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 reciente 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>ES</th>
<th>DE</th>
<th>EN</th>
<th>NL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>From French,</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>passed récents</td>
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<tr>
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<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
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</table>
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
Reichenbachian analysis – evidence

- Data from Bres&Labeau (2015) and Havu (2005) confirm this analysis: recent past not used in situations 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.
    “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.
    “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:

<table>
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<th>x</th>
<th>car(x)</th>
<th>X(x)</th>
<th>get_often_stolen(x)</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>car(x)</td>
<td>red(x)</td>
<td>get_often_stolen(x)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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))

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>x, n, ev', e</th>
<th>x, n, ev, ev', e</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>named(John, x)</td>
<td>named(John, x)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X(ev')</td>
<td>ev' ≤ ev</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>arrive(x, e)</td>
<td>Q(s) [pragm. state]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>t(ev') &lt; t [relative tense]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>t(s) o r [aspect]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>arrive(x, e) [VP]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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!)