

INFLECTIONAL MORPHEMES AS A BANE TO GRAMMATICAL ACCURACY IN LEARNING FRENCH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the problem posed by inflectional morphemes to grammatical accuracy in learning French as a second language. French, a morphologically rich language, presents significant difficulties for learners accustomed to less inflected languages. Inflectional morphemes are linguistic elements that are added to words to change their grammatical properties, such as number, gender, tense, or person. In French, inflectional morphemes play a significant role in shaping the grammar of the language. This study explores the specific inflectional morphemes that pose the greatest problems, focusing on verb conjugations, gender and number agreement in nouns and adjectives, and the complexities of pronoun usage. The data for this study are drawn from the written essays of 40 first year students between the sessions 2017 to 2023 at Akwa Ibom State University. It is observed that students generally lose a lot of marks because of poor grammar, particularly inflectional markings. This essay studies inflections in French, specifies their different forms, their modes of operation and states that an inflection may seem insignificant in appearance but very significant in marking grammatical sentences. The findings reveal that inflectional morphemes significantly challenge second language learners in various verb tenses and moods in written French. This is particularly evident among beginners and intermediate learners, who often defaulted to the infinitive form. The study concludes by recommending much attention be given to the teaching of inflections which consist of tense, agreement, modal and aspect, including explicit grammar instruction.

Key words: Challenges of second language learning, French grammar, Grammatical properties, Inflectional Morphemes, Structure of words.

INTRODUCTION

French, with its complex system of inflectional morphology, presents a considerable challenge for second language learners. Unlike languages with fewer inflections, French relies heavily on morphemes to convey grammatical information such as tense, person,

number, and gender. This reliance on inflectional morphology can be particularly difficult for learners whose first language has a different morphological structure. In Nigeria, French is one of the foreign languages taught in tertiary institutions of learning. The country, as a matter of fact, is “surrounded mostly by francophone countries like Niger in the North, Cameroun and Chad in the East and the Republic of Benin in the West” (Ade Ojo, 1993, 4; Inegbe, 2020, 171). Thus, to communicate meaningfully with our immediate neighbors, there is a great need to understand and be understood as well when using French to communicate orally or in written form. This declaration finds credence in Carroll’s assertion as cited by Weir (1988) that the “prime need of most learners is not for a theoretical or analytical knowledge of the target language, but for an ability to understand and be understood in that language within context and constraints of particular language-using circumstances” (9). Hence, it requires much effort to master the various components of the French language including “grammatical competence (knowledge of the rules of grammar), sociolinguistic competence (knowledge of rules of use and rules of discourse) and strategic competence (knowledge of verbal and non-verbal communicative strategies)” (Kelly, 1964; Udousoro, 2005; Inegbe, 2015) for educational and interactional purposes. French grammar is difficult for most second language learners of French.

Grammar is specifically centered around the rules of language, principally, syntactic rules. French syntax, like many other languages, is governed by rules that dictate how words and phrases should be arranged to form meaningful sentences. These rules are often based on phrasal categories, which are groups of words that function together as a unit: noun phrase, verb phrase, prepositional phrase, adjective phrase, and so on, formed from lexical categories like nouns, verbs, prepositions, adjectives and adverbs. Anyone learning a language must contend with grammatical rules, specifically inflectional rules which consist of tense, agreement, case, modals and aspect. Inflectional markings, which involve changes in word form to indicate grammatical information, are fundamental aspects of French grammar. However, these inflectional markings can pose significant challenges for learners acquiring French as a second language. This study focuses on the challenges of marking inflectional morphemes among second language learners of French. It examines what the syntactic category of inflection is, the syntactic functions of inflections and their critical position in the development of proficiency in the grammar of French.

Theoretical Framework

In the framework of generative grammar developed by Noam Chomsky, inflectional markings play a crucial role in the syntax and morphology of human languages. Inflectional markings are grammatical morphemes added to words to express various grammatical categories such as tense, mood, aspect, number, and case. They are distinguished from derivational morphemes, which create new words with different meanings. Inflectional morphology is influential in Chomsky’s theories, especially in how it relates to syntax. Government and Binding theory are a comprehensive theory of syntax and phrase structure grammar in the

tradition of transformational grammar that was developed by Noam Chomsky in the 1980s (Chomsky, 1982; Carnie, 2006). The aim of this theory was to account for the syntactic phenomena observed across various languages in a uniform manner. While Noam Chomsky is the principal architect of Government and Binding Theory, many linguists have contributed to its development by expanding upon its ideas. Some noteworthy figures include: Richard Kayne, known for his work on syntactic structures and the Linear Correspondence Axiom, which stems from Government and Binding theory; Howard Lasnik, a prominent figure who has worked extensively on aspects of syntax in Government and Binding and later frameworks; Maria Luisa Zubizarreta known for her contributions to the field of syntax and prosody within the Government and Binding framework; and Julius Moravcsik noted for his work on the implications of Government and Binding theory in typological.

The name Government and Binding refer to the two key sub-theories of the theory. The sub-theory, *Government* refers to a formal relationship between certain elements in a sentence, whereby one element, usually a verb determines certain properties of another element like case assignment. Government is crucial for understanding how subjects, objects, and indirect objects function within clauses. The second sub-theory, *Binding*, deals with how pronouns and other referring expressions relate to their antecedents. The binding theory consists of three principles (A, B, and C) that govern the relationship between pronouns and noun phrases (Ouhalia, 1999; Chomsky, 2005). Principle A, indicates a domain within a sentence where the anaphor must be bound in its governing category, that is with an antecedent; Principle B, indicates the domain within a sentence where a pronoun must be free within its govern category, that is to say, it must not be bound with a noun phrase; and Principle C, indicates the domain within sentence where the referential expression must be free, that is to say, it must be independent in its reference. The *Case* aspect of Government and Binding theory explains how and why noun phrases receive their grammatical case, which is essential for determining their syntactic roles. The *Theta Theory* addresses how verbs assign thematic roles like agent, patient, etc. to their arguments, which governs the relationship between verbs and their complements. The *X-bar Theory* is a proposal for the structure of phrases that specifies how different levels of structure such as, heads, complements, and specifiers interact within phrases. Government and Binding theory posit two levels of representation which are: the *Deep Structure* (D-Structure), and the *Surface Structure* (S-Structure) (Chomsky, 1982). The D-Structure conveys the core semantic meaning of a sentence while the S-Structure is the actual phonetic realization of that sentence.

Government and Binding theory primarily address syntactic structures; it offers useful tools for analyzing the interaction between syntax and morphology in French. Understanding how inflectional forms emerge from syntactic structures, along with the role of feature checking and agreement, can enhance comprehension of the morphosyntactic properties of the language. While Government and Binding theory had a significant influence on linguistic theory, it has evolved over the years and has seen numerous critiques and alternatives, leading to the development of subsequent frameworks like *Minimalist Program* (Chomsky, 1995; Ouhalia,

1999). Minimalist Program focuses on how inflectional features are generated and how they interact with syntactic structures. Applying the minimalist program to French inflectional morphology can lead to a more refined understanding of how grammatical relationships are encoded, how language structures are organized, and how morphological features are generated and utilized within syntactic contexts. This theoretical lens encourages a focus on the underlying principles governing language, promoting insights into French specifically and the nature of language in general.

The presence and interaction of these features can affect sentence structure significantly. Chomsky's theories on inflectional markings highlight the intricate relationships between morphology and syntax, while Government and Binding theory provides a robust framework for understanding complex syntactic structures and their relationships within and across languages. These two concepts remain central to contemporary linguistic research and debate.

Grammatical Rules

Grammatical rules in French, like any other language, are the set of principles that govern the structure and usage of words to form correct sentences. They dictate how words should be combined to form sentences, the correct order of words, and the agreement between different parts of speech (Claudia, Blevins, Booij, and Vito, 2020; Inegbe, 2013 and 2020). These guidelines ensure that communication is clear, consistent, and understandable. In other words, grammatical rules provide the framework for language, allowing us to express our thoughts and ideas effectively. By adhering to these rules, we can create sentences that are grammatically correct and convey our intended meaning. These rules encompass various aspects, syntactic, semantic and phonological rules. Syntactic rules according to Inegbe specifies "the principles and processes that govern the structure of sentences in a language, usually including word order"(129), and Radford (1980) states that "semantic rules of sentence interpretation, specify how to interpret the meaning of the sentence; phonological rules of sentence pronunciation, specify how to pronounce the sentence"(34).

The interplay of these elements results in French grammatical structures. Thus, the category of inflection is the center of sentence grammar and sentence grammar is category-based grammar. According to Radford, (1980), "category-based grammars are more constrained than word-based grammars" (46). It is not just enough to specify to learners of French as a second language that words and phrases belong to specific grammatical categories, and to specify their position in sentences, but more importantly, that words undergo morphological changes when they occur with other words in a correlation between nouns and verbs, time relation in verbs and in terms of genitive case markings, French uses primarily the preposition "de" to the express genitive. Napoli (1996) observes that inflectional morphemes can be productive across an entire category and add a minimal sense to words within their domain of operation in addition to delicate and specific sense earlier expressed by Inegbe and Radford. It is upon the realization of the importance of inflection to the construction of grammatical sentences that Chomsky, (1981)

and Haegeman, (1994) conclude that inflection is the center of sentence grammar. However, the most challenging aspect for second language learners lies in understanding how these interconnected elements combine to form grammatical structures. This involves grasping how to mark inflectional morphemes and master other grammatical processes. Inflections are bound morphemes. A morpheme is the smallest meaningful unit of grammar and cannot be further decomposed except in phonological or semantic terms. It is in morphemes that the variations in the form of a single lexical item for purposes of grammar manifest in different grammatical functions. Examples of such are provided below:

Number— “le livre/ les livres” (the morpheme ‘s’ is added to indicate plurality)

Tense— “je parle/je parlai” (the morpheme ‘ai’ is added to indicate past tense)

Person— “je parle/ tu parles/ nous parlons/ vous parlez” (the verb endings vary to indicate the person)

Mood—“que je parle, que nous parlions; que j’aie, que nous ayons; que je sois, que nous soyons; que j’aie, que nous allions”(the subjunctive mood uses different verb endings)

Aspect— “j’ai parlé/ je parlais” (the auxiliary verb ‘avoir’ and the past participle ‘parlé’ are used to form the perfect aspect).

From the above illustrations, it becomes obvious that the various grammatical functions of a word in French are often conveyed through changes in morphemes. These changes can involve adding or removing morphemes or altering the existing morphemes.

Morphemes are either free or bound. Free morphemes are lexical entities. Bound morphemes are divided into two main categories: inflectional and derivational. Inflections are part of the highly restricted finite set of constraints in language which a child acquiring his/her first language knows through intuition or learns in a second language situation with much effort. In French, all inflections are suffixes of a specific class since there are different manifestations of suffixes either as inflectional or derivational. Inflectional suffixes show changes in the form of words in relation to their syntactic function in sentences in the form of “agreement, selection and case marking” (Stockwell, 1977, 78). In French, inflections occur on verbs, nouns, adjectives, and pronouns. My emphasis in this study is on verbs and nouns. In most cases, the tendency is that these grammatical units are not often realized due to a lack of knowledge of the importance of these grammatical units or morphemes in the making of grammatical sentences. Inflections are essential for understanding the meaning of French sentences. Inflectional morphemes add a delicate or specific tense to a word without changing its part of speech or core meaning. Their purpose is to show grammatical relationships within a sentence while derivational morphemes are lexical rather than purely grammatical. The function of derivational morphemes is to create new words by changing the word’s meaning or its part of speech. It is on this premise that Napoli, (1996) states that morphemes have semantic or grammatical meaning. Since inflectional

morphemes are critical to grammaticality, it is therefore needful to guide learners of French to develop proficiency in this aspect of the grammar of French.

The Structure of Words

The way words are structured internally adheres to a system that governs not only how words are framed but also their grammatical correctness in relation to other words within a sentence. Words are more than just roots and affixes; they belong to specific syntactic categories (David, 1975, p. 66), such as nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, and so on. These categories determine how words can be used in sentences. For instance, a word can be a noun in one sentence and a verb in another. For example, Noun: J'ai ouvert un **compte** bancaire (I have opened a bank *account*.) and Verb: Je **compte** les billets (I am counting the notes.). French words can change their function based on their context in a sentence. There are more possibilities depending on the specific word and its context. French grammar rules, such as word category, plays a significant role in determining the type of agreement and the conjugation in a sentence. French has a complex system of agreement between nouns, adjectives, and verbs based on gender and number. Here's a breakdown of the main categories:

N. —Nouns (Noms) : Le livre (the book), la maison (the house), un chat (a cat), etc.

V. —Verbs (Verbes): Parler (to speak), manger (to eat), voir (to see), finir (to finish), etc.

Adj. —Adjectives (Adjectifs): Grand/Grande (big m/f), beau (handsome), belle (beautiful), etc.

Adv. Adverbs (Adverbes): Rapidement (quickly), très (very), souvent (often), etc.

Prép. —Prepositions (Prépositions) : À (at, to), dans (in), avec (with), etc.

Pron. —Pronouns (Pronoms) : Je (I), tu (you), tu (you), il (he/it), elle (she/it), etc.

Conj. —Conjunctions (Conjonctions) : Et (and), mais (but), parce que (because), etc.

Aux. —Auxiliaries (Auxiliaires) : avoir (to have), être (to be).

These syntactic categories come together to create phrasal categories, which in turn combine to produce complete sentences. Sentences are built from phrases, which are composed of words. Words are the smallest independent units of language and have both syntactic and semantic functions. French grammar is highly structured, and agreement is essential for producing grammatically correct sentences. Agreement helps to maintain consistency within a sentence and avoid confusion. However, sentences are grammatical partly because of the correct use of inflections. They help to ensure that sentences are both grammatically correct, and that they are not just the structural arrangement of words. A sentence in French is grammatical when word structures are properly arranged, and the inflections are marked correctly. That is why it is not just enough to identify which words belong to which categories and their positions in

sentences, but it is also important to know that words undergo morphological changes when they occur with other words. This explains why an expression such as “Nous chante bien” is ungrammatical since the verb “chanter” can inflect for person and number. The verb, ‘chanter’, needs to be conjugated to match the subject, ‘nous’. The correct conjugation is ‘chantons’. Thus, the correct expression is “Nous chantons bien”. Since the subject is the first-person plural the verb must agree with it for the sentence to be grammatical. Only open class elements that is, adjectives, nouns, verbs, and pronouns, undergo morphological changes in French whereas closed class systems like prepositions, conjunctions do not. This lack of morphological variation in the closed class system makes it easier to learn and use these word classes in French.

Nouns and Verbs Inflectional Morphemes

The following are the different types of inflections on nouns and verbs in French which the second language learner of French should know. French verbs undergo inflection based on mood, tense, number, and person. French verbs have a complex system of inflections. The common verb tenses include the present, past, future, conditional, and subjunctive. Each of these tenses is conjugated differently for each pronoun (je, tu, il/elle) and these pronouns also have inflectional morphemes to indicate person and number when conjugating. For example:

Present tense: Je mange (I eat)

Past tense: J’ai mangé (I ate)

Future tense: Je mangerai (I will eat)

Inflectional morphemes are used to indicate the tense of a verb. For example, the ending *-e* is often used for the present tense, while *-ais* might be used for the imperfect past tense. Verbs must agree with the subject in person (1st, 2nd, or 3rd) and number (singular or plural). Inflectional morphemes are used to indicate this agreement. Nouns in French have gender (masculine or feminine) and number (singular or plural). Most of these nouns form their plural by adding an ‘-s’ or ‘-es’ (fem.) to their singular form. The choice depends on the ending of the noun since certain nouns remain unchanged in both singular and plural forms. For examples :

Singular —	le français (masc.)	Plural —	les Français
	la française (fem.)		les françaises
	L’étranger (masc.)		les étrangers
	l’étrangère (fem.)		les étrangères

The gender of a noun in French is often determined by its ending as seen in the examples above. The feminine nouns are formed by adding an *-e* to the masculine singular noun, but if the masculine noun ends already in “*e*”, no additional “*e*” is added, for example: ‘le cinéaste, le journaliste’, etc. Other patterns of forming feminine nouns in French include: **-f** ‘veuf’ and **-ve** ‘veuve’; **-et** ‘cadet’ and **-ette** ‘cadette’; **-eur** ‘acteur’ and **-trice** ‘actrice’; **-eur** ‘chanteur’ and **-**

euse ‘chanteuse’, etc. There are exceptions in the formation of plural nouns in French. If the singular nouns end in **-s; -x; -z**, no additional **-s** is added in the plural, as in:

Singular—	le bras	Plural—les bras
	le nez	les nez
	le prix	les prix

There are also some nouns with irregular plurals. These are nouns which end in **-eau; -eu; -ou**. They add an **-x** to form their plural. For example:

Singular—	le bateau	Plural—les bateaux
	Le neveu	les neveux
	Le bijou	les bijoux

French nouns which end in **-il; -al; -el**, form their plural by replacing/changing the **-il**, or the **-l** to **-ux**:

Singular—	le travail	Plural— les travaux
	L’hôpital	les hôpitaux
	Le ciel	les cieux

Noun gender and number are important factors in French grammar. Adjectives and articles must agree with the gender and number of the noun they modify. Articles like *le, la, un, une* must agree in gender and number with the noun they precede. For example: ‘un cahier’ becomes ‘des cahiers’ while ‘le cahier’ becomes ‘les cahiers’ in their plural forms. Adjectives must also agree in gender (masculine and feminine) and number with the noun they modify. This is achieved by changing the ending of the adjective. For example: ‘grand’ (big, masculine sing.) becomes ‘grande’ (big, feminine sing) and for their plural forms ‘grands’ becomes ‘grandes’. Adjectives like *ce* or *cette* use inflectional morphemes ‘ces’ (plural) to agree with the noun they modify. These inflections represent the different classes of errors of inflections committed by second language learners of French and are categorized under tense, agreement, modal, aspect, and case.

Selected Data of Tense and Agreement Errors

This paper employed a qualitative research approach. Qualitative data was gathered through observation of the written essays of 40 first year students between the sessions 2017 to 2023 in Akwa Ibom State University, Nigeria. Instances of wrong markings of inflections in French language are drawn from students’ scripts for close study, and for the discussion of tense

and agreement errors among Nigerian learners of French as a second language. The examples are:

1. Hier, je allerai au Tropicana avec mes cousins.
2. Demain, elle allée à la plage pour se relaxer.
3. Pendant mes vacances, je suis visité Obudu et j'ai vu ranch.
4. Il y a deux semaine, nous avons finis nos examens.
5. J'adores les gens de ma nouvelle maison, elles sont très gentille.
6. J'ai mangé trois pomme, elle était délicieux.
7. Elles aime ces robe bleu, il est très jolie.
8. Le française sont très bonne en cuisine.
9. J'ai acheté des livre française, je les ai trouvé très intéressant.
10. Je peux allait au cinéma.
11. Il devrait de commencer à étudier.
12. Nous voulez manger dehors ce soir.
13. Je suis mangeais le gateau hier.

In the above data, inflections are asserted where they should not occur or omitted where they should without due recourse to time and number which are markers of tense and agreement. The methodology involved a systematic examination of the sentences pertaining to learners' errors in written French.

Data Analysis and Discussions

Tense error

A tense error occurs when a speaker or writer uses an incorrect tense to express the time or aspect of an action or event. This can lead to confusion or misunderstanding in communication. These errors can arise from various factors, such as: interference from first language where learners apply rules from their native language to the target language; overgeneralization, where learners may over-apply a rule they have learnt to situations they do not apply; under-generalization, where learners may fail to apply a rule in situations where they do apply (Corder, 1967; Ajiboye, 1993; Inegbe, 2019). For instance, omitting the auxiliary verb 'avoir' in the present perfect tense a learner's strategy would be to choose to simplify the language to communicate effectively. Hence, he would avoid the use of certain tenses because he finds them difficult; and lack of exposure to the target language. However, Chomsky's framework provides a useful starting point for understanding French verb tense. According to Chomsky (1981), the inflection category contains the features: $[[\pm \text{Tense}], (\text{AGR})]$. This means that there are two classes of inflections namely: the $[\text{+ Tense}]$ INFL and the $[\text{- Tense}]$ INFL. The $[\text{+ Tense}]$ INFL contains a finite verb, that is, a verb which marks for tense, person, and number as a category of the verb. This is typically done using verb conjugations. An example of finite verb with tense is 'Je chante' (I sing). The $[\text{- Tense}]$ INFL contains infinitive verb also called

non-finite verb and does not mark for tense. An example of infinitive verb without tense is ‘chanter’ (to sing). However, while infinitives are generally considered tenseless, French has non-finite forms like the *passé composé* and *plus-que-parfait* that can convey temporal information. French uses auxiliary verbs like *avoir* or *être* to form certain tenses. These auxiliary verbs may, themselves, be finite or non-finite, adding complexity to the tense system. Examples 1-4, above, fall under [+ Tense] INFL.: *Hier, je allerai au Tropicana avec mes cousins*. There is an error of incorrect verb tense in the sentence. The conjugated verb: ‘je allerai’ is incorrect and should be replaced with ‘je suis allé’, the correct tense to describe this action that happened yesterday. Therefore, the correct sentence is: *Hier, je suis allé au Tropicana avec mes cousins*. Incorrect conjugation of the verb, *aller*, is also seen in *Demain, elle allée à la plage pour se relaxer*. The correct sentence is: *Demain, elle ira à la plage pour se relaxer*. There is incorrect conjugation, word order and missing articles before ‘Obudu and ranch’ in sentence 3: *Pendant mes vacances, je suis visité Obudu et j’ai vu ranch*. The correct sentence is: *Pendant mes vacances, j’ai visité l’Obudu et j’ai vu le ranch*. Incorrect marking of plurality in ‘semaine’ and agreement of the past participle is seen in sentence 4: *Il y a deux semaine, nous avons finis nos examens*. The correct sentence is: *Il y a deux semaines, nous avons fini nos examens*. Finite verbs inflect to mark tense as past or non-past and inflect to agree with the subject in person and number. In the extracted data, there is a complete violation of these inflectional rules in French, the very reason the sentences are ungrammatical.

Furthermore, examples 5-9 fall under [- Tense] INFL, which contains infinitive verbs called non-finite verbs which do not inflect for tense or agreement. Non-finite verbs in French are verbs that are not conjugated for person, or number. They are primarily used as nouns, adjectives, or parts of verb phrases. Here are some common examples:

Infinitives: *As nouns:* ‘Le manger est important’. (Eating is important).

As adjectives: Une chose à faire. (Something to do).

In verb phrases : Je vais marcher. (I’m going to walk).

Participles: *Present participles:* Une femme marchant. (A walking woman).

Past participles: Une maison construite. (A built house).

Gerunds: En marchant, je me suis perdu. (While walking, I got lost).

These non-finite verbs do not inflect for tense or agreement; they can still convey temporal or modal meanings when used in certain constructions. For instance, the present participle can indicate ongoing action, while the past participle can indicate completed action. The agreement feature of inflection is obligatorily dependent on the tense feature of inflection in that if an inflection is [+ Tense] then it must agree with its subject but if it is [- Tense], it does not agree with its subject. For grammaticality, a verb must agree with the subject but will not if

the verb is a minus tense. The agreement feature is determined from the first verbal element in a sentence. Tense, therefore, is an obligatory element in finite verb phrase and denotes the change that occurs in the structure of the verb to indicate time. Learners of French need to understand the nature of French verbs and tense features as well as master their operations to be proficient in the marking of inflections to make grammatical sentences. They should know that tense is marked on verbs since it is only verbs that can inflect for tense. French verbs undergo different types of inflectional markings, and one of each type is attached to the appropriate stem form to indicate the aspect or viewpoint of the action being described.

Agreement errors

Agreement is a fundamental aspect of French grammar, particularly when it comes to verbs, articles and nouns, adjectives, and pronouns. In French, adjectives, articles, and pronouns must agree in gender and number with the noun or the verb they modify or refer to. An agreement error is a grammatical mistake that occurs when a subject and its verb do not match in number (singular and plural). For example: ‘subject-verb mismatch’ as in ‘Le vêtement sont propres’ (The clothe are clean). This sentence is incorrect because ‘le vêtement’(clothe) is singular, but ‘sont’(are) is plural. The correct sentence would either be ‘Les vêtements sont propres’ or ‘Le vêtement est propre’. Verbs must agree in tense with the rest of the sentence-; that is to say, verbs must agree in person and number with their subject. For example, if the subject is first person singular, the verb must be conjugated in the first person singular form. Pronouns must agree in person, number, and gender with the noun or pronoun they refer to. Agreement helps to clarify the relationship between words in a sentence. Like in the illustrated example above, the adjective must agree in gender and number with the noun it modifies.

In the selected data- above, the examples violate inflectional rules on agreement. Agreement is a composite of four features: person, number, and gender when they are considered in consonance with other constituents of the sentence. *Person* is 1st (singular or plural), 2nd (singular or plural), or 3rd (singular or plural/ masculine or feminine); *gender* typically makes references to masculine (male beings or objects) or feminine (female beings or objects); and *number* is related to nouns either as singular in which one entity is involved or plural in which more than one entity is involved. Nouns typically inflect for number, and most nouns inflect to mark plural with an –s as discussed earlier. This is because many of these irregular forms come from Old French or Latin, where they had different plural rules. Sometimes, it could be due to semantic reasons and for easy pronunciation of the word. Most learners of French find it difficult to mark the distinction between singular and plural nouns in agreement with verbs that co-occur with them. This explains the ungrammaticality in sentence 5 where gender agreement and verb conjugation error is observed: *J’adores les gens de ma nouvelle maison, elles sont très gentille*. The verb ‘j’adores’ should be conjugated in the first person singular: ‘j’adore’; ‘les gens’ is a masculine plural noun, so the adjective and the pronoun referring to it must also be masculine plural: ‘gentils’; and ‘elles’ should be : ‘ils’ since ‘les gens’ is masculine. The correct

sentence would be: *J'adore les gens de ma nouvelle maison, ils sont très gentils*. Error is also observed in gender and number agreement in sentence 6 **J'ai mangé trois pomme, elle était délicieux**. The noun 'pomme' is a feminine noun, and 'trois pomme' should be in plural: 'trois pommes', so the pronoun, verb and adjective 'elle était délicieux' referring to it must be feminine plural as well: 'elles étaient délicieuses'. The correct sentence is: *J'ai mangé trois pommes, elles étaient délicieuses*. Same error in gender and number agreement is seen in sentence 7: **Elles aime ces robe bleu, il est très jolie**. The verb 'aime' should be 'aiment' to agree with the plural subject 'Elles'; 'robe' should be plural 'robes'; 'bleu' should agree in gender and number 'bleues'; 'il' should be 'elles' to agree with 'robes' the subject. The correct sentence is: *Elles aiment ces robes bleues, elles sont très jolies*. In sentence 8 **Le française sont très bonne en cuisine.**: 'Le' should be 'les' since it is referring to a plural subject; 'française' should be 'Français' to match plural masculine noun; 'sont' is correct, but the following adjective 'bonne' should be 'bons' because 'Français' is masculine plural. The correct sentence is: *Les Français sont très bons en cuisine*. And in sentence 9 **J'ai acheté des livre française, je les ai trouvé très intéressant.**: the correct plural form of 'livre' is 'livres'; 'des livre française' should be 'des livres français', and the adjective 'français' needs to agree in number with the noun; and the past participle 'trouvé' needs to agree in number and gender with the object 'les', so 'je les ai trouvé' should be 'je les ai trouvés'. The correct sentence is: *J'ai acheté des livres français, je les ai trouvés très intéressants*. However, the main errors are related to conjugations and verb tenses because they violate concord rules in which a verb must agree with the subject in person and number. Other errors are related to word ordering, omission of articles before nouns and marking of plurality in French words.

Modal and aspect errors

The inflection category in French also contains modal and aspect. Modal verbs are used to express possibility, ability, permission, and obligation. In French, they include: *pouvoir, devoir, vouloir, falloir, savoir*. Aspect refers to how an action is viewed in terms of its duration, completion, or repetition. French has two main aspects. They are 'perfect' and 'imperfect'. Perfect aspect indicates a completed action, for example: *j'ai protégé*, while the imperfect aspect indicates an ongoing or habitual action, for example: *je protégeais*. Modal and aspect errors in French refer to mistakes made in using modal verbs and aspects of verbs. Errors involving modal and aspect abound in the speech and writing of second language learners of French. Examples 10-13 fall under modal and aspect errors. They are instances of incorrect conjugation of the verb 'aller' in passé composé as seen in sentence 10: **Je peux allait au cinéma**. The correct sentence would be: *Je peux aller au cinéma*. Incorrect construction with 'de' before infinitive verb 'commencer' is observed in sentence 11: **Il devrait de commencer à étudier.** The correct sentence would be: *Il devrait commencer à étudier*. Sentence 12, **Nous voulez manger dehors ce soir.** contains a subject-verb agreement error. The subject 'nous' should be paired with the correct form of the verb 'vouloir' which is 'voulons'. The correct sentence is: *Nous voulons manger dehors ce soir*. Examples 10-12 are instances of wrong marking of modal verbs because

of the inflection of the verbs which co-occur with the modals. A modal always occurs as the first verbal element followed by an uninflected verb as in ‘peut aller’ and not ‘peut allait’; ‘devrait commencer’ and not ‘devrait de commencer’; ‘nous voulons manger’ and not ‘nous voulez manger’ respectively. The sentences are ungrammatical because modals do not inflect to mark tense. When a modal follows a lexical verb it does not inflect. It is the poor mastery of the grammar of modals that causes this class of error.

Example 13 is an error involving aspect. Aspect, as explained earlier, is that form of the verb which shows whether an action is completed or still ongoing. It allows a speaker to relate situations with time as well as allows him/her to view an event in various ways. It does not fix situations in relation to the act of speaking as it is with tense (Saeed, 2009). Thus, the sentence: *Je suis mangeais le gâteau hier.* is incorrect because of a grammatical error. The combination of auxiliary verb ‘être’ with the verb ‘manger’ in this context is incorrect. The correct auxiliary verb to use with manger is ‘avoir’. ‘Mangeais’ is the imperfect tense of the verb ‘manger’. The correct sentence would be: *J’ai mangé le gâteau hier.* This sentence uses the auxiliary verb ‘avoir’ and the past participle ‘mangé’ to form the *passé composé*, which is the correct tense for expressing a completed action in the past. From the findings and discussions, the category of inflection is the center of sentence grammar and sentence grammar is a category-based grammar.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Inflectional morphemes are grammatical elements that add grammatical information to the meaning of a word. They may seem very insignificant in words but they are more important than they seem since they convey much sense both in terms of grammar and meaning. It is the central position of inflections and its significance in the making of grammatical sentences in language that has led to significant shifts in our understanding of language structure and the underlying rules that govern it. Inflectional morphemes in French present a formidable challenge for second language learners due to their complexity and need for precise grammatical understanding. By implementing effective teaching strategies, such as explicit grammar instruction, contextualized learning, and contrastive analysis, language educators can help learners overcome these difficulties and achieve proficiency in French. In conclusion, inflectional morphemes are essential for understanding and using French grammar correctly. They allow the expression of different meanings and relationships between words within a sentence.

French language courses should prioritize explicit instruction on inflectional morphemes, providing learners with clear explanations and ample practice opportunities. Inflectional morphemes should be taught within meaningful contexts to help learners understand their functional significance and usage in daily life communication. Comparing and contrasting inflectional systems in French with learners’ native languages can highlight similarities and differences, aiding in comprehension and retention. Encouraging learners to be aware of their own errors and providing constructive feedback can facilitate the acquisition of accurate

inflectional markings. Learners should be introduced to targeted practice activities, such as conjugation drills, gap-fill exercises, and controlled writing tasks. Strategies for raising learner awareness of inflectional morphology, such as highlighting morphemes in texts and encouraging learners to notice patterns, should also be explored. Utilizing digital tools, such as interactive exercises and language learning apps, can also offer engaging and personalized practice opportunities for inflectional markings.

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