

Dissolving the French conjugation classes

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French grammars distinguish two main conjugation classes:

1. GROUP 1 (*long-er* 'go along')
 - Infinitive in *-er* /e/
 - 90% of existing lexemes, around 6000 lexemes
 - Main attractor for new creations
2. GROUP 2 (*maigr-ir* 'get thin(ner)')
 - Infinitive in *-ir* /iʁ/
 - A subset of forms in /is/ (*maigrissant*)
 - Around 350 lexemes
 - Few recent *dictionary* creations after 1800
 - Productive? Unproductive?
 - Regular? Irregular?
3. GROUP 3
 - Several patterns of small frequency, 400 lexemes
 - Irregular, unproductive

Groups 1 vs. 2: morphological differences

	LONGER	MAIGRIR
imperfect 1-3sg, 3pl	lǝʒ-ε	meɣɤ- is -ε
pres 1pl	lǝʒ-ǝ̃	meɣɤ- is -ǝ̃
pres 3sg	lǝʒ	meɣɤ- i
simple past 3sg	lǝʒ- a	meɣɤ- i
simple past 1pl	lǝʒ- a -m	meɣɤ- i -m
future 2/3sg	lǝʒ-(ə)ɤa	meɣɤ- i -ɤa
pres. subj. 1-2sg, 3 pl	lǝʒ	meɣɤ- is
past subj. 1pl	lǝʒ- a -sǝ̃	meɣɤ- i -sǝ̃
pres. part.	lǝʒ-ǝ̃	meɣɤ- is -ǝ̃
imperative 2sg	lǝʒ	meɣɤ- i
imperative 2pl	lǝʒ- e	meɣɤ- is - e
infinitive	lǝʒ- e	meɣɤ- i - ɤ
past participle	lǝʒ- e	meɣɤ- i

Table 1: Partial paradigm for LONGER (group 1) and MAIGRIR (group 2)

Research questions

Research questions:

- What distinguishes Group 1 vs. Group 2?
- What is the morpheme /i(s)/ in Gr. 2 verbs?

Traditional answers (Plénat 1987, El Fenne 1994, 2020 Bonami and Boyé 2003, Aronoff 2012...):

- Group 1 and group 2 have a different morphological *signatum* (different types of stems, theme vowels, inflectional paradigm).
- /i/ is either a theme vowel, or the final part of Group 2 verbal stems (together with /s/).

Common assumption: the link between verbs and their group is **idiosyncratic**, purely morphological, and cannot be explained by semantics, syntax or phonology. (see Oltra-Massuet 2020)

But...

The existence of **doublets differing by their semantics** is unexpected if the link between verbs and their group marking is purely morphological [^o=technical/dated/rare] (see also Hewson 1997: 156)

Stem	Gr. 2 verb	Gr. 1 verb	
<i>égal</i> 'equal'	^o <i>égal-ir</i> COS	<i>égal-er</i> STATE/COS	<i>égal-is-er</i> COS
<i>bête</i> 'stupid'	<i>a-bêt-ir</i> COS	<i>bêt-ifi-er</i> COS/ACT	
<i>fainéant</i> 'lazy'	^o <i>af-fainéant-ir</i> COS	<i>fainéant-er</i> ACT	
<i>marron</i> 'brown, chesnut, curl'	<i>marronn-ir</i> COS	^o <i>marronn-er</i> ACT	
<i>louche</i> 'squinty/fishy'	^o <i>louch-ir</i> COS	<i>louch-er</i> ACT	
<i>feuille</i> 'leaf'	^o <i>feuill-ir</i> COS	^o <i>feuill-er</i> ACT	

COS: change-of-state, ACT: activity.

Hypotheses

- The suffix /i(s)/ **comes with a semantics** which speakers are able to generalize from. (see also Hewson 1997: section 10.3)
- Its semantics is **determined by the type of stem** (root or word) it is concatenated with.
 - In **word-derived** (deadjectival or denominal) verbs, it spells out V_{cause} , but in **root-derived** verbs, it denotes the **identity function**.
 - Case of **contextual allophony of functional heads** (Wood 2012 elaborating on Schäfer 2008, Marantz 2013).
- French has **no conjugation classes** as such. Rather, it has regular verbs (-er, “Gr. 1”), a small set of irregulars (“Gr. 3”), and regular verbs with the /i(s)/ suffix (“Gr. 2”).
 - The suffix /i(s)/ triggers **inflectional allomorphy** in specific contexts.

Plan

1. Group 2 is regular and productive
2. Semantic trend across group 2 verbs and refinement of the hypotheses
3. Experiment
4. Discussion and predictions

Group 2 is regular and productive

Group 2 is regular

- A class is **regular** if speakers conjugate a new or nonce verb from this class according to its paradigm (Dressler 1997, Bonami and Boyé 2003, Boyé and Cabredo Hofherr 2005).
- Group 2 is by now standardly taken to be regular (Boyé and Cabredo Hofherr 2005, Bonami and Boyé 2007, Boyé 2011).
- See experimental work by El Fenne 1994, Bonami et al. 2008.

Group 2 is productive

- It is often admitted that Group 2 is unproductive (Kilani-Schoch and Dressler 2005)
 - Last dictionarized 2 Gr. verb around 1900.
- But several authors (Hewson 1997, Boyé 2000, Bonami and Boyé 2003: 120) note that new **word-derived** Group 2 verbs can easily be formed (*siennir, orangir, blanchouillir*)
- Around 1000 entries for Group 2 in the Wiktionary, many of which are not dictionarized but nevertheless used by native speakers.

Group 2 is productive

- (1) J'avoue que c'est un moment qui **m'agourmandit**.
'I've to admit that this moment is appetizing to me.'
(Mediapart, 2014, borrowed from Provençal French)
- (2) Que nous reste-t-il du temps qui passe quand le monde **s'assauvagit** comme pas possible.
'what is left from time passing when the world gets wild like crazy.'
(Wordpress, 2009, back from Middle French)
- (3) Est-ce que l'ours '**ensauvagit**' davantage le paysage que le loup?
'Do bears make the landscape wilder than wolves?'
(**forum.velo-club.net**, 2015, neologism)
- (4) Je trouve que le service **s'amenuit**.
'I find that the service gets worse.'
(Tripadvisor, 2018, back from Middle French)

Semantic trend across group 2 verbs

The 'inchoative conjugation' in Romance

- /i(s)/ < Latin inchoative suffix /-sk-/ which gave rise to the 'Romance inchoative conjugation'
- French (like Italian) narrowed down the choice of vowels to *i* (Allen 1995; see discussion in Kobayashi 1988), the theme vowel of Latin 4th conj. *-īre*, a systematic morphology of the inchoative.

(5) *ruber* 'red', *rubeo* 'be red', *rubescō* 'grow red'

- The inchoative meaning of Latin /-sk/- eroded and got lost (Allen 1995, Schwarze 2009, Da Tos 2012)
- **Hypothesis:**
 - /sk/ re-emerged in French /-i(s)-/ through a process of historical re-analysis (Hewson 1997, Caudal 2014, see also Schwarze 2009: 43).
 - /i(s)/ = **inchoative suffix** (see Fouché 1967, Kobayashi 1988, Hewson 1997: 153 see also Schwarze 2009), i.e. a **spell-out of v_{cause}**

Semantic trend in Group 2 verbs

Impressions from an inspection of lists of Gr. 2 verbs

- Most of Gr. 2 verbs are **word-derived** (Arad 2003):
 - many adjective-derived (*maigr-ir* 'become thin(ner)' < *maigre* 'thin')
 - also noun-derived (*at-terr-ir* 'land' < *terre* 'earth'; *fleurir* 'bloom, decorate with flowers' < *florere*, reshaped on *fleur*)
- Most of the **word-derived** Gr. 2 verbs have a **CoS semantics**
- Gr. 2 word-derived **activity** verbs are exceptional (*bonnir* 'tell good stories') and seem on the road to perdition
- **Root-derived -ir verbs** are less frequent and
 - are mostly **CoS** (like word-derived ones), e.g., *épanouir* 'blossom'
 - are the main source of (the minority of) **activity** Gr. 2 verbs, e.g. *agir* 'act'.

In summary: (i) Gr. 2 verbs are more likely to be **CoS** than **activity** verbs, and (ii) The few activity Gr. 2 verbs are mostly root-derived, not word-derived.

Semantic trend in Group 2 verbs

- Manual annotations are planned.
- 152/180 first verbs of Gr. 2 list in Boyé (2000) have a CoS semantics (84, 4%)
- Annotation by Anscombe (2008):
 - 84% of his 234 Gr. 2 verbs are (in our terminology) word-derived
 - 15% root-derived (from Latin or Germanic a.o.)
 - Most [no quantitative assessment] have an inchoative (CoS) semantics
- Verhulsdonck 2019: mistakes in the conjugation of /i(s)/-verbs significantly reduced among Dutch FFL learners of French once taught that “Gr. 2” is mainly inchoative.
 - ‘les étudiants vraiment avaient l’impression d’avoir appris quelque chose.’ (p. 35)

Summing up: research questions and hypotheses

Research questions:

- Do conjugation classes carry meaning?
- Are Gr. 2 verbs semantically transparent, i.e., is their meaning synchronically compositional (Marslen-Wilson et al. 1996)?

Hypotheses

- The morpheme /i(s)/ is not semantically inert. It is associated with a CoS meaning which is activated in word-derived verbs.
- The meaning of Gr. 2 word-derived verbs is accessed via their component morphemes (a/n and /i(s)/).

Semantics of $i(ss)$

- (6) a. $i(ss) =$
 $\lambda P \lambda e \exists s. [\text{cause}(e, s) \wedge P(s)] / \{\mathbf{a}, \mathbf{n}\}$ ____
- b. $i(ss) =$
 $\lambda P \lambda e. P(e) / \text{elsewhere}$
- (7) a. $[\text{rouge}] = \lambda s \lambda y. \text{red}(s) \wedge \text{theme}(s, y)$
- b. $[\text{rougir}] = [i(ss)](\text{rouge}) =$
 $[\lambda P \lambda e \exists s. [\text{cause}(e, s) \wedge P(s)]](\lambda s \lambda y. \text{red}(s) \wedge \text{theme}(s, y)) =$
 $\lambda e \lambda y \exists s. [\text{cause}(e, s) \wedge \text{red}(s) \wedge \text{theme}(s, y)]$
- (8) a. $[\sqrt{\text{AG}}] = \lambda e. \text{act}(e)$
- b. $[\text{agir}] = [i(ss)](\sqrt{\text{AG}}) =$
 $[\lambda P \lambda e. P(e)](\lambda e. \text{act}(e)) = \lambda e. \text{act}(e)$

Experiment

Method

Wug study (cf. Dumay and Martin 2010, see also Ramscar 2001) :

- We examined language users' intuitions by a two-alternative forced choice test between verbal forms competing for their fit with a given context.
- Used wug-adjectives serving as a basis for the derivation of nonce Gr. 1 and 2 verbs (using the suffix /i(s)/).
- For each alternative, we varied the context on the CoS vs. activity dimension.

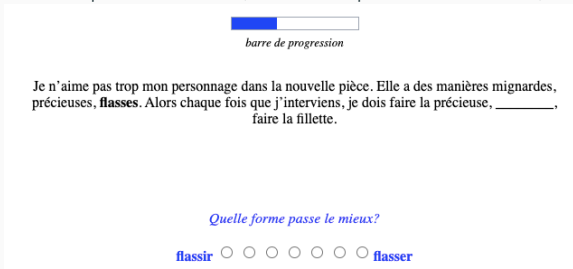
Participants

Native speakers of French, recruited from our own social networks.

1. Experiment 1 (prefixed): N = 28
2. Experiment 2 (unprefixed): N = 16

Procedure

- Choose between *-er* (“Gr. 1”) form and *-ir* (“Gr. 2”) form on an unlabelled 7-point Likert scale (online, PennController/Ibex).
- 2 practice items first, and then experimental items:
 - 8 items per condition (total 16 experimental items).



barre de progression

Je n'aime pas trop mon personnage dans la nouvelle pièce. Elle a des manières mignardes, précieuses, **flasses**. Alors chaque fois que j'interviens, je dois faire la précieuse, _____, faire la fillette.

Quelle forme passe le mieux?

flassir **flasser**

- 8 Gold standard fillers with one right answer.
- Order of presentation (whether *-ir* is left/right) and order of items were randomized.

Procedure

Example of Gold standard fillers:



barre de progression

J'ai vu un crossor du quartier qui **jombine**. Et Pierre m'a dit que dans son quartier ils
_____ tous aussi.

Quelle forme passe le mieux?

jombinissent **jombinent**

Methods

Manipulated two main variables: Context (CoS/Activity) and Prefix (yes/no).

- (9) The world **is changing** at a crazy pace and **is becoming** more and more **baigle**. For the sociologist Michel Pernu, it is **because of** globalization – which disrupts everything and builds new frameworks for organizing human societies – that **the world** *en-baigl-e/en-baigl-it* at full speed.
- (10) Everyone has already noticed that **the new colleague** is very **blatoche**: **super nice, attentive, professional**, etc. The other day, as **he** *a-blatoch-ait/a-blatoch-issait* **as usual with a customer**, I saw the manager start yelling at him.

Nonce words created with the help of Wuggy (Keuleers and Brysbaert, 2010).

Experimental items can be examined at <https://tinyurl.com/french-ir>

Variable Context: CoS/Act

Cues for CoS:

- inanimate subjects
- *devenir* 'become'
- *rendre* 'make'
- *sous l'effet de* 'under the effect of'
- *rester* 'remain'

Cues for Act:

- animate subjects
- modification by agentive adverbials (*volontiers* 'willingly')
- embedding under predicates of desire (*vouloir* 'want')
- Rephrasing of the wug-VP with *faire* 'do'
- Purpose adjuncts (*pour VP* 'in order to')

Predictions

- In the **activity** context, we expected a preference for *-er*.
- In the **CoS** context, we expected a preference for *-ir* via the Stronger Meaning Hypothesis (Dalrymple et al. 1998):
 - Word-derived Gr. 2 verbs: **CoS** only
 - Word-derived Gr. 1 verbs: **CoS** or **activity**.

Methods

Main effects tested:

1. Context (CoS/Act) – within-subject.
2. Prefix (yes/no) – between-subject.

Additional exploratory predictors / search for confounds:

3. Task (create infinitive/singular verb/plural verb)
 4. Stem vowel
- Each context (carrier phrase) was matched with one set of wugs (adjective and derived form).
 - There was no randomization of contexts with wugs in the pilot.

Methods

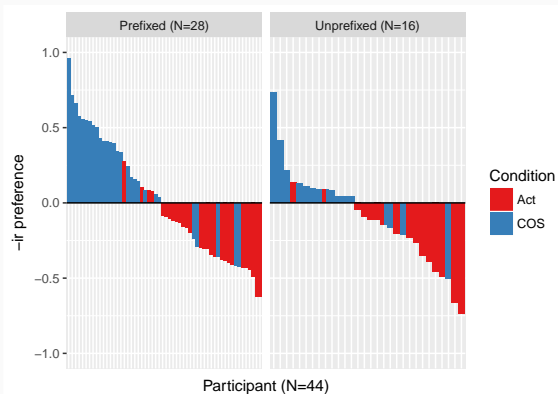
- Scores on the Likert scale were Z-transformed.
 - 1.0: preference for Gr. 2 *-ir*
 - -1.0: preference for Gr. 1 *-er*
- Predictions:
 - Positive scores for **CoS** (*-ir*)
 - Negative scores for **Act** (*-er*)
- Mixed effects model with Condition, Prefix and their interaction as predictors.

Results

CoS 0.19 ± 0.89

Act -0.25 ± 0.86

- Condition
 $p = 0.007$
- Prefix n.s.
- Interaction n.s.



- Activity/COS distinction was a strong predictor of participants' choice, in line with the hypothesis: (i) preference for *-ir* in CoS; (ii) preference for *-er* in Act.
- Ask us later about prefixation.

Discussion

Discussion

- The morpheme /i(s)/ is associated with a **CoS** meaning (in word-derived verbs). It is not semantically inert.
- The morpheme /i(s)/ appears across all forms because it enters the semantic composition of the predicate.
- This is compatible with the view that not all Gr. 2 verbs are inchoative (Nyrop 2004: 52, Brunot 1936: 450, Maiden 2003, Martinet 1969: 111, Aronoff 2012, ...) :
 - Root-derived Gr. 2 verbs may, but do not have to, instantiate CoS semantics.

Predictions

1. Prediction 1: combination with other morphological exponents

of v_{cause}

- Martin and Piñón (2020): under one of their readings, /ifi/ and /is/ spell out v_{cause} , too (see, e.g., *égal-is-er* ‘make/become equal’).
- We predict these suffixes not to combine with /i(s)/, which is supported by the data (**wug-ifi-(i)-r*, **wug-is-i-r*)

2. Prediction 2: nominalizations

- We expect /i(s)/ to be part of the morphological make-up of event nouns derived from Gr. 2 verbs, which is supported by the data, too (*blanch-i-(sse)-ment*, *blanch-iss-age*).

Predictions

3. Prediction 3: reinterpretation of word-derived Gr. 2 activity verbs.
 - The compositional meaning of word-derived Gr. 2 verbs can be occasionally overridden by specific lexemes, see (11)-(12).
 - But such verbs seem automatically assigned the expected compositional CoS meaning by naive speakers (see also Boyé 2000: 22).

(11) *chauvir*

- a. **Lexicographed meaning:** prick up one's ears
- b. **Common naive interpretation:** become bald

(12) *bonnir*

- a. **Lexicographed meaning:** tell good stories
- b. **Common naive reinterpretation:** become better

Next directions

Morphological differences between Gr. 1 and Gr. 2 verbs

In **most cases**, the morphological differences are reduced to the presence vs. absence of /i(s)/:

	LONGER	MAIGRIR
imperfect 1-3sg, 3pl	lǝʒ-ε	μεγϋ- is -ε
pres 1pl	lǝʒ-ō	μεγϋ- is -ō
pres 3sg	lǝʒ	μεγϋ- i
simple past 3sg	lǝʒ- a	μεγϋ- i
simple past 1pl	lǝʒ- a -m	μεγϋ- i -m
future 2/3sg	lǝʒ-(ə)ʋa	μεγϋ- i -ʋa
pres. subj. 1-2sg, 3pl	lǝʒ	μεγϋ- is
past subj. 1pl	lǝʒ- a -sjō	μεγϋ- i -sjō
pres. part.	lǝʒ-ã	μεγϋ- is -ã
imperative 2sg	lǝʒ	μεγϋ- i
imperative 2pl	lǝʒ-e	μεγϋ- is -e
infinitive	lǝʒ- e	μεγϋ- i -ʋ
past participle	lǝʒ- e	μεγϋ- i

Morphological differences between Gr. 1 and Gr. 2 verbs

What about the other morphol. differences between the “groups”?

- Can be treated as contextual allomorphy of /is/:
 - Infinitive: /e/ default, /r/ is a contextual variant.
 - Simple past indicative: /a/ spells out 3SG.PAST/1PL.PAST (“Gr. 1”), zero is a contextual variant.
- Simple past and past subjunctive pertain to formal written register, and are regularized in some varieties or genres:
 - ‘l’idéaliste a tant regardé le soleil que son visage *s’aplatissa*.’ (T. Tzara)
 - *affaiblissit* in Parisian French (Jaubert 1958, *apud* Meul 2010: 24)
- Non-standard Gr. 2 forms in (child) French may be revealing.
 - Sa face de poulet *s’aplatissa* contre le sol. . www.wattpad.com/104801531-samira-de-la-tess-aux-paillettes-de-strass-secret/
 - La lumière *m’éblouissa* le 21 janvier 2003 à 13h58.
lewebpedagogique.com
 - Il *rougissa* énormément, n’osant pas bouger.
neko-kainushi.niceboard.com

Next directions

1. Refined experiment:
 - Control more closely for Task (e.g. avoid infinitive).
 - Compare word-derived vs. root-derived nonce verbs.
 - Production task on a given artificial stem and a context that varies again on the CoS/activity dimension.
2. Formal analysis:
 - Investigate the role of affixation on CoS semantics of word-derived vs. root-derived *-er/-ir* verbs.
 - Syntactic analysis of /i(s)/ to go with the semantic analysis.
3. Investigate the productivity of /i(s)/:
 - Lexicographic study.
 - Production and meaning assignment tasks.
4. Compare with the distribution in the lexicon.

Thank you!

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Task: adj-inf, adj-sg, adj-pl

We experimented with three tasks.

Adjective wug to infinitive (2):

(13) frache < affracher/ affrachir

Adjective wug to simple present present singular verb (3):

(14) louffe < alouffe/alouffit

Adjective wug to simple present plural verb (3):

(15) raune < araunent/ araunissent

Vowel

Controlling for effects of vowel harmony or some kind of sound symbolism:

frache a

flasse a

baigle ε

faiches ε

raunes o

ploques o

louffe u

crouche u

maloches a o

blatoche a o

caruches a y

maruches a y

rilonces i ã

picrons i ã

locerge o ε

torrenne o ε

Prefixes

- French prefixes *a-*, *en-*, *é-* and *dé-* often act as transitivizers (Junker 1987, Boons 1991, Labelle 1992, Aurnague and Plénat 2007).
- The reflexive *se* is often needed to obtain the anticausative use of a prefixed verb (Labelle 1992), for the external argument projected by the prefixed verb needs to be absorbed by *se* (Reinhart and Siloni 2005, Schäfer 2008)

- (16) a. *Mon chapeau a **amoché**.
my hat has a-ugly-é

Intended: 'My hat got damaged.'

- b. Mon chapeau s'est **amoché**.
my hat REFL=is a-ugly-é

'My hat got damaged.'

Prefixes

- But prefixed Group 2 verbs seem to more easily keep/get an anticausative use even without a reflexive (Thorn 1907):

(17) Nolwenn Leroy a amochi avec les années.
Nolwenn Leroy has a-ugly-i with the years

‘Nolwenn Leroy got uglier over the years.’ (Internet)

- If reflexively unmarked Gr. 2 verbs may be used in unaccusative (anticausative) frames more easily than *-er* verbs, the preference for *-er* verbs should be stronger for prefixed verbs than for unprefixed ones.
- But the task may not be appropriate to track this effect.

Prefixes

- Prefixation with *a-*, *dé-*, *en-* blocks activity semantics (Martin and Piñón 2020).
- May be a confound in the prefix condition.

- (18) a. Ils en-marouch-ent. (#ACT)
- b. Il a-blatoch-e. (#ACT)