

Self-presentation

1. Accreditation book

Histoire d'S ou le participe passé au Rasoir d'Ockham (L'Harmattan, 2016)

The French past participle agreement whatsoever, constructed without an auxiliary, used with the verb "*avoir*" or auxiliated by "*être*" is the subject we have chosen to address in this book.

Why agreement of the past participle?

The least that can be said of agreement of the French past participle is that it leaves no one indifferent: purists like to see it applied as it should be, linguists want to reform it in depth, pedagogues dream to find its magic formula, users will see it either as the spearhead of grammar and observe it religiously, or as a set of preposterous instructions and sharply denigrate it, journalists point annually to the alarming decline in the level of spelling in official examination and competition papers, not to mention the legislature, who appears not to know, either, to which agreement to turn to. In response to this mass phenomenon, the traditional obedience censorship generally covers users with opprobrium, readily accused of expressing themselves, mostly in the oral form, too casually.

From a strictly linguistic point of view, however, it seems illusory - and unfounded - to consider that usage could be the only factor responsible for this situation. Indeed, at a closer look, the agreement system itself is not exempt of responsibility, far from being so: firstly, because it relies on many rules, often straddling syntax and semantics, and thus requires, at a minimum, advanced capabilities in functional analysis (mostly), with all that that implies in knowledge and grammatical expertise; secondly, because it contains moult exceptions, where agreement is prescribed or because it contains numerous exceptions when agreement is prescribed or, conversely, is proscribed either against evidence, or either against linguistic intuition, not to mention various special cases, including ambivalences; thirdly, because agreement rules that come up most often, such as, for example, the position rule or that of verbs which are occasionally reflexive (pronominal), undeniably create perplexity at least, within contemporary usage. This dense set of rules, grammatical prerequisites, special cases and other exceptions to be integrated, in both oral and written forms, has succeeded in constituting today a cognitive load that many users clearly do not assume (either because they cannot do so, or either because they do not want to do so), who, when they do not simply and purely drop it out altogether, follow an individual logical substitution rule, usually simpler and faster than that observed in standard grammatical French. Not to mention the more harmful, at least from our point of view: indeed, none of the reform proposals - and God knows there have been a good amount- raised by the past participle agreement in general since the nineteenth century has succeeded so far to reconcile the different decision makers!

For us, however, if the situation is alarming, it is not desperate, convinced as we are, indeed, that the past participle agreement system can be saved, and at a low cost. This, however, can be done so on one condition: return to the linguistic system itself to methodically break it down, uncover and correct errors before restarting the machine! And this is how we have chosen to submit to the entire francophone community, under the form of this theoretical work, our own idea of a reform.

Not that we thought we would necessarily do better than our predecessors in terms of impact or reception, needless to say, but because we are deeply convinced that one must still and always try until one or the other of proposed linguistic reforms succeed in imposing itself,

within official institutions (in schools, in universities, in grammars, in the French Academy or in the French legislation) and, above all, before the situation becomes definitely uncontrollable in the field of usage. And it is precisely this history of the past participle under Ockham's Razor that this book relates.

What linguistic problems have we identified?

Regarding the position rule, we know only too well, that the past participle agrees in gender and number with its direct object if and only if it is preceded by the direct object: *on a toujours vivement critiqué l'action européenne mais on ne l'a cependant jamais critiquée publiquement*. And this exclusive agreement is to be prescribed, moreover, regardless of the syntactic structure of the site (that is to say that the object is the anteposed following a manipulation of the pronominalisation, dislocation, cleavage, semi -cleavage or relativisation type).

So, of course, why (obliged to) agreement in one case (when the past participle is preceded by its direct object) but not in the other (when it is followed by its direct object), we have all probably already asked ourselves this question, at least once ... But what should primarily concern us, from a strictly linguistic point of view, is the fact that the verb and the adjective (qualifier) are not sensitive, in terms of agreement, to location, respectively, of the subject (*la nuit, les étoiles blanches s'élèvent dans la noirceur du ciel ; la nuit s'élèvent/*e les étoiles blanches dans la noirceur du ciel*) and of the (common) noun (*la nuit, les étoiles blanches s'élèvent dans la noirceur du ciel ; la nuit s'élèvent/*e les étoiles blanches dans la noirceur du ciel*). Now, these two agreement pairs have as well a donor (respectively, the subject and the noun) and a receiver (respectively, the verb and the adjective), the donors in question also being, obviously, mobile on the syntagmatic axis, as they sometimes precede their respective recipients, sometimes follow them.

In other words, only the past participle-direct object tandem reacts, as regards agreement, to location of the donor relative to the receiver. And this rare exception in French grammar, not to say unique, should authorise us to question the linguistic legitimacy of this so-called old position rule.

Another issue of great importance, according to us, but we are probably mistakenly asserting this, is one ignored in the literature, more generally related to agreement of past participles employed verbally.

In French, indeed, as a general rule, the past participle agreement follows the agreement rule inherent to the grammatical category that it invests in discourse; thus participles employed adverbially, prepositionally, adjectivally or nominally agree respectively as adverbs (*veuillez trouver ci-joint les pièces justificatives demandées ; veuillez trouver plus loin/plus bas les pièces justificatives demandées*), as prepositions (*étant donné sa préparation, il n'y a pas lieu de s'inquiéter ; avec/après sa préparation, il n'y a pas lieu de s'inquiéter*), as adjectives (qualifiers) (*un projet de loi sur le placement des enfants abandonnés a été déposé ; un projet de loi sur le placement des enfants seuls/malheureux a été déposé*) or as (common) nouns (*ses allées et venues se font rares ; ses visites/inspections se font rares*) that they are in discourse.

The past participle in its verbal form, however, follows, and against all odds, an agreement logic to say the least peculiar, not at all comparable to that shared by the four previous types: actually, instead of agreeing as the auxiliated verb that it is in discourse (agreement with the subject after the auxiliary "être", no agreement after "avoir"), the past participle employed verbally agrees both as a function of the role it plays in the composed verbal form that it creates or contributes to creating (depending on whether it is a temporal or passive auxiliated

verb, or the centre of a participial proposition) and the syntactic architecture, together with the semantic configuration of the site that hosts it (depending on whether or not there is a direct object, this complement being anteposed or not to the past participle that requires agreement, and whether it constitutes or not the actual object). This is why, for example, as in past participles auxiliated by "être", some agree with their subject (*elles ne sont pas évanouies, malgré la force centrifuge*), others do not agree (*ils se sont plu dès leur première rencontre*), and furthermore others agree with their anteposed direct object (*les injures qu'on s'est adressées resteront tues*).

Finally, the verbal type engenders alone almost all of the agreement rules of past participles in French, *i.e.* around fifty, against three at most for the other four types taken together (the adjectival, the nominal, the prepositional and the adverbial types), not counting the many and various specific cases (including exceptions) and resulting inconsistencies - and that we, users, know only too well: so it seems not exaggerated to say that the past participle agreement system as a whole is so lopsided today that its usage may simply collapse at any time ... and it therefore becomes inevitable and urgent to intervene linguistically!

What research hypothesis are we defending?

If agreement of the past participle in its verbal employment (including the position rule) is so different, if not isolated, from that of the other four types, it is that French grammar, following our research hypothesis, at least, has a categorical approach (hence distributional), and biased that strives to consider it *in abstracto* (that is to say at the language level), when it should be doing so *in situ* (that is in discourse). Indeed, by categorising it solely in terms of its contingent function, which might have prohibited a heterogeneous framework such as the agreement framework, which falls at the same time within morphology, syntax and semantics, the French grammatical tradition has, so to say, missed out the categorical transfer inherent in the use of the past participle in discourse (where it is part of the verb).

Moreover, this error in analysis, as profound as it is ancient, has triggered very serious consequences: the past participle employed verbally, not having been duly considered as the verb that it really is in discourse, does not fall within the agreement rule - where it should be, *i.e.* that of the (auxiliated) verb, but rather within around fifty prescriptions, all equally preposterous, which include, in particular, the rule stipulating agreement of the auxiliated past participle by "avoir", only with its direct object, and only when the latter precedes it.

What is our theoretical framework?

To verify our research hypothesis, it is within the Ockham's Razor framework (in the name of the English Franciscan philosopher of the late Middle Ages "William (of) Ockham" (c. 1280-c. 1349) that we chose to place our reflection, theoretically.

The gist of the approach of William of Ockham, the so-called "principle of simplicity" or of "parsimony" (from the Latin "*lex parsimoniae*") seeks to eliminate in a principled way unnecessary assumptions: more precisely, what would be called, but much later, "Ockham's Razor" says not to consider new hypotheses as long as those already existing are enough or may suffice, which not only avoids one from taking risks in altering the problem or in missing a rule, or missing a sufficient general law, but also to anticipate *ad hoc* solutions.

Definitely, as will be attested in his book, a strict application of the principle in question to the agreement rule of the French past participle is indeed efficient, when it comes to revealing and eliminating the (very) many different superfluous and recalcitrant rules.

What are the main objectives pursued?

The first of them was to break down the different types of past participles into a single agreement linguistically legitimate rule (against almost fifty currently in use), that is to say, a rule provided by the system itself, which provokes *ipso facto* elimination of all current individual cases, including exceptions.

To do so, we first of all carried out a critical analysis of the agreement system as a whole, which would allow highlighting on one hand, unnecessary superfluous or linguistically unnecessary rules, and on the other hand, the fact that it is the past participle of the verbal type, responding to a logical agreement as an exception (that is to say one that no other type shares), which induces alone all the linguistic flaws in the system.

The fault of the past participle in its verbal use thus established, it then became necessary to reconsider the agreement rule, but this time in the light of the grammatical category that it is part of in discourse, that is of the (auxiliated) verb, and no more that which it intrinsically belongs to in language, which, along the way, revealed the *ad hoc* character of the so-called "position rule".

Let us add, finally, that the proposed reform of the past participle agreement that we have presented is destined to the Francophonie as a whole, either through institutional linguistic communities of the francophone countries, or among users themselves.

What linguistic solution have we proposed and what are the key impacts?

The culprit of the entire French past participle system having been found (*i.e.* the verbal past participle), the linguistic solution that we intended to suggest had therefore to (primarily) pass by it: hence the idea to reconsider agreement of the verbal past participle in the light of Ockham's Razor became a logical approach for us, a scientific principle whose application has allowed us, not only to expose, in order to denounce, the (so) many different superfluous and recalcitrant rules of the agreement system as a whole, but, above all, to demonstrate that from a strictly linguistic point of view, the past participle use should not agree otherwise than as the (auxiliated) verb it is in discourse: that is systematically with its subject when it is auxiliated by "*être*", and never when it is auxiliated by "*avoir*".

Thus, the most prominent and promising aspects that emerge from our reform proposal are, from our point of view:

- that firstly, no new rules would be generated, since those related to adverbial, prepositional, adjectival and nominal usages of the past participle would remain the same, and those specific to the verbal usage would all be replaced by the single rule of the (auxiliated) verb, which is not new, as it is already at play in French grammar. In the end, it is to say that only the one and the same agreement rule that would remain in all and for all, as the past participle would then systematically agree according to its proper use, that is to say, following the grammatical category that it invests in discourse;

- that the current agreement model, more generally, would not be distorted: not only would the past participle agreement rules be preserved as they are (both in number and in typology), but moreover that the general principle, based on a system of morphosyntactical interactions between donors and receivers, would remain unchanged - with the exception, let it be emphasised again, that the anteposed direct object would lose its characteristic as a donor, following the disappearance of the position rule ;

- that this would not imply, then, new grammatical prerequisites: because, as we just mentioned, the various agreement rules and the general principle of the agreement rule of the past participle would be maintained, that the agreement rules of four of the five types of use would remain the same and that those (around fifty) specific to the verbal use would collectively give place to the single (auxiliated) verbal agreement rule, whose functioning, and for good reasons, is well known to all, hence no new recognition criterion and / or identification test, or underlying reasoning would need to emerge. Better, all grammatical prerequisites currently linked to the verbal use of the past participle, including the position rule, would necessarily cease to exist;

- that, moreover, no new special cases nor new exceptions would be generated, since, precisely, neither the agreement rules that would be maintained (those of the respective use of the past participle as an adverb, a preposition, an adjective or a noun), nor that of the auxiliated verb (which would then become the only agreement rule of the past participle in its verbal use) are concerned; better, all current special cases, including exceptions, would consequently be rendered obsolete.

- and that in the end, the agreement verbal rule (including the auxiliated verb), main issue of the reform of the past participle, so we hope, is already among the very first that users (beginners) learn in school and, by force of circumstance, agreement of the verb (especially if it is the main verb) being the most important rule for viability of the sentence, among those they apply more often and therefore master (and probably still accept) the better later; not forgetting that it is also one of the points of French grammar in which didactics has succeeded in demonstrating its talent, since nowadays there are indeed as many formulations of this rule as there are approaches to it (semantic, functional, syntactic, entertainingly, ...);

- that the resulting remarkable economy of time and energy would allow teachers to devote more time to more useful linguistic tasks, socially speaking, such as, for example, argumentation or demonstration;

- and that agreement of a past participle in French would hence become a logical grammatical exercise, instead of the exercise of pure memory it is today (and since centuries).

Suffice to say, finally, that everyone is capable, according to his or her own competence and / or linguistic preferences, to obtain satisfaction, even if it is necessary to well keep in mind that success of such a project can only be expected within a joint effort of all normative or similar networks, and that it remains fatally dependent on the general language policy conducted by the various countries concerned, including France.

What are the main stages of our thinking?

In terms of the logical organisation of this book, there is a close link between three main components: first, we go through, as a preliminary reminder, all types of usages and agreement rules that are related to the past participle in French, illustrated systematically by examples and commenting each of them (chap. 1); then, we focus our attention specifically on the so-called "position rule" in order to identify the many different loopholes this rule entails, making it, from a strictly linguistic point of view, a decidedly *ad hoc* directive (chap. 2); finally, our analyses are carried out within the general system, in order to show, firstly, that the analysis that the French tradition has made of the grammatical category of the past participle in its verbal use is biased and how it is so, and how this analysis is at the basis of

all problems in the agreement system, and secondly, to propose, while defending it, our own solution to the problem, which we consider scientifically and linguistically legitimate (since it is derived from the strict application of Ockham's Razor) and innovative (because, unless erroneously, we believe it has never been employed in previous research) (chap. 3).

What could be the applications of this research?

The two hundred or so pages gathered here, first, reflect main research findings that we have made, alone or in collaboration, the last three years on the subject. Therefore the volume *Histoire d'H ou le participe passé au Rasoir d'Ockham* (subtitled: *Théorie et application*) is primarily a theoretical book, even if the third chapter contains a long stretch of pages applied to contemporary French.

The first follow-up to be given to this work, therefore, will be the corresponding practice volume (subtitled: *Exercices et corrigés*), whose publication is scheduled for 2017 (*L'Harmattan, coll. "Dixit Grammatica."*): it will be a list of various exercises to show exactly the practical consequences of the linguistic solution we provided in Volume 1, together with the methods and application conditions related to this solution; the book will also contain a large comparative portion of the type normative agreements-consecutive agreements under Ockham's Razor.

Another contribution is also being finalised, namely a volume co-authored with Jean-Christophe Pellat (University of Strasbourg, France), in which we provide (hopefully in 2016, *L'Harmattan, coll. "Dixit Grammatica"*) for the francophone linguistic community a tagged corpus (functionally speaking) of almost five thousand occurrences of past participles in all their different aspects. The corpus, so constructed, will be taken from part of Marcel Proust's works.

2. Research overview

As could be seen in our different publications, in terms of research, our works are based on two main distinct areas: syntax, semantics, logic, cognition and lexicology, on one hand, areas that we treat transversally, with analyses carried out at the interface of these sectors, in the perspective of a constraining (morpho) syntactic and discourse structures by semantico-logical and cognitive prevalent configurations (1); school grammars, on the other hand, that is dealt with in view of a profound and comprehensive reform, relying as much on theoretical linguistic advances, as on every day factual trends of native users (2).

(1) syntax, semantics, logic, cognition and lexicology

In this context, we particularly concentrated our efforts on the infinitive and perception verbs, and on the various constructions they are likely to govern:

- in 2002, first of all, we have tried to show that from a strictly functional point of view, analysis of the infinitive subordinate proposition (*j'entends les oiseaux chanter*) as the direct object of the main verb (proposed by traditional grammars) was difficult to defend (→ Marsac, F. (2002). La subordonnée infinitive en question "s" : l'infinitive n'est pas complément d'objet direct du verbe principal. *Cahiers de publications doctorales de l'Association des Doctorants et Docteurs de l'Université Marc Bloch de Strasbourg*, 3, 89-98);
- then in 2006, when we defended the hypothesis that in some structures Vinf V SN2 (*travailler ennue beaucoup Marie*), and although SN2 are here interpretatively considered the

semantic and logical subject of Vinf, control of Vinf by SN2 was not implicated, contrary to a position defended by generative grammar (→ Marsac, F. (2006). Perturbation dans le contrôle de l'infinitif de certaines structures Vinf V SN2. *Travaux linguistiques du CerLiCO*, 19, 183-202);

- in 2008, when we showed that discontinuity of the infinitive construction governed by a perception verb (*j'ai entendu ton train passer / je l'ai entendu passer*) did not affect its constituency, i.e. that one completive agent could be formally fragmented without implying its (sub) division into two new agents, contrary what is posited in the Meaning-Text Theory (→ Marsac, F. (2008). Pour une analyse syntaxique des constructions infinitives régies par un verbe de perception en adéquation avec leurs propriétés sémantico-logiques et cognitives. *SCoLiA*, 23, 129-150).

- in 2010, finally, we proposed an account of infinitive constructions governed by a perception verb, which reconciles their syntactic features with their semantic properties on one hand, with the valence and the transitivity of perception verbs on the other (→ Marsac, F. (2010). Du statut fonctionnel de l'infinitif régi par un verbe de perception. *Sciences pour la communication*, 90, 165-184).

However, since these fundamental linguistic research works do not at all aim at being isolated findings, we have been trying for some time now to endow them with a transdisciplinary orientation:

- in 2011, first, when we tried to show, in collaboration with a specialist in textual linguistics, that the results of our works on perception could be useful in analysis of literary texts with a high concentration of perception verbs (→ Fonvielle, S & Marsac, F. (2011). Les phénomènes de la perception dans le texte proustien. In K. Modrzejewska (éd.), *La condition humaine dans la littérature française et francophone* (pp. 321-332). Opole : Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Opolskiego);


- then in 2012, when we proposed a multi-interface analysis model (at the intersection of semantic, logical, cognitive, lexical and syntactic approaches) of *Infinitives de Compte rendu de Perception* (ICP) or *Infinitive Perception Accounts* (IPA), directly inspired by the process of "defragmentation" in computer sciences, a process which runs when a disc becomes too slow in opening documents or programmes (→ Marsac, F. (2012). La Fragmentation actancielle : vers une analyse "interfacielle" des infinitives de perception directe. *Studia Romanica Posnaniensia*, 39(4), 85-977);

- finally recently, when with articulatory phonetics experts, we have shown, via an acoustic analysis of speech sequences, that the use of tools in the area of experimental phonetics could conclusively complement traditional discourse analysis applied to televised political debates (→ Bechet, M., Hirsch, F., Marsac, F. & Sock, R. (2014). La Primaire socialiste : un événement politique à l'origine d'un nouveau phonostyle ? *Neophilologica*, 26, 78-89 ; → Bechet, M., Hirsch, F., Marsac, F., Richard, A., Sandré, M. & Sock, R. (2013). Usages stratégiques de la pause silencieuse dans le débat politique médiatisé. L'exemple de François Hollande. *Mots*, 103, 23-38 ; → Hirsch, F., Marsac, F., Didirkova, I., Bechet, M. & Ben Messaoud, M.A. (submitted end 2015, and currently being reviewed). Spécificités du rythme de la parole politique. Le cas de François Hollande. *Romanica Wratislaviensia*).

(2) School grammars

In this context, we are working mainly on an ancient issue of French morphology and the various problems related to it: agreement of the past participle. So far we have thus been able to show in particular:

- that the agreement rule of the past participle of perception verbs followed by an infinitive, are not only based on a profound dual cognitive and functional misunderstanding (→ Marsac, F. (2014). *Et au final, ces oiseaux, est-ce qu'on les aura vraiment entenduS chanter ?* In A. Gautier, L. Pino Serrano, C. Valcárcel & D. Van Raemdonck (dir.), *ComplémentationS* (pp. 255-276). Bruxelles: Peter Lang), but also, on neglect of the prosodic criterion of the post-verbal zone (full or empty), thus going against the "natural" rule of users (which they develop and apply themselves), and which is operational though in many French speakers (→ Marsac, F. & Marengo, S. (2013). *L'accord du participe passé des verbes de perception régissant une construction infinitive : reconsidération en vue d'une représentation formelle en Théorie Sens-Texte*. In F. Marsac & J.-C. Pellat (dir.), *Le Participe passé entre accords et désaccords* (pp. 31-47). Strasbourg : Presses universitaires de Strasbourg ; → Marsac, F. & Marengo, S. (2014). *Verbes de perception régissant un infinitif et accord du participe passé : vers une règle prosodique ? Travaux de l'Institut de Phonétique de Strasbourg – TIPS, 36, 59-78*);
- or further, that the agreement rule of the past participle constructed with an auxiliary whatsoever should normally be summed up in one (and the same single) linguistically legitimate rule, against the about fifty currently *ad hoc* existing rules, and that this rule, moreover, pre-existed in French school grammars (→ Marsac, F. (2014). *De la légitimité linguistique de la règle dite "de position" dans l'accord du participe passé français*. *Orbis Linguarum, 41, 97-108* ; → Marsac, F. (2013). *De l'accord du participe passé français : si vis pacem, para... pacem !* In N. Gettliffe & J.-P. Meyer (éd.), *Dans la carrière des mots* (pp. 171-191). Strasbourg : Presses universitaires de Strasbourg).
- more generally, to conclude, these works on the French past participle have led us particularly to editing a collective work (→ Marsac, F. & Pellat, J.-C. (eds) (2013). *Le Participe passé entre accords et désaccords*. Strasbourg: Presses universitaires de Strasbourg), and a monograph in two volumes, the first one to be released in early 2016 (→ Marsac, F. (2016). *Histoire d'S ou le participe passé au rasoir d'Ockham – Théorie et application*. Paris: L'Harmattan), the second one scheduled for early 2017 (→ Marsac, F. (ongoing). *Histoire d'S ou le participe passé au rasoir d'Ockham – Exercices et corrigés*. Paris: L'Harmattan).



Fabrice Marsac