Towards a cross-linguistic, compositional semantics of the

recent past

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Time in Translation

The *recent past*

- Morphologically, the *recent past* (*passé récent*) in French is:
  VENIR (in present tense) + de + INFINITIVE, e.g.:

  - Je *viens*   *de voir*   Marie.
    I   come.PRES-1SG   DE see.INF   Mary.
    "I have just seen Mary." (e.g. Havu (2005), Bres&Labeau (2015))

- Found in most Romance languages

  - Spanish *pasado receinte* with "acabar", e.g.:

  - Acabo   de ver   a   María.
    finish.PRES-1SG   DE see.INF   A   Mary.
    "I have just seen Mary."

  - Also in Catalan, Portuguese, though not Italian

The *recent past* in translation

- Typically translated in Germanic languages with a Perfect + Just

- Interestingly, this category of the Perfect is glossed over in most literature

Main questions

- Does the *recent past* **always** translate to PERFECT + JUST?

- What are the **semantics** of the *recent past*?

- How does this fit into a **compositional** semantics of the PERFECT?

The *recent past* in translation – data

- Dataset: Europarl parallel corpus, december 2000

- Algorithm to extract French and Spanish *recent pasts*

- Mark translations in English, German and Dutch

- Assign tenses (PERFECT, PAST, PRESENT) to translations

The *recent past* in translation – counts

From French,
75 *passé récents*

	ES	DE	EN	NL
pasado receinte	45	-	-	-
Perfect	19	41	43	38
Past	3	11	19	7
Present	-	-	2	2
NA	8	23	11	28

From Spanish,
54 *pasado receintes*

	FR	DE	EN	NL
passé récent	45	-	-	-
Perfect	4	33	37	33
Past	3	7	10	5
Present	2	2	2	3
NA	3	12	5	13

The *recent past* in translation – takeaways

- French is more liberal with the construction than Spanish
  - But: Spanish construction a bit more present-like:
  - "**Acabo de salir** de una reunión" ➔ "Je **viens** à l'instant d'une réunion"
- The PERFECT is not always used for translation
  - e.g. "comme je **viens de dire**" ➔ "as I just **said**"
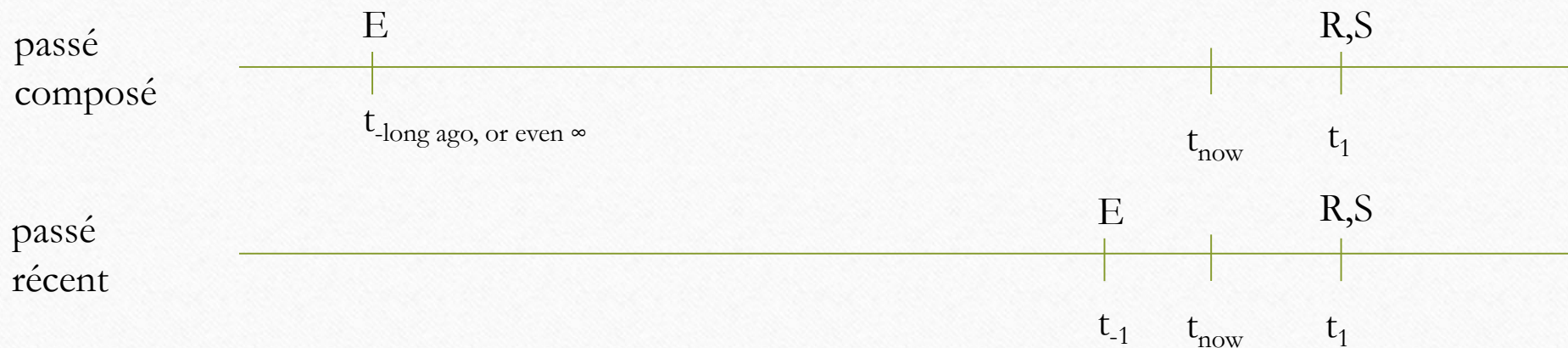
The *recent past* in translation – takeaways

- For more distant temporal occurrences (e.g. last meeting), French allows *recent past*, Spanish goes to PERFECT, English to PAST, German and Dutch to PERFECT.

  - … comme le Sommet de Nice **vient de** nous en **donner** ➜
    … as the Nice Summit so graphically **demonstrated**

  - … des droits fondamentaux que nous **venons de proclamer** à Nice ➜
    … fundamental rights , which we **proclaimed** in Nice

- While English "just" is used in almost all translations, German and Dutch use various other adverbs

  - e.g. "soeben", "jetzt" in German, "net", "kortgeleden" in Dutch

Reichenbachian analysis

- Bres & Labeau (2015): *recent past* is immediate anteriority marker

- In Reichenbachian terms, E<R,S (E imm. anterior to R, sim. with S)

  - So a constraint on the time between event and reference/speech time

passé composé

E   R,S

$t_{-long\ ago,\ or\ even\ \infty}$ t_{now} t_1

passé récent

E   R,S

t_{-1} t_{now} t_1

Reichenbachian analysis – evidence

- Data from Bres&Labeau (2015) and Havu (2005) confirm this analysis: *recent past* not used in sitations where the *passé composé* is possible

- *Recent past* not allowed with past time adverbials
    - Je viens   de   voir   Marie   (* hier   soir   à   18.00)
      I   come.Pres-1sg De   see.Inf Mary   (* yesterday evening at   18.00)
      "I have just seen Mary (* yesterday evening at 18.00)."
    - But it can be used with "depuis longtemps" ("since long"), though marginally

Reichenbachian analysis – evidence

- Recent past not allowed in negation

  - Pierre est là?   - * Oui,   il   ne   vient   pas   de   sortir.
    Pete   is   there? - * Yes,   he   Neg   come.Pres-3sg   Neg   De   leave.Inf.
    "Is Pete there? - * Yes, he hasn't just left."

- Recent past does not appear with stative verbs (so: no continuative reading), only for transitions (note the English *become*)

  - Jean   vient   d'être   père.
    John   come.Pres-3sg   De-be.Inf   dad.
    "John has just become dad".

And now…

- So Bres&Labeau's analysis seems warranted, but how can we arrive at that **compositionally** for the Perfect in Germanic languages?

- We will have to take a closer look at the Just-forms for this

Compositional semantics

- Lee (1991): "specificatory *just* used for cases that are precisely specified (bounded) at one extreme, but imprecisely specified at the other. "just" then focuses on the marginal phase of this period, immediately proceeding the moment of utterance."

  - *I've just finished the book* ➔ "have finished the book" is bound by "just"

  - *It happened just before midnight* ➔ "before midnight" is bound by "just"

Compositional semantics

- However, "just" has other uses:
  - depreciatory: *I was* **just** *going to talk about my husband.*
  - empathic: *He is* **just** *amazing.*
  - restrictive: *I* **just** *notice it at night.*
- Lee (1991) questions whether the specificatory (temporal) reading of "just" can be used for these cases as well.

Compositional semantics

- Schaden&Tovena (2009): "gerade" is a focus particle

  - Gerade rote autos werden oft   gestohlen.
    Just   red   cars   become often   stolen.
    "Precisely red cars are often stolen."

- Analysis with background/foreground DRT:

x
car(x)
X(x)
get_often_stolen(x)

x
car(x)
red(x)
get_often_stolen(x)

Compositional semantics

- We can use this analysis for the temporal reading of "gerade" as well: e.g. "John has just arrived" (compare Nishiyama & Koenig (2004))

x, n, ev', e
named(John, x)
X(ev')
arrive(x, e)

x, n, ev, ev', e	
named(John, x)	
$ev' \leq ev$	
Q(s)	[pragm. state]
t(ev') < t	[relative tense]
t(s) o r	[aspect]
arrive(x, e)	[VP]

Compositional semantics

- Depending on the language, the bound on *ev'* must be close (English) or can be further away in the past (German, Dutch)

  - This is also where there is competition between the perfect/recent past in Spanish

- A similar analysis can be done for the cases with "just before midnight"

  - Although it's not directly clear how this can help for the other forms.

Further work

- Repeat the multilingual analysis, starting from the English Perfect + "just" construction.

- Investigate the Spanish examples that went into the Present

- Include Italian in the analysis

  - Romance language with French-like Perfect, but no *recent past*.

Thanks!

Do follow our project via

http://time-in-translation.hum.uu.nl/

(PhD and post-doc position opening soon!)