

## **Abstract: Main Session Tense**

What do translation corpora tell us about the semantics and pragmatics of tense?  
The case of the English preterit

This study aims to investigate the semantics and pragmatics of the English (EN) preterit through looking at its translation into French (FR), Italian (IT) and Romanian (RO) in parallel corpora with a contrastive methodology. One of the most important advantages of multilingual translation corpora, besides bringing empirical, quantitative and objective evidence for linguistic theories, is that they emerge information which remains hidden otherwise.

Relevance Theory and its followers (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995, 2004; Blakemore 1987; Smith 1990; Wilson and Sperber 1998; Carston 2004; Moeschler 2002; Moeschler et al. 1998; Saussure 2003; Binnick 2009) consider that the meaning of a tense is underdetermined and it must be contextually filled in through inference. Tense conveys crucial information for the temporal interpretation of an utterance, which includes locating eventualities with respect to each other and with the moment of utterance speech point S with the help of reference point R and event moment E (Reichenbach 1947). Blakemore (1987) introduces the conceptual/ procedural distinction referring to information encoded by linguistic expressions. In this study, verb tenses are described in terms of their conceptual and procedural contents.

Our hypothesis is that multilingual translation corpora bring to surface what is constant and what is variable in the underdetermined meaning of the preterit. We assume on the one hand, that there is little cross-linguistic variation for the conceptual content of the preterit, namely reference to past time. On the other hand, we expect significant variation for its procedural content. Grisot and Moeschler (2013) argue and bring evidence from experimental data that the EN preterit has two usages related to its procedural content: it has a narrative usage when it locates temporally or/and causally two eventualities and a non-narrative usage when does not express a temporal or causal relation between two eventualities. They have shown that in parallel corpora narrative usages of the preterit are translated into FR most often through a simple past or a compound past tense and non-narrative usages are translated most often through an imperfect. Based on their results, we assume that this cross-linguistic picture holds for other languages, such as IT and RO.

We bring evidence from multilingual parallel corpora investigation. We have built a corpus of 432 occurrences of the EN preterit and their translation by professional translators into three target languages. The corpus contains texts from four stylistic registers (38% of the preterit occurrences are from the literary register, 25% from the JRC-Acquis corpus, 19% from the EuroParl corpus and 18% from the journalistic corpus).

Four tenses are most frequently used for the translation of the preterit into FR, IT and RO, namely three past time tenses (simple and compound past tenses, and imperfect tense) and one present tense. As far as FR is concerned, past time tenses are used in 73% of the cases (*passé composé* 34%, *imparfait* 23% and *passé simple* 16%) and the present tense in 8% of the cases. In Italian, past tenses are used in 72% of the cases (*passato remoto* 22%, *imperfetto* 17% and *passato prossimo* 33%) and the present tense in 5%. In RO, past tenses are used in 82% of the cases (*perfectul simplu*

18%, *imperfectul* 15% and *perfectul compus* 49%) and the present tense in 5% of the cases.

These results show that there is little cross-linguistic variation for the conceptual content of the preterit, namely reference to past time. Specifically, past time tenses are used in more than 72% while the present tense is used in 5% of the cases. As far as procedural content is concerned, our results show cross-linguistic variation. More specifically, the translation into FR, IT and RO puts forward two usages of the preterit. Contexts where the preterit refers to eventualities temporally and/or causally ordered correspond to a translation through a *passé simple* or a *passé composé* (50% in FR, 55% in IT and 67% in RO) and contexts where the preterit does not order temporally or causally two eventualities correspond a translation through an *imperfect* (23% in FR, 17% in IT and 15% in RO).

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