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Thinking the present together in natural languages

Tempus is fugiting. (Dylan Thomas, *A Portrait of the Artist as a young Dog*)

Parce que nous / On est calées sur la Lune / Comme la marée et les loups-garous / Si dehors tout a l'air si doux / Méfions-nous de l'eau qui dort (Amélie-les-Crayons, *Calées sur la Lune*, in *Le porte-plume*, 2007)

Par exemple : je saisis au vol le mot Temps. Ce mot était absolument limpide, précis, honnête et fidèle dans son service, tant qu'il jouait sa partie dans un propos, et qu'il était prononcé par quelqu'un qui voulait dire quelque chose. Mais le voici tout seul, pris par les ailes. Il se venge. Il nous fait croire qu'il a plus de sens qu'il n'a de fonctions. Il n'était qu'un moyen, et le voici devenu fin. Devenu l'objet d'un affreux désir philosophique. Il se change en énigme, en abîme, en tourment de la pensée... (Paul Valéry, *Variété*)

On n'écrit (on ne décrit) jamais quelque chose qui s'est passé avant le travail d'écrire, mais bien ce qui se produit (et cela dans tous les sens du terme) au cours de ce travail, au présent de celui-ci, et résulte, non pas du conflit entre le très vague projet initial et la langue, mais au contraire d'une symbiose entre les deux qui fait, du moins chez moi, que le résultat est infiniment plus riche que l'intention. (Claude Simon, discours de Stockholm, remise du Prix Nobel de Littérature, 1985)

Introduction

In natural languages, the category known as “present” is manifested in at least three distinct ways:

- (i) naming the category with one or several nouns of the lexicon, such as, a case in point, the word *present* in English, *Präsens* in German, *présent* in French;
- (ii) pointing to the present moment by means of one or several adverbs or analogous indexers such as *now* and *yet* in English (as in: *Have you finished yet?*), *jetzt* and *nun* in German, *maintenant* and *à présent* in French;
- (iii) locating a situation, event or action in “time”, usually by means of one or several grammatical tenses applied to a verb: *He scores!* and *Relax! He's joking.*

If languages were formal codes, with words as labels referring to autonomous material or psychological realities, one would expect there to be *one* word to designate the category; *one* adverb to focus the hearer's or reader's attention on the stretch of time that includes the current experience of listening or reading; and *one* tense to relate the situation, event or action with the moment at which it is being referred to.

The lexicon does seem to comply with this requirement indeed, as the word *present* does not appear to have any authentic synonym (the *actual* can be opposed to the *virtual* but not the *past* or the *future*). It is worth noting that the lexicon is by no means innocent and usually at least reflects and maybe conveys some sort of hidden folk philosophy or traditional and unconscious culture. For example, the notion of *time*, akin to Latin *tempus* and *templum* and Greek *temnein* “cut”, is derived from the intuition that time is a flow (the *Chronos*) to be divided in elementary phases, moments, instants, a psychological process which is grounded

in the common experience of the natural and embodied rhythms and cadences of everyday life (breathing, the heartbeat, walking, the circadian clock, tides and the lunar cycle, seasons and the solar cycle, and so on) according to Leroi-Gourhan 1965. In the same way, the *historical time* is the abstract segmentation of the continuous flow into three periods or epochs known as the *past*, the *present* and the *future*, an intellectual partition and conception that can only be achieved through the use of unequivocal words in specific languages, apparently mapping singular notions against singular signifiers – not that languages are codes (Kravchenko 2007) but that philosophical notions appear to have caused a consensus to emerge.

However, unlike the lexicon evoked in (i), the other two word classes and forms (ii) *adverbs* and (iii) *verb tenses* do not satisfy this condition, for several reasons: (a) there are usually more than one adverbs and tenses pointing to the “present” or attaching an event to it, and (b) each of those adverbs and tenses are usually polysemic and may express other periods of time (or other) than the present properly speaking (if there is any such thing). How can there be several signifiers in competition to point to or relate events to the same “present” category if it is unified? Does it mean that words and grammatical forms “encode” different conceptions of the present in a given language? If we consider variation between lexicons and grammars in linguistic typology, does this mean that languages encode culturally variable conceptualization of the “presents”? Or is the encodingist approach to languages ill-founded altogether?

The goal of this paper is to present the role played by lexical and grammatical systems in the way in which the “present” is conceptualized through the experience of speech understood not as a formalized system encoding preset autonomous representations, but as a learnt practice and social form of thinking (Saussure 1916, Voloshinov 1929, Calvet 1975, Ogien 2007) involving embodied action upon the human mind(s) leading to the dynamic production of mental states and processes which are constitutive collective and shared formats of awareness. To achieve this goal, the first section summarizes the main principles of this conception; the second section explores the way in which the present can be pointed to by the two markers *jetzt* and *nun* in German, with additional remarks about *now* and *yet* in English; and the third section explores how events can be correlated with different definitions of the present obtained by using different tenses – simple and progressive presents in English, and the complex, agglutinative present of Tagalog (Philippines).

1. Theoretical assumptions

To fully understand what verbal cogitation is about, one must reconsider the very nature of language in phenomenological terms (Lavelle 1942; Merleau-Ponty 1945; Vygotsky 1962; Bottineau 2008, 2010^{bcd}). Basically, *languaging*, to use a term coined by the Chilean biologist Maturana (1978), is action. It consists in producing *cues*, that is, sequences of acoustic events by means of a coordination of articulatory gestures which alterate the acoustic quality of the tune produced by the “voice”, the vibration of the vocal chords. Articulatory gestures are both an evolution of the shout, an exaptation of non-verbal gestures (biting, sucking, licking, swallowing, coughing) (Corballis 2003, McNeill 2005, Jousse 2008), and an adaptation of those gestures around a unified intentional function- the controlled production of intentional, consensual and meaningful signals – and a unified system of constraints – the absence of any external object in the mouth and the need to coordinate the gestures around the signalling function. Similarly, the syllable, words and syntax, as a sets of sequential procedures, are grounded both in experienceable natural and physiological rhythms and in unconscious neurological patterns (Allott 1995, MacNeilage 1998).

When the cue is executed somatically by the speaker's phonatory and articulatory activity, a perceivable acoustic signal is produced, received by all the human subjects present, received, processed and "interpreted": it looks as if a mental piece of information had been somatically encoded, physically transmitted and perceptually decoded.

But languaging is also used by human beings in the form of internal discourse, private meditation and reflexive "thinking" known as endophasia, barely accessible to instrumented observation and hardly constituted as a worthy object of scientific investigation with a few notable exceptions (Vygotsky 1962, Shanon 1993, Laplane 2000, Bergounioux 2004). In this case, the motoric production of the articulatory gestures is not executed by the body, it is merely simulated by the neurological system. This simulation is also involved in speech perception according to one version of the motor theory of speech perception (Liberman & Mattingly 1985). A simpler and more unified way of stating this fact is to say that signifiers can be executed at two levels in human experience, (i) obligatorily, at the neurophysiological level, in a form that appears as simulation to an external observer but is experienced as mental execution (that is felt as *real*, not even imaginary or dream-like) by the conscious subject taken as an object with which the observer may identify empathically; and (ii) optionally, at the extended somatic, biomechanical level, in a form that appears as signal-generating gestures to the observer's perceptive sensorial capture and semiotic processing, that is experienced as signal-generating controlled motoric action by the producing agent. On the perceptual side, superficial multimodal capture of the signal ought to be differentiated – auditory and optionally visual on the side of the hearer-(viewer), tactile and auditory on the proprioceptive side of the "voicer".

The ordinary experience of endophasia reveals that the mental simulation of physical speech enables the thinker to synthetise her own ideas following the same bodily procedure as the one that must be used to conduct the synthesis of analogous "ideas" or "representations" in other people's minds in the case of vocal address. Speech and languaging are best defined as the synthesis of ideas by phonatory means, in short *phonosynthesis*, in a perfect analogy with the term photosynthesis. The synthetizing process is *embodied* in that it is not "internal" or centralized in the brain and neurological system, it is distributed over the whole body, the environment in which the acoustic effects propagate, and the various perceiving consciences present in it at the moment when the cue is delivered.

This synthesis involves recurring segments of cues known as words and morphemes. Words are, by definition, segments of cues which any given speaker, for example Didier Bottineau, has had to extract from other speakers' own cues, for example any participants' cues at the "Präsens" seminary in Moscow: words are dialogic by nature, and in lexical semantics, their meaning cannot only be a category or prototype drawn from the subject's personal experience of its referential occurrences in the material world, but rather a synthesis of the different contextual values taken by the word in the different contexts in which it has been used by the collectivity of speakers. Hence, the *cultural notion* centralized by the noun does not coincide with the *empirical category* elaborated by individuals in their own personal and non-verbal experience, even if this distinction is fallacious as the two levels keep contaminating one another (for example, Gibson 1977's affordances: does one know that a chair is an object to be sat on because one has already sat on many chairs, or because one has been told, taught and shown how to do so by one's mother?). Thus, languaging is not necessary for intelligent thinking – one may recognize objects, ascribe emotional values, plan actions and reform some forms of knowledge without uttering or thinking a single word; but when the word is actually used in the act of languaging, it has a double effects: (i) evidently, coordinating intersubjective consciences around shared acts of semantic synthesis by means of a common embodied procedure; and (ii) less evidently, amplifying and extending the individual's subject own "intelligence", in the etymological sense. Indeed, a subject, when thinking verbally, will

combine social concepts, rather than personal categories, and she will do so under the combinatory constraints of “grammar” (morphology, syntax) that enable one to improvise a complex execution within the boundaries of “rules”, in fact routines in which one has been trained through spontaneous practice much more than through institutionalized schooling. In short, one learns a specific spectrum of conceptualization and semantic synthesis through ordinary languaging, and this practice leads to the internalization of cognitive patterns and procedures whose dynamic manifestations are originally “external” in relation to the subject, but distributed if one considers this dynamic at the level of the cultural group that practices one given language. Learning and acquiring a language consists in successfully semiotizing the interactional verbal practices to which one is exposed in a given social environment and start synthesizing “ideas” in this cultural format both for the benefit of others and one’s own, either delivering embodied contributions to the community, or simulating reflexive contributions that will focus one’s attention on a federating semantic and cognitive project. In short, to speak is to make one(self) think, and to speak in a given language is to make one(self) synthesize ideas and coordinate egos and minds around cognitive projects whose elaboration is formalized and formatted by the semiosis of behavioural units, sequences and fluctuations known as morphemes, words, constructions and prosody. In this theoretical framework, the goal of this paper is to illustrate how the verbal conceptualization of the “present” is shaped by the adverbs and tenses available in a given grammar, and how the formats of this conceptualization is derived from the present experience of the act of speech in its social and cultural dimension: how the verbal presence of thinking shapes the verbal thinking of the present.

2. On the two “nows” of German and English

German has two adverbs to refer to the present moment, *jetzt* and *nun*. In our problematic, the question is: does the use of the one or the other cause the interpreter to conceptualize the present moment in contrasted ways? It is interesting to note that the question is of popular interest if one considers the linguistic forums in which the question is raised and debated¹. Some members answer negatively: “By the way, I really don't see any difference between "nun" and "jetzt" in the meaning of "now" or "right now". It's just that "jetzt" is more informal, whereas you will hardly hear anyone say "nun" in everyday speech.” Some other members see clearcut difference in usage and meaning between the two adverbs: “"Jetzt" means "right now," "this current point in time." (...) "Nun" is broader, and can be used as a filler as well.” Many members insist on the use of *nun* as a filler, somehow contradicting the idea that *nun* is falling out of use: “Often storytellers will punctuate their stories with "nun"s in the same way one might use "so" or "so then" in English.” (...) “"Nun" kann auch als "well" genutzt werden. (*Nun, das bin ich nicht gewohnt.*)” (...) “"Jetzt", however, can never mean "well", not even colloquially, whereas "nun" or "nun ja" are used as interjections.” I can add – from personal experience – that *nun ja* is frequently reduced to *naja* and used as a pessimistic interjection when it comes to turning a page in the string of thought or conversation, especially when the speaker has nothing to add, cannot find a conclusive solution, or experiences a feeling of impotence in a given situation – something like “there’s nothing I / we can do about it so let’s talk about something else”. This connotation is reinforced in combination like *nun mal*: *So ist das nun mal. Das ist nun mal so.* “That’s the way it is“. *Wie Frauen nun mal sind! Solarstrom ist nun mal teuer.*

¹ <http://forum.wordreference.com/showthread.php?t=132355>

In a similar way, *nun* is used in negatively connotated interactions, implying an irritated mood: "Nun" can be used to express annoyance: "Was willst du nun?" Some members also insist that "Nun" is also used to mean "now," but has more of a connotation of "by now," as in "Nun bin ich manche Stunde / Entfernt von jenem Ort" ("By now I'm many an hour away from that place" – from Schubert's "Der Lindenbaum."), while others consistently reject any such interpretation: "Jetzt bin ich manche Stund von jenem Ort entfernt." sagt mir exakt dasselbe. Ich persönlich sehe zwischen den beiden Wörtern ad hoc keinen großen Unterschied, um den gegenwärtigen Zustand auszudrücken“.

Obviously it would not be reasonable to sketch rash extrapolations about the *jetzt / nun* contrast as there is a great deal of regional, social and individual variation, especially in a country like Germany, not to mention neighbouring German-speaking countries. And this is exactly what the semiosis of grammatical systems by individuals and communities is about: some alternations stage contrasts that offer themselves to interpretation, and some users will interpret them while others will not, at the conscious level at least, for if one systematically records the way in which the *jetzt / nun* alternation is effectively practised by those who deny that there is any relevance in it, it may well be discovered that there is some relevance to it after all. This is the reason why we will consider that the general use of the alternation provides a *model for interpretation*, which will not necessarily be implemented “cognitively” by all speakers, but which may be considered as part and parcel of the linguistic system, not as a mental piece of software to be systematically installed in every individual cortex, but as a collective system of practice that can be semiotized in a consistent way. The relevant properties are the following.

(i) *Jetzt* is used in a prospective way and tends to cause interpretation to look forward to the future from the present instant, staging the present moment as an event under expectation; while *nun* tends to be retrospective and look back on the past, staging the present as a turning point, a more or less drastic change in relation to what had been going on before. On the German-French television channel Arte, the oncoming programme is usually announced by “Und jetzt” before it actually starts, with the announcement of yet another programme in between; and then by “und nun” when the announcement is immediately followed by the beginning of the programme: *jetzt* is prospective, *nun* performative (it triggers the change) - *Das Spiel ist nun zu Ende* “Now the game is over”, *Nun ist es zu spät* “now it’s too late” (let’s admit it); as a filler: *Nun, wenn es dir gefällt* “well, if that’s what you want” (the speaker is *changing her mind*); *Nun denn!* “All right!”. In the context of dialogue and interlocutive relations, this means that *jetzt* is centred on the speaker’s knowledge, who introduces the perspective of a change to the hearer, while *nun* presupposes some form of shared knowledge or awareness of the ongoing process and expected change – hence its use as a linkword (“so”) and a filler (“well”), a tool-word that is instrumental in conducting a change in mental spaces in a performative way: *Und nun?* “Well then?”; *Nun komm endlich!* “Do hurry up!”; *Nun können wir anfangen* “Now we can get started”; *Nun heisst es handeln* “Now is the time for action”. *Nun* can also be used reflexively when the speaker suddenly becomes aware of an unexpected change in the situation, which may concern either material circumstances, or her own mental activity: *Was hast du nun angestellt?* “What have you been up to?”, *Nun ging mir auf, was ...* “I now realized what ... », *Nun ist guter Rat teuer* ‘now is good advice expensive’ implying « What am I (going) to do now ? ».

This is particularly evident in some historic national socialist speeches in which the notion of change at the present instant was a crucial topic: (Goebbels) *Meine Kommilitonen! Deutsche Männer und Frauen! Das Zeitalter eines überspitzten jüdischen Intellektualismus ist nun zu Ende, und der Durchbruch der deutschen Revolution hat auch dem deutschen Weg wieder die Gasse freigemacht.* (In this speech proclaiming the end of “Jewish intellectualism” and the outbreak of the “German revolution”, Goebbel uses *nun* five times, and *jetzt* five times, in a

way which underlines the contrast in the most spectacular way). (Hitler) *Die große Zeit ist jetzt angebrochen, Deutschland ist nun erwacht, die Macht haben wir nun in Deutschland gewonnen, nun gilt es das Deutsche Volk zu gewinnen (...)*. “the big time has now broken out”: “now” = *jetzt*, implying “at last”, “we had been looking forward to this”, while *nun* in “Germany is now awake” is clearly used as a performative trigger: it causes a radical change in the content of the interpreter’s mental space known as present time. One may even wonder if this recurring use of *nun* in those historical circumstances has not contributed to the current disuse of this adverb, except as a linkword and filler, in which the performative dimension is retained.

(ii) *Jetzt* is used in an *affirmative* way and tends to provide an positive answer to the question “is the event or action we are expecting coming to reality?”, while *nun* is used in a *negative* way and tends to provide a negative answer to the question “is the current situation a continuation of the previous one?”; hence *bis jetzt* “up to now”, vs **bis nun*, contradictory in terms, except in some specific contexts and set phrases; vs *von nun an* “from now on” and *von nun ab* “as of now”. In morphology, the *jetzt / nun* pair of temporal adverbs clearly echoes the *ja / nein* pair of interjections for approval and denial, introducing the notion of dialogic debate at the heart of the definition of the “present”, which is understood in terms of intersubjective negotiation. The idea is that in German, the mental present to be obtained through the use of grammatical markers is to be construed in the terms of a relation between an expectation and a perceivable reality (*jetzt*) or between a current perception and a remembered past (*nun*), and that this relation is resolved in the terms of an approval or identification (*jetzt*: yes, what we expected is coming true) or of a denial or differentiation (*nun*: no, what we are now witnessing is not the same situation as the one we experienced before) – which makes *jetzt* a marker of *consensus* and *nun* one of *polemic*. *Nun* is akin to latin *nunc* “now” = *num-ce*, with *num* as a polemic “negative now” as in *Num tot ducum naufragium sustulit artem gubernandi ?* (Cicero, *De divitatione* 1, 24) “Have the shipwrecks of so many leaders put an end to the art of navigation?” (the expected answer is “no”). *Nun*, *nunc* and *num* contain a negative submorphemic element *n-* which is to be found throughout Indo-European languages (German *nein*, *nicht*, *nun*; English *no*, *not*, *nill*, *null*, *naught*; Latin *ne*, *num*, *nam*, *nonne*, *nunc*). Another important echo in present-day systems is that which links *ja/nein* and *jetzt/nun* with yet another pair, that of lexical units expressing the circadian alternation: *Tag / Nacht* (cf. *tak* “yes” in Polish, akin to Russian *da* and German *ja*), Latin *dies / nox*, English *day / night*, Spanish *día / noche* and so on. According to Pokorny (775) (Jean-Philippe Reinmuth, personal communication), *nox* can be traced back to I.-E. **nek^w-*, **nok^w-* ‘night’ (Pokorny 762) < **ne* ‘no’ + **ok^w-* ‘see’ as in Lat. *oculus* “eye” (Pokorny 775): literally the night is self-defined as the period during which *one cannot see*, as in *Nacht und Nebel*²; incidentally German even seems to have remotivated this connection in the analogy *Acht* “attention” / *Nacht* “no attention, sleep”. Those elements allow us to conclude that (i) the negative dimension of *nun* is firmly grounded in a diachronic tradition, and (ii) the connection between those three parallel systems (*Tag / Nacht*, *jetzt / nun*, *ja / nein*) illustrates the way in which abstract acts of conceptualization are in fact deeply rooted in the very concrete perceptions of the material world.

In this case, one may hypothesize that the empirical basis is the *yes / no* contrast in human negotiations which, applied to the conceptual organization of experiential continuous time, yields the separation of a *yes*-period “day” and a *no*-period “night” (we are a diurnal species,

² For **nebh-* « cloud » (Latin *nebula*) Pokorny hesitates between two interpretations of the root: (i) **bheH-* ‘shine, light’ (Pokorny 104); in this case, a cloud is an object which does not shine. (ii) The same root is also attested with the meaning ‘blow, inflate, sigh’, equally compatible with the notion of cloud; in this case initial *n-* < **en-* ‘blow’ (cf. **enk-*, **onk-* ‘sigh’, Pokorny 322), which makes the combination tautological. So there is a serious suspicion that **nebh-* does include initial negative *n*, but it cannot be fully confirmed.

not a nocturnal one) and which, applied to the conceptualization of the present as a threshold, yields the representation of a positive step *jetzt*, to be used in consensual contexts, and of a negative one *nun*, to be used in polemic and conflictual situations: *Nun mal im Ernst!* “But seriously, folks!”; *Nun erst recht nichts!* “Now less than ever!”. In some examples the polemic value and the retrospective value are combined, as in the order *Nun komm endlich*, which both expresses exasperation and the desire for a change in relation to the immediate past (another example from Goebbels: *Nun, Volk, steh auf, und Sturm, brich los!*). In correlative structures, *nun* underlines the polemic undertone between the two possibilities in opposition: *ob es dir nun passt oder nicht* “whether you like it or not”; *ob wir nun Erfolg haben oder nicht* “whether or not we’re successful”. In present-day spoken German, one will even hear a transitional *jetzt-nun* combination, which lays the stress on the present as a threshold between a previously expected step and an outcome which may turn out as either similar to or different from the expectation: *Bin ich jetzt nun gelöscht oder blockiert?* (Forum, about the access to a Facebook profile). *Denn* can reinforce the transition: *Was sind denn jetzt nun genau Spaghetti-Elemente?*

In the case of English, a similar model can be applied to *yet* and *now* in spite of the major differences between the two systems. In affirmative sentences, *now* is the only adverb of the two that can be used to point to the ongoing present: *now* retains the value of interruption and drastic change that characterizes German *nun*, but *now* is the only form while *nun* is the marked one, as opposed to the unmarked *jetzt*. In interrogative and negative sentences, a marked usage of *yet* enables a speaker to conceptualize the present as the prospective accomplishment of a current expectation: *Have you finished yet? No, I haven’t finished yet.* The difference with German *jetzt* is dialogic in nature: in English, the present can be conceived prospectively by the use of *yet* if and only if the confirmation remains to be obtained – which is the case in interrogation, with the question delegating the answer to the addressee; and is also the case in negations using *not yet*, when the prospect of fulfillment is postponed. When the accomplishment is obtained, the present can no longer be accessed prospectively and has to be construed negatively by means of retrospective *now*, which validates the change of situation: *Now I’ve finished.* As an interjection, *now* is frequently used to put an end to an ongoing conflict: *Now, now, now!*

Just as *nun* echoes *nein* in German, *now* echoes *no*, but it must be added that *yet*, in a most remarkable way, echoes *yes*, despite their heterogeneous origins in diachrony. Two etymologies are given for *yes*: *gea*, a non polemic “yes” of confirmation (as opposed to French polemic *Si!* And Breton polemic *Eo!*); but Shipley 1984 also hypothesizes a compression *id est* → *yes*. So the morphological *yes / yet* analogy in present-day English cannot be supported by any robust piece of evidence in the history of the language, and if this analogy plays a semantic role, it must be ascribed to one of the major cognitive processes conducting language change, remotivation. Indeed, in some of its other uses, the highly polysemic *yet* also acts as a marker of past approval: *He is mean, and yet he is very rich* → In saying “he is mean”, I seem to be suggesting that he has no money, but this is not the case, I am and *was already aware* that he does have money when I said “he is mean”; *yet* indicates that the oncoming idea “he is rich” was already accepted by the speaker at the moment when she said “he is mean”: *yet* is a “past form” of *yes*, that is, a form of *yes* that refers the process it triggers, approval, to the cognitive past of the speaker, the previous stages of semantic construal. The same value can be observed in other uses such as *yet* + comparison *yet better*, in which *yet* alternates with *still* (denoting stability, the absence of change, in conformity with the core value of *yet*) and *even* (which, as an adjective, has a similar value). In previous studies in a model in morphosemantics known as *cognemantics* (Bottineau 2008), I have proposed that there exists in English a whole series of submorphological, transcategorial alternations such as *s/t* in *yes/yet*, *this/that* and *plays/played* (voiced in this context): *-s*

connects a dynamic representation with the experience of the immediate or enlarged present (*the Queen walks to the throne*), *-t* connects the same dynamic representation with another mental space simulating reality, that is, memory or imagination (*the Queen walked to the throne, if the Queen walked to the throne*). *This (th-i-s)* introduces a noun which presently defines an object by naming the category to which it belongs (*this book*) while *that (th-a-t)* attaches the occurrence to a category which is supposed to have been previously identified or mentioned (*that book*); both this and that share a marker of memory *th-*, pointing to the indexical nature of the occurrence (see *the, there, then* etc.), as opposed to non-memorial *wh-* in interrogatives (*which, what, where, when*), and the *i/a* alternation involves proximity vs distance (in spatial, temporal, emotional and discursive context-varying terms).

As a general rule, grammatical markers include phonological markers whose articulatory properties and oppositional contrast enable them to convey interpretative mental processes that result in the formation of an abstract image schema whose re-construction is rooted in the experience of the signifier as a piece of motoric action and sensorial perception, communicatively and/or reflexively: *this* involves three procedural instructions, (a) retrieving an identified object *th-*, (b) locating it proximally *-i-* and (c) identifying it at the time of present awareness *-s* with a conceptual category that may be mapped against a lexical notion by a noun. *That* involves (a) *th-* for the occurrence, (b) *-a-* for distant location in space, time, affect or discourse, and (c) *-t* a memorized category that can be recalled by a lexical notion in the form of a noun. When the body produces the “marker” understood as an embodied operator, the mind is made to recurrently and dynamically produce the corresponding complex mental network of relations. Thus, no image schema needs to be stored in long-term memory, since the *wording* is apt to recreate it whenever it is needed: the memory of the past is, basically, re-invention in the present (Rosenfield 1998).

Similarly, because of the same *-s/-t* contrast, *yes* conveys immediate approval while *yet* restores past approbation. *Yet* in the sense of *now* in negative and interrogative sentences is only a specific use that mobilizes this general core value of past approbation in a context of temporal measurement and pointing. This is to say that in English, as well as in German, there is no word to “designate” an “objective present” that is conceivable exclusively from the isolated individual speaker’s point of view. Rather, the present is construed *linguistically* in a constructivistic way that requires a connection with the past or the future (retrospection vs prospecting) to be accepted or rejected in dialogical terms. The linguistic construal of the present is not the spontaneous schematization of the instant by the experiencer in ordinary, non-social and non-verbal life (which does not exist anyway); it is the way in which every user of the language is taught to reconceptualize the present in an intersubjective fashion whenever it is necessary to point one’s or the other’s attention to the present moment in the context of verbal exchanges. As we can see, some languages will not “conceive” the present moment without distributing the conceptual process over several consciences rather than one, because of the very intersubjective nature of verbal cognition. Let us now turn to similar phenomena in the realm of verb tenses.

3. On verb tenses

Many languages like German, English and French do have a simple present *tense*, but those tenses are by no means reserved for the “expression” of the present *time*: more often than not, they can be used in contexts referring to

- the past, especially in time-lines: English *1066: William invades Britain*³; French *Le 29 mai, le président de la République, René Coty, fait appel au « plus illustre des Français ». Charles de Gaulle accepte de former un gouvernement.*
- the future : *I'm seeing the boss tomorrow, Je vois le patron demain ;*
- occasionally, fictional situations : *Tu es en train de te maquiller pour un rendez-vous galant et tu t'aperçois que tu as un énorme bouton sur le nez* (Beginning of an article in a woman's magazine : *Imagine you are making up for a rendez-vous and you discover that you have a huge pimple on the nose*, « imagine » being implicit in French)
- the current moment of shared experience : *it's raining, il pleut* ; in this case it can be used either in a descriptive way, or with a performative undertone, with the statement seemingly controlling the action itself: [TV programme] *I pour the milk into the saucepan / je verse le lait dans la casserole.*
- the whole of the time line for general knowledge shared by the community: *Dogs bark, Les chiens aboient / Un chien, ça aboie.*

Obviously, it is not possible to sketch a simple one-to-one correspondence between one grammatical tense on the linguistic side and one mental category or space on the other. Some languages possess *several* present tenses: English: simple vs “progressive” present) which may either sort out rigorously several contrasted ways of construing the “present”, or incorporate optional, additional features aimed at focussing the users’ attentions on selected aspects of the “present” as it is conceived and/or experienced, as is done by verbal periphrases in Romance languages (Spanish *estar* + gerund, an optional progressive that includes one of the two “be” verbs – *estar* < *stare* “stand”, as opposed to *ser* < a probable conflation of *sedere* “sit” and *esse* “be”; French *être en train de* + infinitive, *train* < verbal noun from *traîner* “pull (a heavy object)” “drag something behind oneself”). Linguists have produced an impressive series of models to account for the difference between the simple and progressive forms. The main positions are the following (a representative sample at least):

- Joos (1964): the *progressive* expresses increasing or decreasing intensity in 'stative' situations.
- Jespersen (1973, IV-178), the frame theory: “the action or state denoted by the expanded tense is thought of as a temporal frame encompassing something”.
- Guillaumean Language psychomechanics (Hirtle 1967, Joly 1964, 1980, 1988, 1990): the progressive an intersecting construal of the event-time. Lapaire & Rotgé 1993: the progressive has an expanding effect on the construal of the event-time (“dilatation”).
- Metaoperational Grammar / Theory of the Phases (Adamczewski 1976, Adamczewski & Delmas 1982): the “progressive” denotes a second level of metalinguistic elaboration of the subject / predicate connection, nominalizes the predicate to which it applies, ascribing to it a thematic value and fostering anaphoric and presuppositional effects in situations and contexts.
- Culioli's Theory of Enunciative Operations (Bouscaren & Chuquet 1987, Souesme 1993): the “progressive form” anchors the predication in the situation of speech and connects it with the speaker's viewpoint (feelings, knowledge and opinions) at the moment of actual speech, as opposed to the aoristic value of the simple present.
- Presupposition and modal values (Larrea & Rivière 1993, 2010): the progressive emphasizes the subject's role (state or involvement) and denotes the observer's point of view on the ongoing process.
- From the Guillaumean tradition, Cotte (1996 and 1997) converges with Adamczewski and Culioli in that the progressive reelaborates predication, presupposing and commenting a preestablished statement, as opposed to the simple form, which

³ See for ex. *The Domesday Book online*, <http://www.domesdaybook.co.uk/william.html> [consulted 06/07/2011]

performs the statement in the first place, with context-dependent stative or dynamic values.

- Several attempts at synthesizing the preceding models have been made (Girard 2002, Furmaniak 2005): the progressive stages a referential discrepancy between the literal meaning of the predicate and the actual interpretation of the utterance in the situational and dialogical context; the connection between aspect and derived effects is metonymic in nature.

Once again, the central question is: how is a human community taught to conceptualize the present by the grammatical system it uses? (Bottineau 2010a, about Breton) In English, what do the simple vs progressive present tenses teach a thinker to conceive? A simple example can be found in the use of verb tenses in the lyrics of the Beatles' song *She's leaving home* (1967):

She's leaving home

(The Beatles 1967 / Paul McCartney, with the help of John Lennon)

Wednesday morning at five o'clock as the day begins
Silently closing her bedroom door
Leaving the note that she hoped would say more
She goes down the stairs to the kitchen clutching her handkerchief
Quietly turning the backdoor key
Stepping outside she is free.

She (We gave her most of our lives)
is leaving (Sacrificed most of our lives)
home (We gave her everything money could buy)
She's leaving home after living alone
For so many years.

Father snores as his wife gets into her dressing gown
Picks up the letter that's lying there
Standing alone at the top of the stairs
She breaks down and cries to her husband Daddy our baby's gone
Why would she treat us so thoughtlessly
How could she do this to me.

She (We never thought of ourselves)
is leaving (Never a thought for ourselves)
home (We struggled hard all our lives to get by)
She's leaving home after living alone
For so many years.

Friday morning at nine o'clock she is far away
Waiting to keep the appointment she made
Meeting a man from the motor trade.

She (What did we do that was wrong)
is having (We didn't know it was wrong)
fun (Fun is the one thing that money can't buy)
Something inside that was always denied
For so many years.
She's leaving home. Bye, bye

In blatant contradiction with what is taught in most international descriptive and pedagogical grammars of the English language, in this text, the simple present is constantly used for the description of ongoing situations (*father snores*) as well as for the narration of punctual events limited in duration (*she gets down*; (the mother) *gets into her dressing-gown, picks up the*

letter, she breaks down and cries 'our baby's gone', etc.). What matters is that this tense is used when the speaker is stating the evidence, that is, construing a representation that could be produced by other observer, knower or speaker in the same position. The simple present states pieces of common knowledge, as in *Oil floats on water, dogs bark, William the Conqueror invades Britain in 1066* or knowledge that is accessible to anybody, as in *I pour the milk into the saucepan*. The event is inferred to be punctual in some contexts, recurrent in others (*I never have coffee after dinner*), or even more general (*Boys don't cry*); the scope of the “present”, narrow or large, virtual or actual, is given by contextual elements (mostly adverbs and other circumstantial) and cultural knowledge (*the Queen walks to the throne*: a stereotypical excerpt from the 1952 crowning ceremony radio report; *I pour the milk into the saucepan*: a stereotypical quote from a cook presenting a recipe during a TV programme; *I never have coffee after dinner*: a stereotypical declaration of a very common personal habit). In using this tense, a speaker implicitly states that she is not the inventor of the presentation activated by her verbal production, and she does claim the intellectual ownership of the idea. In this sense, simple tenses in English are dialogical: when used, they stage the speaker as a mediator relaying ideas which has not originated and for which he is authorized by an enunciative tradition, a dialogical depth, even a simulated one; she is talking in the name of the *common, collective self*. Among Celtic languages, breton has a specific mode for the verb *bezañ* “be”, the “frequentative” or “habitual” (in the past, present or future), to be used with all verbs to “express habits” and, mostly, general truths emanating from the community’s cultural mouth: *Koskoriad an heol e vez graet eus ar c’hoskoriad planedennoù a vevomp ennañ* “the group of planets we live in is known as the solar system” (Bottineau 2010a). This mode is to be distinguished from the “indicative”, which does not invoke the collective speaker.

In the Beatles’ lyrics, the “progressive form” is used only in critical moments: to reveal that “she’s leaving home” and, - even worse! - “she’s having fun”. In this use, someone is telling somebody something which had gone unnoticed or remained totally ignored so far: an addresser is causing an addressee to become aware of a fact, to construe a piece of knowledge which had previously been unavailable or inaccessible. While the simple present underlines the social dimension of the present and the collective ownership of or accessibility to the situation under scrutiny, the progressive present unveils an intersubjective discrepancy, underlines a mismatch between consciences, and declares that the speaker is the sole original owner and creator of the act of awareness that is being shared in the “communicative” process. Most of all, the progressive tense’s structure, *be + V-ing*, enacts the way in which the intersubjective bridge is gapped: the addressee is made to identify (*be*) an ongoing process (*-ing*), that is, a process whose beginning had remained unnoticed. What matters is not the objective fact that the ongoing event has a duration, but the very duration required by the access to actual awareness – there are things that require time for perception, understanding, and acceptance, and there is a verbal tense which makes it possible for a speaker to *conduct* – in the musical sense, as a *conductor, ein Dirigent* – this access to an awareness that had previously been recognized to be lacking.

Paradoxically, in highlighting the “middle” of the process, the progressive effectively conceals the accomplished and unaccomplished sections of its development, forcing the interpreter to reestablish their content on her own, leading her attention to the restoration of presupposition and the computation of goals and consequences, and more generally the inference of the relevance and significance of the event. In other words, only a *sample* of the event is given, forcing the interpretive process to complement it with a diagnosis, an act of semiosis. In a phenomenological and hypallactic shift, the material progression of the process is emphasized as a kind of trigger to activate or convey the psychological progression of the understanding: in Berthoz 2009’s terms, the English progressive is a *simplex* device for

processing a complex notion, the indexation of three progressions, (i) that of the perceivable or conceivable event, (ii) that of the act of perception or conception itself (cf. *I am seeing pink elephants and the time it takes to admit it*), (iii) that of the act of interpretation on the part of the receiver (*you are being cheated here*) if it is different from the former. In short, visualization, conceptualization and interpretation are three forms of realization, and the “progressive form” is the common operator for conducting them all, together or separately, communicatively or reflexively, with all the semantic, psychological, presuppositional, interlocutive effects which have largely been explored in the linguistic literature; and the very structural duration of the *be + V-ing* pattern is formally instrumental in conveying this effect (Chevallier & Delport 1995, Pottier 1995), making it a case in point for illustrating Merleau Ponty’s phenomenological stance that thought, and in this case an awareness of the coupling of external and internal ongoings, are born in the experience of the speaking process in its embodied dimension – a notion which could be condensed in a somewhat barbaric term, *thoughting*.

In the Beatles’ lyrics, this phenomenon is most apparent for several reasons. Firstly, there is an ambiguity: does “she’s leaving home” mean that the singer is imposing his truth to the mother, and/or revealing it to the listener? Does it mean that the mother is reflexively becoming aware of the situation and imposing this truth to herself, as if she were her own addressee, and/or is she revealing it to her husband? Who is concerned by the distance separating the observer from the event? The progressive formally stages an intersubjective mismatch which can be implemented in various configurations which are not mutually exclusive. Secondly, the gradualness of the progression is iconically displayed by the very syntax of the text: “she is leaving home” is in fact interrupted three times by the parents’ bracketed protests; the singer has to struggle to conduct the growth of awareness to its end, and the resistance is stated explicitly step by step (*why should..., how could..., and so on*).

In this song, the contrast between the two tenses is extremely sharp because of the literary dimension of the composition. In ordinary present-day English, however, the same contrast can easily be evidenced.

The progressive is normally used to “describe” (to conceptualize) a situation whose content is unacceptable for logical or cultural reasons: *I’m seeing pink elephants*; it is used when the situation is symptomatic of a fact that remains to be interpreted: *I’m being a blonde* (in context: “I can’t understand anything”). The intersubjective mismatch is often obvious: *‘We are seeing the world change’* (John Major); *While it is true that he is owning that watch, is he a legitimate owner?*; *If we’re not playing golf, I’m not going anywhere!* (= if you decide that we’re not playing golf, I decide that I’m not going anywhere); *Or maybe lesbianism is like a wig that straight girls put on - sure she’s being a blonde but she’s still brunette underneath!* (“being a blonde” in this context = looking like one to me).

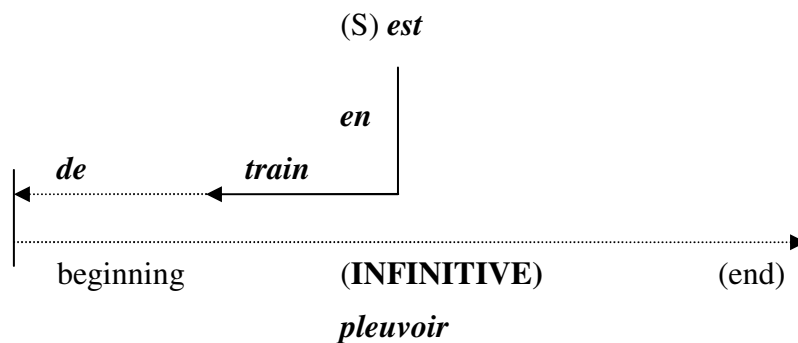
The progressive can be used either for a symptomatic situation (*Can’t you see I’m reading?*) or for the diagnosis of a situation: *When a young woman marries an old pensioner, she is marrying his fortune.* (Forum) *Looking at this silly hippie picture to your left, you would assume that she knows what it takes to embody and spread love, peace, and happiness. She’s got up the peace fingers, the peace symbol as a necklace, the groooovy bandana and tie-dye, the cool, easy-going dreads, and quite the cheesy smile. This picture says “I’m lovin. I’m peacin. I’m happying.”* Writers are relatively free to alternate the two forms in order to sort out backgrounded events and foregrounded, salient actions: *The members rise from their seats and form a procession. Now Mr Major is joining / (joins) Mr Blair and they are walking / (walk) down the centre aisle, through the door. Madam Speaker rises and takes her place in the procession (...). The head of the procession is just arriving at the door of the House of Lords...* In those examples, when the progressive is used, the speaker is clearly speaking in the name of her individual self, as opposed to the common self voiced by the simple tense.

The English verb tense system is remarkable for the way in which the simple / progressive contrast has been systematically grammaticalized. Romance languages like Italian, Spanish and French also possess progressive constructions analogous in structure but with major differences: in Spanish, *estar* + gerund is used to focalize the addressee's attention on a selected process without necessarily inferring that some diagnostic inference is to be plotted, and the event is backgrounded rather than foregrounded; moreover, the Spanish often use the progressive to avoid conjugating the verb itself in the simple form, a phenomenon known as *decondensation* or *deflexivity* (Bottineau & Begioni 2010). In German, a periphrasis *tun* + infinitive is often used by mothers talking to young children to avoid verb conjugation, and this turn is used systematically in Alsatian (a Germanic dialect spoken in Eastern France) in the form *düen* + infinitive. In French, the simple present tense is used systematically to present punctual situations, events or actions, or recurring ones, or generalities, pieces of shared knowledge attributed to the common self: *En 1962 le Général de Gaulle est rappelé au gouvernement.*

French also possesses a “progressive”, one that is remarkably complex in form and meaning, *être en train de* + infinitive, and does not coincide in use with the English progressive; and the specificity of this form has been widely debated (Anscombe 2005, Borillo 2005, Laca 2005, Lachaux 2005ab, Mortier 2005). This turn is used exclusively when the addresser is making the addressee “reboot” or update the perception or conceptualization of an event which had been detected or imagined by the one and not by the other. This updating process can be traced by analysing the sequence of operations displayed by the markers:

- (1) *être* instructs the interpreter to identify the already known subject with an oncoming attribute and modify the subject's properties;
- (2) *en* instructs her that this attribute is going to be a spatial-temporal conceptual domain such as *en France* (spatial) or *en marche* (temporal) – cf *in England / in operation*;
- (3) *train*, a deverbal noun from the verb *traîner* “to drag something along”, specifies this conceptual domain as a process in which a moving agent is dragging along an objet. This event schema instructs the interpreter to focus her attention bidirectionally, (i) prospectively, towards the future: the direction of the movement, so as to determine the goal of the process; and (ii) retrospectively, towards the past: the origin of the movement, so as to determine the nature of the dragged object;
- (4) *de* “from”, an ablative preposition, fixes the position of this origin, putting an end to the mental retrospection and preparing the interpreter's mind for a “mental U-turn” form that point;
- (5) the infinitive specifies the nature of the event, providing a schematic image of its whole span and duration.

In this complex instructional procedure, the interpreter's mind is not just left to collect a sample of the ongoing process and infer the implicit content of the accomplished and unaccomplished sections as is done by the English progressive; it explicitly is instructed to think back to the beginning of the unperceived or unconceived event and from there conceptualize the event from the beginning towards the end (as this is a schematic procedure of conceptualization and not a description of what is actually occurring in the perceivable world, the fact that the moment when the rain ends is not known is not a relevant issue: instructional patterns are meant to enact presentations, not to represent referential situations mimetically). For *Il est en train de pleuvoir* “it's raining”, this mental recapitulation can be schematized as follows:



The declaration *Il est en train de pleuvoir* does not just mean that “rain is going on”, it includes the notion that the speaker and/or hearer had failed to detect the beginning of the event and needs to be invited to reconstruct it as the rain as a semiotic signifier may have a relevant impact on the interpretation of the current situation and on the interlocutors’ emotional and intellectual response to ongoing events and plans of actions. If no such meaning is intended, in ordinary usage people will simply say *il pleut*, once again “it’s raining” in English, and not “it rains” in this context. The French progressive is more specialized than the English one, it is used to reduce cognitive discrepancies, which are usually distributed intersubjectively, as in: *Allô chérie, le train est en train d’entrer en gare* (the husband on the train is informing his wife at the station of a fact that she cannot see); *Regarde / Je te signale que tu es en train de tremper ta cravate dans ton assiette* (the wife is informing the husband that he has not noticed that his necktie is dipping in his plate).

In spoken French, it is possible to use *tu es en train de* + infinitive at the beginning of a narration to suggest a fictional setting in which the hearer is to picture herself in an imaginary situation, necessarily a non-perceivable one, inevitably to be “overlooked” in the first place: *Tu es en train de te préparer pour aller à un rendez-vous galant et tu constates qu’un énorme bouton te pousse sur le nez. Qu’est-ce que tu fais?* « Imagine that you are getting ready for a rendez-vous and suddenly you realize that an enormous pimple is growing on your nose. What do you do?” The interest of this construction is to avoid presenting the fictional event as unreal: the reader is expected to picture herself in this situation as if it were real, simulate the experience the predicament, and the violent emotional reaction that goes along with it.

In some cases, *être en train de* is used to tackle reflexive cognitive mismatches or conflicts within the inner self: *Serais-je en train de me faire avoir ?* Literally, “Could I be being cheated?” – a self-ironical remark in which a speaker pretends to be making herself become aware of her situation, often used in conversations and forums out of autoderision. As the question is not sincerely addressed to any listener, the use of the conditional *serais* is necessary: the French conditional combines an infinitive marker *-r-* for the expression of possibility with an personal inflection in the imperfect *-ais* (a suffixed reduction of Latin *habere*), indicating that the author of the hypothesis is not the actual speaker at the moment of the utterance, but a fictional instance of her own self belonging to her remembered past. The effect is that of a simulated internal dialogue between the duplicated instances of the ego, which results in an exclusion of the external addressee from the interrogative transaction.

This duplication is to be understood as a piece of emulation as the grammatical form does not reflect a subjective spontaneous psychological stance; on the contrary, it is the regular practice of the form in the cultural environment of the speaking community that will get individual speakers into the habit of both presenting and thinking themselves up along the lines of the external verbal practices they are exposed to and are bound to, literally, incorporate. Linguistic performance turns out to be a kind of play-acting in which the actor is unaware that she is playing a role so that she identifies her conscious, attentional and

intentional self with the role she is playing, eventually believing that what she says reflects her spontaneous free intuitions and ideas, in the illusion that she is encoding a message and meaning it. Speech is instrumental in the continuous reconstruction of a synthetic and coherent ego which is defined in the terms of attentional focussing and cognitive convergence around objects of preoccupation entailing emotional response, values, knowledge and projects. This convergence is intentionally conducted in the course of intersubjective verbal transactions and, in between, maintained by the practice of internal speech, endophasia.

For this reason, grammatical forms should not be interpreted as symbols standing for classes of referential situations or conceptual representations and image schemas, but as constructivistic embodied operators whose function is to coordinate the permanent ongoing regeneration of distributed egos between the human bodies in interaction, which may reduce to one in the case of endophasia; in any case, subjective coordination entails intersubjectivity, polyphony, and giving oneself a dialogic depth that will be a good match for other polysubjective non-verbal instances such as the ones postulated by psychoanalysis: speech makes it possible for the individual to tame the internal psychic crowd by redefining herself as a person and a member of the club forming the “external crowd”, constructing a complex ego that is itself organized in the constructivistic terms of social relations.

Thus, speech is instrumental in the continuous autodetermination of the mind, the self and experience through socialized behaviour, that is, embodied actions that will have concerted effects on intersubjective connections and the subjects that instantiate them, in a classical phenomenological fashion. Maturana and Varela name this autodeterminative process *autopoiesis*. The embodied processes by which a subject acts upon an intersubjective network within an environment that is itself construed by a species and a group along the lines of its own dynamic processes (involving perception, memory, knowledge and intentional categorization, affordances – all the components of Von Ueksküll’s *Umwelt*) is known as an *enactive interface within a consensual domain*. Speech happens to operate as a specific ensemble of conventionalized embodied procedures and is best defined as an *enactive interfacial system within a conventional subdomain* that is itself a part of the general consensual domain rather than a separate system beside the world and out of the human body and mind, as structuralism would have it. The difference between the English progressive and the French one illustrates the way in which a grammatical form is in fact a piece of procedural enactive interface whose activation will automatically co-determine the attentional progress and concentration of the related minds towards intrasubjective and intersubjective coordination and awareness.

This analysis does not only concern the present, it must be applied to other tenses to specify the way in which a tense will contribute to the present adjustment of coordinated minds. In French, the simple past (*passé simple*) will instruct the hearer to conceptualize a past event of which he had never heard of, which was never accessible in perception or discourse, and is therefore not available in long-term memory: *il entra dans la pièce* “he entered the room”. This tense is used for historical and fictional narrations in which the addressee is *taught* about the content of an authentic or imaginary past; and the French simple past is never used in reflexive endophasia (unlike the English simple past). By contrast, the imperfect (*imparfait*) is used by a speaker who stages herself as executing an act of remembrance, as in the following TV advertisement for a detergent for ovens, screened by the film actress Alice Sapritch: *Avant, j'étais moche. Ma vie était un enfer. Je l'ai rencontré, il a tout changé... Jex Four. D'une main, je vaporise. Ca m'amuse ! Je laisse agir. C'est propre. Jex Four, il agit à fond. C'est chouette la vie !* The imperfect can be used for personal souvenirs, as in this example, or for general knowledge, that is, remembering what one has learnt at school or anywhere else through verbal interactions : *Les Gaulois vivaient dans des huttes* « The Gauls lived in huts ». The imperfect neutralizes the difference between the remembrance of personal experience

acquired through non-verbal events (the *episodic memory*) and the remembrance of knowledge acquired through occurrences of speech (the *semantic memory*, acquired through episodes of speech which are normally not remembered as such, except in historic circumstances such as the political examples given above). Hence the ambiguity of examples like *L'instant d'après, le train démarrait*, which can mean either “one moment later, the train derailed” or “one moment later, the train would have derailed (if the emergency brakes had not been efficient enough)” – either the imperfect recalls the actual event, or it recalls the mere declaration that it was bound to happen in the circumstances.

As verbal and non-verbal memories are treated alike, the imperfect is said to be a *polyphonic* tense in that it entails interpreting a piece of knowledge which has already been stated and can be retrieved as an object: the tense mobilizes two “voices”, that of the speaker at the moment of actual speech, and that of a virtual “enunciator” to which the original statement is to be attributed. The virtual enunciator does not need to be consciously specified in the interpretation, but can be modeled in various formats depending on the context: *Avant j'étais moche* “formerly, I was ugly” can refer to either an actual saying *Je suis moche* “I am ugly” stated by the unhappy woman in front of her mirror or to the mere realization of the perceptual fact – all the more so as perception does not only consist in processing signals, it requires the connection of occurrences with categories and the attribution of properties, values and affordances to the object, making it a subject of a form of non-verbal predication that is structurally analogous to the propositional and clausal syntax of human languages.

In journalese, the imperfect is often used to recall a notorious event that is assumed as a piece of collective, shared knowledge on account of its recurring exposure in the media: *Le 26 avril 1986 explosait la centrale nucléaire de Tchernobyl*. In this usage, the addressee is made aware that she should not be learning this fact on reading the sentence, and is informed that the speaker's intent is not to expand on that historic event, but to add new considerations in relation to this topic, such as: *How far is the old sarcophagus from collapsing? Is the projected one financed and under construction? Are there still as many victims as before? How are survivors and descendants coping with their plight?* and so on. Obviously this use of the imperfect cannot be explained in aspectual terms involving the duration of the event (and let alone its recurrence), the descriptive attitude of the narrator; the Gestaltian backgrounding effect can be invoked, but it falls short from accounting for the real stake of this use: recalling an intersubjectively distributed piece of cultural knowledge and instructing an addressee (i) to position herself in relation to this supposedly shared knowledge and (ii) to expect incoming additional information about the topic.

Under this definition, the imperfect is instrumental in profiling the ongoing course of mind of the interacting consciences: it “refers” to the past, but it operates “in the present”, or even *makes the present*, in a specific way which differs from the effect of other tenses: the simple past *La centrale nucléaire de Tchernobyl explosa en 1986* informs the addressee about a past event that is not an object of memory; the present perfect (*passé composé*) *La centrale de Tchernobyl a explosé en 1986* produces the same effect with an additional dimension, the connection with an awareness of the current state of the world (what radioactivity there is left 25 years after the explosion) and the way in which it affects experiencers, including the interlocutors in the present. The simple present (*présent*) *La centrale nucléaire de Tchernobyl explose en 1986* focusses the addressee's attention on the awareness of a collective piece of cultural knowledge that does not even require an act of memory to be remembered and is supposed to be readily available to any thinker's mind at any moment in social life, a bit like the Ten Commandments. The future tense (*futur*) could even be used, in a context in which systematic negligences in the eighties on the part of Soviet engineers are denounced: the writer could assert her judgment by anticipating the event categorically *La centrale nucléaire*

de Tchernobyl explosera en 1986, and be perfectly understood even if her text is written in 2011.

In journalese, the future is often shifted to the past in the form of the conditional so as to attribute this kind of categorical prediction to a past voice that is not identified with that of the current speaker, creating an effect analogous to that of free reported speech: *Le Président Obama se rendrait à Tchernobyl en 2012* “It is alleged that President Obama is to visit Chernobyl in 2012”. This polyphonic dimension of the imperfect, both as a component of the conditional (see above *Serais-je en train de me faire avoir?*) and as a simple tense, accounts for all of its other uses: in the protasis of conditional sentences *Si j’étais un homme* “If I were a man” (title of a famous song composed and interpreted by Diane Tell) the underlying assumption is, in the present “je ne suis pas un homme”, assumed by the current speaker, is contradicted by *si* (a polemic “yes” as in *Oui! –Non! – Si!*) in the virtual mouth of an enunciator who is not identified with the speaker and whose own proposition is presented as an object of memory: the hypothesis is construed as a conflict between two positions, one implicitly assumed in the present by the speaker, and the other explicitly rejected as an object of memory attributed to and defended by a virtual enunciator that insists on imposing it all the same, in a simulated controversy. Thus, the hypothesis in the protasis is best defined as a simulated reality obtained by means of a simulated debate between two instances of the speaker, a locutor whose position is accepted and an enunciator whose position is rejected. This remarkable structure illustrates the way in which such a complex mental space as hypothesis or unrealis can be construed by means of a dramatic setting involving a controversy between several abstract instances of the speaker’s self: the subject is made to conceptualize abstraction along the lines of an intersubjective discussion; which confirms the idea, if need be, that reality and unreality, the actual and the virtual, the “present” and the “non-present” in all its forms are conventional categories that can be achieved only through constructivistic negotiation, even in the case of personal ideation.

In French, as well as in English and other languages, all tenses are intrinsically “present” in the sense that using them results in profiling the interlocutors’ course of mind at the moment of the verbal interaction. Tenses are mainly dedicated to this task, which involves a great deal of intersubjective negotiation: the representation of time (epochs and durations) is a final construct rather than a semantic or psychological primitive to be encoded and, even in the case of the “present”, it is difficult to find a tense or construction that can be directly mapped against a spatio-temporal image schema that unequivocally formalizes the way in which time is construed in experience and out of the social interplay. Some cases can be found indeed, like the tense system in Tagalog (Philippines). In this language, the agglutinative morphology of the verb of the present tense incorporates elements which enact the present time as a transitional threshold between the future and the past:

Root (R)	<i>isip</i>	“thought”
Root + focalizer (F) (agent)	<i>magisíp</i>	imperative think!; infinitive to think
R + F + Partial reduplication of the initial syllable	<i>magísip</i>	future
R + modified F	<i>nagisíp</i>	past
R + mF + PRIS	<i>nagísip</i>	present

The root *isip* designates the notion of “thought”, to be incorporated into a noun, a verb or any other word class by the relevant morphemes. The prefix *mag* focalizes an agent and yields a verb in the imperative *magisíp* that can also be used as an “infinitive” in complex constructions. This combination of a root and a focalizer is taken as the base form of the verb, and all other processes to produce “tenses” are additional: the future is obtained by a partial

reduplication of the initial syllable of the root *magísip*, in a kind of iconic stutter which delays the root in form as well as in meaning (or effect) and suggests futurity. The past is obtained by a modification of the initial consonant of the agent focalizer *mag / nag*: the agent is virtualized and relegated to memory, suggesting a past tense *nagísip*. The present is obtained by cumulating those two processes: *nagísip*. The “present” is thus conceptualized as a transitional threshold separating an incoming future and an outgoing past: morphology enacts protension and retension and, as a signifier, turns those philosophical categories into learnable cognitive processes. In Tagalog, the construal of the present is transparent in morphology, and it does not seem to involve intersubjectivity, contrary to all that we have observed in a sample of Romance and Germanic languages. This means that the very nature of the cognitive processes which are evidenced in morphology is not a universal constant and that the way in which a grammatical apparatus focusses on monitoring the constructivistic dimension of meaning and/or its configurational dimension in the form of image schemas is in itself a typological variable. There is no necessary, predetermined way to construe the present in languages.

Conclusion

Languages do not “represent” or “encode” a present that exists in parallel, they stage verbally the mental conception of a certain way of experiencing it psychologically. The problem is that speech is by definition interpersonal and entails the confrontation of several psychological central units or cognitive subjects, not just one. For this reason, grammar will not always encode a unifying and universal representation of the present that is supposedly common to all minds independently of the act of speech. On the contrary, a grammar, as a system of embodied morphological signifiers that one uses in order to produce intersubjectively distributed cognitive effects, is bound to incorporate in its morphosyntactic distributions the answer for an omnipresent question: how do the forms to be used by one subject tackle the question of the differentiation of the cognitive paths that may have to be followed by differentiated interpreting subjects at the moment when and in the situation in which the statement is produced?

Present tenses are usually uninflected forms whose center varies from the interlocutors to the community, and this variation accounts for the way in which those tenses vary from “immediate ongoingness” to “general truths”. Some languages like Tagalog evidence a kind of spontaneous, empirical philosophy of the present moment as a threshold between imaginary mental spaces. Progressive periphrases are complex routines / procedures that use the dynamic conceptualization of ongoingness as a phenomenological engine for the benefit of the interpreter, either reflexive or addressed. In the latter case, the intersubjective gap is widened and the difference in knowledge between the consciences in confrontation is underlined. It seems that this is the only case when the presentation of the present is actually centered on one specific subject selected by one determined speaker. This confirms that languaging is by nature dialogic and social; adopting an individual stance is not impossible, but it is a more complex issue which requires ad hoc procedures that do not emerge spontaneously in all language types.

Rather than saying that “constructions encode image schemas / representations / mental patterns” I prefer to say that verbal practices, understood as formal procedures as well as embodied routines, train the subject into the art of forming and re-forming semantic scenarii and “scenes”, that is, to enact them. I define speech as a *tekhne kognitike*, and art of thinking by corporal means and embodying social routines, a way in which the brain uses the body as a levy and engine to produce mental states that can neither be achieved directly, nor invented

individually. This is why language organizes the mind as well as it federates the selves of the species into a community that constitutes and stages itself as a unified agent on the environmental scene. Redefining languaging in the context of embodied and distributed cognition has far-reaching consequences, and certainly not only for linguists. Different languages, or embodied thinking techniques, may thus yield interculturally compatible – and translatable – results, so that it is not necessary to hypothesize (Flamm 1990) that languages go as far as shaping ideologies and philosophies. Verbal action is not meant to restrict the knowledge we elaborate about the world, but to enhance it and open it as widely as possible, albeit in culturally specific ways.

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