If there is no time-denoting sentence adverb in the clause, pick as t' the reference point in the narrative (typically the time of the last event mentioned).
-  [If no appropriate temporal referent is available, posit one by accommodation.]
- c. Create a substructure γ in the discourse containing ε the eventuality description of the clause in the imparfait.
- d. Add on t condition γ .

 Notice (28) refers to time-denoting sentence (IP) adverbs, which c-command the tense; a VP adverb is part of the eventuality description and it cannot provide an appropriate time of reference for the imparfait.

These instructions are illustrated in (29) to (34). Consider first (29). It has the structure in (30), where the sentence adverb *à trois heures* ‘at three o’clock’ is the temporal referent of discourse being predicated upon. This sentence gives rise to the DRS in (31), interpreted as saying that the event of Tom leaving the office is an element of the set of eventualities characterizing the time referent ‘three o’clock’.



- (29) *À trois heures, Tom **quittait** le bureau.*
 “At three o’clock, Tom left-IMP the office.”

(30) [3 o’clock [_{event} IMP [_{event} Tom leave the office]]]

(31)

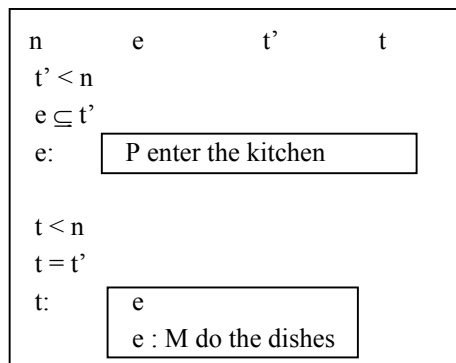
n	t'	t
$3 \text{ o'clock}(t')$		
$t < n$		
$t = t'$		
$t :$	e	
$e : \text{Tom leave the office}$		

In (32), the temporal referent of discourse for the imparfait is the time introduced by the event of the first sentence. The sentence in the imparfait has the structure in (33) where t functions like a pronominal finding its referent in the previous discourse. In DRT, pronouns introduce a discourse referent and equate it with some accessible discourse referent (the antecedent) (Kamp & Reyle:70-71). This is what happens here in the temporal domain, as illustrated in the partial DRS (34). The event of entering the kitchen, in the passé simple, introduces in the discourse a past temporal referent t' , which functions as antecedent for t .

(32) Pedro entra dans la cuisine. Marie **faisait** la vaisselle. (=Kamp 1981)
Pedro entered-PS the kitchen. Mary was doing-IMP the dishes.

(33) [t [IMP [Mary do the dishes]]]

(34)



In this proposal, a clause in the imparfait doesn't move the story line forward not because it denotes a state, but because it provides a condition on a temporal referent of discourse. As such, its contribution to the discourse is purely descriptive.

6. *The interpretation in context of a clause in the imparfait*

The imparfait gives rise to various interpretations in context: progressive, habitual, bounded event. In this section, I propose that these interpretations result from the predicative character of the imparfait, each particular interpretation being triggered by the context of use of the imparfait.

If a clause in the imparfait denotes a property of a specific interval of time, it is natural to conclude that the interval is completely affected by this property

(a holistic effect also found with adjectives). This is why states are most natural with the imparfait: states cover the time of reference. When an event is converted into its progressive state, it similarly covers the time of reference. In (35), for example, the event of reading War and Peace is converted into the progressive state of being engaged in the reading activity, a progressive state which can truthfully apply to the moment ‘3 o’clock’.

- (35) *À trois heures, Tom lisait Guerre et Paix.*
 “At three o’clock, Tom read-IMP War and Peace.” (= ‘was reading’)

This is the only coherent interpretation when, as in (35), the event described covers an interval of time larger than that denoted by the time of reference. Because French has no progressive operator, the transition from event to progressive state is free (Moens 1987). This transition is triggered by the context ; we can view it as the introduction of an implicit coercion operator having a progressive value, this operator being introduced in context in order to be able to interpret the eventuality in the imparfait as a property of the time-denoting adverb :

- (36) [At three o’clock, [_{state} C_(PROG) [_{event} IMP [_{event} Tom read War and Peace]]]]

This account is distinct from Swart’s in two respects. First, the order of application of the imparfait and the coercion operator differs. Swart’s coercion operators apply to the event description in order to allow it to meet with the selectional restrictions of the imparfait. In (36), the coercion operator applies to the clause in the imparfait in order to allow it to yield a coherent interpretation when combined with the time-denoting adverb. Also, the coercion operator in (36) is a discursive, pragmatic operator; it is not, as in Swart, a grammatical aspectual operator, the covert equivalent of the English Progressive.

In (37), illustrating a habitual interpretation, the event described (Tom_leave_the_office) covers a much smaller interval than the time denoted by the sentence adverbial (last_month); moreover, the VP adverb locates the eventuality at three o’clock. For the eventuality of Tom leaving the office at three o’clock to be interpreted as characterizing the interval of one month, the only coherent interpretation is that the event is recurrent, habitual, as in (38).

- (37) *Le mois dernier, Tom quittait le bureau à trois heures.*
 “Last month, Tom left the office at three o’clock.”

- (38) [Last month [_{state} C_(HAB) [_{event} IMP [_{event} Tom leave the office at three o'clock]]]]

The bounded event interpretation illustrated in (39) raises the following question: How can a single (non recurring) event occupying a small portion of an interval be used to predicate a property of that interval?

- (39) *Le lendemain, Tom partait pour Paris.*
 “The next day, Tom left-IMP for Paris.”

The answer lies in Kleiber’s Principle of integrated metonymy stating that certain characteristics of certain parts may characterize the whole (Kleiber 1994:154-155). Kleiber illustrates this principle with the following example, which may be uttered if a glass of water has been spilled on the floor and only a small portion of the floor is wet.

- (40) *Le carrelage est mouillé.*
 “The tile-flooring is wet.”

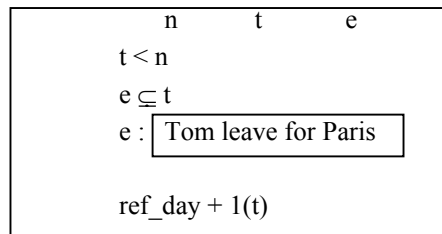
Extended to the imparfait, this principle predicts that in some discursive contexts an event occupying part of an interval may characterize the whole interval, provided that it is viewed as sufficiently important to do so. This, I propose, is the case with (39).

This brings us to the second question asked at the beginning of this paper : what is the difference between a sentence in the imparfait narratif like (39) and the corresponding sentence in the passé simple (41)? Recall that both sentences would be translated in English with a simple past.

- (41) *Le lendemain, Tom partit pour Paris.*
 “The next day, Tom left-PS for Paris.”

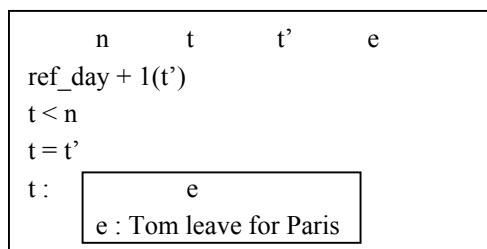
In the present framework, the difference is the following. The passé simple introduces a past eventuality in the main discourse and the adverb is a modifier locating the event in time. Thus, as schematized in (42), (41) asserts the existence of a past event of leaving by Tom, this event being located the next day (expressed here for simplicity as ‘ref_day + 1’).

(42) Le lendemain, Tom partit pour Paris.(PS)



By contrast, the imparfait introduces the eventuality into a substructure adding a condition on an existing temporal referent, as shown in (43). It states that the interval of time denoted by the adverb has been characterized by some memorable event, namely that Tom left for Paris.

(43) Le lendemain, Tom partait pour Paris. (IMP)



This explains why the imparfait narratif is typically found in novels to mark the end of an episode : it allows the writer to present the time of reference as a turning point in the life of the protagonists. In (43) the next day is to be remembered as the day that Tom left for Paris.

Sentences (16) and (18), repeated below, while not playing the same discursive function, are explained similarly. (16) presents the discovery of America as the event characterizing the year 1492, the event by which that year is to be remembered; (18), presenting yesterday as characterized by acts of vandalism, creates a contrast between yesterday and previous days when no such acts occurred, and supports the argument that the American interests are now being attacked.

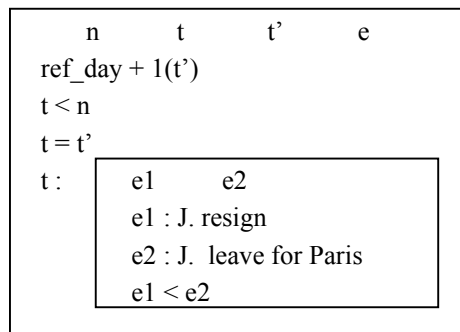
(16) *En 1492, Christophe Colomb **découvrait** l'Amérique.*
 "In 1492, Columbus discovered-IMP America."

- (18) *Les iraniens s'en prennent maintenant aux intérêts américains. Hier, deux banques américaines **étaient** saccagées.*
 “The Iranians are now attacking American interests. Yesterday, two american banks were ransacked-IMP.”

7. *Sequence of events in the imparfait*

We are now in a position to provide an answer to the initial question : how is it that (1a) and (2a) denote sequential events? I propose that the events are introduced as a list within the subordinate discourse structure created by the imparfait, as illustrated in (44) for (2a).

- (44) *Le lendemain, Jean **donnait** sa démission et **partait** pour Paris. (=2a)*
 “The next day, John resigned-IMP and left-IMP for Paris.”




Within the substructure, the events are interpreted sequentially following the narrative rhetorical rule discussed in section 2. This sequence of events does not affect the narrative line in the main discourse because the role of the substructure within the main structure is to add a condition on a temporal referent, in this case, a complex condition. This DRS also illustrates the fact that the narrative rhetorical rule follows from the aspectual nature of the eventualities, and is not a consequence of the use of a particular tense.

8. *Conclusion*

To summarize, I have shown that sentences in the imparfait may denote bounded events and that such bounded events give rise to a sequential, narrative, interpretation. I have proposed that this follows if eventualities in the imparfait are introduced in a subordinate discourse structure interpreted as characterizing a temporal discourse referent. The sequential interpretation follows from the narrative rhetorical rule applying within the substructure.

Because this sequence of events is embedded in a subordinate structure, the sentence as a whole doesn't function as a narrative clause, and it doesn't move the story line forward.

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