A Comparative Analysis of French and English Auxiliary Verbs

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Abstract

When a verb helps another verb to form one of its tenses in a sentence, it is said to have helped the verb to make clear its meaning at that point in the sentence. This verb is called a helping or an auxiliary verb. It is auxiliary in the sense that it is indispensable as it appears in the sentence. This study, however, analyses and compares the dynamism in French and English auxiliary verbs. The study emphasizes the distinctiveness of the French auxiliary verbs and how they are applied in speech and writing. Sentences using various forms of verbs are presented in the current study both in French and English languages.

Key words : Auxiliary verbs, Compound tense, English and French, Languages

Introduction
Danielle Leeman-Bouix (1994)

> Faire de la grammaire, c'est apprendre à observer, réfléchir, raisonner, se poser des problèmes et construire des hypothèses pour les résoudre: c'est se constituer les outils intellectuels fondamentaux qui permettent d'analyser et de

> comprendre le monde auquel, telle la vitre, la
> langue donne accès.

Why is the study of Grammar essential in Language studies? From the above, grammar is a tool that helps us to understand words and their forms in sentences. Grammar helps us to understand ourselves. Without the study of grammar, it will be difficult or even impossible for us to solve some basic problems in our daily lives. For instance, grammar helps us to understand the meaning and importance of punctuation signs. It helps us to know how and when to apply the various punctuation signs. Let us consider the following examples

1. A woman, without her breast, is useless.
2. A woman: without her, breast is useless.

With the help of punctuation signs, the structure of the sentence is easily comprehensible to the reader. Grammar thus helps the reader to understand the rules, peculiarities and regulations in the language of studies (Greenbaum &Quirk 1973). Further, with grammar we learn the skills to write in order to meet the needs of a particular audience. For instance, Teste F (2020), takes the language learner through various newspaper publications in order to build up the learners competences and writing skills in journalism. In addition, Bouter (2018) puts together a work that guides theatre artistes. The write puts together exercises to help learners in theatre and cinema presentations. Likewise, Vermurie (2019) presents grammar textes for professional purposes. Designed to cater for the language needs of adult beginners (vrais debutants), the work draws exercises from all works of life and exposes the learner to rules and regulations guiding sentence formation and general daily conversations for professional purposes. Barthélémy F. (2011) also lays emphasis on grammar for oral communication. This work presents oral exercises to build confidence which enhances oral communication skills in the learner. In La Grammaire en dialogues, Miquel C (2013) also puts together role plays that addresses the functions of figures of speeches in French grammar. The authour discusses rules and regulations guiding sentence structures in French grammar. In another study, Umukoro G

(2018) emphasizes the importance of language in tourism development. The study discusses French language grammar in enhancing relationships during tourism activities. Now let us discuss one of the building blocks of grammar "verbs" which is our focus in this study.

Discussing verbs without referring to conjugation in French grammar is like bringing up a child without instructions. Every child undergoes some form of teaching while growing up. This helps to groom the child from infancy to adulthood. Chomsky et al (2014), talks about the central concern of the study of language to include generative grammar, also seen in this study as a pertinent ingredient in the understanding of sentences structures in French grammar. Thus, verb on the other hand, is seen as a child. The French verb to be precise undergoes restructuring from the infinitive to form the required tense in the sentence.

The word "tense" comes from the same word as the French word "temps" which means "time". The tense of a very indicates the time at which the action of that particular verb took place and as such, the speaker does not need to give any additional information to indicate when the action of the verb took place. The Oxford Advanced Dictionary of Current English (1963) defines "a tense" "a verb form" that shows time: these tenses are further classified according to the way they are formed. The intention of this study is to highlight the distinctive features of French verbs over English verbs with emphasis on the application of the auxiliary verbs in forming compound tenses.

The verbs "avoir" and "etre" which belong to the third group of verbs in French are the only auxiliary verbs used in the formation of compound tenses. Grévisse (1990) defines the auxiliary verb thus: "les verbs auxiliaires sont des verbs qui, dépouillant leur significant propre, servent à former les temps composes". He continues: "les verbs auxiliaires par excellence sont avoir *et* etre" (102). This however, does not say that these two verbs exist only as helping verbs, but they function also in their own capacity as main verbs in a sentence e.g.
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1. L'homme est mortel
   Man is a mortal
2. Mon père a une voiture
   My father has a care

A translator will have to be careful when applying the auxiliary verbs in translating texts so as not to deviate from the actual sense of the message given.

COMPOUND TENSES IN FRENCH AND ENGLISH

    English

- I have eaten   - present perfect
- I was eating   - past progressive
- I will eat   - future
- I will have eaten   - future perfect
- I would eat   - conditional
- I would have eaten   - past conditional

    French

- J'ai mangé   I have eaten
  present perfect
- J'avais mangé   I had eaten
  past perfect
- J'aurai mangé   I will have eaten
  future perfect
- J'aurais mangé   I would have eaten
  past conditional

Sentences 2 and 3 in English, when translated into French are not compound verbs since they do not require the auxiliary verb.

From the above examples, we have highlighted the common differences in the structure of the verb tenses in both French and English grammar. While the compound tenses existing in English grammar are formed by one or more auxiliary verbs plus the main verb, the French distinguished itself with the use of only **two** auxiliary verbs 'avoir' and 'etreê plus the past participate of the main verb.

COMPOND VERB: THE USE OF THE AUXILIARY

When a verb tense is composed of an auxiliary plus a main verb, it is termed a compound verb. The study will discuss some compound verbs in French and how they are combined to form compound tenses.

THE PAST TENSE: FRENCH AND ENGLISH

In English, several verb forms indicate an action that occurred in the past. For instance:

- I was walking   - past progressive
- I used to walk   - with the helping verb "use to"
- I did walk   - past emphatic
- I have walked   - present perfect
- I had walked   - past perfect
- I have been walking - perfect continuous
- I had been walking - past perfect continuous

In French language, many verb tenses express an action that occurred in the past. We have; the passé compsé, the passé recent, the conditionnel passé etc. Each of these tenses has its own set of endings and its rules which tell us when and how to use it. For the purpose of this paper, we will be concern with the past and compound tenses in French and English.

THE PERFECT TENSE (PASSÉ COMPOSÉ)

The perfect tense in French is composed of two elements: the auxiliary and the past participle. Most verbs use the auxiliary "avoir" conjugated in the present, while others known as the verbs of "movement" or "motion" in French "verb de movement" and verbs of state in French "verbs d'état" use the verb "être". In other words, verbs conjugated with the auxiliary "etre" in the present tense are of two groups: verbs of movement or motion that indicates movement from a former position to another. Such verbs are used when you intend to show that a person or thing has shifted position or has moved from the position he was before to another. The following

according to Delatour *et al* constitute verbs of movement or motion (verbs de movement); "aller", "arriver", descendre", "entrer" "monter", "passer", "retourner", "sortir", "tomber", and "venir", "naître", "mourir" (98).

There are some exceptions to the rule for some movement verbs, which use the "avoir", they are, "marcher", "danser", "sauter". Thus, we cannot say "*Je suis couru trés vite*" (98). Note that some verbs of movement or motion must necessarily be conjugated with avoir when they have direct object complements: rentrer, descender, monter, passer, retourner, sortir. For example:

- Les étudiants de la chambre 201 sont d*éjà* montés

    The students in room 201 have already gone upstairs

"Montre" has no direct object complement in the sentence above. Nevertheless, in the sentence below:

- Le portier de l'hôtel a monté leurs bagages dans la chambre. The sentence is made up of a direct Object complement "les bagages" « luggage »
- À quelle heure êtes – vous sortis de la salle de réunion ?
    What time did you leave the meeting hall? "sortir" in this case does not have a direct object compliment.
- Pour arranger mon chambre, j'ai sorti tous mes vêtements.
    To be able to tidy up my room, I brought out all my clothes. "sortir" to bring out has a direct object compliment "books".
    The rules of agreement: French and English
- J'ai parlé   -   I spoke, I have spoken
- Je suis allé -   I went, I have gone

Analysis: Thus, the sentences above will be analyzed as follows:
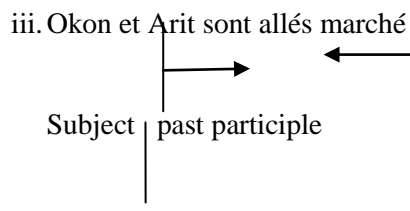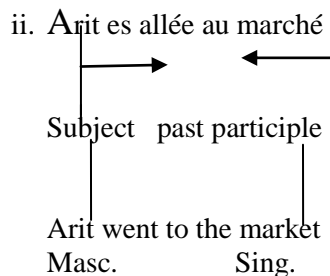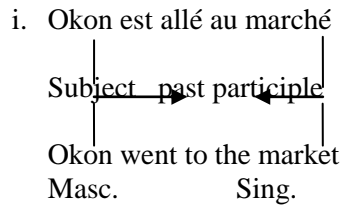**Structure I**

Depending on which auxiliary verb is required, the following rules of agreement are indispensable

    a. If the auxiliary verb is 'être' the past participle agrees with the subject in French. This is however not the case in English

    b.

    c.

        i. Okon est allé au marché

            Subject   past participle

            Okon went to the market
            Masc.   Sing.

       ii. Arit es allée au marché

            Subject   past participle

            Arit went to the market
            Masc.   Sing.

      iii. Okon et Arit sont allés marché

            Subject past participle

Note: In French language, even if there is one male among 20 females, the "person" and the "people" take the masculine form in the passé

    d. Agreement with direct objects
        The past participle of the verb "avoir" agrees with the direct object if it comes before the verbs in the sentence in French. This is not the case in English. In English grammar, the main verb in English remains the same irrespective of the nature of

the subject or object as the case may be. However, this rule does not apply if the object comes after the verb, in this case, the past participle does not change for instance.

Structure II

iv. Quelle voiture as-tu achetée ?

v. Quelle avez-vous vu Arit? Je l'aivue hier.

                              Dir. Obj. Past Part

When did you see Arit? I saw her yesterday

          Fem.   Sing.

          Which car did you buy?

vi. Voici le portable et la voiture que j'ai achetés.

             Antecedents   dir. Obj.   past part

                                   Masc. Plural

Here are the laptop and the car that I bought

THE IMPERFECT TENSE (L'IMPARFAIT)

The next verb tense we will look at is the <u>imperfect</u> tense. In French, this is a simple tense formed by adding certain endings to the stem of the verb. This does not exist in English.

Though the conjugation of the "imparfait" seems so regular and easy to memorize, it might however be confusing for English students who are learning French to know when to use the imparfait. Let us consider the following possibilities:

    a. If the English verb form includes the English auxiliary used to, the French verb is put in the "imparfait".

Structure III

NB: I <u>ran</u> can be replaced by used to <u>run</u>.

Quand J'étais petite, je courais à l'école tous les matins.

b. If the English verb form is in the past progressive tense, the French is put in the imparfait e.g. I was running yesterday.

We have to take a further look at another distinguishing feature of how the auxiliary verb is applied in the French grammar to form its needed tense. Except for the presence of the auxiliary "used to" or the "past progressive" in an English sentence, an English translator who is faced with a sentence like "Okon went out with Arit", will need to understand the context in which the sentence is used before he actually ascertains whether to use the passé compose or the "imparfait" when translating.

Structure IV
- Okon went out with Arit
  a. Question 1: What did Okon do yesterday?
     Answer: Okon went out with Arit
  b. Question 2: Okon went out with Arit

The same form of the verb "went to" is used in the two answers above. Though the verb has the same meaning, they are used in different contexts. In the first context, we are saying that Okon went out with Arit just once (yesterday), whereas in the second context we are saying that Okon used to go out with Arit (when he was in college). These sentences will be translated thus in French as follows:

a. Okon est sorti avec Arit

    Passé composé

b. Okon sortait avec Arit

    L'imparfait

In the first sentence, the use of the passé compose implies that Okon went out once with Arit while in the second sentence, the use of "imparfait" implies that Okon used to go out with Arit or went out with her more than once. It is also worthy to note that, the

"imparfait" and passé composé are often used to compare the duration of one action to the duration of another in the same sentence, though the "imparfait" is used for the longer of the two actions. Thus, when you ask the question: "what happened?" the verb is required in the passé compose. While the questions "what was going on?" will require a verb in the "imparfait" e.g.

- I was eating when he left

NB: Both actions are taking place at the same time, but the action of eating was going on when the leaving happened.

Je mangeais quand il est sorti.

Imparfait   passé composé

THE PAST PERFECT TENSE (PLUS-QUE-PARFAIT)

It is worthy to remind us here again that verb tenses indicate the time that an action occurs. Thus when two verbs for instance in a sentence are in the same tense, it indicates that the actions took place during the same period. In order to ascertain that they took place at different periods.

a. The boy was running because it was raining
   Les élèves couraient parce qu'il pleuvait

   Imparfait   Imparfait

b. The pupils were running because it had rained
   Les éléves couraient parcequ il avait plu

   Imparfait   Plus-que-parfait

Analysis: In the first sentence, we have the same verb tense and the actions taking place at the same time.
The actions in the "Imparfait" show that they took place at the same time in the past.

In the second sentence however, we have different verb tenses and different actions taking place at different times. The action in the plus-que-parfait occurred before the action in the "imparfait". Furthermore, in English one cannot always determine when to use the past perfect as a result. In many cases, English usage permits the use of the simple past to describe an action that preceded another if it is clear which action came first. For instance:

a. The police wanted to know who saw the thief

                         Simple past   simple past

b. The police wanted to know who had seen the theif

                         Simple past   Past perfect

However, the two sentences above mean the same thing and are correct in English. Incidentally, in French, following the sequence of tenses, only the second sentence would be correct.
Thus:

                    Imparfait   plus-que-parfait

The verb in plus-que-parfait stresses that the action was completed before the action of "wanting to know". Notably, the sequence of tenses in French is more rigid than English.

THE FUTURE TENSE (LE FUTUR)
The next aspect of verbs we are going to discuss is the future Tense known as (Le future) in French. The Future tense as the name implies indicates that an action will take place sometime in the future. In English, while the future tense is formed with the auxiliary <u>will</u> or <u>shall</u> plus the dictionary form of the main verb, the future is simply indicated by a simple tense in French.

Structure VI
a. I <u>will finish</u> tomorrow morning

b. Je <u>finirai</u> demain matin
c. Okon and Mary <u>will finish</u> their homework tomorrow.
d. Okon et Mary <u>finiront</u> leur devoir demain

In the sentences above, English uses an auxiliary verb to form the future tense, the French does not need an auxiliary verb to show that the action will take place in the future; the <u>future</u> form in English is a Regular verb – Aimer, Finir, Vendre

	Infinitive	Stem
a.	Aimer	aimer
b.	Vendre	vendre

Irregular verbs - *aller, venir, avoir*

	Infinitive	Stem
a.	Aller	ir
b.	Avoir	aur
c.	être	ser

From the above structure, it is observed that, in French the regular verbs use the infinitive as the stem to form the <u>future</u> while the irregular verbs have irregular <u>stems</u>, which howver must be studied and memorized. Generally, whatever the stem, regular or irregular, the sound of the letter "R" is always heard before the future ending.

Another aspect of French that distinguishes it from English in this case is for example while English uses the <u>present tense</u> after expressions such as; <u>as soon as, when</u>, which introduces an action that will take place in the future, French uses the future tense. E.g.

Structure VII
a. As soon as he finishes, I will call.

                    Present
b. Dès qui l finira, je téléphonerai.

Future

c. He will come when he is ready.

Present
d. Il viendra quand il sera prêt

Future

Generally, from the above sentences and others used in this study, French appears to be stricter in its use of tenses and as such, learners of the language much pay attention to these variations.

THE CONDITIONAL (LE CONDITIONNEL)
Another distinctive feature of the French the study considers is the "conditionnel". Though the "conditionnel" does not exist in English, it is an important "mood" in French. Therefore, it will be necessary to discuss "mood" at this point. According to the University Grammar of English (1980)" mood is expressed in English to a very minor extent by the subjective, as in the following sentences".
    a. So be it then!
  and largely by the past tense forms as in:
    b. If you taught me, I would learn quickly
  Above all, by means of the modal auxiliary; as in:
    c. It is strange that he should have left so early

Verb forms are divided into moods that in turn are subdivided into one or more tenses as we have already discussed. The word mood thus, is a variation of the word "mode", meaning manner or way. The various moods indicate the attitude of the speaker towards what he or she is saying. For instance, different moods are used when making a statement, giving an order etc. as we earlier stated, verbs can be divided into different moods. Let us briefly look at the moods in French and English. Verbs in English can be in one of three moods.

1.
2. The indicative mood-seen as the most common mood, it is used to state the action of the verb, that is to indicate facts e.g.
a. Mr. White reads newspapers

   Present indicative
b. Mr. White was there
   Past indicative
c. Mr. White will come on Friday
   Future indicative

3. The imperative mood – this expresses actions in form of a command, e.g.
a. Mr. White, read the book now
b. Mr. White, come back now!

NB: However, this is not divided into tenses
c. The subjective mood – this is used to express attitude or feelings towards the action of the verb e.g.
   • The government requires that workers pay tax.
     NB: This mood is not divided into tenses.

On the contrary, the French language identifies four moods;
a. The indicative
b. The imperative; also used to give orders e.g. venez ici
c. The subjunctive: This in French has 2 tenses; the present and past and is used much more frequently than in English.
d. The conditional mood. This expresses the action of the verb as a possibility or impossibility.
There are two tenses; the present conditional and the past conditional.
a. Si ma mere avait de l'argent, nous voyagerions en Amérique.
b. If my mother had money we would travel to America

However, there is an English verb form which is similar to the French conditional and which can help us understand "le "conditonnel" in French, thus, for the purpose of this paper, we will call this form the "conditional". The "conditional" has a present and a past tense, but we are only going to look at the past tense in this study.

In English, the "past conditional" is formed with auxiliary would have + the past participle of the man verb. Let us consider the following examples:
1. He <u>would have eaten</u> if he was paid the money
2. John <u>would have traveled</u> if he had been healthy.

In French, the past conditional known as the "le conditionnel passé" is formed with the auxiliary "avoir" or "être" in the present conditional + the past participle of the main verb:

Structure VIII
    a. Il aurait mangé s'il avait eu de l'argent.

                  Past conditional

    b. He would have eaten, if he had any money
                Past conditional

Analysis
    a. The sentences in both French and English are hypothetical and contrary-to-fact.
    b. The if-clause; this is the subordinate clause that starts with (si)
    c. The result-clause, which is the main clause.

Thus: if-clause = past perfect/result clause = past conditional
Examples:
    a. S'o; était venus, j'aurais été contente
        Plus-que-parfait   past conditional

    b. If he had come, I would have been happy

Past perfect   past conditional

Conclusion

In summary, this study concentrated on the past and compound tenses in French. It has taken time to demonstrate how past and compound tenses are formed in French language. It has also discussed some variations that an English student who is learning French language is likely to come across in the study of the language.

Secondly, though French grammar may appear to be very simple, some aspects of the language are difficult to comprehend and handle by English students and students of English who are learning French language. From our findings thus, it is suggested that for a better understanding of how verbs work in French, a learner must first study the attentively the various verb forms to know when and how to use them. Overall, this area calls for more researches. As a leading light, the paper opens the way for many more to follow.

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