AN OUTLINE OF FRENCH SENTENCE-STRUCTURE

D. McArthur

(Victoria University of Wellington)

As far as I know there is no brief statement of French sentence-structure in existence. I hope to show that the most common patterns may be reduced to very few, even if the number of elements in a given sentence, i.e. words, phrases or clauses, is considerable. I have established the basic types by a process of commutation. For instance, in the following sentences, the sections in italics are *syntactically* interchangeable and so may be considered the same functional unit.

Le film	plaît	
Il	"	
Celui-ci	"	
Celui de Barrault	"	
Le film qu'on a vu	"	
Aller au cinéma	"	etc.

Function does not depend solely on syntactic arrangement, however. In the sentences *Il le tue*, and *Il le devient* for instance the same syntactic arrangements -- subject, pronoun (-object), verb -- contains two different types of meaning which must, I feel, be differentiated.

Analysis of the basic sentences and the manner in which these may be elaborated will lead to a classification of some of the parts of speech. Parts of speech may be defined in several ways, but I will stress definition by function, that is, according to the way in which a word may be used with other words. One may contrast, for instance, definition by "content": "a noun is a naming word", etc. Our functional definitions will be tautological because it is in the nature of parts of speech as I see them that they only exist and function in terms of the other words with which they are related: basically, they have no qualities in isolation.

We should always remember that a given word or construction may have different functions in different syntactic or semantic contexts, and so may not belong essentially to any one category of parts of speech except in an etymological sense. For instance, the French word *Régence* is commonly found as a noun, but in the context *un meuble Régence* it performs the function of an adjective.

As far as nomenclature for parts of speech is concerned, it is important to note that the terms and definitions applicable to one language may not be suitable for another. I have invented some new terms or used some old terms in new ways, as I see them suitable to the data. I think that anomalies in existing terminology, if nothing else, justify my action. At the same time I hope the terms I use are self-explanatory. For instance, in the sentences *Il boit vite, Il boit très vite*, both *vite* and *très* are traditionally termed "adverbs" when they obviously have different functions. I will call *vite* an adverb or "verb-modifier" and *très*, in this context, an "adverb-modifier".

The basic sentence-patterns I propose coincide with different verb-constructions. No doubt it is possible to classify sentences in other ways, but I hope that this scheme has the merit of simplicity without distorting the material.

BASIC SENTENCE-PATTERNS

TYPE 1

Nominal	V. 1
e.g. L'homme	court.

Notes:

   V. 1:

      — Finite form of intransitive verb, or of a verb being used intransitively (for instance, contrast *Il sort* with *Il sort son mouchoir*). V. 1 includes compound tenses, and *aller/ venir* with infinitive (*i.e.*, considering them "compound" verbs: *Je vais partir. Je viens manger.*).

   Nominal (subject):

      — noun, with or without article or other determiner, or adjective-become-noun (*e.g.*, *les aveugles*), or noun with modifying word, phrase or clause.

      — bound or proclitic pronoun subject *e.g.*, *je, tu*, etc.

      — free pronoun *e.g.*, *celui, celui-ci, cela, quelqu'un, quelque chose, plusieurs, certains, beaucoup, assez, trop, deux* (*e.g.*, *Trop me dégoûte. Trois sont partis.*), etc. Or free pronoun with modifying phrase or clause, *e.g.*, *celui de Paul, celui qu'on a vu hier.*

      — infinitive, infinitive with modifier (*e.g.*, *bien travailler*), infinitive with phrase or clause: *partir dans la nuit, dire qu'il est parti*, etc.

TYPE 2

(a) Nominal[1]	V. 2	Nominal[2]
e.g., Cet homme	est	mon père.
C'	est	mon père.
(b) Nominal	V. 2	Nominal-modifier
e.g., Cet homme	est	vieux.
C'	est	à la mode.
(c) Nominal	(*le* V. 2)	
e.g., Elles	le deviennent.	
(Elles deviennent folles.)		

Notes:

   V. 2:

      — finite form of copulative verb (*e.g.*, *sembler, devenir*) or a verb used as copulative (*e.g.*, *être, rester, paraître.* Contrast *Il est là* with *Il est ingénieur.* One may consider certain usages of *vouloir dire, signifier*, and *valoir* as copulative also.)

   Nominal[1]:

      — as for Nominal in Type 1.

   Nominal[2]:

      — as for Nominal in Type 1, except that the bound pronoun subject is not found in this position.

   Nominal-modifier:

      — adjective, or adjectival phrase *e.g.*, *de retour, de rigueur*, etc.

   le:

      — proclitic neuter pronoun.

TYPE 3

(a) Nominal¹	V. 3	Nominal²
e.g., L'homme	tue	le loup.
Il	dit	que les oiseaux sont partis.
Il	commande	que les gens s'en aillent.
Le garçon	essaie	de partir.
J'	entends	chanter.

(b) Nominal	(-n V. 3)
L'homme	le tue.
Il	le dit.
Il	le commande.
Il	l'essaie.
Je	l'entends.

Notes:

V. 3:
— finite form of a transitive verb or of a verb being used transitively. (Contrast *Il descend* and *Il le descend*.)

Nominal¹ (subject):
— as for Nominal in Type 1.

Nominal² (object):
— as for Nominal in Type 1 (except for bound pronoun subject: *je*, etc.) with the following qualifications and additions:
   (i) an infinitive or phrase with infinitive <u>may</u> be introduced by *de* or *à*: *Il essaie de partir* (but *Il veut partir*.). At this point a problem of classification arises: are the many verbs like *vouloir, devoir, aimer*, etc., which take a dependent infinitive better classified as auxiliaries than as V. 3? If the verb is frequently found with a simple noun object, it would seem better to group it with V. 3:
   e.g., Il veut *des gâteaux*.
         Il veut *partir*.
                                        (cf. *préférer*, etc.)
   (ii) a clause, after verbs of "asking, saying, thinking, wishing, etc.", will be introduced by *que, comment*, etc.

(-n):
— bound pronoun, direct object e.g., *le, la, les*, etc. (including *en: Il en boit*.).

TYPE 4

(a) Nominal¹	V. 4	Infinitive	Nominal²
e.g., Il	entend	chanter	un homme.
Il	fait	réparer	sa voiture.

(b) Nominal	(-n V. 4)	Infinitive	
e.g., Il	l'entend	chanter.	
Il	la fait	réparer.	

Notes:

    V. 4:

       — finite form of *entendre, voir, faire, laisser*, etc.

Infinitive:

    — the infinitive is "active" or "passive" according to the context. (Contrast the simple value of infinitives in Type 3: *Il permet de réparer sa voiture*, etc.).

Nominal[1] (subject):

    — as for Nominal in Type 1.

Nominal[2] (object):

    — as for Nominal in Type 1 (except for bound pronoun subject).

(-n):

    — bound pronoun, direct object.

TYPE 5

(a) Nominal[1]	V. 5	Nominal[2]	Nominal[3] / Nominal modifier
e.g., Il	croit	son cousin	ingénieur. / malade.
(b) Nominal[1]	(-n V. 5)		Nominal[(3)] / Nominal modifier
e.g., Il	le croit		ingénieur. / malade.

Notes:

    V. 5:

       — a restricted group of verbs: *croire, appeler, considérer*, etc. One might also compare constructions like *avouer pour : Il avoue pour maître son vieux professeur*.

Nominal[1]:

    — as for Nominal in Type 1.

Nominal[2]:

    — as for Nominal in Type 1 except for bound pronoun subject and infinitive.

Nominal[3]:

    — as for Nominal[2] above.

Nominal modifier:

    — as for Nominal modifier in Type 2: adjective, past participle-become-adjective, adjectival phrase, and also phrases which we normally consider adverbial: *Je le crois en bas; Je le crois chez lui*; etc.

TYPE 6

IMPERSONAL CONSTRUCTIONS

	IL	V.	Nominal
e.g.,	Il	plaît	de voyager.
	Il	arrive	qu'on le voit.

Notes:
  V.:
    — may be transitive or intransitive (*e.g., Il le blesse de partir,* but *Il plaît de voyager*) or copulative (*e.g., Il est difficile de faire cela*).
    I prefer to except certain traditional expressions like *il faut, il semble que* (unless it is used as a copulative: *Il semble avantageux qu'il parte*) from this category. It will be noted that our other examples *may* be inverted so that the Nominal becomes subject of the verb: *e.g. Voyager plaît. Partir me blesse.*

Nominal:
  — infinitive (with or without dependent phrase or clause) introduced by *de.*
  — clause introduced by *que.*

IMPERATIVES, INTERROGATIVES AND PASSIVES

The list of basic sentence-patterns could be increased by addition of imperatives, interrogatives and passives. These may be considered "transformations" of our established patterns, however, rather than new patterns.
I have classified negatives as modifiers (see below).

MODIFIERS

The basic sentences may be elaborated by modifiers which provide additional or limiting information. Modifiers may be attached to single words, to phrases, or to complete sentences. For instance, in a sentence like: *Naturellement, le bon garçon travaille très vite. naturellement* may be considered a modifier of the whole sentence *Le bon garçon travaille très vite; bon* modifies *garçon* only, etc.
The modifiers may themselves consist of single words, or phrases, or clauses:

e.g.,	l'homme *malade*
	l'homme *au chapeau gris*
	l'homme *qu'on a vu hier*

A modifier may itself be modified:

e.g.,	un train *rapide*
	un train *très* rapide

Finally, we must stress once again that a given word or construction may perform different functions:

  e.g., Il parle naturellement, but *Naturellement il parle.*

I have grouped the modifiers according to the elements they modify.

Verb-modifiers:
  — may accompany infinitives and participles as well as finite forms.
  1. Modifier showing person or thing affected by verb, normally known as "indirect object":
      e.g., Elle pense *à lui.*
          Il *me* semble que c'est vrai.
          Je le *lui* donne.   etc.

  2. Adverbs of place, time, manner, etc. (including *y, en,* and comparatives like *mieux*).

  3. Phrases or clauses of place, time, manner, etc.

4. Limiting expressions: *ne... pas, seulement, presque,* etc.

Nominal-modifiers:

1. Adjectives, including ordinal numerals with the noun (but, in *Le troisième part maintenant, troisième* may be considered a noun), nouns in apposition.

2. Cardinal numerals and expressions like *beaucoup de, assez de, autant de ... que ...,* etc. with the noun or pronoun. But in the sentences *Trois sont partis* and *Assez me plaît, trois* and *assez* may be considered pronouns.

3. Various adjectival phrases:

> e.g., le crayon *de Pierre*
> celui *de mon ami*
> le train *de Paris*
> pont *en béton*
> la maison *de celui-ci*
> chocolat *à croquer*
> les affaires *dans ma chambre*
> une maison *coûtant plus d'un million,* etc.

4. Relative clauses.

5. Limiting words *e.g., presque, seulement. Elle est presque femme.*

6. *en* when equivalent to an adjectival phrase or genitive, *e.g., Il voit le bout du fil; Il en voit le bout; / Il en boit trop,* etc. (It may be difficult to distinguish this from the indirect object: see Verb modifier 1: Je *lui* tords le bras; J'*en* tords le bout).

Pronoun-modifiers (overlaps "Nominal-modifiers"):
(Note that only free pronouns —— *cela,celui,* etc. —— can be modified).

1. Various adjectival phrases (compare Nominal-modifiers 3).

> e.g., celui *de Pierre*
> dix *des meilleurs*

2. Relative clauses (compare Nominal-modifiers 4).

3. Limiting words like *presque* (compare Nominal-modifiers 5).

4. Expressions like *beaucoup de* (compare Nominal-modifiers 2).

5. *en* when equivalent to an adjectival phrase or genitive (compare Nominal-modifiers 6).

> e.g., J'*en* prends trois.

(We consider *trois* a pronoun here: see above Type 1, Nominal subject, etc.).

Sentence-modifiers:

Unlike the majority of those modifiers already mentioned, sentence-modifiers have a relative freedom of position: they may occur at the beginning, end, or in the middle of a basic sentence. Many verb-modifiers likewise have a certain freedom and at times the distinction between verb- and sentence-modifiers may seem false, especially when we remember that a given form may serve several functions. In the two sentences *Il partira bientôt,* and *Bientôt il partira,* it is easy to consider the word *bientôt* as an adverb in both cases. But we must make a distinction in the case of *Il parle naturellement,* and *Naturellement il parle.*

1. Single-word sentence-modifiers
   — "adverbs" used thus.
   — (possibly) interjections like *hélas.*

2. Phrases
  — phrases showing time or other circumstances (compare clauses below), *e.g.*, *Malgré la pluie*, il est parti. *En lisant ce livre*, j'ai appris que ...

  — "rhetorical" phrases like *en effet*.

3. Clauses showing accompanying circumstances: time, reason and cause, purpose, contrast, concession, etc.

  e.g., *Quoiqu'il soit malade*, il voyage toujours.

MODIFIERS OF MODIFIERS

Modifiers of adjectives and adjectival phrases:

1. *si, très*, etc.

  e.g., *très* mauvais,
    très à la mode;

2. discontinuous constructions showing comparison or result:

  e.g., Il est *aussi* grand *que son frère*.
    Il est *si* ennuyeux *qu'on refuse de l'écouter*.

Modifiers of (true) adverbs:

1. *si, très*, etc. (Compare Modifiers of adjectives 1).

2. Discontinuous constructions showing comparison or result (compare Modifiers of adjectives 2).

3. "Relative" clauses with *où*, *e.g.*, Je le mettrai là *où vous voulez*.

Modifiers of cardinal numerals (with noun):

— *plus de, moins de*, etc., *e.g.*, Je vois plus de dix hommes.

Modifiers of sentence-modifiers:

These are rare but do occur *e.g.*, *bien* in *Bien naturellement, il l'aime*.

CONJUNCTIONS

The term "conjunction" groups elements which have varying functions. Essentially the conjunction serves to link basic sentences or parallel sections within a sentence.

We may distinguish *level* conjunctions and *subordinating* conjunctions.

Level conjunctions:

(i) may link sections of a sentence which are syntactically parallel:

  e.g., Il cherche son chapeau *et* ses chaussures.
    Il les cherche dans le tiroir *et* sous la table.
(Conjunctions frequently used in this way are: *et, ou, ni, soit*)

(ii) or may link two or more basic sentences. The association may be "formal", in the sense that the two basic sentences are combined in one by suitable punctuation:

  e.g., Il partira *et* je rentrerai.
    Il chante bien, *mais* je ne suis pas satisfait.

More frequently, the association of the two sentences is semantic only:

e.g., Il part. *Or,* sa femme l'accompagne.

We may classify the kinds of interdependence created by the various conjunctions:

1. Addition: *et, aussi, d'ailleurs,* etc.
2. Consequence: *ainsi, donc,* etc.
3. Comparison: *ainsi, pareillement, de même,* etc.
4. Contrast and concession: *cependant, pourtant, néanmoins,* etc.
5. Relative time: *avant, après,* etc.

These conjunctions may also be classified as sentence-modifiers and are sometimes called "conjunctive adverbs".

Subordinating conjunctions:

As the name implies, subordinating conjunctions create a link between a basic sentence and one or more other basic sentences or clauses which are secondary to it. The subordinated sentences provide information about the "circumstances" of the action related in the basic sentence and they may be considered sentence-modifiers like the level conjunctions mentioned above. Further, the subordinated sentences have relative freedom of position in relation to the main clause or sentence (cf. sentence-modifiers).

Once again we may classify these conjunctions according to the semantic relationship they create between main and subordinate clause:

1. Cause: *parce que,* etc.
2. Purpose: *afin que,* etc.
3. Condition: *si, pourvu que,* etc.
4. Contrast and concession: *tandis que, bien que,* etc.
5. Comparison: *de même que,* etc.
6. Time: *quand,* etc.