

The Acquisition of French Morphosyntax and Structures by Indonesian Students Learning French

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ABSTRACT

This study describes the interlanguage in French produced by the students. The main objective of this study is to argue that the students the abstract structure containing morphosyntactic features that can be realized by overt morphology or abstract morphemes. Two approaches explain the relationship between structure and overt morphology or abstract morphemes. First, the Morphology Before Syntax (MBS) which emphasizes that if the relevant morphemes are not mastered, the structure will not be formed. Second, The Syntax Before Morphology (SBM) which confirms that the structure has been mastered by the students even though irrelevant morphemes fill the structures. The results of the analysis show that the SBM can explain the structure in both convergent and divergent sentences. The object of this research is simple French sentences made by the students of the A2 level of French in the context of acquiring French as a foreign language.

Keywords: French, morphosyntax, structure, Syntax Before Morphology (SBM)

1. INTRODUCTION

Simple sentences in French can be called Inflection Phrases whose main element is Infl (ection) for example modal verbs, auxiliary or suffixes, and lexical categories such as nouns, verbs and all meaningful words (Haznedar, 2003; Pollock, 1989; Prévost, 2009; Radford, 2004). Simple sentences in French can be called Inflection) Phrase) whose main element is Infl (ection) whose morphosyntactic features are [\pm Definite], [+ Nominative], Tense [\pm Past], Number [\pm Plural] and Person [\pm 1Person]. All features of Infl determine the forms of pronouns at the subject position of the sentence. While the Tense, Number and Person features determine the forms of finite verbs

In the context of learning French as a foreign language, learners (who are the participants of this research) must master Infl and its morphosyntactic features to form simple sentences but the results are interlanguage which can be native-like or are different from the target language exemplified below in (1a-b) where (1a) is correct but (1b) is wrong.

1.a [IP[Spec Elle] [I'[Infl lira] [VP[Spec][V'] [V ce journal demain]]]]].

She will read newspaper tomorrow

b. *[IP[Spec Elle][I'[Infl lit_i] [VP[Spec][V'] [V_{ii} ce journal demain]]]]]

She reads newspaper tomorrow

The difference between (1a) and (1b) lies in the morphological variation of finite verbs. In (1a), the morphosyntactic features of Infl are [-Past (future), [-Plural] and [+ 3P] features which is realized by the feature verb lira [will read] whose features are also [-Past (future), [-Plural] and [+ 3P]. Thus, the sentence is correct. Conversely, in (1b), the features of Infl are represented by the verb lit [reads] whose features are [-Past (present)], [-Plural] and [+ 3P] which then creates the wrong sentence.

The similarity between (1a) and (1b) is the pronoun Elle [she] whose features are the features of [+ Def], [+ Nominative], [-Plural] and [+ 3P] in accordance with

morphosyntactic features of Infl. The main question that arises from (1a-b) is whether the subjects still have the abstract structure in (1b).

Previous research on ILG in French in Indonesia was dominated by the theory of error analysis comparing cases like (1a-b) above against French grammar, for example Tobing (2003) who can successfully explain the data in (1b) but they gave less detailed answers for (1a) due to the limitations of the adopted theory.

In the Generative Grammar theory, two approaches regulate structural relationships, namely Infl with its morphemes, namely finite verbs and pronoun subjects, namely, the Morphology Before Syntax (MBS) and the Syntax Before Morphology (SBM) (White, 2003) (Lardiere, 2007). Both terms were coined by White (2003) and Slabakova (2009). According to the MBS, if the relevant morphemes (finite verbs) are not mastered, the structure (Infl as the head of) IP will not be formed. Second, the SBM which confirms that the structure (infl) has been mastered by the students even though irrelevant morphemes fill the structures (IP). The MBS is in accordance with the assumption of the Rich Agreement Hypothesis which states that the acquisition of the verb paradigm is closely related to the acquisition of Infl. So, in (1a), the mastery of finite verb *lira* [will read] shows that Infl has been mastered by the subjects or students. On the other hand, the verb *lit* [reads] in (1b) shows that the subjects have not mastered Infl and its abstract features of morphosyntax. So in the MBS, there must be a one-to-one relationship between the verb *lira* [will read] which is used to obtain Infl. If the above relationship is not fulfilled, for example in (1b), then Infl is stated to be absent or deficient or impairment. Therefore, the students are considered unable to form sentences i.e. the structure of IP.

According to the SBM, students were deemed to have had Infl with their abstract features of its morphosyntactic features from previous language and both transfers into the target language. This means that

at the beginning of acquiring a new language, students already have Infl (the main element of the IP structure) and lexical categories. The SBM assumes that the relationship between functional and lexical categories is separate. This means that SBM does not recognize a one-to-one relationship, for example Infl may be represented by an overt morphology or abstract morpheme and the SBM emphasizes vocabulary learning, for example how to conjugate verbs based on the abstract features of Tense, Number and Person from Infl.

This paper aims to emphasize that the functional category Infl is attainable and therefore the abstract structure (IP) is always available in both correct or wrong simple sentences.

2. METHODS

This research is a descriptive study that focuses on the acquisition of morphosyntax and the structure of the French language in both right and wrong sentences (ILG). The language data studied is the functional category of Infl and the features of morphosyntax which are abstract in relation to the overt morphology or abstract morphemes of the finite verbs that the students already have. The participants consisted of 16 students who were at level A2 of French proficiency and they had taken the French Grammar course 1 which demands the acquisition of a way to form a finite verb, especially verbs that have the suffix -er, -ir and -re. In addition to the literature study, this study also uses a productive test technique (taken place on 17th April 2020) to explore the abilities of each student and the results are presented using the PAP measuring technique in which students are declared capable of obtaining finite verb formation if they get a percentage score of 75%. This means that they do not need a remedial program. The formation of the finite verb that have been given to the subject include verbs ending in -er, -ir and -re as well as the subject pronouns as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. The Morphological Paradigm of Tense, Number and Person in the finite verb representing features morphosyntax tense, number and person belonging to Infl

	Je [I] -Plu +1P	Tu [You] -Plu +2P	Il [He] -Plu +3P +Mask	Elle [She] -Plu +3P -Mask	Nous [We] +Plu +1P	Vous [You] +Plu +1P	Ils [They] +1P +Mask	Elles [They] -Mask
1.-er verbs	-e	-es	-e	-e	-ons	-ez	-ent	-ent
2. -ir verbs	-is	-is	-it	-it	-issons	-issez	-issent	-issent
3.-re	-s	-s	-ø	-ø	-ons	-ez	-ent	-ent

As can be seen in Table 1 adopted from Prévost (2009) and that French only has two abstract morphemes that represent Infl's abstract features of morphosyntax, namely on line 3 where the features [-Past (present)], [-Plural] and [+ 3P] do not have its phonological realization. The rest are the suffixes that are overt morphology of abstract features of the morphosyntax of Infl. To explore the above information on the acquisition of overt morphology, this study used two productive tests, namely the conversion of infinitive verbs into finites.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Findings from Test

Finite verbs in French are different from those of Indonesian or English. Each finite verb shows a suffix representing Infl's features of Tense [-Past (present)], Number and Person. In Indonesian, the finite verbs do not change for Tense (present), Number and Person features (Sneddon, 1996), while English has a pinch of morphemes which represent the Tense, Number and Person features, namely the suffixes -s (-Past (present)), [-Plural] and [+ 3P] (Radford, 2004).

In order to obtain information on the acquisition of the French finite verb, a productive test that converts the infinitive verb to the finite verb has been carried out. The test was attended by 16 students out of 32 students

from the proficiency level of A2 who were invited to take it. The results can be seen in the tables above dan those in below.

In Table 2 above, all students achieved results above 75% of the score which confirms that the students do not need to take part in the remedial program. The success of the above derivation is marked by the presence of suffixes in bold, each of which marks and represents Infl's Tense, Number and Person features. The failure achieved by a minority of students lies in the use of irrelevant suffixes i.e. substitution or omission, for example *travailles [work] in (1), *accept and *acceptent [accept] in (2), *cherche [find] in (3), *apporte [bring] in (4), *bavarde and *bavardons [chat] in (5), *encourage [encourage] in (6), *visite [visit] in (7) dan *gagne [earn] pada (8).

In contrast to the infinitive verb finite which ends in -er, the data in table 3 above shows an unsatisfactory result because a large number of students had to follow the remedial program due to the score achieved below 75% even though there was a very satisfying highest score. The failure lies in the use of irrelevant suffixes i.e. substitution or omission, for example *cueillir [gather] at (1), *fini and *finish [finish] at (2), *rempli and *remplies [fill] at (3), *ouvre and *ouvri [open] at (4), *réfléchez [think] at (5), *sent and *sensi [feel] at (6), *offre [offer] at 7), and *mort [die] at (8).

Table 2. Morphological variation on Verb having suffix -er

No.	Subject Pronoun and Finite Verbs	Percentage
1	Lucie (travaille) à Lyon. Lucie (works) in Lyon.	15/16 (93%)
2	Mon frère et moi, nous (acceptons) votre invitation. My brother and I, we (accept) your invitation.	13/16 (81%)
3	M. et Mme Benoît (cherchent) un appartement. Mr. and Mrs. Benoît (are looking for) an apartment.	12/16 (75%)
4	Tu (apportes) toujours des fleurs. You always (bring) flowers.	12/16 (75%)
5	Vous (bavardez) sur la terrasse. You (chat) on the terrace.	14/16 (87%)
6	Il (encourage) ses employés. He (encourages) his employees.	15/16 (93%)
7	Ils (visitent) le musée. They (visit) the museum.	14/ 16 (87%)
8	Je (gagne) à la loterie. I (win) the lottery.	13/16 (81%)

All sentences adopted from Heminway (2008)

Table 3. Morphological variation on Verb having suffix –ir

No.	Subject Pronoun and Finite Verbs	Percentage
1	Nous (répond ons) aux questions du professeur de français. We (answer) the questions of the French teacher	13/16 (81%)
2	Vous (rend ez) les livres à la bibliothèque. You (return) the books to the library.	11/16 (68%)
3	Ils (vend ent) des fruits et légumes au marché. They (sell) fruits and vegetables at the market	14/16 (87%)
4	Je (descend s) l'escalier à toute vitesse. I (rush down) the stairs.	14/16 (87%)
5	Tu (attend s) l'autobus depuis dix minutes. You (wait) for the bus for ten minutes	13/16 (81%)
6	Il me (tend) la main pour me dire bonjour. He (holds out) his hand to say hello	13/16 (81%)
7	Elle (perd) toujours ses clés. She always (loses) her keys.	13/16 (81%)
8	Elles (étend ent) leur action à d'autres domaines They extend theiru action to other areas	12/16 (75%)

All sentences adopted from Heminway (2008)

Table 4. Morphological variation on Verb having suffix –re

No.	Subject Pronoun and Finite Verbs	Percentage
1	Nous (cueill ons) des fl eurs dans le jardin. We (pick) flowers in the garden.	15/16 (93%)
2	Elle (fin it) à dix-huit heures. She (ends) at six o'clock.	14/16 (87%)
3	Je (rempl is) les verres des invités. I (fill) the guests' glasses.	10/16 (62%)
4	Tu (ouv res) les fenêtres du salon. You (open) the living room windows	14/16 (87%)
5	Vous (réfléch issez) à leur proposition. You (think about) their proposal.	9/16 (56 %)
6	Je (sens) les bonnes odeurs de la cuisine. I (smell) the good smells of the kitchen.	12/16 (75%)
7	Elles (offr ent) toujours les mêmes fl eurs. They always (offer) the same flowers.	9/16 (56 %)
8	Il (meur t) de faim. He dies of hungry	12/16 (75 %)

All sentences adopted from Heminway (2008)

Although the majority of students managed to obtain the relevant suffixes with the features of Infl, the data in table 4 also shows that there is a group of students who failed to obtain the relevant suffixes with the features of Infl. The mistake they make is to substitute or remove the suffix that should follow the verb. Misalnya *répondez [respond] pada (1), *rendrez atau *rendes [make] pada (2), *vend [sell] pada (3), *descend [descent] pada (4), *attend pada (5), *tende dan *tends [tend] pada (6), *perde atau *perdes [lose] pada (7) *étend [widen] pada (8). Based on the three tables above, it is clear that a small proportion of subjects use substitutions or omissions.

3.2. Findings from Correct Sentences

The findings in the Table 2 - 4 can be interpreted according to MBS and SBM are as follows.

First, the students already have an IP structure characterized by the presence of Infl, whose morphosyntactic features allow the existence of a subject element in the IP Spec. Second, the students have also mastered the IP structure whose main element is Infl, which has morphosyntactic features. This can be seen in the finite verbs in V whose suffix represents Infl's Tense, Number and Person features. Third, MBS emphasized that the IP structure had been mastered because the students had mastered the subject pronouns and finite verbs which indicated that Infl was the main element of IP. Fourth, according to SBM, the subjects have already Infl which is realized by the presence of relevant subjects pronouns and also by the relevant finite verbs because each subject pronoun and suffix in the finite verbs reflect Infl's morphosyntactic features.

For example, the derivation of convergence is taken from (3) in Table 4.

3.a. [IP[Spec Ils][I'[I vendent][VP[Spec] [V'[V] [DPdes fruits et légumes au marché]]]]]

Subjects use the verb finite vendent [to sell] which features [-Past], [+ Plural] and [+ 3P] to get an Infl which also features [-Past], [+ Plural] and [+ 3P] dan also pronoun Ils [they] which also represents Infl. The derivation was then stated as convergent because Infl was successfully obtained and became the main element in forming IP. So it is clear that there is a one to one relationship between the verb finite and Infl. This also means that each feature of Infl was represented by overt morphology in the verb finite through the suffix -ent. So both MBS and SBM support the acquisition of IP abstract structures whose main element is Infl

According to MBS, the process of sentence formation is as follows. The finite verb Vendent [sell]

which features [-Past (present), [+ Plural] and [+ 3P] is used to find Infl from the mental dictionary owned by the students. At the same time, the students used the pronoun Ils [they] to find Infl from the mental dictionary that the students had. Finally, Infl is selected and the correct sentence is formed because Infl allows the finite verb to occupy Infl and also allows the pronoun subjects Ils [they] to occupy the Spec IP (sentence subject element). The result is the correct sentence in (3a). According to SBM, it has an IP structure characterized by mastery of Infl with features [-Past (present), [+ Plural] and [+ 3P]. Infl is used to obtain finite verbs such as vendent [sell] which also has the feature [-Past (present)], [+ Plural] and [+ 3P]. In addition, the [+ Plural] and [+ 3P] features are used to look up the subject pronoun of the subject's mental dictionary and the final pronoun Ils [they] is selected. The result is the correct sentence in (3a).

3.3. Findings from Incorrect Sentences

The findings of the wrong sentences showed two views, namely according to MBS and SBM

3.b *[IP[Spec Ils][I'[I vend][VP[Spec] [V'[V] [DPdes fruits et légumes au marché]]]]]

According to MBS, the subjects did not get INFL and finally the IP structure failed to be achieved. This view is based on the finite verb vend [sell] which features [-Past], [- Plural] and [+ 3P] which does not allow obtaining Infl with the features [-Past], [+ Plural] and [+ 3P]. At first glance the data in (3b) supports MBS. However, MBS forgot about the pronoun subject Ils in Spec IP which still showed the [+ Plural] and [+ 3P] features which still indicated the existence of Infl with the [+ Plural] and [+ 3P] features. So, the absence of IP structures is not strong.

At the same time, students who made sentences (3b) were still able to answer other questions correctly. This shows that the student concerned has mastered Infl. This means that MBS does not pay attention to the instability of students in the acquisition of Infl and its features.

On the other hand, the divergent data in (3b), according to SBM, is not caused by the failure to obtain Infl but the subjects have used Infl with the features [-Past], [+ Plural] and [+ 3P] and the one chosen is vendrent after beating the verb finite vendent [to sell] and pronoun Ils [they]. This means that the subject has lack the verb finite vendent [to sell], in particular the suffix -ent. However, SBM did not mention that the subjects failed to form IP because the subjects were deemed to have owned Infl as the main element of IP.

4. CONCLUSION

The students' acquisition of French was generally successful because they were able to make sentences in French with the relevant finite verb. In the convergence derivation, both MBS and SBM successfully compete tightly because of the one-to-one relationship between Infl's features and the verb finite which is indicated by the presence of the relevant suffix. However, this competition did not occur in explaining the divergence derivation because MBS failed to defend the argument, namely the assumption that the subjects did not succeed in obtaining Infl. After all, it turned out that Infl still existed as evidenced by the instability in the divergence derivation. This means that the students can work on the derivation of convergence in other sentences. On the other hand, SBM has won its argument on derivation because SBM considers that the students already have a structure and the fault lies only in the failure to obtain the verb finite.

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