

THE LOCUS OF FRENCH GENDER CONCORD¹

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The most common agreement rules for past participles in French seem simple enough, at least when verb is a copulative. All but one of the sentences in (1) illustrate the rule of agreement with leftmost NP² within the same major clause

1. a. La femme est partie
- b. Elle et sa fille sont sorties
- c. Elle et son mari s'en sont allés
- d. Lui et sa femme sont arrivés
- e. La concierge semble fatiguée
- f. La salle est bondée
- g. La vendeuse est agacée (par son mari)
- h. Toute femme [[qui est] intelligente] est avantagée
- i. La cerise a mûri+e

When the verb is *être* or one of the other copulative verbs, such as *devenir*, *paraître*, or *sembler* as in (1e)³, the agreement rule affects not only past participles but adjectives too, as in (1e,f). The rule includes the passive (cf. 1g). It also explains the gender marking in (1h) of the embedded remnant *intelligente*. The "missing" item can only be a copulative. The lone ungrammatical sentence (1i) is faulted by the non-copulative nature of its verb.

The only complexity in cases such as those exemplified by most of (1) is to distinguish the single gender constituency of such pairs of nouns as those at leftmost position in (1c,d) compared with (1b). When nouns are thus conjoined the feminine

¹I am grateful for the incisive comments of Jacques Durand, and other friends and colleagues, on an earlier version of this paper. The flaws which remain are mine alone.

²NP is here intended to indicate nouns, noun phrases and pronouns. My bias towards feminine examples results from the fact that in French the masculine is morphologically unmarked.

³Lyons (1968:323) 'the 'verb to be' in such sentences as *Mary is beautiful* (unlike the verb *cook* in *Mary cooks fish*) is in contrast with only a limited set of other 'verbs', notably *become*. The occurrence of *become* rather than *be* depends upon the selection of the 'marked' rather than the 'unmarked' term in yet another grammatical opposition.'

marking of agreement is blocked by the presence of masculine (unmarked) NP. Here we have a split between number⁴ and gender, since in none of the three cases in (1) of conjoined subject NPs could the past participle be marked as singular. The operation of number concord and that of gender must take place at different levels, where there are different structural representations for multiple subject NP. Yet grammarians hold that "the inflexion of the adjective is clearly a matter of surface structure." (Lyons (1968:323)). There is no doubt (cf. Chomsky (1986b:158)) for argument] that number agreement must *follow* passivization. The assignment of number can operate with syntactic information about the degree of bracketing, distinguishing (2a,b)

2. a. [[Jean] [[et] [Marie]]]...
 b. [[Jean] [et] [Marie]]...

but information about gender is derived only from the lexical categories. This can be shown easily enough by such idiosyncratic examples as *la victime*, for any victim, or *le maréchal*, for any marshal or blacksmith.

If the verb is not a copulative, the French past participle will agree only with a NP which has been moved to a position immediately to the left of the verb within the same clause. This is illustrated in (3b-d)

3. a. La prof a loué l'étudiante
 b. L'étudiante que le professeur a louée
 c. Le professeur l'[=l'étudiante] a louée
 d. L'étudiante s'est louée

There is no agreement of past participle in (3a), even though, as in (3b), there is in the surface a NP to the left. It is not simply a matter of differential case-assignment (between nominative and accusative), for a nominative can be the antecedent for gender marking, if the verb is copulative, just as the (moved) accusative can be the antecedent if the verb is otherwise. Note that it is the type of verb which is responsible for assigning case. And it is the type of verb, the categories which it selects, which determines movement. Where there is movement there is gender-marking.⁵ Agreement in (3b-d) is triggered by the leftward movement of the NP in those sentences.

Such movement is not without distortion, and the Projection Principle discussed by Chomsky (e.g. 1986a) aims to model the retention of that structure necessary for interpretation. Where movement is concerned it is argued that a *trace* remains in the original site of the item moved. In (4) are repeated the sentences of (3), but now with an indication (as *t*) of the *trace* of items which have been moved to the left in the development of surface structure. In (3a) there has been, of course, no

⁴ I am not here referring to lexical number, which in French has a not very important role. I know of only 17 nouns, such as *la gage/les gages*, *le ciseau/les ciseaux*, *la nouille/les nouilles*, *la vue/les vues*, where number makes a difference to the meaning of a noun. In at least a third of the cases, the difference is not commonly functional, e.g. *l'appât/les appâts* or *l'assise/les assises*.

⁵ The difference between *copulative* and *transitive* is the one that has validity for the determination of binding.

movement – and no agreement of past participle

4. a. L'étudiante que le professeur a louée *t*[+fem]
 b. Le professeur l[+fem]'a loué *t*[+fem]
 c. L'étudiante s[+fem]'est louée *t*[+fem]

It is common to assume that the appearance of the *clitic*, the pre-verbal object pronoun, occurs at a late stage in the generation of a sentence. But Kayne usefully pointed out (1971:241) that "linguistic theory must be constrained so as to disallow the selection of a grammar in which the distribution of anaphoric pronouns is determined by rule converting full NP's to pronouns." Base-generation of clitics is the only basis for predicting the occurrence of unstressed forms (*le, la, les*) rather than the stressed forms (*lui, elle, eux, elles*), for if the pronoun were formed before movement then it would be the stressed pronoun which would occur in clitic position. And such a sentence would be ungrammatical.⁶

The explanation of passives such as (1g) is a particularly important argument for the use of abstract elements such as *trace* and *empty categories* (cf. Chomsky 1986a). The sentence instanced as (1h), given again as (5a), depends for interpretation on the recognition of the *empty category*: *e*. Chomsky (1986b:157) proposed for the passive sentence *John was killed* the structure given here as (5b).

5. a. La femme [[*e*] intelligente] est avantagée
 b. [NP_e] INFL be [VP [V kill][NP John]]

It was argued by Chomsky (at the same place) that the rule which assigns the passive morpheme, eventually to produce *killed* in English, must be followed by movement.⁷ This movement must leave a *trace*. In (6) there is a similar structure, but this time with French lexis and with *trace* noted.

6. [NP Jean[+fem]] INFL être [VP [V tu[e] par [NP_e]]]

There is a strikingly close relationship in all these cases, and even the passive, with its copulative verb, can be included. Given this, it appears that the gender marking of past participles, even if not of adjectives, takes place at the locus of *trace*, i.e. is determined by movement, which precisely characterises the relation between D(cep)-structure and S(urface)-structure (cf. Chomsky (1986b:155-56)). The *trace* with which the gender marking of past participles appears to be associated depends for its significance on the features which it has inherited from the lexical configuration of the item which has been moved. Without this degree of government there can be no proper binding relation between the *trace* and its antecedent, the

⁶ It is interesting to note that movement is not inevitable, although *Jean ~~elle~~ a vue* is ungrammatical, *Jean a vu elle* (without movement) is simply very colloquial. So, pronominalization without movement is (just) grammatical, whereas movement of an already-formed post-verbal pronoun to clitic position cannot take place.

⁷ Essentially the argument is that *John* cannot remain as a nominative in the position which is typically case-marked as direct object. It would be hard to accept this fully, given the presence of the copulative verb in the structure of the French passive, if it were not for the peculiar nature of the copulative verbs. In Lyons (1968:322) the traditional view was reinforced that the verb *be* is solely "the locus in surface structure for the marking of tense, mood and aspect."

item moved leftwards. The value of the lexical configuration will depend on the θ -role of the lexical item. The *projection principle*, outlined briefly earlier, models the maintenance at all levels of the grammar of the lexical definitions which determine D-structure. A verb such as *tuer* has the lexical entry in (7)

7. [___ NP] Agent, Patient.

The movement of NP (the Patient) in the course of syntactic development triggers the agreement of a past participle. This agreement of gender occurs only where the perfect tense is involved. Gender marking and tense assignment must be equally present in the base.

It has been shown that the passive, although characterised by its use of a copulative verb, includes movement to the surface subject site. The lexicon contains verbs with their arguments (Agent, Patient, Beneficiary, etc.) in logical form. The generation of surface structure requires the movement of subjects (and of objects to preverbal position in French). The sentences of (1) thus have a source which involves movement of the subject NP. In this light the evolution of ["être", NP___] <Referent, Predicate> or of "tuer", ___NP] <Agent, Patient> are alike, the landing site of each being that of the nearest NP to the left.

The sentences of (8) are notably different from one another in their concord. This difference can be motivated only by the conditions in the dependent clauses

8. a. Jeanne s'est vue [transformée par son mariage]
 b. Jeanne s'est observé [insulter ses meilleurs amis].

Whereas in (8a) there is past participle agreement with the clitic (identical in its reference with the subject), in (8b) no such expected concord has operated. In (9) are shown the structural relations.

9. a. Jeanne s[+fem]'est vu[+fem] t[+fem] transformé[+fem] t[+fem]
 b. Jeanne_i s[+fem]'est observé [PRO_i insulter]

In (9b) *PRO*, the null subject of an untensed verb, is not acting primarily as *trace*, and there is therefore no theoretical justification for the gender marking of the past participle. It is only the close linking of the verbs which allows the sharing of *PRO*. In (9a), however, there is once again the demonstration that it is *trace* which licenses the gender marking of the predicate. Thus gender, unlike number (and even tense, for how else than by surface structure could we explain the concordance rules of French?), gender plays a uniquely deep role in support of lexical projection.

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