Transformational processes in English and French: A comparative study

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Abstract

This study seeks to investigate how some French and English transformations are done and used by language writers and speakers. Transformational rules enable us to convert a declarative or assertive sentence to imperative, interrogative, exclamative and negative ones. They also enable us to learn and master the transformation involving deletion, permutation, adjunction, substitution, ellipsis, etc. Using phrase structure rules, we were able to analyse the studied sentences. Next, we applied the lexical insertion rules to put the words in their right terminal modes and the X-bar theory to put the items in their right hierarchies and to capture all the transformational processes follow the same pattern in both English and French.

Keywords: **Transformation, phrase structure rules, transformational rules, declarative sentence, X-bar theory**.

Introduction

A transformation is simply a change in the structure of a simple or complex sentence to cause a difference in its meaning or interpretation. It is derived from the verb 'transform' meaning to change. For this reason, any time we convert the structure of a sentence to change its role, we are doing a transformation. For example, a declarative sentence can be converted to an imperative, a negative, an exclamative or interrogative sentence by applying certain rules to the deep structure as in the following:

1. John is writing a letter (declarative)
2. Is john writing a letter? (interrogative)
3. John is not writing a letter (negative)
4. Write a letter (imperative)
5. A letter is being written by John (passive voice)

According to Gleason (1974), "a transformation is a statement of the structural relation of a pair of constructions which treats that relation as though it were a process". This is why it is normally stated in the form of rules which may be applied to one of the input/output pair. Gleason adds that transformation is "the changing of the structure or form of a sentence into another grammatical structure or form." This definition implies that one can convert a simple sentence to a complex one, an exclamative sentence to an assertive one; or an imperative sentence to interrogative, etc.

Transformational grammar continues from where the phrase structure grammar stops (Gleason, 1974; Nwala, 2015). This means that transformational rules depend on those of the phrase structure. Also, each simple sentence depends on and corresponds to Phrase Structure Rules. It is only declarative sentences that can be acted upon by the phrase structure rules to convert them to the surface structure.

Transformation enables us to do the following operations: deletion, substitution, passiveisation, permutation affix movement, indirect object movement, coordination, insertion etc. This shows that it is very essential in the formation and stating of grammatical sentences and the formal relations between them.

In this study, we are going to see how transformational rules enable us to convert a declarative sentence to other types; an active voice to passive voice, to effect operations such as deletion, insertion, coordination, etc, in both English and French as shown in the exemplified sentences.

Let us, therefore, continue this study using the following order: literature review, methodology, theoretical framework, transformational processes in English and French, and conclusion.

I. Literature Review

1. Phrase Structure Rules

The phrase structure grammar (PSG) was introduced following the rejection of Halliday's functional systemic grammar. It is a rewritten-rule grammar which allows for the formalization of the workings of immediate constituent grammar (ICG). It recognizes the various categories and hierarchies of lexical items and phrase in sentences. Based on phrases structure rules, the constituents of sentences can be expanded or segmented (Nwala, 2015). Phrase structure rules supply information about the functions, categories and relationship between or among lexical items and phrases in constructions. Again, they describe how sentences are formed.

Phrase structure rules were introduced by Noam Chornsky in his book titled "Syntactice Structures (1957). These rules are capable of generating only correct and well-formed sentences of a given language. The following are the Chomskyan four phrase- structure rules:

1. S → NP + VP (P → SN + SV in French)
2. VP → V + NP (SV → V + SN + (SP) in French)
3. NP → Det + N (SN → Det + N in French)
4. PP → Prep + NP (SP → Prep + SN in French)

Each symbol on the left of the arrow is replaced by or re-written as that on the right. This means that the first rule is read as sentence is re-written as noun phrase (NP) and verb phrase (VP) which is written in French as "phrase est remplacé par sysntagme nominal (SN) et syntagme verbal (SV)" as in Nwala (2015), Baylon & Fabre (1999) and Yule (2006). A noun phrase (NP) can be a single noun or a pronoun. This means that a noun phrase is rewritten as a noun or pronoun as follows:

NP → N (men), (SN → N (leshommes) in French)
NP → pron (they), (SN → Pron (ils) in French)
A noun phrase can be preceded by a determiner in which case we have:
NP → Det + N (The old man (le vieil homme)
(The blue car (la voiture bleue)
(SN → Det + N) in French)

Further, a noun phrase can be rewritten as determiner followed by an adjective and then a noun as in:

VP → det + adj + N (SN → det + adj + N in French)
e.g. the small American car (la petite voiture américaine)
The short beautiful French woman (la française belle et courte)
The second rule is read as verb phrase rewrites as verb and noun phrase as in 'eat the food' (mange le repas), 'hit the ball (frappe la balle) and 'read the novel' (lis le roman).

Still, a verb can be rewritten as verb, noun phrase and prepositional phrase as in 'eat the food in the kitchen' (mange le repas dans la cuisine), 'hit the ball in the pitch' (frappe la balle au champ), enter the room with a knife (entre la chambre avec un couteau) etc.
The third rule can be read as noun phrase is replaced by determiner and noun as in the man, the car, etc. However, there can be an optional adjective between the determiner and the noun as in the rich man (l'homme riche), the small car, (la petite voiture), etc

The fourth rule is read as prepositional phrase is made up of preposition and noun phrase as in : in the cupboard (dans l'armoire), on the road (sur la route), under the tree (sous l'arbre), etc.

2. Transformational rules

Transformational generative grammar (TGG) was introduced by Noam Chomsky in order to remedy the short falls of the Phrase Structure Grammar (PSG). This is because phrase structure could not explain the deep structure of sentences and the ambiguity (Nwala, 2015). Transformational grammar recognizes two levels of linguistic constructions; the deep structure and the surface structure. The former is the abstract realization which defines all structural interpretations and formation of sentence while the latter is the output of the former in form of words or speeches. (Yule, 1996; Nwala, 2004).

Transformational syntax consists of an infinite system of rules that allow us to form correct sentences in a given language (Baylon & Fabre, 1999). Transformational rules enable us again to do such syntactic operations as permutation, insertion, deletion, substitution, coordination, negativisation, passivisation, affixation, interrogation, etc. According to Nwala (2015) and Nnamdi-Eruchalu (2012), there are four basic types of transformational rules (Trules). These are the movement or permutation rule, the deletion rule, the insertion or adjunction rule and the substitution or copying rule.

3. Lexical Insertion Rules

Lexical insertion concerns the collocation of words in phrases and sentences. The rules operate when the phrase structure rules have generated the deep structure. The latter, that is, phrase structure rules, generate the deep structure but do not put the lexemes at the terminal node. This implies that lexical insertion places the appropriate words in the terminal node of a phrase structure tree. They match the syntactic elements at the terminal node of tree diagrams with the lexical items of the same category (Nnamdi-Eruchalu, 2012). Also, they ensure that words are surrounded by the right constituents.

4. Morphophonemic Rules

This group of rules govern the changes that occur in the allomorphs. They are limited to the open lexical categories: nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs. This means that they concern only the major categories (Gleason, 1974). Inflection, plural formation and agreement depend on morphophonemic rules (Diinee, 2009).

III. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is based on phrase structure rules, lexical insertion rules and x-bar theory. These have been explained in the literature review section of this study except the X-bar theory.

X-bar theory, according to Ndimele (1999), in Nwala (2004) accounts for proper word order. The theory correctly puts items into their proper hierarchies and also captures the importance of the head of a phrase. The proponents of the x-bar theory believe that the only compulsory item in a phrase is the head; every other item is a projection of the head. It is an improvement on the phrase structure theory (Nwala, 2004; Carnie, 2007).

IV Methodology

In this study, we used the Noam Chomsky's phrase structure rules to analyse the example sentences meant for the transformation. Next, we applied the lexical insertion rules to assign linguistic units to their various terminal nodes in the structure of the sentences. This enable us to do the required transformational operations in both English and French. The sentences were taken from English and French grammar texts.

V. Transformational Processes in English and French

In this section we shall consider how English and French speakers and writers do correct transformations of declarative sentences into the imperative, interrogative and exclamative ones and the formation of the negative and positive forms. We shall juxtapose the English and French example sentences in order to find out if there exists any difference(s) in both languages. Let see how this works in the following sub-section.

i. Declarative sentence into the imperative mood

Let us take the following declarative sentences in both English and French

1. John is writing a letter (Eng.)
   Jean écrit une lettre (Fre.)
2. John is sending me some money (Eng.)
   Jean m'envoie de l'argent (Fre.)
3. You are closing the door (Eng.)
   Tu fermes la porte (Fre.)

In both languages, in order to convert a declarative sentence into an imperative one, we drop the subject and use only the verb or verb and object in case of a transitive verb. The transformation of the three pairs of sentences above gives us the following imperative ones when the lexical insertion rules act on their surface structure:

1. Write a letter.
   Ecris une lettre.
2. Send me same money.
   Envoie-moi de l'argent.
3. Close the door.
   Ferme la porte.

We can now see that in French, the 's' in the present indicative conjugation of the –er (group 1) verbs is dropped in order to form an imperative sentence from a declarative or assertive one. Again, certain French verbs form the imperative using the subjunctive mood, to show politeness and uncertainty as in:

1. Ayez pitie de moi! (subjunctive of 'avoir')
   Have mercy on me!
2. Je veux que tu fasses le travail (subjunctive of 'faire')
   I wish that you do the work.

"I wish that you do the work" is a polite request for someone to carry out an order. The same thing applies to "have mercy on me". The speaker is not certain about the expected mercy.

ii. **Declarative Sentence into Interrogative Mood**

Generally, in both English and French, the conversion of a declarative sentence to an interrogative one follows the inversion of a declarative SV or SVO order on the use of isn't it? (N'est – ce pas? In French) after the declarative sentence as in the following examples:

1. Are you writing a letter? (Eng)
   Ecris-tu une lettre? (Fre)
2. You are writing a letter. Isn't it? (Eng)
   Tu écris une lettre. N'est-ce pas? (Fre)

In French, we can equally use the expression
: Est-ce que….(Is it that ….) as follows:
Est-ce que tue écris une lettre? (Fre)
It is that you are writing a letter ? (Eng)
Other interrogative transforms are: as follows:

1. Is John sending me some money? (Eng)
   Est-ce que Jean m'envoie de l'argent? (Fre)
   Or : Jean m'envoie de l'argent ? (Fre)
   Jean m'envoie-t-il de l'argent ? (Fre)

2. Are you closing the door ? (Eng)
   Tu fermes la porte? (Fre)
   Or : Est-ce que tu fermes la porte ? (Fre)
   Also, interrogation is marked by a variation in intonation. Interrogative sentences are marked by a rising intonation in both languages. In French, there is a sharp rise on the final syllable in the Yes/No questions. For example:
1. Sont-ils arrivés? (Fre)
   Have they arrived (Eng)
2. Ont-ils mangé? (Fre)
   Have they eaten? (Eng)

iii. **Declarative Sentence into Exclamative Sentence**

A delcaative sentence can be changed to exlamative one by deletion rule thus:

1. It is really a great victory (declarative)
   C'est vraiment une grande victoire (declarative)
2. What a great victory ! (exclamative)
   Quelle grande victoire! (exclamativie)
3. This is a beautiful girl! (declarative)
   C'est une belle fille (declarative)
4. What a beautiful girl ! (exclamative)
   Quelle belle fille! (exclamative)

iv. **Declarative Sentence into Negative Form**

In order to convert a declarative sentence into a negative one, we make the adverb of negation such as only (seulement), hardly (neguére), never (ne….jamais) not at all (ne…point) etc to surround the verb. For example, we have:

1. John is writing a letter → John is not writing a letter (Eng)
   Jean écrit une lettre → Jean n'écrit pas de lettre (Fre)
2. John is sending me some money → John is not sending me some money (Eng)
   Jean m'envoie de l'argent → Jean ne m'envoie pas d'argent (Fre)
3. I am eating some cake → I am not eating cake (Eng)
   Je mange du gâteau → Je ne mange pas de gâteau (Fre)
4. I see my brother → I hardly see my brother (Eng)
   Je vois mon frère → Je ne vois guère mon frère (Fre)
5. Ngozi comes early to work → Ngozi never comes early to work
   Ngozi va tôt au travail → Ngozi ne va jamais tôt au travail

It is observed that in french the adverbs of negation are formed by using the particle « ne » followed by the positive single adverbs while in English they exist as single words such as never, only, hardly, etc.

v. **Passive transformation of the active voice**

Passive transformation involves the displacement of the noun phrases and the modification of the verbal form. It follows the rule: NP1 + VP + NP2 → NP2 tauxiliary + past participle + preposition + NPI. For example: "Jean is married to Mary" becomes "Mary is married by Jean". In French the active and passive voice sentences are: "Jean se marie à Mary" and "Mary est mariée par Jean".

Another example is as follows:

1. The buy has eaten the cake (Le garçon a mangé lé gateau)
2. Le gâteau a été mangé par le garçon. (The cake has been eaten by the boy).

For a passive transformation to take place, the subject of the active voice changes to the object position in the passive voice. Also, the verb to be converted must be transitive. The passive voice is derived from the active voice through the process of passivisation.

vi. **Transformation by Movement or Permutation**

In both English and French, the movement rule is used to remove a phrase from its initial position to final or medial position or vice-versa. In most cases, it is the adjunct that is moved from one place to another either by fronting (initial position) or postponement (final position). It is also called permutation rule. The following examples show movement transformation:

1. The children are reading under the tree (Eng)
   Les enfants lisent sous l' arbre (Fre)
   In this example, the adjunct (prepositional phrase) existing as "under the tree" can be moved to the beginning or middle of the sentence thus:
2. Under the tree the children are reading (Eng)
   Sous l'arbre les enfants lisent (Fre)
   or
3. The children, under the tree, are reading (Eng)
   Les enfants, sous l'arbre, lisent (fre)

vii. **Transformation by coordination**

This is also called Tconjunction. It is used to form coordinated sentences from simple sentences or clauses. It uses connectors such as and, because, so, for, etc. for this

coordination process. Examples of adjounction include the following in both French and English:

1. John is a student (John est étudiant)
   Emeka is a banker (Emeka est banquier)
   These two sentences can be coordinated to form a complex one as in:
   John is a student and Emeka is a banker
   John est étudiant et Emeka est banquier
2. Ngozi is sweeping the room (Ngozi balaie la chambre)
   Paul is cooking the rice (Paul cuit le riz)
   These two sentences can be transformed thus:
   Ngozi is sweeping the room while Paul is cooking the rice
   Ngozi balaie la chamber pendant que Paul cuit le riz.
3. Peter will be admitted into the university (Peter sera admis dans l'université)
   He passed his extrance examination (Il a réussi à son examen d'entrée)
   Peter will be admitted into the university because he passed his entrace examination
   Peter sera admis dans l'université parce qu'il a reussi à son examen d'entrée.

viii. **Transformation by Substitution**

Substitution is the replacement of certain words or phrases by another. It helps to avoid certain repetitions. It occurs on nouns, verbs and clauses. Examples of each type of substitution include:

1. Do you like pineapple? Yes, I do (verbal substitution)
   Tu aimes l'ananas? Oui, je l'aime
2. The blue car is fine but I prefer the red one (nominal substitution)
   La voiture bleue est bleue mais je préfère la rouge
   Do you think Wike will win the 2023 election ? I think so.
   Penses-tu que Wike va gagner l'élection de 2023? Je pense de cela.

ix. **Transformation by Ellipsis**

Ellipsis is a cohesive device that invovles the omission of words, groups or clauses. It has an implied meaning (Kamalu, 2018). It occurs in a similar environment as substitution at the nominal, clausal or verbal levels. It is used in telegraphs, political and advertorial slogans, poetry and journalistic titles. Examples of ellipsis include the following:

1. Which of the girls do you prefer? The fattest (nominal ellipsis)
   Laquelle de ces filles préfères-tu? La plus grosse
2. Have you eaten your food? yes, I have (verbal ellipsis)
   As-tu mangé ton repas? Oui, j'ai mangé

3. Would you like a bottle of star beer? yes, I would
Voudrais-tu boire une bouteille de star? Oui, j'en voudrais

Conclusion

In both English and French, the interrogative transformation involves the use of inversion, intonation change and declarative followed by isn't it ? (N'est-ce pas? in French). However, there is no hyphen between the verb and the subject personal pronoun inversion order, that is, Vs in English. Secondly, in both languages, passive transformation is not possible with intransitive verbs. Next, the English present continuous tense has the auxiliary verb "to be" (être) added to the present participle but this is not possible with French e.g.

I am eating (some) rice (Eng)
Je mange du riz (Fre)

In French there is only one word "mange" while English has two: "am" and "eating". Further, the French future tense uses one word but the English one uses shall/will followed by the base verb as in shall/will be admitted which is "serai admis" in French. As for the imperative transformation, the subject is dropped in both languages as in get out! (sortez!), write the letter (Ecris la lettre) etc.

All the selected transformational processes studied here follow the same syntactic pattern in the two languages.

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