

Passé composé and *imparfait* in Japanese learners of French

– With particular consideration of the aspect hypothesis –

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Summary

A longitudinal survey and free conversation analysis of Japanese students of French found that the lexical aspect of verbs plays an important role in French second language acquisition. Concerning the stage of acquisition of activity verbs, the longitudinal survey detected only small progress in the correct selection of *passé composé* (PC) or *imparfait* (IMP), while in the free conversation data, activity verbs were often used in PC but also in IMP, which suggests a progression to the next stage of acquisition.

Keywords:

passé composé, *imparfait*, Japanese Learner of French, Aspect Hypothesis

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Introduction

In the second language acquisition (SLA) of tense-aspect morphology, it is well known that “the inherent (lexical) aspect of verbs has a strong influence on L2 acquisition”, (Shirai 2002: 455). It is important to note here that the lexical aspect of verbs refers to the inherent semantic categories of verbs. According to the tradition of (Vendler 1957), verbs have four different lexical aspects: state, activity, accomplishment, and achievement.¹ In the field of French SLA, a number of previous studies have found evidence of a significant effect of lexical aspect on the acquisition of French tense-aspect morphology: (Bergström 1997), (Howard 2002), (Howard 2017), (Izquierdo 2009), (Kilhstedt 2002), (Labeau 2002), (Labeau 2005), (Labelle 2002), (Shirai 2002). However, including the relatively large differences in SLA situations—that is, classrooms or natural settings, French as the second or third language, Europe or Asia, and probably speaking or writing tasks—the process of acquisition of the tense-aspect morphology of French does not necessarily lead to convergence but rather to divergence. Excessive use of *imparfait* (IMP) has been reported among Canadian learners of French in immersion, (Harley and Swain 1978), as well as an overuse of *passé composé* (PC) among English natives; see (Labelle 2002: 78). As can be seen from these previous studies, the characteristics in the use of IMP and PC are not only found in Japanese speakers, but also in learners of different languages. Although these findings are not directly related to our study, they are significant from a cross-linguistic point of view.

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¹ We are fully aware of the theoretical limitations and critical discussions of these four types based on three semantic features; (KIHLSTEDT 2002: 333) and others. In fact, the distinction between activity and accomplishment verbs often seems very difficult to determine. At present, we do not yet know a more effective or logical classification than the four verb types in Vendler’s tradition.

1. Lexical aspect and the aspect hypothesis (AH)

	State verb	Activity verb	Accomplishment verb	Achievement verb
Punctual	–	–	–	+
Telic	–	–	+	+
Dynamic	–	+	+	+

Figure 1. Lexical aspect of verbs.

Figure 1 illustrates four different verb types based on three semantic features. Figure 1 is a slightly modified version of Shirai, see (Shirai 2002: 456), itself based on (Andersen 1989) and (Andersen 1991). Three semantic features, *punctual*, *telic*, and *dynamic*, are conceived of as inherent in the four verb types. The lexical aspect represents the temporal characteristics of a verb or verb phrase. *To be*, *to believe*, and *to know* are state verbs. State verbs do not have the semantic features of punctuality, telicity, or dynamicity, but usually represent a static state and are rarely used in a progressive form. In contrast, activity verbs, such as *to live*, *to run*, or *to study*, differ from state verbs in that they name dynamic and non-static events. Activity verbs can take a progressive form to depict an event that is in progress at the reference time of the sentence. Accomplishment verbs, such as *to arrive at*, *to draw a picture*, and *to go to*, differ from activity verbs because their events are *telic* (cf. Greek τέλος ‘final goal’) and have a definite goal. Therefore, an accomplishment verb possesses an explicit end, and its progressive form means that the event is approaching its goal. Finally, achievement verbs include verbs such as *to be born*, *to find*, and *to die* that not only have a goal, but also—in contrast with accomplishment verbs—are characterized by the event being realized in a moment. In other words, their action is *punctual*.

The aspect hypothesis (AH) concerns the order of acquisition of lexical aspect and applies in both L1 and L2 acquisition. In languages like French, where the past perfective aspect²—that is, PC—and the past imperfective aspect—that is, IMP—are strictly distinguished as grammatical categories, previous studies of the AH have demonstrated that no matter what a learner’s L1 is, the following two tendencies will be observed in the learner’s French.

First, PC will be introduced in the achievement verb and the accomplishment verb and, later, in the activity verb and the state verb. The

² More precisely, French PC is used to mark both *perfective* and *perfect* values. PC as perfect can refer to a past situation that has present relevance, such as the present result of a past event; (Comrie 1976: 12).

acquisition of PC begins with a prototype of the perfective aspect, i.e., achievement and accomplishment verbs, and afterwards, it extends to peripheral members of the other tense-aspect categories, activity and state verbs. (Shirai 2002: 457). The acquisition of IMP generally lags behind that of PC, beginning mainly with state and activity verbs. The AH posits the implicational order of acquisition, in which IMP always comes after PC.

Examples (1) and (2) were extracted from free conversations among Japanese learners of French as exemplifying typical combinations of state verbs and activity verbs with IMP.

(1) The state verb *être* ‘to be’ in IMP

[Context: Talking about overseas travel]

J01 – (...) quand j’étais en France j’ai voyagé beaucoup euh #³ en Europe
(jpto2j01kt1_11_a)

‘(...) when I was in France, uh, I traveled a lot in Europe’

(2) The activity verb *habiter* ‘to live’ in IMP

[Context: Asked where you were living in Paris]

Y11 – j’habitais très près de République (jpto2y11ah1_11_a)

‘I lived right next to République’

The state verb *être* represents the background situation of the event of traveling in (1), and the activity verb *habiter* describes the past dynamic state of the speaker in (2).

(3) The accomplishment verb *venir à* ‘to come to’ in PC

[Context: I was learning dance before I entered college]

S01 - mais euh comme je *suis venue à* Tokyo (jpto2rs1jt1_11_a)

‘but uh, as I came to Tokyo (so I’m not learning dance anymore)’

(4) The achievement verb *naître* ‘to born’ in PC

[Context: Talking about Japanese-ness]

JT1 - # moi personnellement moi je suis complètement japonais c’est-à-dire mes parents sont japonais je *suis né* au Japon (jpto2rs1jt1_11_a)

‘I personally I am completely Japanese in other words, my parents are Japanese and I was born in Japan’

³ # stands for a pause. Free conversation is not punctuated. We deleted some tags added by our francophone transcriber because they were not pertinent to our analysis.

The accomplishment verb *venir à*, which has an explicit goal, is generally used in PC, and the achievement verb *naître*, which is endowed with both telicity and punctuality, is also usually realized in PC.

2. The longitudinal survey

We would like to introduce the results of a longitudinal survey conducted in October 2011 and June 2012. First, in October 2011, we surveyed 22 first-year students at the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies who had just learned PC and IMP, and in June 2012, after a 7-month interval, we administered the same survey to 11 of the 22 students. The questionnaire comprises a series of forced questions in which the respondents must choose either PC or IMP for 81 infinitives, including all four lexical aspects, in each context. The survey had a 45-minute time limit, dictionaries were not available, and Japanese translations were added for some questions.

Based on the data collected in this way, we analyzed the percentages of prototypical combinations that the AH asserts will be acquired at an early stage of learning. In other words, on the one hand, we investigated the proportion of PC for achievement and accomplishment verbs versus the proportion of IMP for state and activity verbs. Figure 2 compares the percentages of each combination for 2011 and 2012.

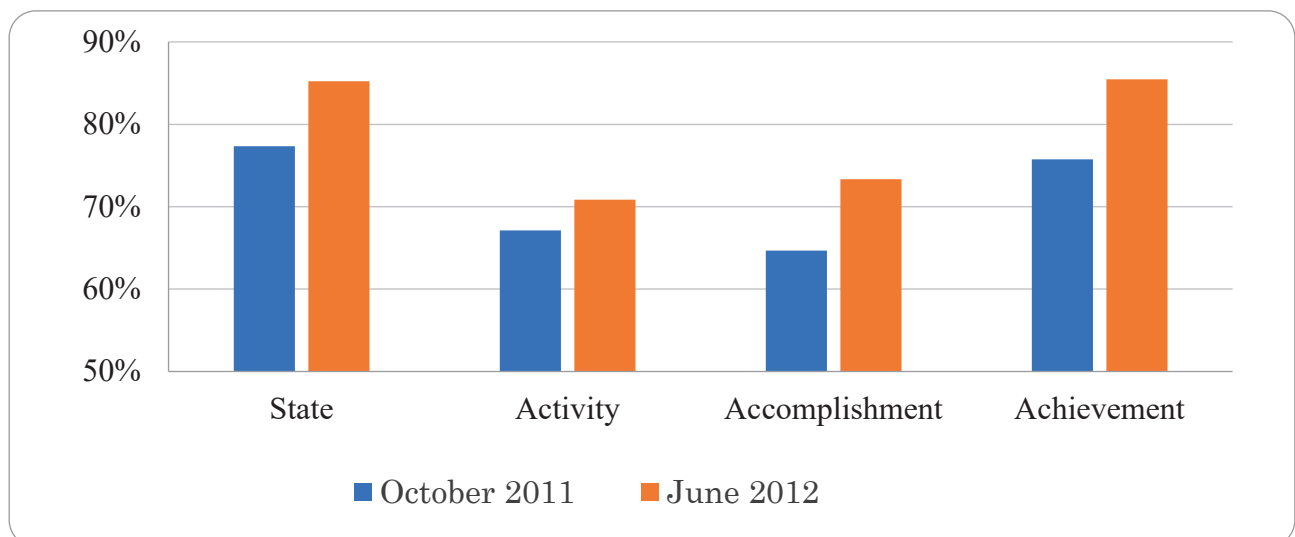


Figure 2. Longitudinal survey administered in October 2011 and June 2012.

	October 2011	June 2012	Gap 2012– 2011
State	77.4%	85.2%	+7.9%
Activity	67.1%	70.9%	+3.7%
Accomplishment	64.7%	73.3%	+8.7%
Achievement	75.7%	85.5%	+9.7%

Figure 3. Percentage of combinations of four lexical aspects

First, for all four types, the percentage of combinations was higher in 2012 than in 2011 (Figure 3). With the passage of time, the proportion of PC increased for achievement verbs by 9.7 percentage points and accomplishment verbs by 8.7 percentage points, and that of IMP for state verbs by 7.9 percentage points and activity verbs by 3.7 percentage points. Next, since the first scores in 2011, we can see that our students already had a strong tendency to choose PC for achievement verbs and IMP for state verbs. This phenomenon supports the AH. Third, in contrast with other lexical aspects, activity verbs showed hardly any progress in 2012 regarding the appropriate verbal tense,⁴ with a gap of 3.73 percentage points. These results of the longitudinal survey bring us to the following research questions.

3. Research questions

In the present article, in order to investigate the subsequent learning process of Japanese learners, we analyzed the use of PC and IMP in Japanese learners of higher than basic French in the free conversation of intermediate- and advanced-level learners of French. In these conversations, we analyzed the use of PC and IMP and their combinations with the four verb types. Specifically, 536 tokens of PC and IMP in free conversation were classified into the four verb types, and the combinations of the verb type and PC or IMP were investigated.

The free conversation data were recorded on March 20, 2016, from 5 male and 11 female Waseda University students. All of them have studied abroad in French-speaking countries and are at the B1 level or above in the European Framework of Reference. They held free conversations in pairs, where in general one was the speaker and the other the listener. In some cases, the speaker and listener took turns. The topic of the free conversations was a personal experience in the French-speaking world.

⁴ In French, the perfective PC is only used in the past tense, while the imperfective tense is available in both present and past tense, i.e., IMP.

4. PC and IMP in free conversations of intermediate- and advanced-level Japanese learners

Figure 4 shows the percentages of combinations between PC and IMP for each of the four verb types in free conversation. We notice that only state verbs stand out in combination with IMP. In a survey of 75 American university students using a description task of part of a film, Bergström arrived at the same conclusion. Students marked dynamic verbs in PC—that is, achievement, accomplishment, and activity verbs—while they marked non-dynamic verbs in IMP—that is, state verbs (Bergström 1997). She also found an implicational sequence of acquisition in which a stable usage of IMP only appeared at an advanced level. In our free conversation data, activity, accomplishment, and achievement verbs appeared very frequently in combination with PC. As claimed under the AH, the combinations state verb + IMP and achievement verb + PC are acquired in an early stage of learning, and the same tendency was observed in the longitudinal survey mentioned above. The intermediate- and advanced-level students appear to have mastered these typical combinations in free conversation. Now, let us consider the others—that is, activity and accomplishment verbs.

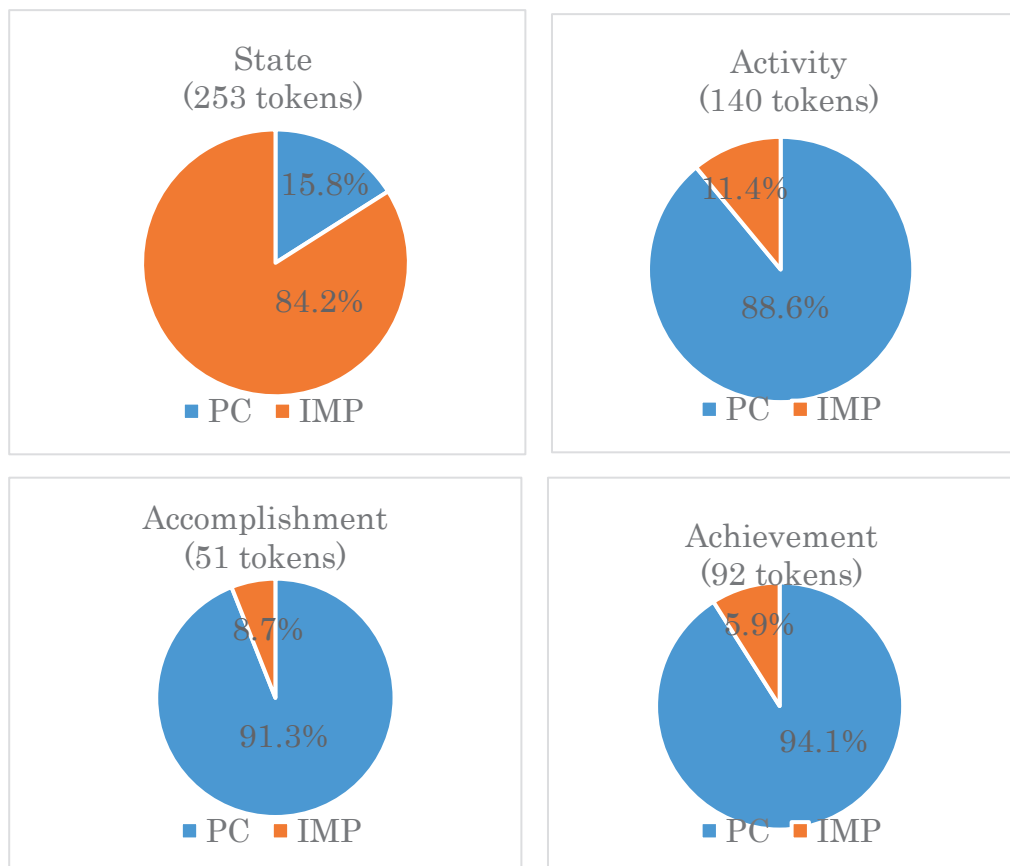


Figure 4. Four verb types and PC and IMP in free conversation.

There were 51 tokens of accomplishment verbs in total, but the verbs used were significantly biased. The verb *aller à* ‘to go to’ was used 46 times, accounting for 90.2% of the total, occurring 45 times in PC and only once in IMP. *Aller* ‘to go’ is the most typical intransitive verb that takes *être* as an auxiliary when rendering PC, and is one of the most familiar PC forms in basic French grammar.

5. PC and activity verbs

As seen above, activity verbs are generally used in IMP form from the early stages of learning. However, it is speculated that activity verbs may be used in PC forms by intermediate and advanced learners. We will examine this issue in this section.

5.1. The longitudinal survey

The relationship between activity verbs and PC or IMP will need to be examined in more detail while taking into consideration the contexts in which they were used. We first analyzed the results of the longitudinal survey. In the examples below, there was clear progress in 2012 over 2011. In (5), (6), and (7), the percentage of students who chose PC for the three activity verbs was 63.6% (*voir qqn*), 63.6% (*faire des progrès*), and 54.5% (*manger*), respectively, in October 2011. In contrast, 7 months later, 90.9% of the students selected PC in these sentences in June 2012.

(5) The activity verb *voir qqn* ‘to see someone’ in PC

A: Claire, tu n’as pas assisté à la réunion hier après-midi, je *ne t’ai pas vue*?

B: Oui, c’est vrai, je ne suis pas venue.

A: ‘Claire, you didn’t attend the meeting yesterday afternoon? I didn’t see you.’

B: ‘Yeah, it’s true, I didn’t come.’

(6) The activity verb *faire des progrès* ‘to make progress’ in PC

[Context: Asked why you performed better than the other students]

Ils *ont fait beaucoup de progrès* grâce à leur professeur.

‘Thanks to their teacher, they have made great progress.’

(7) The activity verb *manger* ‘to eat’ in PC

Il *a mangé* tellement de crème au chocolat qu’il a été malade.

‘He ate too much chocolate cream and got sick.’

In (5), *je ne t'ai pas vue* 'I didn't see you' states the cause for Claire's absence from the meeting the day before. In (6), there is a clear relationship between cause and effect. *Beaucoup de progrès* 'a great progress' was realized *grâce à leur professeur* 'thanks to their teacher'. In (7), the cause of his illness was eating too much chocolate cream. In this way, it can be said that the activity verb is put in PC in contexts expressing a causal relationship. Perhaps once the context is interpreted as a cause and effect relationship, an activity verb obtains a telic meaning that is not originally found in it, rendering it similar to an accomplishment verb, allowing the use of PC. In (8) and (9), the causal relationship is clearly expressed by *parce que* 'because'. In all, 27.3% (*grandir*) and 54.5% (*prendre*) of our students chose PC in 2011 but 54.5% and 72.7% in 2012.

(8) The activity verb *grandir* 'to grow up' in PC

[Context: As a reason to live in a large apartment]

Nous avons déménagé parce que nos enfants *ont grandi*.

'As the children grew older, we moved.'

(9) The activity verb *prendre la route* 'to take the road' in PC

[Context: Asked why the arrival was delayed]

Nous sommes arrivés en retard parce que nous avons *pris la mauvaise route*.

'We arrived late because we took the wrong road.'

Judging from these examples, it appears that the lexical aspect of verbs is closely related to the selection of PC or IMP, but this is not the sole factor, and in activity verbs, the context of cause and effect also influences the choice of PC.

Next, let us look at the examples in IMP. (10) and (11) are examples depicting a past state or a background situation that will be regarded as typical examples of IMP. For activity verbs like *attendre* 'to wait for' and *hurler* 'to growl', 95.5% and 90.9% of the students selected IMP in 2011, respectively, and in 2012, everyone chose IMP.

(10) The activity verb *attendre* 'to wait for' in IMP

[Context: Because my colleague said he was looking for Isabelle]

Tout à l'heure, j'ai vu Isabelle qui *attendait* l'autobus.

'Just now, I saw Isabel waiting for the bus.'

(11) The activity verb *hurler* ‘to growl’ in IMP

[Context: My friend told me I was sleepy]

Hier soir, vers minuit, j’ai entendu des chats qui *hurlaient* et qui se battaient.

‘Last night, midnight, I heard a cat growl and quarrel.’

However, in (12), it was difficult for our students to select the IMP even when describing the past state or background. Only 22.7% selected IMP for the activity verb *rouler très doucement* ‘to run slowly’ in 2011 and 36.4% in 2012.

(12) Je me souviens très bien de ma première leçon de conduite. C’était un 12 octobre. Je suis montée dans la voiture et je me suis installée près du moniteur. J’ai démarré. Je *roulais très lentement*. Le moniteur très gentil, il me parlait doucement. Tout allait bien mais il a commencé à neiger, je ne voyais plus rien!

‘I remember the first car lesson very well. It was October 12th. I got into the car and sat next to the instructor. I started the engine. I ran slowly. The instructor was very kind and spoke kindly to me. Everything went well, but it started to snow and I couldn’t see anything!’

5.2. Free conversation data

According to the AH, the use of PC begins with achievement and accomplishment verbs and, afterwards, is extended to activity and state verbs. Since the data providers of the free conversation are intermediate- and advanced-level learners of French, the fact that PC was used often for activity verbs may constitute evidence of progress in the use of PC. In fact, 140 tokens of activity verbs were attested, of which 88.6% were in PC. Nevertheless, for some activity verbs, both PC and IMP were used. For instance, the activity verb *étudier* ‘to study’ is one such example.

(13) [Context: On the topic that few people study French in high school]
AH1 - mais au lycée euh donc euh tu *n’avais pas étudié* l- l’anglais du tout ? (jpto2ah1yi1_11_a)

‘AH1 - but in high school uh so uh you hadn’t studied E- English at all?’

(13) is in fact an example of a pluperfect, whose correct use indicates that the learner is at an advanced level (Bartning et Schlyter 2004: 287). In free conversation, there are six tokens of *étudier* ‘to study’ in PC and four in IMP.

(14) [Context: Complimented for good pronunciation in French]
AH1 - mais j'ai *étudié* le [la]⁵ grammaire à l'université pour la première fois (jpto2ahlyi1_11_a)
'AH1 - but I studied grammar for the first time in college.'

In (14), *j'ai étudié le grammaire à l'université pour la première fois* 'I studied grammar for the first time in college' describes not a state but an activity, and there is no clear goal. However, in the context of *la première fois* 'the first time,' at least the starting point is clearly indicated. Here, the event of "studying for the first time" may be closer to that of the accomplishment verb.

(15) [On the topic of interest in French culture]
HK1 - euh parce que avant # avant de partir en France # euh j'ai *étudié* les relations in- internationales (jpto2hk1ki1_11_a)
'HK1 - uh because before # before leaving for France # uh I studied in- international relations'

(15) presupposes that the study of international relations was effectuated before leaving for France. HK1 was then obliged to view this event in its entirety in a definite period. This may explain the reason HK1 selected PC.

(16) [Context: After the topic of studying film in France was a difficult but good experience]
KI1 - vous avez # euh tu *as étudié* en France avec euh en anglais ou en français? (jpto2hk1ki1_11_a)
'KI1 - did you # uh you studied in France with uh in English or in French?'

(17) [Context: Explaining why I visited Lyon]
HK1 - oui # parce que j'ai u- j'ai une amie qui *a étudié* là-bas # et (jpto2hk1ki1_11_a)
'HK1 - yes # because I have u- I have a friend who studied there # and'

(18) [Context: It turns out that the talked-about woman was also an acquaintance of the hearer]
HK1 - mh et # et elle m- m'a dit # que e- elle *a étudié* beaucoup beaucoup pour pour obtenir une un di- dip- diploma un certificat #

⁵ The brackets [] represent a grammatically correct form suggested by our francophone transcriber.

(jpto2hk1ki1_11_a)

‘HK1 - mh and # and she m- told me # that sh- she studied a lot a lot to get a a di- dip- diploma a certificate #’

(19) [Context: On the topic of Celtic and Roman culture]

JO1 - donc euh # ouais j’ai étudié sur cet [ce] problème qu’est-ce [quelle est] la situation du [de la] fusion entre # (...) (jpto2jo1kt1_21_a)

‘JO1 - so uh # yeah I investigated on this [this] problem what [what is] the situation of [the] merger between # (...)’

In (16), (17), (18), and (19), the study has already finished, whether the result of the event is relevant to the present state or not.

The activity verb *étudier* ‘to study’ in IMP

(20) [Context: After being surprised by the large number of American students]

AH1 - parce que j- moi je t- j’étudiais à dans un [une] université francophone (jpto2ahlyi1_11_a)

‘AH1 - because I- I I t- I was studying in a French-speaking university’

(21) [Context: I heard that you chose French as the language subject for college entrance exams]

AH1 - <euh donc>⁶ tu étudiais le français quand à à au lycée ? aussi ? (jpto2ahlyi1_11_a)

‘AH1 - <uh so> were you studying French in in high school? also?’

(22) YI1 - ah XXX⁷ ah oui c’est ça c’est ça

AH1 - ah donc e- elle étudiait

YI1 - <ah oui>

AH1 - le français aussi ? (jpto2ahlyi1_11_a)

YI1 ‘- ah XXX ah yes that’s it that’s it

AH1 - ah so e- she was studying’

YI1 ‘- <ah yes>

AH1 - French too?’

(23) [Context: On the topic of classical dance at the National Conservatory of Music in Paris]

⁶ < > represents a part overlapping the preceding utterance of another person.

⁷ A proper noun anonymized.

SY1 - et alors euh # dans la journée # j'étudiais comme les autres Français
(jpto2sy1sol_11_a)

'SY1 - and then uh # during the day # I studied like other French people'

In (20), (21), and (22), we can understand from the context that the speaker chose IMP because he had been studying continuously for a certain period of time. In (23), *dans la journée* 'during the day' indicates that the speaker was continuing his study or used to continue his study in the daytime.

To sum up, these examples of free conversation show that intermediate- and advanced-level French learners who had experience studying abroad could express the activity verb *étudier* in both PC and IMP, depending on context. This situation, which we could not observe in the longitudinal survey, is clear evidence that the level of acquisition has progressed in intermediate- and advanced-level students.

Conclusion

We first note that the lexical aspect of verbs is a significant factor in the results of both the longitudinal survey of Japanese students and the free conversation of intermediate- and advanced-level Japanese students. According to the AH, the combination of achievement and accomplishment verbs with PC and of state and activity verbs with IMP seems to be acquired in an earlier stage of learning French. In free conversation, it appears that with the extensive use of PC for three types of verbs, only state verbs were excluded. This tendency demonstrates the progress of the tense-aspect morphology of French from basic-level to intermediate and advanced-level Japanese students.

The second remark concerns the stage of acquisition of activity verbs. In the longitudinal survey, we observed only small progress in the correct selection of PC or IMP for activity verbs. Contrariwise, in the free conversation data, activity verbs were used often in PC but also in IMP, depending on context. Being able to use PC or IMP appropriately in context is clear evidence of the progression to the next stage of acquisition.

Finally, this study is no more than a preliminary report on the tense-aspect selection in Japanese learners of French. However, there is an important aspect of the SLA that was intentionally excluded from the present discussion. What is the significance of PC or IMP as selected by Japanese learners of French in this study? We must compare learners' selection of PC and IMP with that of native French speakers. Recently, an approach called comparative interlanguage analysis (CIA) has been proposed, especially for

SLA of the English language; see (Granger 1996). Our learner language must be analyzed from the perspective of CIA. However, such a comparison does not seem simple because we have extremely poor empirical data on how native French speakers select PC or IMP in a given context. We must thus investigate the mechanism and variation in the tense-aspect selection of native French speakers.

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