

ReCALL Journal

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Projects

The idea behind Genders

A simple tutorial package designed to help learners of French to internalise knowledge of noun gender distinctions.

Noun gender is one of the most, if not the most, exasperating features of French for a learner. Apart from a relatively small number of words whose gender is set semantically (*père, mère, fils* etc.) there seems to be no reason why a table, freedom or France itself should be feminine, while a wall, a beginning or Japan should be masculine.

Yet it is an area of grammar that French children have no difficulty with at all. This is all the more surprising when one remembers that there is a great deal of French grammar, whole tenses for instance, that is specific to the written code and that has to be learnt by children when they go to school. In spite of this, though it is true that, like all children acquiring their native tongue, French children produce plenty of non-standard forms, (*de la herbe* for *de l'herbe*, or *ça malairait bon* as past tense of *ça m'a l'air bon*) even quite small French children make surprisingly few errors of noun gender.

Traditional grammar, with its emphasis on the written language, was hardly equipped to explain this remarkable achievement on the part of small French children. And in fact traditional grammar books, where they discuss gender at all, point exclusively to features of the written language, the spelling of word endings for example. Since there is no stage in a child's acquisition of French, at which she or he "knows" certain nouns before being able to assign their gender correctly, it is obvious that any regularities observed in the written code are irrelevant so far as this particular skill is concerned.

Two pieces of scientific research into native French speakers' skill with noun gender were able to show that it is based on, or at least related to, a system of regularities in the pronunciation of the endings of words. The most considerable of these, carried out in Canada, (Tucker, G.R. *et al*, 1977) describes sorting the thirty one thousand nouns in the *Petit Larousse* dictionary according to their phonetic endings. This analysis revealed

some very strong and consistent patterns. For example, more than 99% of the 1,963 nouns listed that end with a nasal /a/ sound (*gant, sang, banc* etc.) are masculine. Clearly, powerful regularities exist in the way in which noun gender in French is assigned. That even children are intuitively aware of these regularities was shown by testing school pupils with very rare, or even non-existent, "nonsense", words to which they usually assigned the gender in accordance with the rule being tested.

The Canadian project, by demonstrating that the gender of a majority -84.5%- of the French words tested is assigned according to a consistent pattern, clearly showed that noun gender in French is rule governed. However, the very thoroughness of this research, into a large sample of the language as a whole, inspires some doubt as to how far it explains the processes by which native speakers acquire this skill, and above all how it may be imparted to foreign learners. For example, the regularities noted can be expressed as a set of rules, but there are at least 40 of these rules, far too great a number to be taught usefully to students. That French children have internalised the rules, and apply them intuitively, does not mean that they are in any way conscious of them. French children are, to the contrary, no more aware of these rules than English children are, for example, conscious of the rules governing adjective order. As for example can be shown by an ability to rearrange: * *whitewashed little third cottage*. What is more, some of these rules have more than 30% of exceptions, most of which are very common words. Also, many of the words in the lists from which the rules or regularities were derived are extremely rare or unusual. For example, the 5175 words counted that end in an /R/ sound (76.8% masculine) include *sisymbre, opprobre, faucre* and *hypocondre*, to cite just a few. It is obvious that, while this research demonstrates a feature of great interest regarding the language as a whole, the sample of the language by which French children learn to assign gender correctly must be of a different order, and very much smaller. It is natural to assume that this sample will consist of the most common and the most frequently occurring words.

Looking for an explanation of French speakers' skill with noun gender by analysing the commonest and most frequent words is the idea behind an earlier piece of research, which was carried out in Russia (Mel'cuk, I.A., 1958). Here the nouns examined are those that figure in the French Word Book of G.E. Vander Beke, published in 1935, which is a frequency dictionary. Dr Mel'cuk 's analysis reveals regularities covering 85% of frequent words. The regularities are, however, much less clearly defined than those in the Canadian research.

To come now to our own work in Aberdeen. It started when, in the early eighties, thanks to the York Child Language Survey, we came by 80,000 words of transcriptions of French children of 8 to 10 years old talking among themselves. Though this was long before the days of OCR, we were able to have it rendered machine-readable and accessible to a concordancer. One of our brightest students of the time took on the job - it was her Honours dissertation- of analysing the 540 nouns appearing in this, small but significant, corpus, to see how far they bear out the regularities observed by Tucker *et al.*

We expected to find that, if we took this very small corpus, consisting exclusively of words used by small children and therefore of the commonest everyday language, the regularities observed by Tucker *et al* would be more strongly marked. Instead of this, we found roughly the same regularities as the Canadian project found in the 31,000 nouns of the *Petit Larousse*. On the other hand there were some interesting differences. For example, in several cases - words ending /g/ or /t/ - we found the majority of nouns to be of a different gender to that in Tucker's lists.

In both cases, but more clearly in our small and limited study, there was a definite tendency for the exceptions to the regularities noted by Tucker to occur among the most frequently occurring words. This is of course a well-known phenomenon in applied linguistics. The exceptions to rules tend to occur in cases that are either very common or very rare. E.g. English plurals: *child/children* and *hippopotamus/hippopotami*.

Interest in noun gender at the time led to the devising of a simple tutorial CALL program to teach learners of French the correct gender of common nouns. It functioned very simply. The learner was presented with a series of nouns, in batches of twenty at a

time, and invited to click on M or F for each one. If the learner chose wrongly an adjective would appear that was marked phonetically for gender (not all adjectives are thus marked). The learner would have to type out the adjective together with the noun before proceeding.

This worked satisfactorily, and many students said they found it useful. However, some of the brighter ones complained that the exercise confused them; it had, they claimed, the disastrously counterproductive effect of actually making them feel uncertain about the gender of words that they would have got right had they not thought about it. Colleagues who tried out the program had a somewhat similar experience, as did the author of both the program and of this paper. The phenomenon was described in an earlier article (Farrington, B. 1986). It can be seen that it raises interesting questions concerning the relation between implicit and explicit linguistic knowledge, between the native speakers' knowledge "of" the language and the linguist's knowledge "about" it, between explicit thinking and unthinking intuitions. The question is not without relevance to other forms of tutorial CALL.

Whatever about that, other preoccupations intervened, and the idea of a CALL package to help learners of French to cope with the problem of noun gender was shelved for twenty years. This brings us to the software we are presenting here.



Fig. 1 Genders. French vocabulary software developed by Faro Systems.

Two things were borne in mind when designing this present package. First was the fact that our earlier little program actually confused learners, made them less instead of more certain of the gender of common nouns. Closer investigation of this undesirable effect suggested that it was probably caused by the peremptory way in which the learners were presented with a series of words and, for each word, obliged to put their money either on an F or on an M, as it were in the abstract. Therefore, in the new package, rather than confronting the learners with a pair of mandatory, cast-iron, options, they are offered the feminine and masculine form of a number of contexts, usually standard expressions or adjectives collocating with the noun, and invited to choose between the forms. Whenever they feel uncertain which to choose, and this is important, they are encouraged, not to guess, but to click on an icon marked Not Sure, which presents the word in a context fixing the gender, and fixing it audibly. Any words that the learners are thus not sure of will figure in the next batch of words offered.

Secondly, it was decided to give much more importance to context and collocation than to the 40 or more rules discovered by the Canadian researchers. This was not to discount the importance of the rules. (They are in fact indicated to learners using the software.) These rules may well make explicit the knowledge that French speakers have internalised in acquiring the language. But, as it is hardly necessary to point out, native speakers do not learn their language by obeying rules, they acquire it by building the rules for themselves, intuitively, by noticing what words and meanings do, in the complex texture of sound that they hear. What is more, the rules do not help much when it comes to explaining the down to earth manner in which children, and learners, get to know the gender of individual nouns. And they have little relevance to the ways

in which native speakers check their intuitions when, as often happens, they are suddenly unsure of the gender of an unfamiliar noun. This is particularly true when one considers that there are more exceptions to these rules among the commonest and most frequently occurring nouns. For example the following twenty words, all of which figure in *Le Français Fondamental 1er degré*, are all exceptions to rules which are valid for more than 80% of nouns in each category: *auto, chanson, commerce, coté, dent, eau, façon, fin, fois, leçon, main, million, neige, page, peau, radio, sens, service, silence, téléphone*. There are a hundred others, equally common.

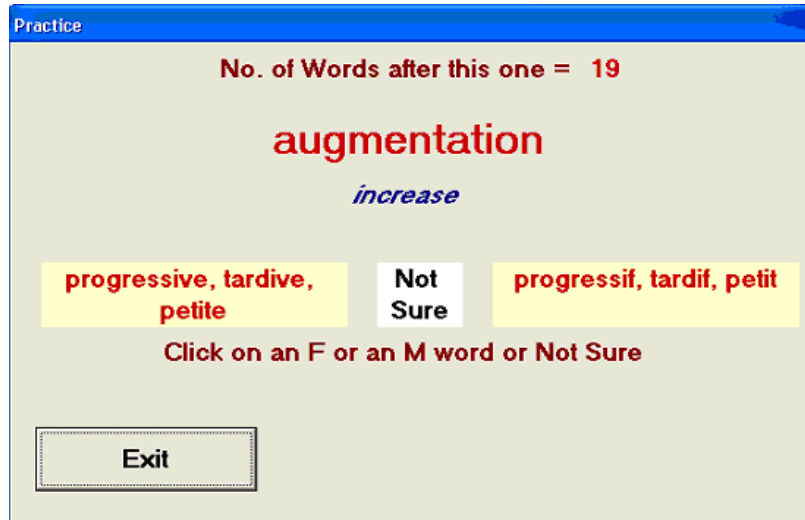


Fig. 2 Different contexts and collocations to choose from, as well as a Not Sure option.

The best approach, therefore, seemed to be, not to try and teach the learners rules, to which the commonest words were often exceptions, but to reproduce the manner in which a native speaker checks the gender of any noun s/he is uncertain of, namely by encouraging them to think in terms of context and collocation. So, as noted above, we present the words, one by one, in batches of twenty as before, with, for each word, two sets of adjectives marked for gender to choose from. And they are given the option of clicking on Not Sure.

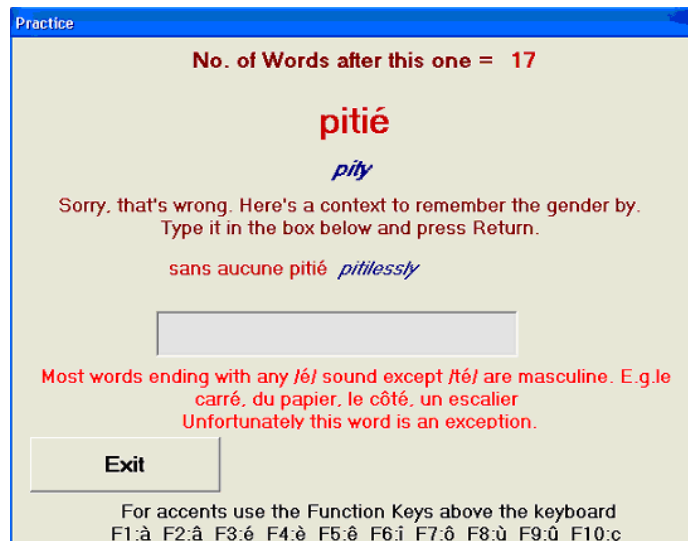


Fig. 3 Example of context to remember a gender by.

The data for *Genders*, containing just over 2500 words, consists, with a few exceptions, of all the relevant nouns in the *Larousse Dictionnaire du Français Essentiel* (Matoré 1963). The 1500 words on Level 1 consist of all relevant nouns in *Le Français Fondamental*, plus obvious homonyms like architecture and garage. Relevant here means excluding words whose gender is set semantically, (*père, maître, neveu*) and also nouns which can be either M or F (e.g. *secrétaire*). The data file contains in addition, for each word, a set of possible collocating adjectives and, where one could be found, a standard expression using the word in a way that makes its gender audible. Compiling all this took some time. We would draw attention to the point that, in the construction of *Genders*, as much, if not more, work and time was devoted to finding and selecting the linguistic content as was taken up by programming.

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