THE USE OF FRENCH DESCRIPTIVE ADJECTIVES AMONG NIGERIAN FRENCH LANGUAGE LEARNERS: PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

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Abstract

We are motivated by the fact that the students of French in Nigerian universities, after travelling to French-speaking countries for a "year abroad programme", often come back still with difficulty in writing correct French. This programme (a year abroad programme) is purposefully designed to enable the second language learners interact with the native speakers of the language and thereby learn the proper use of the language. By the time the students come back, it is always observed that there is more improvement in their spoken French than in written French. That is to say that their mastery of the French Grammar is inadequate and without which the students remain incapable of making use of the language effectively. The use of French adjectives by Nigerian French learners is problematic in French grammar. The second language learner normally encounters two major difficulties regarding the use of French adjectives. First, the position of a French adjective with respect to the noun it modifies, then the agreement of a French adjective with the noun it modifies. This paper explores the various positions of descriptive adjectives in French and also the agreement between the adjectives and the nouns they modify in order to enable the Nigerian French learners master their uses in sentences.

Introduction

It has been observed that a language learner, who stays in the midst of the native speakers of the language, learns the oral aspect of the language first before the written form. This is in line with Williamson's explanation that "Every normal child grows up speaking the language(s) of his community without special training. But he will never learn to write these languages unless he is

specially taught either by attending school or by taking lessons" Ndimele (2007: 2). In other words, without being taught the grammar of a language, the learner remains incapable of writing, and speaking correct sentences. That is the reason why Gleason () remarks that the mastery of grammar "is the key to the understanding of verbal communication". He further states that "a grammar, even a very good one, of a language only partially known can be a very frustrating thing".

The use of French adjectives still poses a lot of challenges for the Nigerian French learners. Adjective has been defined by many scholars. According to Kaur (2009: 16), adjectives are words that say more about or describe a noun. Anumihe (2001:107) added that, except verbs and adverbs, adjectives qualify nouns, pronouns and other parts of speech. Syntactically, Ndimele (2007:132) states that "The function of the adjective is to specify or limit the reference or attributes of nominals(e.g. nouns, pronouns) or noun phrase". Thus, adjectives in general give more explanations to nouns they modify. Adjectives that describe a noun or a pronoun are called Descriptive Adjectives, Kaur (2009:20).

French descriptive adjectives, just like in English, can function either as attributes when they precede the noun they modify. Example:

une petite fille/a small girl;

une grande maison/ a big house.

Or as predicates when they serve as complement of a subject or an object. For instance:

L'école est grande (The school is big)

L'homme est beau (The man is handsome)

Position of French adjectives

French adjectives can be placed on either side of the noun they modify (i.e. pre-head modifier when they come before the nouns they modify, or post-head modifier when they come after the nouns they modify). This concept poses a lot of problem to French learners as to where the adjective should be placed with respect to the noun it modifies.

Pre-head modifiers

Lagane (2004 :7) explained that "ll existe une liste limitée d'adjectifs qui sont ordinairement placés avant le nom (antéposé) ; ces adjectifs n'ont le plus souvent qu'une ou deux syllabes''

[There exists a limited number of adjectives which are ordinarily placed before the noun; these adjectives are usually made of monosyllabic or disyllabic words] (translation ours)

Let us take a look at the following examples

1. Un **peti**t garcon a small boy

   ↓ ↓ ↓

   Det. adj N

2. Une **belle** fille a beautiful girl
3. Une j**olie** chemise a pretty shirt

The adjectives " petit, belle and jolie modify the nouns garçon, fille and chemise respectively in the examples (1) (2) and (3) respectively and they all appear before the nouns they modify. For Nigerian students learning French, this may not really pose a problem as the arrangement of words follow the same pattern as that of English, their official language which they are used to.

Post-head modifiers

Simone Oudot asserts that in general, French descriptive adjectives follow the nouns they modify. These include colour adjectives, participles (derived from verbs), "political" adjectives (nationality, sexuality, political persuasion, religion…), adjectives denoting shape. Let us take a look at the following:

1. Une femme **nigérianne** a Nigerian woman
2. Un stylo **rouge** a red pen
3. Une famille **bourgeoise** a middle class family
4. Un homme **marrié** a married man
5. Les chasons **chrétienne**s the christian songs

The adjectives indicating nationality (nigerianne), colour (rouge), social class (bourgeoise), religion (chrétiennes) and participle (marrié) modifying the various nouns "femme, stylo, famille, chansons, and home" respectively, all appear after the nouns they modify.

However, depending on their meaning, certain descriptive adjectives are placed before or after the noun, Here are some examples :

6. Un homme grand (a tall man)



Art N adj.

7. Un grand homme (a great man)



Art adj. N

The adjective 'grand' in the example (6) is placed after the noun giving a mere description of the noun "home" (i.e man) as being tall. But in example (7) the same adjective, placed before the noun makes the adjective undergo a change in meaning from its denotative meaning(tall) to a connotative meaning (**great**).

8. Des stylos verts (green pens)
9. Ma verte année (my fruitful year)

The adjective 'vert' has equally gone beyond its literal meaning as **colour green** in example (8) to mean **'fruitful'** in example (9) by virtue of its position with respect to the noun it modifies.

Agreement in French adjective

According to Oudot (2000:69) "An adjective (or a past participle used as an adjective) agrees in gender and number with the noun or the pronoun it modifies, whether as a direct modifier or as a predicate adjective. An Adjective modifying nouns of different genders is in the masculine plural".

Agreement in gender: This simply means that when the noun being modified by the adjective is a masculine/feminine noun, the adjective must also correspond to the same gender form. Below are some examples:

10. Le garçon intelligent (the intelligent boy)
11. La fille intelligent**e** (the intelligent girl)

In example (10), the noun(garcon/boy) is a masculine noun, so the adjective also takes a masculin gender by bearing no affixation of any kind. In example (11), the noun (fille/girl) is feminine, and so the adjective agrees in gender by suffixation of "e" to the adjective (intelligent-**e**)

Agreement in number: According to Dubois and Lagane (2001:49) "En general, le pluriel de l'adjectif se forme en ajoutant -s au singulier" [Generally, the plural of adjectives is formed by adding -s to the singular form]. Oudot (200:71) added that "The plural of most adjectives is formed by adding –s to the singular (masculine or feminine) form. All feminine adjectives have regular plurals. Only masculine adjectives are irregular". That is to say that, the adjective modifying a noun must reflect the number of the noun as to whether the noun is in singular form or in plural form. When the noun being qualified is in the plural form the adjective also takes the plural form. Here are some examples

12. C'est une maison grande (it is a big house)

13. Ce sont des maisons belle**s** (these are beautiful houses)

In example (12) the word "grand**e**" did not take 's' as in the example (13), because the word "maison" which it modifies is in the singular form, rather it takes the suffixation of 'e' so as to agree in gender with the feminine noun(maison). In example (13) the adjective (belle**s**/beautiful) agrees in number with the noun (maisons/houses) which it qualifies by bearing the mark of plurality 's'

Evaluation

Below are some sentences written by students during evaluation exercise, with corrections and comments.

1. Mon père est Nigerian, ma mère est aussi Nigerian (My father is a Nigerian, my mother is also a Nigerian)

2. Ngozi a deux jupes noirs (Ngozi has two black skirts)

3. Voilà l'arbre robustee (Here is the robust tree)

4. Ce sont des étudiantes sérieuxes (These are serious students)

5. Ike porte des pantalons rougs (Ike is putting on red trousers)

In example (1), the student simply writes the adjective (Nigerian) without observing any agreement for the feminine form. He writes the adjective "Nigerian" for male the same way as for the feminine. This may simply be because in the student's mother tongue and in English the student's lingua franca, agreement does not occur between the adjective and the noun it modifies. In the English language the adjective qualifying the various nouns(either masculine or feminine gender) is written in the same way as seen in the examples below:

Mon père est nigérian (my father is a **Nigerian)**

Ma mère est nigériane (my mother is a **Nigerian)**

Thus, the student is not used to agreement between adjective and noun. The correct sentence should read:

Mon père est Nigerian, ma mère est aussi Nigeriane.

In example (2), the learner understands that the noun being modified is in the plural form and so, the adjectives must equally agree in number, so he/she adds 's' to the adjective (noir-**s**), but the error here is that the candidate does not observe the agreement with respect to gender, which will ordinarily demand the affixation of 'e' to the adjective(noir), because the noun (jupe/skirt) being modified is a feminine noun. The correct sentence should, therefore, read:

Ngozi a deux jupes noires (Ngozi has two black skirts)

In example (3), the learner understands the need for agreement between the adjective and the noun it modifies. He therefore tries to effect agreement in terms of gender by adding 'e' to the adjective (robuste-e). This is purely the case of a confused student, because the noun(arbre) is not even a feminine noun as he/she probably has thought. Even if the noun were to be a feminine noun, there would be no addition of 'e' since the adjective already ends with 'e'. The correct sentence should read:

Voilà l'arbre robuste(Here is the robust tree)

In example (4), the student is fully aware of adjective agreement. He tries to observe the agreement with respect to both the gender and the number, but the sentence remains grammatically wrong as the student does not realize that there are words that cannot just add "e"t o the masculine form of the adjective. He therefore adds 'es' , to the masculine word"serieux", the student adds the 'e' to agree in gender and the 's' to agree in number with the noun (étudiantes) as plural. The error is made at the level of the gender agreement. The feminine form of the adjective "sérieux" is "sérieuse" to which the suffix "s" should be added. The correct sentence should be :

Ce sont des étudiantes sérieuses.

In example (5), the student also realizes the need for agreement between the adjective and the noun being modified. In his attempt to get the agreement in terms of gender, the student understands that the noun in question is a masculine noun, he therefore thought that removing the 'e' ending of the adjective "roug-e" would render his sentence grammatically correct. He was entirely wrong anyway, because the adjective originally terminates with 'e' , even in the masculine form (rouge). So, there will be no need of removing the 'e' ending. Nevertheless, the candidate makes a good effort in trying to properly place the agreement in terms of number correctly, by adding 's' to the adjective, to denote that the noun being modified is in the plural form. The correct sentence should read:

Ike porte des pantalons rouges (Ike puts on red trousers)

Conclusion

From our analyses, it is obvious that for any French learner to use adjectives correctly in sentences, he/she is obliged to master the agreement. This poses a serious challenge to Nigerian students learning French as a foreign language, because English is not a gender language and also adjectives in English do not agree in any way with the nouns they modify in gender or number as in the case of French. Teachers of the French language should endeavour to provide their Nigerian French students with appropriate regular exercises in order to help them master the rules of French adjectives usage in French grammar.