Beyond the Basics: A Deep Dive into French Subject Pronouns with Targeted Strategies for Proficient Learning

Mohammed Mahmoud Alhilal

PhD. In Linguistics, English Language Department, King Faisal University, Hofuf, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4089-1920
malhilal@kfu.edu.sa , alhilal8979@gmail.com

Abstract

Numerous pedagogical resources (Price, 2008; Batchelor & Chebli-Saadi, 2011; Judge & Healey, 1985, among others) dedicated to French language learning frequently rely on English translations and simplified examples, neglecting the intricate nuances and distinctive features inherent in the French language. This study aims to explore the complexities encountered by learners in mastering French subject pronouns (FSPs) compared to their English equivalents. Drawing upon Fry's (2016) framework for efficient study techniques, our objective is to identify unique challenges and propose strategies to mitigate them. Employing a comparative qualitative research approach, we meticulously examined FSPs examples with input from five native French speakers to ensure linguistic accuracy and cultural authenticity. The findings illuminate the distinctive characteristics of FSPs, including their agreement in person, number, and gender, as opposed to English subject pronouns, which only agree in person and number due to the absence of a straightforward gender category. Furthermore, the study reveals nuances in pronunciation, spelling, contraction, and liaison that contribute to the difficulty of learning FSPs. This research contributes to the pedagogical discourse by providing evidence-based recommendations to address the challenges associated with mastering FSPs, thereby advancing language education practices. Pedagogical

implications include incorporating the identified distinctive features directly into French language courses to facilitate understanding and learning. Additionally, learners can benefit from utilizing effective study techniques to grasp the peculiarities of FSPs, ultimately enhancing linguistic knowledge and comprehension.

Keywords: Difficulty of French Language, French vs English Pronouns, Learning French Pronouns, Teaching French Pronouns.

Introduction

This article sheds some light on the uses of FSPs with the aim of highlighting their distinctive properties and of identifying the features that make learning them difficult or confusing to a novice learner. The latter refers to a person who has no previous knowledge about the topic he/she is trying to learn; the researcher who is a novice learner of French reports his own learning experience of FSPs. Though research on learning a second language other than English is receiving increasing global attention, a small number of studies focused on the assumed difficulty of learning French. This article attempts to bridge this gab by comparing and contrasting FSPs with their English counterparts, focusing on their distinctive features and their difficulty to learn.

Learning French as a second language presents unique challenges, particularly in grasping the nuances of FSPs. These pronouns, integral for achieving fluency, exhibit features that significantly differ from their English counterparts, such as gender distinctions and complex sociolinguistic rules. Novice learners often struggle with these aspects, leading to confusion and impeding their language learning process. This study aims to dissect the intricacies of FSPs to understand the hurdles learners face, especially in relation to their English equivalents.

The primary objective of this research is to explore the distinctive features of FSPs that contribute to the learning difficulties encountered by novice learners of French. Through a detailed comparative analysis, this study seeks to identify and describe the specific

characteristics of FSPs that differ from English subject pronouns and present learning challenges. Another main objective is to propose effective pedagogical strategies that leverage these findings to enhance the teaching and learning of FSPs, making the process more accessible and engaging for learners. This study focuses on the following research question: What features do FSPs have that make them difficult to learn? The main motive behind this study is to facilitate learning FSPs; the researcher started thinking about this topic during his self-learning of French language, choosing this topic because "French subject pronouns are used very regularly, largely to avoid ambiguity" Batchelor and Chebli-Saadi (2011, p.436). Thus, the findings of this study aim to disambiguate the use and learning of French and also to reduce the possible difficulty French language learners may encounter when learning FSPs.

This study holds substantial significance for language educators, curriculum developers, and learners of French. By elucidating the complexities of FSPs and offering evidence-based recommendations for teaching and learning these pronouns, the research aims to improve pedagogical practices. It contributes to the broader discourse on second language learning by providing insights that could facilitate a more nuanced understanding and mastery of French. Ultimately, the findings may serve as a foundation for developing more effective and learner-friendly instructional materials and methodologies, thereby enriching the language learning experience.

The organization of this paper ensures a structured and comprehensive exploration of the complexities surrounding FSPs and their implications for language education. The study begins with an introductory section, setting the stage by providing the background and rationale for focusing on FSPs within French language learning. Following the introduction, the literature review section critically examines existing research on language learning challenges, particularly in relation to FSPs, highlighting gaps in the literature that this study seeks to address. Subsequently, the method section outlines the comparative qualitative research approach employed, detailing the data collected and the

International Journal of Educational Sciences and Arts (IJESA)

Vol. (3), No. (5)

IJESA

May 2024

المجلة الدولية للعلوم التربوية والآداب

الإصدار (3)، العدد (5)

validation process by native French speakers. Building upon the methodology, the results and discussion section presents a thorough analysis of the findings, elucidating the distinctive features of FSPs and the associated learning challenges. The conclusion section synthesizes the key insights gleaned from the study, underscoring its contributions to language education and suggesting avenues for future research. Furthermore, the implications of the study section delves into the practical applications of the findings, offering recommendations for pedagogical practices. Finally, the paper concludes with a section on limitations and recommendations for future research, acknowledging the constraints of the study while proposing avenues for further investigation to advance our understanding of FSPs and enhance language learning methodologies.

Literature Review

The literature review section provides a comprehensive overview of existing research on FSPs. By synthesizing prior studies, we aim to identify gaps and insights relevant to understanding the complexities of FSPs. Subject pronouns take the place of a noun in a sentence and perform the action of a verb. A subject pronoun can help identify who or what is doing the action of the verb which can be a person, a thing, an idea, or a place, etc. Stein (2005, p. 5) shows that "a subject pronoun, which may replace the subject noun, allows for a more fluid conversation by eliminating unnecessary repetition of the same noun." Pronouns usually replace nouns and indicate case, person gender and number. One main reason for the assumed difficulty of learning French is that while nouns in English are uniformly neuter, they denote either masculinity or femininity in French (Dimnet, 2016, pp. 9-10); this same point is also expressed through the gender of adjectives whose forms follow the gender of their accompanying nouns, a difference that makes French so difficult to learn when compared with English wherein adjectives are gender-free. Gender difference in FSPs shows that we have two pronouns translating as they, *ils* and *elles*. However, gender difference is not the only factor adding to the

difficulty of FSPs where "sociolinguistic rules governing choice of pronouns of address are notoriously difficult in French" Dewaele (2004, p. 383). Other factors involve some uncategorized uses of FSPs which create a challenge to learners: Fonseca-Greber & Waugh (2003, p. 225) report some "vague uses of *on*, which could be interpreted as either '*we*' or '*one*'."

Offord's (2006, p. 162) comprehensive examination of French pronouns highlights the intricate variability among their forms, noting that "there is much anomaly among the forms that the personal pronouns adopt in French," and demonstrating how some French pronouns such as "*me*" and "*te*" can serve diverse functions, while "*lui*" and "*leur*" can refer to multiple individuals. Judge and Healey (1985, p. 68) show that these variations underscore the fundamental disparities between French and English pronouns, and warn that "embarrassing misunderstandings can arise from a faulty knowledge of these differences." This study aims to elucidate such complexities, offering insights to mitigate misunderstandings. In a similar vein, Mazet (2013, p. 326) underscores the irregularity and difficulty inherent in handling French pronominal verbs, revealing that "the French equivalents of those pronominal verbs are super irregular ... and rather difficult to handle," thereby contributing to the perception of French as a particularly challenging language. Walker's (2001, pp. 11-52) thorough analysis further elucidates the multifaceted nature of learning French, emphasizing the ambiguities and complexities inherent in navigating the linguistic and sociolinguistic landscape of the francophone world, demonstrating how "consistent generalizations are difficult to establish" in French. Collectively, these insights underscore a prevailing perception of French as a linguistically intricate and demanding language to master. However, by dissecting these complexities and offering nuanced explanations, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of French language learning.

Though, previous studies support the notion that learning French is challenging, but neither the unique characteristics of FSPs nor the pedagogical implications that may be

International Journal of Educational Sciences and Arts (IJESA)

المجلة الدولية للعلوم التربوية والآداب

Vol. (3), No. (5)

IJESA

May 2024

الإصدار (3)، العدد (5)

drawn from studying them have been well-addressed. This study aims at addressing this topic and bridging this gap by identifying the distinctive features of FSPs and suggesting some strategies to overcome them.

Methodology and Source of Data

FSPs are divided into three persons: first person *je* and *nous*, second person *tu* and *vous*, and third person *il, elle, ils,* and *elles*. The pronoun *on* is discussed as an equivalent to *nous* and the English indefinite pronoun *one*. Examples provided are checked for grammaticality and translation by 5 French native speakers aged (30-50). Each French example is followed by its English translation. Focus is on the points that make FSPs difficult to learn, especially when they are different from English. In-text French pronouns are written in italics for clarity. A comparative research method is implemented to achieve the objectives of this study; comparative analysis is used "to improve the validity of our generalizations […] Some research questions simply cannot be answered except through comparative analysis" Gary (2007, p. 326); FSRs do not fall far from these questions. The international phonetic alphabet will be used to transcribe some French words whenever phonemic transcription is important and the theory of phonetics and phonology as explained in Roach (2009) is assumed in this study.

Most of the examples given for illustration are the FSPs *je*, *tu*, *il*, *elle*, *nous*, *vous*, *ils*, *elles*, and *on* and therefore data collection is not an issue for this study. Nevertheless, the other example sentences presented throughout the study are mainly based on the grammar books consulted; five French native speakers checked the French example sentences presented for grammaticality, translation and correct usage.

This study makes use of the study program outlined by Fry's (2016) framework which concentrates on how students can "study smarter." Fry (2016, pp. 98-103) shows that "what makes something memorable is its extraordinariness, how much it differs from our normal experiences," showing that "associating new information with what you

already know will make it easier to recall." That is to say, Fry points out that one way to deal with topics that are difficult to recall or remember is to "associate the unfamiliar with the familiar, though the association may be very odd. But to really make it effective, the odder the better." Fry's (2016) framework suggests a novel approach to learning FSPs by emphasizing the memorability of extraordinary information and the power of associating the unfamiliar with the familiar. By applying Fry's principle that "the odder the better" for these associations, educators can craft memorable learning experiences that significantly improve recall and understanding of FSPs.

The literature review has underscored the intricate complexities of FSPs, illustrating the significant challenges they pose to learners, especially in comparison with English. Despite extensive research, a clear gap remains in fully comprehending FSPs' unique aspects and devising effective teaching strategies to address these challenges. This study seeks to bridge this gap, proposing to enrich understanding and pedagogical approaches to FSP learning.

Results and Discussion

The Results and Discussion section delves into the nuances of FSPs in comparison to their English counterparts. In the following sections, I divide FSPs into three groups and give detailed description for each pronoun. Along the way, some distinctive features differentiating FSPs from their English counterparts will be pointed out. These features will be further highlighted and identified. We hope that future studies benefit from the findings of this research in facilitating the learning and teaching of French subject pronouns.

Unlike English which has only seven subject pronouns which are *I*, *he*, *she*, *it*, *they*, *we*, and *you*, French has nine ones, *je* or *j'* (first-person singular), *il* (third-person masculine singular), *elle* (third-person feminine singular), *nous* (first-person plural), *vous* (second-person singular and plural), *tu* (second-person singular), *ils* (third-person masculine

plural), *elles* (third-person feminine plural), and *on* (informal, but common, equivalent to *nous*, *il*, *elle*, etc.).

Je and *nous* represent the first-person pronouns where the former is the singular first-person and the latter the plural first-person. Both *tu* and vous translates as *you* and represent the second person; however, *tu* is regarded as the familiar form that one uses with members of the family or close friends, whereas *vous* is always used with strangers and with people that we do not know well, in addition to being the plural of *tu*. Thus, while *tu* is always associated with the singular second-person, *vous* can be used with both, but it, i.e. *vous*, can indicate a formal and/or a polite form.

Unlike English which uses one genderless pronoun for third-person plural *they*, French uses two pronouns: *ils* which is used for the plural masculine and *elles* which is used for the plural feminine. Thus, the third-person plural pronouns in French are *ils* and *elles*; the former is a third-person plural masculine pronoun while the latter is a third-person plural feminine pronoun.

Because nouns in French have gender (male or female), French does not have a pronoun equivalent to the genderless English personal pronoun *it*; this means that the French use *il* to mean both *he* and *it*, and uses *elle* to refer to *she* and *it*.

French *nous* and its English counterpart *we* have the same reference, the first-person male/female plural pronoun. *On* is frequently used, especially in speech, as the equivalent of any personal pronoun, particularly *nous* (Price, 2008, p. 212). *On* can have the same meaning as the English *one*; however, *on* is more common in French than the use of 'one' in English, Thacker and D'Angelo (2013). The following table lists all the FSPs with their English counterparts.

Table (1): *French subject pronouns*

French Subject Pronouns			
Singular	**English equivalent**	**Plural**	**English Equivalent**
je / j'	I	*nous*	we
tu or vous	you	*vous*	you
il	he it	*Ils*	they
elle	she it	*elles*	they
on	one, we, you, etc.		

After providing a general overview of FSPs, we will now discuss them in more detail, using illustrative examples to demonstrate how they are used in French and how they can be similar to or different from their English equivalents. Because our discussion is organized according to their number, first-person pronouns *je* and *nous* will therefore be covered first.

First-Person Subject Pronouns: *je* and *nous*

Like English, French has two first-person subject pronouns: one is singular *je* and another is plural *nous*; *je* and *nous* correspond to their English counterparts *I* and *we*, respectively. By discussing the examples in 1. (a-c) below, we can show some distinctive features distinguishing the first-person singular subject pronoun.

1.

a. *J'arrive.*

   I'm coming.

b. *Bon, j'y vais.*

   Right, I'm off.

c. *J' habite à Paris.*

   I live in Paris.

Unlike English where the auxiliary verbs *be, have,* and *will, etc.*, not the subject pronouns, get contracted with the preceding pronoun as in *I am* vs *I'm*, *I have* vs *I've*, *I will* vs *I'll*, etc., in French it is the pronoun, not the verb, that gets contracted: the examples in 1. (a-c) above show that the pronoun *je* gets contracted to *j'* when followed by a verb beginning with a vowel like *arrive* (come) as in 1. (a), by *y* (there) as in 1. (b), or by a muted *h* in a verb like *habiter* (live) as in 1. (c). That is to say, one difference between *je* and its English counterpart *I* is the contraction of *je* into *j'* when followed by a verb beginning with a vowel, the word y (there), or a verb beginning with a muted *h*. English *I* does not change form regardless of the initial sound of the following word. Check the following examples

2.

   a. I visit my grandmother on weekends.

   b. I'm/am writing a report.

   c. I've/have a car.

   d. I'll send the report to the boss.

The pronoun *I,* or any other English pronoun, cannot be contracted at all; it is rather the following auxiliary verb that can be contracted into *'m* as in 2. (b), into *'ve* as in 2. (c) or into *'ll* as in 2. (d). Further, contraction of auxiliaries in English is not always obligatory and can be a way of differentiating casual speech from formal one. Contraction of *je* with the following word in French is determined by whether the following word starts with a vowel or a consonant, or whether *je* is followed by a muted *h* or *y*. It is a general grammatical rule in French that words - including the pronoun *je*- consisting of a single consonant followed by *e* "lose their vowel before a verb beginning with a vowel or mute h or before en and y," Offord (2006, p. 163). There is no way the pronoun *I*, or any other English pronoun, is contracted with the following words in English.

Another interesting distinctive feature of the first-person pronoun *I* in English is that it is always capitalized whether it is at the beginning, in the middle or at the end of the sentence. *Je* however is capitalized only when it introduces the sentence. Consider the following examples

3.

  a. *Je parle français.*

   I speak French.

  b. *Il ne sait pas quand j'arrive.*

   He doesn't know when I'm arriving.

For the novice learner of French, the vowel sound in *je* is not easy to deal with: *je* is a word made up of one syllable consisting of the consonant /ʒ/ followed by the French vowel /ə/; the latter is known in French phonetics as mute /*e*/ or feminine /*e*/; similar French words including this vowel are *de*, *le*, *me*, etc. The closest structure showing similar spelling in English is represented by words like *be*, *he*, *me*, *we*, etc.; nevertheless, the vowel in these English examples is pronounced differently where the long vowel /i:/ is usually used, not the English short vowel /ə/, known in English as schwa. Thus, the potential confusion might arise from the fact that French and English can use similar spelling with different pronunciation.

Nous is the first-person plural subject pronoun in French; it is the equivalent of the English pronoun *we*. Here are some examples.

4.
  a. *Nous regardons la maison.*

   We look at the house.
  b. *Nous voulons voir le directeur.*

   We want to see the manager.

Unlike *je*, *nous* does not contract with the following word even if it is followed by a vowel or a muted *h*.

5.
  a. *Nous allons au marché.*

      We go to the market.
  b. *Nous habitons près de la mer.*

      We live beside the sea.

One more nuisance that a learner of French may face is the pronunciation of *nous* as /nu/ where the last consonant /s/ is not pronounced. This applies to words of similar structure like *sous* /su/, *tous* /tu/, *fous* /fu/, *vous* /vu/, etc. However, this final /s/ in *nous* is pronounced when followed by a word that begins with a vowel or a muted /*h*/. This also applies to the other French subject pronouns ending with an /s/, *elles*, *ils*, and *vous*.

6.
  a. *Nous‿avons*[1]

      We have.
  b. *Vous‿êtes*.

      You are.

The /s/ sound at the end of *nous* and *vous* will turn into a /z/ sound in pronunciation because *avons* and *êtes* start with vowels; this is known in French as liaison, a case in which "a final consonant that is normally silent is pronounced in certain circumstances before a word beginning with a vowel, and then counts as part of the following syllable" Price (2008, p.10). Liaison is one main feature of French pronunciation which can make it difficult to determine where one word ends and where the next

---

[1] (‿) is a symbol that is traditionally used to indicate that two words being connected by liaison with a different sound. It is also referred to as the tie.

begins. Thomas (1998) shows that liaison is rarely taught to French learners because of its complexity. Similarly, Eychenne (2011, p. 79) calls liaison one of the three fundamental problems of French phonology; Liaison thus adds another type of difficulty to the learning of French in general and to the recognition of some FSPs in particular. What makes things even worse is that French grammar (see Bennett, 1991; Sturm, 2016, Wong et all, 2017; Hornsby, 2020, among others) shows that there are three types of liaisons in French: obligatory, optional, and forbidden. Sturm (2013, p. 158) points out that "the difficulty, of course, is remembering which words begin with 'h-aspiré', as there is no rule from which aspiration or non-aspiration may be predicted." Further, the optional type of liaison can depend on stylistic variation and all three types of liaisons are governed by a long list of rules that must be studied separately (Sturm, 2013).

Thus, though English and French both have the same number of first-person subject pronouns, there are some differences between them; the most important of which is the contraction of *je* into j' and the point that j*e* is written in upper case only when it is at the beginning of the sentence while *I* am always capitalized wherever it occurs. English words that have parallel spelling to French *je* have their short vowels pronounce differently. Pronouncing or not pronouncing the final /s/ in *nous* and its liaison is a further nuisance that adds to the difficulty of learning and recognizing the pronunciation of *nous, vous, ils,* and elles. Fry (2016)'s program outlined above demonstrates that the more different from what we already know a concept is the easier it is to remember. Such unique features of *je* can, according to Fry (2016)'s program outlined above, be the same points that help learners understand and recognize FSPs in spite of the difficulty assumed for these pronouns because they are different from what we already know. This same pronunciation feature of liaison characterizing the /s/ sound in *nous*, *vous*, *ils*, and *elles* makes French pronunciation so odd that this oddity itself makes it easier to remember.

Second-Person Subject Pronouns: *tu* and *vous*

Tu and *vous* both refer to the second-person subject pronouns; while *tu* is regarded as the informal form used with members of the family or close friends, *vous* is always used to show respect, rank, and people that we do not know. *Tu* is always used with singular second-person subjects; *vous* is used with both singular and plural subjects but it can also indicate a formal and/or a polite form. However, "the tu/vous pair is the most fertile source of problems, especially as the singular second-person form 'thou' has disappeared from current English" Judge & Healey (1985, p. 69).

The first thing that may strike a novice learner of French is that *tu*, unlike *je*, does not get contracted with the following word even though *tu* ends with a vowel as is the case in *je*. A learner may wonder why contraction is implemented in *je* but not in *tu* though both are structurally the same, both are made of a consonant followed by a vowel. Thus, only 7. (a) is correct in the examples below.

7.
  a. *Tu es formidable.*
       You are terrific.
  b. **T'es formidable.* [2]
       You are terrific.

Like *nous*, *vous* is not concerned with male and female usages as it is used to refer to both. It is used for a formal reference such as speaking to older people, professionals, politicians, strangers or people we do not know.

8.
  a. *Comment allez-vous, madame?*
       How are you, madam?
  b. *Est-ce que je peux vous aider, madame ?*
       Can I help you, madam?

---

[2] The asterisk symbol *(*) used before sentences traditionally indicates that a sentence is ill-formed or ungrammatical.*

Tu, on the other hand, is for informal use as when speaking to children, friends, relatives, animals, etc.

9.

    a. *Tu es trop mignon!*
       You're too cute!
    b. *Tu viens chez moi prendre un café* ?
       Are you coming to my house for a coffee?

Though the difference between *tu and vous* seems straightforward, Batchelor & Chebli-Saadi (2011, p. 438) show that "actual usage is far more complicated than it would suggest." Deciding to use *tu* or *vous* is not always easy. One suggestion to ovoid such complications is made by Hawkins & Towel (2015, p. 47) who show that the non-native speaker would be well-advised to use *vous* from the outset, and to allow the native speaker to take the initiative about any change to *tu.*" Similar piece of advice is also given by Judge & Healey (1985, p. 68) who find it "wiser for the non-native speaker to leave the initiative in *tutoiement* to the native speaker interlocuter." The French verbs *tutoier* and *vouvoyer* mean to address someone as *tu* and *vous* respectively. So, when a speaker wants to use the informal *tu*, he/she can ask *On peut se tutoyer?* which means *Can we talk using the informal pronoun tu*? Conversely, a speaker may ask *On peut se vouvyer?* when he/she wants to be addressed formally. Thus, the study of the difference between *tu* and *vous* is related to several dimensions such as hierarchy, age, social status, attitude, etc., which go beyond the limitation of this study. That is, some of the differences between *tu* and *vous* have to do with societal issues like attitude and social status which are mainly related more to the field of sociolinguistics rather than to teaching or learning.

To sum up, the second-person subject pronouns in French are represented by the pronouns *tu* and *vous*, with tu being the informal form and vous being the formal one. Unlike *vous*, which is used with both singular and plural second-person pronouns, *tu*

is only ever used with singular second-person pronouns; *vous* is able to denote a formal or courteous setting. Deciding whether to use *tu* or *vous* is not always simple because it can depend on other sociolinguistic aspects. Despite having a vowel at the end of *tu* (as is the case in je), *tu* does not get contracted with the next word. Both male and female subjects can be addressed with the pronouns *tu* and *vous* as their use is not gender-specific. The French verbs *tutoyer* and *vouvoyer* signify using the pronouns *tu* and *vous*, respectively. This dichotomy in the use of the second-person pronouns is clearly different from the normal use of *you* in English, a point which, according to Fry's program outlined above, helps make the *tu*/*vous* distinction very memorable because of its extraordinariness and of being different from our normal experiences in English where only *you* is used.

Third-Person Subject Pronouns : *il, elle, ils,* and *elles*

There are four third-person subject pronouns in French and exact number in English, (*il*, *elle*, *ils*, *ells*) and (*he, she, it, they*) respectively. Nevertheless, their use and reference are not exactly the same in both languages; the French third-person plural pronouns *ils*, and *elles* need to agree with the nouns they refer to in both number and gender whereas the English third-person plural pronoun *they* does not require agreement with the gender of the noun it refers to. We discuss the third-person singular and plural pronouns one by one in the following sections.

Third-Person Singular Subject Pronouns: *il* and *elle*.

Unlike English which has three third-person singular pronouns *he, she, and it*, French has only two, *il* and *elle*; these two pronouns are used to refer to male and female singular third-person subjects respectively. This means that French does not have an equivalent to the English pronoun *it* which is used in English to replace singular inanimate nouns be they ideas, objects, or animals. That is, one can use French subject pronoun *il* to refer to *le docteur* (the doctor) as well as to *la clé* (the key) and therefore

French *il* and *elle* are used to replace animate and inanimate nouns. Consider the following examples

10.
a. *Elle boit le lait.*
    She/It drinks the milk.

b. *Il boit le lait.*

    He/It drinks the milk.

This means that *elle* in 10. (a) can – without context – refer to a female human subject like a girl or a woman as well as to any female animal like a female cat or a female dog, etc. Similarly, *il* in 10. (b) can refer to singular male human subjects like John, a boy or a singular male cat or a male dog, etc. This feature can add some difficulty to the novice learner whose first language dictates the use of *it* with inanimate nouns, objects, animals, etc.

The lack of an equivalence to the *it*-like pronoun in French gives *il* additional usages which can be fulfilled by *it* in English. The most distinguished example is the use of *il* impersonally. Typical French examples include the following sentences.

11.
a. *Il s'agit de votre mère.*
    It's about your mother.
b. *Il faut que tu sois patient.*

    It is necessary to be patient (or you have to be patient).

One unique property of *il* as used in 11. (a) is that it can mean *it*; for a novice learner of French, this can be very challenging to follow because the literal translation reads *He is about your mother* while the intended meaning is *It's about your mother*. A further difficulty that might arise in understanding this use of the pronoun *il* is in finding out that *il* as in 11. (b) can be translated as *you have to be patient* in which

International Journal of Educational Sciences and Arts (IJESA)

المجلة الدولية للعلوم التربوية والآداب

Vol. (3), No. (5)

IJESA

May 2024

الإصدار (3)، العدد (5)

case the learner needs to account for the impersonal use of the pronoun *il* as meaning *you* though it literally translates as *he*.

An equally confusing, but also interesting, use of the impersonal *il* is when it is used to express the weather as in 12. (a-b) and time as in 12. (c).

12.
   a. *Il pleut.*
      It is raining.
   b. *Il neige.*
      It is snowing.
   c. *Il est sept heures.*
      It is 7:00 O'clock.

To a novice learner, 12. (a-c) respectively translates as *He is raining, He is snowing* and *He is 7:00 O'clock* which can be semantically wrong and challenging to comprehend. *Il* is used in 12. (a-c) to express sentences that can be expressed only by using the pronoun *it* in English. One also wonders why *elle* is not possible in these structures where it is wrong to say **Elle pleut* and **Elle neige* though both *la pluie* (the rain) and *la neige* (the snow) are both feminine nouns. We shall not follow this discussion as studying how far French is a sexist language falls beyond the scope of this article.

Thus, though the lack of an equivalent of an *it*-like pronoun in French can be confusing to a novice learner, looking at this point as being an unfamiliar aspect of French can conversely make it very easy to recall as suggested by Fry's program outlined above; though using *il* in French to refer to *it* when talking about the time or weather can be wired or odd, "the odder, the better" Fry (2016, p.104). That is to say, a novice learner of French can easily remember and recognize the use of *il* to refer to *it* because being odd can make it easier to recall.

In this section we have seen that there are two French third-person singular subject pronouns, *il* and *elle*. The lack of an equivalent to the pronoun *it* is covered by the use of *il* to refer to both animate and inanimate subjects. *Il* and *elle* are used for both human and non-human subjects, a point which presents a challenge for beginners as French lacks an *it*-like pronoun that performs this function exclusively. Confusion may also result from the usage of the impersonal pronoun *il* in French while discussing the weather or the time.

Third-Person Plural Subject Pronouns: *ils* and *elles*.

French has two third-person plural pronouns, *ils* and *elles*. They both can be equivalent to *they*; however, *ils* is used to refer to plural males while *elles* to plural females. That is to say, the French pronouns *ils* and *elles* do not only agree in number with the subjects they refer to, but also in gender.

13.
  a. *Elles se rencontrent à la fête.*
     They meet at the party.

  b. *Ils vont camper.*

     They are going camping.

One striking paradox in FSPs is that though *elles* in 13. (a) refers exclusively to a group of females, we cannot say that *ils* in 12. (b) refers exclusively to a group of males: one feature of *ils* is that it refers to a group involving both males and females. Thus, the example in 13. (b) can refer to either a group of males or to a mixed group of both males and females. A corresponding point is also available in the French agreement between adjectives and their referents; agreement of adjectives with the referents of *ils* shows similar tendency toward masculinity where the adjective takes a masculine plural form though the referent involves both male and female nouns.

14.
  a. *Louis and Camille sont australiens.*
     Louis and Camille are Australian
  b. *Ils sont australiens.*
     They are Australian.

Australiens used in 14. (a-b) is a plural masculine adjective though it refers to the male noun *Louis* and the female noun *Camille*. Thus, the example in 14. (b) can refer to a group of male Australians or to a group of mixed-gender Australians. Thus, unlike English wherein the genderless pronoun *they* are used, in French the masculine plural pronoun *ils* is used to represent a group of both males and females which might sound a sexist tendency to a novice learner where "even if there is only one male in a large group of females, ils still holds sway," Batchelor & Chebli-Saadi (2011, p. 437).

To sum up, *ils* and *elles* are the two third-person plural pronouns in French. Though they both are translated as *they*, the first corresponds to a male *they* and the second to a female *they* since *ils* and *elles* agree in both gender and number with their referent. It can be challenging to learn FSPs since *elles* only refers to a group of females, whereas *ils* can refer to either a group of males or a group that includes both males and females. Unlike English adjectives which by default do not show gender or number agreement with the noun they modify, French adjectives used with *ils* are also masculine in number and plural in form though their referents can involve both male and female nouns. A novice learner who is used to using adjectives without a gender or a number agreement may find the later FSPs' characteristic very challenging.

A. *On,* A Versatile Subject Pronoun

On is one of the most confusing FSPs a novice learner of French will confront. The confusion may occur because *on* can cover a range of other pronouns and "that *on* can be equivalent of almost any other pronouns." Offord (2006, P. 174). The French

pronoun *on* is usually used instead of *nous* and is therefore equivalent to the English first-person plural pronoun *we*. Here is an example where *on* is equivalent to *nous*

15.
   a. *Brigitte et moi, on est mariés.*
      Brigitte and I, we're married.
   b. *On a une fille.*
      We have a daughter.

One nuisance a learner has to put up with is agreement where the verb following *on* takes an *il,* not a *nous,* verb conjugational ending. In other words, the verb *est* (is) in 15. (a) and the verb *a* (has) in 15. (b) agree with a third-person singular subject though the subject *on* refers to a first-person plural subject. For a novice learner, saying *on est* as shown in 15. (a) above is very much like saying *we is* in English; similarly, saying *on a* as shown in 15. (b) literarily translates as *we has* in English, a point that can leave a novice learner so baffled. Thus, *on* never takes a *nous* verb conjugational ending, even when it refers to the first-person plural subject. That is, *on* is semantically plural, but grammatically singular.

A different confusing usage of *on* is when it represents the English indefinite personal pronoun *one*; *on* "is normally regarded as the nonspecific form of the 3rd person singular pronoun subject," Judge and Healey (1985, p. 57).

16.
   a. *On m'a volé mon portable.*
      Someone stole my phone.
   b. *On ne sait jamais.*
      One never knows.

This means that *on* does not really have a specific pronoun reference and therefore translating it to English "presents problems and choosing the most appropriate corresponding pronoun requires careful thought," Batchelor & Chebli-Saadi (2011, p.

443). This feature of indeterminablity of the referent adds more difficulty to the novice learner. *On* "can be translated in a variety of ways and can replace all the subject pronouns" Batchelor & Chebli-Saadi (2011, p. 443). Here is an example, from Batchelor and Chebli-Saadi (2011, p. 444), where *on* can also refer to feminine or plural subjects

17.
  a. Quand on est mère, on est fière de ses enfants.
     as a mother, one is always proud of one's children.
  b. On est venus aussi vite que possible.
     we came as quickly as we could. Two or more people speaking.

<div align="center">Example 17. (a-b) is from Batchelor & Chebli-Saadi (2011:444)</div>

Exploring other possible uses of *on* is beyond the limitation of this study and can "belong to familiar speech and not to the written language," Judge & Healey (1985, p. 57). Thus, future studies should look for other characteristics of FSPs, analyze other type of French pronouns, and compare them with their English counterparts to provide a better understanding of how a novice learner of French thinks and recognizes French.

Thus, this section has shown that *on* is another perplexing pronoun since it encompasses a variety of other pronouns; *on* is challenging to translate because of this feature. *On* is frequently used to substitute *nous*, the first-person plural pronoun. While *on* relates to the first-person plural pronoun, subject-verb agreement might be misleading since *on* takes an *il*, not *nous*, verb conjugational ending. A novice learner often finds it challenging to ascertain the true reference of *on*. Other uses of *on* relate to how familiar or unfamiliar the speech is, a topic which is outside the scope of this study.

Conclusion and Implications of The Study

In this concluding section, we bring together the findings of our exploration into French subject pronouns (FSPs), offering insights into their complexities and

implications for language learning. While English and French share similarities in subject pronouns, differences arise in their reflection of gender, person, and number categories. This study sheds light on the learning process of FSPs for novice French learners, guided by previous research and language-learning resources. Utilizing a comparative research approach, the study delves into the unique features of FSPs that may pose challenges for learners, contributing valuable insights into their complexities.

This study delves into existing research confirming the commonly held belief that French presents challenges for language learners. Notably, prior investigations have overlooked the nuanced characteristics of French subject pronouns (FSPs) and their pedagogical implications. Consequently, this study endeavors to address this gap by shedding light on the distinctive features of FSPs and their relevance to French language education.

Employing a comparative research approach, we meticulously scrutinized the usage of FSPs. Our examination commenced with an analysis of "je" and "nous." It became evident that "je" undergoes contraction to "j'" under specific grammatical conditions, a phenomenon absent in its English counterpart, "I." Moreover, while "je" is capitalized only when initiating a sentence, "I" maintains capitalization regardless of its placement within the sentence. Despite apparent orthographic similarities between French and English, pronunciation disparities exist, complicating the learning process for novice learners of French.

Furthermore, our study elucidated that the pronoun "nous" does not undergo contraction with subsequent verbs, unlike "je." Additionally, FSPs terminating in /s/ undergo liaison, where the /s/ sound transitions to /z/ when followed by a vowel or muted /h/. However, the final /s/ remains silent in French when it is final in isolated words or when succeeded by a consonant. The intricate nature of French liaison presents a formidable challenge, further complicating the learning of FSPs.

French uses *tu* and *vous* to refer to the second-person subjects where *tu* is regarded as the informal form and *vous* the formal one. *Tu* is always used with singular second-person subjects whereas *vous* is used with both singular and plural subjects. *Vous* can also indicate a formal and/or a polite usage. Studies show that deciding on the choice of *tu* and *vous* is not always easy as it can depend on other sociolinguistic factors. *Tu* does not get contracted with the following word even though it ends with a vowel as is the case in *je*. *Tu* and *vous* are used for both male and female subjects and gender plays no role in their usages. The French verbs *tutoier* and *vouvoyer* mean to address someone as *tu* or *vous* respectively.

French third-person subject pronouns can be singular like *il* and *elle* or plural like *ils* and *elles*. French does not have an equivalent to the English pronoun *it* and therefore uses both *il* and *elle* to cover for this shortage in its pronoun inventory. Thus, a novice learner is to deal with the fact that *il* and *elle* are used for both human and non-human subjects because French does not have a pronoun that is used mainly for this purpose like the English *it*. Confusion might also be in place when French uses *il* as an impersonal pronoun to talk about the weather or time: the difficulty in such cases is that a typical sentence like *Il s'agit de votre mère* can literarily translate as *He is about your mother* while the actual intended meaning is *It is about your mother*. Similarly, *Il pleut* literally translates as *He rains* while the actual intended meaning is *It is raining*.

French has two third-person plural pronouns, *ils* and *elles*. Though both translate to English as *they*, the former is a male *they* and the latter a female *they* because *ils* and *elles* agree with their referent in person, gender, and number. *Elles* refers exclusively to a group of females, while *ils* refers to either a group of males or a group involving both males and females, a point which can also add to the difficulty of learning FSPs. In English, adjectives used to describe a noun or a pronoun do not show gender or number agreement whereas in French adjectives show agreement in both gender and

number with the noun/pronoun they modify. However, French adjectives modifying *ils* are masculine in number though their referent can involve both male and female nouns. The latter feature of French poses some challenge to a novice learner who is accustomed to using genderless and numberless adjectives in English.

On is also a confusing pronoun as it covers a range of other pronouns which makes it difficult to translate. *On* is usually used instead of the first-person plural pronoun, *nous*. Subject-verb agreement plays a confusing rule in this pronoun where *on* takes an *il*, not *nous*, verb conjugational ending though it refers to the first-person plural pronoun. It can be difficult for a novice learner to determine the real reference of *on*. Other usages of *on* have to do with whether the speech is familiar or otherwise, a point which falls beyond the limitation of this study.

Though this article was limited to the study of FSPs, a few pedagogical implications can be drawn. The distinctive features identified throughout the study can be used to support the teaching and understanding of FSPs by presenting them directly to the novice learner in a French course rather than leaving him/her struggle until he/she discovers them. Learners can benefit from Fry's (2016) program to study smarter and realize that the odder the features FSPs have, the easier they will be remembered and understood. The difficult points identified throughout this article can be considered as distinctive features that can contribute to the linguistic knowledge of the francophone/anglophone grammar, and help facilitate the understanding and learning of FSPs.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Despite the valuable insights gained from this study, several limitations warrant acknowledgement. Firstly, the author, assuming the role of the novice French learner, may have introduced subjectivity into the analysis, potentially limiting the generalizability of the findings. The study's reliance on subjective judgments in

assessing grammaticality and translation accuracy may have further constrained its scope.

Additionally, the study predominantly focused on written examples of French subject pronouns, overlooking potential differences in their spoken usage. A more comprehensive analysis incorporating both written and spoken language data could offer a more nuanced understanding of FSP usage. Thus, future research endeavors could benefit from a larger and more diverse sample of French learners to improve the representativeness of the findings. Moreover, a study with a broader range of data sources may provide clearer insights into the intricacies of FSP usage.

In conclusion, while this study has provided valuable insights into the complexities of French subject pronouns (FSPs), further research is necessary to address the identified limitations and deepen our understanding of this linguistic phenomenon. By systematically addressing these constraints and exploring new avenues of inquiry, future research endeavors hold promise and have the potential to enhance language learning pedagogy and promote cross-linguistic communication, a point which brings this study to a close.

Acknowledgement

References

1. Batchelor, R. E., & Chebli-Saadi, M. (2011). *A Reference Grammar of French*. Cambridge University Press. Doi: https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511921872.
2. Dewaele, J.-M. (2004). Vous or tu? Native and non-native speakers of French on a sociolinguistic tightrope. *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching (IRAL),* 42 (4). pp. 383-402. Doi: https://doi.org/10.1515/iral.2004.42.4.383.

3. Dimnet, E. (2016). *French Grammar Made Clear for Use in American Schools*. Funk & Wagnalls Company.

4. Eychenne, J. (2011). La liaison en français et la théorie de l'optimalité. *Langue française*, 169, March, 79-101. https://doi.org/10.3917/lf.169.0079.

5. Fonseca-Greber, B., & Waugh, L. R. (2003). "On the Radical Difference between the Subject Personal Pronouns in Written and Spoken European French". In *Corpus Analysis*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004334410_013.

6. Fry, R. (2016). *How to Study: The Program that Has helped Millions of Students Study Smarter, Not harder*, 25th Anniversary Edition.Career Press. USA.

7. Gray, P. et al. (2007). *The research imagination: An introduction to qualitative and quantitative methods*. Cambridge University Press.

8. Hawkins, R., & Towell, R. (2015). *French grammar and usage fourth edition*. Routledge. London. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315724355.

9. Heminway, A. (2017). *French Demystified: Hard Stuff Made Easy*, 3rd edition. The United States of America. McGraw-Hill Education.

10. Hornsby, D. (2020). *Norm and ideology in spoken French: a sociolinguistic history of liaison*. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-49300-4.

11. Houy, B (2015). *How to Learn French in a Year: A Proven Formula to Learn French Fast, Sound Like a Native and Have Fun in the Process. [s.n].* Frenchtogrther.com. ISBN: 1514314185, 9781514314180.

12. Judge, A., & Healey, F. (1985). *A Reference Grammar of Modern French*. Edward Arnold. Australia.

13. Kendris, C., & Kendris, T. (2013). *Pronounce it perfectly in French*. Barron's.

14. Mazet, V. (2013). *French Grammar for Dummies*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Hoboken, NJ.

15. Offord, M. (2006). *A student Grammar of French*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511995729.

16. Penner, A., & Bechet, C. (2016). *French in 32 Lessons*. New York. W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.

17. Price, G. (2008). A Comprehensive French Grammar, Sixth edition. Oxford: Blackwell, xix + 588 pp. 978 1 4051 5385 0. *Journal of French Language Studies*. 2009;19(1):147-148. doi:10.1017/S0959269508003670.

18. Roach, P. (2009). *English Phonetics and Phonology: A practical course*. Fourth *Ed.* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

19. Schmidt, D.-K., Williams, M. M., & Wenzel, D. (2011). *French for Dummies*. John Wiley & Sons.

20. Stein, G. (2005). *Webster's new world 575+French verbs*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Hoboken, NJ.

21. Sturm, J. (2013). Liaison in L2 French: The effects of instruction. In. J. Levis & K. LeVelle (Eds.). Proceedings of the 4th Pronunciation in Second Language Learning and Teaching Conference, Aug. 2013. (pp. 157-166). Ames, IA: Iowa State University.

22. Sturm, J. (2016). Teaching "Liaison" to intermediate learners of L2 French. *The French Review* Vol. 90, No. 2 (December 2016), pp. 157-170. printed in USA.

23. Thacker, M. and d'Angelo, C. (2013). Essential French Grammar. Oxon. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429441882.

24. Thomas, A. (1998). La liaison et son enseignement : des modèles orthoépiques à la réalité linquistique. *Canadian Modern Language Review-Revue Canadienne Des Langues Vivantes*, *54*(4), 543–552. https://doi.org/10.3138/cmlr.54.4.543.

25. Walker, D.C. (2001) *French sound structure*. Calgary, Alberta: University of Calgary Press.

26. William Bennett (1991) Liaison in French, Word, 42:1, 57-88, DOI: 10.1080/00437956.1991.11435832.

27. Wong, W., Weber-Fève, S., Edouard Ousselin, & VanPatten, B. (2017). *Liaisons: An Introduction to French World Languages and Cultures Books*. 12.