

EXAMINING SENTENCE AS A TOOL FOR SYNTACTIC ANALYSIS IN ENGLISH AND FRENCH LANGUAGES

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Abstract

In this paper, we are exclusively concerned with the part of grammar that deals with the structure of sentences. This is called syntax. Not only the grammatical units of language were explored but the division of selected sentences into constituents (units) was also analyzed. To achieve this feat, sentences were separated into words and finally, words were regrouped on the basis of relationship between them. This paper has gone further to explain how the (agent) or subject of a sentence is identified through grammatical units. The grammatical units were introduced on the hierarchical order [down-up]. The general syntactic framework we have adopted is inspired by the theories of language developed by Noam Chomsky. The choice of this study is based on the assumption that English and French are “closely related and well documented languages” (Tanja et al, 2010:110) and the two (duo) “constitute a minimal pair suitable for micro-comparison (Kayne, 2005). Most learners that were not always comfortable with the syntax and structure of the two languages would be familiar with their components and syntax of English and French languages armed with this work.

Key words: grammatical units, syntactic analysis, English, French language.

Résumé

Dans cet article, nous nous intéressons exclusivement à la partie de la grammaire qui traite de la structure des phrases. C'est ce qu'on appelle la syntaxe. Non seulement les unités grammaticales de la langue ont été explorées, mais la division des phrases sélectionnées en constituants (unités) a été également analysée. Pour réaliser cet exploit, les phrases ont été séparées en mots et enfin, les mots ont été regroupés sur la base de la relation entre eux. Cet article est allé plus loin pour expliquer comment l'agent ou le sujet d'une phrase est identifié par des unités grammaticales. Les unités grammaticales ont été introduites dans l'ordre hiérarchique [du plus petit au plus grand]. Le cadre syntaxique général que nous

avons adopté est inspiré des théories du langage développées par Noam Chomsky. Le choix de cette étude repose sur l'hypothèse que l'anglais et le français sont «des langues étroitement liées et bien documentées» (Tanja et al, 2010: 110) et que les deux (duo) «constituent une paire minimale adaptée à la micro-comparaison (Kayne, 2005). La plupart des apprenants qui n'étaient pas toujours à l'aise avec la syntaxe et la structure des deux langues seraient familiers avec leurs composants et la syntaxe des langues anglaises et françaises et bien équipés à travers ce travail.

Mots clés: unités grammaticales, analyse syntaxique, anglais, langue française.

Introduction

Syntax is a set of rules in a language. It dictates how words from different parts of speech are put together in order to convey a complete thought. Andrew (2004) defines it as a word which comes from Greek 'Suntaxis' meaning 'the joining of several units together so as to form sentences'. Atwood (2020) explains further that the word comes from ancient Greek for "coordination" or "ordering together". This means that syntax determines the way words are put together and arranged orderly to form constituents such as phrase(s), clause(s) or sentence(s). Yusuf (1999) on his part conceives it to be "the study of the arrangement of words to form sentences". Therefore, syntax could simply mean sentence making. Andrew (op. cit) went further to describe syntax in terms of a taxonomy i.e. the classificatory list of the range of different types of syntactic structures found in a language. The central assumption underpinning syntactic analysis in traditional grammar is that phrases and sentences are built up of a series of constituents, syntactic units, each of which belongs to a specific grammatical category and serves a specific grammatical function (Bescherelle 1997:11). Given this assumption, the task of the linguist analyzing the syntactic structure of any given type of sentence is to identify each of the constituents in a sentence, and to say what category it belongs to and how does it function.

Pei and Gaynor (1965) explain that syntax is the study and rules of the relation of words to one another, and science of sentence construction. Soutet (1989) admits that the privileged unit in the syntactic analysis is the sentence. Therefore, syntax studies the sentence patterns of a

language and provides insight into the implicit knowledge of the native speaker of a language (Salman 2013). Chomsky (1957) describes syntax as the study of the principles and processes by which sentences are constructed. Being a group of words that express a thought, a sentence is the largest unit to which syntactic rules can apply.

The available tools for doing the syntactic analysis of sentences in English and French languages are the grammatical units (nouns, adjectives, prepositions, verbs etc.). Grammatical units or grammatical category explains a class of expressions which shares a common set of grammatical properties.

Words like *boy / garçon**¹; *cow / vache**; *hand / main**; *idea / idée**; *place / place**; *team / équipe** etc. belong to the grammatical category of noun, they all share certain grammatical properties in common e.g. they have a plural form (ending in the suffix +s in both languages). They can all be premodified by the article(s), and so forth. Likewise, by saying that words such as *see / voir**; *know / connaître*; *like / aimer**; *understand / comprendre**; *write / écrire**; *appear / apparaître** etc belong to the grammatical category of verb. What is implied is that they too have certain grammatical properties in common (e.g. they can be conjugated in different forms of tenses...).

Similarly, by saying that *tall / grand, haut**; *hot / chaud**; *narrow / étroit**; *old / vieux, ancient**; *wise / sage**; *sad / triste** etc. belong to the grammatical category of adjective. The fact is hereby captured that they share a number of grammatical properties in common (e.g. they can take the comparative “er” suffix in English but “plus” in French). Examples of such are: taller (**plus** → grand, haut)*; older (**plus** → vieux, ancient)*.

In much the same way, by saying that words like *quickly / vite, rapidement**; *cleverly / habilement**; *urgently / urgemment**; *truly /*

¹ Asterisk (*) put in front of word(s) calls attention to French equivalent/ meaning the same

*vraiment**; *greatly* / *grandement**; *completely* / *complètement** etc. belong to the grammatical category of adverb with exception of words such as *fast*, *seldom*, *often* etc. We aim to capture the grammatical properties which they share (not least the fact that they all end in the suffix *ly* and *ment* respectively). It seems to be more interesting to know that all adverbs of manner derived from adjectives that have their suffix in *ly* in English also have it in *ment* in French language. And in addition, by saying that *on* / *sur**; *up* / *en haut**; *down* / *en bas**; *over* / *sur*, *au-dessus**; *under* / *sous**; *between* / *entre** etc. belong to the grammatical category of preposition. We are saying that they have certain grammatical properties in common (e.g. they can be intensified by a word).

A large number of words in the two languages have the same Latin roots and are mutually comprehensible. As a result, the two languages share many grammatical features and contain many cognates. Alphabet: The French alphabet contains the same 26 letters as the English alphabet, plus the letters with diacritics: *é* (acute accent) *è à ù* (grave accent), *â ê î ô û* (circumflex), ... etc. (Benjamins, 1999)

The concomitant problem, however, is the significant number of false friends in the two languages. Here are just a few examples of which learners should take note. The French word is listed first, followed by the correct English equivalent: *pain** = bread (not pain); *blessé** = injured (not to bless or blessed); *injurer** = insult, abuse (not to injure); *lecture** = reading (not lecture); *tout** = every, all (not tout); *librairie** = bookshop (not library)... This development in resemblance in words could also be called false cognates, that is, words may look alike but don't necessarily mean the same thing.

Grammatical Units

Having learned something about the nature and operations of grammar and syntactic analysis, we are bound to be curious about the tools they use. These tools are theoretical constructs that are called:

- Morpheme - the smallest unit
- Word - the next unit
- Phrase - the next unit
- Clause - the next unit, and
- Sentence - the highest and longest unit.

These linguistic units are unique in the sense that they almost completely stand and operate in a hierarchical order.

- (a) a word has one or more morphemes
- (b) a phrase has two or more words
- (c) a clause has two or more phrases, and
- (d) a sentence or clause may contain two or more phrases, or feature one or more clauses or combine both phrases and clauses in a variety of ways.

All these stretches of a language operating as objects of syntactic analysis are succinctly discussed with examples.

The Morpheme

Syntactic analysis can rightly begin from the level of morpheme. It is most simply defined as the smallest meaningful unit of a language. Here are some examples:

| | | | |
|-----------------|----------------------|--------------------|-------------------------------|
| <u>Cat,</u> | <u>start,</u> | <u>courage,</u> | <u>bright,</u> |
| (<u>chat</u>) | (<u>commencer</u>) | (<u>courage</u>) | (<u>brillant/éclatant</u>)* |

These morphemes or words can each stand on their own and so are called ROOT MORPHEMES. Each of them is capable of attracting bound morpheme by a way of inflections or derivatives e.g. cat + s = cats, start + ing = starting; (*chat* + s = *chats*, *commenc*(er) + *ant* = *commençant*)*

There is also another class of morphemes called BOUND MORPHEMES. Here are some examples:

- s, -ed, -ous, -ly, -s
 -é -eux -ment*

These morphemes cannot stand on their own and so they are always attached to root morphemes as we can see in the following examples:

| | | | |
|-----------------|-----------------------|----------------------|------------------------|
| cat + <u>s</u> | start+ <u>ed</u> | courage +ous | bright+ <u>ly</u> |
| cats | started | courageous | brightly |
| chat + <u>s</u> | commenc(er)+ <u>é</u> | courage + <u>eux</u> | brillant + <u>ment</u> |
| chats | commencé | courageux | brillamment |

The word

Egbe (2000) stated that word represents an important tool for syntactic analysis. For all practical purposes, it can be defined as a unit that consists of one or more sounds and thus forms a single unit which can stand alone and is used to express a meaning - an action, idea, object, a process, state of affair, etc. There are, indeed, many aspects to it. These include: phonetic, morphological, syntactic and semantic aspects.

On the phonetic/phonological level, word consists of one syllable or more, each of which is a set of phonemes. Each word is thus pronounced in one or more phonations, according to the number of syllables it contains. For example:

| | | | | | |
|--------------|------------------|----------------|---------------|-----------------|--------------------|
| <u>Man</u> , | <u>contain</u> , | <u>reply</u> , | <u>sell</u> , | <u>humble</u> , | <u>electricity</u> |
| Homme | contenir | répondre | vendre | humble | électricité* |

As regards the morphological aspect, word consists of one morpheme or more, as we have seen above. Some classes of words can, however, change their shapes through the combination of the relevant morphemes so that they may be able to perform their syntactic and semantic functions in their sentences.

Here are more examples:

he (il), happy (*heureux*), has (*a*) and year (*an/année*):

For one year now, he has been very happy with us here

*Depuis une année maintenant, il a été très heureux avec nous ici**

In the syntactic aspect, words are separated into different classes and sub-classes as follows:

1. Nouns - man / homme, Rachael / Rachel, smoke / fumée
2. Verbs - go / aller, eat / manger, call / appeler
3. Adjectives - old / vieux, good / bon, blue / bleu
4. Adverbs - very / très, often / souvent, quickly / vite, rapidement
5. Articles - a(n) / un, une, the / le, la
6. Quantifiers - few / peu, many / beaucoup, plusieurs, all / tout
7. Demonstrative adjectives - these / ces, that / cela, this / ceci, ce
8. Pronouns - she / elle, we / nous, they / ils, elles
9. Prepositions - in / dans, by / par, with / avec
10. Conjunctions - and / et, for / pour, when / quand
11. Interjections - ah! Oh! Silence! Hello! / allô! Bravo!
12. Determiners - the / le, la, l', some / quelques, his / son, sa

The Phrase

A phrase represents yet another important level of syntactic analysis. It consists of a group of words which has four significant features present in both languages as follows:

- (a) It has internal syntactic and semantic cohesion.
- (b) It is an identifiable single unit,
- (c) It expresses a thought, and,
- (d) It is named after its head.

Thus, the following examples qualify to be called phrases with such structures as we can see below. The head of each phrase is underlined.

- | (A) Noun phrases | (B) Adjectival phrases |
|------------------------------------|--|
| the <u>book</u> purchased – M.H.M. | very <u>late</u> already – M.H.M |
| (<u>le livre</u> acheté) | (<u>déjà</u> très <u>tard</u>) |
| a tall <u>man</u> – M.M.H | very <u>old</u> – M.H. |
| (<u>un homme</u> élané) | (très <u>vieux</u>) |
| the <u>day</u> before – M.H.M | <u>ncredible</u> indeed – H.M. |
| (<u>le jour</u> précédent) | (<u>tout à fait</u> <u>incroyable</u>) |

- **Prepositional phrases**

In the house – H.M.M.

(dans la maison)

just for you – M.H.M

(juste pour toi)

- * **Adverbial phrases**

very nice – M.H.

(très gentil)

very narrow indeed – M.H.M

(très étroit en fait)

- **Verb phrases**

Must have killed – M.M.H.

(devrait avoir tué)

should not have been expelled – M.M.M.M.H.

(ne devrait pas être renvoyé)

However, the following are not phrases as they do not form recognizable units: if goes (si va), man to (homme à), and with (et avec), the to buy (le à acheté),

The clause

A clause (known as *proposition** in French) consists of a group of words that contains a finite verb and it is capable of expressing a meaningful and complete thought (Salman, 2013; Dubois et Lagane, 2004). These words occur according to set patterns as follows:

- (a) one half of the group is the subject.
- (b) the other half is the predicate.
- (c) the predicate contains a finite verb.
- (d) a clause is identified as a single thought unit, and so.
- (e) it can occur in different parts of the sentence.

Here is an example:

I know a man / who speaks six languages.

(*je connais un homme/ qui parle six langues*).

In the example sentence, the clause is separated from its neighbor by a slash. The verbs in the clause are know (*connais*), speak (*parle*).

As observed above, the clause is one of the three domains of the phrase. Its domain of operation is the sentence. Therefore, both the subject and predicate sections of the clause serve as locations where phrases occur.

We can also observe in the example above that

- (i) a sentence can embed one or more clauses,
- (ii) the reverse is not possible,
- (iii) a phrase (which is lower in rank than the clause) can however embed a clause. For example
[A man] / who speaks six languages.
[Un homme]/ qui parle six langues.

The Sentence

Egbe (2000) defines a sentence as a group of various words and is believed to express a meaningful and complete thought. In a normal situation, a complete sentence should have a subject and predicate, and can often be composed of more than one clause. *The Cambridge Dictionary* (2021), defines sentence as “a group of words, usually containing a verb, that expresses a thought in the form of a statement, question, instruction, or exclamation”. We can see this when it is used to make a statement, give a command, ask a question or make an exclamation as follows:

- (a) The lady will be here at noon.
- (b) Give the visitor what he requested for.
- (c) Can you send me the report early tomorrow?
- (d) You can't be serious!

The sentence thus has the following characteristics:

- unlike the other grammatical units, it can stand alone – it is independent,
- it has the capacity to embed all the other units, including the clause (see example (b) above).
- like the clause, it has a subject and a predicate (the predicate, of course, contains a verb).

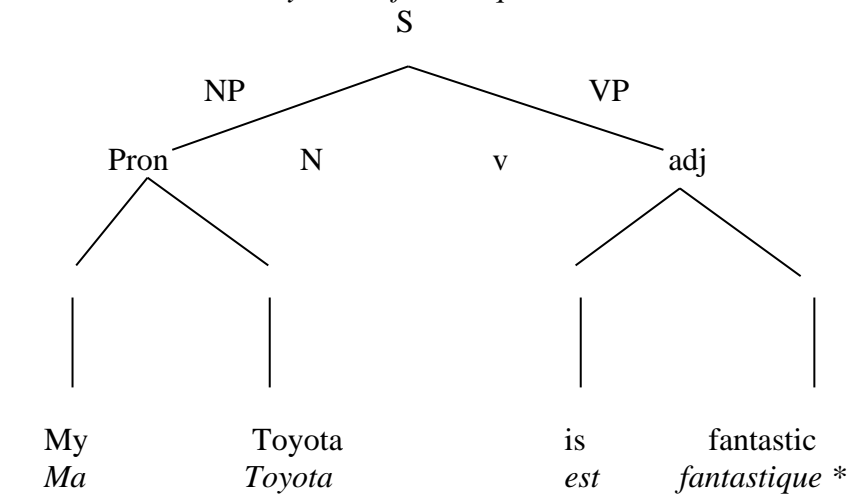
- it cannot be embedded as a sentence by any of the other units,
- when it is embedded, it loses its independence and becomes a subordinate clause,
- it begins with a capital letter and ends with either a full stop /./, an exclamation mark /!/ or a question mark /?/
- it is the longest unit for grammatical or syntactic analysis, and,
- it is one of the major exponents of coherence in an extended discourse.

Syntactic analysis

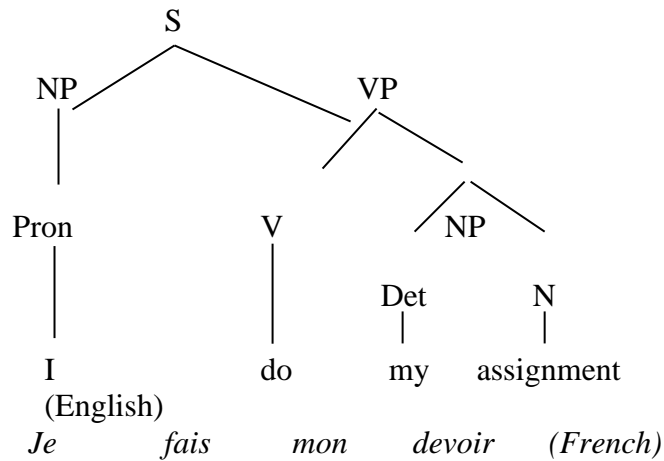
Attempts were made to do the analytical study of English and French Languages with a view to marking some similar and different trends in their syntaxes.

Below are examples of some selected sentences drawn from both languages:

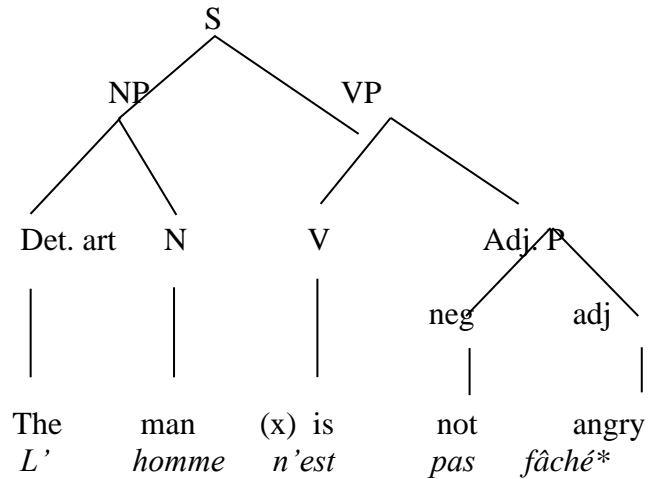
Sentence A: My Toyota is fantastic
*Ma Toyota est fantastique**



Sentence B: I do my assignment
*Je fais mon devoir**



Sentence C: The man is not angry (English)
L'homme n'est pas fâché (French)



As we can observe from the two languages, affirmative (positive) sentences have no or little differences but negative sentences in both languages make a significant difference. The reason for this is that French clausal negation is bipartite and consists of an element “ne”, which can be omitted in colloquial French, and an element “pas” (Yuan, 2003:353). Since “pas” is not affected by the movement of the

finite verb, “ne” is considered an affix heading a projection of negative phrase whose specifier is occupied by the negative operator “pas”. As for English, the thematic verbs never appear to the left of negation and the negation “not” occupies the specifier of negative phrase like “pas” in French. English negative sentences with thematic verbs are characterized by the insertion of the auxiliary “do”. With the exception of “be” and “have”, English verbs are negated by using the construction “don’t” or “do not”. Learners, especially those studying English and French need to be acquainted with this development in order for them to avoid committing this error of negative sentence construction.

Conclusion

It is quite obvious that this paper has made an effort to expose many readers to the knowledge of grammatical units as tools for analyzing sentences in a language. A morpheme, according to Ogunsiji and Sunday (2008) is defined as the smallest, meaningful unit of grammar of a language. The work undertaken in this area of knowledge will arm learners of a language with basic requirement(s) of sentence syntactic analysis.

Egbe (2000) describes word as a unit that consists of one or more sounds and other forms, a single unit that can stand alone and is used to express a meaning. Nordquist (2020) on his part describes it as a speech sound or a combination of sounds, or its representation in writing, that symbolizes and communicates a meaning. Word classes have two parts – major and minor. The major part consists of Noun, Verb, Adjective and Adverb while the minor part consists of pronoun, preposition, conjunction and interjection. However, there are some words that are discussed under sub-class i.e Articles, Determiners, Quantifiers and Particles. Both the teachers of English and French languages will benefit a lot from this paper by increasing their knowledge of language syntax.

Salman (2013) describes phrase as a string of words that forms a grammatical unit that contains neither a subject nor predicate of its own. The users of this paper will have the opportunity to broaden their knowledge of the phrase, its types and uses.

The sentence and clause are closely examined in this paper too as the duo is inseparable (Dubois et Lagane, 2004:130). A clause can be just a simple but complete sentence or a combination of two or more collection of meaningful sentences put together to make a complete thought. Egbe (2000) defined the two units in different ways. As a simple sentence can also be referred to as a clause, Grevisse (1969) on his part clearly explains that a clause is a logical collection of words that relates directly or indirectly to the verb by means of which a deed, a wish, a sentiment etc is expressed. The types of clause and sentence identified were equally mentioned and discussed adequately to increase the exposure of the learners of English and French languages to the syntactic analysis of sentences in both international languages.

In both languages, there are some similarities; most notably the same alphabet and a number of true cognates and positive/affirmative sentences have no or little difference depending on the sentence type. Though comparing some characteristics in both languages, we can deduce few (precisely at least five) differences from this study, the facts that

- French language has many types of word agreement (either in gender or in number) whereas English has none e.g: *les filles que j'ai vues** (the girls that I've seen); *le garçon que j'ai vu** (the boy that I've seen)
- French language has more articles in use (e.g: *le, la, l', les, un, une, des*...*) but English has few (e.g: a, an, the)
- In French language, the capitalization is less common but opposite is the case in English e.g: *la langue française** (French language); *les nigériens** (the Nigerians).
- In French language, conjugation of verbs are different for each grammatical person but in English they are different only for

third person singular e.g: *tu parles*, *il parle*, *nous parlons*, *vous parlez*, *ils parlent** (you speak, he speaks, we speak, you speak, they speak)

- In French language, verbs are negated using two words “*ne... pas*” but in English verbs are negated using one word “not” e.g: *ils ne sont pas étudiants** (they are not students).

Recommendations/ suggestions

Consequent upon various findings encountered in the process of writing this paper, the writers were motivated to make the following recommendations:

- It was found out that France and Britain relatively share some linguistic affinities. Therefore, the two languages are interlocked in some aspects. They both share the same number of 26-letter alphabets. At the level of phonology, there are some words in English and French languages that fairly sound alike. Thus, the two languages may be learnt hand in hand in most nations to enable the learners acquire two international languages for higher exposure.
- The English and French language teachers should endeavour to attain the mastery of the grammatical units of both languages to make them comfortable while imparting knowledge in different aspects of the two languages.
- Furthermore, the language teachers should be making frequent attempts to analyze sentences syntactically in English and French languages to record areas of linguistic similarities and differences in both languages.
- The personalities and authorities (Ministries of Education) that are stakeholders in English and French curricular should design favourable logistics for parsing and also, make enough funds available for carrying out researches in the aspect of syntactic structure analysis for linguistic transformation in the 21st century.

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