

From perfect aspect to counterfactuality : the semantic evolution of the conditionnel passé in French

As the perfect equivalent of the *conditionnel présent* in French, the *conditionnel passé* (*j'aurais aimé*, 'I would have liked') only lately integrated the tense paradigm in the history of the language: this form is not attested before the 12th century and, according to Wagner (1939: 231), it is only from the 18th century onwards that its use has superseded that of the past subjunctive in counterfactual conditionals (*Si j'avais su, je ne serais pas venu*, 'If I had known, I **wouldn't have gone**). Except for Wagner's study (1939), there is almost no study on this tense and its historical evolution remains rather under-documented.

The present paper contributes to fill this gap by investigating the semantic evolution of the *conditional passé* in the diachrony of French and exploring the mechanisms of linguistic change involved. This study relies on the quantitative and qualitative analysis of a diachronic corpus extending from Old French to Modern French. The objective is two-fold:

Firstly, I depict the different stages of diachrony of the *conditionnel passé* in French by investigating several of features which evolved over centuries: its relative frequency, its contexts of use (indirect speech, modal contexts, intersubjective contexts, evidential contexts), its interpretations (*perfect*, *past* and/or *counterfactual*) and the actionality of the predicates the *conditionnel passé* can combine with. The corpus study shows that the major evolution of the *conditionnel passé* is the development, around the 16th-17th centuries, of a counterfactual meaning at the expense of the perfect value coming from the compound morphology *AVOIR/ÊTRE* + *past participle*; for instance, in conditionals, the *conditionnel passé* progressively stopped referring to the anteriority of a potential eventuality (1), to increasingly express the non-realization of a (past) eventuality (2):

- (1) *Puis n'avoit garde de morir, ma dameisele, vostre amis, qui ceste herbe li avroit mis sor ses plaies et bien liee.* (Ch.de Troyes, 12th century)
'Your friend, my young lady, would not fear to die, if one **applied** (lit. **would have applied**) this herb on his wounds and tied it well.'

- (2) *Il tua tout ce qui s'opposa à son passage ; et blessa Aribée en tant de lieux, qu'enfin il se seroit sans doute **resolu** de se rendre ; si tout d'un coup une maison enflamée ne fust tombée si près du lieu où ils combattoient, qu'Aribée en fut ensevelis.* (M. de Scudéry, 17th century)
'He killed everyone who opposed him and wounded Aribée in so many places that the latter **would have** probably **resolved** to surrender, if all of a sudden a burning house had not fallen so close to the place where they were fighting that Aribée was buried by it.'

Secondly, I explore the mechanisms of linguistic change that underlie the described evolution. I argue that the emergence of the counterfactual meaning stems from the conventionalization of pragmatic inferences which I analyze as the transition between bridging contexts and switch contexts (cf. Traugott & Dasher 2002, Heine 2002).

In the end, the studied case neatly illustrates with an 'inflected tense' what has been mostly reported with modal markers (see for instance Van Linden and Verstraete 2008), namely the potential inferential link between perfect aspect and counterfactuality.

References

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