

Article

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Time Will Tell : Tense in Narration

Sarah Cummins

Introduction

Part of the implicit pact between narrator and reader is the shared assumption that the story told takes place at a time other than the time of narration — whether or not it actually took place or is set in past or future chronological time. This assumption doubtless underlies the common feeling that a past tense is appropriate to narrate the events of a story. From Weinrich (1964) and Benveniste (1966), who exclude the present tense from the set of tenses used for “Erzählung” (narration) and “histoire” respectively, to Hardin and Picot (1990 :143), who state categorically that “le présent de narration n'existe pas en anglais”, the consensus often seems to be that stories are naturally told in the past. Yet storytellers themselves do not feel constrained from using present tenses to tell their stories, whether oral or written, and the linguists and literaturists who observe them have tried to describe the conditions and motivations for this choice and to highlight its effects. (See, for example, Fleischman (1990), Casparis (1975), Chuquet (1994), Vuillaume (1990), Schriffrin (1981), Labelle (1987).)

My purpose here is to analyse the conditions and motivations for the choice of the present tense to narrate an extensive series of children's books, the *Premiers romans* published by Éditions de la courte échelle in Montreal, and to determine whether these factors call for the same choice in their translation into English.

The *Premiers romans* are aimed at children from perhaps seven to nine years of age, not beginners but fluent readers of text, rather than isolated words or sentences. The books are between 4000 and 5000 words long and are divided into six to eight chapters. Many but not all of them are narrated in the first person, and that is the case for the three I look at in detail here : *Sophie vit un cauchemar* by Louise Leblanc (SVC); *Le monde de Félix* by Sylvain Trudel (MF); *Le gros cadeau du petit Marcus* by Gilles Gauthier (GCPM). A striking fact about all of the books in this series is that the prominent tense used is the present. Of course, the present is not the only tense used. Narration in the strict sense — recounting the punctual, foregrounded events that advance the action — is done via the present, the *passé composé*, or very occasionally the *passé simple*. But the *passé simple* is never used as the main narrative tense.

Since both a past and a present narration are theoretically possible, I wondered (as translator of more than 30 of the *Premiers romans*) about the uniformity of tense choice. Was this perhaps a requirement for books in the series, as is the length of the story? A representative of the publishing house, when queried, said that no particular instructions are given to the authors about what tenses they should use. She added, however, that authors know that it is best to avoid anything that early readers might find daunting or off-putting, such as unfamiliar verb forms. The present is naturally chosen for the sake of simplicity, accessibility, and facility for inexperienced readers. She also mentioned that, for the novels with a child protagonist narrating in the first person, it is important that the narrative voice be authentic; it should sound like a child's voice. It is felt that the *passé simple* would detract from this authenticity¹.

This comment suggests that the present tense is chosen in order to make the stories sound like oral narratives, as if actual children were

¹ The age of the readership need not restrict the use of certain tenses. The collection *J'aime lire*, published in France by Bayard for readers aged six to ten, for example, offers a number of narratives using the *passé simple*. (*Graine de montre* by Marie-Aude Murail (1987) and *P'tit Jean et la sorcière* by Évelyne Reberg (1994) are examples.) Nor does first-person narration of stories for this age group require the present tense; *En route pour hier* by Martine Dorra (1995), also in the *J'aime lire* collection, is a first-person narration in the *passé simple*.

recounting experiences they had lived through. It must be emphasized, however, that the *Premiers romans* with a first-person child narrator are not equivalent to written-down oral narratives. The *Premiers romans* are indeed novels — short, simple novels, to be sure, but in their structure and style definitely literary. Their use of tense does not conform to that observed in oral narratives (cf. Schriffrin (1981), Wolfson (1982), Labelle (1987), Declerck (1991)). Nor does it conform entirely, however, to certain observations made about the use of the present tense in literary narratives in French.

Analyses of tense in narration

Of analyses of tense in narration, those put forward by Weinrich (1964), Benveniste (1966), and Chuquet (1994) claim to have broad applicability, rather than accounting merely for the usage of a particular work, a particular author, or a particular period. Weinrich's and Benveniste's systems are alike in dividing the tense array of French into two groups, which Benveniste calls "histoire" and "discours" and Weinrich "Erzählen" (narration) and "Besprechen" (translated as "discourse" by Casparis (1975) and as "commentaire" by Michèle Lacoste (Weinrich 1973)). The "histoire" and "Erzählen" categories include the *passé simple*, the *imparfait*, and the *plus-que-parfait*, while "discours" and "Besprechen" use the present, the *passé composé*, and the future².

Benveniste (1966 : 238-9) asserts that "[l]'énonciation historique...caractérise le récit des événements passés". This mode excludes first and second person, adverbials like *maintenant*, and any use of the present tense, except an atemporal one. The speaker or narrator does not intervene at all in the story. The "discours" system presupposes a speaker and a hearer; its tenses are the present, the *passé composé*, the future, and the *imparfait*. The distinction between "histoire" and "discours" does not correspond to that between written and spoken language, for although the "histoire" mode is not used in speech, the "discours" mode is used in both speech and writing.

² For Benveniste, the *imparfait* belongs to both "discours" and "histoire"; Weinrich differs in not allowing a tense to belong to both groups.

Curiously, Benveniste excludes "le présent historique" from his system, dismissing it as a mere "artifice de style" (Benveniste 1966 : 245). This comment illustrates a weakness of his system : a degree of circularity in the definitions, where the "plan d'énonciation" is defined in terms of its tenses, which in turn are classified in terms of which "plan d'énonciation" they belong to. When a discrepancy crops up, like the "présent historique", a tense belonging to "discours" clearly used in an "histoire" setting, it is excluded from the system. Certainly, the observation that tenses and perhaps other morphosyntactic elements fall into groups that are habitually used together is insightful and sound. But it is not clear what role the rigid distinctions Benveniste proposes play in the language as a whole, since there is a very active and vibrant area of interaction between the two systems — for example, first-person narration in the *passé simple*, or narrations that switch between *passé simple* and *passé composé*, while remaining in the realm of "histoire".

Although Weinrich's tense divisions are even stricter, he does not associate grammatical person with tenses, and he recognizes that, within a text, tenses from both "Erzählen" and "Besprechen" may appear, although the text itself predominantly belongs to one or the other. The world of "Besprechen" is practical, objective, down to earth; its texts include editorials, wills, scientific reports, etc. The narrated world is remote and relaxed. "[I]n narration the attention centers around the questions 'what next?' or 'is this really true?', 'how could this happen?', while discourse provokes an 'is he right?'" (Casparis 1975 : 145). When a tense from one system is used in another, its use is "metaphorical", affecting attitude, perspective, and emphasis. A present tense of narration keeps its original meaning from its own context, while taking on meaning from the narrative context — it is thus inherently ambiguous. The common explanation for the present of narration given by grammarians is also a kind of temporal metaphor : the present is said to give an effect of vividness and drama, *as if* the events recounted were happening simultaneously to the narration.

Certainly Weinrich's model is broader in scope than Benveniste's, yet it does not seem to offer an adequate explanation for the very common use of "Besprechen" tenses (particularly the present) in narration, nor for the different effects this use has across languages. As Chuquet (1994 : 3) points out, there are cases where the present of narration is successful in French but unacceptable when translated into

English. Present-tense narration is a more marked stylistic choice in English.

Chuquet is particularly interested in how a present of narration is treated in translation; she notes that French-to-English translators usually make one of two choices : either the present tense is maintained and the temporal organization of the source text is reproduced in the target text, or there is a systematic transposition to past narration. When the choice is made to transpose, tense is often “standardized” — the preterite is used throughout, even though the source text may make frequent tense-switches, and tense-switching is a common enough device in English-language narration. Chuquet takes this as a sign of the differing values of present-tense narration in French and English, dependent on the interaction of present tense with the entire linguistic system it belongs to, and she analyses what these values are. The present, because of its almost chameleon-like temporal/aspectual adaptability, can be used “dans le cadre de récits construits en rupture par rapport au repère-origine de l'énonciation” (Chuquet 1994 : 8). The *passé simple* in French and the preterite in English also mark a break, but they do so explicitly. The present does not indicate the dislocation overtly, and this is part of what makes it distinctive as a tense for narration of events presented as “past”, or “previous” to a reference time.

Chuquet's analysis is insightful and her perspective of seeking a commonality in diverse situations rather than working from a rigid *a priori* classification is liberating. But the common denominator she identifies in present-tense narrations in French and English does not, in my view, explain the choice of the present as the basic tense in the *Premiers romans* (and the overwhelming use in them of the related “discours” set of tenses). That is, I do not think the present tense is used to signal a break with the reference time of the utterance. Instead, the “discours” series of tenses is used to link the narration to its time of utterance.

Tense in the *Premiers romans*

Each story of the *Premiers romans* is attached to the here-and-now of its telling. The stories do not only recount past events; they also link them explicitly to the present. While the authors may have deliberately avoided narration in the *passé simple*, they did not simply choose one tense over

another. These novels are not stories written as if a *passé simple* had been transposed to another tense, or as if the “histoire” mode had been converted into “discours”. They are narrations, not discourse or commentary; but the narrative strategy used to tell the stories requires a present perspective — it requires the tenses associated with the “discours” mode.

An excerpt from *Le monde de Félix* offers an apt illustration of this requirement. The young narrator, Félix, and his friends are playing “la cachette barbecue”, a variation of hide-and-seek that involves the boys kissing the girls when they find them. Félix hopes to find Lucie and kiss her. The *passé composé* is used to narrate the punctual events that advance the action; these verbs are underlined.

J'ai avancé lentement vers les vieux pneus où se dressait la couette de cheveux. Je tenais mon bouquet bien fort.

— Je t'ai trouvée, Lucie. Tu peux sortir de ta cachette.

Lucie s'est relevée. Horreur! Ce n'était pas Lucie, mais Yan. Le sacripant!

— Oh oui! mon chéri! criait-il. Viens me donner un bisou...

J'ai failli le gifler, mais... Lucie est apparue derrière lui! Elle a accepté mes fleurs et m'a embrassé sur la joue. J'ai cru fondre!

J'ai la joue la plus heureuse du monde! Je ne la laverai plus jamais!

(*MF*, pp. 29-30)

The last line of this passage reveals the present perspective, which is maintained even when the narrative proceeds in the past. The time when Félix thinks and narrates *Je ne la laverai plus jamais* must be very close to the time when the events he narrates take place. This passage is a bit like a diary entry, which recounts what happened on the day that is just ending and the diarist's feelings about these events.

When the passage is transposed to an “histoire” mode, with punctual events narrated in the *passé simple*, this link to the present cannot be maintained. Instead Félix's thought is linked to the same reference time as the events that are narrated.

J'avançai lentement vers les vieux pneus où se dressait la couette de cheveux. Je tenais mon bouquet bien fort.

— Je t'ai trouvée, Lucie. Tu peux sortir de ta cachette.

Lucie se releva. Horreur! Ce n'était pas Lucie, mais Yan. Le sacripant!

— Oh oui! mon chéri! criait-il. Viens me donner un bisou...

Je faillis le gifler, mais... Lucie apparut derrière lui! Elle accepta mes fleurs et m'embrassa sur la joue. Je crus fondre!

J'avais la joue la plus heureuse du monde! Je ne la laverai plus jamais!

All of the *Premiers romans* assume a minimal temporal distance between the time of the story and the time of narration. In fact, aspects of the story situation impinge on the time of narration throughout the novels, as the narrator evokes situations that hold at both times. This temporal proximity between the time of the story and the time of narration is the main reason for the present perspective and the use of the "discours" tense system.

The *passé simple* has the opposite effect : it sets off the time of the story from the time of narration. The time when events took place cannot impinge on the present, the time of telling.

The effect of temporal proximity is enhanced in first-person narratives, because the narrator is also a character in the story. But it is nonetheless present even in third-person narrations. Often the present tense seamlessly stitches together narration of punctual events and descriptive passages of situations that still hold true at the time of narration. This is illustrated in an excerpt from a *Premier roman* narrated in the third-person, *Pas fous les jumeaux!* by Bertrand Gauthier. All the verbs are in the present. The ones that tell the story are underlined³; those that describe situations that still hold true at the time of narration are in bold type.

En vitesse, il se déshabillent et se rhabillent avec les vêtements de l'autre.

C'est leur méthode habituelle.

En deux temps, trois mouvements, Bé devient Dé.

Et Dé est maintenant Bé.

En toute tranquillité, à la fin de la récréation, chacun retourne dans la classe de l'autre.

Ainsi, aux yeux des adultes, les jumeaux **sont** de friands et habiles sportifs et **ont** aussi d'excellents résultats scolaires. (*Pas fous les*

³ The "déformabilité" of the present tense highlighted by Chuquet is evident in these verbs : while it is clear that they tell the story, we are not certain whether they refer to a single instance or repeated instances of events.

jumeaux!, pp. 40-41)

Tense is not the only device used to achieve temporal proximity. The link is also established by temporal adverbials that take their reference from the time of utterance⁴:

Marcus n'a pas l'air en forme aujourd'hui. (*GCPM*, p. 7)

C'est samedi aujourd'hui et je dois me rendre chez la Puce. (*GCPM*, p.14)

Marcus a eu toute une surprise en rentrant avec ses parents hier. (*GCPM*, p. 49)

L'année scolaire a débuté aujourd'hui. (*MF*, p. 47)

L'autre jour, dans un cours de sciences, madame Papillon nous a appris une chose incroyable. (*MF*, p. 55)

J'avais oublié que l'année scolaire débute aujourd'hui. (*SVC*, p. 7)

Cet été, à la colonie de vacances, on a observé longuement les étoiles. (*MF*, p. 15)

Ce matin, dans le gymnase, monsieur le directeur a déclaré : ... (*MF*, pp. 47-48)

The time of the story is interpreted as the same day as the time of narration in a narration that includes the word *aujourd'hui*, or *ce matin*, and as the previous day when the narration uses *hier*. *L'autre jour* can only be interpreted as a few days previous to the time of narration, not in reference to any other time.

Temporal proximity requires the tenses of the "discours" mode, but within this system, events previous to the time of narration can be related in either the *passé composé* or the present. The three books discussed here use both, but the present tense stands out. The reason for this, I think, is a particular feature of their storytelling style. Rather than being dense with incident, these novels tend to tell their stories through large doses of background information, interior monologue, description, and dialogue, interspersed with punctual events that advance the action.

⁴ Benveniste cites *maintenant* as a time adverbial that is compatible only with the "discours" mode and the present perspective. Yet *maintenant* does not necessarily derive its reference from the time of utterance; it can in fact have a temporal reference previous to the time of utterance and can be used with tenses of the "histoire" group.

Consider the passage below, from *Le gros cadeau du petit Marcus*. The narrator, Jenny, is friend to the main protagonist, Marcus, whose father has a drinking problem.

Je l'entends se battre contre ses mèches rebelles dans la salle de bains. Il ne semble pas en venir à bout. Il doit y avoir de l'eau partout.

— Bonjour.

— Euh... Bonjour.

Le père de Marcus est là, à un mètre de moi. Avec le vacarme de la Puce, je ne l'ai pas entendu venir.

— Comme ça... c'est toi... la fameuse Jenny.

— Euh... Oui... Non... Pas fameuse, mais... Oui... C'est moi...

— Je suis... content de te rencontrer... Marcus... m'a beaucoup parlé de toi.

— Ah oui!... Ah... Bon... Je ne savais pas...

Je vois le père de Marcus pour la première fois et j'ai l'air d'une vraie folle! Je lui réponds n'importe quoi, comme si je ne comprendais rien.

Ce n'est pas facile de se retrouver devant quelqu'un dont on s'est fait une idée plutôt négative. (*GCPM*, pp. 15-16)

What happens in this excerpt is that Jenny meets her friend's father for the first time and they try to make small talk. But these events are not recounted as such. Instead, the meeting is related through description, dialogue, and the narrator's thoughts. If this passage were in the past, the dominant tense would be the *imparfait*, not the *passé composé*. This transposition is shown below, with the verbs underlined.

Je l'entendais se battre contre ses mèches rebelles dans la salle de bains. Il ne semblait pas en venir à bout. Il devait y avoir de l'eau partout.

— Bonjour.

— Euh... Bonjour.

Le père de Marcus était là, à un mètre de moi. Avec le vacarme de la Puce, je ne l'avais pas entendu venir.

— Comme ça... c'est toi... la fameuse Jenny.

— Euh... Oui... Non... Pas fameuse, mais... Oui... C'est moi...

— Je suis... content de te rencontre... Marcus... m'a beaucoup parlé de toi.

— Ah oui!... Ah... Bon... Je ne savais pas...

Je voyais le père de Marcus pour la première fois et j'avais l'air d'une vraie folle! Je lui répondais n'importe quoi, comme si je ne comprendais rien.

Ce n'est pas facile de se retrouver devant quelqu'un dont on s'est fait une idée plutôt négative.

Since the present tense can be used both to recount actions and events and to provide background and description, it offers a kind of narrative unity, and in stories with so little incident it is a means of avoiding long stretches of prose in the *imparfait*. If a past perspective is taken, the choice must be made between state and event, between background and foreground (cf. Weinrich 1973, Couper-Kuhlen 1989). This is illustrated by a comparison of another excerpt from *Le gros cadeau du petit Marcus*, largely in the present, and its transposition to the past.

Mission accomplie! Le père de Marcus se déguise dans la classe de Mordicus. Sa femme l'aide à ajuster le costume d'Antoine. Dans quelques secondes, un père Noël tout neuf va sortir de sa cachette.

Ça y est! La porte de la classe s'est ouverte et le père de Marcus vient d'apparaître. Il a sur le dos une immense poche de cadeaux. Son rire remplit le gymnase.

La mère de la Puce regarde s'éloigner le gros bonhomme rouge. Elle semble passablement nerveuse. Elle a probablement du mal à croire qu'il s'agit vraiment de son mari.

Marcus, lui, ne tient plus en place. Debout près de moi, il se mord les lèvres. Il ne lâche pas des yeux son père qui s'assoit maintenant sur l'immense trône.

Le père Noël salue la foule. (GCPM, pp. 37-38)

Mission accomplie! Le père de Marcus se déguisait dans la classe de Mordicus. Sa femme l'aidait à ajuster le costume d'Antoine. Dans quelques secondes, un père Noël tout neuf allait sortir de sa cachette.

Ça y est! La porte de la classe s'était ouverte et le père de Marcus venait d'apparaître. Il avait sur le dos une immense poche de cadeaux. Son rire remplissait le gymnase.

La mère de la Puce regardait s'éloigner le gros bonhomme rouge. Elle semblait passablement nerveuse. Elle avait probablement du mal à croire qu'il s'agissait vraiment de son mari.

Marcus, lui, ne tenait plus en place. Debout près de moi, il se mordait les lèvres. Il ne lâchait pas des yeux son père qui s'est assis/s'assoit maintenant sur l'immense trône.

Le père Noël a salué/saluait la foule.

Again, the transposition to the past relies heavily on the *imparfait*, but a few sentences could be either foregrounded or backgrounded — *son père*

qui s'est assis or *qui s'assoyait sur l'immense trône* and *Le père Noël a salué/saluait la foule*. The present allows the ambiguity; the past demands that it be resolved.

To sum up, the “discours” mode is appropriate for the *Premiers romans* because the narrative requires temporal proximity between the time of the story and the time of narration. Within the “discours” mode, the present tense is often chosen over the *passé composé* because of its compatibility with using backgrounded events and non-events to tell the story.

Tense in translation of the *Premiers romans*

These reasons motivate the choice of a present perspective in French. What effect do they have on the choice of tense when the stories are translated into English? The “discours/histoire” opposition describes tense compatibilities in French which may not find counterparts in other languages; the present tense’s interactions within the French system may be unparalleled as well. Tense use in a translation must be motivated by the target language system as well as by the narrative structure of the source text. As it turns out, the reasons behind the tense choice in the *Premiers romans* do not require the same choice of present tense in English.

The present tense in French neutralizes the aspectual difference between punctual events on one hand and states and imperfective processes on the other, but the English tense/aspect system works differently. The present and past systems in English mark the same aspectual values — thus these values are not neutralized or emphasized in one tense but not the other. Moreover, the aspectual values marked are not equivalent to those distinguished in past tenses in French. English uses simple forms in both past and present for situations that are seen as whole, in their entirety, without internal structure, whether they be states, processes, or punctual events. Progressive forms in both past and present are used for ongoing, incomplete processes, or to highlight some internal structure in the situation. Add to this the modal verbs of English, which are not marked for tense and aspect, and it is clear that the stylistic considerations that tilt the balance toward the present tense in French do not hold in English.

This is illustrated by a present-tense and a past-tense translation of the passage above from *Le gros cadeau du petit Marcus*.

Mission accomplished! Mikey's dad is in Attila's room, turning himself into Santa Claus. Mikey's mom is adjusting Mr. Lotecki's costume to fit him. In just a few seconds, a brand-new Santa will make his first appearance.

Here goes! The classroom door opens/is opening and Mikey's dad steps/is stepping out, with a huge bag of presents slung over his shoulder. His hearty laughter fills the gymnasium.

Mikey's mom watches him make his way around the gym. She seems a bit nervous. She probably can't believe that it's really her husband doing this.

Mikey can't sit still. He bounces up and down beside me, biting his lip and never taking his eyes off his father, who is now settling/now settles into his enormous throne.

Santa waves at the crowd.

Mission accomplished! Mikey's dad was in Attila's room, turning himself into Santa Claus. Mikey's mom was adjusting Mr. Lotecki's costume to fit him. In just a few seconds, a brand-new Santa would make his first appearance.

And then — the classroom door opened and Mikey's dad stepped out, with a huge bag of presents slung over his shoulder. His hearty laughter filled the gymnasium.

Mikey's mom watched him make his way around the gym. She seemed a bit nervous. She probably couldn't believe that it was really her husband doing this.

Mikey couldn't sit still. He bounced up and down beside me, biting his lip and never taking his eyes off his father, who now settled/was now settling into his enormous throne.

Santa waved at the crowd.

The past perspective in French calls for extensive use of the *imparfait*, but in English neither the present nor the past requires heavy use of progressive forms. In fact, there are only a few instances where the progressive seems possible. So the stylistic difference between past and present which may motivate a choice in French does not transfer to English. Instead, the translation difficulty arises with an expression like *Ça y est*, which can find an easy equivalent in the present but not in the past. Potential equivalents like *Here he comes!* or *Here goes!* only work in the present; **Here he came!* is impossible in the past, while **Here went!* is totally incomprehensible. If the past perspective is chosen in the

translation, a different solution has to be found : *And then* — or *He was ready!* or *And now the moment had come!* or *It was time!* are possibilities.

The requirement of temporal proximity does not determine tense choice in English either. The time of the story can be interpreted as very close to the time of narration in either a present or a past narration, because the preterite in English does not automatically achieve a perspective remote from the present time, as does the *passé simple* in French. In fact, as Chuquet argues, the present tense in narration can create a more marked break between the time of the story and the time of narration than does the past tense.

So this factor does not require either past or present tense, but the choice of past tense, which is the usual means of recounting events that occur previous to a present reference time, does entail a certain amount of tense-switching. Consider again the example of a diary. The typical way to write a diary in English is to use the past tense to narrate recent events, and the present tense for comments on them made at the time of narration as well as descriptions that hold true at both times. A diary has a present perspective even when events are narrated in the past.

The present perspective in the translation can be achieved in the translation of the *Premiers romans*, even with past-tense narration, through the use of adverbials that take their reference from the time of narration. Like their French equivalents, *today*, *yesterday*, *the other day*, *this summer*, and *this morning* take their reference from the time of utterance, and therefore create a present perspective.

Even when a basic narrative tense is settled on for the translation, further tense choices are required to translate aspects of the authors' individual narrative styles, which I now examine briefly in turn.

The novel that is the most straightforward in its use of tense use is *Sophie vit un cauchemar*. This story is told mainly in the present tense — for both narration and description — but also uses an device found in other *Premiers romans*, which I call “snapshot” narration. The author focuses briefly on a scene in the present tense and then backshifts, filling in previous events with narration in the past. Here is an example, with past verbs in bold type and present verbs underlined :

Seize heures. J'ai l'impression de rouler dans une friteuse. L'autobus pétille de rires et de cris.

Au milieu de cette cacophonie, je ne m'entends pas réfléchir. Et j'en ai besoin! Fiou! Toute la journée s'est déroulée du mauvais pied.

D'abord j'ai appris que la Loupe serait mon professeur...

À la récréation, j'ai réuni les membres de ma bande afin d'élaborer un plan.

Clémentine, la bolle de la classe, n'en voyait pas la nécessité. La Loupe ou une autre, ça ne change rien pour elle.

Tanguay s'empiffrait de chips. Il n'avait pas d'idées. Il n'en a jamais. On ne peut pas réfléchir en se goinfrant. Et Tanguay a toujours des friandises à bouffer : son père est propriétaire d'un dépanneur. (SVC, pp. 11-12)

The present tense of the first two paragraphs sets the scene : this is description, background, not narrative event. Then there is a switch to the past to fill in the story previous to the snapshot scene : the *passé composé* for events (*j'ai appris, j'ai réuni*), and the *imparfait* for continuing processes (*ne voyait pas la nécessité, s'empiffrait de chips*); the present is used when the reference still holds true at the time of narration (*a toujours, est propriétaire*). One use of the present (*On ne peut pas réfléchir...*) is atemporal, expressing a general truth.

In the translation, the past tense was used for most of the narration :

Four o'clock in the afternoon. I felt like I was riding in an electric frying pan. The schoolbus sizzled with laughing and shouting.

I couldn't hear myself think in all that racket. And I needed to think. Whew! The whole day had been a disaster, from start to finish.

First I found out that the Eagle was going to be my teacher.

So at recess I got everyone in my gang together to make a plan.

Clementine, who's the smartest kid in the class, didn't see why we needed a plan. It makes no difference to her whether she has the Eagle or some other teacher.

Nicholas was chomping down chips. He didn't have any ideas. He never does. You can't think when you're stuffing your face. And Nicholas always has a pile of snacks, because his dad owns a corner store.

Proximity between the time of the story and the time of narration is established by using the present tense for whatever still holds true at the time of narration, which as in a diary continually shifts throughout the

book. Note also the single use of the past perfect (*had been*) which moves the narrated events farther back in the past from a past reference. It is worth mentioning here that a long sequence of past perfects in English would be stylistically heavy and inappropriate to both the tone and readership of these stories. So while strict temporal sequence might require past perfect for the eventive verbs after *had been* (that is, *First I had found out that the Eagle was going to be my teacher. So at recess I had gotten everyone together to make a plan.*), it is preferable to use a single past perfect to shift the action back and preterites for events following this time.

In two chapters of *Sophie vit un cauchemar*, present-tense narration is used to a somewhat different effect. These chapters constitute the climax of the book — the scenes where Sophie shoplifts and is caught. This passage differs from other present-tense narration in the book : an initial paragraph sets the scene and the remainder is an unbroken sequence of events and immediate observations, one after the other. The present tense, whether used for background or foreground, events or description, never refers to the time of narration, only to the time of the story. This plunges heroine and reader fully into the story, and gives narrative coherence, unity, suspense.

The translation of *Sophie vit un cauchemar* switches to the present tense to narrate this passage. This switch has the effect of dislocating that part of the narrative from the rest, thereby heightening its impact. (This switch does correspond to Chuquet's "rupture".) Moreover, the use of the present tense to narrate the strict, uncommented sequence of events gives a frozen-in-time effect, which reflects the heroine's feelings. An excerpt from the translation of this episode is given below.

I want the t-shirt, and that makes me less afraid. I glance quickly around me. A few people are walking by quickly. Over there, an old lady is trying on gloves. She's not looking my way. Now!

But once I make my mind up, I'm scared again. My hand is shaking and I just grab any old t-shirt. I slip it into my jacket. then I turn tail.

Inside me a voice is yelling. "Don't rush! You're attracting attention. Slow down!"

The exit seems to be kilometres away. I can feel the t-shirt slipping under my jacket. My heart is beating so hard it will probably push the t-shirt out.

Now the door is near. My friends are waiting. I can see them staring at me, wide-eyed. Through my fear I feel a stab of satisfaction. They're really impressed! But now — what's the matter?

They take another step back...another...now they're running away. At that very instant, a hand comes down on my shoulder.

Of the three *Premiers romans* discussed here, *Le monde de Félix* is the most reminiscent of a diary. Its narrator is a dreamy, sensitive boy who asks deep philosophical questions. The book starts out with his observations on parents, siblings, and family life, and moves on to a generalized description about every summer's departure for summer camp, which turns specific as incidents of one particular summer at camp are recounted. Then the narrative moves through events of the rest of that summer and finishes up with the beginning of a new school year. As in a diary, the present perspective of the narration continually moves forward.

Again, this book relies heavily on non-event — description and rumination. When events are recounted, the tense used is typically the *passé composé*. But *Le monde de Félix* is the only one of these books to use the *passé simple*. In past narration, “reporting” verbs accompanying a quotation are sometimes (but not always) in the *passé simple*, as in the following example :

...Un soir, Jean nous a parlé de la vie des étoiles :

— Les étoiles sont toutes nées un jour, comme vous!

— Ah! oui!?! s'exclama une fille , étonnée. Je ne savais pas que les étoiles pouvaient naître par césarienne... (MF, p. 15)

In fact, the *passé simple* is typically the past tense used when the reporting verb is *en incise*, breaking up the quoted material, as above, and the verb always precedes the subject. On the other hand, every past use of the reporting verb that precedes the quotation is in the *passé composé*, as below, including a quotation from an ancient, Jean L'Anselme, even though the time of this utterance is certainly remote from both the time of the story and the time of narration.

Je me suis dit : «mon monde vieillit, mon monde vieillit...» (MF, p. 37)

...elle s'est écriée :

— Mon Dieu! Des immortelles! Pauvre Félix, as-tu peur qu'il nous arrive malheur? (MF, p. 40)

Un matin, madame Papillon nous a parlé d'un drôle de moineau qui s'appelait Jean L'Anselme. Ce monsieur-là a dit :

Toutes les bonnes choses ont une fin, sauf les saucisses qui en ont deux. (MF, p. 61)

It is evident, then, that the use of the *passé simple* is a stylistic device that has nothing to do with temporality and everything to do with formal simplicity : it is used in order to avoid inversion with a compound form : *a-t-il dit, a-t-elle précisé*, etc. Since the *passé simple* is not used to suggest a remote narrated world, it would be inappropriate to attempt to reproduce its purely formal effect in translation.

The third novel, *Le gros cadeau du petit Marcus*, uses the "snapshot" technique to narrate in early chapters. A descriptive scene is set in the present tense, which establishes a temporal reference point, then previous events are filled in with past narration. After that, a new present-tense reference point is set, and more past narration fills in events previous to the new point. In this way, the story jumps from point to point with present-tense description and fills in the story with past narration.

An example is given below, with the present tense underlined and the past in bold type.

Et nous voici maintenant tous entassés dans sa petite auto.

Je dis «entassés» parce qu'il y a plus de monde que prévu. Antoine **a insisté** pour que le père de Marcus vienne avec nous. Et puis il nous a fait une surprise.

Antoine est accompagné d'une jeune femme qui a l'air d'être son amoureuse. (GCPM, p. 21)

But in later chapters, this pattern is abandoned and stretches of narration alternate between the present and the *passé composé* :

Il accueille Henriette avec un grand sourire. Il lui remet le premier cadeau. Toute l'école applaudit.

...

— Numéro 25. Qui sera le petit Jésus cette année?

C'est Marcus!

Dès qu'il **a entendu** son numéro, la Puce **a bondi** de sa chaise. Il court vers l'estrade. Il est déjà devant son père qui fouille dans son sac.

La Puce a fait un salut comique en recevant son cadeau. En une seconde, il a grimpé sur les genoux du père Noël. Et il l'a embrassé sur les joues.

L'assistance a éclaté de rire. La mère de Marcus est émue. La Puce revient en sautillant. (GCPM, pp. 40-42)

The events recounted in this passage are strictly sequential. Yet they are not recounted as if they take place one after the other in a smooth progression on the same time plane. Instead, the tense switches seem to constantly push the narration forward to the next scene. The past-tense narration fills in the gaps between present-tense snapshots, but rather than backshifting, it forward-shifts to the next snapshot. First there is a stretch of present-tense narration, and then the exclamation *C'est Marcus!* indicates a shift — a new snapshot. The *passé composé* does not refer back from that but from the following present tenses, which make a new snapshot. The *passé composé* narration is used as bridge between snapshots. Here is another example :

Antoine en père Noël! Il a un sac rouge sur son dos et il invite tout le monde à le suivre au salon.

Marcus est fou de joie. Il s'est jeté sur un fauteuil près de sa mère. Ses yeux brillent comme les lumières dans l'arbre.

Le père Noël a déposé son sac. Il affirme qu'il a un cadeau très spécial pour Marcus et moi. Marcus s'étire le cou pour voir.

Antoine ouvre lentement le sac. Il fait exprès de nous faire languir. Marcus frétille d'impatience.

Il vient d'apercevoir quelque chose. Il est resté figé pendant un moment, puis il m'a regardée en silence. Un immense sourire éclairait son visage.

Curieuse, j'ai penché la tête en avant.

Et j'ai découvert...MORDICUS dans sa cage!

Le père Noël annonce que Mordicus va passer les vacances des Fêtes chez Marcus. (GCPM, pp. 54-55)

The present tenses take snapshots; the *passé composé* acts as bridge between snapshots, not as a backshifter. The sentence *Il vient d'apercevoir*, formally a present but marking an event previous to the present reference time, indicates a shift to a new snapshot.

Translation of the tense shifts of this device is tricky. Following the tense use of the original, as shown below, produces a very disjointed

effect — so disjointed, in fact, that the reader has difficulty determining the sequence of events.

It's Mikey!

As soon as he **heard** his number, Mikey **bounded** from his chair. He **runs** to the stage. He's **already standing** in front of his father, who **is rummaging** in the bag.

Mikey **made** a funny little bow when he **took** the present. Then, in a second, he **climbed** up on Santa's lap and **gave** him a big kiss.

Everyone **burst** out laughing. Mikey's mom **looks** so happy she could cry. Mikey **hops** back to his seat.

Mr. Lotecki dressed as Santa Claus! He **carries** a big red sack on his back and he **tells** everyone to come with him to the living room.

Mikey **is jumping** for joy. He **flopped** onto a chair next to his mother. His eyes **are sparkling** like the lights on the Christmas tree.

Santa **put** down his bag. He **announces** that he has a very special present for Mikey and me. Mikey **cranes** his neck to see.

Slowly, Mr. Lotecki **opens** the bag. He deliberately **lets** the suspense build. Mikey **is squirming** with impatience.

He's **seen** what it is! His mouth **dropped** open and he **looked** at me, without saying a word. A huge smile lit up his face.

I **was** curious. I **leaned** forward to peek.

And I **discovered**...ATTILA in his cage!

Santa **announces** that Attila can spend the Christmas holidays with Mikey.

Although alternating between the present and the past tenses does not result in a successful translation, there are ways of preserving some of the shifting effect produced by tense switches in the original. In the second excerpt, for example, the present perfect, a tense that fits in a present perspective, can be used for some of the verbs in the *passé composé*.

Mr. Lotecki dressed as Santa Claus! He **carries** a big red sack on his back and he **tells** everyone to come with him to the living room.

Mikey **is jumping** for joy. He **has flopped** onto a chair next to his mother. His eyes **are sparkling** like the lights on the Christmas tree.

Santa **has put** down his bag. He **announces** that he has a very special present for Mikey and me. Mikey **cranes** his neck to see.

Slowly, Mr. Lotecki **opens** the bag. He deliberately **lets** the suspense build. Mikey **is squirming** with impatience.

He's seen what it is! His mouth has dropped open and he looks at me, without saying a word. A huge smile lights up his face.

I'm curious. I lean forward to peek.

And I discover...ATTILA in his cage!

Santa announces that Attila can spend the Christmas holidays with Mikey.

This device creates a shifting effect similar to that of the original, but it also backgrounds the events recounted in the present perfect (cf. Osselton 1982). The present perfect implies that the action of the verb creates a state or result that continues to the present reference time (e.g. Mikey has flopped onto a chair, so he is now on the chair). For this reason, the use of the present perfect is not always possible or desirable. Using the present perfect to translate the *passé composé* verbs in the first excerpt is either impossible because no durative state or result affecting the present can be surmised (*Mikey makes a funny little bow when he has taken the present*) or undesirable because it inappropriately backgrounds certain events (*Everyone has burst out laughing*).

A more uniform present-tense narration sacrifices some of the shifting effect, but allows the foregrounded events to be recounted sequentially :

It's Mikey!

As soon as he hears his number, Mikey bounds from his chair. He runs to the stage. He's already standing in front of his father, who is rummaging in the bag.

Mikey makes a funny little bow when he takes the present. Then, in a second, he climbs up on Santa's lap and gives him a big kiss.

Everyone bursts out laughing. Mikey's mom looks so happy she could cry. Mikey hops back to his seat.

Mr. Lotecki dressed as Santa Claus! He carries a big red sack on his back and he tells everyone to come with him to the living room.

Mikey is jumping for joy. He flops onto a chair next to his mother. His eyes are sparkling like the lights on the Christmas tree.

Santa puts down his bag. He announces that he has a very special present for Mikey and me. Mikey cranes his neck to see.

Slowly, Mr. Lotecki opens the bag. He deliberately lets the suspense build. Mikey is squirming with impatience.

He's seen what it is! His mouth drops open and he looks at me, without saying a word. A huge smile lights up his face.

I'm curious. I lean forward to peek.

And I discover... ATTILA in his cage!
Santa announces that Attila can spend the Christmas holidays with Mikey.

The double-underlined sentences, *It's Mikey!* and *He's seen what it is!*, help to push the narration forward. They would not have this effect if they were in past tenses and set into a past narration : *It was Mikey!* and *He saw what it was!* or *He'd seen what it was!* can function only as single events in a sequence; they do not have the effect of pushing the narration forward.

Conclusion

The use of tense in the *Premiers romans* is a departure from more familiar narrative strategies. Yet these stories could not be told in the way they are with a different set of tenses. The tense array used in the books fits Benveniste's "discours" system, but this choice is not motivated by a desire to imitate speech or to simplify the narration, or forced because the stories are not really literary narratives. Rather, it is required because of the temporal proximity between the time of the story and the time of narration. The present tense's ability to represent a range of aspectual values and event types is the reason for its predominance. But even though these stories fit into "discours", all of the tenses of the "histoire" mode creep into the *Premiers romans* at one time or another.

The translations of the *Premiers romans* sometimes use past narration, sometimes present, and tense switches are common. In this way, the informal immediacy of narration that characterizes the *Premiers romans* is carried over in translation. Tense choice in translation must stem from narrative structure and the resources of the target language, not from a blind adherence to source text tense use or to generalizations about the appropriateness of present-tense narration and tense switching.

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ABSTRACT : Time Will Tell : Tense in Narration — This article examines both linguistic and narrative motivations for the use of present tense in a series of children's novels in French, concluding that the choice is dictated by temporal proximity between the time of the story and the time of the narration, and by the aspectual indeterminacy of the present tense. The choice of tense in the English translation is then discussed. Since the English tense system makes different distinctions and has different effects, various solutions are called for.

RÉSUMÉ : Le Temps de narration — Cet article examine le choix du présent comme temps de narration dans une série de romans jeunesse, en mettant en valeur des exigences tant linguistiques que narratives. Le choix du présent est dicté par la proximité entre le moment du récit et le moment de la narration, et par la déformabilité aspectuelle du temps présent. Pour la traduction des romans en anglais, les choix sont faits en fonction d'un système différent qui donne des effets différents. Il en résulte donc des solutions diverses.

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