

A NEW LOOK AT FRENCH LIAISON

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ABSTRACT

The phonology of French has attracted a great deal of attention from the theoreticians, especially for the phenomena connected with what is known as liaison (Trager 1944; Schane 1968; Hooper 1976; Klausenburger 1978; Gaatone 1979; Clements and Keyser 1983, Stemberger 1985, to mention only a selected few). What has largely been ignored, however, is that a given liaison may be either (a) obligatory, (b) optional or (c) forbidden. The purpose of this paper is to examine under what circumstances the requirement for liaison varies, and the probable underlying reason for this variation.

1. Introduction

It has often been commented that there is in French a very strong preference for open syllables, and that, wherever possible, syllables begin with a consonant and end with a vowel. This leads, in fact, to what is called enchaînement whereby the last consonant of one word and the first vowel of a following word will form a separate syllable of their own. Because of the phenomenon of enchaînement and because there is no word stress in French, but only phrase stress, words are run together into phrases, normally coinciding with breath groups, with a single stressed syllable at the end of each phrase.

It can be seen, in fact, that liaison is a special case of enchaînement, since if the following word begins with a consonant, the final consonant of the preceding word is dropped: petit pain. But if, by contrast, the following word begins with a vowel, the final consonant of the preceding word will be pronounced thereby forming a syllable to bridge the two words: petit animal [p(ə)-ti-ta-ni-mal].

Many linguists who are familiar with the phonological data of liaison are however unaware of the constraints that govern its functioning. There are many cases (i) where a liaison is

forbidden, (ii) where it is only optional, and (iii) where it is required.

These three sets of data will be examined in what follows, and observations made on the syntactic and grammatical formations that give rise to this tripartite division.

2. Obligatory Liaisons

2.1. Between article or other definer and following noun, adjective, or adverb; between common adjectives and following noun; between common adverbs and following adjective. Included in the definers are the so called possessive adjectives, which function exactly as do articles, and also the numerals. (Liaison is marked by = between words).

les=amis, les=uns et les=autres, les=Européens;
des=enfants, des=heures, des=hommes;
un=artiste, un=enfant, un=article;
ces=attitudes, ces=anciens=amis;
un bon=ami, un grand=ami, de beaux=enfants;
mon=auto, mes=avis, mon=ancien professeur;
certains=hommes, aucun=ami;
trois=heures, six=enfants, dix=animaux;
un très=amical souvenir

These examples of obligatory liaison all underline the fact that the order of words between a definer and its following noun is quite rigid, there being a tightly ordered relationship between all the words that occupy this space. Normally, nothing can be moved in such a group of words without causing significant differences of meaning, and if the noun itself is moved, everything must be moved with it without disturbing the order of words, a requirement that did not apply to Classical Latin, for example. For this reason, we shall limit the term Noun Phrase to that group of words which starts with the definer and ends with the noun. This means that in the present discussion we shall consider adjectives that follow the noun to be attributes separate from the noun phrase.

The noun phrase thus defined is in fact a single syntactic unit, which will serve in one of several functions: (i) subject, (ii) object, (iii) in apposition, (iv) object of a preposition (which will in turn permit various adjectival and adverbial functions).

The rigid ordering of the noun phrase indicates that there are close sequential relationships between its components, and it is these close relationships that are marked by the obligatory liaisons. In short the NP (i) functions as a single syntactic unit, (ii) has rigid ordering, (iii) is phonologically cemented by obligatory liaisons.

If this rigid ordering of the NP is in turn the product of an ordered sequence of stages, this sequence must begin with the noun, since the noun determines the gender of the preposed adjective and the article. The fact that the preposed adjective is contiguous to the noun and dependent upon it (and attached where possible by liaison) indicates that the adjective is the next stage, followed by its own dependent adverb, and that the last stage is the article. This means that in a phrase such as un très grand livre the ordering runs, as Valin has proposed (1981), from right to left, in contradistinction to the notional genesis of the sentence which necessarily runs from left to right (in terms of our writing convention). Presenting the NP in this inverse sequence, therefore, easily identifies or marks it as a separate syntactic unit with its own internal coherence (an endocentric construction in traditional terms), marked at least in part by the use of liaison.

2.2. Between personal and other pronouns that are subjects and the immediately following or preceding verb:

ils=ont, elles=auront, nous=avons, vous=avez;
on=a, ils=aiment, tout=est prêt;
ont=ils? sont=elles? est=il?

These examples underline the fact that French subject pronouns are clitics, (except that nous and vous have also other functions). Because they are clitics, for example, they are unable to undertake any other syntactic relationship; even a simple linking with the conjunction et is impossible, for example: *il et elle sont partis, whereas this is a perfectly feasible strategy in English: He and I went for a walk. This liaison therefore marks the very close syntactic relationship between a main word and its cliticized elements.

2.3. Between the object pronouns and the verb which follows them:

il vous=envoie, vous les=avez lus, il les=aura, il nous=aime.

Here again we are dealing with cliticized elements, which may only be used with the verb (except for nous and vous). The ordering is strict, and when the verb is moved to a different position in the sentence the so-called conjunct pronouns must be moved with it without altering the order. These pronouns, like the subject pronouns, are not able to enter into any other syntactic relationship: they may not be conjoined with et, and they may not be modified by any other element. Once again the obligatory liaison marks the very close dependency relationships of these clitics to their verb.

2.4. Between certain prepositions and the following noun phrase:

dans=une heure, sans=espoir, en=allant, sous=une table;
avant=eux, devant=elle.

Once again we note that the order of words in a prepositional phrase is very rigid. In traditional grammars it was normally said that a preposition governed the following noun phrase or pronoun, and in languages with cases it is normal to have a case agreement with a particular preposition. In a modern dependency grammar, the noun phrase or pronoun is considered to be dependent upon the preposition (Hudson 1980), and in languages like French and English, which have no case marking in the noun, it is the rigid ordering of the prepositional phrase that marks this dependency. It is also clear from the data of Modern French that there are varying degrees of closeness of relationship between preposition and following noun phrase. In some cases, for example, the preposition can exist independently as an adverb, without its following noun phrase. The following two sentences, for example, are interchangeable.

Je ne l'ai pas vu depuis dix heures
Je ne l'ai pas vu depuis

Here it is obvious that the NP dix heures is an optional extension of depuis, which is otherwise quite capable of standing on its own. In this instance, therefore, the relationship between the noun phrase and the preposition is loose and optional.

With the prepositions à and de, on the other hand, (which are probably the underlying basic elements of the whole prepositional system) the relationship between the preposition and the following noun phrase is so close that the preposition and the article amalgamate

and the preposition thereby becomes integrated within the noun phrase; that is, it becomes a part of that sequence of words which starts with the definer and ends with the substantive:

du livre, aux=amis, au lit, des=enfants.

The more a preposition belongs to the fundamental set of prepositions that relate closely to nouns (because they represent the fundamental contrastive functions in which nouns may be employed), the greater the requirement for a liaison between preposition and following noun phrase. The looser the relationship between preposition and noun phrase, the less likely is the need of a liaison, and with many of the less common prepositions the liaison becomes optional. There are, in fact, some uncommon prepositions (selon, vers, hors, moyennant, nonobstant) with which there is never a liaison with the following noun phrase.

2.5. Between the parts of fixed expressions:

mot=à mot, deux=à deux, de temps=en temps, un pis=aller;
plus=ou moins

Here again we are confronted with the necessity of processing these items as a single unit in the sentence: their internal coherence is cemented phonologically by liaison. The total function of de temps en temps, for example, is adverbial, equivalent to English every now and then; it would be a fundamental strategic error to treat it as two prepositional phrases, from time, to time. Once again we see obligatory liaison used as a syntactic marker of the internal coherence of a phrase.

In light of the above it is interesting to note that one never hears the s of the plural of such compound nouns as des salles à manger, des pots à eau, and des arcs-en-ciel. It is obvious that the whole compound is treated as a single unit and that one may not pluralize a component part, even if the traditional spelling still adds an s to a component within the compound. With other hyphenated words this integrity of the compound is recognized, so that pot-au-four is listed in the dictionary as invariable.

It is also noteworthy that the liaison is made in Comment=allez-vous, emphasizing that this is a ritual formula, not to be analyzed as a normal sentence (compare English How do you do).

Liaison is never made with comment except in this typical social formula.

2.6. Between the copula and the following predicate:

c'est=utile, il est=impossible, c'est=une fille;
il est=avocat.

This liaison emphasizes the role of the copula as a necessary part of the predicate.

3. Liaisons That Are Not Made

Some linguists who have looked at the question of liaison in French have not realized that there are certain instances of grammatically related words where a liaison is not made, in spite of the fact that the first word in a sequence ends in a silent final consonant and the next word begins with a vowel. The following are examples of syntactic relationships where liaison is not allowed.

3.1. Between a singular noun and a following adjective, or following complement:

l'esprit / humain, un lit / immense, un enfant / étourdi;
appartement / à louer.

Much has been written on the meaningful difference between preposed and postposed adjectives in all the Romance languages. There are further interesting comments to be added to this topic, but they lie outside the range of the present discussion. Suffice it to say, for present purposes, that the attribute, the adjective which follows the noun, is contrastive in force, is felt to be a separate entity, whereas the epithet, the adjective that is preposed to the noun, is not. It is for reasons such as this that the complementary adjectives in such phrases as votre charmante fille and un magnifique repas are preposed, since if they were postposed, they would produce invidious contrasts with daughters who were not charming or meals that were less than magnificent. Normal human politeness suggests that such comparisons are to be avoided. We may conclude therefore that the adjective which is preposed is felt to be a quality inseparable from the noun, whereas the adjective that is postposed is felt to be separable:

it is quite conceivable that the entity described by the noun might not have this quality. A preposed adjective conveying the inseparable quality normally carries a required liaison; the postposed adjective marking an unquestionably separable quality is considered syntactically separate to the point where a liaison may not be made.

3.2. Between a subject pronoun placed after the auxiliary or the verb in the interrogative form, and the past participle or direct object which follows:

sont-ils / entrés, sont-elles / arrivées, avez-vous / osé,
a-t-on / amené les enfants, ont-ils / aperçu quelque chose;
ont-ils / une voiture, font-ils / un voyage?

In these cases the immediate dependency relationship is between past participle and auxiliary, or else between direct object and verb. There is no immediate syntactic link, by way of contrast, between subject and past participle, and between subject and object. We must conclude, therefore, that it is the syntactic gulf between the subject on the one hand, and the past participle and direct object on the other hand, that prevents the liaison from being made in these cases. If there is no immediate syntactic link of dependency between two sequential elements in the sentence, they may not be connected phonologically by liaison.

3.3. Between noun subject and following verb:

le chat / est dans la cuisine, les enfants / ont mangé;
le fermier / est au champ; chanter / est un bonheur pour
elle;
trois / est le nombre que je préfère, le tout / est de ne
rien dire

It may seem surprising at first sight that liaison between noun subject and verb is not allowed, whereas liaison between pronoun subject and verb is required. One notes, however, that because the pronoun subject is a clitic, it may not be separated from the verb except by other elements of the verb phrase such as the negative marker and the pronoun objects. The noun subject on the other hand can be separated by a whole clause, as in the following example:

Les plantes [qui ont les fleurs mâles et les fleurs femelles sur des pieds séparés] sont appelées dioïques.

One concludes therefore that between noun subject and verb there is not, in fact, a close syntactic relationship. This is borne out by the fact that linguists, in trying to establish syntactic dependencies, have disagreed as to whether the noun subject is dependent on the verb, or the verb dependent on the noun subject. The traditional view, supported by the dependency relationships proposed by linguists such as Jespersen (1924:96ff) and Guillaume (1971:145), is that the verb is dependent on the subject, and that this dependency is shown by the agreement of the verb. The opposite point of view is that of Tesnière (1959), who proposed that both subject and object were dependent on what he called the "valency" of the verb. Again, there is much that is interesting to be said on the nature of this, the major syntactic relationship of the sentence, but for our purposes here we note only that not allowing liaison between a noun subject and its verb simply underlines the fact that this is an exocentric construction, different from such endocentric constructions as adjective-and-noun, where the dependency relationship is clear, both morphologically and semantically.

3.4. Before words that have undergone a major recycling:

des / oui! des / oh! et des / ah! d'admiration

Words such as oui and oh, ah are not ordinarily nouns. In order to become nouns, they must undergo some kind of morphological recycling. No liaison is made between the article and such recycled nouns; such a liaison is, after all, an ordinary syntactic marker of the normal relationship between article and noun. Since these items are not by nature nouns, the lack of liaison is a marker of the normal syntactic distance between such elements and the articles that precede them when they have become nouns. It is probable that we should include in this category the numerals when they are treated as nouns, since one says:

le / huit octobre, le / onze novembre;
i'envoyais / un, ils seront / huit, vous serez / onze,

whereas it is normal to have a liaison in compound numerals such as dix-huit.

3.5 Between an interrogative adverb and the following clause to which it belongs:

quand / arrivez-vous? comment / acceptez-vous?
combien / en ont-ils?

This usage contrasts with that of the conjunction, which regularly forms a liaison with its following clause:

quand=il arrive

The relationship between a conjunction and its clause, however, is similar to that between a preposition and its noun phrase: by means of the conjunction the whole clause is recycled as an adverb, requiring a close syntactic dependency of clause to conjunction. The sentence adverb, by contrast, has but a loose connection to its clause, reflected its mobility: vous arrivez quand?

4. Optional Liaisons

4.1. Between a plural noun and following adjective or following verb:

activités=intenses, des=enfants=adorables, des femmes=âgées;
mes parents=insistent.

Since the liaison between a noun and following adjective is forbidden in the singular, the obvious conclusion to be drawn from these examples is that an otherwise forbidden liaison may be made in order to distinguish the plural from the singular.

4.2. Between the auxiliary verb and the following past participle:

vous=êtes=allés, nous=avons=eu, j'aurais=été.

One would expect a close syntactic relationship between auxiliary verb and past participle, since these two elements together form the verb phrase, and together make a single verb in which the auxiliary carries all the grammatical marking of person, mood and tense, whereas the past participle presents the lexical element of the verb. It is noteworthy, however, that many elements can come between auxiliary and past participle in both French and English. One notes, for example, that in French the pas of the negative goes between auxiliary and past participle, whereas if

there were a close syntactic cohesion between the two elements, one would expect the pas to follow the past participle. A variety of adverbial elements may also be introduced between auxiliary and past participle, as we can see in such English examples as "he had [from time to time unsuccessfully] attempted to communicate." The fact that there is a definite relationship of dependency between auxiliary and past participle allows this liaison to be made, but because the relationship is not considered to be syntactically close, the liaison is not required. The past participle, in fact, as the following section will show, is treated in similar fashion to the complements of the verb, almost as if it were the complement of the auxiliary.

4.3. Between the verb and its direct object or other verbal complement. This encompasses also the past participle when used by itself with its own complements:

vous=avez=un livre, nous chantons=une chanson;
remis=à neuf, mis=en demeure, pris=en flagrant délit.

Here again we are dealing with a syntactic relationship where a following element is dependent on a prior element. A frequently used test of dependency relationships is the noting of the element that can stand alone without the other. In the dependency relationship between verb and direct object, the verb can stand alone without the direct object, but the direct object cannot stand alone without the verb. This test is diagnostic for establishing that the direct object is the dependent element. Likewise the adverbial complements, being tertiaries in the sense of Jespersen, are dependent on the verb, which in Jespersen's terms is a secondary (1924:96). Stemming from this observation, a pattern may be observed: a word that is followed by words or expressions that are syntactically dependent on it may be linked to these following elements by liaison. This general rule, for example, is true of the adjective:

heureux=au jeu, malheureux=en amour.

The same kind of liaison may be also found between the present participle and its following complements as the following examples will show:

en allant=à Paris, en parlant=avec ma mère;
ployant=et déployant, regardant=et rêvant.

For the most part, however, these liaisons are no longer made in ordinary conversation or informal style, and some of them would only be encountered in very formal style, such as formal readings and recitations. It is generally agreed that the traditional forms of liaison are gradually disappearing from contemporary French usage.

5. The Phonology of Liaison

The phenomena of liaison, of deletion of final schwa, and of the so-called aspirated h form a complex that has attracted a great deal of attention in phonological theory in recent years. One of the earliest attempts to deal with these problematic elements was that of Schane (1968) who, following the fashion set by Chomsky and Halle (1967), simply presented fundamental features of the phonological history as an operative synchronic phonology. Using details of the historical phonology as an "abstract" synchronic phonology gave rise to the abstractness controversy and the eventual charge that such abstract phonology, having no empirical base, was of doubtful value. The last ten years in particular have seen a movement toward more concrete underlying representations, and under the banner of Natural Generative Phonology a movement towards a phonology that may be considered realistic, a working model of natural processes.

Further progress has been made in recent years in the development of a phonology that recognizes the syllable as a different level from the phoneme. This move is to be welcomed, since there are many problems that are either insoluble or else lead to false conclusions if one takes a purely segmental approach. Within the framework of CV phonology, for example, we have had interesting and persuasive analyses of these problematical elements of French phonology, including liaison. Thus Clements and Keyser (1983) represent the silent final consonant of an adjective such as petit as being extra-syllabic, that is, as not belonging to the fundamental CVCV structure of the base word. This extrasyllabic consonant may, however, make use of the initial vowel of the following word to form a syllable that bridges the two words. French phonologists of all kinds are generally agreed that liaison constitutes such a syllable.

The phonologists, however, neglected to consider the constraints that we have examined: the obligatory liaisons, the forbidden liaisons, and the liaisons that are optional. Many of them apparently

take it for granted that liaison is a regular phonological phenomenon: Klausenburger, for example, cites Jean est ici as an example of the maintenance of nasalization (of Jean) when liaison occurs (1978:34), seemingly unaware that liaison between Jean and the following verb is not permitted in the first case, so that the possibility of affecting the nasalization never arises.

From the data of our brief survey, however, we may note the interlacing relationship of phonology and syntax: where there is a very tight dependency relationship between two words, the phonology allows us to build the bridge of a syllable between them, thus phonologically marking their close syntactic relationship. When there is no immediate relationship between the two words, and when the dependency relationship is at one remove or more, the possibility of building this syllabic bridge is rejected. And thirdly, when there is a syntactic relationship of dependency between the two elements, but this is not a tightly knit or rigid one, the possibility of building this syllabic bridge remains an option for the speaker.

6. Conclusion

The phenomenon of liaison in French is not easy to describe, and still more difficult to explain. Many linguists have attempted phonological explanations, with varying degrees of success, but few have realized that liaison is not only a phonological, but also a syntactic phenomenon. We have attempted to show that liaison is in fact a phonological marker of a close syntactic relationship between words, and that where this close syntactic relationship does not exist, liaison will not be made, even if the phonological conditions exist for it. From these observations it follows that liaison is an important phenomenon for the study of syntax, since it marks the degree of syntactic relationship between adjoining words, thereby presenting a variety of interesting evidence on the nature of syntactic dependencies.

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