French *en passant* as seen through its Czech counterparts: from converb to a complex preposition and a discourse marker

Key words: converbs, Czech, French, preposition, discourse marker

This study examines the polysemy of the French construction *en passant* through its correspondences in a large multilingual corpus annotated in Universal Dependencies (InterCorp, Rosen, Šimčík, Vavřín & Zasina 2024, de Marneffe et al. 2021). The French *en passant* has undergone reanalysis, evolving from a verbal form (converb – *gérondif*, Halmøy 2003) to a complex preposition (*en passant par*, Stosić 2012) and also to an adverb and a discourse marker (cf. *en attendant*, Vigier 2012). We argue that Czech equivalents serve as a semantic and functional mirror of the source construction (Dyvik 2004, Nádvorníková 2024), providing insights into its contextual uses in French.

In spatial semantics (Talmy 2000), the verb *passer* expresses motion of the Figure relative to the Ground. This motion, often depicted as 'median', can either highlight an intermediate step of the Figure's motion (see 1), or be part of a broader trajectory encompassing departure/source and arrival/goal (see 2). These two spatial configurations underpin the evolution of *en passant*:

1) Intermediate motion and brevity: motion focuses on its interaction with a median landmark and *en passant* is primarily translated in Czech using adverbials (PPs or adverbial clauses):

FR. *Il ôta son chapeau* ***en passant*** *devant le petit groupe.*
3SG.M remove.PST.3SG POSS.3SG hat **pass.**CVB in.front.of DEF.SG small group
'He took off his hat **while passing** in front of the small group.'

cs. *Když míjel jejich skupinku, smekl.*
when pass.PST.3SG poss.3.PL little group remove.hat.PST.3.SG.
'**While passing** in front of their small group, he took off his hat.'

This focus on a temporally limited interaction has given rise to a re-analysis of the meaning of median motion in the sense of brevity, allowing *en passant* to evolve into a discourse marker introducing incidental remarks (Prévost 2007). The bridging context is *soit dit en passant* ('incidentally'). Czech predominantly renders this function with *mimochodem*, which retains the etymological link to motion ('walking'). Backward analysis (Malá 2014) reveals that *mimochodem* most frequently corresponds to French discourse markers *au fait, à propos* or *au passage*, which, while more frequent than *en passant*, also signal incidental remarks with no further connection to the preceding context.

2) Macro-event integration: when *en passant* functions as part of a complex motion event (*aller de X à Z en passant par Y, ,go from X to Z through/via Y'*), it may evolve into the complex preposition *en passant par* (Stosić 2012), often used in enumerative series. Czech equivalents typically feature the preposition *přes* 'across', while initial and final phases may be encoded by lexicalized converbs (*počínaje* 'starting' and *konče* 'ending', see Dvořák 1983: 120–123).

The study will focus on text types where *en passant* appears most frequently in the InterCorp corpus (subtitles, journalistic texts, and fiction). UD annotation will aid in identifying and quantifying its contextual uses (Diewald 2006, Himmelmann 2004), including subject control, properties of the head verb and the adjuncts (or the lack thereof). This analysis will enhance our understanding of how enumerative series and incidental remarks are expressed in French and in Czech. More broadly, this synchronic contrastive study may help future diachronic research into the reanalysis of converbs in general (see Ylikoski 2003).

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