

Deriving anteriority in the *perfect of recent past*

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Most Romance languages share a grammaticalized construction to refer to events in the recent past, e.g. the *passé récent* in French and the *pasado reciente* in Spanish. In English, typically a *present perfect* alongside the adverb *just* is used to convey this meaning, commonly referred to as *perfect of recent past* (Comrie 1985) or *hot news perfect* (McCawley 1971). We show the French *passé récent* leads to a reading of immediate anteriority, which blocks readings that are available for the *passé composé* (Bres & Labeau 2015). In a parallel corpus study, we find that the Spanish and French *recent past* forms have a similar distribution, and the Germanic languages generally use PERFECT + JUST in translation. We then provide a DRT analysis to derive immediate anteriority compositionally.

Keywords: recent past, hot news perfect, translation, compositional semantics, DRT

1. From *recent past* to PERFECT

Cross-linguistically, there is variation in reference to events in the recent past. French uses a grammaticalized construction that is formed with a present tense of *venir* ‘come’ followed by the particle *de* and an infinitive, as in (1) below. This construction is referred to as the *passé récent*. The construction also has a passive appearance in (2) and can appear with other tenses of *venir*, e.g. in the *imparfait*, as in (3).

- (1) Je viens de voir Marie.
I come.PRES.1SG DE see.INF Mary
‘I have just seen Mary.’ (e.g. Havu (2005); Bres and Labeau (2015))
- (2) Je viens d’ être informé.
I come.PRES.1SG DE be.INF inform.PTCP
‘I have just been informed.’

- (3) Je venais de voir Marie.
 I come.IMPF.1SG DE see.INF Mary
 ‘I had just seen Mary.’

Most Romance languages share this construction. In Spanish, (1) is translated as (4) below, which uses the verb *acabar* ‘finish’ as the auxiliary. The construction is commonly referred to as *pasado reciente*. In Catalan and Portuguese (though not Italian), similar constructions are available.

- (4) Acabo de ver a María.
 finish.PRES.1SG DE see.INF A Mary
 ‘I have just seen Mary.’

In this paper, we limit ourselves to French and Spanish data, and only to constructions with a present auxiliary form (excluding forms like (3)). We refer to both constructions as *recent past*.

Germanic languages like English, German and Dutch, commonly translate this construction using a *present perfect* in combination with the adverb *just*. In German, one uses *gerade*, and in Dutch, *zojuist* is the preferred adverb. We refer to this construction as PERFECT + JUST.¹

This subcategory of the PERFECT is referred to as *perfect of recent past* (Comrie 1985) or *hot news perfect* (McCawley 1971). In a subsequent paper, McCawley (1981) argued the semantics is comparable to that of an *existential perfect* (e.g. ‘I have seen Mary five times’). This argument is often used to refrain from further analysing this construction (e.g. Portner (2003); Nishiyama and Koenig (2010)).

This is peculiar for several reasons. First, there is clear cross-linguistic variation between Romance and Germanic languages in realizing this construction. Secondly, the construction shares some but not all properties of a (typical) PERFECT, which we will show in the next paragraph. Finally, the construction allows for a test of compositionality of a semantics for the PERFECT: how can we derive recency from the particle JUST?

This paper is structured as follows. In Section 2, we showcase the Reichenbachian analysis of Bres and Labeau (2015) of the French *passé récent*, and we complement this with data from Havu (2005). In Section 3, we present data from the Europarl parallel corpus (Tiedemann 2012), intended to show differences in translation of the *recent past* construction in the Germanic languages. Section 4 introduces the features of JUST in English, Dutch and German that can be used for

1. In this paper, we use PERFECT to refer to the linguistic category that encompasses the HAVE-PERFECT, morphologically formed by a present tense form of HAVE (or BE in French, German and Dutch for a restricted set of verbs) followed by a past participle. The category includes the English *present perfect*, but not the *past perfect*.

a compositional analysis of the PERFECT + JUST construction. Section 5 develops this analysis using discourse representation theory (DRT). Section 6 concludes.

2. A Reichenbachian analysis of the *passé récent*

In this section, we showcase the Reichenbachian analysis of Bres and Labeau (2015) for the French *passé récent*. This analysis makes predictions on the distribution of the *passé récent* as opposed to the *passé composé* (the French PERFECT). We use additional data from Havu (2005) to show that these predictions are satisfied.

Generally, the *passé composé* is assumed to follow the Reichenbachian E-R,S schema (e.g., de Swart (2007)). This means that the event time in a *passé composé* should be before the reference time, and that the reference time coincides with the speech time. Bres and Labeau propose the *passé récent* rather follows a $E < R,S$ schema, in which $<$ conveys immediate anteriority. If we compare the two schemata, we see that the *passé récent* creates a restriction of immediate anteriority on the relation between E and the simultaneous R and S.

If Bres and Labeau's $E < R,S$ analysis is correct, we expect certain characteristics of the (French) *passé composé* not to hold for the *passé récent*. As e.g. Schaden (2009) reports, the French *passé composé* has a wider distribution than the English *present perfect*. The *passé composé* can appear in sentences with past time adverbials and in situations that contain progression (e.g. storytelling), while the *present perfect* is generally ungrammatical in these situations.

The *passé récent* lacks these two characteristics of the *passé composé*. Havu shows that in general, the *passé récent* does not appear together with past time adverbials like 'yesterday evening', as in (5) below. Note that the *passé composé* is perfectly fine here.

- (5) Je viens de voir Marie (# hier soir à 18.00)
 I come.PRES.1SG DE see.INF Mary (# yesterday evening at 18.00)
 'I have just seen Mary (# yesterday evening at 18.00).'

Bres and Labeau show that the *passé récent* is rarely found to express narrative sequence. De Swart (2007) shows the *passé composé* can actually be used to tell a story, but only if the form is free to enter temporal relations with other times and events. (5) above shows this does not hold for the *passé récent*.

Two other expectations rise from the immediate anteriority restriction in the $E < R,S$ analysis. First, we expect it to rule out occurrences of the *passé récent* with stative verbs (in which the event time overlaps the reference time). Secondly, we do not expect the *passé récent* in combination with negation (in which the event time is stretched indefinitely into the past).

In their corpus analysis, Bres and Labeau show the *passé récent* is used far more frequently with telic events (achievements, accomplishments) than with atelic events, and not at all with unbounded states. The examples with stative verbs that they do find are clear transitions, as in (6) below. Notice how English requires the verb *become* rather than *be* for a correct translation.

- (6) Jean vient d' être père.
 John come.PRES.3SG DE be.INF dad
 'John has just become dad.'

For negation, Havu shows that in general, combining the *passé récent* with negation is infelicitous, as in (7) below. Havu does make the case that negation can appear in cases of anteposition, for example to stress that an event has not just taken place, but already some time ago.

- (7) Pierre est là? - * Oui, il ne vient pas de sortir.
 Pierre be.PRES.3SG there? yes, he NEG come.PRES.3SG NEG DE leave.
 INF
 'Is Pierre there?' - * 'Yes, he has not just left.'

In the next section, we examine whether the Spanish *pasado reciente* covers a similar pattern of uses by extracting both forms from a parallel corpus. We also investigate how Germanic languages translate this construction.

3. The recent past in translation

In the glosses above, the *recent past* is translated with a PERFECT + JUST construction. We examine whether this also holds in corpus data, or if there are situations which prompted translators to use other tenses. We also examine whether the Spanish and French constructions are used under similar circumstances.

We created an algorithm to automatically extract occurrences of *venir de + infinitif* as well as *acabar de + infinitivo* from (parallel) corpora.² The algorithm looks for an occurrence in the present tense of *venir* (for French) or *acabar* (for Spanish), then searches for the lemma *de* after this occurrence in the same sentence, and then searches for an infinitive. If the search returns these three items, the algorithm returns the sentence, as well as the translations in the other languages under review (here: English, German and Dutch, and Spanish or French depending on the source language). The search in a sentence stops whenever a punctuation mark

2. The algorithm (MIT licensed) is available via GitHub: <https://github.com/UUDigitalHumanitieslab/perfectextractor>.

is found. An added factor of complexity is the passive construction (see (2) above). In those cases, if the infinitive *être* or *ser* ‘be’ is found, an additional search for an (optional) past participle is started.

We applied this algorithm to the Q4–2000 section of the Europarl parallel corpus (Tiedemann 2012) to extract all *recent past* occurrences.³ Applying the extraction algorithm yields 264 *passé récents* from French, and 240 *pasado recientes* from Spanish. Of these, two French and two Spanish occurrences turned out to be false positives and were removed from the dataset. Table 1 shows how languages translate the French *passé récent*, and Table 2 shows how languages translate the Spanish *pasado reciente*. The assigned tense labels are purely based on form, not on potential meaning. For example, the *present perfect continuous* might

Table 1. Tenses of translations of the 264 occurrences of the French *passé récent* construction.

	English	German	Dutch	Spanish
<i>recent past</i>	–	–	–	175
PERFECT	184 ^a	148	157	49
PAST	42	37	21	2
PRESENT	–	4	2	2
paraphrase	15	57	44	10
wrong translation ^b	23	18	40	26

a. This includes 4 *present perfect continuous* occurrences.

b. Apart from cases where the *recent past* was not translated, this also includes cases in which there was a translation mismatch or no translation available at all.

Table 2. Tenses of translations of the 240 occurrences of the Spanish *pasado reciente* construction

	English	German	Dutch	French
<i>recent past</i>	–	–	–	185
PERFECT	169 ^a	138	148	24
PAST	40	34	19	1
PRESENT	7	10	9	13
PAST PERFECT	–	1	–	–
paraphrase	7	47	34	11
wrong translation	17	10	30	6

a. This includes 3 *present perfect continuous* occurrences.

3. Q4–2000 encompasses the European parliament proceedings of October, November and December 2000, and is a common testbed for NLP applications.

Lastly, we find that in a large majority of translations, an adverbial indicating recency accompanies the PERFECT. Table 4 provides an overview of adverbs used in translations of the *passé récent*. While English is strict in its use of *just*, German and Dutch use a rather productive set of adverbs. For German, *gerade* and *soeben* are the adverbs of choice. For Dutch, *zojuist* and *net* are the most common translations.

Table 4. Adverbs used in the Germanic translations with a PERFECT of the French *passé récent*

Adverb	English	German	Dutch
<i>just</i>	<i>just</i> (142)	<i>gerade</i> (44), <i>(so)eben</i> (43), <i>vorhin</i> (5)	<i>(zo)juist</i> (73), <i>(daar/zo)net</i> (27), <i>(zo)pas</i> (5)
<i>recently</i>	<i>recently</i> (4)	<i>vor kurzem</i> (7), <i>kürzlich</i> (5), <i>kurz zuvor</i> (1)	<i>onlangs</i> (10), <i>kortgeleden</i> (2), <i>laatstleden</i> (1)
<i>now</i>	<i>now</i> (5)	<i>jetzt</i> (4), <i>nun</i> (1)	<i>nu</i> (5)
<i>already</i>	<i>already</i> (2)	<i>bereits</i> (5), <i>schon</i> (1)	<i>al</i> (3), <i>reeds</i> (2), <i>inmiddels</i> (1)
<i>so far</i>	<i>so far</i> (1)	<i>bisher</i> (1)	–
prehodiernal	–	4	5
other adverbs	1	3	6
no adverb	24	24	16

To conclude, we found that the French and Spanish *recent past* forms are generally translated similarly. The Germanic languages have a clear preference for PERFECT + JUST to translate the *recent past*. In the next section, we show that different uses of JUST cause difficulty for a compositional analysis of PERFECT + JUST.

4. The role of JUST in the *perfect of recent past*

As described in Section 2, in the typical analysis of the *recent past*, the event time is restricted to being immediately anterior to the speech and reference time. In Section 3, we saw Germanic languages generally use PERFECT + JUST to translate the *recent past* construction. To derive immediate anteriority compositionally in the PERFECT + JUST construction, need to shift our focus to the adverb JUST in each of the Germanic languages. In this section, we consider the English, Dutch

and German *JUST* forms and subsequently try to generate hypotheses for the compositional analysis.

4.1 English *just*

Table 4 shows that in translations of the *passé récent*, the adverb *just* is used almost exclusively. This adverb, as Lee (1991) argues, is associated with a range of readings, exemplified below in (14–17).

- (13) *specificatory*: I have **just** finished the book.
 (14) *depreciatory*: Will you be long? – No, I'm **just** finishing this page.
 (15) *emphatic*: He is **just** amazing.
 (16) *restrictive*: I **just** notice it at night.

Lee concludes that what ties all these readings together is a notion of restriction. Lee does not spell this out further, but does give some compelling arguments for a monosemous account of *just*.

4.2 Dutch *zojuist* and *net*

The typical adverb in the Dutch PERFECT + JUST construction is *zojuist*, which is a purely temporal adverb and can only be used in sentences like (13). Devos and Vandeweghe (2000) show the alternative *net* has a similar range of senses as the English *just*, but add a reading of similarity ('just like', see (17) below).

- (17) Hij is net een zigeuner.
 he is.PRES.3SG NET a gipsy
 'He is just like a Gypsy.'

Devos and Vandeweghe do not come up with an extensive semantics for *net*, but do point out its strictness in interpretation. In (18) below, a continuation in which the speaker says that the well is actually 55 meters in depth, will be infelicitous with *net* in place, but considered felicitous without *net* in the original sentence.

- (18) Die put is net vijftig meter diep.
 that well is.PRES.3SG NET fifty meters deep
 That well is only just fifty meters deep.

4.3 German (*so*)*eben* and *gerade*

In German, we again find a large number of adverbs as the main forms of JUST. Of these, *soeben* is purely temporal. *Gerade* (literally: ‘straight’) and *eben* ‘level’, on the other hand, have other uses besides its marking of immediate anteriority. Temporally, *gerade* also functions as a marker of progressivity. Compare (19) and (20), in which the latter the addition of *gerade* blocks the habitual reading and only allows a progressive interpretation. Dutch *net* also shows this effect.

- (19) Otto isst Schokolade.
 Otto eat.PRES.3SG chocolate
 a. ‘Otto eats chocolate (in general).’
 b. ‘Otto is eating chocolate (now).’
- (20) Otto isst gerade Schokolade.
 Otto eat.PRES.3SG GERADE chocolate
 a. * ‘Otto eats chocolate (in general).’
 b. ‘Otto is eating chocolate (now).’

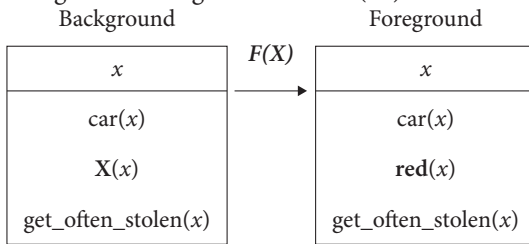
König (1991) states *gerade* and *eben* are also prominently used as focus particles. In (21), *gerade* shifts our focus to a specific subset, namely red cars, not cars of any other colour. Note that in this case, *gerade* should be translated with *precisely* rather than *just* or *now*.

- (21) Gerade ROTE_F Autos werden oft gestohlen.
 GERADE red cars become often stolen.
 ‘Precisely red cars are often stolen.’

From this observation, König argues that *gerade* and *eben* should be analysed as emphasizing the identity of two arguments. Here, ‘cars that are often stolen’ are equalled with ‘red cars’. The analysis extends to the progressive use: the emphasis on identity anchors the sentence to the present and makes it impossible to convey a habitual reading. To account for immediate anteriority, König proposes a semantic shift, i.e., *gerade* and *eben* have gradually extended their reference to the immediate past.

Schaden and Tovina (2009) propose a DRT analysis of *gerade*, starting with the basic idea that *gerade* as a focus particle points at a specific subset of the property or proposition at hand, using a foreground-background DRS (originally developed by von Stechow (1999)). Focus is assumed to create two representations of the sentence: a *foreground*, which contains all elements of the sentence, and a *background*, which is a way of representing alternatives. In the background, the focus value is replaced by a variable. For (21), this leads to the following (simplified) DRS:

(22) Foreground-background DRS of (21).



In this analysis, *gerade* is not represented in either foreground or background, but rather as an operator ranging over functions f from background onto foreground. *Gerade* assigns X to the focus value (FV, in this case ‘red’) whenever the proposition φ (in this case the conjunction $\text{car}(x)$, $X(x)$ and $\text{get_often_stolen}(x)$) holds: it creates a condition on the assignments g and h .

$$(23) \quad [[\textit{gerade}]] = \forall h \exists g ([[\varphi]]^{g,h} = 1) \rightarrow h(X) = FV$$

We follow Schaden and Tovená in their idea that both the immediate anteriority and progressive reading of *gerade* can be dealt with a foreground-background analysis. However, we feel their account lacks some scrutiny. In the next section, we use the observations from this section to develop a more explicit, compositional semantics of PERFECT + JUST.

5. A compositional semantics of the *perfect of recent past*

From the previous sections, we gathered requirements for a semantics of PERFECT + JUST. In the analysis of German *gerade*, we saw that JUST adds focus, but no additional elements or conditions to the DRS. From Dutch *net*, we found that JUST creates strict readings. We use these observations to generate a DRT semantics for PERFECT + JUST.

The most commonly used DRT semantics for the PERFECT is provided by Kamp and Reyle (1993).⁴ The main principles of this analysis are outlined in DRS (24) below. The DRS introduces a speech time n , a reference time t , a state s , an event e , and individuals x and y as discourse referents. Reference time t is constrained to be equal with speech time for present tense ($t = n$) and is temporally included in the state s ($t \subseteq s$). e is an event described by the verb phrase. It abuts the consequent state: s starts at the very moment when e ends ($e \supset \subset s$).

4. While alternative DRT semantics have been provided for the PERFECT (e.g. Nishiyama and Koenig (2010)), we stress that the main results from this paper are applicable to these analyses as well.

(24) DRS for *Mary has met John*.

n, t, e, s, x, y
$t = n$
$t \subseteq s$
Mary(x)
John(y)
$e: x$ meet y
$e \supset\subset s$

Kamp et al. (2015) provide an update of this semantics to deal with sentences with temporal adverbials like *today*. For a sentence like *Mary has met John today* to be true, both the meeting event and the consequent state need to be included into today. In the original model, *today* can be bound to reference time (e.g. $h \subseteq t$, with h referring to *today*). However, this only generates $h \subseteq s$ by transitivity, while we want something stronger: we want *today* to also temporally include the event e .

Kamp et al. therefore introduce a second timespan, location time t_{loc} , that allows for binding adverbial phrases (as opposed to reference time, that binds to tense). Location time temporally includes not only the state, but rather the event nucleus ec , a composition of e and s . Finally, Kamp et al. replace the abut relation $e \supset\subset s$ with a function $res(s, e)$, that specifies the relation between the event and the resulting state.⁵ An example DRS is displayed in (25) below.

(25) DRS for *Mary has met John today*.

$n, t, t_{loc}, ec, e, s, x, y$
$t = n$
$t \subseteq s$
$n \subseteq t_{loc}$
$ec \subseteq t_{loc}$
day(t_{loc})
Mary(x)
John(y)
$e: x$ meet y
$res(s, e)$
$ec = e \oplus_{ev} s$

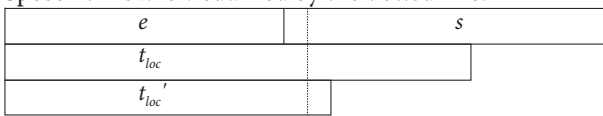
One way to create a reading of immediate anteriority with *JUST* would be to act on the condition for *today* (i.e. $day(t_{loc})$), and to posit t_{loc} somewhere near speech time. However, as (26) below shows, in Dutch (and German), *JUST* can combine with past time adverbials. Hence, directly acting on t_{loc} is unavailable for *JUST*.

5. Even so, the temporal abut relation $e \supset\subset s$ can be derived from this new condition. We refer the reader to Kamp et al. (2015) for details.

- (26) Marie heeft Jan net gisteren ontmoet.
 Mary have.PRES.3SG John NET yesterday meet.PTCP
 ‘Mary met John just yesterday.’

We would therefore rather propose JUST places emphasis on the relation of temporal inclusion between speech time n and the location time t_{loc} . This emphasis creates a stricter reading of temporal inclusion, namely that JUST marks the relation as being as close to equal as possible. This, as a side effect, moves t_{loc} towards the beginning of the state s . The process is visualized in (27) below. In (28) below, we find the application of this idea in a foreground-background DRS.

- (27) Visualizing a loose (t_{loc}) and strict (t_{loc}') interpretation of temporal inclusion. Speech time n is visualized by the dotted line.



- (28) Foreground-background DRS for *Mary has just met John*.
 Background Foreground

$n, t, t_{loc}, ec, e, s, x, y$	$F(X)$	$n, t, t_{loc}, ec, e, s, x, y$
$t = n$	→	$t = n$
$t \subseteq s$		$t \subseteq s$
$X(n, t_{loc})$		$n \cong t_{loc}$
$ec \subseteq t_{loc}$		$ec \subseteq t_{loc}$
Mary(x)		Mary(x)
John(y)		John(y)
$e: x$ meet y		$e: x$ meet y
res(s, e)		res(s, e)
$ec = e \oplus_{ev} s$		$ec = e \oplus_{ev} s$

In the DRS in (28), we suppose that the (temporal) relation X between the speech time n and the location time t_{loc} is unspecified in the background. In the foreground analysis, JUST creates a reading in which t_{loc} only just includes the speech time. In the DRS, this is denoted as $n \cong t_{loc}$. For this analysis to work, we assume that in the background, alternative relations between n and t_{loc} are available, as in (29) below.

- (29) $x = \{\subseteq, \cong, =\}$

In the foreground, JUST then selects for the most strict interpretation of temporal inclusion. Equalling n and t_{loc} however is out of the question, as this would by

transitivity also generate $e \subseteq n$ (from $n = t_{loc}$ and $ec \subseteq t_{loc}$), which is not what we want. Therefore, $n \cong t_{loc}$ is the strictest viable alternative.

The analysis also provides a solution to infelicity of habitual readings with JUST, as showed in (19) and (20). JUST explicitly binds the location time: it only just temporally includes the speech and reference time. Hence, the location time can not indefinitely continue in the future, which is what a habitual reading would require. Thus, JUST rules out the habitual reading.

In comparison to the analysis of the *passé récent* in Section 2, we indeed derive recency of the consequent state from the restriction on temporal inclusion. However, there is no clear rejection of JUST + PERFECT combining with events further in the past, something we see in both (12) and (26). The apparent cross-linguistic differences (English opts for a PAST in both cases) are not explained by this analysis, and require further work. Furthermore, our analysis in (28) does not show an explicit aversion of stative verbs, nor of negation, even though this was implied by analysis in Section 2.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, we analysed reference to events in the recent past across languages. Most Romance languages realize this with a periphrastic construction (*passé récent* in French and *pasado reciente* in Spanish). We applied the analysis of immediate anteriority of Bres and Labeau (2015) to the *passé récent*. Their Reichenbachian $E < R, S$ analysis predicts the *passé récent* is not used in reference to events further in the past, nor in narrative discourse.

Analysis of our parallel corpus shows the Spanish *pasado reciente* has a similar distribution as its French counterpart. We found Germanic languages generally translate these forms with the PERFECT + JUST construction, although there are some notable exceptions with references to events further in the past and *as*-parentheticals.

The insight that German *gerade* doubles as a focus particle allowed Schaden and Tovená (2009) to propose a foreground-background DRT analysis for JUST. We applied this idea to develop a compositional analysis for PERFECT + JUST. In this analysis, we argue JUST generates a condition of strict temporal inclusion between the location time and speech time. This condition creates recency of the consequent state as a side effect.

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