

French Affixal System and its Semantic Description

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Abstract

This research, in a descriptive way, presents the semantic morphology of the French derivation system. It also covers the semantic possibilities of the French affixal system. According to the relevant research, the derivation allows to pass from one lexical unit to another. This passage is made by means of the affixes. Indeed, by virtue of their coded meaning, they convey a semantic instruction that specifies the type of semantic operation to be performed on the sense of the base to construct the global sense of the derived form. Based on the same direction, our work will study the semantic value of the affixal derivation, focusing on the different values of the affixes. This also leads us to study in part the synonymy and the homonymy of the affixes which conveys to us information about their meaning.

Key words: Derivation, Affixes, French, Semantic description, Affix values

INTRODUCTION

The derivation roughly allows to «pass» from one lexical unit to another. As far as the affixal derivation is concerned, this passage is effected by means of the derivative or derivative affixes which bear meaning. Traditionally, by derivation is meant a process of creating lexical units whose derivative created retains a morphological relationship with the base from which it derives.

The semantic representation of the derivation which is commonly done and which is presented as such in the grammars, is limited to the morphological derivation, that is to the derivation relations between morphologically related lexical units.

We also talk about the semantic derivation. Is it different from the morphological derivation? In general, it allows to derive from the senses, without the derived units and their bases being formally close. The various derivatives of a lexical unit thus form a more or less important set depending on whether the unit is productive or not. Indeed,

semantic derivatives are paradigmatic semantic relations that are sufficiently recurrent in the language. We can thus distinguish semantic derivatives from morphological derivatives. Since this research concerns the semantic description of the French affix system, it studies the morphological derivatives, while alluding to the semantic derivatives. All the consciousness of a derivation is based on the affix and opposes the units prefixed to the suffixes, the affixal system which underlies the derived lexicon being constituted by two subsets: that of the suffixes and that of the prefixes.

To deal well with the semantic description of the French affix system we try to work on the value of affixal derivation and affixes. Functionally, the derivative is either a categorizer or a semantic modifier. The categorizer transfers the sign to another part of the speech. The semantic modifier modifies the meaning, the signified, this is clear for the diminutives, the suffix adds a particular value.

The same values are often manifested by several affixes in the morphological world, and this is a very remarkable case in the suffixal system. This imposes in the French lexicon the different paradigms of derived units with similar values, constructed with a variety of affixes. An examination of the distribution of affixes with similar values shows that these affixes are not all alike. They have small individual variations and the similarities are only an appearance. This does not prevent us from considering that each of these affixes has its peculiarities and its own combinatorial morphological and semantic possibilities.

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The last part of our work focuses on the study of synonymy and the homonymy of suffixes, to provide further information on their meanings. We will notice that several suffixes can have the same meaning and vice versa, the same suffix can have several meanings. This means that some suffixes are polysemic. The homonymy of the suffixes results, on the other hand, from the phonetic development of the suffixes which originally were different particles.

Semantic Value of the Affixed Derivation

In the construction of derived units, the syntagmatic relationship¹ (Martinet, *Éléments de linguistique*, 1960, p. 27) between the base and the affix is duplicated by a paradigmatic relationship² (Ibid) of the derived unit with the set of units of the unit to which it belongs. It is therefore by double reference to the affix and its affixal field that a derivative is recognized, for example in the series circulation, absorption, augmentation, modification., the common trait of these derivatives is to belong to the paradigm. Of the action names formed with the suffix -tion added to a verb base. As we have explained, the derivation provides the transition from one lexical unit to another. As far as the affixal derivation is concerned, this passage is effected by means of the derivative affixes which bear meaning. According to Riegel, “[Derivative affixes] play the dual role, as a constituent, of a constructed form and as an operator constructing meaning in relation to the basis to which they are added. Indeed, by virtue of their coded meaning, they convey a semantic instruction that specifies the type of semantic operation to be performed on the sense of the base

1. The relationships between the units in the statement (which) are called syntagmatic and are directly observable. In the sentence: it is a good beer, these are for example the (good) relations with its neighbors. To describe these relations, we must reserve the term of contrasts (According to Martinet).
2. The linguistic units are in two distinct types of relationship. We have on the one hand the relations in the statement which are called syntagmatic. On the other hand, we have the relations which we conceive between units which may appear in the same context; and which, at least in this context, are mutually exclusive. These relationships are called paradigmatic and are referred to as oppositions. (According to Martinet)

to construct the global sense of the derived form. Thus the suffix -ier of apple tree selects in the sense of apple base the notion of a well defined type of fruit to build that of the tree that produces this fruit. (Riegel *et Pellat et Rioul*, 1994, p. 542). Other examples for derivation affixes can be given (Mel'èuk, 1993- 2000: volume 2: 2^e partie, p. 287):

-*eur* corresponds to the meaning ‘the one who makes X’: *dans-eur* = ‘he who dances’, *march-eur* = ‘he who walks’, and so on.

-*erie* is the place where you make X professionally: *parfum-erie* is the place where you make and sell perfume, *pâtis-erie* the shop where you make and sell pastry products, etc.

-*able* corresponds to ‘as can be the X-er’: *mange-able*, *support-able*, *fais-able*, etc.

Re- corresponds to ‘again’: *re-peindre*, *re-descendre*, etc.

The various derivatives of a lexical unit thus form a more or less important set depending on whether the unit is productive or not. The representation of the derivation which is commonly made and which is presented as such in the grammars, is limited to the morphological derivation, that is to say to the derivative relations between morphologically related lexical units. Semantic derivatives are paradigmatic semantic relations that are sufficiently recurrent in the language to be noticed. Polguère (Polguère, 2000 p. 517) presents the semantic derivation as follows:

“There exists a semantic derivation link between two lexical units L1 and L2 in one of the three cases:

- 1) L1 and L2 convey approximately the same meaning. L2 is a (almost) synonymous, generic or conversive of L1, if it belongs to the same part of the discourse; otherwise, L2 is a verbal, nominal, adjectival or adverbial correlative of L1.” Thus, the lexical units *maison* and *demeure* are quasi-synonyms, therefore, they maintain a relation of semantic derivation; *meuble* is a semantic derivative of *armoire* since it is its hyperonym; *vendre* and *acheter* are conversives, so they are in relation semantic derivation.
- 2) “L1 and L2 have opposite meanings. L2 is a (quasi-) antonym of L1.” *Vertical*, for example, is an antonym, and therefore, a semantic derivative of *horizontal*.
- 3) “L2 designates an element of the situation designated by L1.” This is, for example, the relationship between *meurtre* and *meurtrier* (typical name of the first actant of ‘meurtre’) or between *meurtre* and *victime* (typical name of the second actant of ‘meurtre’).

In the Introduction to Explanatory and Combinatory Lexicology (Mel'èuk *et al.*, 1995, p. 133), the authors oppose semantic derivatives, syntactic derivatives. They consider as syntactic derivatives, lexical units having changed syntactic category without having acquired a component of additional meaning. For example, *chute* is the nominalization of *tomber*, *pendant* is the adverbialization to *durer*, *présidentiel* is the adjectivization of *président*, *juré* the verbalization of the *serment*: all these derivatives thus formed retain strictly

the same meaning as that of the lexical unity of which they are derived. They allow a reformulation, a paraphrase.

Traditionally, by derivation is meant a process of creating lexical units whose derivative created retains a morphological relationship with the base from which it derives. More broadly, a semantic derivation is envisaged, it makes it possible to derive from the senses without the derived units and their bases being formally close. A derivative is characterized by the form and value of the suffix, but also by the grammatical nature and genus of the base [syntagmatic part which produces sequences represented by the syntagmatic indicator (used to mark the relations of certain units with others Elements of the statement), on which the transformations apply]. For *vernissage*, *-age* denotes the action, that is to say the *vernir*. These are names of actions. This suffix attaches to a verbal basis and provides male names. In spite of a formal coincidence, *-age* of *pèlerinage* has a different status, it attaches to a nominal base, as *veuvage*. From the point of view of value, the two morphemes are also distinguished, *pèlerinage* is not a name for action, it is a condition or a state. Not only do the suffixes differ in form but also in terms of employment. Deverbatives (derivatives formed on a verb) are therefore opposed to denominatives (derivatives formed on a noun or an adjective).

A third group was reported by Benveniste: the derivative delocutives (derived from a phrase), for example *remercier*. It is not built on the noun *merci*, but on the locution *merci!* (= Say thank you). The process does not exist except in modern languages.

Functionally, the derivative is either a categorizer or a semantic modifier. The categorizer transfers the sign to another part of the speech. The suffix *-er* causes a verb to be placed in the class of names (cf. *enseignement* and *enseigner*), the verb becomes a name. The semantic modifier modifies the meaning, the signified, this is clear for the diminutives, the suffix adds a particular value: *maisonnette*, *maison*; but both are names.

The importance of derivation as a means of expressing a language is relatively poor in French today, Italian is very flexible but French remains much more strict. A suffixal field (set of derivatives) does not always form a perfectly homogeneous set. For example: in French, the names of agents in *-eur*, it is still a type of derivative deverbative (*penser*, *penseur*). The word in *-eur* denotes the one who performs the action expressed by the basic verb. On the formal level, we also have a *-teur*, *-ateur* or *-iteur* (*sauveur*, *sauveteur*, *serveur*, *serviteur*).

There is also a situation which is not homogeneous on the semantic level, *-eur* applies either to a profession or to a

person who performs an act in a particular situation. There are many trade names (*imprimeur*) and sometimes the author of an act (*promeneur*, *parleur*). Sometimes one and the same word refers sometimes to one or the other (*danseur*, *voyageur*). These two functions are distinguished syntactically, these two subclasses do not lend themselves to the same use.

Profession names lend themselves to preaching (*il est danseur*), but not to those who dance on a particular occasion. These words in *-eur* transpose a verbal expression, they are deverbative. However, the corresponding verbal statement sometimes involves a determination in adverbial form. '*Il vend bien*' becomes '*un bon vendeur*'. In this syntagma, *bon* does not have its usual meaning (*un gros mangeur* eats a lot but is not necessarily big or *gros*), so we have a semantic sliding. These transposition mechanisms have a wider extension. Agent names finished by *-ant* have the same remarks (*un bon étudiant*, *un petit commerçant*). The adjectives are employed in a way to the second degree. There is a spirit of competition, the suffixes are defined in relation to each other.

The distinction between professional agent and author of an act is also found in the words finished by *-ant*. *Représentant* (trade) can be used as a predicate, but *passant* does not relate to a permanent status, but to a current state, so it is wrong to say *il est passant*. The basis of these derivatives finished by *-eur* and *-ant* is formed both on transitive and intransitive verbs, so we have common traits. *Diseur* (transitive), *parleur* (intransitive). The referent refers sometimes to persons, sometimes to objects, most often to persons, but not exclusively.

A *distributeur* can be a person or thing. In this particular object reference function, *-eur* refers to a device and *-ant* to a product (*tranquillisant*, *colorant*). This is a significant and significant difference. There are, therefore, no morphemes which are quite synonymous. A precise difference of *-eur* and *-ant* occurs in doublets, sometimes the two derivatives: *exploiteur* and *exploitant*, one exploits his staff abusively, the other does it normally. French also provides *passieur* and *passant*, one passes (transitive verb), the other passes in the intransitive sense. In adjectival jobs, there are clear differences: *des yeux charmeurs* or *des yeux charmants* (one actively charming, the other passively or naturally). The derivative in *-eur* has a dynamic connotation, it expresses an agentif process, the derivative in *-ant* simply relates an objective process. According to the various studies on the derivation in *-ier* (*e*), it can be concluded that it is organized around two models:

- According to model 1, which brings together all the names of animates, adjectives and part of the non-animates, the suffix *-ier* (*e*) forms nouns and adjectives that maintain a diversified "pragmatic" relationship

with their base; for the names, the attribution of the gender is done according to a disjunctive logic (determined implicit, generic or pseudo neutral).

- Depending on model 2, the suffix *-ier (e)* only forms animated names such that, the derived name contains the base name, with inversion of the kind of the base.

By simplifying to the extreme, from a few typical examples that will serve as landmarks, one can thus schematize the semantic relation that associates the derivative with its base:

- 1) “The *potier* makes *pots*. The *poulinière* makes *poulains*. The *tisonnier* is used to shake the *tisons*. The referent of the derivative (or its rector name) is characterized by what it does. The semantic operation is based on an agentive relationship. The derivative designates the agent or instrument, the base designates the object. I will call “agents” the derivatives of this first series, by far the most important “(Corbin D. et Corbin P., 1991, p.73).
- 2) “The *buronnier* makes cheeses in a *buron*. A *côtière* region is near the *côte*. The *plafonnier* is on the *plafond*. The referent of the derivative (or its name rector) is characterized by the place where it is located. The semantic operation is based on a location report. The base designates the location. I will call the derivatives of this second series “locatives”¹ (Ibid, p.73).

1. The parallelism between agentive and locative must not be confusing. The locative derivatives are not place names, but names that locate their referent by locating it at the location designated by the base.

- 3) “The *phalanger* has *phalanges* “singularly conformed”. *Coquillier* limestone contains *coquilles*. The *verdier* is a bird of *verte* color. The referent of the derivative (or its rector name) is characterized by one of its elements or constituent traits. The semantic operation is based on a synecdochic relation. The derivative designates the whole, the base the part. I will call the derivatives of this third series “synecdochic” (Ibid, p.74).
- 4) “A *princière* look is characteristic of a *prince*. A *régulier* verb complies with the *règle*. A *cuvier* is a kind of *cuve*. The referent of the derivative (or its rector name) is characterized by what it is, actually or metaphorically. The semantic operation is based on an identification report. I will call “derivatives of identification” the derivatives of this fourth series “(Ibid, p.74).

Different Values of Affixes

In this predominant morphological world, the same values are often manifested by several affixes, and this is a very remarkable case in the suffixal system. This imposes in the French lexicon the different paradigms of derived units with similar values, constructed with

a variety of affixes, for example series formed with the suffixes: *-age, -ment, -tion, -ade, -son, -ance*, can represent the names of action: *perforage, balaiement, autodestruction, baignade, livraison, suffisance,...*

This variety of affixes for the same value is still marked by a variety of morphological variants for a multitude of these affixes: some linguists recognize five variants of the suffix *-tion* (*-ssion, -sion, -xion, -ition, -ation*), Others add further (*-isation, -ification*). The prefix *mes-* has two variants (*mé-, mal-*).

The variants of a single suffix often come into play, causing semantic differentiations. Some variants may be more vital than others and may be added to bases of various origins, or form terms for various lexicons. A synonymy might be suggested by this information. But by adopting the hypothesis of an economical and utilitarian language, it is better to deny any perfect synonymy in the affixal system, just as the lexical system in general.

It happens that there are two realizations of the name derived by two suffixes (this is the case especially of *-age/-ment*):

- *Gondolage, gondolemen;*
- *Laçage, lacement;*
- *Réglage, règlement;*
- *Décollage, décollement*

Two cases are possible: either the semantic differentiation is null as for *laçage/lacement* (action and lacer result) or *gondolage/gondolement* (gondoler action), or it takes place according to a specialization of two vocabularies: We have the *décollage* of the plane, but the *décollement* of the retina.

The similarity of use is in the majority of cases accompanied by a rapprochement in terms of combinatorics, for example: all the names of actions are derived from verbal bases. This phenomenon of similarity of use, the presence of variants is explained not only by the variety of origins but also by the vitality of the affix itself. Indeed, affixes are elements of construction that are elaborated, transformed through the diachronic movements of the lexicon.

On examining the different distributions of affixes with similar values, it appears that these affixes are not all absolutely similar. They have small individual variations and the similarities are only an appearance. Of course, it is difficult to establish a theory with sure criteria, but this does not prevent us from considering that each of these affixes has its peculiarities and its own combinatorial morphological and semantic possibilities.

According to their meaning the nominal suffixes can be divided into four essential categories: 1) Suffixes which

form names designating things. 2) Suffixes that form names of persons. 3) Suffixes that form abstract names. 4) Appreciative suffixes (diminutives, augmentative, pejorative, etc.).

Nominal Suffixes for Names of Things

-ade, f (popular) – colonnade; *-age, m* (pop) – feuillage; *-ail, m* (pop) – gouvernail; *-aille, f* (pop) – ferraille; *-ain, m* (pop) – quatrain; *-aine, f* (pop) – douzaine; *-aire, m* (scientific) – formulaire; *-ard, (pop)* – buvard; *-as, m* (pop) – plâtras; *-asse, f* – paperasse *-at, m* (scientific) – internat; *-ateur, m* (scientific) – réfrigérateur; *-ature, f* (scientific) – armature; *-ée, f* (pop) – bouchée; *-eau, m* (pop) – ciseau; *-elle, f* (pop) – passerelle; *-erie, f* (pop) – blancherie; *-ette, f* (pop) – allumette; *-euse, f* (pop) – batteuse; *-ier (ière) (pop)* – encrier, cafetière; *-ine* (scientific) – aspirine; *-ite* (scientific) – bronchite; *-oir (-oire) m, f* (pop) – rasoir, conservatoire; *-on, m* (pop) – bouchon; *-ure, f* (pop) – armure, dorure.

The suffixes *-ine* and *-ite* are scientific suffixes, used chiefly in medical terminology: the first to mark chemicals, the second for the names of diseases.

Nominal Suffixes for Names of Persons

Most commonly used: *-ain, -aine, m, f* (pop) – Américain; *-aire, m, f* (scientific) – révolutionnaire; *-ais, -aise, m, f* (pop) – Anglais; *-and, -ande, m, f* (pop) – Normand; *-ard, -arde, m, f* (pop) – campagnard; *-atèur, -atrice, m, f* (scientific) – agitateur, cantatrice; *-eur, m, -euse, f* (pop) – chauffeur, blancheuse; *-ien, -ienne, m, f* (scientific) – praticien; *-ier, -ière, m, f* (pop) – menuisier; *-iste, m, f* (scientific) – dentiste; *-ois, -oise, m, f* (pop) – Danois; *-on, -onne* (pop) – fripon.

Nominal Suffixes for Abstract Notions

-ade, f (pop) – bravade; *-age, m* (pop) – passage; *-aison, f* (pop) – déclinaison; *-ance, f* (pop) – assistance; *-at, m* (scientific) – prolétariat; *-ature, f* (scientific) – signature; *-ence, f* (scientific) – prudence; *-erie, f* (pop) – camaraderie; *-esse, f* (pop) – sagesse; *-eur, f* (pop) – grandeur; *-ie, f* (pop) – jalousie; *-ise, f* (pop) – franchise; *-isme, m* (scientific) – marxisme; *-ité, f* (scientific) – égalité; *-ment, m* (pop) – avancement; *-té, f* (pop) – beauté; *-tude, f* (scientific) – exactitude; *-ure, f* (pop) – rupture.

Appreciative Nominal Suffixes

-aille (collective and pejorative) – canaille; *-ard* (augmentative and pejorative) – gueulard; *-aud* (pejorative) – rougeaud; *-eau* (diminutive) – renardeau; *-elet, -elette* (diminutive with tenderness) – maigrelet, femmelette; *-creau, -erelle* (depreciative) – poëtereau; *-eron* (diminutive, caressing) – moucheron; *-et, -ette* (diminutive, caressing) – jardinet; *-illon, -illonne* – oisillon; *-on* (diminutive, augmentative) – ourson, ballon; *-ot, -otte* (diminutive) – menotte.

All appreciative suffixes are of popular origin. Nominal suffixes include not only the suffixes of nouns, but also those of adjectives. Many suffixes of substantives serve at the same time to form adjectives (suffixes of persons and appreciative suffixes), such as: *-ain, -aine, -ais, -aise, -ard, -ature, -atrice, -aud, -éen, -elet, -et, -ette, -eur, -euse, -ien, -ienne, -ier (-ère), -in, -iste, -ois, -oise, -ot, -otte*.

Besides these suffixes common to substantives and adjectives, there are particular adjectival suffixes such as: *-able* (admirable), *-al (-alle)* – national, *-âtre* (rougeâtre), *-el (-elle)* – accidentel, *-esque* (pittoresque), *-eux (-euse)* – joyeux, *-ible* (admissible), *-if (-ive)* – craintif, *-ième* (dixième), *-ique* (atomique), *-u* (barbu).

The prefixes do not change the words to such a point as the suffixes. The prefix, like an initial syllable that adds to the words, communicating to them a certain new nuance. The suffix can pass the word from one part of the speech to another. While the prefix does not have this function. Prefixes may be added to nominal or verbal radicals, but they form new names (nouns or adjectives) or new verbs respectively. For example, the prefixes «*dé(s)*», «*in-*», «*mé(s)-*», in addition to a nominal or adjectival radical form nouns or adjectives: *bonheur – désbonheur, fini – infini, content – mécontent*.

Different prefixes are added to the verb «*poser*»: *exposer, imposer, interposer, juxtaposer, opposer, préposer, proposer, reposer*», and form only new verbs.

The appearance of new words formed with prefixes and especially with the help of negative prefixes and the prefix «*re-*» testifies to the vitality of this training in the language of today.

The Synonymy and Homonymy of Suffixes

Several suffixes can have the same meaning and vice versa, the same suffix can have several meanings. Suffixes expressing the same idea are called synonymous suffixes. For example, to express the idea of a person from a country, French has the suffixes: *-ais, -ois, -ien, -ain* (*an, and*). Ex.: *Français, Chinois, Italien, Américain, Allemand, Castillan*. To express the idea of an abstract quality exist the suffixes *-eur, -esse, -erie, -té, -ité*, which, added to an adjectival radical, form feminine names: *fraîcheur, tendresse, étourderie, fermeté, gravité*.

In spite of their synonyms, these suffixes are not interchangeable, that is to say, they can not be added indifferently to any adjectival radical, but only to that which is established according to custom: thus «*tendre*» can only be formed «*tendresse*».

In order to form names of agent, of action, or of one who exercises a profession, a profession, there are suffixes which may be added to the verbal and nominal radicals.

For example, *-aire- notaire, -ateur – aviateur; -eur, -euse – mineur; -ien, -ienne – technicien, -ier – conférencier, -teur (trice) – acteur.*

The list of synonymic suffixes makes us see at the same time that several suffixes are repeated to express different ideas, that is to say that certain suffixes are polysemic. For example, the suffix *-ier(arum)* forms derivatives with a wide variety of meanings. These derivatives designate: 1) names of things: (*un soupir*); 2) the names of persons: (*serrurier, portier*). It also serves to form adjectives of different meanings: *printanier*.

The homonymy of the suffixes results, on the other hand, from the phonetic development of the suffixes which originally were different particles. For example, “-eur», masculine suffix, derived from “-atorem» and “-eum», feminine suffix, designating an abstract quality, derived from “-orem».

The suffixial derivation is a very productive means of word formation in modern French, especially in the domain of nouns and adjectives. This is the nominal bypass par excellence.

CONCLUSION

Our work consisted in offering a more or less satisfactory presentation of the semantic morphology of the French derivation system. We have also tried to deal with the semantic possibilities of the French affix system. To achieve this we have examined, explained the different values of affixes. We also presented four essential categories of nominal suffixes, while studying their semantic content. Finally, to complete the semantic presentation of the affixes, the last part of this research was intended for synonymy and homonymy of suffixes. During our work, in order to make more understandable the ideas presented and the results drawn, we have always taken into consideration the presentation of the examples.

We have shown that the lexical functions must be considered, since they give a clear and systematic account of the semantic relations between the different morphological derivatives of terms.

At the end of this work, which led us to examine a number of drifts, then to analyze in general the mechanism of affixation in French, and more particularly the prefixes and suffixes, we are able to answer the questions previously asked about derivational morphology and the semantic content of affixes.

We have come to the conclusion that it is now undeniable that it is necessary to associate form and meaning in a

morphological operation of word construction, since meaning, although it often experiences semantic-referential adjustments, is always predictable at least partially during a lexical construction. If later, the word constructed changes meaning, it does as any other word of the language. Thus, we have reaffirmed that the prefix has, besides its semantic instruction, a power to create new words, such as the suffix. The meaning of the derived word is determined by the meaning of the suffix and the meaning of the radical to which it is added.

Obviously, the lines of thought outlined so far need to be checked and elaborated by subsequent work, for we think that it is useful to carry out a reflection supported by a broader set of terms, in order to extract other derivatives that we were not found in the sources studied. In addition, there is much room for specific and detailed studies on the use and effectiveness of affixes in the formation of words concerning the various technical and scientific fields.

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