
ALLER et MOURIR oddities in French conjugation:
il a été au spectacle à pied, il a mouru d'ennui du début à la fin

XXX
YYY

French verbal inflection presents classical cases of deviation from canonical inflection (Corbett, 2005): suppletion (Corbett, 2007), overabundance (Thornton, 2019) and defectiveness (Sims, 2015). In this paper, we look at some oddities in the paradigms of ALLER ‘to go’ and MOURIR ‘to die’ and the interactions between defectiveness, suppletion and overabundance and their consequences for morphological theory.

1 The data

At first glance, ALLER ‘to go’ is not defective and it is a straightforward example of suppletion with both idiosyncratic stems (e.g. *i* for the future and conditional forms: *i-rai*, *i-ras*, ...) and forms (e.g. *vont* for the present 3rd person plural). It does not display the types of overabundance of POUVOIR ‘can/may’ (*je peux/puis*) limited to one form of a lexeme, of ASSEOIR ‘to sit’ (*je m’asseois/assieds*, *nous nous asseyons/assoyons* limited to some stems of a lexeme or that of the verbs in *-ayer* with fluctuating yods such as BALAYER ‘to sweep’ (*je balaie/balaye*).

ALLER	1sg	2sg	3sg	1pl	2pl	3pl
ind prs	va	va	va	alɔ̃	ale	vɔ̃
ipfv	ale	alɛ	alɛ	aljɔ̃	alje	alɛ
pst	ale	ala	ala	alam	alat	alɛʁ
fut	iʁe	iʁa	iʁa	iʁɔ̃	iʁe	iʁɔ̃
sbjv prs	aj	aj	aj	aljɔ̃	alje	aj
ipfv	alas	alas	ala	alaszɔ̃	alaszje	alasz
cond prs	iʁɛ	iʁɛ	iʁɛ	iʁjɔ̃	iʁje	iʁɛ
imp prs	—	va	—	alɔ̃	ale	—
	inf	prs part		pst part		
non-fini	ale	alā	ale	ale	ale	ale

However, there are two observations that complicate the situation a little. First, there is an idiomatic use of S’EN ALLER ‘to leave’ whose paradigm does not follow from the combination of the French special clitics and the conjugation paradigm of ALLER. The examples in (1) are both attested in French with different sociolinguistic value.

- (1) He left.
- a. %Il s’est en allé. (informal)
 - b. %Il s’en est allé. (formal)

(1a) could be interpreted as *en* being reanalyzed as a prefix on ALLER in the informal variety but the imperative forms used by all speakers display the special clitic in its usual position which is not compatible with a verb S’ENALLER.

- (2) Leave!
- a. va-t'en !
 - b. *en vas-toi !

This seems a case of incomplete reanalysis rather than overabundance. But, in the formal register, there is evidence of suppletive overabundance: as shown below in (3), there are alternative forms for the simple past borrowed from the ÊTRE paradigm.

- (3) He went looking for the police.
- a. Il s'en alla chercher la police. (neutral)
 - b. %Il s'en fut chercher la police. (formal)

The forms in (3b) are rare but well established in French literature. This particular overabundance in the simple past does not spread to ALLER itself but ALLER also borrows forms of ÊTRE. The use of *avoir été* (literally 'to have been') in examples such as (5b) is stigmatized in formal French invoking the fact that ÊTRE is not a verb of movement.

- | | |
|--|---|
| <p>(4) He goes to the station. (movement)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Il va à la gare. b. *Il est à la gare. | <p>(5) He went to the station. (movement)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Il est allé à la gare. b. Il a été à la gare. |
|--|---|

But the expressions in (4) have completely different meanings¹, while those in (5) are synonymous.² Moreover, *avoir été* is compatible with a movement specific complement unlike *être*:

- | | |
|--|---|
| <p>(6) He goes from London to York.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Il va de Londres à York. b. *Il est de Londres à York. | <p>(7) He went from London to York.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Il est allé de Londres à York. b. Il a été de Londres à York. |
|--|---|

We see this as a suppletion in the paradigm of ALLER, creating overabundance in the compound tenses of the movement verb. Of course, ALLER also functions as an auxiliary for near future in the present and the imperfective indicative making it a defective auxiliary compared to ÊTRE and AVOIR, which combine with all simple tenses.

While the preceding phenomenon focuses on two extremely frequent verbs (ÊTRE 'to be' 32000 occ/Mw, ALLER 'to go' 10000 occ/Mw), the case of MOURIR 'to die' is different, centering on marginal data concerning a less frequent verb (920 occ/Mw). The inflection paradigm of MOURIR as represented in references such as the *Bescherelle* (Arrivé, 1997) is neither suppletive, nor overabundant, nor defective. Despite this display of apparent simplicity, two complications arise.

¹*Il est à la gare* is correct with the interpretation *he is at the station* using the verb ÊTRE.

²*Il a été à la gare* could also be understood as ÊTRE and mean *he has been at the station (at some point)* in some specific contexts.

MOURIR	1sg	2sg	3sg	1pl	2pl	3pl
ind prs	мѡѣѡ	мѡѣѡ	мѡѣѡ	мѡѣѡ̃	мѡѣѡѣ	мѡѣѡѣ
ipfv	мѡѣѣ	мѡѣѣ	мѡѣѣ	мѡѣѣ̃	мѡѣѣѣ	мѡѣѣѣ
pst	мѡѣѡ	мѡѣѡ	мѡѣѡ	мѡѣѡѡ	мѡѣѡѡѡ	мѡѣѡѡѡ
fut	мѡѣѣѣ	мѡѣѣѣѣ	мѡѣѣѣѣ	мѡѣѣѣ̃	мѡѣѣѣѣ	мѡѣѣѣ̃
sbjv prs	мѡѣѡ	мѡѣѡ	мѡѣѡ	мѡѣѣ̃	мѡѣѣѣ	мѡѣѡѣ
ipfv	мѡѣѣѣ	мѡѣѣѣѣ	мѡѣѣѣѣ	мѡѣѣѣ̃̃	мѡѣѣѣѣѣ	мѡѣѣѣѣ
cond prs	мѡѣѣѣѣ	мѡѣѣѣѣѣ	мѡѣѣѣѣѣ	мѡѣѣѣ̃̃̃	мѡѣѣѣѣѣѣ	мѡѣѣѣѣѣ
imp prs	—	мѡѣѡ	—	мѡѣ̃	мѡѣѣ	—
	inf	prs part		pst part		
non-fini	мѡѣѣѣѣ	мѡѣ̃̃	мѡѣѡ	мѡѣѡ	мѡѣѡѡ	мѡѣѡѡѡ

The simpler one is that the prescribed forms of the 1st and 2nd person plural of conditional present *nous mourrions* and *vous mourriez* have a phonological make-up that poses a problem for French phonology. In the future and the conditional present, the double *r* must be pronounced as a geminate contrary to what usually occurs in French, where a double *r* can be pronounced either as a simple *r* or a geminate. In practice, the forms of indicative imperfective and conditional present offer a contrast.³

(8) *mourrait* conditional present vs *mourait* indicative imperfective

- a. il mourait : мѡѣѣ/*мѡѣѣѣ
- b. il mourrait : *мѡѣѣѣ/мѡѣѣѣ

Because this constraint on the double *r* is so limited, a context where a double *r* is followed by a yod appears only in the 1st and 2nd person plural of conditional present of these few verbs. With this distribution of data, most speakers feel uneasy speaking out the forms leading to competition between forced articulation, alternative repairs and avoidance.

(9) We would die.

- a. nous [мѡѣѣ̃̃̃] (forced pronunciation)
- b. nous [мѡѣѣ̃̃̃̃] (schwa insertion, analogy on *BOURRER* ‘to stuff’)
- c. nous [мѡѣѣ̃̃̃̃̃] (infinitive stem borrowing, analogy on *PARTIR* ‘to leave’)
- d. avoidance defectiveness

Another complication appears in a completely different context with the past participle of *MOURIR*. Like *ALLER*, *MOURIR* has a pronominal form *SE MOURIR* with a different aspectual value. Where *MOURIR* ‘to die’ is an achievement, *SE MOURIR* ‘to be dying’ is an activity:

(10) *MOURIR* (achievement)

- | | |
|--|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. ‘he dies’ i. Il meurt. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> b. ‘he died’ i. Il est mort. (standard French) ii. ??Il est mouru. (playful joke) iii. ??Il a mouru. (child’s mistake) |
|--|---|

³This is also the case for verbs of the inflectional classes of *COURIR* ‘to run’ and *ACQUÉRIR* ‘to acquire’

(11) SE MOURIR (activity)

- | | |
|---|--|
| a. ‘he is dying of shame’
i. Il se meurt de honte. | b. ‘he was dying of shame’
i. *Il s’est mort de honte.
ii. %Il s’est mouru de honte.
iii. avoidance defectiveness |
|---|--|

In the case of the activity, the *mort* past participle seems to be strongly associated with a state and cannot be used for the activity. The remaining choice is between *mouru* as an “overabundant” participle or avoidance. For the speakers using *mouru*, it seems that the activity past participle extends to MOURIR in contexts with the same activity reading:

(12) MOURIR: ‘he was dying of shame during the whole evening’ (activity)

- | |
|---|
| a. Il mourait de honte pendant toute la soirée. (indicative imperfective) |
| b. %Il a mouru de honte pendant toute la soirée. (compound past) |

2 Analysis outline

The data presented shows cases of suppletion, overabundance and defectiveness but in various ways depending on the frequency of the paradigm cells targeted.

The MOURIR phonological difficulty with *mourrions*, *mourriez* stands somehow outside the domain of morphology along with the defectiveness of the *-eur/-rice* derivations on stems ending in *s* (e.g. *prédécesseur*/**prédécessrice* ‘predecessor’) but in a slightly different way. The morphological output is just as clear but the phonological trap it falls in is different. While there is a clear constraint for the avoidance of *sr* in derived words, the rarity of the double *r* plus yod summons an insecurity for the resolution and the possible avoidance of conflictual decisions, which leads to alternate forms or defectiveness. For the S’EN ALLER with the quasi-prefix, there would a simple solution extending the paradigmatic analysis of Bonami & Boyé (2007) to the pronominal verb S’EN ALLER and to include *va-t’en*, *allons-nous-en*, *allez-vous-en* in the portemanteaux rules of their PFM analysis (Stump, 2001) given the high frequency of the imperative forms.

The most interesting cases lie with the compound tenses and the alternate past participles. In the case of ALLER compound tenses (*être allé* vs *avoir été*), one could suggest a defective alternate verb ÊTRE, synonym with ALLER and restricted to compound tenses, avoiding overabundance in the spirit of Acquaviva (2008), but we would rather treat *été* as an overabundant suppletive past participle for ALLER along the lines defended by Thornton (2018). The same would apply to the activity MOURIR/SE MOURIR licensing a special form of the past participle, either no past participle or *mouru* in place of *mort*. The frequencies of *été* as the past participle of ALLER and the potential for the use of (SE) MOURIR as an activity are vastly different, which could explain in turn the disparity between the suppletion in one case and the insecurity in the other.

Both these cases would be similar to the *hay* form of HABER ‘to have’ in Spanish, which replaces the standard *ha* (present 3SG) when it is used as an existential. All these cases could be analyzed with pairs of lexemes sharing almost the same flexeme in the sense of Fradin & Kerleroux (2003). To account for these special variations, the flexeme would have to accommodate localised variation for the realization of a stem and some of its selection properties like in the cases of both ALLER and MOURIR, the alternate past participle has to use a different auxiliary to form its compound tenses.

References

- Acquaviva, Paolo. 2008. *Lexical plurals: A morphosemantic approach*. Oxford University Press.
- Arrivé, Michel. 1997. *La conjugaison pour tous* Bescherelle. Hatier.
- Bonami, Olivier & Gilles Boyé. 2007. French pronominal clitics and the design of paradigm function morphology. In Geert Booij, Luca Ducceschi, Bernard Fradin, Emiliano Guevara, Angela Ralli, Sergio Scalise & <http://mmm.lingue.unibo.it/> (eds.), *On-line proceedings fo the fith mediterranean morphology meeting (mmm5) fréjus 15-18 september 2005*, 291–322. Bologna: Università degli Studi di Bologna. <http://mmm.lingue.unibo.it/>.
- Corbett, Greville G. 2005. The canonical approach in typology. In Zygmunt Frajzyngier, Adam Hodges & Rood David S. (eds.), *Linguistic diversity and language theories*, vol. 25, 25–49. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing.
- Corbett, Greville G. 2007. Canonical typology, suppletion and possible words. *Language* 83(1). 8–42.
- Fradin, Bernard & Françoise Kerleroux. 2003. Troubles with lexemes. In Geert Booij, J de Cesaris, Sergio Scalise & Angela Ralli (eds.), *Topics in morphology. selected papers from the third mediterranean morphology meeting*, 177–196. Barcelona: ULA-Universitat Pompeu Fabra.
- Sims, Andrea D. 2015. *Inflectional defectiveness*, vol. 148. Cambridge University Press.
- Stump, Gregory T. 2001. *Inflectional morphology. A theory of paradigm structure*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Thornton, Anna M. 2018. Troubles with flexemes. In Olivier Bonami, Gilles Boyé, Georgette Dal, Hélène Giraudo & Fiammetta Namer (eds.), *The lexeme in descriptive and theoretical morphology*, 303–321. Berlin: Language Science Press.
- Thornton, Anna M. 2019. Overabundance: a canonical typology. In *Competition in inflection and word-formation*, 223–258. Springer.