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# The non-literal use of tenses in Latin, with particular reference to the *praesens* *historicum*

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## 1. PROPOSITIO: NON-LITERAL USES OF TENSES IN DISCOURSE<sup>1</sup>

In the Latin grammatical tradition, the tenses of a main clause –at least absolute tenses such as present (*facio*), perfect (*feci*) and future (*faciam*) – are considered as being denotations of chronological moments of time, as can be seen in the term *tempus*, which has both a referential interpretation (*time*) and a linguistic interpretation (*tense*), like its hyponyms *praesens*, *praeteritum*, and *futurum*. As Quintilianus put it,

(1) *sunt autem tria tempora, ita ordo rerum tribus momentis consertus est: habent enim omnia <initium>, incrementum, summam*

« As there are three divisions of time, so the order of events falls into three stages: for everything has a beginning, growth and consummation »  
(*Inst.Or.* 5.10.71)

However, the correspondence between tense and time is not so simple and direct in languages, and various mismatches between these two dimensions exist, such as *praesens pro praeterito*, *praesens pro futuro*, *futurum pro praesente* (with modal connotations), and *praeteritum pro praesente* (to smooth over a claim or request, cf. French *Je voulais vous demander*). Predictably, non-literal uses are more frequently found for the present, either as source or as target of a temporal metaphor, so that a really present time reference (*hic et nunc*) is only a minimal part of the functional domain of the present tense.

Although these phenomena are common in all languages, different languages may possess different *translationes temporum* in a higher or lower degree. The *prasens pro futuro*, for example, is more frequently used in Gothic than in Latin and Ancient Greek: Wulfila translates the Greek future with the present, as can be seen in (2), where the present *hvopa* “I glorify myself” translates the Greek future *καυχήσομαι* “I will glorify myself”.

(2) *unte managai hvopand bi leika, jah ik hvopa* (καυχήσομαι)

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« Puisque beaucoup se glorifient selon la chair, moi aussi je me glorifierai »  
(Mossé 1942 : 169)

Conversely, the *praesens pro praeterito*, also called *praesens historicum*, is more frequent in Latin and Ancient Greek than in Gothic: the Greek present is translated with a preterit by Wulfila, as in (3), where the Gothic preterit *qap* "he said" renders the Greek present λέγει "he says". In Latin, the *praesens historicum* is even more frequent, in all periods and in all authors, than in Ancient Greek, where it develops only after Homer, in the artistic prose of the Classical period.

(3) *jah qap* (λέγει) *du imma Jesus*  
« Et Jesus lui dit » (Mossé 1942 : 168)

The *praesens historicum* in Latin is the topic of this paper, which aims to be a contribution to a view of grammatical forms, such as tenses, as shaped by discourse and context.

## 2. NARRATIO: THE STATE OF THE ART ON THE PRAESENS HISTORICUM

The *communis opinio* in the literature is that the *praesens historicum* is used instead of the perfect to denote past events in a more vivid or dramatic style (cf. Ernout & Thomas 1953: 221; Hofmann & Szantyr 1965: 306-307; Mellet *et al.* 1995; Pinkster 1998). Wackernagel, for example, speaks of *Farbung* "colour" or *dramatische Lebendigkeit*.

« Der Gedanke steht im Vordergrund, dass darin *eine besonders lebendige Form der Darstellung, eine starke Vergegenwärtigung des Vorganges* liege; man denkt, es werde etwas im Praesens hist. erzählt, wenn es gleichsam *mit dramatischer Lebendigkeit* dem Hörer vorgeführt werden soll, so dass er selbst Zeuge des Vorganges ist, ihn gleichsam miterlebt. » (Wackernagel 1928: 164; emphasis added)

This is, however, not always the case. Wackernagel himself observes that in Latin the *praesens historicum* is much more frequent in Caesar than in Tacitus, although Caesar's prose is clearly not pathetic at all.

« Aber, dass das Praesens hist. eo ipso und immer dieser Absicht diene, kann man unmöglich behaupten. Dagegen spricht schon, dass wenig römische Autoren es so häufig anwenden wie Caesar; er wendet es häufiger an als Tacitus, obwohl er doch viel trockener und weniger pathetisch schreibt als dieser. » (Wackernagel 1928: 164)

These cases are justified with the observation that sometimes the *praesens historicum* can be used to communicate events in an essential and solemn style. This use, called *praesens tabulare*, emerges both in chronicles and in inscriptions, and is ascribed to the annalistic traditions. A similar *modus narrandi* can be found today in the titles of newspapers, where it is crucial only to communicate

the event pure and simple, since the details will follow, and the past time reference is implicit.

« Da ist also von Dramatik nicht die Rede; man wird hierfür am vorsichtigsten sagen: es gab eine Art der Mitteilung über Vergangenes, bei der der Abstand gegenüber der Gegenwart unausgesprochen bleiben konnte, wo es bloss darauf ankam, den Verbalbegriff auszudrücken. Es ist dies ein Ausfluss des zeitlosen Präsens. » (Wackernagel 1928: 165)

Apparently, the *praesens historicum* can express completely different functions, and may be used in sophisticated and emphatic passages as well as in plain, non-adorned compositions. Owing to this contradictory use, some scholars claim that the present per se is meaningless: it would be an “unmarked”, “neutral” or “atemporal” tense, which may acquire its own meaning only in a specific context (cf. Serbat 1988; Moralejo 1988; Touratier 1994: 94-101). However, as Pinkster (1998) remarks, the distribution of the *praesens historicum* is different from that of historical tenses such as the perfect: the *praesens historicum* tends to occur in clusters, especially in short clauses that are linked by *asyndeton*. This seems to indicate that some underlying semantic components constrain such a syntactic distribution (« the present has its own place in the tense system with a specific, “positive” semantic value of its own: presenting a state of affairs as contemporaneous with the speech situation”, rather than regarding it as a tense indicating as its basic meaning “temporality” », Pinkster 1998: 80).

To understand this meaning, the precious judgments of traditional Indo-Europeanist studies can be related to more recent pragmatic findings, where vague notions of style and emphasis are reformulated in the framework of discourse analysis, textual linguistics, and information structure.

### 3. ARGUMENTATIO: THE PRAESENS HISTORICUM IN CAESAR

#### 3.1. Materials and methods

The observation that the *praesens historicum* is frequent in Caesar’s *De Bello Gallico* makes this corpus particularly valuable to study the contexts where the *praesens historicum* appears, and the possible principles other than dramatisation or solemnity that may underlie this non-literal tense. As a matter of fact, examples drawn from traditional grammars may well illustrate the main points of interest of constructions such as tenses, but certainly do not suffice to detect the pragmatic functions behind them, for which the comprehensive analysis of a long and coherent text seems necessary. Accordingly, we performed an exhaustive investigation of the original nucleus of *De Bello Gallico*, that is, books I-VII of this work.

As the next step, we must find a criterion to identify the *praesens historicum* in an unambiguous way. First, we excluded all verb forms which may be interpreted as non-presents. Forms such as *inquit* or *instituit* may be morphologically interpreted as either presents or perfects without looking at the

context. In a prose text, this morphological ambiguity also extends to verbs with an apophonic perfect such as *venit* or *fugit*, for which vowel length is not indicated.

Second, we excluded all presents which may be interpreted as non-historical, that is, the a-temporal or general present and the habitual present. The general present applies to proverbs or sentential expressions (4) and – more frequently in our corpus – to descriptions of countries (5) and human customs.

(4) *Multum cum in omnibus rebus tum in re militari **potest** fortuna*  
 « Fortune accomplishes much, not only in other matters, but also in the art of war » (6,30)

(5) *(Hercynia silva) **oritur** ab Helvetiorum et Nemetum et Rauracorum finibus rectaque fluminis Danubi regione **pertinet** ad fines Dacorum et Anartium*

« (The Hercynian Forest) begins at the frontiers of the Helvetians, Nemetes, and Rauraci, and extends in a right line along the river Danube to the territories of the Daci and the Anartes » (6,25)

### 3.2. Results

Once the domain of the *praesens historicum* is precisely defined, data point out that the predicates attested in the *praesens historicum* form a quite homogeneous class: the majority of them represent predicates of “utterance”, “knowledge” or “propositional attitude” (so called in Noonan 1985), such as *accuso, appello, arbitror, censeo, cerno, cognosco, commemoro, commonefacio, communico, conclamo, concrepo, confido, confirmo, coniuro, conloquor, constituo, consulo, credo, curo, demonstro, dico, disco, doceo, dubito, excogito, hortor, impero, impetro, indico, interdico, iubeo, iudico, mando, moneo, nego, nuntio, obsecro, obtestor, oro, ostendo, persuadeo, peto* “to ask”, *polliceor, posco, proba, profiteor, pronuntio, propono, puto, quaero, recito, reperio, rogo, scio, sollicito, videor, voco*, etc. Consider example (6).

(6) *se suis copiis suoque exercitu illis regna conciliaturum **confirmat**. Hac oratione adducti inter se **fidem et ius iurandum dant** et regno occupato per tres potentissimos ac firmissimos populos totius Galliae imperio sese potiri posse **sperant***

« He assures them that he will, with his own forces and his own army, acquire the sovereignty for them. Incited by this speech, they give a pledge and oath to one another, and hope that, when they have seized the sovereignty, they will, by means of the three most powerful and valiant nations, be enabled to obtain possession of the whole of Gaul » (1,3)

“Utterance contexts” do not mean here single predicates, but rather entire constructions, which can be identified only in the whole context. For example, the verb *do* is per se a quite vague predicate, which may denote many different types of verbal and non-verbal actions, according to the complement. It becomes an utterance predicate in (6), in the expression *fidem et ius iurandum dare*, which denotes a verbal act of promising solemnly. Similarly, the general

verb *facio* becomes an utterance predicate when combined in the common expression *certiorem facio* “to let someone know, to inform”.

Table 1 illustrates the distribution of the *praesens historicum* in all main or independent clauses of our corpus (the use of the *praesens historicum* in subordinates – which is quite rare – is briefly discussed below in §6). As can be seen, about 60% of occurrences of the *praesens historicum* concern predicates of utterance, knowledge, and propositional attitude (here indicated with the simplified labels “utterance”).

Table 1. Distribution of the *praesens historicum* in Caesar

| <i>De Bello Gallico</i> | PRAESENS HISTORICUM  |                          | Separate Total |
|-------------------------|----------------------|--------------------------|----------------|
|                         | “utterance” contexts | “non-utterance” contexts |                |
| Liber I                 | 55 (66%)             | 28 (34%)                 | 83<br>(100%)   |
| Liber II                | 8 (53%)              | 7 (47%)                  | 15<br>(100%)   |
| Liber III               | 30 (68%)             | 14 (32%)                 | 44<br>(100%)   |
| Liber IV                | 12 (67%)             | 6 (33%)                  | 18<br>(100%)   |
| Liber V                 | 142 (61%)            | 91 (39%)                 | 233<br>(100%)  |
| Liber VI                | 86 (62%)             | 53 (38%)                 | 139<br>(100%)  |
| Liber VII               | 228 (61%)            | 146 (39%)                | 374<br>(100%)  |
| Overall Total           | 561 (62%)            | 345 (38%)                | 906<br>(100%)  |

The prevalence of the *praesens historicum* with utterance constructions is significant to the extent that tenses, as well as other verbal categories such as moods, voice, person, number, etc. may be in principle grammaticalized to all predicates, and are not so conditioned by the semantics of the single verbs. By contrast, non-utterance contexts represent a heterogeneous category – and for this reason we have defined it in a negative way – where no semantically consistent nucleus can be identified. We will see below further principles that may lie behind the 38% of this non-utterance class: although it is a minority, this is not a scarce percentage, and certainly must be accounted for. For now, it may suffice to identify a possible rationale behind the 62% of utterance contexts where the *praesens historicum* is found.

The fact that a distinctive formal manifestation is devoted to events related to speech, knowledge or propositional attitude, as well as to situations described with a subjective point of view or comment of the speaker, reminds the textual difference between “commentative tenses” and “narrative tenses” identified by Harald Weinrich (1964). Weinrich, the founder of textual linguistics, considers temporal mismatches as temporal metaphors, according to a broad view of metaphor that is not limited to the lexicon, but also encompasses morpho-

syntactic strategies. Weinrich distinguishes commentative tenses and narrative tenses in various modern languages of Europe, such as English, German, French, Italian, and Spanish. Narrative tenses, such as Italian *imperfetto*, *passato remoto* and *trapassato prossimo*, are preferred in the written or formal language when the author reports an event in a quite objective or detached way, and are especially used in some genres such as novel or romance. Instead, an author resorts to commentative tenses (Italian *presente*, *passato prossimo*, and *futuro*) when a situation is described in a more personal way, by adding a sort of subjective comment. This especially occurs in lyric poetry, dramas, as well as in essays or works of literary critique, where the author expresses his point of view and offers an interpretative perspective to the reader. Commentative tenses are especially employed in dialogues, and therefore entertain a privileged relation with the spoken language and with the colloquial and informal register.

The difference between “commented and narrated world” (*besprochene und erzählte Welt*), of which Weinrich showed the relevance to account for the distribution of tenses in the Romance and Germanic languages, may be also identified in Latin. It may be argued that in Latin the present and the future are commentative, while the imperfect and the perfect are narrative. This holds true for both literal and non-literal uses of tenses. A non-literal use of the present, such as the *praesens historicum*, represents the extensions of a commentative tense such as the present in the functional domain of the past when the past situation has some similarities with the situations normally encoded by the present, and this precisely occurs when a speech situation is denoted. Thus, the *praesens historicum* may represent a commentative tense in two situations: when it expresses a comment of the author on the narration; when it expresses the narration of a typically commented action such as speaking, thinking, and knowing.

This, however, does not imply that the primary meaning of the present tense in Latin corresponds to the commentative function, as Weinrich assumes to be the case for the present tense in the Romance and Germanic languages. The denotation of the chronologically present time is more probably the primary meaning of the present tense in languages, as observed by classical grammarians and also by typological studies (cf. Comrie 1985). The commentative function may be more properly deemed as a derivation, often formed by a conversational implicature, from the basic chronological meaning.

## 4. CONFIRMATIO: THE PRAESENS HISTORICUM IN COMMENTATIVE CONTEXTS ET SIMILIA

### 4.1. Events of utterance, knowledge, and propositional attitude

Utterance events denoted by the *praesens historicum* usually emerge in the descriptions of a council, as in (7), which shows both proper utterance predicates such as *orant*, *pronuntiatur*, *excogitantur* and idiomatic utterance predicates such as *dat manus* “surrender”, which in this particular context represents a verbal capitulation.

(7) *Consurgitur ex consilio; comprehendunt utrumque et **orant**, ne sua dissensione et pertinacia rem in summum periculum deducant: facilem esse rem, seu maneant, seu proficiscantur, si modo unum omnes sentiant ac probent; contra in dissensione nullam se salutem perspicere. Res disputatione ad mediam noctem perducitur. Tandem **dat** Cotta permotus **manus**: superat sententia Sabini. **Pronuntiatur** prima luce ituros. Consumitur vigiliis reliqua pars noctis, cum sua quisque miles circumspiceret, quid secum portare posset, quid ex instrumento hibernorum relinquere cogeretur. Omnia **excogitantur**, quare nec sine periculo maneatur, et languore militum et vigiliis periculum augeatur*

« They rise from the council, detain both, and entreat that they do not bring the matter into the greatest jeopardy by their dissension and obstinacy; the affair was an easy one, whether they remain or depart, if only they all thought and approved of the same thing; on the other hand, they saw no security in dissension. The matter is prolonged by debate till midnight. At last Cotta, being overruled, yields his assent; the opinion of Sabinus prevails. It is proclaimed that they will march at day-break. The remainder of the night is spent without sleep, since every soldier was inspecting his property, (to see) what he could carry with him, and what, out of the appurtenances of the winter-quarters, he would be compelled to leave. Every reason is suggested to show why they could not stay without danger, and how that danger would be increased by the fatigue of the soldiers and their want of sleep » (5,31)

#### 4.2. Comments, summaries and explanations

Sometimes, in the middle of a narration, a predicate of utterance, knowledge or propositional attitude appears to express a comment on a certain situation, as in (8), where first the perfect is used to denote the objective fact that Orgetorix died, and then the *praesens historicum* is used to express a more subjective suspect.

(8) *Cum civitas ob eam rem incitata armis ius suum exequi conaretur multitudinemque hominum ex agris magistratus cogerent, Orgetorix mortuus est; neque **abest suspicio**, ut Helvetii arbitrantur, quin ipse sibi mortem consciverit*

« While the state, incensed at this act, was endeavouring to assert its right by arms, and the magistrates were mustering a large body of men from the country, Orgetorix died; and there is not wanting a suspicion, as the Helvetians think, of his having committed suicide » (1,4)

While the perfect is commonly used to denote a sequence of events, the *praesens historicum* is preferred when the author wants to summarize a situation. In (9), for example, a series of events is reported in a battle between the Romans and their enemies, who *perturbaverunt*, *desiluerunt*, *in fugam conicierunt*, and finally *perterritos egerunt*. Then, Caesar comments that seventy-four Roman knights are killed, with the *praesens historicum* (*interficiuntur*). He does not imply that all these knights are killed precisely at this point of the military action, but rather in the whole battle (*eo proelio*).

(9) *At hostes, ubi primum nostros equites conspexerunt, quorum erat V milium numerus, cum ipsi non amplius DCCC equites haberent, quod ii qui frumentandi causa erant trans Mosam profecti nondum redierant, nihil timentibus nostris, quod legati eorum paulo ante a Caesare discesserant atque is dies indutiis erat ab his petitus, impetu facto celeriter nostros perturbaverunt; rursus his resistantibus consuetudine sua ad pedes desiluerunt subfossis equis compluribus nostris deiectis reliquos in fugam coniecerunt atque ita perterritos egerunt ut non prius fuga desisterent quam in conspectum agminis nostri venissent. In eo proelio ex equitibus nostris **interficiuntur** IIII et LXX, in his vir fortissimus Piso Aquitanus, amplissimo genere natus, cuius avus in civitate sua regnum obtinuerat amicus a senatu nostro appellatus. Hic cum fratri intercluso ab hostibus auxilium ferret, illum ex periculo eripuit, ipse equo vulnerato deiectus, quoad potuit, fortissime restitit; cum circumventus multis vulneribus acceptis cecidisset atque id frater, qui iam proelio excesserat, procul animadvertisset, incitato equo se hostibus obtulit atque interfectus est*

« But the enemy, as soon as they saw our knights, whose number was 5000, whereas they themselves had not more than 800 knights, because those who had gone over the Meuse for the purpose of foraging had not returned, while our men had no apprehensions, because their ambassadors had gone away from Caesar a little before, and that day had been requested by them as a period of truce, made an onset on our men, and soon threw them into disorder. When our men, in their turn, made a stand, they leaped from their horses to their feet according to their practice, and stabbing our horses in the belly and overthrowing a great many of our men, put the rest to flight, and drove them forward so much alarmed that they did not desist from their retreat till they had come in sight of our army. *In that encounter seventy-four of our knights were slain*; among them, Piso, an Aquitanian, a most valiant man, descended from a very illustrious family; whose grandfather had held the sovereignty of his state, and had been styled friend by our senate. While he was endeavouring to render assistance to his brother who was surrounded by the enemy, and whom he rescued from danger, he was himself thrown from his horse, which was wounded under him, but still resisted with the greatest intrepidity as long as he could. When he fell, surrounded on all sides and after receiving many wounds, and his brother, who had then retired from the fight, observed it from a distance, he spurred on his horse, threw himself upon the enemy, and was killed » (4,12)

One could argue that the use of the praesens historicum *interficiuntur* after a series of perfects is due to the principle of economy or “conjunction reduction” in Kiparsky’s (1968) terms. Accordingly, once an event has been already anchored in the past there is no need to explicit again the past time reference and the present may be employed. This principle, however, does not apply very well to the praesens historicum in Latin, as can be seen from the passage in (16). Here the praesens historicum *interficiuntur* is also followed by the perfects *eripuit*, *restitit*, *obtulit* and *interfectus est*, so that we have the sequence perfect-present in the first part of the text and the sequence present-perfect in the

second. This undermines Kiparksy's assumption that the variation between the perfect and the present is regulated by a precise directionality. By contrast, the hypothesis that the *praesens historicum* expresses the speaker's comment is appropriate to explain cases such as (16), where the summarizing expression « in that encounter seventy-four of our knights were slain » is followed by the narration of a specific fact, the death of the Aquitanian Piso, which is isolated and described in details in the report of the battle. The perfect *interfectus est*, used for this particular episode of the Aquitanian Piso, contrasts with the preceding *praesens historicum* *interficiuntur*, which refers to the death of the Roman knights in general.

The passage in (16) also allows to add a corollary to the common observation that the *praesens historicum* tends to occur in clusters (cf. §2). Although clusters represent a strong trigger for the *praesens historicum*, they are not the only syntactic environment in which this verbal form is used – and right at this point the commentative function of the *praesens historicum* clearly appears. When the *praesens historicum* occurs out of a cluster, isolated in the narration, it usually represents an utterance situation or expresses a more or less parenthetical comment of the narrator.

The author's comment inside a narration is often introduced by conjunctions such as *nam* or *enim*, which represent typical markers of explanation, like Ancient Greek *γάρ* and Old Indian *hí*. The clause in (10), for example, is drawn from a passage narrating how Vercingetorix imposed a strong discipline to his soldiers; in fact – the author comments – he used to punish them in terrible ways if they were found somehow faulty.

(10) *Nam maiore commisso delicto igni atque omnibus tormentis **necat***  
 « for on the commission of a greater crime he puts the perpetrators to death by fire and every sort of tortures » (7,4)

As Caroline Kroon (1995 : 169) observes, « in the majority of cases *nam* is not involved primarily in causal clause combining, in the sense of marking *semantic* (notably causal) relationships between consecutive clauses. It appears to be more adequate to say that *nam* signals the occurrence of a discourse unit which has a subsidiary role with regard to another, more central unit. »

The commentative use of the *praesens historicum* here underlined may be corroborated by the observation (offered to me by Paolo Poccetti) that the *praesens historicum* alternates with the perfect in private religious inscriptions, while in official inscriptions only the perfect is regularly found. This may be related to the fact that private inscriptions are characterized by a more immediate and subjective register with respect to public inscriptions.

### 4.3. Non-sequential events

The use of the *praesens historicum* in summaries, comments, and remarks referring to situations outside the main sequence of events makes this non-literal tense particularly appropriate when the author does not pursue a sequential narration, but rather describes a number of non-ordered, non-articulated facts that may also overlap. An instance of this appears in (11), where the Romans

are surprised by a sudden attack of the Germans, so that confusion is all over the camp, and many overlapping verbal events (*quaerit, pronuntiat, etc.*) and non-verbal events (*sustinet, circumfunduntur, etc.*) are described.

(11) *Inopinantes nostri re nova perturbantur, ac vix primum impetum cohors in statione sustinet. Circumfunduntur ex reliquis hostes partibus, si quem aditum reperire possent. Aegre portas nostri tuentur, reliquos aditus locus ipse per se munitioque defendit. Totis trepidatur castris, atque alius ex alio causam tumultus quaerit; neque quo signa ferantur neque quam in partem quisque conveniat provident. Alius iam castra capta pronuntiat, alius deleto exercitu atque imperatore victores barbaros venisse contendit; plerique novas sibi ex loco religiones fingunt Cottaque et Tituri calamitatem, qui in eodem occiderint castello, ante oculos ponunt. Tali timore omnibus perterritis confirmatur opinio barbaris, ut ex captivo audierant, nullum esse intus praesidium. Perrumpere nituntur seque ipsi adhortantur, ne tantam fortunam ex manibus dimittant*

« Our men, not anticipating it, are perplexed by the sudden affair, and the cohort on the outpost scarcely sustains the first attack. The enemies spread themselves on the other sides to ascertain if they could find any access. Our men with difficulty defend the gates; that very position and fortification secures the other accesses. There is a panic in the entire camp, and one inquires of another the cause of the confusion; they do not readily determine whether the standards should be borne or into what quarter each should betake himself. One avows that the camp is already taken, another maintains that, the enemies having destroyed the army and commander-in-chief, are come hither as conquerors; most form strange superstitious fancies from the spot, and place before their eyes the catastrophe of Cotta and Titurius, who had fallen in the same fort. All being greatly disconcerted by this alarm, the belief of the barbarians is strengthened that there is no garrison within, as they had heard from their prisoner. They endeavour to force an entrance and encourage one another not to cast from their hands so valuable a prize » (6,37)

Such contexts may explain most cases included among “non-utterance” predicates of Table 1. It may seem that the *praesens historicum* expresses a dramatic representation of events in these cases. We think, however, that what is at issue here is not drama, emphasis or πάθος, but rather non-sequentiality, since the *praesens historicum* also occur in other passages where the author similarly shifts from sequential narration to non-sequential description, without having any pathetic representation of the event. This particularly occurs in the preparation to the battle, when Caesar describes many auxiliary events such as digging canals or building walls for defense, as in (12). In such cases, the military actions represented backgrounded details with respect to the events of the battle, which is always foregrounded and described in iconic temporal order, usually in the perfect. The backgrounding function of the *praesens historicum* is here underlined by the temporal adverb *interea* “in the meanwhile”.

(12) *Interea ea legione quam secum habebat militibusque, qui ex provincia convenerant, a lacu Lemanno, qui in flumen Rhodanum influit, ad montem Iuram, qui fines Sequanorum ab Helvetiis dividit, milia passuum XVIIII murum in altitudinem pedum sedecim fossamque **perducit**. Eo opere perfecto praesidia **disponit**, castella **communit**, quo facilius, si se invito transire conentur, prohibere possit*

« Meanwhile, with the legion which he had with him and the soldiers which had assembled from the province, he makes a trench and a wall which was nineteen miles long and sixteen feet high, from the Lake of Geneva, which flows into the river Rhone, to Mount Jura, which separates the territories of the Sequani from those of the Helvetians. When that work was finished, he distributes garrisons, and closely fortifies redoubts, in order that he may the more easily intercept them, if they should attempt to cross over against his will » (1,8)

#### 4.4. Motion events

One of the main non-utterance predicates that are inflected in the *praesens historicum* may be identified in *proficiscor*, as in (13), as well as in other motion verbs, which describe the exit, entrance, or position change of a character in the scene. These movements are described as “linking” events among the various battles, which represent foregrounded information.

(13) *Qua consuetudine cognita Caesar, ne graviori bello occurreret, maturius quam consuerat ad exercitum **proficiscitur***

« Caesar, being aware of their custom, in order that he might not encounter a more formidable war, sets forward to the army earlier in the year than he was accustomed to do » (4.6)

Moreover, the fact that the *praesens historicum* is often used with intransitive predicates denoting motion and scene changes, may account for the remaining non-utterance uses of this tense, which are characterized by a low level of transitivity and topicality. Du Bois (1987) showed that the prototypical transitive clause is organized around an established agent, who persists through different clauses and therefore represents the main topic of the discourse. Instead, the subject of an intransitive clause (and particularly the subject of an intransitive clause describing a movement, entrance or exit) often represents a new piece of information, which carries the same informational value as a typical direct object.

#### 4.5. Predicates with a low degree of transitivity

It may be interesting to notice that most examples of the *praesens historicum* either are deponents or are inflected in the middle-passive voice. We have already seen some examples of this in utterance contexts such as *pronuntiatur* and *excogitantur* in (7) and *confirmatur, adhortantur* etc. in (11). It is acknowledged that utterance predicates are semantically characterized by a scarce transitivity (Partee 1973; Munro 1982). If we take prototypical transitive

predicates meaning “kill” such as *neco*, *occido*, *interficio* – which of course are not synonymous –, we may observe that they are almost equally attested in the perfect (18 times) as in the *praesens historicum* (15 times). The difference in use between the two tenses becomes, however, apparent when one considers that 10 out of 15 instances of the *praesens historicum* are middle-passive, as in (14), or reflexive, as in (15).

(14) *Eo die Quintus Laberius Durus, tribunus militum, interficitur*  
« That day, Q. Laberius Durus, a tribune of the soldiers, was slain » (5,15)

(15) *Se ipsi interficiunt*  
« They kill themselves » (5,37)

The transitivity of the clause is clearly reduced when the patient is presented as the main topic of a passive clause without any mention of the agent, as in (14) and (16). The passage in (16) shows another way how the *praesens historicum* may decrease the transitivity of predicates such as “kill” or “wound”: the human patient Titus Balventius is demoted in the dative case (the “sympathetic dative” in the definition of Havers 1911 : 170ff) and an inanimate referent such as the affected body part (*femur*) is encoded as the grammatical subject.

(16) *Tum Tito Balventio, qui superiore anno primum pilum duxerat, viro forti et magnae auctoritatis, utrumque femur tragula traicitur; Quintus Lucanius, eiusdem ordinis, fortissime pugnans, dum circumvento filio subvenit, interficitur; Lucius Cotta legatus omnes cohortes ordinesque adhortans in adversum os funda vulneratur*  
« Then each thigh of T. Balventius, who the year before had been chief centurion, a brave man and one of great authority, is pierced with a javelin; Q. Lucanius, of the same rank, fighting most valiantly, is slain while he assists his son when surrounded by the enemy; L. Cotta, the lieutenant, when encouraging all the cohorts and companies, is wounded full in the mouth by a sling » (5,35)

## 5. REFUTATIO: A UNIDIRECTIONAL CORRELATION

One may object that contexts of utterance, knowledge, or propositional attitude may also be easily found with the perfect tense. For some utterance predicate, such as “to answer”, the perfect is the most typical form: it is more common to find *respondit* than *respondet*. Similarly, it is more common to find *existimavit* “he thought” than *existimat* “he thinks”. For some other utterance predicates, such as *dico* or *peto*, the possibility to find a present as in (17) or a perfect as in (18) is almost the same.

(17) *Itaque a Cingetorige atque eius propinquis oratione Indutiomari cognita, quam in concilio habuerat, nuntios mittit ad finitimas civitates equitesque undique evocat: his certum diem conveniendi dicit*

« Thus, the speech of Indutiomarus, which he had delivered in the council, having been made known by Cingetorix and his allies, he sends messengers to the neighbouring states and summons knights from all quarters: he appoints to them a fixed day for assembling » (5.57)

(18) *Legati haec se ad suos relatueros **dixerunt** et re deliberata post diem tertium ad Caesarem reversuros: interea ne propius se castra moveret **petierunt**. Ne id quidem Caesar ab se impetrari posse **dixit***

« The ambassadors said that they would report these things to their country men and, after having deliberated on the matter, would return to Caesar after the third day; they begged that he would not in the meantime advance his camp nearer to them. Caesar said that he could not grant them even that » (4.9)

This possible objection can be overcome, however, by stating that the correlation between the *praesens historicum* on the one hand and contexts of utterance, propositional attitude or comment on the other is unidirectional. That is, while the *praesens historicum* is mainly used in utterance contexts, the opposite does not hold true, since utterance contexts can also be found with the perfect.

Two reasons – one specifically related to the Latin verbal system, the other more general in nature – may be identified for such functional asymmetry. First, the Latin perfect merges both the aorist and the perfect proper of PIE, and the PIE perfect mainly represents states resulting from a previous action (Wackernagel 1904). Stative predicates often represent emotional or mental situations, as can be seen in the case of Ancient Greek οἶδα “I know”, Latin *novi* “id.”, *memini* “I remember”, *odi* “I hate”, etc. Second, the past time is expressed under normal circumstances, that is, in its literal meaning by a past tense, which is therefore expected to possess all kinds of uses in this domain. To the extent that the *praesens historicum* is a non-literal tense, its distribution is more marked than that of the perfect to denote the past, and covers only a restricted area of the functional domain of the past.

## 6. EPILOGUS: FROM BACKGROUNDING TO COMMENTATIVE

We have seen that the *praesens historicum* in Caesar’s prose is often used with utterance predicates or in those commentative contexts that Weinrich (1964) identifies in the present, future and composite past tenses of the daughter Romance languages. In Latin as well, these uses are also found for the future, which often acquires modal epistemic meanings (cf. Ernout & Thomas 1953 : 226), but are not found for the imperfect or for the perfect, which represent narrative tenses in Weinrich’s terminology. From this perspective, Weinrich’s distinction between *besprochene Welt und erzählte Welt* corresponds in Latin to the distinction between primary tenses and secondary tenses.

The commentative sense of the *praesens historicum* probably derives by conversational implicature from the backgrounding use of (literal and non-literal) present tense in the discourse. As Hopper & Thompson (1980) observed, a

strong relationship exists in many languages between the present tense on the one hand (often characterized by imperfective aspect and atelic actionality) and backgrounding function on the other. Instead, prototypically transitive clauses conveying foregrounded information mainly use the past tense, expressing perfective aspect and telic actionality.

In Latin, the backgrounding function of the present may be identified in subordination. As anticipated, subordinate clauses with the *praesens historicum* are rather few (this is to be related to the fact that subordinates usually abide by the *consecutio temporum*, where the use of the subjunctive and of the infinitive is more common than that of the indicative). In our corpus, we counted 22 instances of subordinates with the *praesens historicum* (vs. 906 instances of the *praesens historicum* in main or independent clauses, cf. Table 1). In this reduced number, it is typical to find the use of the so-called “a-chronic *dum*”,<sup>2</sup> which is used for situations that are simultaneous and backgrounded with respect to the event denoted by the main clause, as in (19).

(19) *Dum ea **conquiruntur** et **conferuntur**, [nocte intermissa] circiter hominum milia VI eius pagi qui Verbigenus appellatur, sive timore perterriti, ne armis traditis supplicio adficerentur, sive spe salutis inducti, quod in tanta multitudine dediticiorum suam fugam aut occultari aut omnino ignorari posse existimarent, prima nocte e castris Helvetiorum egressi ad Rhenum finesque Germanorum contenderunt*

« While those things are being sought for and got together, after a night's interval, about 6000 men of that canton which is called the Verbigene, whether terrified by fear, lest after delivering up their arms, they should suffer punishment, or else induced by the hope of safety, because they supposed that, amid so vast a multitude of those who had surrendered themselves, their flight might either be concealed or entirely overlooked, having at night-fall departed out of the camp of the Helvetii, hastened to the Rhine and the territories of the Germans » (1,27)

A backgrounding function may be also identified in the imperfect. It is often the case that the author employs the perfect to report the main events and the imperfect to open a geographical description in the body of the narration. In (20), the form *appellabatur* introduces the description of the area where a military operation takes place.

(20) *Eos impeditos et inopinantes adgressus magnam partem eorum concidit; reliqui sese fugae mandarunt atque in proximas silvas abdiderunt. Is pagus **appellabatur** Tigurinus*

« Attacking them encumbered with baggage, and not expecting him, he cut to pieces a great part of them; the rest betook themselves to flight, and concealed themselves in the nearest woods. That canton was called the Tigurine » (1,12)

<sup>2</sup> The number of subordinates with the *praesens historicum* appears as being even more reduced if one considers that the a-chronic *dum* has a function close to that of a coordination marker. A clause introduced by *dum* is not affected by the tense of the main clause and is maintained in the indicative in the *oratio obliqua* (cf. ORLANDINI 1994).

From this point of view, the backgrounding function characterizes the discursive use of the tenses belonging to the *infectum*, while the system of the *perfectum* – and the perfect tense in particular – mainly expresses foregrounded information.

If we apply Weinrich's framework to Latin, it appears that the imperfect is a narrative backgrounding tense, while the present is a commentative backgrounding tense. The *praesens historicum* may cover both functions: in its denotation of a past time by means of a present tense, it may express a comment in the narration, or alternatively the narration of a typically commented action such as speaking, thinking, and knowing. Such possible uses in different domains of interpretation determine the vagueness and the opposite meanings that the *praesens historicum* is traditionally assigned. This, however, does not imply that the *praesens historicum* is found indifferently in commentative as well as in narrative contexts – if so, the distinction between commentative and narrative uses would be deprived of theoretical significance in regard to Latin tenses. Quite differently, the polysemy of the *praesens historicum* is internally organized: by no means has it expressed the prototypical narrative function, that is, a series of sequential events related to the same human agent. The *praesens historicum* rather indicates a topic shift in a sequence of events, or a series of temporally unordered events, or the author's comment that detaches for a moment the addressee's attention from the narration. Such use is very different from that attested in the Romance languages and in other modern languages of Europe. It has been observed that in French and English, for example, the historical present normally occurs in sequential situations, which are constructed around the same participant and are presented as foregrounded information (cf. Wolfson 1979; Schiffrin 1981; Fleischman 1991). This indicates that the same form of the historical present may have strikingly different functions in different languages, and even in different stages of the same language. This also suggests that the discursive motivation of apparently aberrant uses of a grammatical tense can be found after an exhaustive reading of texts, rather than in isolated sentences extrapolated from grammars.

## EDITION

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## TRANSLATION

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