A Discussion on the Memory Strategies of the Gender of Nouns in Teaching French as a Second Foreign Language

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Abstract. "Gender"[1] (le genre) is a typical grammatical feature of French nouns. Compared with English, this is a prominent feature of French, and this feature also constitutes one of the difficulties in French learning. Accurately remember French nouns' gender is the basis for the proper use of articles and adjectives. The study and mastery of French nouns' gender often causes great trouble to Chinese French learners, especially to English majors who take French as a second foreign language. Even native French speakers do not understand the gender of all nouns, and the mastery of gender is acquired rather than inherent. This paper mainly summarizes some methods and techniques of French nouns' gender acquisition and memory from the formation of nouns in order to help Chinese French learners better learn and master the French nouns.

Keywords: Grammatical gender, morphology, semantics, suffix

1 Introduction

The French language belongs to the Romance language group within the Indo-European language family. Its grammatical gender division evolves from the division of neuter and non-neuter nouns in ancient Indo-European languages, to the division of feminine, neuter and masculine nouns in the Latin language, and finally to the division of feminine and masculine nouns. Compared to questions such as "why do French nouns have gender" and "why is this word feminine while another word masculine", the question "how to remember the gender of French nouns" is more important. It is of great practical significance for improving the proficiency in French and facilitating French learning.

The "gender" discussed in this paper refers to the grammatical concept rather than the biological gender of human and animals, though the two concepts are connected to some extent. Animate nouns can be remembered based on semantics: "male human and animals are masculine, whereas female human and animals are feminine." However, the grammatical system of the French language is arbitrary for most inanimate nouns. The gender of a word is irrelevant to its specific meaning, so semantics cannot serve as the basis to judge the gender of words. In the article "The arbitrariness of French nouns and its significance in teaching", Wu Tong introduced the categorization of grammatical gender from a typological perspective, and demonstrated the arbitrariness of French vocabulary both synchronically and diachronically. According to Wu, "we believe there is a certain basis for the gender divisions of French nouns, but the elements involved are diverse, including phonetics, semantics and morphology."

2 Discussion

With a flexible application of French word formation, this paper intends to discuss the memory strategy for the gender of nouns based on the "gender" in the grammatical category. All the nouns studied in the statistics are extracted from the 1st to the 3rd volume of Xin Daxue Fayu, the text book for learning French as a second foreign language at Yangtze University. During the statistical process, animate nouns

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[1] "Gender" is actually a grammatical category as it classifies nouns based on morphological markers such as morphology and syntax. The grammatical "gender" is distinct from the biological "gender". It is translated as "genre" or "sexe" in French.

(e.g. occupational nouns [2]) are excluded, whereas inanimate nouns with only one gender [3] (e.g. lit, livre, ville, etc.) are included. Rough statistics show that there are 874 nouns in the three volumes. Based on statistics and summaries, we find out that the morphology-based memory strategy is still the best option for studying French as a second foreign language. Our memory strategy is to decide the gender of a noun by observing its suffix, as the gender is demonstrated grammatically with the suffix in French. Other supplementary strategies will also be applied.

suffix / total number	total number	The number of masculine nouns	The percentage of masculine nouns	The number of feminine nouns	The percentage of feminine nouns
-tion	58	0	0%	58	100%
-sion	11	0	0%	11	100%
-ment	27	0	0%	27	100%
-age	25	22	88%	3	12%
-té	30	3	10%	27	90%
-ée	15	2	13.3%	13	86.7%
-t	82	76	92.7%	6	7.3%
-ce	46	6	13.0%	40	87.0%
-esse	9	0	0%	9	100%
-que	17	4	23.5%	13	76.5%
-ture	10	0	0%	10	100%

As we can see from the table above, almost all the nouns ending with the suffix "-tion" are feminine where the suffix is pronounced as [sjɔ̃]. The only exception is "bastion", a masculine noun where the suffix is pronounced as [tjɔ̃]. However, the nouns ending with the suffix "-tion" pronounced as [tjɔ̃] are unnecessarily masculine. For example, "question" and "suggestion" are both feminine. Moreover, almost all the nouns ending with the suffix "-sion" are feminine. Therefore, the memory strategy of this kind of nouns is based on morphology.

The nouns ending with the suffix "-ment" are all masculine which can be categorized into two cases: gerunds and other nouns. Gerunds, also known as derivatives, are the results of derivation[4]. Derivatives take up a large portion in French vocabulary, and their generation follows certain rules. The relation between the affix and the root usually determines the meaning and grammatical property of the derivative. There are mainly four types of derivations: suffix derivation, prefix derivation, non-suffix derivation, and prefix-suffix derivation. According to suffix derivation, gerunds can be generated by adding the noun suffix "-ment" to root verbs. For example, the masculine noun "approfondissement" is generated by adding the noun suffix "-ment" to the root verb "approfondir" with its meaning remaining unchanged as "deepening". The same rule applies to "remplacement" (remplacer), "paiement" (payer) and "classement" (classer). It is worth noting that the suffix "-ment" can also serve as an adverb suffix as in "vraiment", "heureusement" and "rapidement". Adverbs and nouns are two different grammatical properties with different usages and locations in the sentence, so it is easy to differentiate them. Similarly, masculine nouns also take up a large percentage in the nouns ending with the suffix "-age". Almost all the gerunds ending with the suffix "-age" are masculine, such as "chauffage (chauffer)"(heating), "chômage (chômer)" (unemployment) and "voisinage (voisiner)" (neighboring).

Among all the nouns in the statistics, feminine nouns ending with the suffix "-té" take up to 90%. Within 30 words, there are only three masculine nouns: "été", "côté" and "traité". So can we assume that monosyllable or disyllable words ending with the suffix "-té" are definitely masculine, while the other nouns are feminine? Obviously we can't. Based on observation, we find out that disyllable words such as "santé" and "beauté" turn out to be feminine. Through further observation, we find out that feminine nouns such as "santé" and "beauté" have one thing in common, namely, they are all derivatives generated by adding the suffix "-té" to adjectives. For example, "actualité" derives from the adjective "actuel",

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[2] Occupational nouns are becoming increasingly feminine.

[3] Nouns with two genders such as "tour" and "livre" are not excluded. For example, "tour" is feminine when it refers to tower/gun turret, but masculine when it refers to annulus/perimeter.

[4] The word formation that combines the original word components with derivational affixes.

"densité" derives from the adjective "dense", "beauté" derives from the adjective "beau", "santé" derives from the adjective "sain" ("sain" derives from "san"), etc. As a result, we can assume that almost all the monosyllable or disyllable words ending with the suffix "-té" are masculine, whereas almost all the derivative nouns generated by adding the noun suffix "-té" to adjectives are feminine. Therefore, the memory strategy of this type of vocabulary is mainly based on morphology with certain semantic basis.

The table above also demonstrates that the nouns ending with the suffix "-ture" and "-esse" are 100% feminine. Generally speaking, the nouns ending with the suffix "-esse" can be categorized into two cases. In one case, the noun derive from an adjective, such as jeunesse＝jeune＋esse, tendresse＝tendre＋esse, vitesse＝vite＋esse, politesse＝poli＋t＋esse, richesse＝riche＋esse. In the other case, the noun derives from a verb. In this case, the root verb serves as an independent word without adding any suffix, which is known as non-suffix derivation. As verbs mostly get rid of the original suffix (usually the last syllable) in this case, this method is also known as back-formation. For example, "presse" derives from the verb "presser", "cesse" derives from the verb "cesser". It is worth noting that almost all the nouns ending with the suffix "-esse" are feminine.

Most of the nouns ending with the suffix "-ée" are feminine. Among all the nouns in the statistics, only "lycée" and "muse" are masculine, while the rest are all feminine. In particular, almost all the nouns ending with the suffix "-que" that refer to disciplines are feminine. For instance, gymnastique (gymnastic), informatique (information technology), musique (music), physique (physics) and statistique (statistics)are all feminine nouns according to our statistics. Similarly, many nouns ending with the suffix "-logie" that refer to disciplines are feminine, such as biologie (biology), psychologie (psychology), sociologie (sociology), géologie (geology) and technologie (technology).

Besides, location nouns ending ending with the suffix "-erie" are feminine, such as boulangerie (bakery), briocherie (briocherie), pâtisserie (pastry), charcuterie(delicatessen), boucherie (butchery), poissonnerie (fish shop) and raffinerie (refinery). In contrast, nouns ending with the suffix "-isme" are masculine when they refer to certain theories such as "chauvinisme" (chauvinism) or thoughts/moral sentiments such as "défaitisme" (defeatism) and "héroïsme" (heroism).

In the statistical process, we also find out that adjectives referring to colors like "bleu" (blue) are masculine when they serve as nouns, such as "vert" (green, adj.) & "le vert" (green, n.) and "rouge" (red, adj.) & "le rouge" (red, n.). Although this type of nouns does not have the aforementioned regular suffixes, they remind of another rule, i.e. nouns generated by conversion are usually masculine. Conversion refers to the word formation that changes grammatical property instead of morphological or phonetic property and generates a new word by giving the original word a new meaning. Some linguists also refer to it as zero derivation. In addition, transmutation is also an important way to enrich French vocabulary. The transmutation in French mainly comprises nominalization, adjectivization and adverbialization, among which nominalization is the most universal with several common cases below:

Transmuting from adjectives: le vrai (truth), le rouge (red), un rapide (express train)

Transmuting from pronouns: le moi (self), le rien (nothing)

Transmuting from verbs: le boire (drink), le manger (food), le parler (talk), le savoir (knowledge), le pouvoir (power), le vouloir (wish), le dire (word)

Transmuting from prepositions: le pour (approval), le contre (disapproval)

Transmuting from adverbs: le pourquoi et le comment (why and how), le bien (the good), le mal (the evil);

Transmuting from conjunctions: des si (ifs), des mais (buts).

Languages are ever changing. They can only maintain eternal vitality to avoid extinction through constant changes. Meanwhile, languages communicate and borrow from each other. The exchange of languages is also the exchange of cultures. In this process, a new word class "loanwords" come into being. As indicated by the name, loanwords are the words borrowed from one language to another language which are usually transliterated. So what are the gender rules of loanwords in French? The gender of loanwords also features arbitrariness, which can be categorized into two cases. In one case, the loanword has gender in its original language. For example, the word "pizza" originates in Italian where it is feminine. In this case, the word remains feminine in French. By contrast, loanwords without gender division in the original language such as English and Chinese are usually masculine in French. Most loanwords from English are masculine, such as le tee-shirt (T-shirt), le club (club), le roller (roller skate), le week-end (weekend), le jean (jeans), le sandwich (sandwich), etc. One exception is the feminine word "session", which is a noun ending with the suffix "-sion".

Apart from morphology-based memory strategy, we can also adopt category-based memory strategy. For example, the nouns referring to seasons, months and days are all masculine, whereas the nouns referring to time, including heure (hour), minute (minute) and seconde (second), are all feminine. All the nouns referring to languages are masculine, such as "le français" (French), "le chinois" (Chinese), "l'arabe" (Arabic) and "l'anglais" (English). However, as this type of words derive from adjectives, i.e. they share the same word form as corresponding adjectives, we need to decide their grammatical property before deciding their gender.

3   Conclusion

The gender of nouns has always been a challenge in French teaching. By summarizing some gender rules based on statistics of nouns in the text book, this paper expects to help French learner to decide and deduce the gender of French nouns in a relatively easy way. The arbitrariness of the gender division of French nouns means that the mastery of the gender in French cannot simply rely on the orthography-based memory strategy. While semantics-based memory strategy applies to remembering animate nouns, category-based memory strategy is another important method. The specific categorization depends on the learner's accumulation on a daily basis to discover the connections between words and to summarize rules. Mechanical memory strategy is inevitable to some extent for irregular nouns.

During my classes, I focus on teaching the students who choose French as their second foreign language to use these methods comprehensively. The effect is considerable and good. Compared to the past, the students are more calm on facing the nouns' "gender problem". On the one hand, in dictations, their performances are much better particularly for the nouns. On the other hand, there is a higher and higher accuracy for students in doing nouns related exercises such as the articles, possessive adjectives, indicative adjectives and other adjectives… At least, in terms of nouns gender, the mistakes are much less than the before. It turns out that these strategies and methods are effective, realistic, feasible and worthy of putting into practice.

Besides, although the words in statistics total 874, the number of words in each category is rather limited, which reduces the accuracy of statistics. As this paper only offers a restricted view of the issue, it is worth thinking whether we should take dictionaries as data sources, establish relevant data bases, or adopt more scientific and efficient research methods.

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