The role of the imperfect in Romance counterfactuals

I. THE PUZZLE OF THE COUNTERFactual. The multifarious uses of the Romance imperfect – progressive (1a), generic/habitual (1b), counterfactual conditional (1c), and modal displacement of planning (1d) – have long challenged a unified theory.

(1) a. Jean traversait la rue, quand il s’est fait écraser.
   ‘Jean was crossing the street, when he got crushed.’

b. À l’époque, les femmes portaient des corsets.
   ‘At the time, women wore corsets.’

c. Si Jean arrivait demain, il rencontrerait Jane.
   ‘If Jean arrived tomorrow, he would have met Jane.’

d. Hier encore, on allait à la plage cet été. [adapted from Cipria & Roberts 2000]
   ‘Still yesterday, we were supposed to go to the beach this summer.’

Yesterday still, we went imperfect to the beach this summer.

Cipria & Roberts (2000), emphasizing the progressive, generic, and modal uses, argue that the imperfect is ultimately a species of modal quantification with promiscuous modal flavor. Ippolito (2004), on the other hand, characterizes the counterfactual and modal interpretations without the more classical uses of the imperfect. Despite the desirability of unification, we suggest that the semantic element responsible for the progressive, habitual, and generic uses (for us, the modal IMP, (2)) be divorced from the counterfactual and modal uses (provided by FUT (4)), given that the latter lack the traditional hallmarks of the imperfect: atelicity/ongoingness, obligatory past reference, and the necessity for contextual framing (Delfitto & Bertinetto 1995, Bononi 1995). Nonetheless, we propose that the imperfect may be treated uniformly as the spell-out of the IMP morpheme and that counterfactual uses contain both IMP and FUT, both visible out of the IMP morpheme and that counterfactual uses contain both IMP and FUT, both visible on the French conditionnel (Iatrudou 2000). In addition to providing generic quantification, IMP additionally presupposes the pastness and framing hallmarks of the imperfective (Pianesi & Giorgi 1997, 2004). Crucially, we claim that IMP quantifies vacuously in counterfactuals, a consequence of stacking modals under Hacquard’s (2006) event relative modality. The anteriority presupposition, however, remains in effect, triggering the counterfactual nature of conditionals with imperfect (Iatrudou 2000, Condoravdi 2001, Ippolito 2004, Arregui 2007).

II. THE SEMANTICS OF IMP. We propose that a single operator IMP is responsible for the progressive, habitual and generic meanings associated with imperfect morphology. We further assume that modal accessibility relations are relative not to worlds but to event pronouns (Hacquard 2006). Within this picture, we take IMP to be equivalent to Portner’s (1998) progressive, as modal quantification over worlds compatible with the circumstances of some event. The anteriority and framing requirements we analyze as presuppositions IMP places on the time of the event in question (Giorgi & Pianesi 1997, 2004). This serves as the nonfinal sub-event of the progressive event instantiated in the actual world.

(2) [[IMP]] w = \lambda x P_x : \top \text{-time}(c) < t(b) \land t(c) \subseteq \top \text{-time}(c) \forall w \in \text{Best}(\text{Circ}, N, l, c, p)

\exists e \in e' P(w)(e \checkmark 1)]\text{, where } t_b \text{ is the local evaluation time.}

(3) skeletal syntactic tree: e_{w, l} \lambda x \lambda e \lambda x' \lambda e' [x \in \text{ John run } e']

Following Ferreira (2005), we assume that habits are simply IMP quantification over plural events. Finally, we assume that generics without verifying instances (This machine crushes oranges) are a special type of habits (i.e., plural event), which crucially requires an actual teleological construction/promisatory event, corresponding to a portion of the preparatory process (Moens & Steedman 1988, Cipria & Roberts 2000): as with progressive, part of the event (habit) is instantiated in the actual world (smoking events in ‘John smokes’, the intentions of the engine in ‘This machine crushes oranges’).

III. COUNTERFactual USES. The counterfactual conditional in (1c) contains a conditionnel matrix verb, which Iatrudou (1990) notes is the imperfect above the future. We take the future to also be an event-relative metaphysical modal, future-shifting a la Abusch (1998), and assume the corresponding modally stacked syntactic structure in (6):

(4) [[FUT]] w = \lambda x P_x \lambda w \lambda o \lambda v \lambda w' \lambda e \lambda P_{\text{Best}}(\text{Meta}(e) \text{ where } p(t_b \in x(\forall w)) [q(t_b \in x(\forall w) - 1].

Thus both IMP and FUT are present in a counterfactual conditional. However, as both quantify relative to characteristics of \(e\), IMP vacuously quantifies over its nuclear scope. The presuppositions of IMP survive intact, requiring that \(e_{\text{ IMP}}\) be located in a salient past interval.

(5) skeletal syntactic tree: e_{w, l} \lambda x \lambda [\text{IMP } e] \lambda [\text{FUT } e] \lambda [3e' \in \text{ he, arrive e'}] \lambda [3e' \in \text{ he, meet e' Jane}]

Thus both IMP and FUT are present in a counterfactual conditional. As both quantify relative to characteristics of \(e\), IMP vacuously quantifies over its nuclear scope. The presuppositions of IMP survive intact, requiring that \(e_{\text{ IMP}}\) be located in a salient past interval.

(6) [[(1c)] w = \lambda e \in \text{TOP \text{- TIME}(e) \text{ vacuous}}

\forall w \in \text{Best}(\text{Meta}(e) \text{ where } p(t_b \in x(\forall w)) [q(t_b \in x(\forall w) - 1].

Thus both IMP and FUT are present in a counterfactual conditional. However, as both quantify relative to characteristics of \(e\), IMP vacuously quantifies over its nuclear scope. The presuppositions of IMP survive intact, requiring that \(e_{\text{ IMP}}\) be located in a salient past interval.

IV. FRAMING INTERVALS. We have claimed the topical event must be framed by a contextually-provided temporal interval, thus accounting for the infelicity of “out of the blue” uses of progressives/habituals/generics. Overt temporal adverbs do this by updating the context (cf. Bittner 2007). However, note that topical intervals may be evoked by reference to individuals and as well:

(8) Les dinosaures mangeaient de la viande.
   ‘The dinosaurs ate meat.’

V. THE SEMANTIC ROLE OF IMP.

Recall that while the progressive/habitual/generic use of the imperfect requires framing, the counterfactual use does not. Given the fact in (8), we suggest that this is because the antecedent itself provides specification of the interval when \(p\) was settled (Ippolito 2008). Thus, reference to an individual’s potential arrival in (1c) makes salient his plan for travel, and hence the interval during which that plan was formulated (the past fork event).