
The use of tense/aspect in dialogue: first investigations

Background

The Time in Translation Project

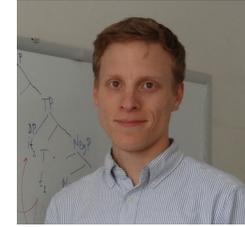
PIs



PhD



Post-Docs



Many affiliated BA, MA and PhD students



...



DIGITAL
HUMANITIES LAB

Time in Translation

Write a semantics of the PERFECT.

> Five languages (3 Germanic, 2 Romance)

> Account for distribution at the sentence level, in narration and in

dialogue

> Methodology: back and forth between theory and data



Translation Mining (corpus-based) + native speaker experiments

Translation Mining in narratives

Basic intuition

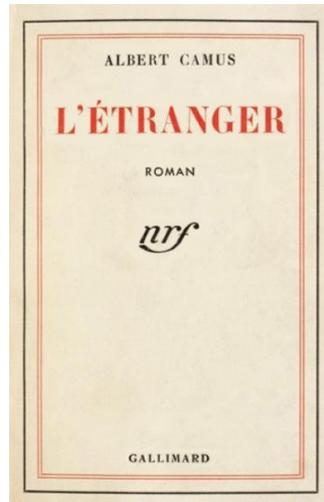
la grammaire est un système où tout se tient

Understanding the PERFECT
requires us to understand the
tense/aspect systems of languages
in their entirety...

Translation Mining

Data from translation corpora allow us to compare tense/aspect systems of languages and study them in detail.

Example : translations of Camus' *L'Étranger*, Chapter 1



FRENCH

Perfect

Imperfective

Present

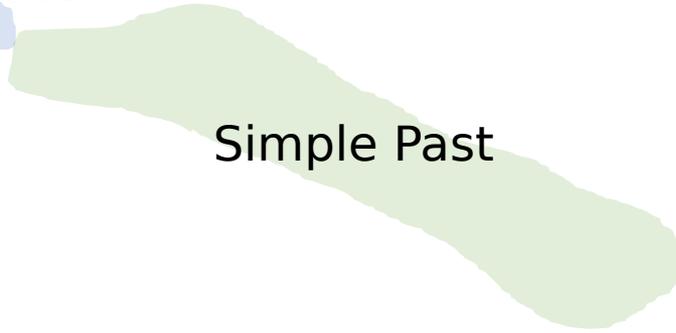
PluPerfect

ENGLISH

Perfect



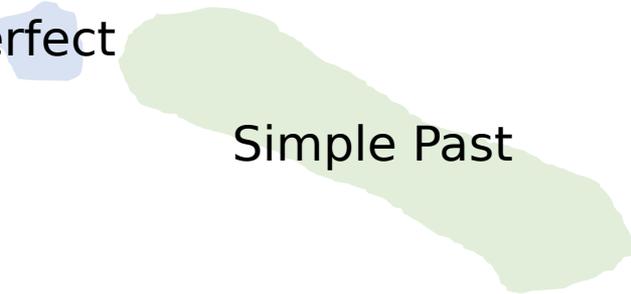
Simple Past



SPANISH

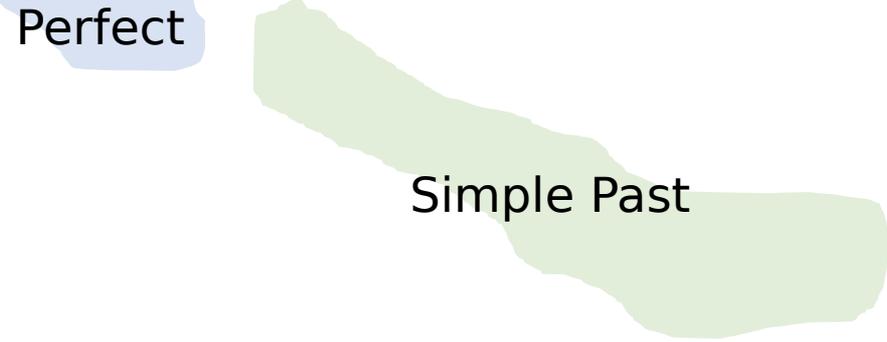
Perfect

Simple Past



DUTCH

Perfect



Simple Past

GERMAN

Perfect

Simple Past

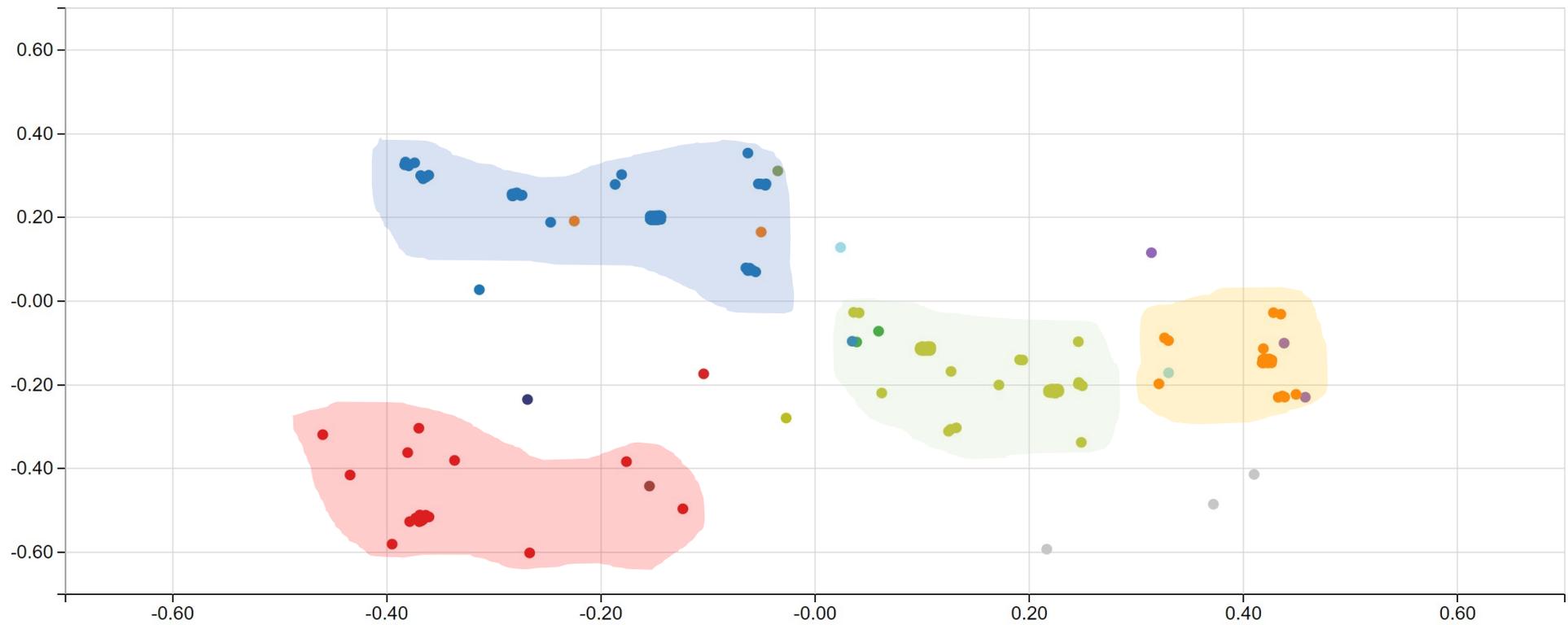
Translation Mining

Using data from translation corpora to compare tense/aspect systems of languages and study them in detail.

Example : translations of Camus' *L'Étranger*, Chapter 1

> Bigger picture but also strong grip on the data

FRENCH



J' **ai lu** le dossier de votre mère .

Translations

German

Perfekt

Ich **habe** die Akte Ihrer Mutter **gelesen** .

English

present perfect

I **'ve read** your mother 's file .

Spanish

pretérito perfecto compuesto

He **leído** el expediente de su madre .

Italian

passato prossimo

Ho **letto** la pratica di vostra madre .

Dutch

vtt

Ik **heb** uw moeders map **doorgelezen** .

'Drie jaar geleden is mevrouw Meursault hier gekomen. U was haar enige zoon.' Ik dacht dat hij mij iets wilde verwijten en ik begon hem de zaak uiteen te zetten. Maar hij viel mij in de rede en zei: 'U hoeft u niet te rechtvaardigen, jongeman. [_{context 2} **Ik heb uw moeders map doorgelezen.**] U kon haar niet bijspringen. Zij had verzorging nodig. En uw inkomsten zijn bescheiden. Per slot van rekening was zij hier gelukkig.' Ik zei: 'Zeker, mijnheer.' En hij voegde er aan toe: 'Ach ja, hier had zij vrienden,

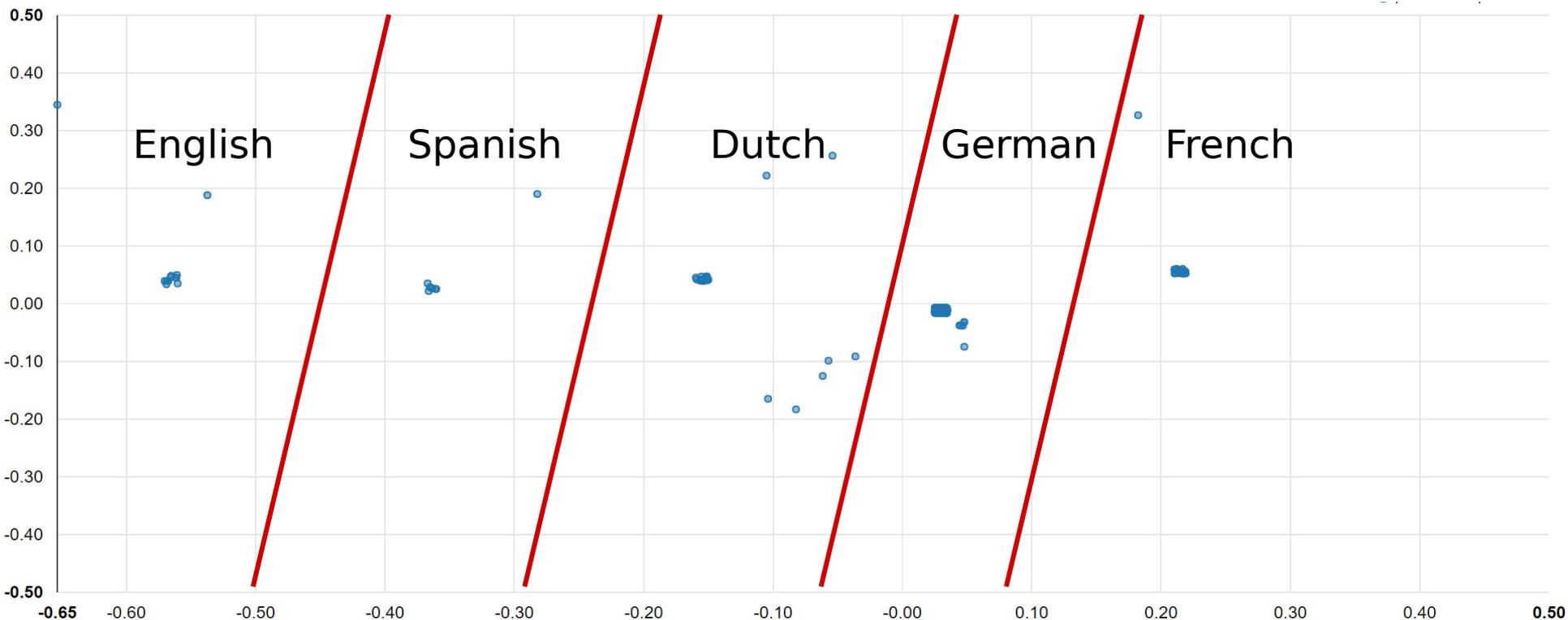
Translation Mining

Using data from translation corpora to compare tense/aspect systems of languages and study them in detail.

Example 1: translations of Camus' *L'Étranger*, Chapter 1

- > Bigger picture but also strong grip on the data
- > Sliding scale

English < Spanish < Dutch < German < French



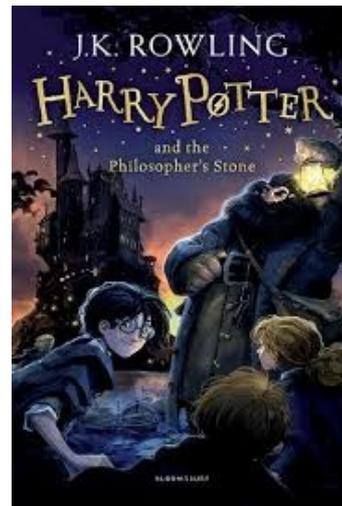
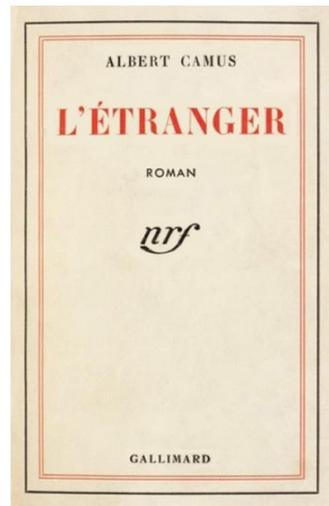
Ik heb uw moeders map doorgelezen.

Ze hebben het deksel er op gedaan, maar ik moet het losschroeven om u in de gelegenheid te

Het gesticht ligt twee kilometer buiten het dorp. Ik ben er te voet heen

Hij ging naar Ik wilde moeder meteen zien. buiten, kwam weer terug en zette stoelen neer.

Exploring dialogue

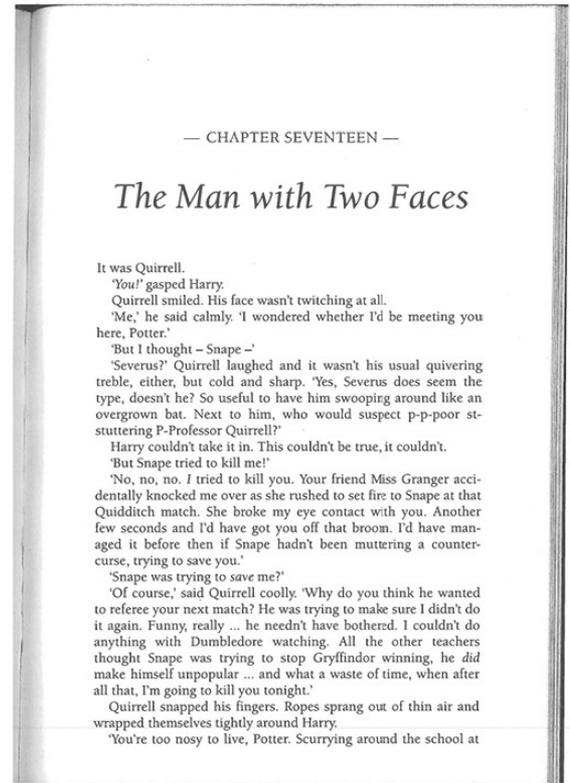
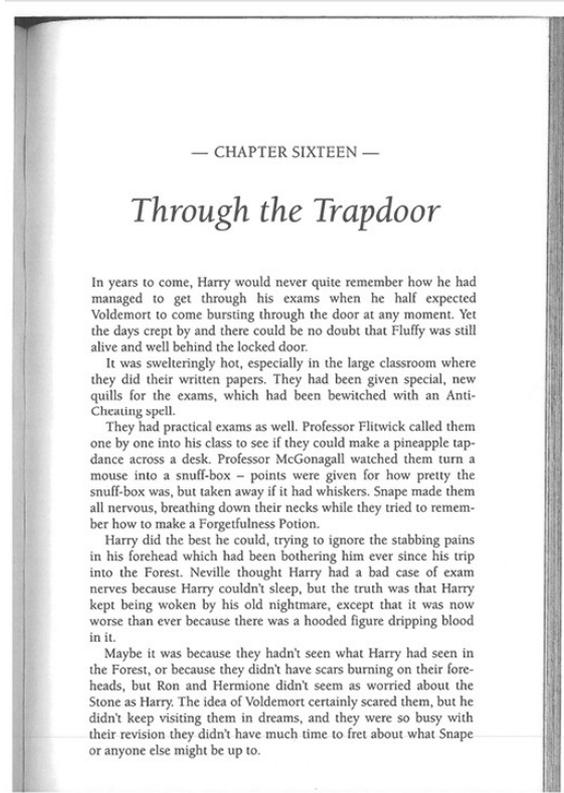
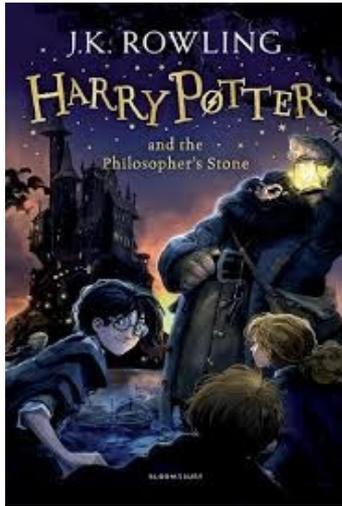


	en	de	es	fr	it	nl
PRESENT	6	6	4	3	6	5
PERFECT	0	0	0	0	8	0
PAST	430	461	336	313	316	465
IMPERFECT	0	0	126	130	112	0
PAST PERFECT	29	27	18	30	24	32

Tab. 1: Most frequently attributed tense categories in the **narrative** parts of the novel.

	en	de	es	fr	it	nl
PRESENT	126	154	122	129	129	162
PERFECT	27	78	23	99	100	60
PAST	120	64	88	0	2	84
IMPERFECT	0	0	38	50	39	0
FUTURE	20	15	13	11	23	9

Tab. 2: Most frequently attributed tense categories in the **dialogue** parts of the novel.



	en	de	es	fr	it	nl
PRESENT	6	6	4	3	6	5
PERFECT	0	0	0	0	8	0
PAST	430	461	336	313	316	465
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Tab. 2: Most frequently attributed tense categories in the **dialogue** parts of the novel.

~ 39 verbs in longer dialogues 467 verbs in longer dialogues
 60% is present oriented 36% is present oriented

The Man with Two Faces

It was Quirrell.

'You!' gasped Harry.

Quirrell smiled. His face wasn't twitching at all.

'Me,' he said calmly. 'I wondered whether I'd be meeting you here, Potter.'

'But I thought – Snape –'

'Severus?' Quirrell laughed and it wasn't his usual quivering treble, either, but cold and sharp. 'Yes, Severus does seem the type, doesn't he? So useful to have him swooping around like an overgrown bat. Next to him, who would suspect p-p-poor st-stuttering P-Professor Quirrell?'

Harry couldn't take it in. This couldn't be true, it couldn't.

'But Snape tried to kill me!'

'No, no, no. *I* tried to kill you. Your friend Miss Granger accidentally knocked me over as she rushed to set fire to Snape at that Quidditch match. She broke my eye contact with you. Another few seconds and I'd have got you off that broom. I'd have managed it before then if Snape hadn't been muttering a counter-curse, trying to save you.'

Storyline in dialogue

→ Splitting up dialogue further

141 verbs in 'storyline'

77 verbs in 'pure dialogue'

And what can we say about dialogue?

English 77 verbs 59 simple pasts

18 perfects

→ Same contexts as in Camus (= those known from the literature on sentence-level uses)

Dutch 77 verbs 33 simple pasts

12 simple presents

30 perfects

And what can we say about dialogue?

Dutch 33 simple pasts

12 simple presents

30 perfects

" Maar ik hoorde u een paar dagen geleden snikken - ik *dacht* dat Sneepe u bedreigde ... "

Hij wist alles al . Hij zei alleen : ' Harry *is* achter hem aan , hè ? ' en rende direct naar de derde verdieping . "

' But I heard you a few days ago , sobbing - I *thought* Snape was threatening you ... '

He already knew - he just said , " Harry *'s* *gone* after him , hasn 't he ? " and hurtled off to the third floor .

" *Hebt* u die trol *binnengelaten* ? ' You *let* the troll in ? ' "

Envoi

Questions

French? Spanish? German?

Why are languages the way they are?

English has only one tense it can use to talk about the past.
(extended now theories of the perfect)

Dutch has two and chooses the simple past for states and the present perfect for events but only in **dialogue**. Does the semantics of the perfect vary?

Does the semantics of the simple past vary?

Are we dealing with two ways of optimizing over semantically identical tenses?
How does the dialogue/storyline distinction come into play?

Thanks for your attention!

And visit us at <https://time-in-translation.hum.uu.nl/>