

FUNCTIONS OF THE VERB-BASED -ANT FORM IN CONTEMPORARY FRENCH

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Introduction

In this article we attempt to summarize the functions of the verb-based *-ant* form (sometimes referred to as the "present participle", "gerund", etc.). The material should be of interest to teachers of French in particular, but there are wider questions involved: for instance, under Functions 1 and 2 it appears that grammatical interpretation depends as much on lexical content and context as on specific grammatical signals; further, one might consider that the *-ant* form is "economical" compared with, say, the finite verb, which varies with person, number, tense, aspect, and mood, and one can discuss the question of relative efficiency in communication.

Almost all the examples have been taken from French texts set down in the last twenty years (the few examples not taken from texts have been subjected to the scrutiny of native French speakers). We have used the newspaper FRANCE-SOIR in particular because of its colloquial style.

Certain questions of terminology will be considered briefly at the end. For the moment we will avoid terms like "present participle" and "gerund"; we will simply use the term "P-form" (in which "P" may be interpreted as "participial"), rather than "the *-ant* form", and when necessary we will refer to the phrase with it as nucleus as the "P-phrase" or the "P-tagmeme".

In this article we avoid discussion of the more general question of the hierarchical relationship between "phrases" and "clauses", the "nesting" or "embedding" of one within the other, etc. Therefore we use the term "main construction" rather than "main clause" for the group of elements with finite verb as nucleus with which the P-tagmeme is associated:

e.g. Elle le disait en pleurant.

(*Elle le disait* = main construction; *en pleurant* = P-tagmeme)

En entrant j'ai remarqué que la pièce était noire.

(*En entrant* = P-tagmeme; *j'ai remarqué que la pièce était noire.*
= main construction)

Plan

- Function 1 Nucleus of an adverbial tagmeme, relating to subject of main construction
- Function 2 Nucleus of an adverbial tagmeme, with independent subject
- Function 3 Preposition
- Function 4 Adverb and fixed adverbial phrase
- Function 5 Nucleus of an adverbial tagmeme, relating to object of main construction

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Function 6 Nucleus of an adjectival phrase

Function 7 Adjective

Function 8 Noun

Discussion

Terminology

Bibliography

Functions 1.A – 1.P Nucleus of an Adverbial Tagmeme, Relating to Subject of Main Construction

Overt Grammatical Signals and Features

The P-tagmeme may precede, interrupt, or follow the main construction.

If it follows, there may be a pause between the main construction and the P-tagmeme.

The P-tagmeme may be introduced by *en*, *tout en*, and, sometimes, by *bien que*, *quoique*, *parce que*. Frequently there is no particle (or "relator" – see below, under *Terminology*) present.

Semantic relationships between the P-tagmeme and the main construction

In many sentences, and particularly when there is no relator present, the meaning of the P-tagmeme may be considered "neutral", "gratuitous", or coordinate, for instance:

Compare *Il est parti avec sa soeur, prenant deux valises.*

Il est parti avec sa soeur, et il a pris deux valises.

However, in many of the sentences which have no relator, the reader or listener *interprets* the relationship as one of cause, result, etc., because of the lexical content of the sentence, or because of the total linguistic and/or extra-linguistic context. For instance, in the following example the P-tagmeme may easily be interpreted as an expression of result:

Le caillou est tombé de très haut, écrasant le cabanon.

(We shall see later that the relative order of the main construction and the P-tagmeme may affect the interpretation.)

A particular meaning may be communicated by the use of a conjunctive adverb ("coordinating conjunction"). The conjunction will occur in the second element of the sentence, whether this be the P-tagmeme or the main construction:

Les ballons... prendront des photographies de la couche nuageuse, apportant AINSI de précieuses informations aux responsables de la météorologie. (BNF 10/4/65)

Aimant les arts, la musique, ils se passionneront ÉGALEMENT pour les dernières inventions de la technique et de la science.

(reference lost)

When *en* (alone) is used as the relator, the P-tagmeme may communicate a variety of meanings. The relative order of the P-tagmeme and the main construction may be a factor. The interpretation may depend on the general content of the sentence and/or the larger linguistic or extralinguistic context.

With *tout en* there may be a slight degree of ambiguity.

With *bien que*, *quoique*, and *parce que* there is no ambiguity.

The table opposite is intended to make some of the factors clearer. It is important to remember, however, that some of the divisions we have made on the meaning axis, as well as some of the terms suggested for these divisions, are arbitrary (hence the quotation marks). Note the following abbreviations:

+ 7	=	with pause, normally
- 7	=	without pause, normally
∅	=	no relator present

1.A "NEUTRAL"/"COORDINATE"

1. [...] les républicains sont même allés [...] jusqu'au vote hostile, participant à la suppression en première lecture [...] (FS III)
2. Le président Johnson, lisant chaque citation, remet les décorations [...] (FS III)
3. [...] prenant au sérieux son rôle [...], Eisenhower accapara résolument la direction de la lutte [...] (FS I)

1.B "SIMULTANEITY"/"IMMEDIATE PRECEDENCE"

4. Abandonnant sa voiture, M.B. est parti à la recherche d'un fermier secourable. (FS II)
5. [...] et sortant son couteau de sa poche, il se porta un grand coup [...] (FS II)

1.C "CAUSE"/"JUSTIFICATION"

6. Considérant que la consommation du nickel [...] est appelée à augmenter fortement [...], la société a mis au point un vaste programme d'équipement [...] (FS III)
7. Elle n'ouvre pas non plus sa porte davantage, se sentant sans doute plus en sûreté à l'intérieur. (DLL 57)

1.D "RESULT"

8. [...] la neige aussitôt commence à recouvrir la trace cloutée des semelles, reconstituant peu à peu la blancheur primitive de la zone écrasée [...] (DLL 75)
9. [...] toutes les fenêtres sont closes [...], ne laissant deviner aucune trace de la vie. (DLL 54)
10. L'arbre est tombé en travers de la rue, blessant trois piétons.

Meaning of P-Tagmeme in Relation to Main Verb Construction	Position in Relation to Main Verb Construction			Relator				Examples (references are to examples following the table.)	
	Prec.	Ins.	Foll. +7	Foll. -7	∅	en	tout en		bien que quoique
1.A. "NEUTRAL"/"COORDINATE"	X	X	X		X				1, 2, 3
1.B. "SIMULTANEITY"/"IMMEDIATE PRECEDENCE"	X				X				4, 5
1.C. "CAUSE"/"JUSTIFICATION"	X	X	X		X				6, 7
1.D. "RESULT"			X		X				8, 9, 10
1.E. "NEUTRAL"/"ACCOMPANIMENT"				X	X				11
1.F. "MANNER"				X	X				12
1.G. "MEANS"				X	X				13
1.H. "MEANS" (EMPHASIZED).	X				X				14
1.I. "TIME WHEN"/"OCCASION"	X/			X	X				15, 16
1.J. "TIME"/OCCASION (EMPHASIZED).	X				X				17
1.K. "CONDITION"	X				X				18
1.L. "SIMULTANEITY"/"ACCOMPANIMENT"			X			X			19
1.M. "SIMULTANEITY" (EMPHASIZED)	X/		X			X			20
1.N. "ADDITION"/"CONTRAST"/"CONCESSION"	X/	X/	X/			X			21
1.O. "CONTRAST"/"CONCESSION"			X				X		22
1.P. "CAUSE"			X					X	23

1.E "NEUTRAL"/"ACCOMPANIMENT"

11. - Je lui ai raconté l'histoire, dis-je en laissant tomber la clef dans ma poche.

(FS I)

1.F "MANNER"

12. Elle marche en hésitant.

(One might compare the constructions with *aller*: *Leur pouvoir va croissant. Les prix vont (en) augmentant.* Cf. also 1.E)

1.G "MEANS"

13. Le troisième signal, le vert, [...] s'obtient en soustrayant le signal bleu [...] du signal rouge [...]

(BNF 10/4/65)

1.H "MEANS" (EMPHASIZED)

14. En forgeant, on devient forgeron.

1.I "TIME WHEN"/"OCCASION"

15. En recopiant son dessin original le dessinateur [...] s'est volontairement trompé sept fois.

(FS I, II, III)

16. Jacqueline Kennedy a voulu sourire en entrant dans sa nouvelle maison.

(FS III)

1.J "TIME WHEN"/"OCCASION" (EMPHASIZED)

17. En perdant Stalingrad, Hitler commençait à perdre la guerre.

(FS I)

1.K "CONDITION"

18. En prenant cette route, vous risqueriez de vous perdre.

1.L "ACCOMPANIMENT"/"SIMULTANEITY"

19. Il fronça les sourcils, tout en caressant les bras de sa chaise longue.

(FS I)

1.M "SIMULTANEITY" (EMPHASIZED)

20. Tout en continuant ses études d'ingénieur électricien, P. tenta sa chance sur le ring.

(FS)

1.N "ADDITION"/"CONTRAST"/"CONCESSION"

21. La S.I.E.S. a l'intention, tout en satisfaisant les besoins intérieurs, de fabriquer des quantités limitées d'engrais [...] pour l'exportation.

(BNF 910)

1.0 "CONTRAST"/"CONCESSION"

22. La France, bien qu'étant un des pionniers de la T.V.(1927), a pris du retard dans ce domaine [...]. (GF 176)

1.P "CAUSE"

23. [...] on les trouve inutiles et confuses; inutiles, parce que sans rapport réel avec l'action, confuses parce que ne remplissant pas ce que devrait être, censément, leur rôle fondamental [...]. (PNR 125)

Functions 2.A - 2.D

Nucleus of an Adverbial Tagmeme, with Independent Subject

Grammatical Features

The P-tagmeme may precede or follow the main construction.

If it follows, there is a pause between the main construction and the P-tagmeme.

The P-tagmeme is introduced by a noun (except that in the case of *étant donné* there is a change of order, and besides, a clause may replace the noun) and this noun is the subject of the P-form.

Semantic Relationships Between the P-Tagmeme and the Main Construction

Generally speaking, one may compare the relationships noted under *Functions 1.A - 1.K*: sometimes the P-tagmeme may be considered neutral and coordinate, sometimes it may be interpreted as cause, result, etc. The relative order, and the linguistic and extra-linguistic contexts may be cues. Once again it must be noted that there is a certain arbitrariness in our divisions.

2.A "NEUTRAL"

The P-tagmeme may precede or follow the main construction. Sometimes, when the P-tagmeme follows the main construction, the subject of the P-form restates or re-introduces a noun given in the main construction: see examples 4 and 5.

1. [...] le jour diminue dans la grande salle, l'ombre gagnant depuis la gauche et s'épaississant de plus en plus. (DLL 132)
2. Depuis la Libération, la hausse des prix aidant, le public français a paru bouder quelque peu les salles de cinéma. (GF 171)
3. Elle est immobile, les bras pendant le long du corps. (DLL 91)
4. La livraison de ces appareils sera échelonnée sur un an, le dernier devant être livré avant la fin du premier semestre 1964. (BNF 6/4/63)
5. Ils sont tous partis, chacun portant sa valise.

2.B "CAUSE"

The P-tagmeme may precede or follow the main construction.

6. Demain, la crise du cinéma s'aggravant, il faudra trouver un moyen de limiter la concurrence de la T.V. (L.F.A. 392)
7. Elle n'ouvre pas non plus sa porte davantage, se sentant sans doute plus en sûreté à l'intérieur. (DLL 57)
8. Étant donné que leur besoin est réel, nous aurions tort de leur refuser notre aide.

2.C "OCCASION"/"CONDITION"

The P-tagmeme may precede or follow the main construction.

This function is limited to a few expressions: *le cas échéant* (which may also be considered a conjunctive adverbial phrase because it refers to some preceding utterance), and *Dieu/le temps aidant* (but these may have a different function: see example 2 under *Function 2.A*).

9. Dieu aidant, on réussira à trouver les égarés.

2.D TIME (DURATION)

The P-tagmeme may precede or follow the main construction.

This function appears to be limited to expressions with *durant* (but see also under *Function 3 (ii)*).

10. Une semaine durant, elle restait là à attendre son ami.

Function 3 Preposition

(i) Certain prepositions ending in *-ant* appear to have come, via a "mis-related participle", from *Function 1*. Compare the following:

Nous disons, suivant cette théorie, que le problème peut être résolu.

(Cf. *Function 1.A*)

Suivant cette théorie, le problème peut être résolu.

(*suivant* is a preposition)

Moyennant deux paiements de 50 francs, vous recevrez le livre.

(= *en effectuant* ... Cf. *Functions 1.H, 1.K*)

Moyennant cette somme, la marchandise vous sera expédiée tout de suite.

(*moyennant* is a preposition)

One might predict similar developments in the case of *poursuivant*, *partant*, *en attendant*. One can see the process in the following example as well:

Selon des informations en provenance de Washington, et citant des milieux gouvernementaux, Marina Oswald aurait révélé au F.B.I. que [...] (FS III)

In this sentence *citant* is not related to the subject of the main construction.

- (ii) Certain prepositions ending in *-ant* appear to have come from *Function 2*. Compare the following:

Toute sa vie durant, il a été un fort honnête homme.

(See *Function 2.D*)

Durant toute sa vie, il a été un fort honnête homme.

(*durant* may be considered a preposition)

*Ce pendant, elle préparait ses valises.

(See *Function 2.D*)

Pendant ce temps, elle préparait ses valises.

(*pendant* is a preposition)

Function 4 Adverb and Fixed Adverbial Phrase

The adverb *cependant* and the expression *le cas échéant* can be related to *Functions 2.C* and *2.D* (for *cependant* see also *Function 3*, section (ii)).

It also seems possible for adverbial expressions to develop from *Function 1*. In the following example the P-form is not related to the subject of the main construction, at least not in the narrow grammatical sense:

[...] tout de suite à gauche, en entrant, s'y détache la petite affiche blanche [...] (DLL 55)

Functions 5A, 5B. Nucleus of an Adverbial Tagmeme, Relating to the Object of the Main Construction

5.A

The P-tagmeme closely follows the object of the main verb, without any pause (unless of course the P-tagmeme is coordinate with an element having the same function). The main verb is normally one of "perception", "discovery", and perhaps "representation";

e.g. découvrir
dépeindre
figurer
imaginer
regarder
représenter
surprendre
trouver
voir

The P-tagmeme gives information about the state or activity of the object.

Examples:

1. Nous avons surpris le coupable essayant de sortir.
2. [...] j'ai vu le même jeune homme en cuirasse massacrant toute une foule.
3. Trois hommes [...] que Mathias venait de rencontrer discutant devant la porte [...].

(ET 157)

(LV 56)

5.B

The P-tagmeme closely follows the object of the main verb, without any pause. The P-tagmeme is frequently introduced by *comme*. The main verb is normally one of "conception" or "attribution";

e.g. concevoir
 considérer
 révéler
 sentir
 signaler

The P-tagmeme gives information about the "qualities" of the object.

Examples

4. On considère ces produits comme faisant partie de notre stock.
5. Je signale l'hypothèse comme étant fautive.
6. Sur trente Irlandais, un seul m'a donné le XV d'Irlande gagnant.

(FS III)

Function 6 Nucleus of an Adjectival Phrase

Distributional Features

The P-form immediately follows a noun or pronoun, without any pause between. The P-form is itself normally followed by an object or adverbial phrase.

Semantic Relationship

The P-tagmeme modifies or qualifies the noun or pronoun, often with a determinative value.

Examples:

1. [...] je m'étais trouvé embarqué avec l'auteur sur un paquebot italien cinglant vers Miami. (MC 31)
2. Deux ouvriers travaillant dans le jardin découvrirent les ossements de deux cadavres. (FS III)
3. La loi créant l'impôt est applicable aux opérations postérieures au 15 septembre, 1963 [...]. (FS)

Note: This function of the P-form appears to arise from the neutral "adverbial" function (1.A).
Compare the following:

Une liste de noms fut établie par Kennedy, comprenant [...] (FS III)
(= Function 1.A)

Une liste de noms comprenant [...] fut établie par Kennedy.
(= Function 6)

Function 7 Adjective

Many adjectives ending in *-ant* have come from the P-form. As far as their function is concerned, it would appear to have derived from *Function 6*: the P-form with *Function 6* has been treated as a pure adjective provided it had no grammatical dependents (objects, adverb or adverbial phrase, etc.).

Compare:

Nous cherchons la lettre correspondant à celle-ci.

(= Function 6)

Nous cherchons la lettre correspondante.

(= Function 7)

Examples of other adjectives:

étonnant
gênant
obéissant
plaisant
suivant
vivant

Terminology

The question of terminology arises in connection with the following functions:

1. Nucleus of an adverbial tagmeme, relating to subject of main construction.
2. Nucleus of an adverbial tagmeme, with independent subject.
3. Nucleus of an adverbial tagmeme, relating to object of main construction.
6. Nucleus of an adjectival phrase.

First, while it is true to say that identification of any linguistic unit involves consideration of function as well as form, it does seem useful in the present case to attempt some separation. Thus we would call the form ending in *-ant* (invariable), closely associated (by stem and meaning) with the form known as the finite verb, the "present participle form". Then we can go on to say that this form has certain functions.

In grammars of French, the form occurring in *Function 1* and introduced by *en* is termed the "gerund" ("gérondif"). This arises from terminology used in grammars of Latin and should perhaps be abandoned.

Rather than introduce new terms for the functions we prefer to let the matter rest.

Footnote: the term "relator". We have used the general term "relator" to cover the "prepositions" and "subordinating conjunctions" occurring in Function 1. Again there is need for clarification of function and terminology; traditionally, prepositions introduce nouns or pronouns and subordinating conjunctions introduce clauses. (The word "relator" is well established in the practice of the Summer Institute of Linguistics.)

Function 8 Noun

Many nouns ending in *-ant* (e.g. *assistant, croyant, dirigeant, passant*, etc.) have come from the P-form. This function is easily explained as an extension of Function 7: for instance, *les hommes gagnants* becomes *les gagnants*; *les éléments composants* becomes *les composants*.

Discussion

If a linguistic unit is "simpler" (i.e. shorter, and containing less morphemes/tagmemes, etc.) than another linguistic unit, and yet conveys the same meaning in a given context *without ambiguity*, it may be said to be more efficient. (For our present purposes, ambiguity is defined within a given sentence, without reference to the wider linguistic or extra-linguistic context.)

The P-form might be considered more efficient, than, say the finite verb; the latter involves a complex morphology, questions of agreement, etc. In particular, the P-tagmeme might be considered more efficient than adverbial and relative clauses; compare the following:

Ayant soif, il s'est offert un verre.

Comme il avait soif, il s'est offert un verre.

Elle en veut aux femmes ayant plus qu'elle.

Elle en veut aux femmes qui ont plus qu'elle.

However, the P-form can only operate adequately within certain limits. First there are restrictions on the "reference" of the P-form: it refers to the subject of the main construction in Function 1, to the subject of the P-tagmeme in Function 2, to the object of the main construction in Function 5, to the antecedent in Function 6. In other words the reference (or "subject") of the P-form is very restricted. Secondly, we have seen that the number of "adverbial" meanings that the P-tagmeme can convey (Functions 1 and 2) is restricted, and there is often ambiguity. The user of the language can, however, draw upon other resources - prepositional phrases, infinitive phrases, clauses - to communicate a wider range of meanings and to avoid the risk of ambiguity. (It would be possible to draw up tables of "equivalents" and compare their relative efficiency in a range of contexts.)

At least as far as this material is concerned it would seem that the economical form is the less flexible form.

Bibliography: Sources of Examples

The abbreviations on the left are those used in our article. The Arabic numerals used beside them in the article give the page-reference.

- | | | |
|-------|---|---------|
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| - II | - | 10/4/65 |
| - III | - | No. 910 |
| DLL | A. Robbe-Grillet, 1959. <i>Dans le labyrinthe</i> . Paris, Éditions de Minuit. | |
| ET | M. Butor, 1957. <i>L'emploi du temps</i> . Paris, Éditions de Minuit. | |
| FS I | <i>France-Soir</i> 10/11/61 | |
| - II | - 17/11/61 | |
| - III | - 8-9-12/63 | |
| GF | G. Michaud, 1964. <i>Guide France</i> . Paris, Hachette. | |
| LFA | <i>La France d'aujourd'hui</i> , 1964. Paris, Hatier. | |
| LV | A. Robbe-Grillet, 1961. <i>Le Voyeur</i> . Paris, Éditions de Minuit. | |
| MC | <i>Marie-Claire</i> , February 1968. | |
| PNR | A. Robbe-Grillet, 1963. <i>Pour un nouveau roman</i> . Paris, Éditions de Minuit. | |