À TRAVERS DE?
A DIACHRONIC ANALYSIS OF FRENCH À/AU TRAVERS IN COMBINATION WITH THE PREPOSITION DE[1]

Abstract

In this contribution, we deal with two main questions concerning the French expressions *à travers* and *au travers* (meaning both '(way) through/across') in combination with the preposition *de* ('of/from'). These complex dynamic expressions, derived from the word *travers* ('breadth') and stemming from Latin *tran(s)versu(m)* ('oblique, across'), belong in French to the limited group of the main markers of spatial dynamic relations with a medial polarity. In the past, the preposition *de* could combine with both *à travers* and *au travers*; today, *à travers de* does no longer exist, and neither does *au travers* (used as an adverbial expression only). Using a corpus retrieved from the FRANTEXT database and covering four Centuries (from 1500 to 1899), this paper offers a diachronic analysis of how the combinations *[à/au travers + de]* have evolved in time. Theoretically, we take our inspiration in functional approaches developed in the framework of cognitive linguistics. We determine when the combinatory freedom of *à travers* and *au travers* with respect to the use of the preposition *de* ceased to exist (the beginning of the 18th Century for *à travers*, the beginning of the 17th Century for *au travers*), and examine whether semantic consequences entailed by this process can be found. It is shown that both *à travers (de)* and *au travers (de)* were subjected to a semantic reorganization, which affected the uses described by the functional notion of Contrast, and the proportion of dynamic and static uses. Finally, we observe an increasing amount of Abstract tokens.

1. Research topic and questions

1.1. Dynamic complex prepositions containing French travers

A great number of French spatial prepositions, especially static ones, have formed the subject of thorough semantic descriptions that often adopt a functional approach. Let us mention, for example, the work of scholars like Vandeloise (1986; 1987; 1988; 1990), Aurnague (1991), Vieu (1991), Dendale & De Mulder (1997; 1998a; 1998b) and Borillo (1998). By contrast, studies dealing in detail with intrinsically dynamic prepositions are fairly rare (Stosic 2002a:18–19). In addition, simple expressions (ex. *dans*, *sur*, *à*) seem to have been more frequently analyzed than complex (analytic) ones.

The complex dynamic expressions derived from the word *travers* ('breadth'), stemming all from Latin *tran(s)versu(m)* ('oblique, across'), have been dealt with in synchronic analyses, but the contributions are comparatively few. After Spang-

Hanssen (1963:231–233) briefly commented on the contrast between *à travers* and *au travers* (meaning both '(way) through/across'), an unpublished master's thesis (Somers 1988) dealt with the spatial uses of *en travers* ('athwart, across') adopting a methodology inspired by Vandeloise (1986). In a French translation of his paper *Abstract Motion* (1986), Langacker (1987:63–64) characterized *à travers* as describing a path. In a few lines dedicated to *à travers,* Weinrich (1989) proposed the semantic feature of 'Progression'. Schwarze (1989) studied the polysemy of *à travers*, and, almost a decade later, Flageul (1997:220–236) analyzed *à travers* and *au travers de* for the first time from a cognitive-semantic point of view. Subsequently, Fong & Poulin (1998) added the aspectual feature of 'telicity' to the semantics of *à travers,* while Borillo (1998) proposed a more general characterization of *à travers* and *au travers de*. More recently, some scholars (Aurnague 2000:40–46; 2001:146–147; Aurnague & Stosic 2002; Kwon-Pak 2002; Sarda & Stosic 2007; Stosic 2002a; 2002b; 2005a; 2005b; 2007) have considered the respective uses of *à travers* and *par* (meaning also '(way) through/across'). Plungian (2002), for the first time, took into account the whole set of prepositional, adverbial and adjectival expressions that contain the word *travers.* Furthermore, two articles (Martin & Dominicy 2001; Dominicy & Martin 2005) tried to bridge the gap between the spatial uses of *à travers* and *au travers (de)* and their perceptual or figurative uses. Stosic (2009) compared the spatial sense of *à travers* to its Serbian equivalent (*kroz*), while refining at the same time the notion of Guidance (*Guidage*) and its semantic features. Finally, Stosic (2012) analyzed prepositional clauses introduced by *à travers*.[2]

1.2. Diachronic perspective

Studies on the diachronic evolution of the expressions described above are even more rare; indeed, only our master's thesis, articles and PhD dissertation seem to exist (Hoelbeek 2007; 2011; 2012a; 2012b; 2013; 2014). Yet, this is a fertile research area that could shed light on the evolutive behavior of complex constructions. For instance, studying the expressions containing *travers* in a diachronic perspective allows one to observe that more combinatory possibilities existed in the past than in Modern French. One example is the use of the preposition *de* ('of/from'), which combined with *au travers* or *à travers* while neither *au travers* in its prepositional function nor *à travers de* exist in Modern French anymore. Indeed, *à travers* and *au travers de* have been subjected to a grammaticalization process, in that they

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[2] Obviously, descriptions of similar expressions in other languages also exist. Consider, for example, the papers of Kaufmann (1993) and Meex (2004) on German *durch*, Cuyckens' (1995) analysis of Dutch *door*, and the numerous publications on the English prepositions *through* and *across*: Bennett (1975:84–88, 124–126), Hawkins (1988:231–233), Herskovits (1986:55, 120–123; 1997), Leech (1969:183–186, 197–199), Lindkvist (1972), Miller & Johnson-Laird (1976:405–410), Shumaker (1977:127–136), Talmy (2000:26–27, 50–58, 176–254, 269–270), Evans & Tyler (2004:247–270).

became ever more frozen. In addition, their respective semantics have progressively diverged, which explains why they were often used and considered as synonyms, whereas this does not seem to be the case in Modern French (cf. Martin & Dominicy 2001; Dominicy & Martin 2005).

1.3. The specificity of à travers and au travers (de)

À travers and *au travers (de)* belong to the limited group of the main markers of spatial dynamic relations with a medial polarity (any movement includes the initial phase of departure, a medial phase, and the final phase of arrival). Similar to French *par* and *via* (Borillo 1998:49), *à travers* and *au travers (de)* have a directional meaning that involves reference to a trajectory. These expressions exhibit very specific usage patterns that give rise to subtle differences compared to similar prepositions. For example, both *à travers*, and *par* can introduce the medial reference entity of a movement. However, *à travers*, unlike *par*, does not take into consideration the relations of that entity with other elements of the environment and does not presuppose that the motion verb involves some kind of alteration of such relations (Aurnague & Stosic 2002:137). The same holds true for *au travers (de)*.

The first difference can be illustrated by example (1), where the medial reference entity (the glass canopy) is not a connecting entity. This raises no problem for the use of *à/au travers (de)* but *par* proves unacceptable:

(1)   *La tuile s'est décrochée du toit et est allée s'écraser sur le sol* **à travers/au travers de/*par** *l'auvent de verre*.

    'The tile came loose from the roof and crashed to the ground *through* the glass canopy.'

The second difference can be illustrated by example (2). Although the verb expresses a movement, the relation between the moving entity (John) and the reference entity (the forest) does not change (Aurnague & Stosic characterize these kinds of verbs by stating that they can introduce a change of location, but do not obligatorily do so; they thus involve only a *potential* change of location (2002:118)). Again, in Modern French *par* does not seem to be compatible with this kind of configuration (except in archaizing language):

(2)   J*ean a marché pendant deux heures* **à travers/au travers de/?*par** *la forêt*.

    'John walked for two hours *across* the forest.'

1.4. Research questions

This paper offers an analysis of the way the use of *à travers* and *au travers* in combination with the preposition *de* ('of'/'to') has evolved in time. Theoretically, we take our inspiration in functional approaches developed in the framework

of cognitive linguistics. The corpus under study covers the period 1500–1899 and contains examples retrieved from the Frantext database. Answers will be provided to the following questions: When exactly did the combinatory freedom of *de* cease to exist? Can semantic consequences be observed that could have been entailed by this change? The question of whether semantic differences existed between uses with *de*, and those without (*à travers de* and *au travers de* vs. *à travers* and *au travers*), interesting as it may be, is beyond the scope of this paper.

1.5. Outline of the paper

Section 2 provides a description of our corpus and methodology. In Section 3, we examine the evolution that led from *à travers (de)* to *à travers* and from *au travers (de)* to *au travers de*; some provisional conclusions are drawn. In Section 4, semantic evolutions during the period under analysis will be described by relying on functional notions (Guidance and Contrast), on the relation between the moving entity and the reference entity (dynamic vs. static), and on Concrete vs. Abstract verb meaning; again, some provisional conclusions will be drawn. Finally, Section 5 will present a synthesis of the results arrived at in this paper.

2. Description of the corpus and methodology
2.1. The corpus

The dataset used is composed of tokens retrieved from the Frantext database. This online diachronic database (continuously under development) contains more than 4000 texts from 1180 until 2009 (4 516 references in June 2013[3]), of which 80% are literary texts, and 20% scientific or technical works.

Table 1 gives an overview of the expressions under study, and their number of occurrences for each Century. For the sake of feasibility, a random sample of 200 tokens is selected for periods where the amount of tokens provided by Frantext exceeds this number:

Table 1. Number of tokens for each expression analyzed[4]

	1500–1549	1550–1599	1600–1659	1650–1699	1700–1749	1750–1799	1800–1849	1850–1899
à travers (de)	26	131	241>200	113	270>200	357>200	3677>200	5605>200
au travers (de)	17	89	177	357>200	247>200	171	318>200	485>200

[3] See www.frantext.fr
[4] Data provided by Frantext, as consulted in June 2011.

This contribution focuses on the prepositional uses of the expressions *à travers (de)* and *au travers (de)*. Therefore, adverbial tokens provided by FRANTEXT are not included. The corpus that will be used thus contains 2387 tokens and looks as follows (see Tables 2 and 3):

Table 2. Number of prepositional tokens for each expression analyzed (1500–1699)

	1500–1549		1550–1599		1600–1659		1650–1699	
	tot.	%	tot.	%	tot.	%	tot.	%
à travers (de)	26>24	92,31	131>118	90,08	200>179	88,00	113>107	94,69
au travers (de)	17>14	82,35	89>83	93,26	177>165	92,22	200>186	93,00

Table 3. Number of prepositional tokens for each expression analyzed (1700–1899)

	1700–1749		1750–1799		1800–1849		1850–1899	
	tot.	%	tot.	%	tot.	%	tot.	%
à travers (de)	200>196	98,00	200>197	98,50	200>198	99,00	200>199	99,50
au travers (de)	200>196	98,00	171>164	95,91	200>179	89,50	200>182	91,00

As shown in Tables 2 and 3, and in Figure 1, the prepositional uses constitute the majority of the tokens, for all periods. Furthermore, the frequency of the prepositional use of the expression *à travers (de)* continuously increased from the beginning of the 17th Century until the end of the 19th Century, while the frequency of prepositional *au travers (de)* decreases from 1750 on (except for the last time interval of 50 years), and is always inferior to that of *à travers (de)* from that moment on:
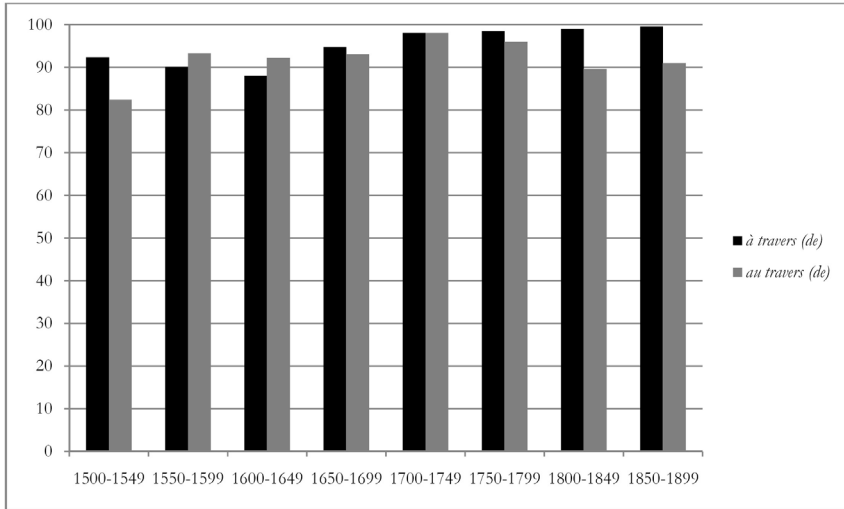
Figure 1. Evolution in percentages of prepositional uses of *à travers (de)* and *au travers (de)*

2.2. Methodological remarks

In the theoretical framework of cognitive linguistics, two entities are distinguished when describing space: the reference entity (the object of the spatial relation) and the located entity (the subject of the spatial relation). In Talmy's (1983) terminology, which will be adopted in this paper, the located entity is called the Figure and the reference entity the Ground. In order to distinguish and categorize the different uses observed, several parameters are taken into account, viz. referential information, the level of abstraction, and functional parameters (the functional character of the Ground, and the functional notion that best describes the relationship expressed). In attributing a crucial role to functional parameters, we follow a mainstream approach in cognitive linguistics that is illustrated by scholars like Herskovits (1986), Vandeloise (1986; 1991) and Stosic (2002a; 2002b; 2005a; 2007; 2009). In this approach, space is described by means of functional concepts inspired in naive physics and human bodily experience, like access to perception, potential meeting, and general vs. lateral orientation. These concepts "are tied to the extralinguistic knowledge of space shared by the speakers of one language" (Vandeloise 1991:13).

This strategy allows us to reformulate in fine-tuned terms the more conventional categorization of spatial, perceptual and metaphorical uses. The terminology used will now be commented on in sufficient detail for the understanding of the present contribution; see Figures 2 and 3 below, with examples containing the Modern French prepositions *à travers* and *en travers (de)* (the former often means '(way) through', the latter rather 'across').

Figure 2 shows that the relation between Figure and Ground can be dynamic (the Figure moves) or static (the Figure occupies a stable position). Contemporary French *à/au travers (de)* does not express static relations anymore (hence the use of *en travers* in the relevant examples), but in the past they were able to encode them. The table also indicates that motion can be of a Concrete or Fictive nature. Concrete motion is a spatial configuration that involves an actual transition from one position to another – possibly within the boundaries of the Ground – while Fictive motion (see Talmy 2000:99–175) applies to a factively static scene that is described by a linguistic expression that fictively presents it as dynamic. In this kind of situations, the moving Figure involved in the Fictive motion is a fictive entity, the so-called 'probe'.

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                    ┌──────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
                    │ Nature of the relation between Figure and Ground │
                    └──────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
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dynamic (motion)	static (position)
Jean marche *à travers* la ville 'John walks *through* the city'	Jean est étendu *en travers de* la route 'John is lying *across* the road'

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        ┌──────────────────────────────────────┐
        │ Nature of the motion that is expressed │
        └──────────────────────────────────────┘
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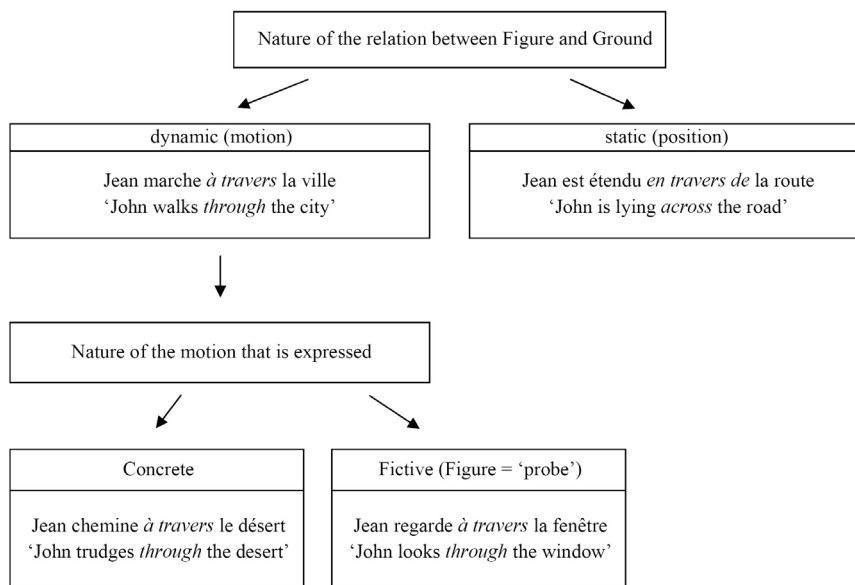| Concrete	Fictive (Figure = 'probe')
Jean chemine *à travers* le désert 'John trudges *through* the desert'	Jean regarde *à travers* la fenêtre 'John looks *through* the window'

Figure 2. Referential information

Figure 3 illustrates the difference between Concrete and Abstract verb meaning as distinguished in this paper, starting from the hypotheses that:

(i)   the concrete, spatial domain is the source-domain for the expressions analyzed and the verbs they combine with;

(ii)   a metaphorical mapping onto another (target-)domain can take place.

To deal with the uses that involve such mappings, a distinction is made between Concrete and Abstract verb meaning. When an abstract relation is expressed, it is similar to a spatial one, but the verb acquires "a metaphorical meaning where the semantics are less defined in terms of spatial context" (Wallentin *et al.* 2005:222). This means that the Figure and the Ground fail to entertain a spatial relationship with each other within a three-dimensional medium, because at least one of the entities (the Ground or the Figure) is a mental concept (i.e. a non-Palpable entity), so that the Figure and Ground do not succeed in establishing a relationship in a three-dimensional physical domain.

Meaning of the verb (or verbal derivatives)	
Concrete	Abstract
Jean court **à travers** *la salle* 'John runs *through* the hall'	*Jean passe* **à travers** *beaucoup de difficultés* 'John goes *through* many difficulties'

Figure 3. Level of abstraction

In this contribution, a very clear distinction between Palpable and non-Palpable entities is made. Such a categorical dichotomy may look like an excessive simplification, in that the parameter of Palpability is rather considered to be a gradient by scholars like Talmy (2000:141), but an in-depth categorization of the entities encountered falls outside the scope of this research. Thus Palpable entities will be seen as "concrete, manifest, explicit, tangible and palpable", and non-Palpable entities as "abstract, unmanifest, implicit, intangible and impalpable" (2000:141).

3. From à travers (de) *to* à travers*; from* au travers (de) *to* au travers de
In this section, we will determine when the combinatory freedom with the preposition *de* ceased to exist, both for *à travers* and *au travers*. Some provisional conclusions are formulated in Subsection 3.3.

The expressions *à travers* and *au travers de* are assumed, here, to be lexicalized phrases that can be categorized as (complex) prepositions and function like simple prepositions. They seem to have been stable expressions for quite some time, since Fagard & De Mulder observed that *au travers de* was already a stable expression in Old and Middle French (2007:19). However, Hoelbeek (2014:197) shows that various indications of instability can be found in the period 1500–1899. Today, *à travers* and *au travers* can be considered bonded syntagms, even if this is not reflected by the orthography (unlike in Italian where *a traverso* is nowadays mostly written as *attraverso*).

In line with Adler, we do not consider the preposition *de* as an integral part of a putative syntagm *au travers de*. Indeed, Adler shows that phrases like *au travers* are in fact simple prepositions that govern a complement by means of the preposition *de* (2001:162). We thus can analyze the lexicalised phrase as follows:

(3)   [*au travers*] + *de* = PREP1 + PREP2

The degree of bondedness between the two prepositions (*au travers* and *de*) within the boundaries of the lexicalised phrase is exactly the subject of this contribution.

A confirmation of the bonded state of *au travers*, but as well of *à travers*, in Modern French can be found when having a closer look at the noun: indeed, one way of testing the degree of bondedness between a preposition and a noun is to examine whether the noun is still modifiable by adjectives. This does not seem the case anymore for the prepositions at hand:

(4)   ***à **beau** travers*

(5)   ***au **beau** travers de*

This impossibility seems to have held for quite a long time: in our corpus, we have to go back to the first half of the 16th Century to find an (adverbial) example with such a modification:[5]

(6)   *À l'une on dit que d'estoc ou de taille*
       L'ung y est mort, l'autre enclos en muraille
       Tenant prison, l'autre donna, sans faille,
       Au beau travers.

       'To one it is said that with the tip and the edge
       One is dead, the other enclosed between walls
       Into prison, the other went, flawless,
       Straight through.'
       (Jean Marot, *Le Voyage de Venise,* 1526)

In the past, the preposition *de* could combine with both *à travers* and *au travers*. Today, *à travers de* does no longer exist, and neither does *au travers* (used as an adverbial expression only). Invariability is considered to be an important characteristic of (simple) prepositions (Di Meola 2000). When the variability ceased to exist, the complex prepositions under study thus became more similar to prototypical prepositions. The first question to be answered is *when* this combinatory freedom ceased to exist.

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[5] To facilitate the reading of ancient examples, Modern French accentuation has been added whenever the word in question was noted, for the rest, according to the current spelling.

3.1. À travers (de)

Examples (7) and (8) illustrate the combinatory freedom just described. In (7), the preposition *de* introduces the complement governed by *à travers*, that is *la plaine* ('the plain'); in (8) the preposition is absent, in accordance with the present-day situation in French:

(7)　　*Cet escadron de malandrins anglais avait battu cet escadron français. Ceux-ci s'en vont* **à travers de** *la plaine le fer en main, ceux-là volent après;*

'This squadron of English bandits had beaten the French squadron. The latter are leaving *through* the plain, sword in hand, the former chase behind them;' (Voltaire, *La Pucelle d'Orléans*, 1755)

(8)　　*Bientôt après, un petit ours, déjà muselé et enchaîné, que son maître conduisait* **à travers** *les broussailles, attira notre attention.*

'Soon after, a small bear, already muzzled and chained, led by his master *through* the bushes, attracted our attention.' (Jean Dusaulx, *Voyage à Barège et dans les Hautes-Pyrénées fait en 1788*, 1796)

Table 4 shows the evolution of the combination *à travers* + *de*. It appears that instances without *de* constituted the majority for the whole period analyzed. The phrase *à travers de* continued to be used until the second half of the 18th Century. However, the percentages are quite low; by the end of the 17th Century they drop under 5%.

Table 4. Evolution of the expressions *à travers* and *à travers de*

period	*à travers*		*à travers de*		impossible to categorize		total
	tot.	%	tot.	%	tot.	%	
1500–1549	20	83,33	4	16,67	0	0,00	24
1550–1599	95	80,51	23	19,49	0	0,00	118
1600–1649	117	65,36	61	34,08	1	0,56	179
1650–1699	94	87,85	13	12,15	0	0,00	107
1700–1749	188	95,92	8	4,08	0	0,00	196
1750–1799	195	98,98	2	1,02	0	0,00	197
1800–1849	198	100,00	0	0,00	0	0,00	198
1850–1899	199	100,00	0	0,00	0	0,00	199

3.2. Au travers (de)

It can be deduced from example (9) that *au travers* could be used without PREP2. However, the variant with *de* (see example (10)) was dominant from the beginning of the 16th Century.

(9)   *Ceste chandelle semble morte,*
        le jour la faict esvanouyr,
        le soleil vient nous esblouyr,
        voy qu'il passe **au travers** *la porte.*

        'This candle looks dead,
        the day makes it become faint,
        the sun comes dazzle us
        see it pass *through* the door'.
        (Théophile de Viau, *Œuvres poétiques*, 1621)

(10)   *Tandis qu'ils se reposoient, ils se regardoient l'un l'autre* **au travers de**
        leurs visières par grande fureur, […]

        'While they rested, they looked at each other *through* their visors with great fury'
        (Vital d'Audiguier, *Histoire trage-comique de nostre temps, sous les noms de Lysandre et de Caliste*, 1624)

Furthermore, as illustrated by Table 5, the preposition *au travers* (without *de*) seems to have ceased to exist by the end of the 17th Century. This combination fell into disuse remarkably earlier than *à travers de*. The two exceptional uses of prepositional *au travers* in the 19th Century were both produced by the same author, Pétrus Borel, and are to be interpreted as intentional archaisms.

Table 5. Evolution of the expressions *au travers de* and *au travers*

period	*au travers*		*au travers de*		*au travers même de*		total
	tot.	%	tot.	%	tot.	%	
1500–1549	2	14,29	12	85,71	0	0,00	14
1550–1599	6	7,23	77	92,77	0	0,00	83
1600–1649	10	6,06	155	93,94	0	0,00	165
1650–1699	0	0,00	186	100,00	0	0,00	186
1700–1749	0	0,00	196	100,00	0	0,00	196
1750–1799	0	0,00	164	100,00	1	0,61	164
1800–1849	2	1,12	177	98,88	0	0,00	179
1850–1899	0	0,00	182	100,00	0	0,00	182

Only one example was found (in the second half of the 18ᵗʰ Century) of the highly marked combination *au travers même de*. The corpus does not present other cases where an adjective or adverb (*même* can be analyzed as belonging to either category) occurs between PREP1 and PREP2. Example (11) shows the context of this exceptional combination:

(11)   *J'ai cru voir ce sentiment dans les yeux de tout le monde,* **au travers même des** *évantails de quelques dames.*

'I thought I saw that sentiment in the eyes of everyone, even *through* the fans of some ladies.'
(L'Abbé Prévost, *Nouvelles lettres angloises ou Histoire du chevalier Grandisson*, 1755)

3.3. Provisional conclusions

The combinatory freedom of the preposition *de* with respect to *à travers* and *au travers* ceased to exist at the end of the 18ᵗʰ Century for the former, and at the beginning of the 17ᵗʰ Century for the latter. Figure 4 illustrates graphically the chronology of this evolution:
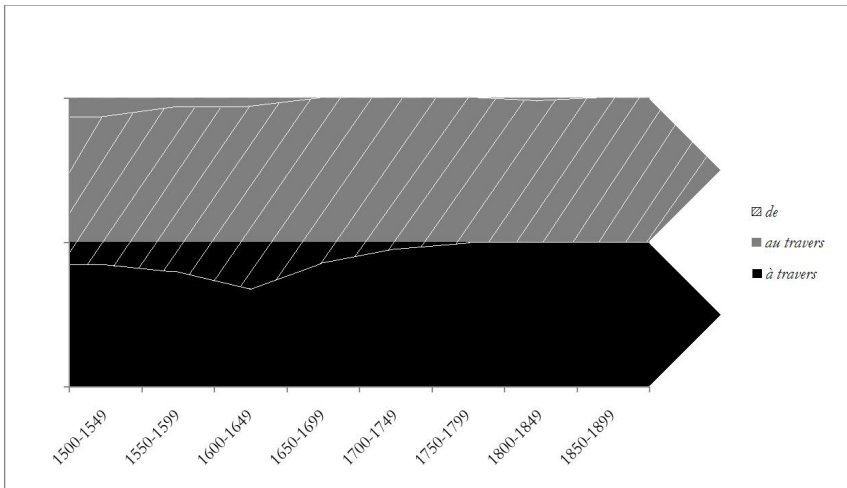

Figure 4. Visualization of the combinatorial evolution of the preposition *de*

The development observed could be considered as a (small) step in the grammaticalization process applying to the prepositions under study, since the fuzziness and variability as to the presence or absence of PREP2 disappeared

completely by the end of the 18th Century. By then *à travers* was no longer able to admit *de*, and *au travers* (in its prepositional use) obligatorily combined with *de* since the middle of the 17th Century. As will be shown later, this clear-cut distribution might have had some rather interesting consequences.

4. Semantic consequences

In this section, we will discuss the semantics conveyed by the expressions under study. We will try to determine whether the diversification process that applied to the combinatory possibilities had a semantic impact. Three aspects will be analyzed: a) the evolution of the role played by the various functional notions that can help to characterize the expressions; b) the changes observed in the ratio between tokens with a dynamic vs. static Figure-Ground relations; c) the changes observed in the ratio between tokens with a Concrete vs. Abstract verb meaning. This will allow us to formulate some provisional conclusions in Subsection 4.4.

Before coming to grips with these aspects, both for *à travers (de)* and *au travers (de)* (in Subsections 4.2 and 4.3), we will define the functional notions we rely on in our description.

4.1. Functional notions

Within the so-called functional approach, adopted here and illustrated by the work of scholars like Herskovits (1986), Vandeloise (1986; 1991) and Stosic (2002a; 2002b; 2005a; 2007; 2009), functional notions are used to describe spatial expressions. The expressions containing French *travers* analyzed here express semantic values that can be characterized by a small group of functional notions. The semantics conveyed are assumed to be the result of an interaction between the various entities involved in a scene, that is:

(12)   Figure + verb (or verbal derivatives) + PREP1 (and possibly PREP2) + Ground

The following typology, based on synchronic research by scholars like Stosic (2002a; 2002b; 2005a; 2007; 2009) and Somers (1988), relies on two functional concepts: Guidance and Contrast.

a) *Guidance*

   • *The notion of an Obstacle*

In order to capture the semantics of Modern French *à travers*, Stosic (2002b:106) introduced the notion of Guidance, as an alternative to the notion of an Obstacle. The latter is often adopted to characterize the (spatial) uses of *au travers (de)* and *à travers (de)* (which have very similar semantic structures). Yet Stosic already

observed that this concept turns out to be quite ambiguous. Even if it is relevant for a very large number of cases, it cannot be applied, for example, to all spatial uses of *à travers (de)*. In fact, French nouns and noun phrases like *le désert* ('the desert'), *la plage* ('the beach'), *la plaine dénudée* ('the bare plain'), *les salles vides* ('the empty rooms'), which may describe a Ground, do not refer or allude to any obstacle at all, as shown by examples (13) and (14):

(13)   *Cependant le général de l'Europe tiroit tousjours avant tant quil pouvoit,* **à travers la plaine large et spacieuse**, *suivant les Chrestiens à la piste, quand son frère Thuracan lestant venu ratteindre luy escria:*

      'However, the general of Europe was still going ahead as much as he could, *across the large and wide plain*, following the Christians at the track, when his brother Thuracan came to join him crying:'
      (Blaise de Vigenère, *L'Histoire de la décadence de l'Empire grec, et establissement de celuy des Turcs, comprise en dix livres par Nicolas Chalcondyle*, 1577)

(14)   *[...] et tomba à terre, où un garçon le pensa arrester, mettant son pied sus ladicte sourissiere, mais il tira si vertueusement qu'il s'arracha la queuë qui demoura dans la sourissiere, et s'enfuit le courtaut* **à travers une court**, *où se pensant encore sauver, vint tomber entre les pieds d'un grand coq dinde, qui le print subitement et l'avalla tout de gob.*

      '[...] and [the rat] fell to the ground, where a boy thought it possible to stop it by putting his foot on the aforesaid mousetrap, but it pulled so stoutly that it tore off its own tail that remained in the mousetrap, and the stumpy [animal] fled *through a farmyard*, still thinking it could save itself, [but it] came to fall between the feet of a large turkey cock, who took it immediately and gobbled it up.'
      (Philippe d'Alcripe, *La Nouvelle fabrique des excellents traicts de vérité*, 1580–1596)

Concerning example (14), we observe that even if a farmyard may be enclosed by walls, it is conceived as a wide space without internal obstacles, where the Figure (in this case, the rat) can choose its path freely: indeed, the scene is conceived from the perspective of the rat.

- *Force dynamics*

In order to ground the notion of Guidance on more general notions, Stosic elaborates on Talmy's Force Dynamics (2000) and defines the Figure as an Agonist that exerts a positive force with respect to the Ground, which plays the role of

an Antagonist and thus opposes a passive force of resistance. He claims that, in contemporary French, the preposition *à travers* is used when this tension between force and counterforce takes place on the lateral axis. This means that the frontal opposition is not a crucial factor (instead, it is considered to be a facultative force) and that what is required is the presence and salience of the two poles that are defined with respect to the lateral orientation (Stosic 2002b:104–106). Figure 5 visualizes this idea:[6]
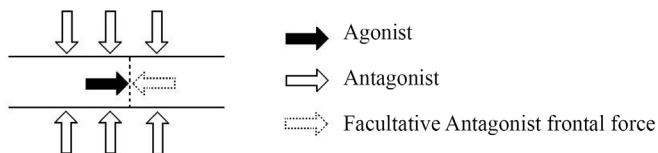
Agonist

Antagonist

Facultative Antagonist frontal force

Figure 5. The notion of Guidance and its facultative frontal Antagonist force

- *The different features of the notion of Guidance*

According to Stosic (2009:18), the notion of Guidance is characterized by a series of features. Not all features need to be verified in order for Guidance to apply to a given situation, neither are they exclusively expressed by *à travers* (Stosic 2009:25). It is not always clear which features are dispensable, and which are not:

- *Dynamicity:* the expression *à travers* is intrinsically dynamic, even if it can be used in static descriptions, where a Fictive path is presumed to be underlying;

- *Internality:* the trajectory of the Figure must be situated – entirely or partly – in the interior of the space that is defined by the Ground;

- *Unity of the Ground: à travers* expresses a binary relation between two entities: in the case of a plurality of entities, the Figure runs through one entity after the other, or the collection of entities is seen as a whole;

- *Opposition to motion:* although there is a clear opposition, the Ground never succeeds in stopping the motion of the Figure (2009:21). Moreover, as mentioned earlier, the interaction is not necessarily situated on the frontal axis;

- *Lateral orientation:* in contemporary French, the preposition *à travers* is used when the tension between force and counterforce takes place on the lateral axis;

[6] Figures 5 to 7 are borrowed from Stosic (2002b:106–114).

- *The minimal path constraint:* the notion of 'Guidance' is applicable, but what is highlighted here is the necessity for the Figure to reach the other side of the ground;

- *Focalization on the path of the Ground:* when *à travers* is used, the Figure needs to run through the Ground for the latter to be able to function as a reference entity (this may be true for Modern French, but does not hold for all ancient uses).

Another interesting feature introduced by Dominicy & Martin (2005:174–176) is their so-called 'Contiguity constraint' that applies to *à travers*, in that the Ground has to form a spatial continuity with the positions occupied by the Figure just *before* and just *after* crossing the Ground. According to these scholars, this constraint explains the difference in acceptability observable in a sentence like (15), given that the 'Forêt de Soignes' is adjacent to Brussels, but not to Paris:

(15)   *Partant de Paris, Max a rejoint Bruxelles* **par/*à travers** *la Forêt de Soignes.*

        'Leaving Paris, Max reached Brussels *through* the Forêt de Soignes.'

b) Contrast
The kind of situation described by the notion of Contrast is nowadays mostly expressed by *en travers (de)*. According to Somers, the modern use of *en travers (de)* is characterized by a concept of resistance that can be understood as an opposition to a physical force or to the usual use of the Ground (1988:55). Example (16) illustrates an opposition to a physical force, while (17) is an example of an opposition to the usual use of the Ground:[7]

(16)   *Mettre des planches* **en travers de** *la porte*

        'To put planks *across* the door'

(17)   *Simon dort* **en travers du** *lit*

        'Simon sleeps *across* the bed'

The feature of resistance is not always present in older uses. In those situations only the opposition to the orientation of another entity seems to characterize the use of *en travers (de)*. More specifically, the Figure occupies a position or follows a path that *contrasts* with the position or the path of the reference entity, and is thus 'opposed' to it only because of its different orientation. Prototypically, the two axes respectively characterizing the Figure and the Ground form an orthogonal angle

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[7] Both examples (16) and (17) are borrowed from Somers (1988:57–58).

of 90 degrees (as made explicit in example (18)), but the angle can be smaller as well, as long as the position or path of the Figure differs evidently from the Ground orientation:

(18)   *[…] de l'autre endroit sera posé le cordeau, croisant* **en travers** *par angles droicts, les lignes tracées:*

'from the other location will be laid out the rope, crossing *across* the drawn lines at right angles:'
(Olivier de Serres, *Le Théâtre d'agriculture et mesnage des champs*, 1603)

Example (18) shows as well the absence of a real resistance (either to a physical force or to the usual use of the Ground). In a diachronic perspective, it thus seems more appropriate to consider the feature of resistance as an originally optional feature of the notion of Contrast that became inextricably bound up with it later.

Finally, example (18) illustrates also how, in older examples, *en travers (de)* often described (fictively) dynamic situations, whereas Modern French use, as analyzed by Somers, tends to be restricted to static situations (*Un arbre* **en travers** *du chemin*; 'A tree *across* the road').

The typical spatial scene described by the notion of Contrast is visualized in Figure 6. As mentioned before, an orthogonal angle of 90 degrees between Figure and Ground seems to be the prototypical situation:

axis characterizing the Ground
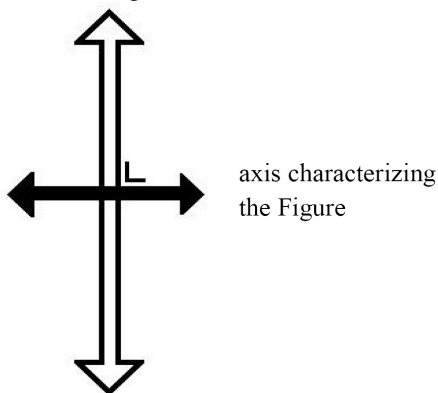

axis characterizing
the Figure

Figure 6. The notion of Contrast in its most prototypical use

To conclude, let us take notice of the similarities between the meaning of the spatial phrase *en travers* ('across') and its original meaning (recall that all expressions

containing *travers* stem from Latin *tran(s)versu(m)* – 'oblique, across'). The semantics of the French verb *traverser* ('to cross') are very similar as well; indeed, in order to cross a Ground like a road, the path is necessarily orthogonally orientated vis-à-vis the axis characterizing the Ground.

4.2. Semantic consequences for à travers (de)

a) Functional notion

The first step in assessing the semantic consequences that the evolution applying to the preposition *de* in combination with *à travers* might have entailed, is to map out the functional notions that describe the uses of *à travers (de)*. Tables 6 and 7 demonstrate that the majority of the tokens convey semantic contents captured by the notion of Guidance. However, until the first half of the 18th Century, *à travers (de)* was able to express uses characterized by the notion of Contrast as well. Remarkably, this phenomenon disappears at about the same moment when the combination *à travers + de* ceases to exist (as shown above, the last two examples in our corpus are found in the second half of the 18th Century):

Table 6. Evolution of the functional notions for *à travers (de)* – 1500–1699

	1500–1549		1550–1599		1600–1659		1650–1699	
	tot.	%	tot.	%	tot.	%	tot.	%
Guidance	18	75,00	113	95,76	173	96,65	106	99,07
Contrast	6	25,00	5	4,24	5	2,79	1	0,93
total	24		118		179		107	

Table 7. Evolution of the functional notions for *à travers (de)* – 1700–1899

	1700–1749		1750–1799		1800–1849		1850–1899	
	tot.	%	tot.	%	tot.	%	tot.	%
Guidance	194	98,98	197	100,00	198	100,00	199	100,00
Contrast	2	1,02	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00
total	196		197		198		199	

Example (19) illustrates the application of Guidance, while (20) is an instance of Contrast (here with a resistance against a potential physical force that follows the orientation of the slope):

(19)   *L'épouvante se mit parmi les catalans, les uns se sauvèrent dans la ville, les autres jetterent leurs armes et se précipitèrent* **à travers** *les rochers;*

'The fear installed itself among the Catalan, some fled into the city, the others dropped their weapons and rushed *through* the rocks;'
(Charles Pinot Duclos, *Histoire de Louis XI,* 1745)

(20)   *Je mis, un certain soir,* **à travers** *la montée,*
Une corde aux deux bouts fortement arrêtée:
Cela fit tout l'effet que j'avois espéré.

'I put a certain evening, *across* the slope,
A rope at both ends strongly fastened:
This caused all the effect I had hoped.'
(Jean-François Regnard, *Les Folies amoureuses*, 1704)

b) Relation Figure-Ground: dynamic vs. static
A second way of measuring the semantic evolution is to look at the static and dynamic uses. In Modern French, static uses describing the position of an entity (often in relation to another entity) are mostly expressed by *de travers (à)* and *en travers (de)*. However, in the past *à travers* was able to express static scenes as well, though this use was fairly rare and seems to have disappeared completely from the second half of the 18th Century, as shown in Tables 8 and 9:

Table 8. Evolution of the dynamic and static uses for *à travers (de)* – 1500–1699

	1500–1549		1550–1599		1600–1659		1650–1699	
	tot.	%	tot.	%	tot.	%	tot.	%
dynamic	20	83,33	116	98,31	175	97, 77	107	100,00
static	4	16,67	2	1,69	4	2,23	0	0,00
total	24		118		179		107	

Table 9. Evolution of the dynamic and static uses for *à travers (de)* – 1700–1899

	1700–1749		1750–1799		1800–1849		1850–1899	
	tot.	%	tot.	%	tot.	%	tot.	%
dynamic	194	98,98	197	100,00	198	100,00	199	100,00
static	2	1,02	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00
total	196		197		198		199	

In (21) we see a dynamic use (characterized by the notion of Contrast without any resistance); an example of a static use can be seen in (22), where a bar blocks a door:

(21)   *En finissant ces mots, il prit un petit bâton environné de crins par un bout, qu'il trempa dans de l'eau, et nous en jetta* **à travers** *le visage, en disant: kyrie eleison.*

'Finishing these words, he took a stick with horsehair winded around at one end, that he soaked in water, and then threw it at us *across* the face, saying: Kyrie eleison.'
(Claude Godard d'Aucour, *Mémoires turcs*, 1743)

(22)   *[…] la porte se trouvant un peu petite, et par malheur une barre qu'on y souloit autrefois tenir pour fermer la porte, estant tombée* **à travers***, les avoit tellement retenus, que devant qu'ils pussent sortir, Polemas s'estoit grandement esloigné.*

'the door being a bit small, and unfortunately a bar that one used to put there in the past to close the door, having fallen *crosswise*, had kept them back to such a degree, that before they could get out, Polemas had got very far.'
(Honoré d'Urfé, *L'Astrée*, 1627)

c) *Concrete vs. Abstract verb meaning*

In analyzing the tokens exhibiting Concrete and Abstract verb meaning, the starting point is the idea that the Concrete, spatial domain is the source-domain for the expressions under study and the verbs they combine with. Tables 10 and 11 show how Abstract uses became ever more frequent, and reached a peak in the first half of the 18th Century. It is striking that about the time *à travers* could no longer combine with *de* (end of the 18th Century), the number of Abstract uses started to decline:

Table 10. Evolution of the Concrete and Abstract uses for *à travers (de)* – 1500–1699

	1500–1549		1550–1599		1600–1659		1650–1699	
	tot.	%	tot.	%	tot.	%	tot.	%
Concrete	24	100,00	112	94,92	160	89,39	91	85,05
Abstract	0	0,00	6	5,08	19	10,61	16	14,95
total	24		118		179		107	

Table 11. Evolution of the Concrete and Abstract uses for *à travers (de)* – 1700–1899

	1700–1749		1750–1799		1800–1849		1850–1899	
	tot.	%	tot.	%	tot.	%	tot.	%
Concrete	125	63,78	137	69,54	151	76,26	156	78,39
Abstract	71	36,22	60	30,46	47	23,74	43	21,61
total	196		197		198		199	

Examples (23) and (24) illustrate a Concrete and Abstract verb meaning, respectively:

(23)   *Arrivés à l'autre bord, nous nous enfonçâmes dans les gorges du Caucase, et un petit bois charmant, arrosé d'une claire fontaine qui en sortoit* **à travers** *des rochers, nous engagea à choisir ce lieu pour notre demeure.*

   'Arrived at the other side, we plunged into the grooves of the Caucasus, and a charming little wood, irrigated by a clear fountain coming out of it *through* the rocks, brought us to choosing this place for our home.'
   (Claude Godard d'Aucour, *Mémoires turcs*, 1743)

(24)   *La raison perça même un peu dans le monde* **à travers** *les ténèbres de l'école et les préjugés de la superstition populaire;*

   'Sanity even pierced a little into society *through* the darkness of scholasticism and the prejudices of popular superstition;'
   (Voltaire, *Lettres philosophiques*, 1734)

4.3. Semantic consequences for au travers (de)

a) Functional notion

Remarkably, as demonstrated in Tables 12 and 13, the expression *au travers (de)* was able, during the whole period analyzed, to express semantic contents characterized by the functional notion of Contrast. This kind of use did thus not disappear, as is the case for *à travers (de)*. However, the majority of the uses are best described by the notion of Guidance, just as happens for *à travers (de)*. The results for the first half of the 16th Century must be interpreted with some reservation, since the low amount of tokens available may cause some distortion.

Table 12. Evolution of the functional notions for *au travers (de)* – 1500-1699

	1500–1549		1550–1599		1600–1659		1650–1699	
	tot.	%	tot.	%	tot.	%	tot.	%
Guidance	3	21,43	79	95,18	160	96,97	184	98,92
Contrast	11	78,57	4	4,82	5	3,03	2	1,08
total	14		83		165		186	

Table 13. Evolution of the functional notions for *au travers (de)* – 1700–1899

	1700–1749		1750–1799		1800–1849		1850–1899	
	tot.	%	tot.	%	tot.	%	tot.	%
Guidance	195	99,49	159	96,95	172	96,09	171	93,96
Contrast	1	0,51	5	3,05	7	3,91	11	6,04
total	196		164		179		182	

Example (25) illustrates a case of Guidance; in (26) we see Contrast:

(25) *Ils finissaient par ne plus même se hâter* **au travers du** *bois maudit.*

'They ended up not even hurrying *through* the cursed wood.'
(Émile Zola, *La Débâcle*, 1892)

(26)   *[…] j'ai songé trois fois à marier ma fille, à lui donner un époux de mon*
       choix; trois fois la providence est venue se jeter **au travers de** *mes projets*
       et anéantir mes plus chères espérances...

       '[…] I thought three times about marrying my daughter, to give her a
       husband of my choice; three times providence came throw itself *across* my
       projects and destroy my fondest hopes...'
       (Pierre-Alexis Ponson du Terrail, *Rocambole, les drames de Paris*, 1859)

b) Relation Figure-Ground: dynamic vs. static

The results displayed in Tables 14 and 15 indicate that, until the end of the 19th
Century, *au travers (de)*, contrary to *à travers (de)*, could be used to express static
scenes. This expression thus appears to be more 'conservative', just as is the case
for the relevant functional notions. Again, the results of the first half of the 16th
Century are probably distorted due to the low amount of tokens available:

Table 14. Evolution of the dynamic and static uses for *au travers (de)* – 1500–1699

	1500–1549		1550–1599		1600–1659		1650–1699	
	tot.	%	tot.	%	tot.	%	tot.	%
dynamic	5	35,71	81	97,59	161	97,58	186	100,00
static	9	64,29	2	2,41	4	2,42	0	0,00
total	14		83		165		186	

Table 15. Evolution of the dynamic and static uses for *au travers (de)* – 1700–1899

	1700–1749		1750–1799		1800–1849		1850–1899	
	tot.	%	tot.	%	tot.	%	tot.	%
dynamic	195	99,49	162	98,78	177	98,88	176	96,70
static	1	0,51	2	1,22	2	1,12	6	3,30
total	196		164		179		182	

Examples (27) and (28) illustrate the dynamic and static uses of *au travers (de)*, respectively:

(27)   *Tu n'as pu te sauver de cette maison brûlée qu'en te jetant comme un désespéré* **au travers de** *tes ennemis;*

    'You have been able to save yourself from this house that burned only by throwing yourself as a desperate person *through* your enemies;'
    (Fénelon, *Dialogues des morts composés pour l'éducation d'un prince*, 1715)

(28)   *Cette posture suscita des souvenirs de Florence, étendue* **au travers de** *la couche.*

    'This position provoked memories in Florence who was stretched out *across* the couch.'
    (Joris-Karl Huysmans, *En route*, 1895)

c)   Concrete vs. Abstract verb meaning

The Abstract uses of *au travers (de)* become ever more frequent, and reach a peak in the second half of the 18th Century, as can be observed in Tables 16 and 17:

Table 16. Evolution of the Concrete and Abstract uses for *au travers (de)* – 1500–1699

	1500–1549		1550–1599		1600–1659		1650–1699	
	tot.	%	tot.	%	tot.	%	tot.	%
Concrete	14	100,00	69	83,13	135	81,82	155	83,33
Abstract	0	0,00	14	16,87	30	18,18	31	16,67
total	14		83		165		186	

Table 17. Evolution of the Concrete and Abstract uses for *au travers (de)* – 1700–1899

	1700–1749		1750–1799		1800–1849		1850–1899	
	tot.	%	tot.	%	tot.	%	tot.	%
Concrete	139	70,92	99	60,37	143	79,89	133	73,08
Abstract	57	29,08	65	39,63	36	20,11	49	26,92
total	196		164		179		182	

Examples (29) and (30) illustrate the Concrete and Abstract use of *au travers (de)*, respectively:

(29)   *Un vieillard respectable voit s'écrouler autour de lui sa maison embrasée: un de ses fils court* **au travers** *des feux et des décombres, arracher son père à la mort;*

  'A respectable old man sees crumble around him his burning house: one of his sons runs *through* fire and rubble, wresting his father from death;'
  (Jean-Baptiste Claude Delisle de Sales, *De la philosophie de la nature*, 1769)

(30)   *[…] mais si vous sçaviez combien l'ennui perce* **au travers de** *la pathétique description que vous m'y faites de votre félicité, […]*

  '[…] but if you knew to what extent boredom shows *through* the pathetic description that you give me of your happiness, […]'
  (Crébillon Fils, *Lettres athéniennes extraites du porte-feuille d'Alcibiade*, 1771)

4.4. Provisional conclusions
From the foregoing it can be concluded that the majority of the uses of both *à travers (de)* and *au travers (de)* are characterized by the notion of Guidance, but either one was also able to express semantics described by the notion of Contrast. In the corpus under study, the expression *à travers (de)* ceased to convey this semantic content from the second half of the 18th Century onward, probably due to a semantic reorganization in favor of *en travers (de)*, the typical expression to express this kind of semantics today. However, the expression *au travers (de)* continued to be used in these contexts, and thus appears to be more resistant in this respect.

The same holds for the static uses: *au travers (de)* continued to be capable of locating entities that do not move, while *à travers (de)* was no longer used for describing such situations from the second half of the 18th Century on. Again, we are probably confronted with a semantic reorganization that affected *à travers (de)* more deeply than *au travers (de)*, because Modern French most frequently resorts to *de travers (à),* and especially *en travers (de)*, for expressing static scenes.

Finally, concerning the evolution of Concrete and Abstract uses, we see a similar evolution for both expressions: an increasing amount of Abstract tokens until the 18th Century, after which a slight regression can be observed. One may wonder what caused this reversal; possibly aspects like differences in genre, register and habits or preferences of authors could have an impact on the results arrived at.

5. General conclusions

In this contribution, we have dealt with two main questions concerning the expressions *à travers* and *au travers* in combination with the preposition *de*.

First, we had to determine when the combinatory freedom of *à travers* and *au travers* with respect to the use of the preposition *de* ceased to exist. On the basis of the data available, it was found that this freedom seems to have vanished at the beginning of the 18th Century for *à travers*, and at the beginning of the 17th Century for *au travers*.

With regard to the semantic evolutions we investigated, it seems unjustified to claim that the end of the combinatory freedom regarding *de* would be the only factor that caused the observed semantic changes. However, they do seem to have been triggered by it, or at least closely related. Indeed, they occur around the same moment: for *à travers*, we showed that at the beginning of the 18th Century this expression does no longer admit the combination with *de*; from that same moment it expresses exclusively dynamic semantics described by Guidance, and its Abstract uses start to decline after having constantly risen in the preceding period. For *au travers*, we saw that the numbers of tokens expressing Contrast and the frequencies of static uses start rising again when *à travers* definitely stops combining with *de* (at the beginning of the 18th Century). A little later, its Abstract uses start to decline again while the previous centuries were characterized by a rising tendency.

Moreover, during the analysis we also observed a significant rise of the tokens containing *à travers (de)* in contrast to *au travers (de)*. This phenomenon also takes place from the moment *à travers* ceases to be used in combination with *de* (from 1750 onwards). Future research will focus on this issue, trying to find an explanation for the diffusion of *à travers*, and to establish whether a connection exists with the evolution described above that caused the preposition *de* to become unacceptable with this expression, and obligatory in combination with the prepositional uses of *au travers* (a possible explanatory factor for the latter evolution could be a reanalysis of *travers* as a noun in the combination *au travers*, impossible for *à travers* because of the absence of a definite article). More specifically, the hypothesis of a more

advanced level of grammaticalization of *à travers* than *au travers de*, followed by a phenomenon of Extension (a rise in frequency entailed by a process of generalization) could form an explanation in this matter. The disappearance of the combination [*à travers + de*] would then be interpreted as indicating an increasing formal stability, or 'bondedness' (Fagard & De Mulder 2007:18), constituting one factor, among others, that can implicate a higher level of grammaticality (Lehmann 2002:131).

Vrije Universiteit Brussel/   Thomas Hoelbeek
Université Libre de Bruxelles

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