Where the Stitch Breaks
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This paper was written for Dr. Keith Lloyd’s Fundamental English Grammar. It compares the difference between the structure of the French and English language.

When William the Conqueror, Duke of Normandy, pierced England in 1066 at the Battle of Hastings, he threaded the English language with Norman French. For years, the ruling class wore the French weave as a social marker (McArthur 382), replacing the common fabric of Latin in such areas as “education, administration, and law” (Greenbaum 405) with the silky folds of the French tongue. Within two hundred years, the British had permanently stitched over 10,000 French words into the English language (Greenbaum 405), and in 1530, John Palsgrave wrote the first grammar of French, Lesclarcissement de la Langue François, in England (McArthur 382).

Although English remains embroidered with the colorful accents of the French tongue, there remain tears in the structural unity of the two languages evidenced in their grammars. I will uncover the most obvious seam splitters, but will decline delving into the messy undergarments for now.

The verb determines the grammatical pattern for the entire sentence. French and English agree with the VT verb pattern of subject, verb, and direct object. However, when it comes to Vg verbs, English, surprisingly, is the more flexible of the two. In English we can remove the word “to” from in front of the indirect object. French mandates the use of “to” whether the indirect object follows the verb or the direct object. For example, in English we can say, “He gave an apple to Sara” and “He gave Sara an apple.” French limits us to saying, “He gave an apple to Sara” or “He gave to Sara an apple” (Sato). If the indirect object is an object pronoun (to me, to you (singular informal), to him, to her, to us, to you (singular formal or formal), to them), it is moved to the slot immediately preceding the verb. “He gave the apple to me” becomes in French “He to me gave the apple” (Sato).

The direct object in French will follow the transitive verb unless the direct object is a personal pronoun. In English we say, “I walk the dog” or “I walk it (him).” In French the sentence reads, “I walk the dog” or “I it (him) walk” (Coffman 214).

“For” or “à,” respectively translated into “for” and “to,” precede the French indirect object, which can only be a person or animal. Some French verbs will not take a direct object while their English counterparts will only take a direct object. Conversely, other French verbs take a direct object, when the English equivalent takes the indirect object. I found the following examples online at French Grammar: Verbs & Objects: Indirect & Direct Objects:

French direct object
attendre un detective
chercher les clés

French indirect object
désobéir à l’institutrice

English indirect object
to wait for a detective
to look for the key

to disobey the teacher
Paula Sato, French instructor at Kent State University at Stark, and I uncovered something startling about VL verbs during our interview. I showed her the sentence “The cake tastes delicious” which contains the VL (linking) verb “taste” and the predicate adjective “delicious.” In French the predicate adjective never follows the verb “taste.” The French people always convert “taste” into a noun to form the sentence “The cake has a delicious taste.” The verb becomes a VT followed by a direct object. This change in the function of a word under certain conditions prompted me to submit a list of other linking verbs to Madame Sato in order to discover whether or not there was a rule forbidding predicate adjectives from trailing linking verbs. The verbs I chose were “appear, feel, seem, sound, become, look, and smell.” Not all the selected linking verbs transformed into nouns when followed by predicate adjectives, but these did - “sounds, looks, and appears.” When the original linking verb changed to a noun, the main verb became either BE or HAVE.

We can conjugate a present tense verb in English and arrive at the same spelling for all but the “he, she, and it” forms where we add an “s” (I go, you go, he goes, we go, you go, they go). In French, each verb changes its spelling according to the personal pronoun subject preceding it (je vais (I go), tu vas (you go), il va (he goes), nous allons (we go), vous allez (you go), and ils vont (they go)). Although the spelling of French verbs varies, for many verbs four out of the six verb conjugations sound alike. “Je parle, tu parles, il parle, and ils parlent” sound identical (Sato).

Here are some interesting verb choices in French. In English we would say, “It is cold.” The literal translation in French would be “It does cold.” “I am hungry” is translated “I have hunger.” “I am twenty years old” becomes “I have twenty years.” “I eat lunch” becomes “I take the lunch” (Sato). In French there are many expressions that use the verb HAVE which are conveyed by using the verb BE in English. For example, “I have sleep” translates into “I am sleepy” in English. “To have fear of” changes into “to be afraid” (Terrell et al. 162).

The perfect aspect in English utilizes the auxiliary HAVE and the past participle. When auxiliary BE works in conjunction with the past participle, the sentence becomes passive. In French HAVE and BE can precede the past participle without making the sentence passive. The French have assigned HAVE its own past participles, and BE also has its own list. A sentence becomes passive when an auxiliary BE combines with a past participle that is assigned to work exclusively in tandem with auxiliary HAVE (Sato).

In English we might say the classic Vg sentence “Someone gave me the book.” The passive version of this Vg sentence reads, “I was given the book.” However, in French the indirect object “me” would never become the subject “I” in the sentence. Instead of writing a passive sentence headed by the subject “I”, the French would write, “On me donne le livre” which is translated “One to me gives the book” or “Le livre m’a été donné” roughly translated “The book to me was given.” In French the personal indirect object of an active verb...cannot, except in rare cases, become the subject of a passive verb” (Staaks xii).

In the perfect aspect, we could say in English, “The woman had dressed quickly” or “The woman quickly dressed.” In French, a short adverb moves into the slot between the auxiliary HAVE and the past participle. A long adverb follows the past participle. “Le bateau a vite coulé”
demonstrates the short adverb “vite” placed in the slot between the auxiliary (a) and the past participle (coulé). “Le bateau a coulé rapidement” exemplifies a long adverb filling the slot that follows the entire verb. The sentences have the same meaning, but the placement of the adverbs varies according to their length” (Sato).

French is not a unisex language. The girl grammar components wear dresses, and the boy grammar components wear pants. In other words, gender plays an important role in French grammar, making French more difficult to master than English, because the various parts must be in agreement. Nouns are either masculine or feminine. Adjectives adjust themselves to the gender of the noun they are modifying. Definite articles “le and la” and indefinite articles “un and une” also agree with the gender of the noun they modify (Terrell et al. 13). Articles before nouns are plural if the noun is plural (Terrell et al. 17).

The definite article can replace possessive pronoun determiners that modify such things as body parts and clothes when the subject of the sentence is clear. For example, in English we say, “He scratched his head.” In French the definite article replaces the possessive pronoun determiner, and the sentence reads, “He scratched the head” (Coffman 54). When we are missing a person’s name or a personal pronoun subject, we place the personal pronoun determiner before the body part just as we do in English. In the sentence “Her hair is blond,” “her hair” identifies an unspecified female subject, and “Her hair is blond” replaces the sentence “She has the hair blond. Some verbs, such as “show, look, and give” emphasize the body part, so we use the possessive pronoun determiner instead of the definite article (Coffman 54).

There is a partitive article in French indicating a quantity that cannot be counted. The French substitute “du, de l’, de la” for this quantity. In English we say, “I drank coffee today.” The French never leave out the partitive article, so the sentence will always read, “I drank some coffee today” (Terrell et al. 125, 126).

The pronoun “en” takes the place of a noun and its partitive article. In the sentence “I want some coffee (Je veux du café), you can eliminate “some coffee” and use “en”. The sentence will then read, “I some want,” because “some” moves to fill the slot in front of the verb, and the reader perceives the identity of the missing noun. In a sentence with an infinitive like “I want to eat some pickles,” we remove “some pickles” and write, “I want some to eat” placing the pronoun “en” before the infinitive instead of using the English expression “I want to eat some.” In English we can say, “I want some to eat,” but it is more common to say, “I want to eat some” (Terrell et al. 254).

If we say, “I wash the car,” the grammatical order of the words remains the same in both French and English. However, when people do something to their own bodies, the reflexive pronoun (myself, yourself, himself, herself, itself, ourselves, yourselves, and themselves) kicks in. The reflexive pronoun fills the slot between the subject and verb. In French we say, “I to myself wash the hands.” In English it would read, “I wash my hands.” All eight reflexive pronouns in English are unique. In French the reflexive pronoun for “(to) himself, (to) herself, (to) itself, and (to) themselves” is the same word – “se” (Sato).

The French never use “’s” to form an inflected possessive noun. They employ “de” which is equivalent to our English word “of.” So instead of “Mom’s book,” they say, “the book of Mom” (Sato).
The last exposed seam I wish to address is the positioning of adjectives. English adjectives normally precede the noun that they modify. In French the majority of adjectives follow the noun. The adjectives that precede the noun are limited, and most of them seem to describe personal or physical characteristics of people such as the adjectives “beautiful, fat, tall, or old” (Coffman 35). Some adjectives change meaning when they change position. Mary Coffman in French Grammar offers this example. “Sa propre chambre” means “his or her own room.” However, “une chambre propre” means “a clean room” (Coffman 38).

These examples are only a handful of the broken threads between the two languages. Although English is taught worldwide for the convenience of commerce, the French people will continue to wrap themselves within the intimate cloak of their own language, preferring to glory in its sound whose effect has been maximized by manipulating word order, rather than to repair the tears between the two languages and imitate “barking dogs” (Sato).

Works Cited


Sato, Paula. Personal interview. 15 Nov. 2011.
