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ABDOU SALIM:
French and English Noun Phrases

Spring 1991

A CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS BETWEEN

THE FRENCH NOUN PHRASE AND

THE ENGLISH NOUN PHRASE

.....
ABDOU SALIM

Senior Honors Thesis
.....

Director: Dr. Jeoffrey. S. Nathan

INTRODUCTION

Although the intensive study of linguistic structures and the comparison of grammatical systems have been around for quite a long time, it still is difficult to recognize that language is part of ourselves and our own thinking. It is mostly when we hear someone-else speak, especially when we hear a foreigner make a mistake that we realize that language is dependent to us culturally, socially and personally.

However, language itself is a very complex system. It is characterized by external and internal features. first, it tells us something about the people who speak it and and their relationship with the outer world. Then a careful examination shows that each language is composed of various and unique elements that are divided up in several ways. One category of these elements is the whole combination of sounds we produce when we communicate. Another category is the hierarchical structure in which sounds are grouped together into words and from words to phrases and latter sentences.

In this paper, I will closely analyse one constituent of both the English and the French languages, which is the noun phrase. The aim of my work is not, of course, a complete analysis of the noun phrase which can be as complex as one wishes to make it. I will rather focus mainly on the " simple noun phrase". My discussion will be

on: a) the constituents of both the English and the French noun phrases.

b) the similarities and differences in structures and other important features.

I. THE NOUN PHRASE

For the purpose of identification, it is perhaps better to start with a definition of what a noun phrase is. Generally, a phrase is defined as " a sequence of words that can function as a constituent in the structure of sentences (Burton-Roberts, 1986:19)". However, the constituents that can be used for the formation of a sentence are of various kinds. A noun phrase is only one of them. A noun phrase is in fact a phrase that contains and is centered on a noun. For instance,

Her rather pleasant face

is a noun phrase and it contains the noun face as the main constituent. Still, one can easily ask why the phrase as a whole has to be the same category as face. The reason is that face functions as the main element of the noun phrase or, as other people would call it, the head of the noun phrase. Of course, a noun phrase may contain more than one noun, but only one noun in a noun phrase can function as its head. The distinction between the head and the remaining elements of the noun phrase is that the head noun is obligatory. The other elements can be omitted. When we say that a noun phrase consists of a head noun and other secondary elements and that the secondary elements are typically optional, it automatically follows that a noun can consist just of a head noun. This observation is true in

English as well as in French. In both languages, a noun phrase may consist of a single noun or a sequence of various elements headed by a noun.

The recognition of nouns and noun phrases in French and in English raises no major practical problems for many people. A noun in French is most often translated by a noun in English and often the accompanying modifying elements show a lot of similarities. However, this facade of similarity conceals many deep differences between the two languages. The study of French nouns, for instance, cannot be isolated from that of the noun modifiers of various kinds. In other words, the noun has to be examined within the framework of the constructions in which it occurs. If we leave aside for the time being the sub-class of proper nouns, it is very rare for a noun in French to occur alone. Especially when it fills grammatical functions on the level of the sentence or a clause, such as a subject or an object, the noun occurs as part of a noun phrase comprising a minimum of two elements of which the noun is the head. The minimum noun phrase is usually made up of two elements which are also found in more complex noun phrases. The first element is a specifier, which may be a determiner or a numeral. The second element of the noun phrase is the noun which may be accompanied by an adjective. The adjective certainly differs from the noun in that it does not have as its primary function the role of head, but is generally subordinated to the head.

a) TYPES OF NOUN PHRASE CONSTRUCTIONS

Although the noun phrase requires a certain element, such as the noun, to distinguish it from other phrases, there is no limit on the number of words or constituents that can be used to make a noun phrase. Both English and French accept a single noun, most often a proper name, to function as a noun phrase.

English: John, Peter, Katie, Chicago, etc., may occur alone as noun phrases.

French: Jean, Pierre, Katherine, Paris, etc., may also occur alone as noun phrases.

Most common nouns can be accompanied by any kind of modifying word and together form a noun phrase of two constituents. As already stated, the noun functions as the head of the noun phrase. The most common constituents that accompany a noun both in English and French in a two elements noun phrase are noun specifiers. These are determiners,

English: The book, this girl

French: Le livre, cette fille
and numerals.

English: one book, some girls

French: un livre, quelques filles

All these types of noun phrases are known as minimal noun phrases. In some circumstances, the two kinds of

specifiers, that is the determiner and the numeral, can appear in the same noun phrase, thus creating a noun phrase of three elements.

English: the two books, the two girls

French: les deux livres, les deux filles

The three element noun phrases appear also in other forms. Often, the head noun may be expanded by the addition of one or more modifying adjectives. Generally, in English, the adjective precedes the noun head. However, in French, the adjective precedes the noun in some cases but more often follows it.

English: the beautiful painting

French: le joli tableau or le tableau rouge

Finally, there are attached to the noun phrase and following it various kinds of modifiers or complements. These may be juxtaposed or obligatory elements following the noun head. They may also be complete phrases introduced by a verbal form, a present or past participle or even whole clauses or sentences.

English: a sport car

a city devastated by the gulf war

the man I saw at school

French: une voiture sport.

une ville devastee par la guerre du golf

l'homme que j'ai vu a l'école

All these examples show us that from a structural point of

view, both English and French have an unlimited number of noun phrases and that the English noun phrase is not strangely different from its French counterpart. English has the specifiers and numerals that occur in places parallel to those of French. A difference, however, appears with regard to the adjective position in the noun phrase in French. Contrary to English, an adjective may occur after the head noun in French. There are only a few adjectives in English that follow the noun and these occur in the so-called frozen expressions. Example:

English: Attorney General

These structural similarities do not tell us all about English and French noun phrases. In order to get a clear sense of the similarities and differences between the English and the French noun phrases, we shall turn to the internal organisation of the noun phrase.

II. ELEMENTS OF THE NOUN PHRASE

We can proceed to an examination of the various types of words that constitute the noun phrase.

A. NOUNS

Functioning as the head of the noun phrase, a noun has not been linguistically easy to define both in English and French. Many linguists attempted to give a practical

definition of the noun, that is by a complete list of characteristics that distinguish the class of nouns from all other parts of speech. For instance, nouns can be recognized by the fact that they follow articles and by the fact that they have a contrast in form between the singular and the plural. As a matter of fact, nouns are preceded by articles and show some contrast of form between singular and plural. However, these observations tell us little about how to recognize nouns. There is no doubt that the presence of articles and plural endings help in the recognition of nouns, both in English and French, but these clues are not sufficient enough for recognizing nouns. Other words besides nouns follow articles and do occasionally end with s . For example, in the phrase " the bad boys", the in front of bad does not make bad a noun. Similarly, in the French phrase "le mauvais garcon, mauvais is not a noun although preceded by an article. Likewise, we can recognize the presence of a plural ending if we know that the thing is a noun because there are other words besides nouns that end sometimes with s. In order to better comprehend the nouns the way they differ from other constituents of the noun phrase, both in English and in French, we shall turn to some special features of the noun.

a) ELEMENTS OF THE NOUN

1) Gender

Among the features that always accompany the noun is gender. It, in fact, serves as an important characteristic relating the noun and the words which modify it.

First, In French gender serves as an obligatory feature of the noun. Every French noun substantive is characterized by the fact that it is necessarily a member of one of the two classes of gender referred to traditionally as masculine or feminine. As Pierre duBois and Rene' Lagane explained:

"masculine refers to the nouns which can be preceded by the specifiers le and un "

" Feminine refers to the nouns which can be preceded by the specifiers la and une "

(1987:45)

The terms masculine and feminine often confuse many people because they suggest a relationship with sex, that is male and female. Of course, there is, in French, for some words a relationship between gender class and sex, but this parallelism is rather limited. Most nouns which denote living creatures of determinable sex exist in pairs: one masculine and the other feminine.

French: chat - chatte

lion - lionne

chien- chienne

For the most nouns of the French language, especially those designating inanimate things, gender does not have anything to do with their sex. Gender is only used as a grammatical feature and an inherent characteristic of the noun.

French: une tasse (a cup)
un verre (a glass)

Une tasse (meaning a cup in French) used as a feminine noun in French has nothing feminine on it. Similarly, un verre (meaning a glass) is used as a masculine and has nothing masculine on it. Furthermore, we find substantives like sentinelle, recrue, which are both feminine gender but referring sometimes to male beings. Also words like Professeur, auteur, ecrivain are always grammatically masculine even when they refer to a woman exercising these professions. In short, gender, in French, is an arbitrary, conventional aspect for the most part and has to be learned for each noun along with its form and meaning. In order to use a French noun correctly, it is essential to know to which gender class a given noun belongs because the noun as a rule does not carry within itself the sign of its gender. This feature is often shown by the form of the noun modifiers accompanying it.

In contrast to French, English has no counterpart for gender. In reality, English substantives do not

automatically belong to gender classes. As Leonard explained:

" Gender in modern English is not a very grammatical property from that which belongs to most inflected languages. The office of gender forms in English is to show sex. Yet in general grammar, gender is usually a matter of the form of the word and its agreement with other words, and seems only remotely with the idea of sex". (1907: 79)

Despite all of this, some people still persist in believing that English has gender. Pence, for instance, stated that gender is that property of a noun which usually makes evident the sex of the object represented by the noun. For him, English should have four genders.

1. Masculine: " A noun referring to a being of the male sex or thought of as of the male sex is said to be in the masculine gender". Example: boy, man...
2. Feminine: " A noun referring to a being of the female sex or thought of as of the female sex is said to be in the feminine gender". Example: girl, cow...
3. Neuter: " A noun referring to an object without life is said to be in neuter gender". Example: sky...

4. Common: " A noun referring to a being which may be either male or female is said to be in common gender".

Example: child, relative...

(1947: 169)

The truth about these genders expressed by Pence is that they are different from the French genders. These are what we can call natural genders. If we are to accept that English has genders related to the sex of the thing being thought of, it will become necessary to admit that French, on the other hand, that French has two genders. One would be a natural gender like the English one mentioned by Pence and the other would be a grammatical one which does not exist in English.

2) Number

The second grammatical feature characteristic to the noun and to which the principle of agreement may apply is that of number. Number is that property of a noun that indicates whether the noun names one person or one thing or more. French, like English, distinguishes grammatically between singular and plural. Like gender, the number is also obligatory in French. In French, substantives are singular when the object in question is considered as a single unit. They are, on the other hand, plural if considered as two or more units. Although both French and English share the same the same numbers, the way they express them is quite

different. In French, the expression of number carried within the form of the noun itself is very rare. Most French nouns keep the same spoken form with respect to the feature of number, that is when singular and plural, the pronunciation of the noun does not change.

French: la femme /fam/ (singular)
les femmes /fam/ (plural)

but the nouns always change their written form.

French: un oeil (singular)
deux yeux (plural)

In addition, contrary to the gender, which is a permanent characteristic of any French noun, the number is not permanent. This is also true of the English nouns. It can change with regard to the way one uses the noun.

Contrary to the French language, in English the expression of number is closely attached to the substantive itself. It is usually expressed in the form of a sibilant suffix. Example: boys /boiz/ or by a vowel alternation within the noun.

English: man
men

In English there is also a parallelism between spelling and speech with respect to the expression of number. A written number mark correspond to a spoken number mark.

English: boy /boi/
boys /boiz/

In French this is very unusual. the written plural markers (which are _s or _x) do not correspond to an orally expressed marker. Pairs of words like homme /om/ and hommes /om/ are pronounced identically.

The disagreement between the two languages with respect to number can also be found in words which are designated by plural in English and singular in French.

English:

French:

Jeans (plural)

un jean (singular)

trousers

un pantalon

the middle ages

le moyen age

These differences between French and English with regard to number do not, however, put a line of demarcation between them. Both languages seem to have similarities especially when number is related to a natural and unique thing. When talking about the sun, the moon, the ocean, etc., both languages use the singular only. There are also nouns like moeurs (French) and morals or customs (English) in which the plural is the correct way in both languages. In short, number represents both similarities and differences.

3) Countable and uncountable nouns

Another important feature of the noun found in both French and English is that some nouns can be used both in the singular and the plural and others can be used only in the singular. The first group is known as countable nouns

and the latter uncountable or mass nouns. The difference between countable and uncountable is inherent within the noun, that is some nouns are countable and some are uncountable and one has to know which is which. French and English use almost the same criteria to distinguish countable from uncountable nouns, but with minor differences. First both French and English agree that a countable noun can be put in plural while an uncountable noun cannot. In addition, in French as well as in English some nouns can be either countable or uncountable with a change in meaning or value.

French: le veau est dans le champs (veau is countable)

J'ai mangé du veau (veau is uncountable)

English: Tea is good for your health (tea is uncountable)

The tea is over (tea is countable)

Although both the French and the English languages use common criteria with regard to the distinction between countable and uncountable nouns, some contrasts still exist. Contrary to English which uses most uncountable nouns without an article, French uncountable nouns are always preceded by a specifier. The fact that a noun cannot be used in plural is what counts the most.

French: la curiosité est une maladie

English: / curiosity is a disease

In French, when the same noun is used in plural, it is no longer an uncountable noun even if it conserves its original meaning. The difference between the use of countable and

uncountable noun can be found in the way the two languages use

them. A French countable noun is not automatically a countable noun in English. There is a number of nouns which are countable in French but uncountable or mass nouns in English. Words like hair, information among many are treated as uncountable in English while the French consider them as countable (hair = les cheveux; information = les informations)

From the discussion above, we can conclude that each language treats the features associated with the noun on its unique way. But parallelism between the two languages exist. Among the three features mentioned, gender presents the major differences between French and English. The grammatical gender found in French does not exist at all in English.

B. NOUN SPECIFIERS

Let us begin with the specifiers, which are of two kinds: determiners and numerals. In general, the presence of a member of the definite determiner class in the noun phrase serves to mark definiteness. Its absence indicates the opposite, that is indefiniteness. Naturally, a noun phrase introduced by a numeral specifier is indefinite. The numeral indicates the number of units of the substantive involved or simply marks an indeterminate number. In some languages like French, a specifier in a noun phrase is so important because a French noun or noun phrase is necessarily either definite or indefinite.

a) The determiners

Interestingly, the determiners regularly occupy the initial position in the noun phrase in both French and English. They generally specify the substantive to which they are subordinate as well as the entire noun phrase. The determiners form a relatively small class of mutually exclusive terms standing in close relation one with another. That is, the occurrence of any given determiner excludes the presence of another in the same noun phrase. This is in fact a reality in French as well as in English. The determiners are as follows: the definite article (le in French, the in English); the demonstratives (ce in French, this or that in English)

the possessives (mon, ton, son, notre, votre, leur in French and my, yours, his, our, their in English) and the interrogative determiners (quel, lequel in French, What, which, whose in English). To these can be added the French partitive specifier du (des, de la) which constitutes a special case since it behaves like a determiner but stands in close relationship with the numerals.

1. The Definite Article

Among the most commonly used determiners is what is traditionally called the "definite article". In English, the definite article is expressed by the while in French it is le. The French definite article has three forms: le if it accompanies a masculine noun, la if it accompanies a feminine noun or les if it accompanies a plural noun.

The definite article is the most frequently occurring of the determiners both in French and English. Its usual function is to indicate that the noun or noun phrase is already known to the speaker. Sometimes, it indicates that the noun is already mentioned in the course of the communication or is present in the mind of the speaker, that is something is definite or identified. This aspect of the definite article is similar both in French and English. However, there are a number of cases in which the two languages deviate.

First in French, " the article is automatically part of the noun or noun phrase" as Jean Dubois has pointed it out (1987:57). Many languages, including English, have many grammatical cases in which the definite article is omitted. In French, this happens rarely. English, for instance, in a number of cases employs nothing while French requires the definite article. Thus:

<u>French:</u>	<u>English:</u>
Il aime <u>la</u> vie	He loves life
L' amour est naturelle	Love is natural

French nouns used with collective or generic meaning, that is referring to the totality of whatever the noun signifies, are preceded by the definite article. English does not use the definite article.

<u>French:</u>	<u>English:</u>
<u>La</u> guerre est un malheur	War is a misfortune
J'aime <u>les</u> chiens	I love dogs

Likewise, many words designating generally something uncountable may occur without the definite article the in English but not in French. In addition to this, there are some cases in which French uses the definite article while English uses a possessive adjective. For instance, it is usual to say:

<u>French:</u>	<u>English:</u>
Il a perdu <u>la</u> memoire	He lost <u>his</u> memory

It seems like this usage is frequent with nouns that designate objects whose possession is more or less parts of the human body, such as leg, hand, memory etc. From these examples, one can easily say that the omission of the definite article is not as frequent in French as it is in English. This, however, does not mean that in French there are no cases where the definite article is not expressed. These cases exist, but they are rather limited. Similar to English, French does not use the definite article with a proper name, or a noun of a city or river. Example:

French:

Pierre visite Paris

In French, the determiner is not also expressed if the noun is in apposition (Jean dubois 1987: 59).

French:

Paris, capitale de la France

Also if the noun is used as an adjective, the article is not used. Example:

French:

Bob est ingénieur (Jean Dubois 1987: 59).

Consequently, we can say that, in the French noun phrase, the absence of a specifier cannot serve as in English as a sort of specifier in itself.

2. The Demonstratives

The demonstratives this and that are used to identify something by pointing at it. They have the meaning of definiteness plus that of indicating something. Contrary to English which has two demonstratives, French has only one such determiner: ce.

The English demonstrative this implies that the thing being talked about is near the speaker or both the speaker and the hearer. Opposite to this is that which implies relative remoteness. For instance, when one says "that pen", the pen can be in the hand of the person addressed or at a distance or simply no longer in existence. Contrary to the English definite article which does not change, the demonstratives change their forms when the noun they occur with is in plural. This becomes these and that changes to those.

English:

this book these books

that book those books

Similar to English demonstratives, the French demonstrative ce can change its form to cet, cette, or ces. The choice between ce and cet in French depends on the noun that follows the demonstrative. If the noun begins with a consonant, ce is used. However, if the noun initiates with a vowel, cet is the only choice. Example:

French:

Ce chateau

Cet enfant

Since French nouns are marked by the gender variation, the demonstrative accompanying the noun changes also its form. When the noun is of feminine gender, ce becomes cette. Similarly, in plural, the French use ces. What seem to be missing in the French demonstratives is the two kinds of demonstratives found in English indicating closeness and remoteness. The French language does have a way of expressing the same idea, but it takes one of two particles -ci and -la placed after the noun to the same thing. -Ci placed after the noun indicates what is near the speaker and -la after the noun indicates what is further, spatially or psychologically, from the speaker.

French:

Ce livre-ci

Ce livre-la

In this kind of context, the meaning of the respective expressions corresponds closely to that of English this and that. But this distinction is really made only when ce...ci and ce...la are used in the same sentence to contrast two things.

3. The Possessives

The possessive determiners are some of the complex determiners both in French and English. " the function most characteristically performed by possessives is the pronounal of determiner within nounal headed units. Used as determiners, possessives indicate that identification is specific and complete. Sometimes, they identify on the basis of ownership (Long 1961:240)". In general, the possessives have the meaning of definiteness plus the relation to person. Three grammatically relevant persons are distinguished in the use of possessives: 1) the person or persons speaking, 2) the person or persons addressed , and 3) all other people excluding the speaker and the hearer, that is third person. Because of the possessive's complexity, let us limit our discussion mainly to the differences between the French possessive determiners and their English counterparts.

The French possessive determiners are: mon, ton, son, ma, ta, sa, notre, votre, leur, mes, tes, ses, nos, vos, leurs. These French determiners, variable words, agree in gender and number with the noun they specify. They are used according to the gender and number of the noun. Example:

French:

Mon livre

Ma femme

Mes livres

As mentioned in the discussion about gender, the possessive agreement with regard to gender has no relation with the sex of the possessor. The relation is solely grammatical. Contrary to French, the English possessive determiners are generally invariable with respect to the noun they accompany.

English:

My book

My table

My books

However, there exists a variation with the possessives his, her and its. This variation is often referred to as a distinction of gender. Actually, the reference in this case is to the sex of the possessor, a feature not directly expressed by the French possessive determiners. For instance, the French noun phrase son prix may mean in English:

His price

her price

its price

This difference in gender does not occur only with the possessive determiner but rather appears in every instance in which English shows gender. In addition to the differences between the two languages, there are also some similarities. French like English always

distinguishes between the individual possessor and the group possessor. Mon like my denotes one individual while notre and its English counterpart our denote a group, specially the speaker plus one or more person. This is part of the meaning the various possessive determiners and is of course different from the grammatical agreement in number.

4. The "WH" determiners

The "wh" determiners are somewhat different from the other specifiers. They are, in fact, variations of one specifier. In French it is quel (translated in English by which, what and even whose). The French determiner quel does not have the same clearcut connotation of definiteness as some other determiners. Its use generally requires some kind of specification or supplement of information. Although it covers almost the same range of meaning as English what and which, its form does not change. For instance:

French:

Quelle maison?

Quelles langues parlez-vous?

English:

Which house?

What languages do
you speak?

Used here as an interrogative determiner, the specifier quel can also be used as an exclamative determiner. It retains the same form as the interrogative determiner and

is used in sentences expressing surprises, admiration etc. Like the interrogative determiner, the exclamative counterpart occurs without any other determiner. This in fact works only in French but not English. Example:

French:

Quel homme!

English:

What a man!

The French determiner quel can also be used in some particular or rather specific cases. as Jean Dubois explained " quel is sometimes preceded or attached to the definite article le- and it stands as a relative determiner (1987:69)". This usage is mostly found in administrative or literal style.

French:

Je lui ai adresse' une lettre recommandee', laquelle lettre ne lui a jamais e'te' remise (I sent him a registered letter which he did not receive).

This typical use of the determiner quel does also exist in English. For instance the same English sentence can be written:

English:

I sent him a registered letter which letter he did not receive.

b) The Numeral Specifiers

The numeral specifiers form the second class of

specifiers. They generally denote the number of units of the nouns they refer to. The numerals can be classified into two main categories: the numbers or countable numerals like one, two, three (French un, deux, trois and the indefinite numerals like several or some. The numerals do not stand in a mutually exclusive relation with the determiners but may generally coexist with one of them in a noun phrase. Example:

French:

Les deux filles

English:

The two girls

In this case, the numerals always follow the determiner. However, the numeral may occur alone introducing the noun phrase. Let us examine some of those cases.

1. The Indefinite Article

The most frequently employed numeral specifier is the so-called indefinite article. With regard to the usage of the indefinite article, there is no much difference between English and French. In both languages, the indefinite article does stand in mutually exclusive relation with the definite article. In English a does not occur in the same noun phrase with the; the same in French un (or une) does not occur in the same noun phrase with le. The only difference between English and French

with regard to the indefinite article is that the French article un (or une depending on the gender of the noun) can be translated into English by one. And one is different from the indefinite articles a, an by the formal differences between the forms. This makes the English article more variable than the French one. In French there is only one variable word: un-une. However, the pronunciation of the French indefinite article un presents, as Grundstrom noted, a variation of forms which shows its respect to the French linking rules (1983:85). For example, the French indefinite article can be pronounced:

<u>Before a consonant</u>	<u>Before a vowel</u>
Un /œ̃/	/œ̃h/

2. The Quantifiers

Generally, the quantifiers are of several types. They all indicate the number of units of whatever the noun phrase they refer to. For the most part, the French and English numbering systems are not different. However, there are some minor differences between the two languages that merit some attention. Contrary to English which does not have variable quantifiers, French has a number of quantifiers that are variable words. In French, these numerals have up to three variant forms in speech. However, the written forms is always the same. For example, the French numeral trois (meaning three) can be pronounced as:

<u>Before a consonant</u>	<u>Before a vowel</u>	<u>Before a pause</u>
Trois /trwa/	/trwaz/	/trwa/

These variations found in French with respect to the quantifiers do not exist in English. For example, the numeral three /θri:/ does not vary regardless of the linguistic environment it occurs in.

In addition to these numbers, French and English have some indefinite numerals. The indefinite numerals usually quantify without furnishing specific numeral values like the numbers. They also precede the noun they modify and may introduce the noun phrase without being preceded by another determiner. Some, however, can be preceded by other determiners. For instance, the French indefinite numerals divers and différents may occur alone or be preceded by a determiner. Example:

French:

Diverses personnes...or...Les diverses personnes

Différentes personnes...or..Les différentes.....

These indefinite quantifiers have multiple values in French. Divers and différents may also occur after the noun. Example:

French:

Des mouvements divers

Des costumes différents

In this context, these indefinite quantifiers function as adjectives. Of course, this does not happen in English. The quantifiers, especially the French ones, are so numerous that we cannot deal with all of them in here. Following is a small list of them:

<u>French:</u>	<u>English:</u>
quelque (es)	some
chaque	each
beaucoup	many/a lot of
maint	many
tout	any/all
certain	a certain
tel	such/any

C) ADJECTIVES

Besides the specifiers, adjectives are the second most important elements that accompany nouns to form noun phrases. In general, there is not much difference between French and English with regard to adjectives, however, two aspects merit to be mentioned. These are adjective agreement and adjective position.

a) Adjective Agreement

Adjective agreement is a typically French aspect. In French, the adjective agrees in gender and number with the noun it modifies. It is sometimes possible for one adjective to refer to two or more nouns joined in the

noun phrase. If the nouns are of the same gender, the adjective agreement is with that gender. If the nouns are not all of the same gender, it is the masculine gender that is used. Example:

French:

Une jambe et un bras humains

Stylistically, it is desirable for the masculine noun to be placed closest to the adjective particularly when this latter element varies in gender. English, of course, lacks this gender agreement.

One thing that happens in both French and English is that " there are a number of adjectives that can be used as singular nouns in French and in English (Swam and Smith 1987:53)". Example, the adjective poor can be used as a noun. French: "le pauvre"; English: "the poor". Although some people may argue that these types of sentences are incomplete or rather elliptic- that is a word is left out- , the construction is acceptable in both languages.

b) Adjective Position

In English, the position of the adjective within the noun phrase could be described as fixed. It always occupies the place between the specifier and the noun. If the noun does not contain a specifier, the adjective

stays in that position, that is, precedes the noun. In French, things are sometimes a little bit different.

In French, the adjective is generally placed contiguous to the substantive, but may either precede or follow the noun head. The position following the noun is certainly much more frequent; it is the place occupied not only by the majority of adjectives, but also by most words or phrases other than specifiers which modify the noun or the noun phrase. Example:

French:

Un homme intelligent

La bombe atomique

Une chambre neuve

However, French has a small number of adjectives, many of which are in very frequent use, which very often occur before the noun they modify. These are adjectives like beau, grand, jeune, petit, vieux, bon, pauvre,

...etc. Example:

French:

Un pauvre homme

Un petit lapin

Sometimes a difference of position with these specific adjectives corresponds to a different meaning. Example:

French:

Un homme pauvre (this person has no money)

Un pauvre homme (this person may be rich but stirs
pity)

It is also the case that quite often there is not clearcut significant difference. Generally in French, the position of the adjective is sometimes a question of style. The lengths of the adjective and the substantive are often considered to play a role, the short element appearing first. Example:

French:

Un long marche

Une aventure extraordinaire

Some people suggest also that the position of the adjective is correlated to the meaning being conveyed. When the adjective precede the noun, the quality it denotes generally is felt to intimately bound to the meaning expressed by the noun and often has a strong quality. When the adjective follows, the quality denoted has a more neutral connotation (Jean Dubois 1987:109).

French:

Une extraordinaire aventure (adjective emphasized)

Une aventure extraordinaire (not truly emphasized)

Another construction that presents huge differences between French and English is when two adjectives are used in the same noun phrase. As Swam and Smith pointed out " in a series of two or more adjectives, French puts et (and) before the last one (1987:53)". Example:

French:

Une courte et rouge robe

Sometimes the French elect not to use the conjunction et and rather put the first adjective before the noun and the second after the noun. Example:

French:

Une belle robe jaune

Une bonne methode linguistique

English, on the other hand, can use the two adjectives before the noun without a linking element. Of course, the use of a coordinating element is a possibility, but it can also work without it.

CONCLUSION

Although the title of this short paper reads "contrastive analysis between the French noun phrase and the English noun phrase", its content is short of a complete analysis of the noun phrase. As I have explained in the introduction, the noun phrase is very complex and for this reason, I have limited my analysis to three main elements of the noun phrase: the noun, the noun specifiers and the adjectives. The three elements are part of the simple noun phrase in both French and English.

What the analysis has shown us is that the French noun phrase and the English noun phrase present both similarities and differences. Structurally, the French noun phrase is similar to its English counterpart. They both can contain the same elements and are always headed by the noun. Functioning as the head, the noun does not present major differences between the two languages, except the notion of grammatical gender which can be said to be typically French. With regard to the noun specifiers, few differences exist between the two languages. The same can be said for the adjectives. However, in French, the adjectives are known to agree in gender and number with the noun they modify.

In short, I can say that there are more similarities

than differences between the French noun phrase and the English noun phrase.

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