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When analogy supplants interference in the syntactic constructions of non-native learners of FLE

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Abstract :
We started from the observation that many errors often qualified as interference errors find their origin and their explanation in phenomena that can be qualified rather as analogies with other forms of the language of learning (in our case French for essentially Arabic-speaking learners). In fact, in the gray area, between syntactic interference and analogy, there are many cases of prepositional usage errors that should be explained.Example :*contacter* vs *communiquer*(*contacter avec quelqu'un /*communiquer* avec quelqu'un) due to the semantic similarities between the two French verbs *contacter*and *communiquer*which enter into different defining syntactic constructions (see LADL tables)than to the similarities with native language verbs.
Keywords: Error analysis, FFL, Non-native learners, Prepositional uses, Syntactic errors.

Introduction

The main reason that prompted us to carry out this study was the finding that in several previous studies dealing with the issue of verbal complementation among Arabic-speaking learners of FFL, the potential causes of syntactic errors have not been a priority. We have often been content to describe them as such in relation to the attested constructions. In this presentation, and with a view to initiating more in-depth research in this area, we will try to focus on the potential reasons and factors favoring these errors. Obviously, talking about verbal complementation among learners in difficulty inevitably leads us to discuss the inappropriate use of prepositions.

These are in fact inappropriate uses that have often posed problems in terms of their explanation. In fact, we find that in many studies dealing with the subject, they have either been taken too lightly, as was indeed the case with Guy Fève (1985), or else; we are simply content to consider them as being the pure fruit of the interference of the mother tongue, namely Arabic. We believe that very little has been taken the risk of venturing further into their explanation, perhaps because of the risks of ramifications that this may imply, or perhaps even just because of the lack of mastery(by researchers often foreign to the Arabic language) of the grammatical rules of the Arabic language.

Given this, we have seen that it would be very judicious to look into it and see closely what parameters could be involved and thus hope to arrive at much more convincing explanations compared to what we already know.

Indeed, in many cases where the lexico-syntactic analogy is latent, the semantic rapprochement with the corresponding lexical units in Arabic often gives the impression that these are pure interference errors, but the problem is much deeper than it seems to be.

In fact, in most cases, it is rare that syntactic interference alone can categorically explain an erroneous use of a preposition. Generalizations made by learners and confusions with structures in the target language often overlap with this. Example : *contacter* vs *communiquer* (*contacteravec quelqu'un/*communiceravec* quelqu'un). At first glance, it would seem that this is a simple error of interference of Arabic language, and yet, this would be due much more to the semantic similarities between the two French verbs *contacter* and *communiquer* which also enter into different defining syntactic constructions (GROSS M. and LECLERE Ch. 1992).

In this article, we will try to shed a little more light on this type of error that has so far remained very little investigated. In fact, these are errors that are often difficult to classify. To remedy this, we felt that it would be very judicious to highlight them in order to better understand the mechanisms that underlie them, and therefore, predict them in advance in order to take them into account later in FFL teaching/learning situations.

As for the theoretical framework that will serve as a reference for judging the conformity of the various syntactic constructions selected, we have opted for the lexicon-grammar of Maurice Gross (GROSS M. and LECLERE Ch.1992) and his Laboratory of Documentary and Linguistic Automation (LADL). It is, in fact, a theoretical apparatus set up to account for all possible syntactic constructions in French. It is the fruit of laborious and meticulous work spanning decades (starting in the 1960s) which makes it, in our opinion, the perfect tool for linguistic analysis in French because, in addition to being known for its rigor, exhaustiveness and objectivity in description, it takes into account, in another respect, all syntactic variables in French. In our case, it allows us to verify the distributional and transformational properties of the statement (BOONS Jean-Paul, GUILLET Alain, LECLERE Christian 1976a). We must bear in mind that each of these properties must be associated with the two other variables which are the lexical elements and the structural elements. From there, our analysis will focus precisely on the analysis of the properties that have not been respected in the unattested constructions of the learners.

In another respect, and given that we are working on the errors of foreign language learners, it seemed to us very judicious to use error analysis as a reference analysis tool (PERDUE C. 1980).

This will allow us, in a first step, to understand the communicative strategies of our learners, and at another level, it will also allow us to shed light on properties of the language that have not yet been sufficiently described in our humble opinion.

Regarding the practical aspect of our study, we will say that through the in-depth analysis of our learners' syntactic errors, we seek to uncover regularities among them. Then, we must question ourselves about the attitude to take towards these errors in a teaching/learning situation. An attitude that should not be content to consider them as violations of the norm or as sins to be blamed, but an attitude that will rather try to understand them in order to better correct them in real teaching/learning situations.

Finally, for the purposes of this study, we have chosen some examples of errors in the use of prepositions that we have noted in written productions by students of the French department (University of M'sila).

In what follows, we will try to see how factors related to analogy with the structures of the target language are superimposed on those related to the mother tongue in the erroneous uses of our learners. We will find, among other things, many syntactic errors that have often been wrongly described as pure interference errors.

1. Morphological and lexico-semantic relationships between verbs in the same language.

We have been able to observe that for many cases that are often described as syntactic interferences, the similarities between the semantic properties of certain verbs in French are superimposed on the first ones and thus further complicate the task for learners.

This was the case for the examples (01, 02, 03 and 04) where the confusion is mainly between the verb s'intéresse à, on the one hand, and the verb s'intéresse de, on the other hand. These are in fact two verbs that are very closely related semantically, but which enter into very diverse syntactic definition tables. Here, it is the confusion of the combinatorial properties of the two verbs in question that must be highlighted:

1. *L'enseignant doit s'intéresser _de_ l'apprenant.
2. *L'état s'intéresse_de_ la protection du peuple.
3. *La syntaxe ne *s'intéresse* pas _de_ la phonétique.
4. *Les femmes *s'intéressent _de_* la cuisine.

In second place, in our opinion, comes the influence of the structures of the mother tongue. We say this based on the fact that the two verbs in question are rendered in Arabic by the same verb yahtamu (bi). Namely, the Arabic preposition bi is often rendered in French by the preposition *à*.

This is also the case in the example (07, 08 and 09) but this time with different verbs. In fact, in all the examples that we are going to propose, the learner would probably tend first to confuse the syntactic properties of two French verbs that he considers semantically as synonyms:

First, the verbs*contacter* qqn *vs communiquer _avec_*qqn:
5.   * L'être humain est capable de *contacter_avec_* les autres

Then, the verbs*épouser* qqn et *se marier _avec_*qqn :
6.   * Le but du prince c'est d'épouser_avec_ la princesse.

Finally, the verbs*s'habituer* à qqn/qqch vs *se familiariser _avec_* qqn/qqch
7. *Comme ça, l'enfant va *s'habituer_avec_* l'école.

As in the previous cases, here again the connection with the supposedly corresponding verbs in Arabic (in order, the verbs yat'assilu, yatazawaju and yataâw'adu), comes in second position given that they all introduce their complement with the preposition *maâ*, an Arabic preposition which is often rendered in French by the preposition *avec*.

In some other cases, as in example (08),
8. *Les médias aujourd'hui *influencent _sur_* les jeunes.

The presence of analogies with the structures of the target language is felt much more clearly. Here, the learner tended to confuse the syntactic properties of two French verbs that etymologically share the same lexical root. Namely, the

verb *influencer* (direct transitive) which directly introduces its complement, and the verb *influer* (*sur*) which necessarily requires the preposition *sur* to introduce its complement. The semantic rapprochement with the supposedly corresponding verb in Arabic (the verb *yu'athiru*) is also felt because it often introduces its complement with the preposition *âla* mainly rendered in Arabic by the preposition *sur*.

2. The amalgamation *Distributionalverb* vs. *Supportverb*

We have also noted that in many cases of inappropriate choice of prepositions that are summarily described as interference errors, the confusion between distributional verb and support verb can also create confusion in the mind of the Arabic-speaking learner. To illustrate this, we would like to cite as an example the case of verbs *ressemblerà*qqn/qqch et *avoiruneressemblanceavec*qqn/qqch.

This confusion, which is very predictable, can to some extent mislead the learner and encourage him to combine the verb "*ressembler*" with the preposition "*avec*" :[**ressembleravec* quelqu'un].

9.   * L'enfant *ressemble **avec*** ses parents.

Certainly, in this example, the influence of the syntactic structure of the mother tongue is perceptible (yatachaabahumaâ), but the above-mentioned amalgamation further complicates the task for a learner who is not yet confirmed.

3. The paradigm of prepositions for the same verb

Of course, not all French verbs have the same combinatorial properties. Moreover, some verbs impose very strict constraints on the choice of the preposition that introduces their complements. As an illustration, we cite the verb *aider* which, in the case of the prepositional verbal complement, always requires the use of the preposition *à*.

Conversely, we find that there are other verbs such as the verb *vivre*, where the paradigm of choice of prepositions is clearly broader. Generally, these are verbsthatmaysometimes not have a prepositionalcomplement : [*vivre avec* des gens / *vivre dans* une société / *vivre en* couple / *vivre pour* la patrie, etc.].

We find this in example (10). Example (11) with the verb*appliquer*isalsoanother illustration : [il *applique* la méthode *à* ce problème/ il *applique* du vernis *sur* le bois, etc.].

10. * L'apprenant est un être humain qui *vit **avec*** une société.

11. * Si on *applique* la loi ***sur*** les gens, ils deviennent libres.

In some other cases, it is rather the lexical-semantic nature of the complement that limits the paradigm of choice of prepositions, going so far as to impose a specific choice. This choice is generally dictated much more by euphonic than syntactic constraints; for example: [alleren Suisse vs aller au Canada] or [émigreren Suisse vs émigrer au Canada]. This will tend to create confusion in the learner's mind, leading them to produce unattested statements such as :

  12. * Tous les Algériens veulent *aller **àla*** Suisse.

13. *Les Africains *ont émigré **à*** l'Europe pour vivre bien.

4. The syntactical flexibility of certain verbs

This phenomenon is mainly observed in the case of errors relating to omissions or the superfluous use of prepositions. This is the case here in examples (14, 15 and 16) with the verbs*changer* and *croire*. Thesetwoverbs are not very restrictive whenitcomes to the choice of prepositionsaccompanyingthem: (il a *changé* Ø des dollars en euros / il a *changéde* couleur), (il *croit* ce qu'il dit / il *croiten* Dieu / il *croitau* père Noel, etc.) :

14. * Avec le temps, La langue *change **Ø*** la structure.

15. *Comme le serpent qui *change**Ø*** la peau chaque année.

16. *L'Européen ne *croitt* pas ***Ø*** le talent de l'homme Africain.

In these examples, there are certainly traces of copying the structures of the Arabic language, but this is far from being the only explanation for the inappropriate use of the verbs in question.

5. Confusion between *Vn* (verbal noun) vs *Infinitive*

A learner who is not yet able to distinguish the syntactic differences between a Vn (verbal noun) and a verb in the infinitive form can very easily make mistakes when it comes to syntactic constructions. This is particularly true of errors in omitting prepositions, but it is not the only one.

In examples (17 and 18), we shall see that the risk of confusion between the verb *transmettre* (example: le but c'est de *transmettre*qqch) and its Vn*transmission* (example: le but c'est*latransmission* de qqch) is highly conceivable. This is a potential confusion that could lead the learner to be misled, especially as in Arabic, this distinction is not significant because, in similar cases, we tend to render the infinitive form of the French verb by a Vn (el-masdar) without needing to use a preposition:

17. * Le rôle du policier *est **Ø*** protéger les gens.

18. * La fonction du texte *est **Ø*** transmettre un message.

Another argument that reinforces our point and leads us to rule out the possibility of a pure interference error is the fact that in Arabic, the way of rendering the prepositional infinitive proposition is almost the same as in French, by using not

a Vn (el-masdar) but a verb conjugated in Mudhareâ (a bit like the equivalent of the future tense in French) preceded by the preposition an. And even if we have to use a Vn (el-masdar) in these cases, we won't need the preposition.

Example (19) provides undeniable confirmation of what we are saying. :

19. * La langue est un outil qui *permet*Ø transmettre des informations.

In this sentence - which is not attested in French-, the learner makes the mistake of not using the preposition (*de*), but if he had based himself on his Arabic substrate, he would not have omitted this prepositional use, given that in Arabic, in similar cases, the use of the preposition (*min*) is obligatory.

So if we have to talk about interference here, it will relate solely to the way in which the units are spread out over the phrase (or even to the choice of the corresponding verb in French) and not to the combinatorial rules of the verb.

Conclusion

From the examples we have just discussed, it is very clear that interference with the structures of the mother tongue is far from being the only factor that encourages prepositional usage errors in our learners. Often, the structures of the target language (French) add even more confusion to the learner's mind.

In another respect, we also note that, in most of the cases cited, syntactic errors in prepositional use are at the root of lexical choice errors; inappropriate choices which will have consequences for the syntactic constructions produced. If this means one thing, it's that the learner gives priority to meaning over syntax. This is the consequence of the methods used to teach French grammar in Algeria (with which we are familiar as learners and teachers); methods based essentially on the translation of words without taking account of their syntactic properties. A word, and more specifically a verb (the core of a sentence), is never used on its own; it is always part of a syntactic structure that obeys intrinsic laws.

As a solution to this, we propose that French grammar be taught in a much more rigorous way, where priority is given to the syntactic structure of the constructions to be taught, starting of course with the core verb of the sentence. By making an inventory of the main constructions in which a verb can be used [the defining constructions in the LADL tables] (PIOT M. 2003), we will avoid any confusion that might arise from the lexical-semantic association between verbs.

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