

Agreeing to disagree: the absence of gender agreement on past participles in French

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While standard French requires past participles (PASTPs) to agree with their antecedents in syntactic configurations where the direct object precedes the verb, this rule is only applied variably in spoken French:

- (1) non-agreement: [Fd0.155.541] au niveau de la décision_{Fem} que_{Fem} tu as pris_{Masc}
agreement: [Fd0.113.764] le cours_{Masc} ... tu sais je l'_{Masc} ai pris_{Masc}

This study sought a) to determine whether PASTP agreement is a productive process in spoken French, and b) which factors condition it. For 99% of French verbs, the difference between the masculine and the feminine forms of the PASTP is phonologically null (Tanase 1976). The remaining 1% (N = 99) distinguishes masculine from feminine by adding an overtly realized consonant (/t/ or /z/) to the feminine form. All PASTP forms with this audible difference were exhaustively extracted, but of the 99 verbs where the distinction is possible, only 30 actually turn up in the corpus of spontaneous speech, for a total of 3566 tokens. Determining the factors that contribute to variant selection can only be done using contexts where there is, in fact, variation. Once these contexts are located and the exclusions are removed, the dataset shrinks significantly. As for what conditions agreement when the opportunity does arise, most of the claims from the literature ascribe the variation either to semantic factors such as specificity of the antecedent (Déprez 1998), or to social factors such as years of schooling (Brissaud 1999). Their reported effects are statistically very weak, but a small number of authors do make passing mention of the noticeable idiosyncrasies for certain lexemes (especially *fait/faite*). My study includes an innovative factor group to test these lexical effects alongside thirteen different claims from the literature. The multivariate results failed to show any of the previously attested semantic or social effects, and furthermore, there were a number of oddities in the results that needed closer attention.

After digging deeper, it turned out that certain of the verbs only *masquerade* as having agreement, when in fact they simply have an idiosyncratic tendency to be produced with a final consonant. This is the case for the PASTP of *faire* (*fait/faite*), which seems to have been lexicalized as [fɛt]. Supporting evidence of this comes from the fact that *fait/faite* is still pronounced as though it bears agreement in syntactic configurations where no object precedes the verb, and therefore where agreement is *proscribed* (2):

- (2) [Fd0.171.88] l'hygiéniste a pas faite [fɛt] beaucoup de cours

Once these masquerading verbs were removed, another multivariate analysis was performed on the remaining tokens, which shows that the *only* thing conditioning the variation is the lexical factor group. In sum, genuine PASTP agreement is virtually nonexistent, as it rarely has the opportunity to be realized, but when it *is*, the only conditioning factor is lexical. The initial multivariate results did not show this, however, and delving more carefully into the data was essential to uncovering the lexical idiosyncrasies that characterize this phenomenon.

References

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