

## French Liaison and the Constraint on Optionality

French liaison is amongst the most interesting of topics for the world's linguists. Of particular interest is its indication of the interface between phonetics, phonology, syntax and semantics. The descriptions of French *liaison* have achieved remarkable findings; though this has been, as always, at the expense of explanation.

Much has been written on the relation of styles and liaison in French and on the nature of the groups which determine the boundaries of phonetic cohesion constituting *liaison* or *enchaînement* in usage. Of more interest has been the discussion of what determines the latent liaison consonant and its triggering. We cannot, for instance, take it for granted that the latent final consonant will always be a direct reflex of its orthographic form; or even simply the final consonant of its stem. For example, the *enchaînement* consonant of *grand* is not [ŋ] but [Σ] as in *grand homme* [v:Σ ʁ:Σ Σ Σ ], even though in derivation, the latent consonant is [ŋ], as in *grandeur* [v:Σ ʁ:Σ Σ Σ ].

It is a necessary part of a strong argument, for example, to claim that *enchaînement* is the default arrangement; but an adequate theory of human language must also be constrained by considerations of the limitations on *enchaînement*. Where *enchaînement* does occur, it is the domain of syntactic and semantic relations.

It is easy to show that *enchaînement* operates between governor and the domain of government. This can be illustrated by the following examples. *Liaison* and *enchaînement* operate, when they occur, across phrases:

*Prepositional phrase*: sans\_eux; avec\_elles: PP  
*Noun phrase*: les\_autres\_artistes ; mes\_insoucians\_amis: NP  
*Verb phrase*: avons-nous | une fortune; vous\_êtes\_au sommet: VP  
*Adjectival phrase*: fort\_heureux; mal\_éclairé : AP  
*Adverbial phrase* : en\_avant; avec\_élan.

NB. The Adverbial phrase is formally identical with PP. The term Adverbial phrase is a role label.

The syntactic and semantic blocks on such default *enchaînement* are usually summarised as those which would otherwise distort important structural relations.



- c) Les chiens affamés de la chasse aboyaient dans la nuit
- d) Les musiciens affolés de la musique de chez leur voisins jouaient une cacophonie
- e) Les gens épatés par la foule restaient là bouche bée

The French speaker faced by the interpretation or utterance of (1a) and (2a) would be very likely to take them at face-value, as synonymous. Yet, there is no doubt of the fundamental contrast between these two sentences. While, in (1a), there could be a liaison between *personnes* and *âgées*, no such link would be possible in the careful spoken form of (2a).

The uncertainty is widespread even in this small corner of the interlevels in French. It is not difficult to see how speakers begin to doubt the systematic nature of French liaison. Sentences in (3) and (4) demonstrate the complexity of interpretation and utterance.

- (3)a) La fenêtre était fermée
- b) La fenêtre était fermée par une immense pierre
- (4)a) Les jeunes gens difficiles quant à leur conduite ne disent rien.
- b) Les jeunes gens difficiles à comprendre ne disent rien.

It is not always clear how a difference of this kind can be explained

- (5)a) [[[Les personnes][<sub>AP</sub> âgées]]mangent très peu]
- b) [Les personnes [<sub>AP</sub> âgées [<sub>MP</sub> de [<sub>DP</sub> moins de] Num 5 ans]] mangent très peu]

In (5) (a) and (b) are contrasted, not by a difference in the lexical content of the adjective *âgées*, but in the structure of the entailment of the adjectives in each of the examples. (5a) has a simple adjective, representing equally the phrasal content, the lexical content and the intermediate level. By contrast, the adjective in (5b) has a different structure at each of its levels: *les personnes* [<sub>AP</sub> [<sub>A</sub> âgées] [<sub>PP</sub> de] [<sub>MP</sub> moins] [<sub>DP</sub> de cinq ans]].

## References

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