

THE USE OF TENSE AND MOOD IN THE DIALOGUES OF 1930s FRENCH FILMS*

MICHAËL ABECASSIS

michael.abecassis@mod-langs.oxford.ac.uk

Resum. L'ús del temps i del mode en els diàlegs de pel·lícules franceses dels anys 1930. L'existència de gravacions ens permet estudiar aspectes del canvi lingüístic en la llengua francesa durant el segle XX d'una manera que no fou possible en els segles anteriors. En aquesta anàlisi s'estudia l'ús que es fa del temps i del mode en un corpus de pel·lícules dels anys 30. Aquest corpus no es pot considerar útil per descriure la llengua francesa d'aquests anys, ja que el llenguatge de les pel·lícules és una elaboració dels guionistes i dels actors, la majoria dels quals provenen de la classe alta. S'estudiarà si aquest col·lectiu considerava l'ús del temps com a diferenciador entre grups socials. S'ha adoptat un enfocament de tipus quantitatiu i s'ha intentat descobrir si hi ha diferències entre els grups de nivell alt i de nivell baix i si el tipus de discurs parlat és gaire semblant a l'escrit.

Paraules clau: temps, francès, ús, cinema, 1930, sociolecte

Abstract. The existence of early sound recordings enables us to study aspects of language change in French over the 20th century in a way that was not possible in earlier centuries. In this analysis, I investigate the use of tense and mood in a corpus of 1930's films. I am not treating my film corpus as authentic data in which I am looking to describe late 1930's French. Language in films is "staged" by 1930's script-writers and actors, most of whom come from upper-class background. I will study whether the script-writers and actors of the corpus regarded the use of tenses as a way of conveying social-group differences. I will adopt a quantitative approach which will attempt to discover if there are differences between the upper and lower groups in my corpus, and which produces more written-text-like speech.

Key words: tenses, French, usage, films, 1930, sociolect

*The following revised research has been conducted in the course of my doctoral dissertation on 'The Representation of Parisian Speech in the Cinema of the 1930s' (University of St Andrews, Scotland 2000). I am very grateful to my supervisor Professor R. A. Lodge (University St Andrews, Scotland) and to W. J. Anderson (University St Andrews, Scotland) for her unstinting help when writing this paper.

1 The corpus

For this research, a corpus of French films (recorded on videocassette) dating from the 1930s has been assembled: this provides interesting and previously unexploited evidence concerning Parisian vernacular speech at that time. The film corpus comprises five black and white films: *Hôtel du Nord* (1938), *Fric-frac* (1939), *Circonstances atténuantes* (1939), *Le Jour se lève* (1939), *La Règle du jeu* (1939).

Fric-frac stars Arletty, Michel Simon and Fernandel. The film derives much of its humour from the contrast between the ‘vernacular speech’ of the proletarian speakers and the ‘standard speech’ of the upper-group characters. Fernandel, acting as a bridge between the two, attempts to integrate himself with petty thieves by approximating to them both socially and linguistically. The comic film *Circonstances atténuantes*, starring Michel Simon, Suzanne Dantès, Dorville and Arletty, presents a variety of Parisian speakers from different social classes. *Le Jour se lève* encapsulates the pessimistic mood that pervaded France in the 1930s. In Carné’s film, scripted by Jacques Prévert, Jean Gabin portrays the tormented working-class male, who murders the obnoxious seducer of an innocent flower-seller, played by Jules Berry. *La Règle du jeu* is one of Jean Renoir’s most famous films. It is a satire and a caricature of the bourgeoisie in its most stereotyped form. Marcel Dalio and Mila Parély play the aristocrats, while Julien Carette is the working-class Parisian speaker. Finally, Arletty’s line ‘atmosphère, atmosphère’ contributed to the popularity of Carné’s *Hôtel du Nord*. Jeanson, the author of this famous dialogue between Jovet and Arletty, wrote the scripts of several classics which opened the way to poetic realism, offering ‘les gens du peuple’ important roles in 1930s French cinema.

I studied these films first because of their lasting popularity: they are some of the most famous films of the 1930s. Above all, however, I thought they were representative of the most stereotypical Parisian sociolect of that period.

2 A social classification of the characters

To help me to assign a social category to each speaker, I have used the following stratification adapted from the INSEE (*Institut National de la Statistique et des Etudes Economiques*) classification:

- A. Liberal professions and upper groups

- B. Middle groups
- C. Employees
- D. Foremen, qualified workers
- E. Specialised workers, labourers

Among these five occupational groups, I can distinguish three broad social classes: lower class (Category E), middle class (Category B, C, D) and upper class (Category A). By “lower class”, I mean people who earn low wages, mostly by manual labour. By “middle class”, I mean high school graduates, semi-professionals and white collar workers. By “upper class”, I mean aristocrats, the nobility and well-to-do people who hold no job but live on private incomes. The jewellery employees in *Fric-frac* with most probably modest salaries are middle group, whereas the public prosecutor in *Circonstances atténuantes* and Robert de La Chesnaye, the aristocrat of *La Règle du jeu*, can be said to be upper group. Because the majority of the characters in my corpus of films fall into the “lower group”, a division of the remaining ones into “middle group” and “upper group” is not methodologically convenient. So, in my study, middle-class and upper-middle class speakers will be put together into one social class which I shall refer to as that of the upper group. Another category should be added to my subdivision: *floaters*. Such characters waver between the upper and lower groups. Examples of this category are Marcel, Valentin, Octave and Edmond.

Most speakers are placed clearly in either the upper group (the *bourgeoisie*) or the lower group (the *classe populaire*), but there is a danger of circularity in my classification. By classifying *a-priori* the characters in each film into the upper and lower groups and establishing my own rather *ad hoc* social categories, I end up with a picture of Paris society divided into two social groups. I am aware that Parisian society in the 1930s was much more complex than this and that my bi-partite division is an oversimplification. However, it is still valid for my purposes, as the script-writers of the films clearly blur all social distinctions other than “upper” and “lower”.

Table 1 presents all the characters investigated in alphabetical order, listing their profession in the films, the names of the actors and the total number of *tokens* in each character’s vocabulary. *Tokens* (or *usages*) count the total number of words used by each character, therefore including multiple occurrences of the same word. If I were to disregard the frequency factor, I could

	Film	Actors	Profession	Total number of tokens in lexicon
Bouic	<i>Circonstances atténuantes</i>	Dorville	innkeeper	1,815
Clara	<i>Le Jour se lève</i>	Arletty	assistant	1,159
Edmond	<i>Hôtel du Nord</i>	L. Jouvet	former pimp	2,006
François	<i>Le Jour se lève</i>	J. Gabin	worker	2,733
Françoise	<i>Le Jour se lève</i>	J. Laurent	florist	816
Geneviève	<i>La Règle du jeu</i>	M. Parély	Countess	970
Jo	<i>Fric-frac</i>	M. Simon	petty criminal	3,879
Loulou	<i>Fric-frac</i>	Arletty	petty criminal	3,255
Madame	<i>Circonstances atténuantes</i>	S. Dantès	unknown	1,541
Marceau	<i>La Règle du jeu</i>	J. Carette	servant	1,024
Marcel	<i>Fric-frac</i>	Fernandel	bank clerk	4,198
Marie	<i>Circonstances atténuantes</i>	Arletty	prostitute	1,934
Monsieur	<i>Circonstances atténuantes</i>	M. Simon	prosecutor	3,398
Octave	<i>La Règle du jeu</i>	J. Renoir	unsuccessful artist	2,549
Pierre	<i>Hôtel du Nord</i>	J.-P. Aumont	artist	791
Raymonde	<i>Hôtel du Nord</i>	Arletty	prostitute	2,076
Renée	<i>Hôtel du Nord</i>	Annabella	hotel maid	2,257
Renée	<i>Fric-frac</i>	H. Robert	bank clerk	2,313
Robert	<i>La Règle du jeu</i>	M. Dalio	Marquis	2,526
Valentin	<i>Le Jour se lève</i>	J. Berry	animal trainer	1,393
Total				42,633

Table 1: Classification of characters by professions

also count the total number of *word types* (or *members*) for each character (see Patterson 1968, p.320; Juilland *et al.* 1964, p.LXI).

Film 1: *Fric-frac*

The employees of Mercandieu’s jeweller’s shop encapsulate the category which the INSEE refers to as “employés” (Offord 1990, p.66). The upper-group characters are Renée and Marcel, although Marcel is better classified as a floater. The lower-group characters are Loulou and Jo.

Film 2: *Circonstances atténuantes*

The upper-group characters are Monsieur Gaétan and Madame Nathalie Le Sentencier and the lower-group characters, dominated by male figures, are Bouic and Marie.

Film 3: *Le Jour se lève*

Valentin is the upper-group figure. He is a cabaret dog trainer and “licencié de philosophie” (339-40). His educational background is well-rated by Clara who, on several occasions, is filled with admiration for his manner of speaking: “c’est formidable c’qui cause bien c’type-là [...] ses boniments on croirait qu’il les sort de ses manches” (219-20). The lower group is made up of three main characters: François, a factory worker, his homonym Françoise, a flower-seller from a modest background, and Clara, an assistant to a cabaret artist. Both François and Françoise were brought up in an orphanage.

Film 4: *La Règle du jeu*

The study of this film is made difficult by the high number of characters. I will concentrate on the most stereotyped characters. Robert La Chesnaye and Geneviève de Marras are the upper-group characters. Marceau is the lower-group Parisian. Octave, a friend of Robert and Jurieu who belong to the upper group, is more of a floater between the upper and the lower groups.

Film 5: *Hôtel du Nord*

In this film, the upper-group characters are Renée and Pierre. The lower-group characters are Raymonde and Edmond. However, Edmond is in fact more of a floater.

I give below the number of words in the upper-group subcorpus (subcorpus 1) and the lower-group subcorpus (subcorpus 2). I have excluded Octave's speech in *La Règle du jeu* because it does not adhere to the patterns of either of the two groups.

Subcorpus 1

Upper group (Geneviève, Madame, Marcel, Monsieur, Pierre, Renée, Renée, Robert, Valentin): 19,387 words

Subcorpus 2

Lower group (Bouic, Clara, Edmond, François, Françoise, Jo, Loulou, Marceau, Marie, Raymonde): 20,697 words

3 Tenses

3.1 GENERAL PATTERN OF TENSE USAGE

Most studies conducted on French tenses are qualitative with a particular emphasis on the differences between the *passé simple* (preterite) and the *passé composé* (perfective) (Cohen 1956, Genouvrier 1973, Vet 1980, Fleischmann 1983). If the former is found mostly in writing-like discourse and formal register, the latter is associated with spoken and colloquial usage. Posner suggested that the *passé simple* was gradually replaced by the *passé composé* in spontaneous speech in the middle of the 18th century (1997, p.205). A few attempts have been made to approach tense usage quantitatively, mostly in written French (Martin & Muller 1964, Stavinochová 1974, Herzog 1981, Engel 1990).

Table 2 presents the percentage of tense usage in three different studies: Kahn (1954) looked at Parisian speech in two thousand utterances made by one single informant. Imbs (1960) and a statistical analysis released in *Le Monde* in the 1970s quantified tense usage in a written corpus of newspaper

	Kahn (1954)	Imbs (1959)	<i>Le Monde</i> (1971)
Present	66.9%	47%	48%
Passé composé	23%	21%	21.5%
Imperfect	4.8%	9.4%	9.4%
Simple future	3.3%	8.8%	7.1%
Conditional	-	0.3%	5.3%
Pluperfect	0.4%	3.7%	4.0%
Past historic	-	7.4%	3.2%
Periphrastic future (“je vais faire”)	1.3%	0.7%	0.4%

Table 2: Tense usage in spoken and written French (adapted from Müller 1985, p.123)

articles¹.

These figures illustrate that the present is the tense most frequently found in Kahn’s spoken corpus. There are no instances of past historic and conditional usage in Kahn’s corpus. The two corpora of written French are characterised by a higher frequency of past and future tenses, such as the imperfect and the future.

In this section, I will investigate whether there exists any difference in tense usage between the upper-class characters in the films and the lower-class ones. I will examine in particular the popular conception of vernacular tense usage as opposed to standard French usage as use of the “passé composé *versus* passé simple, futur périphrastique *versus* futur synthétique [et l’] absence du subjonctif imparfait” (Gadet 1989, p.112). Rather than examining tense usage in all five films, I will concentrate on one film only, *Circonstances atténuantes*. This is because the picture of tense usage is reasonably similar from one film to another. I will look at the following tenses:

- present indicative (e.g. “je sors”)
- passé composé (perfect tense) (e.g. “je suis sorti(e)”)
- imperfect indicative (e.g. “je sortais”)
- simple future (e.g. “je sortirai”)
- pluperfect (e.g. “j’étais sorti(e)”)

¹Müller is here consciously using the date “Imbs (1959)”, which is a correct reference to the underlying data of Imbs (1960) that were collected in 1959.

	Monsieur	Madame	Marie	Bouic
Present	179	87	105	84
Passé composé	23	7	16	10
Imperfect	3	3	7	7
Simple future	19	8	8	3
Periphrastic future	13	1	2	10
Conditional	1	0	1	0
Pluperfect	6	1	2	0
Past historic	0	0	3	2

Table 3: Tense-usage by upper-group and lower-group characters

- past historic (e.g. “je sortis”)
- periphrastic future (e.g. “je vais sortir”)

3.2 THE UPPER-GROUP AND LOWER-GROUP TENSE-USAGE IN *Circonstances atténuantes*

Table 3 shows the different tenses used by the upper-group and lower-group characters and table 4 presents usage as percentages in their respective sociolects. Imperatives, infinitives and gerunds have been omitted as these are not tensed. Given that the conditional can sometimes be temporal (e.g. “il t’a dit hier qu’il te téléphonerait”), and at other times modal (e.g. “si j’étais riche, j’achèterais une voiture”), I have only included instances of temporal conditional in these data.

a) Present

There is no clear difference between the two groups.

b) Passé composé *versus* passé simple

The proportion of the passé composé is slightly higher for the lower-group characters: contrary to expectation, I find no examples of the past historic in the upper-class group, but five examples in the lower-class speech. However, it is found essentially in the song of the film sung by the lower-group speakers. In conversational speech, it is replaced by the *passé composé* which is less formal. Bernet remarks in his study of a 1935 song that the use of the *passé simple* “est lié, à l’écrit, aux

	Monsieur	Madame	Marie	Bouic
Present	74%	81%	73.5%	72.5%
Passé composé	9.5%	6.5%	11%	9%
Imperfect	1%	3%	5%	5%
Simple future	8%	7.5%	6%	2.5%
Periphrastic future	5%	1%	1%	9%
Conditional	0%	0%	0.5%	0%
Pluperfect	2.5%	1%	1%	0%
Past historic	0%	0%	2%	2%

Table 4: Upper- and lower-group character tense-usage as percentages

contextes narratifs et littéraires. Tout autre emploi serait perçu comme amusant ou extravagant” (1995, p.198).

c) Imperfect

There are slightly more instances of the imperfect in the lower group, but the difference is hardly significant.

d) Pluperfect

There is no clear difference between the two groups.

e) Simple future *versus* periphrastic future

There is no clear difference between the lower and upper groups.

f) Conditional

The data show no correlation. The temporal conditional is extremely rare.

3.3 SIMPLE FUTURE *versus* PERIPHRASTIC FUTURE IN THE WHOLE FILM CORPUS

I am now looking at the use of the simple and periphrastic future in the five films. It has to be said that such statistics are debatable. Indeed, the simple future and the periphrastic future are often not interchangeable, as they rarely mean the same thing.

There is a proportionately higher use of the periphrastic future among the lower group.

	Simple future	Periphrastic future
Upper group	66%	34%
Lower group	52%	48%

Table 5: Upper- and lower-group character usage of future tenses

4 Mood

4.1 SUBJUNCTIVE

According to Bauche, the subjunctive “tend à disparaître du LP” (1920, p.109). Bauche’s formulation is an over-simplification. The incidence of the subjunctive is much reduced in vernacular speech in comparison with the standard language. Firstly, the imperfect and pluperfect forms are not used in the vernacular: “the imperfect and pluperfect forms are no longer used in the spoken language, except for humorous purposes” (Judge & Lamothe 1995, p.242). Secondly, in the vernacular, the complex sentences involving subordination occur less frequently than in the written or standard language. Thirdly, whereas the subjunctive survives in the vernacular in “harmonising” usages (e.g. “Mais mon Tintin, où tu veux que je les prennes?” *Fric-frac* 1054), where the option of the indicative is not available, it is hardly present in “contrastive” uses (e.g. “je cherche un chemin qui conduit/conduise au château”), where the option of the indicative is available and where a change of meaning occurs.

The subject of the subjunctive is discussed by Poplack in her variationist study of a French Canadian corpus (1990). Poplack notices that “la position traditionnelle, bien que souvent implicite des grammairiens prescriptivistes [...] présentent l’usage des modes comme s’il était déterminé lexicalement, c’est-à-dire par des listes de verbes ou classes de verbes” (1990, p.6). Unlike traditional prescriptivist grammarians, she adopts in her analysis “la notion de variabilité inhérente [...] c’est-à-dire de supposer que le mode subjonctif est une variable linguistique, qui peut alterner avec l’indicatif et le conditionnel dans certaines propositions enchâssées” (1990, p.13).

	<i>Proposition principale</i>	<i>Proposition enchâssée</i>
e.g.	Admettons	qu’elle peut/puisse partir (indicative/subjunctive)
	il faut	que je lui dis/dise la vérité (indicative/subjunctive)
	je crois	que c’est une bonne chose (indicative)
	je crois pas	que ce soit vrai (subjunctive)

(adapted from Poplack 1990, p.6)

	number of words in subcorpora	subjunctives	subjunctives per thousand words
Upper group (Subcorpus 1)	19,386	36	1.85
Lower group (Subcorpus 2)	20,697	12	0.57

Table 6: Upper- and lower-group character usage of subjunctives

In order to determine whether there are any differences in subjunctive usage between the upper and lower groups in my film corpus, I have in the first instance counted the number of subjunctives used by the two different social groups in each of the films investigated. I have excluded from my count “ambiguous” cases (Poplack 1990, p.15), where the subjunctive and indicative take the same form (e.g.: ind. “je chante”; subj. “il faut que je chante”).

Table 6 presents the frequency of the subjunctive per thousand words for both the lower and upper groups. To calculate the proportion of subjunctives per thousand words, I applied the following formula:

$$\frac{\text{Number of subjunctives} \times 1000}{\text{Number of words in Subcorpus 1} / 2}$$

There are three more subjunctives per thousand words in the upper group compared with the lower group.

Table 7 gives the crude number of occurrences of the present subjunctive (e.g. “il faut que nous chantions”), imperfect subjunctive (e.g. “qu’il chantât”), perfect subjunctive (e.g. “qu’il ait chanté”) and pluperfect subjunctive (e.g. “qu’il eût chanté”) in each film in order to establish whether the upper group uses globally more subjunctives than the lower group.

a) Present subjunctive

The figures cited in Table 7 show that the present subjunctive is the most frequently used form of the subjunctive in both the upper and lower groups. The context of subjunctive use is on the whole the same for both groups. The present subjunctive is found in most cases after the recurrent constructions “il faut que” (seven instances) or “vouloir que” (ten instances). While the upper group often favours the former construction, the lower group more frequently uses the latter. In my corpus, all instances of “falloir que” and “vouloir que” are used, by both groups, with a subjunctive, in accordance with Poplack’s statement that “[falloir] s’associe au subjonctif dans 80% à 100% des cas” (Poplack

	Present	Imperfect	Perfect	Pluperfect	Total
UPPER GROUP	20 (55.5%)	3 (8.3%)	12 (33.3%)	1 (2.9%)	36
<i>Fric-Frac</i>	+	+	-	+	
<i>Circonstances atténuantes</i>	+	-	+	-	
<i>Le Jour se lève</i>	+	-	+	+	
<i>La Règle du jeu</i>	+	-	+	-	
<i>Hôtel du Nord</i>	+	-	+	-	
LOWER GROUP	12 (100%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	12
<i>Fric-Frac</i>	+	-	-	-	
<i>Circonstances atténuantes</i>	+	-	-	-	
<i>Le Jour se lève</i>	-	-	-	-	
<i>La Règle du jeu</i>	+	-	-	-	
<i>Hôtel du Nord</i>	+	-	-	-	

Table 7: Film-differentiated subjunctive usage

1990, p.29). Poplack was, however, referring here to Canadian French, which often uses the indicative after “il faut que”. I have no examples like those quoted by Bauche with “vouloir que” followed by an indicative: e.g. “je veux qu’il vient” (1920, p.100).

b) Imperfect subjunctive

I note the low occurrence of the imperfect subjunctive. This tense is “literary” and had gone out of use in Parisian spoken usage even by the 1930s (see Bauche 1920, p.100). The imperfect subjunctive, used exclusively by Marcel in *Fric-frac* as a joke (“j’eusse préféré que vous *vinssiez* seule” 316), is a tense related to written-text-like speech. Its use in spontaneous French only serves to create a comic effect. There is one instance of “hypercorrect” imperfect subjunctive in Raymonde’s speech: “Ah ben ça serait malheureux d’puis une heure que j’m’inhalâte” (*Hôtel du Nord* 106). Müller uses the term “surjonctif” to refer to Queneau’s creations, e.g. “non d’ailleurs qu’il espérât qu’elle ne se révélassassât à lui [...] bien qu’ils ne pratiquassassent” (Queneau quoted by Müller 1985, p. 59).

c) Perfect subjunctive

The perfect subjunctive is favoured by upper-group speakers.

d) Pluperfect subjunctive

The pluperfect subjunctive is absent from all films except *Fric-frac* in which Marcel uses it as a joke.

I will now compare the different social groups according to the type of subjunctives they use. I have classified their use of the subjunctive into three categories, harmonising, stylistic and contrastive.

A. Harmonising

There are cases where the subjunctive is triggered by some other element in the sentence and is entirely predictable. There may be scope for variation, but this is likely to reflect levels of education rather than subtle distinctions of sense or style, e.g. “Je n’*veux* pas [...] *que* tu te *mettes* à genoux” (*Fric-frac* 1487), “Je ne partirai pas *avant que* vous m’*ayez entendu*” (*Le Jour se lève* 606).

B. Stylistic

There are cases where both the indicative/conditional and the subjunctive are possible, but where selection of the subjunctive signals a higher, more conservative use. I will reserve the term “stylistic” for literary-type contexts. Riegel *et al.* confirm that uses of the imperfect and pluperfect subjunctive belong to “un usage recherché et littéraire” (1994, p.328), e.g. “J’*eusse préféré*/ *aurais préféré* que vous vinssiez seule” (316, 318, 331).

C. Contrastive

There are cases where the subjunctive is not entirely predictable and where its use could be construed as indicating a slight change of meaning. The choice of the subjunctive rather than the indicative often changes the meaning in certain subordinate clauses. Posner shows that “the antecedent is understood as non-referential when a subjunctive follows” (1997, p.210), e.g. “Je cherche un chemin qui conduit/*conduise* au château”. [I am looking for (a particular)(any) path that leads to the castle.]

However, the preceding examples can also imply a degree of certainty; the speaker is almost certain that such a path exists as opposed to an hypothesis that the speaker expresses doubts as to whether there is a path leading to the castle, e.g. of “contrastive” subjunctives in *Circonstances atténuantes*:

“Ce n’est pas que Plombières *soit* d’une gaieté folle” (690).

“un fonctionnaire à qui la loi *ait donné* ce pouvoir...” (799).

	A harmonising	B stylistic	C contrastive
Upper group	25	3	8
Lower group	10	0	2

Table 8: Categories of upper- and lower-group subjunctive usage

“Croyez-vous d’abord qu’il *soit* nécessaire de se signaler à la police” (918).

Differences in meaning between the use of the indicative or the subjunctive in such examples is often very subtle, e.g. “ce n’est pas que Plombières *soit* / *est* d’une gaieté folle”. The former could be interpreted as being hypothetical, while the latter is more assertive. It may well be that there is a stylistic difference, as well as a semantic one, in the previous examples. However, for the purposes of my analysis, the main point is that in examples of “stylistic” subjunctives, such as “j’eusse préféré...”, Marcel could have used the “aurais préféré” form in order to say the same thing, and in the examples I quote in category C, the subjunctive has a different meaning from the indicative.

Lower-group characters almost exclusively favour category A subjunctives. The upper-group speakers, most particularly the ones in *Circonstances atténuantes*, use more subjunctives from categories B and C. Authors of scenarios do not use stigmatised forms of the subjunctive, either because they did not think of them at the time or because they do not see them as stereotypes.

4.2 CONDITIONAL

There is hardly any use of the conditional in my corpus apart from the use of the conditional of politeness which is a feature of the upper-group speech in *Circonstances atténuantes*.

The conditional is a negative politeness strategy, used as an alternative to the imperative to request something formally or to express a wish: “l’atténuation est liée à une requête implicite (“si je pouvais me permettre”) présentée comme potentielle ou irréaliste, ce qui diminue sa force illocutoire” (Riegel *et al.* 1994, p.319), e.g. Monsieur: “nous *voudrions* manger quelque chose” (*Circonstances atténuantes*, 246), “Nous *voudrions* du thé” (*Circon-*

	conditionals of politeness
Upper group	6
Lower group	0

Table 9: Upper- and lower-group character usage of conditionals of politeness in *Circonstances atténuantes*

stances atténuantes, 568), “Voudriez-vous faire monter à ma pépée un verre de vin blanc et une tranche de saucisson?” (*Circonstances atténuantes*, 579–80).

The following study proposes to analyse the tenses employed by the lower and upper-group speakers in “si” clauses. Hypothetical sentences fall into two parts:

<i>Protasis</i>	<i>Apodosis</i>
<i>Si</i> tu étais belle,	je t’aimerais davantage

The expression of an hypothesis in colloquial French can take several non-standard constructions. Grevisse notices in his prescriptive grammar that: “la langue populaire met assez souvent le conditionnel” (1993, p.1670) in the protasis, e.g. “que penseriez-vous de moi, Monsieur, si [...] je vous *demanderais*...” (Grevisse 1993, p.1670). The use of the conditional in both protasis and apodosis was accepted by grammarians until the 17th century when it became stigmatised as non-standard (Posner 1997, p.202). In modern, non-standard French, the past conditional is also found in the apodosis to agree with the use of the past conditional in the protasis, e.g. “si *j’aurais su*, j’aurais pas venu” (Gadet 1992, p.89).

All the “si”-constructions used in the films are entirely standard. However, I intend to compare the use of standard hypothetical sentences by the lower and upper groups. I will exclude from my count unfinished conditional constructions such as “Si vous croyez qu’vous êtes drôles, tous les deux” (*La Règle du jeu* 1452-3), where there is no apodosis, and will quantify three types of “si” subordinates in the films:

1. Si + present (protasis) + present (apodosis) e.g. “si vous n’aimez pas la friture, moi je ne digère pas le demi-sel.” (*Hôtel du Nord* 675)
2. Si + imperfect (protasis) + conditional (apodosis) e.g. “si je venais à la perdre, j’n’m’en consolerais pas.” (*La Règle du jeu* 367-8)

	Present + Present	Imperfect + Conditional	Present + Future
Upper group	43.5%	46.5%	10%
Lower group	50%	39%	11%

Table 10: Upper- and lower-group tense usage in “si”-constructions

3. Si + present (protasis) + future (apodosis) e.g. “si vous dépassez cette porte, vous ne remettrez jamais plus les pieds ici.” (*Fric-frac* 1110-1)

The apodosis of these sentences often receives the conditional in the upper-group sociolect, while the lower group tends to use the present form.

5 Conclusion

The general analysis of tenses in the film corpus indicates a more frequent use of both the passé composé and the periphrastic future by the lower group. The key point in this analysis is that the subjunctive is virtually absent from the lower group and that literary tenses such as the imperfect subjunctive (and its related tense the pluperfect subjunctive) have survived in the speech of the upper group in *Fric-frac*. I also observed differences in the way in which the subjunctive is used, with the upper group using it not only in harmonising cases but also for stylistic and contrastive purposes. Moreover, authors do not use stigmatised forms of the subjunctive. Upper-group speakers also tend to use the conditional of politeness. The use of the conditional in the film corpus is entirely standard. The analysis of tenses in “si”-constructions nonetheless indicates variation between the two social groups, with lower-group speakers favouring the present over the imperfect in the protasis.

References

- [1] BAUCHE, H. (1920). *Le Langage populaire, grammaire, syntaxe et dictionnaire du français tel qu'on le parle dans le peuple de Paris, avec tous les termes d'argot usuel* Paris: Payot.
- [2] BERNET, C. (1995). Le français familier et populaire à la radio et au cinéma G. Antoine & R. Martin, eds., *Histoire de la langue française (1914-1945)*. Paris: CNRS. 191–206.

- [3] COHEN, M. S. R. (1956). Emplois du passé simple et du passé composé dans la prose contemporaine *Travaux de l'institut de linguistique 1*: 43–62.
- [4] ENGEL, D. M. (1990). *Tense and Text. A Study of French Past Tenses* London & New York: Routledge.
- [5] FLEISCHMANN, S. (1983). From Pragmatics to Grammar: Diachronic Reflections on Complex Pasts and Futures in Romance *Lingua 60*: 183–214.
- [6] GADET, F. (1989). *Le Français ordinaire* Paris: Armand Colin.
- [7] GADET, F. (1992). *Le Français populaire* Paris: PUF.
- [8] GENOUVRIER, E. (1973). Grammaire et enseignement du français: quelques considérations sur le passé simple *Société Alfred Binet et Théodore Simon 73*, 530: 3–16.
- [9] GREVISSE, M. & GOOSSE, A. (1936). *Le Bon Usage. Grammaire française* Paris & Louvain-la-Neuve: Duculot. 1993 (13e édition).
- [10] HERZOG, C. (1981). *Le Passé simple dans les journaux du XXe siècle* Berne: Francke.
- [11] IMBS, P. (1960). *L'Emploi des temps verbaux en français moderne (Essai de grammaire descriptive)* Paris: Klincksieck.
- [12] JUDGE, A. & LAMOTHE, S. (1995). *Stylistic Developments in Literary and Non-literary French Prose*. The Edwin Mellen Press.
- [13] JUILLAND, A. & CHANG-RODRIGUES, E. (1964). *Frequency Dictionary of Spanish words* London, The Hague, Paris: Mouton.
- [14] KAHN, F. (1954). *Le Système des temps de l'indicatif chez un Parisien et chez une Bâloise* Geneva: Librairie Droz.
- [15] MARTIN, R. & MULLER, C. (1964). Syntaxe et analyse statistique: la concurrence entre le passé antérieur et le plus-que-parfait dans la Mort le Roi Artu *Travaux de Linguistique et de Littérature, Strasbourg II*, 1: 207–233.
- [16] MÜLLER, B. (1985). *Le Français d'aujourd'hui* Paris: Klincksieck.

- [17] OFFORD, M. (1990). *Varieties of Contemporary French* Basingstoke & London: MacMillan Education Ltd.
- [18] PATTERSON, W. T. (1968). On the Genealogical Structure of the Spanish Vocabulary *Word* 24: 309–339.
- [19] POPLACK, S. (1990). Le subjonctif et la variante inhérente en français *Langage et société* 54: 5–30.
- [20] POSNER, R. (1997). *Linguistic Change in French Language* Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- [21] RIEGEL, M. & PELLET, J.-C. & RIOUL, R. (1994). *Grammaire méthodique du français* Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- [22] STAVINHOVÀ, Z. (1974). Les temps passés dans le français littéraire – remarques statistiques *Etudes Romanes de Bruno* 4: 195–210.
- [23] VET, C. (1980). *Temps, aspects et adverbes en français contemporain – essai de sémantique formelle* Geneva: Droz.