AN OVERVIEW OF FRENCH GRAMMAR: VERBAL AGREEMENT IN THE COMPOUND PAST

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Outline

- Introduction

- Definitions

- The Use of Auxiliaries in the Compound Past

- Gender and Number Agreement

- Exceptions

Introduction

- French is a Romance language that belongs to the Indo-European language family.

- French grammar is derived from Latin grammar.

- French is an inflected language:

❑ Nouns are inflected for number.

❑Adjectives are inflected for number and gender.

❑Most of the pronouns are inflected for person, number, gender and case.

❑Verbs are inflected for tense, aspect and mood.

Definitions

- *Le passé composé* (the compound past)

Refers to a completed action in the past or a past action that has a continuous effect in the present (Hawkins and Towell 2015). Different from *le passé simple* (simple past), which refers to a past action that cannot have continuous consequences in the present.

➢ When the action is completed in the past, the French compound past is the equivalent of the simple past in English.

➢ When the action has a continuous effect in the present, the French compound past is the equivalent of the present perfect in English.

Examples

(1) Les   élèves   ont   fini   leurs   devoirs   hier.
     ART   pupil.PL   AUX   finish.PTCP their   homework yesterday
     'The pupils finished their homework yesterday.'

➤ This sentences conveys a completed action in the past.

(2) L'homme   a   fait   une   erreur.
     ART.man   AUX   do.PTCP ART   mistake
     'The man has made a mistake.'

➤ Past action whose effect continues into the present.

- Agreement/Concord:

"the relationship between two grammatical units such that one of them displays a particular feature (e.g. plurality) that accords with a displayed (or semantically implicit) feature in the other" (Quirk et al. 1985:755).

Examples

(3) The women were happy about the situation.

> ➤ 3rd person plural feminine subject. The verb only agrees in number.

(4) Les   filles   sont   arrivées   en   Janvier.
ART   girl.PL   AUX   arrive.PTCP   in   January
'The girls arrived in January.'

> ➤ 3rd person plural feminine subject. Number and gender agreement markers are present on the past participle.

The Use of Auxiliaries in the Compound Past

When using the compound past in French, the past participles of the verbs do not always have to agree in gender and number. Agreement depends on the auxiliary used with the verb:

- *Le passé composé* using *avoir* (to have):

Most of the verbs in French take *avoir* as an auxiliary when conjugated in the compound past, and their past participles do not demonstrate gender and number agreement markers. This is the case with intransitive verbs and with transitive verbs when their direct object appears after the past participle.

Manger (to eat)
(5) Il   a   mangé   une   pomme.
    he   AUX   eat.PTCP   ART   apple
    'He ate an apple.'

The Use of Auxiliaries in the Compound Past

▪ *Le passé composé* using *être* (to be):
There are exactly 17 verbs that take *être* as an auxiliary when conjugated in the compound past. These are intransitive verbs that convey a meaning of movement or change of state. Their past participles demonstrate gender and number agreement markers.

aller (to go)
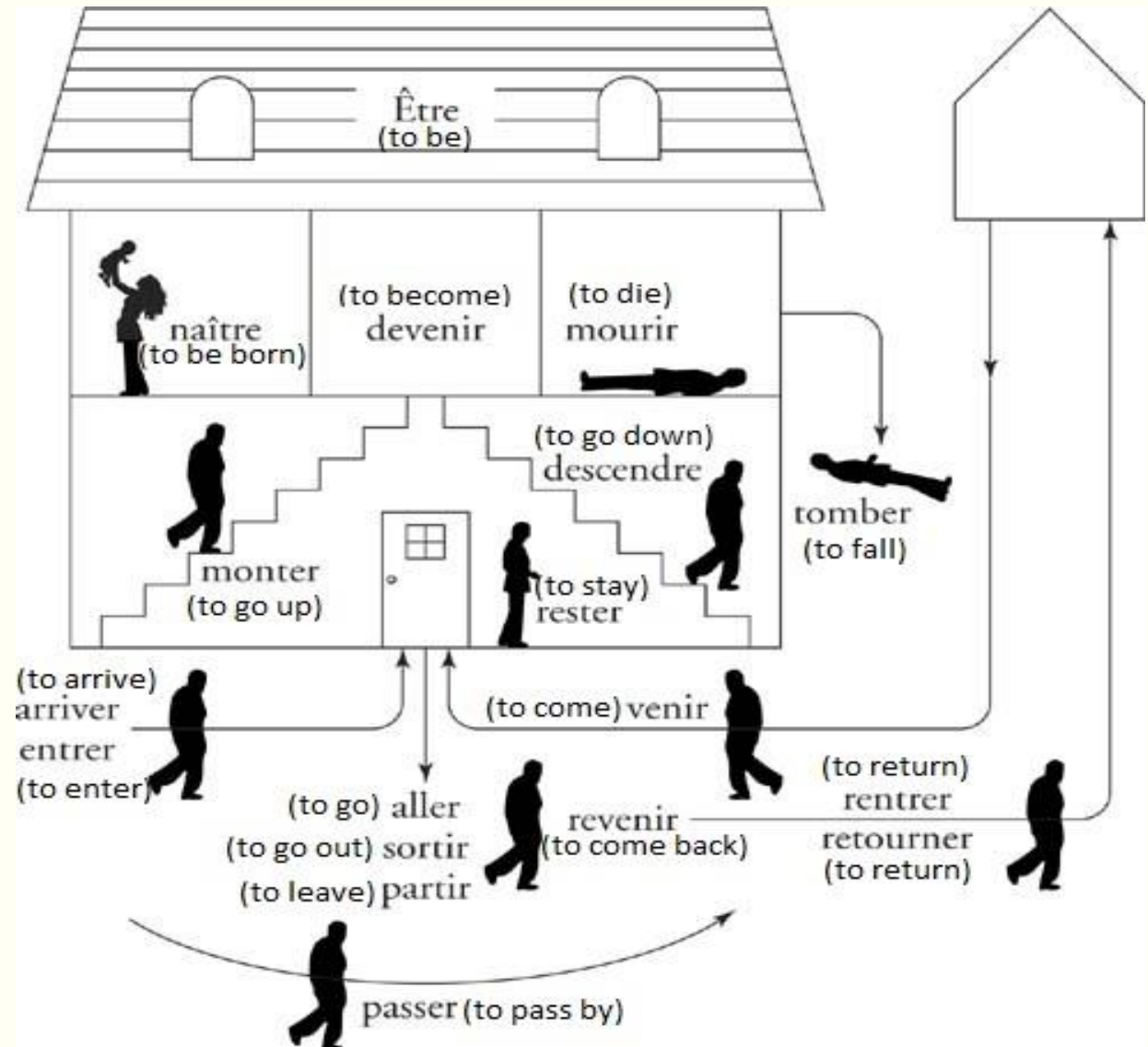(6) Elles   sont   allées   à   la   maison.
    They.F   AUX   go.PTCP   to   ART house
    'They went to the house.'

The 'house' of *être*

This figure is commonly used in teaching French: it illustrates all the verbs that take *être* as an auxiliary.

Gender and Number Agreement

- The past participles of verbs taking *être* as an auxiliary agree in gender (the addition of the suffix *-e* in the feminine) and in number (the addition of the suffix *-s* in the plural).

- All pronominal verbs use *être* as an auxiliary in the compound past.

Example:

se lever (to wake up)

(6) Marie   s'est   levée   le   matin.
     Mary   REFL.AUX   wake.up.PTCP ART   morning
     'Mary woke up in the morning.'

- The French pronominal clitic *se* always agrees in number (and person) with the subject of the sentence: this is explained by the fact that *se+verb* always selects the auxiliary *être* in compound tenses, namely in the compound past.

Exceptions

With the auxiliary verb *avoir*:

- In the case of intransitive verbs and transitive verbs with direct objects appearing **after** the past participle, the latter does not agree in number or gender.

- If the direct object appears **before** the past participle of transitive verbs, there is agreement in gender and number:

❑ Direct object pronouns:

(7) Je   les   ai   vus   hier.
    I   them   AUX   see.PTCP   yesterday
    'I saw them yesterday.'

❑Direct objects in wh-questions:

(8) Quelles   filles   as-tu   vues?
    which   girls   AUX.you   see.PTCP
    'Which girls did you see?'

❑Direct objects in relative clauses:

(9) La   fille   que   tu   as   vue   est   belle.
    ART   girl   that   you   AUX   see.PTCP   be.PRS   pretty
    'The girl that you saw is pretty'

Note:

- In examples (8) and (9), the past participle agrees with the direct object because it undergoes movement.

- The direct object can also be moved by passivization, cliticization, reflexivization or ergative verb raising. In these cases, agreement takes place.
(Bouchard 1987)

Glosses

AUX=Auxiliary
ART=Article
PL=Plural
PRS=Present
PTCP=Participle
REFL=Reflexive

References

Hawkins, R. & Towell, R. (2015). *French grammar and usage*. Routledge.

Bouchard, D. (1987). A Few Remarks on Past Participle Agreement. *Linguistics and Philosophy*, *10*(4), 449-474. http://www.jstor.org/stable/25001286

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