Perfect vs the imperfect

Opening remarks

English people have trouble with this topic because the English past tense doesn't distinguish between a state (which is just one of the uses of the imperfect) and a single event

- "I was surprised when he came in" - A single event of becoming surprised
- "I was seven when my brother was born" - State

This often leads to common, but simplistic beliefs like "J'étais" = "I was" in all cases

- The problem is that while the English past doesn't distinguish between these nuances of the past, the French does
- Saying "J'étais surpris quand il est entré" - means that you were already in a state of surprise when he entered
- To say that you were surprised *by* his entrance, the passé composé is used, "J'ai été surpris quand il est entré"
    - Yet both in English could be rendered as "I was surprised" and students of French often have an aversion to using verbs like être in the passé composé

The difference between the two is **not** necessarily one of a long action (imperfect) vs. a short one (perfect), despite what many teachers say:

You could quite easily say something like this:

"Pendant l'époque glaciaire, la géomorphologie de la planète s'est transformée complètement".

- The geomorphology of the planet changed over many many years, but it is still in the passé composé

While you could also say this, "Le terroriste a été pris de panique: la bombe explosait"

- The bomb exploding happens very quickly

What then is the distinction?

Aspect

The difference lies in something called **aspect**, which deals with the way an event is distributed in time (imagine a timeline) - it's all about how the event is viewed, not necessarily the duration of the event itself

Punctual (or perfective) aspect = views the event as a whole, a point in time
Durative (or imperfective) aspect = presents a situation whose beginning and/or end is left unspecified - the event is seen as extending across an unspecified period of time rather than as a finite point in time

We shall now apply this to the perfect/imperfect distinction.

Perfect tense

The **perfect** is punctual - it looks back on events from the perspective of the present and so views them as finite points in time rather than presenting the situation as it unfolds (J'ai mangé du pain – I've done it, it's over *now*)

For instance - "Pendant l'époque glaciaire, la géomorphologie de la planète s'est transformée complètement".

- Even though the geomorphology of the planet changes over years and years, the change is being viewed as one completed event, a well defined 'block' with a start and end.

The perfect can have two interpretations, depending on context - "I have done something" or "I did something" where the former implies a continued relevance to the present. "La voiture est tombée en panne" can be interpreted either as "The car broke down" (English simple past) or "The car has broken down" (English present perfect) - The former just states that at some point in the past the car broke down, while the latter implies that the car is *still* broken down.

- Because of this focus on the action's relation to the present, the latter interpretation cannot be used in sentences where the actions are clearly related to some temporal marker in the past (You wouldn't say "Yesterday I have read three books")

We have been talking about the perfect in terms of 'finite events', but what about phrases like "*J'ai toujours su* qu'il voulait être médecin"- while we can see the breaking down of the car as a finite event, surely saying "I have always known" implies that I continue to know? My knowledge does not finish.

- Yes, but there is another implication that something has happened that has validated my belief/made me think back on or reaffirm the belief and so the perfect is used to describe that period before something changed, while also allowing for this idea of continued relevance.

Imperfect tense

Contrast the perfect with the **imperfect**, which is durative. It views the situation without reference to start or end and so puts us in the midst of an event as it unfolds, we are brought back into the past.
In the example with the terrorist, "la bombe explosait" describes an on-going process and we are drawn into the past, as if viewing it as it happens . This is a specific type of durative aspect called "progressive aspect".
We do not see this action as a clear 'block' of activity.

As such, the terrorist's panic occurred *during* this explosion and the use of the perfect "a été pris de panique" strongly implies that the panic is directly due to the exploding bomb.

In this specific example the use of the imperfect is almost like going slo-mo - allowing us to look at events that occur during this unfolding event, which in terms of actual time would happen very quickly.

- (remember the length of time time takes for an event to occur does not decide when to use perfect/imperfect)

This can be represented on a timeline where X marks a punctual event:

For "Le terroriste a été pris de panique: **la bombe explosait**"
Time unfolding ----------->
Terrorist panics **X**
<--The bomb is exploding - an ongoing process with no reference to beginning or end ---->

Contrast with "Le terroriste a été pris de panique en voyant les gendarmes et il a essayé de s'échapper".
Time unfolding ----------->
Terrorist sees the police **X**
Terrorist panics **X**
Terrorist tries to escape **X**

These are all viewed as finite actions - punctual aspect

There are **three types of durative aspect (Aspect is not just to do with the past tense, but for the purposes of this discussion all examples are in the past tense)**

- Habitual - "Il mangeait beaucoup de bonbons quand il était petit" - He used to eat lots of sweets as a child/He would eat lots of sweets as a child
- Progressive - describes an on going process (e.g. the bomb example) - Can either be one single protracted action, "Il mangeait quand elle est entrée" (He was eating when she entered), or a repeated one, "John was hitting Bill when she came in" (the action of hitting someone is repeated over time)
    - Note that repetition of the action does not necessarily signal a durative aspect - when the number of occurrences is mentioned, the perfect is used: "Il a sonné plusieurs fois" - he rang several times, because "Il sonnait plusieurs fois" would actually signal a habitual aspect - on several occasions he rang several times.
- Stative - describes a state (a situation that is stable over time and that does not involve any action) e.g. "Elle était grande"
    - This type overlaps with the other two if the state (a) extends around a particular reference point: "John was happy when she came in" (progressive) or (b) when it is coextensive with a long-term period - "John was happy when he was a child" - habitual.

What these types of durative aspect have in common, *when talking about the past*, is that the events are seen from the perspective of the past - there is a sense of being taken to the past: because there is no clear start or end, we are plonked within an unfolding narrative.

Contrast a narrative like this:

- "Tout le monde s'est beaucoup amusé à la fête; les enfants ont joué à cache-cache et les adultes ont beaucup bu"
- **With** "Tout le monde s'amusait beaucoup à la fête; les enfants jouaient à cache-cache et les adultes buvaient beaucoup".

- The first one is punctual - it merely states that everyone had fun and describes some of the activities in a way that views the event as a completed whole that occurred in the past. The perspective is from the time of speaking, looking at a past point in time (which implies a sense of beginning and end)
- However, the second one is durative - we are being brought to the past - the events are not seen as finite actions. There are two durative interpretations:
    - As progressive aspect. Everyone *was having* fun, the kids *were playing* hide and seek and the adults *were drinking* a lot."
    - Or as habitual aspect (in this case the fête is taken to be a tradition of some sort that happens again and again): "Everyone would (always) have fun at the party; the kids would play hide and seek and the adults would drink a lot".

Note – one might argue that the habitual aspect implies an ending "I used to drink a lot" – but the fact remains that once you are focusing on that particular moment in the past – there is no clear start and end – during this period of time the drinking is an activity which stretches out with no perceivable start/beginning, *when seen from the perspective of the past.*

Uses of these tenses in narrative

- The imperfect is often used for backgrounding because of its stative/progressive properties, with the perfect used for finite actions which are seen as points that mark this background.

    - "J'étais au cinéma quand Paul m'a appelé" -
        - "I was at the cinema" - progressive aspect ---"Paul called me" - punctual

As a result of the lack of a clear start and end, the imperfect cannot be used to move a narrative along.

Compare this series of perfect tense clauses:

- Paul s'est levé de bonne heure, il a pris une douche, il a mangé et il s'est brossé les dents.
    - Each punctual event moves the story along, one action following the other.

With this series of imperfect tenses:

- Les voitures klaxonnaient, les oiseaux chantaient et on entendait le bourdonnement des abeilles.
    - Here, we have no movement, no chronological chain of events, but rather an increasingly detailed evocation of one moment in time, which requires a sentence in a punctual tense to give it momentum.