Understanding Core French Grammar

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Vernon Series in Language and Linguistics

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All errors and omissions are, of course, my responsibility.

For EB and JHRB with thanks and love

AJB

Lancing

May 2016

Introduction

The purpose of this book is to explain how the core systems of French grammar work and to try to make mastering the language easier for the English-speaking learner. It deals with verbs and verb constructions, pronouns and their use, adjectives, adverbs and articles and concludes with a section on the primacy of the spoken language.

The idea is to give as few lists as possible except where really necessary, as with the irregular present tenses for example, and these lists are given in appendices at the back of the book. Instead the main part of the book focuses on explaining the systems which need to be tackled in order to understand and master the language.

Chapter 1 covers the tenses of French and tries to simplify the problem of mastering and learning the detail. Chapter 2 considers and explains verb processes and constructions. Chapter 3 concerns the system of French pronouns. There is a discussion of subjects and objects in general and then we look at the whole range of pronouns and their behaviour in French and how to use them, giving extensive worked examples. Chapter 4 looks at issues surrounding adjectives, adverbs and articles. For each of Chapters 1 to 4, there are exercises corresponding to each topic covered at the end of the book

Chapter 5 is different in nature, drawing the learner's attention to the reality of language, which is primarily a spoken medium. It points out that the system and detail given so far describes a formal, official version of the language. Considering just the three areas of negation, questions and passives it highlights the fact that the world of real spoken French can differ greatly from the standard given in the rest of the book. There are of course very many other ways in which the real world differs from the text book.

It should be noted here that this book is not intended for the complete beginner. Although I do treat some very basic issues as well as more complicated ones, a knowledge of fundamental grammatical processes and principles is assumed.

PAGES MISSING

FROM THIS FREE SAMPLE

Chapter 2

Verb Constructions

1.0 Passives

People get in a twist about passives in French when they do not need to at all. You just have to understand what is going on in your own language first and then (almost) completely replicate the process in French.

Passives in English

The following is an Active/Passive pair and we will base what we do on this:

Active: *Fred ate the chicken*
Passive: *The chicken was eaten (by Fred)*

These two sentences are linked by an entirely regular process which will turn any active sentence into a passive one.

	4	3	1		
Active:	*Fred*	*ate*	*the chicken*		
Passive:	*The chicken*	*was*	*eaten*	*(by Fred)*	
	1		2	3	4

Step 1: Original active object becomes passive subject
Step 2: Insert the verb *to be* in the same tense as the active main verb
Step 3: Convert the original main verb into its past participle
Step 4: Move the original active subject into an optional *'by*-phrase'

Using this formula for English, you can create a passive sentence from any sentence in which the verb has an object.

Passives in French

The following is the same Active/Passive pair in French:

Active: *Fred a mangé le poulet*
Passive: *Le poulet a été mangé (par Fred)*

These two sentences are linked by almost entirely the same process as in English:

	4	3	1	
Active:	*Fred*	*a mangé*	*le poulet*	
Passive:	*Le poulet*	*a été*	*mangé*	*(par Fred)*
	1	2	3	4

Step 1: Original active **direct** object becomes passive subject
Step 2: Insert the verb *être* in the same tense as the active main verb
Step 3: Convert the original main verb into its past participle
Step 4: Move the original active subject into an optional *'par*-phrase'

There are some differences between the English and French passive process of course.

Firstly, in step 1 in French I have stipulated that passives have to be made from 'original active **direct** object'. This of course means that active **indirect** objects, in other words 'à-phrases', cannot become passive subjects. So where in English we can have both a) *a letter was sent to us (by X)* and b) *we were sent a letter (by X)* from *X sent us a letter*, from the equivalent French active *X nous a envoyé une lettre*, we can only get u*ne lettre nous a été envoyée,* the equivalent of the English a), and there is no passive equivalent of the English passive b). This is the trickiest thing to get to grips with in French passives. The way they express some equivalent to b) is to keep it active and use the impersonal pronoun *on*: *on nous a envoyé une lettre.*

Secondly, and this is easy, you must agree the passive past participle with the passive subject as in the example above: *une lettre nous a été envoyé**e***. Apart from this you just need to get the tenses right.

Actually, French uses passives far less often that English does, very frequently using the *on* plus active option instead or sometimes using reflexive constructions. See Chapter 2 section 6.0 on reflexives for more detail and Chapter 5 section 3 for a discussion of real language use.

2.0 Imperatives

Imperatives are commands such as *Open the door, Sit down* or *Let's go!* In French they are easy to form.

There are three different main sorts of imperative in French; second person singular or the *tu* form of the verb, second person plural or the *vous* form of the verb, and first person plural or *nous* form of the verb. English does not make a difference between singular and plural *you* forms but we do have the first person plural imperative as in *Let's go!* above.

To form the imperative, simply take the *tu, vous* or *nous* form of the verb. For example:

Take the book	*Prends le livre*
Eat your salad	*Mangez votre salade*
Let's go home	*Rentrons à la maison*

There is just one irregularity which is that *–er* verb second person singular or *tu* imperatives remove the *–s* at the end. In fact all verbs which end in *–es* or *–as* remove the *–s*. For example:

Play well!	*Joue bien!*
Go to the end	*Va à la fin*

A slightly irritating twist to this is that when they are followed by *y* or *en*, the *–s* returns, for example:

Go on/there	*Vas-y*
Eat some	*Manges-en*

We need to say a few words about imperatives and pronouns (see Chapter 3 section 2.3.2 also). Normally, when not using an imperative, object pronouns such as *le, la* and *les* have to go in front of the verb as in *Je la vois – I see her*. However, positive commands are the exception and the object pronouns come after the verb, for example:

Eat it!	*Mange-le!*
Catch her!	*Attrape-la!*

Also in these positive commands, the non-stressable object pronouns *me* and *te* are replaced by their stressable equivalents *moi* and *toi*. For example:

Give me the book	*Donnez-moi le livre*

As you can see too, all of these pronouns which come after the verb in positive commands are linked to the verb by a hyphen.

In negative commands the pronouns go in their usual position in front of the verb, and we use the usual non-stressable versions, for example:

Don't give me the book	*Ne me donnez pas le livre*
Don't eat it	*Ne le mange pas*
Don't catch her	*Ne l'attrape pas*

Imperatives of reflexive verbs follow the same rules. For example:

Wash yourself	*Lavez-vous*
Don't wash yourself	*Ne vous lavez pas*
Get up	*Lève-toi*
Don't get up	*Ne te lève pas*

Occasionally plain infinitives can be used as imperatives but this is only in formulaic, written instructions.

3.0 Questions

We should talk a little here about questions in English first.

There are two basic sorts of question:

i) **Yes/No** questions to which the answer *yes* or *no* is appropriate, for example *Do you play the piano?*

ii) **Wh-** questions which expect an answer with rather more information in them such as place, time, reason etc, for example *Why do you play the piano?* They can be called **Wh-** questions because they are usually introduced by words such as *Where, When* or *Why*.

In French quite naturally there are the same two types of questions, with the equivalent of most **Wh-** words beginning in *Qu-* and so we could call them **Qu-** questions. We will come back to these later.

Likewise, there are two different ways of **making** questions in English:

i) Sometimes we use the auxiliary verb *do* in different tenses with the main verb to make these. For example *Do you like chicken?* is created from the statement *You like chicken* by introducing the verb *do* in the appropriate tense and agreeing with the subject.

ii) The other way does not use *do* because there is already a modal or other auxiliary verb such as *may, can, will, would* etc. For example *May I go now?* or *Would you like a cup of tea?* The verb *to be* does not use *do* although the verb *to have* does sometimes.

You will be very pleased to hear that although there are also two ways of building questions in French the situation is much simpler.

i) Firstly, if the subject is a pronoun simply invert the subject and verb. So, *Tu aimes le poulet* becomes *Aimes-tu le poulet?* where there is a hyphen between the subject and the verb. If the subject is a full noun or noun phrase such as *the president* you cannot use this method. If the subject is the pronoun *il* or

elle, we need to insert *-t-* between the inverted verb and the subject to make it pronounceable, eg *Aime-t-il le poulet?*

ii) Secondly, the other option which can be used regardless of what the subject is, pronoun or full noun, is to put *Est-ce que* in front of the statement. So, using this method, *Tu aimes le poulet* becomes *Est-ce que tu aimes le poulet?* By the way, *Est-ce que*? just means quite literally *Is it that?*

Some of the **Qu-** words in French are the following (although you can see that not all begin in *Qu)*:

qui	*who*
comment	*how/what (like what* in *comment t'appelles-tu?)*
quand	*when*
pourquoi	*why*
où	*where*
*quel**	*which*
d'où	*from where*
combien	*how much/how many*

* *Quel* has four different forms for masculine/feminine, singular/plural:

	Masc	Fem
Singular	*Quel*	*Quelle*
Plural	*Quels*	*Quelles*

Eg *Quelle chemise as-tu achetée?* *Which shirt did you buy ?*
Quels matchs as-tu regardés? *Which matches did you watch ?*

So, to make the **Yes/No** questions in French just use one of the two strategies above. To make the **Qu-** questions simply put the **Qu-** word in front of the questions; for example, as we have seen, *Tu aimes le poulet* can become *Aimes-tu le poulet?* or *Est-ce que tu aimes le poulet*? To ask **why** someone likes chicken, simply bolt *pourquoi* onto the front of these **Yes/No** questions, giving *Pourquoi aimes-tu le poulet?* or *Pourquoi est-ce que tu aimes le poulet?*

Questions with prepositions

In English we can have prepositions left dangling at the end of sentences, although not all speakers of English think that this is acceptable. So for example we can say *Who did you go to the party with?* This seems pretty normal even though some (old-fashioned) speakers would prefer *With who(m) did you go to the party?* This latter option, however, is what we have to do in French. You just cannot leave prepositions dangling in French and so this question will have to be *Avec qui es-tu allé à la boum?* and so on. So *Who did you buy that for?* would be *Pour qui as-tu acheté ça?* See Chapter 5 section 2 for a look at question formation in spoken French.

See Chapter 3 section 4.0 for more on interrogative pronouns.

4.0 Negation

We should begin by talking about negation in English first.

Just as with questions, there are two different ways of negating a sentence in English:

i) In the first method, used with the majority of verbs, again we use the auxiliary verb *do*. This is introduced in the appropriate tense and the word *not* is placed after it and followed by the main verb in its infinitive form without the *to*. So the affirmative *I know* becomes *I do not know*.

ii) As with question formation, the second method involves the auxiliary verb or modal such as *may, can, will, would* etc. Again this includes *to be* but not always the verb *to have* and again the verb *do* is not used. Instead the negative particle *not* is placed directly after the auxiliary verb. So the affirmative *I will buy a car* becomes *I will not buy a car*, and so on.

In French, there is only one method of forming negatives regardless of the verb type. Quite simply, the negative particle *ne* is placed in front of the tensed verb and the 'negative completer', for which there are several possibilities, is placed after the tensed verb. So for example *J'aime le poulet* becomes *Je* ***n'****aime* ***pas*** *le poulet*. Here the negative completer is the most common, *pas*, which just has the force of *not* in English.

It is important to underline that the negative elements go around the tensed verb and not any past participle or dependent infinitives, so for example *J'ai vu mes amis* becomes *Je **n'**ai **pas** vu mes amis* where the past participle *vu* is outside the 'negative envelope'. Similarly, with modal verbs (see Chapter 2 section 8.0 for a further discussion of Modal verbs) such as *pouvoir*, the dependent infinitive is outside the negative envelope. So *Il peut finir le repas* becomes *Il **ne** peut **pas** finir le repas.*

It is worth noting at this point that if there are any pronoun objects in front of the verb then they too are included inside the negative envelope. Thus *Je les ai vus* becomes *Je **ne** les ai **pas** vus*.

Another point is that you will almost never have *un/une* after *pas* or any other negative completer. See Chapter 4 section 3.2.2 for the exception. Instead you will use *de.* So *J'ai un frère* will become *Je n'ai pas **de** frère.*

The only time where the *ne* and *pas* appear next to each other is when an infinitive is being negated. So *Il est important de fumer* becomes *il est important de **ne pas** fumer*. This also happens where there is a pronoun object and so *il est important de le dire* becomes *il est important de **ne pas** le dire*, keeping the *ne pas* together in front of the *le*.

Some other negative completers are:

ne ...jamais	*never*
ne ...plus	*no longer*
ne ...guère	*hardly/scarcely*
ne ...que	*only*
ne ...rein	*nothing*
ne…personne	*no one*

These last two have the pronouns *rien* and *personne*. They can be used as subjects too and go before the *n'/ne*:

Personne n'est arrivé	-	*No one arrived/no one has arrived*
Rien ne s'est passé	-	*Nothing happened/nothing has happened*

In these no *pas* is used!

See Chapter 5 section 1.0 for a discussion of negatives in the spoken language.

5.0 Verbs and Infinitives

In English when we use an infinitive after a verb we do not have to think; we just use the infinitive. There are a couple of exceptions such as *will, may, should, could, might, can* where we use an infinitive without *to,* for example *I may go, she will sing, they could fly* etc. However these are exceptional: most just use the standard infinitive with *to,* eg *He tries to understand, we hope to go,* etc.

In French the situation is different. There are three options. Either the infinitive is introduced by *à, de* or nothing at all, eg:

*Je commence **à** comprendre*	*I am beginning to understand*
*Elle a décidé **de** partir*	*She decided to leave*
*Je veux **[0]** dormir*	*I want to sleep*

In the last example the ***[0]*** just indicates that there is nothing.

There is no real system here and all you can do is to learn which verbs take which option. The lists in appendix 3 offer you a selection of the most common options. There are many more! The best thing is to pick a few and learn them and then keep expanding the stock of the ones which you know.

There are some verbs which take *de* with a following infinitive which also have an object. For example *conseiller à quelqu'un de faire - to advise someone to do.* In these examples, the person **who is being advised** is an ordinary direct object in English but in French is an indirect or *à*-phrase object. With these constructions you have to be very careful when the object of the verb is a pronoun, eg:

*Je **lui** ai conseillé de se taire*	*I advised him/her to be silent*

Because the verb *conseiller* takes an *à*-phrase object, when this is a pronoun in English such as *his/her* as in this example, you have to think carefully about which object pronoun to pick. See Chapter 3 section 2.2 on object pronouns.

6.0 Reflexive Verbs

6.1 Reflexive Pronouns

We need to consider the so-called reflexive verbs, their formation and use.

Reflexive verbs, or verbs used reflexively, have for their object one of the following non-stressable object pronouns:

me, te, se, nous, vous, se

(roughly equivalent to *myself, yourself, himself, herself, ourselves, yourselves, themselves)* and this object must agree with the subject of the verb in both person and number, giving the following pairings :

Je…me

Tu…te

Il…se

Elle…se

Nous…nous

Vous…vous

Ils…se

Elles…se

In these pronouns, *se* is only ever used reflexively whereas the others can be used as ordinary objects of a verb (see Chapter 3 section 2.2), not agreeing with the subject, for example:

Il me voit

where the *il* and the *me* do not agree.

However, *se* can only be used with third person singular or plural subjects, reflexively.

6.2 Where the pronouns go and agreement

These object pronouns when used reflexively go in the same position as when they are not used reflexively, that is directly in front of the tensed verb and in negative sentences just after the *ne*.

For example:

*Je **me** lève*	*I (raise myself) get up* (literal meaning in brackets)
*Je ne **me** lève pas*	*I don't get up*

In the *passé composé* and other compound tenses all verbs used reflexively take *être* and there is agreement of the past participle with the preceding direct object. See the section on Compound Tense Past Participle Agreement in Chapter 1 section 6.0 for fuller details.

So to give some examples:

Elle s'est levée	*She (raised herself) got up*

In this example, the reflexive pronoun *s'* agrees with the subject which is feminine singular and it is the **direct** object of the verb *lever* thus making the past participle agree. However, consider the following:

Elle s'est envoyé une lettre	*She sent herself a letter*

Here, the reflexive pronoun *s'* agrees with the subject which is feminine singular but this time the *s'* is the **indirect** object of the verb and so there is no agreement of the past participle. The **direct** object in this example is *une lettre*.

6.3 How reflexive structures are used

There are several ways in which reflexive verbs are used.

i) **Genuine reflexives,** which turn back the action or process of the verb on the subject. Take *frapper - to hit*:

J'ai frappé la table	*I hit the table*
Je me suis frappé	*I hit myself*

In the first, the action or process of the verb carries on to *the table* and in the second it is turned back onto *myself.* This is a very obvious physical sense of reflexiveness, but it can be much less physical too:

Je me suis vu dans le mirroir	*I saw myself in the mirror*
Elle s'est amusée	*She amused herself (she had fun)*

ii) **Reciprocals**, the equivalent of sentences with *each other* as the object in English. These can only arise with the plural reflexives:

Nous nous aimons	*We love ourselves/each other*
Elles se connaissent	*They know each other/themselves*

As you can see there is an ambiguity in these sentences which does not exist in English because we have the distinction between the reflexive pronouns and the reciprocal pronoun *each other.*

iii) Reflexives are frequently used in French where English would use a **passive** construction. Quite often, although not always, this is in the context of saying what should or should not happen or in giving instructions.

Ce vin se boit très frais	*This wine is drunk very cold*
Cela ne se fait absolument pas	*That just is not done*
La porte s'est ouverte	*The door was opened*

iv) There are some **idiomatic** uses of reflexives and some verbs which only really exist in reflexive form. For example the verb *agir* usually means *to act* but when used reflexively it takes on the meaning of *to be a question of/to be about*:

Il s'agît de travailler très dur	*It's a question of working really hard*

S'abstenir de (to abstain from), s'accouder (to lean on one's elbows), se moquer de (to make fun of) and several others cannot be used without the reflexive pronoun and so have to be regarded as purely idiomatic from the point of view of an English speaker. You can find lists of these idiomatic reflexive verbs in most reference grammars.

v) **Inalienable possession**: in English we say things like *He broke his leg* or *I washed my face* and so on where the *leg* and the *face* necessarily belong to the subject of the sentence. In French the possessive adjective *his* or *my* cannot be used. Instead, a reflexive construction is used:

Elle s'est cassé la jambe	*(*literally*: she broke to herself the leg)*
Je me suis lavé la figure	*(*literally*: I washed to myself the face)*

There are many other similar examples where the object affected necessarily belongs to the subject.

Of course, with the exception perhaps of the uniquely idiomatic uses above, there is really no such thing as a 'reflexive verb' because any verb which can have an object can presumably reflect the action or process of the verb back onto its subject and so make it reflexive. For example:

Elle les a accusés du vol	*She accused them of the theft*
Elle s'est accusée du vol	*She accused herself of the theft*

A little odd perhaps this last one but perfectly possible!

7.0 The Subjunctive – a starter pack

People worry about the subjunctive but there is no need to do so. The fact that we no longer have it in English should not be a problem. You do not need to 'understand' the subjunctive in order to use it correctly and successfully - you just have to learn how to form it and a few expressions which require or introduce it. After a while you begin to get a feel for it and eventually you will have a real understanding of it and why it is necessary.

Formation

Regular present tense subjunctives are formed by removing the '*ent*' from the *ils/elles* form of the present tense and adding the following endings:

e	*ions*
es	*iez*
e	*ent*

These endings are the same for all three classes of verb, *-er, -ir* and *–re*.

For *–er* verbs, the present tense subjunctive is identical to the present indicative in all forms except the *nous* and *vous* forms. For the other two groups, the difference between indicative and subjunctive is much more marked.

There is a group of common verbs with irregular present tense subjunctive which you have to learn given below. The others you will find in any good reference grammar.

Use

The best way to go about mastering the subjunctive in practice is to learn a few common expressions which need to be followed by a verb in the subjunctive, such as:

Il faut que…

Vouloir que...

Bien que…

Être content que…

Il semble que…

The first thing to notice is that the subjunctive is always preceded by an expression ending in *que* (except in set phrases such as: *Vive le Président/La Reine/la Liberté!*). This does not mean, however, that all expressions ending in *que* introduce the subjunctive.

The subjunctive is preceded by particular verbs, by *être* plus adjective, or by conjunctions. In what follows I give a jumbled assortment of ten expressions which require the subjunctive, giving a mixture of present and perfect forms, which are in practice the only tenses of the subjunctive which are used. There are, of course, many others but these will start you off.

Ten expressions taking the subjunctive:

1.	***Il faut que***	*Il faut que tu comprennes*
	It is necessary that	*You have got to understand*
2.	***Ce n'est pas que***	*Ce n'est pas que ce soit un problème difficile*
	It's not that	*It is not that it's a difficult problem*
3.	***Vouloir que***	*Je veux que tu dises la vérité*
	To wish/want that	*I want you to tell the truth*
4.	***Sans que***	*Nous l'avons vu sans qu'il le sache*
	Without	*We saw him without his knowing it*
5.	***Bien que***	*Il est fatigué bien qu'il se soit couché tôt*
	Even though	*He is tired even though he went to bed early*
6.	***Regretter que***	*Je regrette que vous ne soyez pas d'accord*
	To regret that	*I regret that you do not agree*
7.	***Pour que***	*Il a fait ça pour que tu sois content*
	So that	*He did that so that you should be happy*
8.	***Il semble que****(but not il* ***me*** *semble que)*	*Il semble que vous ayez bien compris*
	It seems that	*It seems that you have understood*
9.	***Attendre que***	*J'attends que tu finisses tes devoirs*
	To wait for	*I am waiting for you to finish your homework*
10.	***When there is a superlative in the antecedent of a relative construction:***	
		It is ***the most beautiful picture*** *that I have ever seen*
		C'est ***le plus beau tableau*** *que j'****aie*** *jamais* ***vu*** (perfect subjunctive, see below)

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