PERCOLATION OF GENDER IN FRENCH: THE CASE OF *ENCEINTE*

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In their introductory textbook on French phonology and morphology, Brousseau & Nikiéma (2001) discuss the system of gender percolation in French. Specifically they argue that adjectives do not have underlying gender and instead get their gender from the head of their NP. They make a conspicuous exception for *enceinte* ('pregnant'), claiming that it is specified for gender underlyingly. This specification is unnecessary. First, there is no morphological evidence showing how *enceinte* behaves differently from any other invariable adjective in French. For many speakers, the incongruity of a sentence like *Le capitaine Prieur est enceinte* ('Captain Prieur is pregnant') would therefore be principally a semantic or sociolinguistic issue. Conversely, many speakers did object to the above sentence, saying that the use of the feminine was improper, which would suggest that the adjective has no underlying gender for these speakers. As a result, we can avoid unnecessary complications of the French gender system.

1. Introduction

Many treatments of gender in Romance languages (including Harris 1991, Aronoff 1994, and others) have treated gender as a property intrinsic to nouns, that is, that it is the noun that is specified for gender. Adjectives, on the other hand, come with no gender, and instead receive it from the noun phrase they modify. This process of being assigned gender is called "percolation" (Lieber 1992). In their introduction to French phonology and morphology, Brousseau & Nikiéma (2001) adopt this theoretical claim, one that I too find amply supported by the available evidence. They mention however, that there are some rare, exceptional adjectives such as *enceinte* that defy this convention and are indeed specified for gender underlyingly (296), and leave all other discussion of such adjectives aside. Doing so, however, is a mistake. By saying that some adjectives are specified for gender but not others, they throw a wrench into the gears of the theoretical machinery without any explanation or defense. In reality, there is no need to specify *enceinte* (or any other adjective) as being specified for gender. First of all, there is no morphological evidence showing how *enceinte* behaves differently from any other invariable adjective in French. Secondly, there are some speakers that do accept the masculine form of the adjective, suggesting that *enceinte* is in fact a variable adjective.

In this squib, I first discuss the relevant morphological and phonological principles at work in French. Next, I examine the patterning of *enceinte* according to these principles. Lastly, I discuss the social and semantic factors that play a role in the misconception that *enceinte* is lexically specified for any morphological gender.

2. Phonology and morphology of French

To understand the alternations between masculine and feminine adjectives in French, one must first understand two basic properties of French phonology: the integration of floating segments and the behavior of the schwa. A floating segment is defined as any segment whose phonetic realization depends on the presence of certain morphological or phonological conditions. The word *roux* 'redheaded' would have the phonological structure:

(1) x x   timing slot
     | |
     ʁ u s   segments

A timing slot for each of the first two segments is lexically specified (Prunet 1992), and an additional one is generated when a vowel-initial syllable follows the floating segment, that is, when there is a need to satisfy the No Empty Onset Principle (Paradis & El Fenne 1995). As a result, when the infinitival suffix *-ir* is attached to the adjective, what arises is not **rouir*, but *roussir*.

(2) x x **x** x x   timing slot
     | | | | |
     ʁ u s i ʁ   segments

There are two inflectional morphemes for adjectival gender: the null morpheme for the masculine, and the schwa for the feminine (represented by orthographic *-e*). When the adjective modifies a masculine noun such as *garçon* 'boy,' the null suffix attaches and therefore the floating segment remains unrealized: *garcon roux* [gaʁsõʁu]. When the adjective modifies a feminine noun like *fille* 'girl,' the segment is realized: *fille rousse* [fijəʁusə].

The schwa itself is a much-discussed element of French phonology. Some have seen it as a full vowel that may or must be deleted in certain environments (Durand 1936, Dell

1973), while others have seen it as some sort of empty nucleus, but which serves as a sort of syllable that causes the floating segment to surface phonetically (Anderson 1982, Prunet 1992, Brousseau & Nikiéma 2001). It is the latter approach that I adopt here. The schwa's realization depends partially on phonological criteria, partially on sociolinguistic ones. Thus, the above phonological transcription of *fille rousse* would most likely be rendered [fijʁus] in casual speech. It is generally unrealized at the end of a word unless followed by certain consonants (such as aspirate *h*) or consonant clusters (especially obstruent-glide or obstruent-liquid clusters). As a result, in all further transcriptions, the schwa will be left out unless its presence is a phonological necessity.

Lastly, there are some adjectives in French whose phonetic realizations do not vary, whether masculine or feminine. For example, the adjective *explicite* 'explicit' is always realized as [ɛksplicit], never *[ɛksplici]. In other words, its underlying structure is:

(3) x x   x x x x x x x   timing slots
     | | | | | | | | | |
      ɛ k s p li s i t   segments

where the final timing slot is not generated, but fully specified. In keeping with the objective to create as few exceptions to morphological patterns as possible, I (along with all treatments of French morphology that I have consulted) maintain that these adjectives agree in gender with the nouns they modify as well, though phonologically they do not manifest the variation.

3. The place of *enceinte*

There are three possible ways to analyze *enceinte*: as an invariable[1] adjective unspecified for gender, as a variable adjective unspecified for gender, or as an invariable adjective specified for gender. Under this analysis, *enceinte* should behave no differently morphologically from any other invariable adjective. Its underlying structure is:

(4) x x   x x   timing slots
     | | | |
     ã s ɛ̃ t   segments

For many speakers, this seems to be the case. In obtaining native speaker judgments for a translation of the sentence "In the movie *Junior*, Arnold Schwarzenegger gets pregnant," I found that virtually all speakers, male and female, came up first with the form *enceinte*, even though Schwarzenegger is clearly a masculine referent. Indeed, many insisted that there is no word such word as ?*enceint*. Thus, based on intuitions alone, it could seem reasonable to conclude that *enceinte* is in fact an invariable adjective.

However, there is some motivation to analyze *enceinte* as a variable adjective. First of all, *enceinte* is historically the inflected form of the past participle of the verb *enceindre* 'to close off.' The uninflected, basic form of the past participle would thus be *enceint*. Moreover, a Google search of the word "*enceinte*" (necessarily in quotation marks, as Google will otherwise automatically include inflected forms in its searches) shows that many speakers do use the word *enceint* as an adjective meaning pregnant in some instances. For instance, there is a review of the site malepregnancy.com which talks about *le premier homme enceint* 'the first pregnant man,' as well as more serious discussions about *un couple enceint* 'a pregnant couple.' While Google searches are not substitutes for serious scientific inquiry, they do

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[1] In this paper, "invariable" means invariable with respect to gender, not number.

provide a broad sample of native speaker judgments. Fortunately in this case, they are backed up by historical corpus research shown in the *Trésor de la langue française*, which shows that *enceint* is an attested form, used by such authors as the Goncourt brothers (namesakes of France's highest literary prize, in 1863) and Claude Lévi-Strauss, the famous anthropologist (in 1958). Thus, rare though it might be, *enceint* is an available form for some speakers.

The last analysis of *enceinte* is that of Brousseau & Nikiéma (2001), that of an invariable adjective specified for gender[2]. Thus far, the two approaches have seemed to show no morphological or phonological impetus for such an analysis. There are, however, some sentences such as *Le capitaine Prieur est enceinte* 'Captain(masc) Prieur is pregnant,' which gave pause to some French speakers with regards to grammaticality. For those who, during "l'affaire Prieur" (Fleischman 1997), did not accept the grammaticality of the above sentence, such a statement would only make sense if the feminine article *la* were used with the noun *capitaine*, traditionally a masculine noun, rendering *La capitaine Prieur est enceinte* 'Captain(fem) Prieur is pregnant.' Note that the other possibility to restore grammatical symmetry, namely *Le capitaine Prieur est enceint*, does not come up at all. This would seem to be evidence that *enceinte* indeed has an underlying gender specified. Under this analysis, the gender percolation would go in the opposite direction from every other combination in French, percolating from the complement to the head. This might appear to be the crucial morphological evidence to set *enceinte* apart from other adjectives, but in the next section, I discuss other, more plausible reasons for the gender switch.

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[2] This is somewhat different from the position of Fleischman (1997), as well as several dictionaries (*Larousse de poche*, *Trésor de la langue française*, *Le Nouveau Petit Robert*), which claim that *enceinte* can occur only in the feminine, which suggests that a masculine form in fact exists but is unusable.

4. Sociosemantic adjustments

Rather than suggesting that *enceinte* is morphologically distinct from other adjectives, I find it far more likely that the incongruity of the above sentence is derived from principally semantic grounds, and that the repair is not a morphological adjustment at the level of syntax, but rather a sociolinguistic one, namely an example of feminization of job titles. Dealing first with the issue of semantics, it is clear that the adjective *enceinte* encodes something distinctly female at its core[3]. What is less clear, and the subject of far more debate, is whether *capitaine* encodes something male, masculine, or genderless. The French Academy, among others, contends that grammatical gender is arbitrary in the case of occupation names, and that in French, the masculine gender is the one that happens to include most occupations due to its status as the unmarked case (Fleischman 1997: 838). Conversely, there are other studies that suggest that the use of the masculine article has some influence on the perceived gender of its referent, i.e. a masculine article before an occupation will connote a man doing the job, rather than some androgynous notion of a person doing it (see Cacciari & Padovani 2007 and references therein).

The position of the Academy, seems specious at best. In essence, it is akin to claiming that the majority of professions by sheer grammatical coincidence happened to be the same as the gender of the people holding those jobs, and the fact that they were also the same gender that controlled grammatical norms was also a coincidence. It is far more likely that the gender was derived from the biological sex of the men who held such posts. The Academy's position is also difficult to reconcile with the existence of forms such as

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[3] It also is distinctly human. The variable adjective *plein/e* (literally 'full') is used to describe animals.

ambassadrice, a word that proponents of *féminisation* wanted to use in reference to a woman who was an ambassador, but that others claimed was already reserved for the wife of an ambassador. If the word *ambassadeur* were truly sex-neutral, there would be no word for a wife of an ambassador, though a word for the spouse is conceivable. This is even further evidence that gender in the case of professions is principally derived from biological sex, not from morphological gender. The repair of '*Le capitaine est enceinte*' is a reaction to semantic incongruity. Indeed, Conrick (2002: 216) puts the sentence on the same level as "*Un pompier a accouché la semaine dernière*" (A firefighter.masc gave birth last week), a sentence in which there is no morphological incongruity whatsoever, but semantically implies that a man gave birth. Thus, we can conclude that '*La capitaine est enceinte*' is not a case of gender percolation reversing its direction with a given morpheme, but rather a case of semantic opacity leading to a purposeful creation of an epicene.

Such opacities were a driving force behind the push in Francophone regions to create morphologically feminine counterparts (or epicene forms) to masculine professions, of which *la capitaine* was but one. As Rottet (this volume) points out, this movement led to the acceptance of forms such as *la ministre*, previously a masculine noun only. The repair of *le capitaine* to *la capitaine* was not only to resolve questionable grammaticality in the sentence with *enceinte*, but also to give strength to a larger movement to improve the status of women in the French public sphere. The use of *enceint*, on the other hand, does little to further any cause. At best, it would sound odd to most people and would not solve the larger problem at hand. The decision to leave *enceinte* in the feminine form should not be construed as evidence that it is underlyingly specified for gender, but rather that there are more

sociolinguistically salient forms in semantically opaque sentences that are more likely to be changed for reasons external to the grammar.

5. Conclusion

There is no reason to claim, as Brousseau & Nikiéma (2001) and many others do, that *enceinte* is specified for morphological gender. Most native speakers of French appear to analyze it as an invariable adjective, though there are also some who consider it to be variable. Any unusual behavior of nouns around this adjective seems to be due primarily to semantic and sociolinguistic features of the words involved. There is no motivation then to complicate the workings of the French grammar for this one word. As linguists, we may be tempted from time to time to assert claims about the languages we work on without really investigating whether they are true, simply because we are reasonably convinced that they are, especially when that language is our native tongue. However, this paper should hopefully serve as a reminder to be especially careful with such hunches when they are likely to needlessly complicate our theories.

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