

Pas Si Simple : Past Temporal Reference in Acadian French

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While contemporary spoken French contrasts the *imparfait* (imperfect) with the *passé composé* (present perfect), some varieties of Acadian French still use the *passé simple* (simple past), a verb tense believed to have largely been lost from the spoken language by the 19th century (Fournier 1998). The data in 1-3 come from a sociolinguistic corpus of speech from Grosses Coques, a small village in the Baie Sainte-Marie region of Nova Scotia, where one of the most conservative of present-day Acadian varieties (Flikeid 1994) is spoken:

- 1 Elle se **parlait** toute seule, steady. (GC-25)
she REFL speak-IMP.SG all alone all-the-time
“She used to talk to herself, all the time.”
- 2 J'**ai** point **parlé** trop longtemps. (GC-25)
1PERS have-SG NEG spoke too long
“I didn't speak too long.”
- 3 Je lui **parlis** un élan-là. (GC-25)
1PERS to-him speak-PS.SG a while there
“I spoke to him for a while.”

[Note that in colloquial French the <a> and <i> conjugations for the *passé simple* found in standard French collapses to <i> (Pope 1952), explaining the conjugation of *parler* as *parlis* in 3.] Our data come from conversational and narrative discourse representative of a wide age range and both sexes, for 15 speakers in total. All speakers maintain this three-way tense/aspect distinction and in the data analysed thus far, for 4 speakers (n=973), the supposedly defunct *passé simple* accounts for some 29% of tokens, the same proportion as found for the *passé composé*. Thus we are able to study contrasts (between the *passé simple* and the *imparfait*, between the *passé simple* and the *passé composé*) which are typically studied only for the written language (an exception is Leroux 2004 for 19th century Quebec French).

The data are coded for potential conditioning factors based on the literature (including the work of formal linguists (e.g. Labelle 2002, Swart 1998), general linguists (e.g. Imbs 1960, Vet 1980), grammarians (e.g. Brunot & Bruneau 1887, Grevisse 1980), and sociolinguists (Howard 2004, Leroux 2005)). These factors include adverbial specification, discourse type, inherent lexical aspect, polarity, sentential aspect, temporal relationship with the preceding clause, tense/aspect of the verb of the preceding clause, and the “24-hour” rule. The results thus far show the traditional association of the *imparfait* with habitual and durative contexts and both the *passé composé* and the *passé simple* with punctual contexts. In addition, the *passé simple* is strongly associated with narration (confirming results of a small study by Gesner 1979 for the same variety), particularly with narrative clauses involving complicating action. For the conference paper, the analysis will be extended to the total of 15 speakers and independent variable rule analyses conducted for the *imparfait*, *passé composé* and *passé simple* verb forms. The results will be compared with the historical record for the spoken language, particularly that for the time of colonization of Acadie, and with the results of present-day studies of the written language and of the spoken language, where in the latter case a two-way contrast obtains. Finally, we formalize the Acadian contrasts within the framework of Distributed Morphology (Halle & Marantz 1993).

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