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**Emir Šišić**

*emir.sisic@ff.unsa.ba*

Faculty of Philosophy, University of Sarajevo  
Bosnia and Herzegovina

# Inaudible morphemes in silent morphology: An example of agreement in number and gender in the French language

## Summary

Orthography and pronunciation in the French language are two categories in complete disparity. This discrepancy is reflected in the fact that when pronouncing French, far fewer phonemes are produced than are represented by graphemes in the written form. The goal of this paper is to present the concept of silent morphology, or inaudible morphemes in French, using examples of agreement in gender and number. For this study, we have built a written corpus of allophone French learners L2 called Didacquis, consisting of 30 written productions (narrative and argumentative texts on topics such as studies, travel, and friendships) by 12 learners at the post-initial (PI) stage based on grammatical profiles that show the developmental pathways of acquisition routes (Bartning & Schlyter, 2004). In this context allophone learners refers to people whose first language is not French. The results are interpreted through the Pienemann's Processability Theory (1998). The conclusion is that understanding these letters in French is exclusively contextual due to the presence of silent morpheme endings and the phenomenon of homophony.

**Keywords:** silent morphology, inaudibility, phonemes/graphemes, number, gender

## 1. INTRODUCTION

According to Chevalier (2003: 204), the French language spoken at the court and among the ruling elite was transcribed before the 9th century; however, it was consistently shaped by Latin orthography. From the 13th century onwards, this central French

began to distinguish itself from Latin, developing in relation to regional languages such as Picard, Norman, or Burgundian. Yet, it remained a minority in comparison to Latin. This is well established, yet what is less often highlighted is that French spelling frequently retains sounds that have since disappeared and is slow to incorporate new phonemes. It also carries over from Latin the practice of accentuation.

Given that French orthography is both historical and etymological, many letters still carry traces of the language's history and evolution: these include both etymological letters (directly inherited from Latin and Greek) and historical non-etymological letters. Examples of etymological letters from Latin include pairs like *tempus* / *temps*<sup>1</sup> and *digitum* / *doigt* (Ertek, 2019: 370), which already indicated how evolved forms in French no longer correspond to the phonemes represented in writing. When it comes to writing systems, each adheres to certain rules or conventions governing their use. In the case of French, this rarely amounts to a simple transcription of spoken language, as there is no perfect one-to-one relationship between sound and symbol. Fayol (2003) emphasizes that although there are certain letters that are silent, making no contribution to sound, yet they are retained to aid in understanding the meaning of words. In this sense, spelling represents a compromise: shaped by humanist ideals, it draws from cultural influences while accommodating various pronunciations. Consequently, French spelling is characterized by its complexity and internal contradictions, with an excess of letters that serve differentiating functions (Chevalier, 2003: 205). Writing thus appears to be designed not only for the literate but also for specialists. This is effectively illustrated in works that trace the history of orthography, analyze undertaken reforms, and evaluate the pedagogical approaches needed to facilitate its learning (Catach, 2011). According to Catach (2011), the French graphic system is complex yet regular, coherent, structured, and pluralistic. It is essential to distinguish between phonograms and morphograms. Phonograms represent the part of the signs that primarily convey phonemes, while morphograms complete the notation of morphemes and carry a certain degree of semantic value, which may be autonomous (Catach, 1986: 23). Dubois et al. (1973: 369) define phonograms as follows: "In ideographic writings, a phonogram is a sign that, while capable of functioning with its full value as an ideogram, is used to transcribe the consonantism of a word that is homonymous to the one represented by the ideogram." French orthography integrates three distinct systems. The first is a phonogrammic system,

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<sup>1</sup> Still, examples like *campus* / *champs* show very well the inconsistency of the historical approach to French orthography.

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which represents phonemes (the smallest sound units in language) with graphemes (the smallest written units of language). For example, the word *agneau* consists of three phonograms: [a-gn-eau]. According to Ertek (2019: 367), French language is 85% phonographic. The second system is a morphogrammic system, which employs written forms to convey grammatical (such as tense, number, and gender) and lexical (word meaning) information. Morphograms add information beyond phonetics. They can be categorized into grammatical morphograms, which convey morphosyntactic information (e.g., *agneaux* where the *-x* marks the plural), and lexical morphograms, which carry lexical meaning and create a visual link between roots and derivatives, as seen in the word *rang*, which indicates the family of words such as *ranger* and *rangement* (Catach, 1986: 211). Catach (1986: 233) further identifies the most significant verbal morphograms, including variants such as *-s* (*-x* or *-z*), *-t* (*-d*), *-nt*, *-ent*, and more specifically *-e*, used after verbs ending in *-i*, *-ai*, *-oi*, and *-ui* (e.g., *je crie*, *j'essaie*, *je joue*, *il tue*), and *-r*, marking the infinitive of first-group verbs. As for lexical morphograms, they often have a logographic value and distinguish homophones. For instance, *il bond* refers to the verb *bondir*, while *bon* refers to the adjective *good*. Similarly, grammatical morphograms mark number distinctions, as illustrated in the final *-t* in logograms such as *son* (possessive) and *sont* (verb). A single grapheme can be polysemous, as demonstrated by the word *main*. The phonogram /ain/ is present, but the /a/ also serves as a lexical morphogram in words like *manuel*, *manuellement*, *manucure*, and others (Ertek, 2019: 370). The segmentation of morphemes in speech is reflected in relatively fixed marks in writing, although the sounds may occasionally vary. The endings of noun and verb groups are parallelly marked, with pronouns, endings, and liaisons functioning in both speech and writing in a complementary manner.

The third system is the logogrammic system, which involves written units (logograms) that represent whole words or meanings and help distinguish homophones; words that sound alike but have different meanings or spellings. Homophones can be divided into homonyms, which sound the same but have different meanings (e.g., *sang*, *s'en*, *cent*, *sans*), and homographs, which have the same spelling but different meanings (e.g., *parent* as a noun and *parent* as a verb *parer*, *couvent* as a noun and *couvent* as a verb *couver*). Logograms, representing about 6% of the words in the French language, include lexical examples like *repère* / *repaire* and grammatical examples like *à* / *a*, *et* / *est*, and *ou* / *où* (Ertek, 2019: 369). It is important to note that graphemes can perform multiple functions simultaneously. For example, the word *révélé* includes both a phonogram and a grammatical morphogram, marking the

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past participle of first-group verbs. As noted by Grevisse and Goose (2016), French orthography is phonological rather than phonetic. It relies on a set number of letters that are transcribed into sounds, though there is no direct equivalence between letters and sounds, given that the French alphabet (26 letters) is insufficient to represent the 36 phonemes of the language. The only phonemes that consistently correspond to a single sound are /j/, /k/, and /v/. The main challenge of French orthography lies in the mismatch between phonemes and graphemes, where a larger number of graphemes correspond to a smaller number of phonemes. For example, digraphs like /eu/ and /ai/, trigraphs like /eau/ and /oux/, and nasal vowel representations like /an/ and /on/ all contribute to the complexity of French spelling. While the French orthographic system is relatively stable today, its evolution demonstrates otherwise, as it has undergone frequent changes. Détrie (1995: 195) cites Nina Catach's *Dictionnaire historique de l'orthographe française* (1994), which traces the evolution of several words' spelling. For example, the verb *accoter* has undergone six spelling changes since 1549, transitioning through *accoster*, *accoter*, *accotter*, *acotter*, before returning to the spelling *accoter* in 1606. Similarly, the verb *abattre* was initially written as *abbatre* (1549, 1564), then *abbattre* (1606), had two spellings in 1694, before it returned to a single form (*abbattre*) in 1718.

Out of the 36 phonemes in French, there are 130 phonograms. These include 17 consonants, 3 semi-vowels/semi-consonants, and 12 oral vowels, along with 4 nasal vowels (Ertek, 2019: 366). The ratio of graphemes to phonemes determines the transparency of an orthography: the lower the ratio, the more transparent the system; the higher the ratio, the opaquer it is. French orthography is considered opaque due to the significant mismatch between graphemes and their phonemic representation. Transparent orthography has straightforward letter-to-sound correspondence, while non-transparent orthography involves multiple spellings for the same phoneme. Additionally, French graphemes can be classified as either simple or complex. Simple graphemes represent individual sounds (e.g., *amie* [a-m-i]), while complex graphemes involve combinations of letters representing a single sound (e.g., *chapeau* [ch-a-p-eau]). Ertek (2019: 367) observes that 45 basic graphemes are used most frequently and account for 80-90% of the written language. The remaining 25 graphemes are less common, and about 60 others primarily form rare forms, such as /im/ (e.g., *improbable*), /aim/ (e.g., *faim*), or /yn/ (e.g., *lynx*).

As highlighted in the introduction, there is a notable gap between French orthography and pronunciation. The disparity between graphemes and phonemes

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means that pronunciation alone cannot serve as a reliable guide to spelling. This divergence is especially evident in the large number of oral and nasal phonemes, which have multiple phonogrammic representations in writing. A single letter or combination of letters may be pronounced differently in various contexts, adding further complexity for learners. Therefore, the French writing system must be learned with a thorough understanding of its intricate rules and conventions. The graphic system of French can only be fully understood when one justifies the choice of graphemes based on their relationship with the phonetic system and with the subsystems of the language (Catach, 1986: 27).

## 2. SILENT MORPHOLOGY

According to Catach (1986: 209), each French word consists of a fixed core (referred to as the base or root), which itself is formed from a developed root. For instance, in the word *faire*, *facteur*, *fiction*, the common root is *f*, and in *agir*, *acteur*, *action*, the common root is *a*. Along with this core, there are two types of movable elements that modify the root. One type includes affixes (such as suffixes and prefixes), which, when added to the root, create new “words” that enter the lexicon and can serve as bases for further derivation. These are termed *constructed words*. For example, from *faire*, we can derive *refaire*, *réfection*; from *facteur*; or from *agir*, we can form words such as *réaction*, *réacteur*, and *réactionnaire*, among others. The other type consists of endings and verb inflections, which are not typically included in the lexicon but serve to mark grammatical relationships such as gender, number, and agreement in both spoken and written forms. For instance, the nouns *garçons*, *filles*, and *maisons* all share the final *-s* as a common suffix for pluralization in French. Similarly, adjectives like *petit* and *grand* are introduced into the lexicon with inflectional markers for gender and number, such as *-e* (feminine) and *-s* (plural). These markers, however, are silent in pronunciation, which can make the distinction between singular and plural more challenging (e.g., *petit* vs. *petits*, *grand* vs. *grands*), reflecting the silent morphology of the French language.

This silent morphology is central to our research, particularly the inaudibility of phonemes and morphemes in written French. As Ågren (2005: 30) explains, in comparison to spoken French, written French is characterized by silent morphological markers, which affect verbal homophones and agreements in number and gender. These silent morphological elements have long been considered one of the more fragile aspects of French orthography, posing difficulties for native speakers (L1) and

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even for adults (Jaffré & David, 1999). It is reasonable to assume that these challenges also exist in the acquisition of French as a second language (L2). Silent morphology applies not only to nouns but also to verbs. The difficulty inherent in this orthography can be explained by the fact that written language does not have the advantages of spoken language. In contrast to languages like English, German, or Spanish, where there is a direct equivalence between spoken and written forms, especially in terms of number and agreement (Jaffré & David, 1999), French presents a more complex challenge. Jaffré and David (1999: 7) explore the complexities of writing in French, particularly in the context of number, which they argue is one of the most challenging linguistic areas to master. This task requires a nuanced understanding of several dimensions: theoretical knowledge of the morphological markers across word classes (the morphological dimension), an understanding of how words relate to one another in syntactic structures (the morpho-syntactic dimension), and an ability to manage the complexity of communication situations, both in reception and production. Writing, therefore, demands the simultaneous management of spelling, text, and ideas. The corresponding morphological markers in spoken language are often audible, which makes it easier to transfer them to writing. However, the difficulty in French lies in the fact that silent markers, such as the *-s* in nouns or the *-nt* in verbs, often require cognitive processes to determine their presence or absence. Context analysis becomes crucial in determining when and where these markers should appear in written language (Jaffré & David, 1999: 10). This lack of perceptual salience, the difficulty in distinguishing between spoken and written forms due to the absence of distinctive markers, is central to the challenge. Perceptual salience is a concept commonly discussed in second language acquisition (L2). Ågren (2008: 105) defines it as the extent to which certain aspects of an utterance attract the learner's attention, whether through position, stress, intonation, or other prosodic features. According to Goldschneider and DeKeyser (2001: 22), perceptual salience refers to the ease with which a structure can be perceived or heard, which is key to understanding its role in language acquisition. Ågren (2005: 31) offers examples that highlight these complexities, underscoring the challenge that silent morphology presents to both native and non-native learners of French.

1. Le petit garçon se promène dans la forêt.
  2. Les petits garçons se promènent sur les dunes.
  3. Les jeunes enfants jouent dans le jardin.
  4. Le joli vélo bleu est garé devant l'école.
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5. La jolie voiture bleue est gar**ée** devant l'école.

6. Les jol**ies** voitures bleu**es** sont gar**ées** devant l'école.<sup>2</sup>

Starting with the nominal sphere, agreement between the noun and its complements (determiners and adjectives) must be marked for both gender and number. Regarding the morphology of number, it is traditionally marked by a silent –s, though the plural is audibly indicated on the article (examples 1 and 2). The –s plural must also appear on the noun and adjective, but it remains silent. The only exception to this rule arises when the noun begins with a vowel, in which case liaison occurs between the article or preceding adjective and the noun, making the plural –s audible (example 3). The complexity of the system becomes particularly evident in example 6, where six markers are used to express both the feminine and plural forms, yet only two of these markers (the article *les* and the verb *sont*) are audible, indicating the plural.

In the verbal sphere, the morphological challenge remains consistent regarding number. The primary goal here is to mark number morphology on the verb, with difficulties arising in the third-person plural form, where plurality often remains inaudible. This specific issue represents one of the significant challenges for writers. Therefore, we can conclude that morphology plays a crucial role in mastering written French. The challenge of morphologically representing written French is partly attributed to its silent morphology, which is not audibly present in spoken French, except in cases involving determiners and liaisons that insert an additional consonant to distinguish plural forms. This phenomenon explains the complexity of accurately implementing this morphological system in real-time writing. The morphological expression of number, for instance, has an advantage over gender, as it involves a clear link between linguistic expression and plurality, where an additional element is added when referring to multiple items. This connection between plurality and number is underscored by Jaffré and David (1999), who highlight its relatively simple and transparent semantic foundation. Turning to verb endings, Catach (1986: 234) notes that the complexity of the graphical representation of verbs arises largely from the multiplicity of oppositions, including voice (active or passive), mood (indicative, subjunctive, etc.), and the critical distinction between present and past tenses. Essentially, there are four primary types of verb endings:

1. Endings for the present indicative (based on the zero morpheme),
2. Endings for the imperfect (based on the morpheme as [ε], noted as *ais*, *ait*),

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<sup>2</sup> The underlined elements represent audible morphology, while the bolded ones represent silent morphology.

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3. Endings for the future tense (based on the morpheme [Re], noted as *Rai*),
4. Endings for the conditional (based on the morpheme [Rɛ], noted as *Rai*).

Nevertheless, when it comes to the category of number, apart from the infinitive and the participle, French verbs, regardless of their mood or tense, almost always present a clear opposition between the three persons of singular and the three persons of plural (vowel oppositions, consonant oppositions, etc.). The general graphic marker for number is –s, with –x being, by exception, retained as a logographic letter only when it helps to distinguish the radicals, e.g., *croix / crois* (Catach, 1986: 239). Today, apart from some nominal series (*oeuf / œufs; journal / journaux; travail / travaux*, etc.), the nominal markers of gender and number are generally introduced in speech by determiners, and sometimes, concerning number, by liaisons (Catach, 1986: 210).

After a brief overview of the main features of gender and number markers in the French language, their manifestation in spelling, but their absence in pronunciation, we will examine, using a written corpus, how much the silent morphemes influence the correct agreement of words in the categories of gender and number.

### 3. METHODOLOGY AND CORPUS

For this study, we constructed a written corpus of allophone learners, Didacquis, which consists of 30 written productions (narrative and argumentative texts on topics such as studies, travel, and friendships) from 12 learners at the post-initial (PI) stage of the acquisition process<sup>3</sup> (Bartning & Schlyter, 2004). The main characteristics of the PI stage are as follows:

1. Marking the value of the past with the *passé composé*: Using constructions such as auxiliary and past participle (e.g., *il a donné, il a suivi*).
2. Emergence of isolated forms of the imperfect: specifically, the auxiliary verbs *était* and *avait*.
3. The use of prefabricated phrases like *c'est* and *il y a*.
4. Introduction of temporal subordination with *quand* and causal subordination with *parce que*, as well as modal verbs like *je peux, je veux*.
5. Absence of plural agreement in the present tense (e.g., *ils prend* instead of *ils prennent*), which is seen as overgeneralization, possibly because plural forms are often inaudible in speech (e.g., *il parle / ils parlent*).

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<sup>3</sup> In French *les itinéraires acquisitionnels* or *les parcours développementaux*.

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The data for this study were collected at the University of Sarajevo, specifically from the Department of Romance Studies within the 'French Language and Literature' program, focusing on second- and third-year students in the first cycle of studies (Bachelor studies). The corpus contains a total of 7,460 words, with each text containing approximately 250 words. Regarding the total number of texts per student, the statistics are as follows: one student wrote 5 texts, two students wrote 4 texts each, two students wrote 3 texts each, four students wrote 2 texts each, and three students wrote 1 text each. This investigation aims to examine silent markers associated with plural markers and verb endings, particularly their absence in written form, which can lead to incorrect agreement in sentences. The results are interpreted using Pienemann's (1998) Processability Theory (PT), which outlines a universal acquisition route for the morphosyntactic processing of second language (L2) learners as they develop morphosyntactic structures. According to PT, learners can only understand and produce the linguistic forms of a second language that their current level of cognitive processing allows. That is, learners can handle grammatical and syntactic features that are specific to their stage of development, which only emerge once simpler, previously mastered structures are in place. For instance, PT predicts that predicate adjective agreement, which occurs between the noun phrase and verb phrase, will be more challenging to produce and automate than agreement within the noun phrase itself (e.g., between determiner and noun or between adjective and noun). Furthermore, agreement between the noun and attributive adjective is predicted to be more difficult due to its inter-phrasal nature, which requires processing between two distinct phrases. Pienemann (1998) posits that learners pass through five stages in their acquisition of morphosyntactic structures, during which the computational mechanisms of language gradually develop. In each stage, grammatical information is exchanged progressively, allowing the learner to form increasingly complex structures.

Stage 1 represents the initial contact with the foreign language, during which learners familiarize themselves with individual words of the target language, without grouping them into grammatical categories. The learner's linguistic processing capacity is minimal at this stage, and they primarily use structures that require limited processing, acquiring words as unanalyzed forms without understanding the grammatical relationships between them. Stage 2, or the lexical morphology stage, marks a transition where learners begin categorizing their lexicon and noting features such as gender, number, tense, etc. on the paradigmatic axis. Here, learners identify lexical morphemes within categorical structures. Mastery of lexical morphology is a prerequisite for advancing to the next stage. At this stage, learners still operate

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primarily within isolated lexical categories without involving complex grammatical exchanges. In Stage 3, which involves the phrasal procedure, learners acquire the ability to exchange grammatical information within phrases, specifically between the determiner, noun, and attributive adjective. This stage marks the onset of syntagmatic morphology, wherein learners process agreement within the noun phrase (e.g., *la maison verte*) and verb phrase (e.g., *nous avons travaillé*). Some researchers, such as Mansouri & Håkansson (2007) and Ågren (2008), have divided this stage into sub-levels, distinguishing between determiner-noun and adjective-noun agreement, and between prepositive and postpositive adjectives. Stage 4, known as the inter-phrasal procedure (Lindström, 2013), refers to the point at which learners can process grammatical information across two syntagms, such as subject-verb agreement or agreement between a subject and a predicate adjective (e.g., *la maison est verte*). At this level, learners begin automating intersyntagmatic morphology, which involves more complex processing, such as subject-verb or subject-predicate agreement within the boundaries of a simple sentence. Finally, in Stage 5, learners can process grammatical exchanges across long distances, specifically between the main clause and subordinate clauses (e.g., *la maison qui est verte*). This stage requires learners to apply distinct rules between main and subordinate clauses, with the exchange of grammatical information occurring over a longer span. This level is not applicable to all languages but is relevant in languages such as German or Swedish, where word order differs between main and subordinate clauses. It is important to note that the initial results of this study suggest that the predictions of PT are applicable to both oral and written production in L2. The findings indicate that the two modes of production exhibit similar patterns of grammatical processing development.

These are the three hypotheses we are testing in this paper:

H1 The lexical agreement (Stage 2 PT), where the plural is marked on the noun with the morpheme *-s*, should be produced before phrasal and inter-phrasal agreements (Stages 3 and 4 PT). Examples: *voiture / voitures; garçon / garçons*.

H2 According to the proposed developmental hierarchy, the phrasal agreement of the noun phrase (Stage 3 PT) should appear after the lexical agreement (Stage 2 PT), but before the inter-phrasal agreement (Stage 4). Secondly, we therefore expect to find agreement between the noun and its modifiers: the quantifier, the determiner, and the attributive adjective. Examples: *une fille / deux filles; la fille / les filles; le garçon français / les garçons français*.

H3 Agreement that occurs between two phrases (inter-phrasal agreement) should be produced after the other agreements (lexical and phrasal). Thirdly, it

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is expected to see the emergence of subject-verb agreement after the agreement within the NP. According to the PT hierarchy, agreement between a noun phrase (NP) and an adjective in the predicative position should also be produced after the agreement within the NP. Examples: *les garçons parlent*; *les filles sont sympas*.

#### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Using the Didacquis corpus, we calculated the number of silent morphemes (SM). In the following table, we present the number of errors related to number and gender agreement of nouns (masculine/feminine, singular/plural opposition) (SM NG) as well as silent morphemes in incorrectly conjugated verbs (SM Verbs) and the error ratio per text.

**Table 1.** Silent morphology at the PI stage: Errors with silent morphemes

**Tablica 1.** Tiha morfologija na PI stadiju: pogreške s nečujnim morfemima

SM NG	SM Verbs	SM $\Sigma$	Error ratio
40	28	68	2.27

As we can see from the table, students made a total of 68 errors in silent morphology at the PI stage. It is worth noting that 40 of these errors primarily involve the assignment of inaudible suffixes in the feminine gender for nouns and adjectives, as well as inaudible plurals. This refers to Stages 2, 3, and 4 according to Pienemann's classification. Let's us consider the following examples.

(1PI) J'ai beaucoup recherché et j'ai parlé avec mes amies comment les étude à l'étranger et meilleur option pour tous.

(2PI) La question se pose, existent-il des situation quand il est plus préférable de mentir, que de dire la vérité ?

(3PI) Il est mieux quand on pe rencontre avec leurs culture, leur vie, leur langue.

As can be seen in the three examples above, the silent -s for plural is omitted. When it comes to Stage 2 of PT, the fewest errors are found with silent morphemes in the combination of determinant + noun in the plural (examples 1, 2 and 3), as this combination is most often followed by other elements such as adjectives in the corpus. It means that isolated cases were identified where the elements consist of only a definite article + noun without any additional accompanying elements. Therefore, it

can be concluded that at the PI level, students correctly select the gender in agreement with the noun because a larger number of errors was not found (H1).

However, things become more complicated at stage 3 PT, where there is a greater selection of elements, specifically the combination of inter-phrasal agreement with adjectives in simple sentences: the combination of determinant + noun + adjective or noun + adjective. As a result, there is also a greater number of errors with silent morphemes.

(4PI) Grâce à l'intérnet, j'écoute la musique préféré, je regarde mes films préférés.

(5PI) Parce que la sincérité est une clé de bon amitié, de bon amour.

(6PI) Ce voyage me plaît beaucoup et j'ai été impressionner, car j'ai appris quelques choses nouveaux et maintenant, j'ai quelques amis plus dans ma vie.

(7PI) Malheureusement cette époque de la vie passe vivement. mais le souvenirs restent.

(8PI) Elle était ma meilleure amie, elle avec des yeux bleues et cheveux blancs.

(9PI) Dans lieux mentionnées, la sincérité est souhaitable mais avec la nuance de tranquillité et gentillesse.

(10PI) J'avais très bon professeurs.

(11PI) Je connais là bonnes nouveau gens qui sont mes bonnes amies dans cette période de ma vie.

In examples 4, 7, and 8, the silent *-e* for the feminine form of adjectives is omitted. An interesting example is number 5 with the adjective *bon*. In the first agreement, the agreement is omitted, which is why *bonne amitié* is not used. The reason for this is that the liaison with the noun *amitié* is such that *bonne* is clearly audible in speech, because the consonant *-n* is denasalized. That leads to ambiguity of gender. However, later in the same example, the correct masculine form is used, which may indicate that the student had previously learned that the noun *amour* is masculine. In example 6, the infinitive form is incorrectly used, where the adjective *impressionnée* in the feminine form should appear instead, as the student is female. The number agreement with the noun in example 7 is not clear enough. Although the noun is plural and the verb that follows is also plural, the determinant is in the singular. The opposition between the singular *le* and the plural *les* highlights perceptual salience, and our assumption is that the student is pronouncing the article *le* as the plural *les* with a closed */e/* at the end of the syllable, which is commonly heard in the speech of beginner learners. In examples 8 and 9, we have an incorrect selection of the plural form for the phonogram

/eu/ in the words *bleu* and *lieu*. Although they share the same phonogram, *bleu* forms the plural with *-s* and *lieu* forms it with *-x*. In any case, the plural form with *-x* is less characteristic in French, as, as we've noted earlier, the plural is most marked by the phoneme *-s*. Generally, silent phonograms like /aul/, /eaul/, /eul/, /oeul/ form the plural with *-x* but there are far fewer words with this plural form than those that take *-s*. Regarding example 10 and the combination of adjective + noun, the silent *-s* is omitted. In example 11, we have a more complex agreement with the noun *gens* in the preposed position because there are two adjectives: *bon*, which is here in the feminine form, and *nouveau*, where the silent morpheme is omitted. The noun *gens* is specific in that the adjective in the preposed position must be in the feminine plural form. In this case, the student hesitated and partially relied on their metalinguistic knowledge of this noun, correctly forming the adjective *bon* in the plural (*bonnes*), but did not transform *nouveau* into *nouvelles*, which would have avoided the appearance of silent morphology.

Based on the examples provided, we can confirm that students master lexical agreement (Stage 2 PT) before phrasal agreement (Stage 3), as evidenced by the fewer errors they made at Stage 2, at a slower pace, given the higher number of errors (H2). As we can see in these examples, Stage 3 is less productive with a smaller number of correct agreements, and this is supported by the additional agreements with adjectives in gender and number.

The second category we analyzed, which certainly concerns silent morphology, involves verbs that carry silent grammatical morphemes as markers in their conjugation. A total of 28 errors were identified. As we have already concluded according to the criteria for the PI stage based on Bartning and Schlyter (2004), there is a more productive use of auxiliary verbs as well as modal verbs. We will support this with the following examples, in which the verb endings are silent morphemes.

(12PI) J'était très active dans beaucoup des associations, groupes et équipes.

(13PI) Donc, je pouvait faire tout que je voulait.

(14PI) À sa cours, je regardait un film à la langue français.

(15PI) Il y a beaucoup de pages sur l'intérnet où on peux écouter de différents musiques, on peux regarder des films, on peux lire beaucoup d'articles etc.

(16PI) D'abord, quand je dois faire quelque chose, premièrement, je prend la littérature que j'ai. Je préfère servir des livres. J'y trouve tout ce que me intéresse.

(17PI) Je sait qu'est horrible mentir et que je devais terminer cette terrible coutume.

(18PI) A final, je pense que tout le gens doive être sincère dans toutes les situations.

(19PI) J'ai répondu oui s'il faux au fin de monde.

(20PI) Je suis devenue très connue et mes enfants m'on beaucoup aimé.

(21PI) Mais, une problème, je n'aimait pas les fleurs. N'importe quel fleur, je n'aimait pas.

(22PI) Je me souvient que ma maman était blésé devant mes yeux, mais c'était un souvenir terrible.

As illustrated by the examples, silent morphemes appear in conjunction with the auxiliary verb *être*, as well as with the modal verbs *pouvoir*, *vouloir*, and *devoir*. A notable characteristic of the use of these verbs is that students employ the pronoun *je* in the first person, while the verb is consistently conjugated in the third person singular. This phenomenon can be attributed to the fact that the first three singular forms of these verbs are homophones, meaning they are pronounced the same (e.g., *peux* and *peut* in *pouvoir*; *voulais* and *voulait* in the imperfect form of *vouloir*). Consequently, silent morphemes in these verbs create a situation in which the conjugated verb form could, by analogy, also appear in the second person singular. However, this never occurs in the examples provided. Similar analogies can be observed with other verbs such as *souvenir* (*souvient*), *aimer* (*aimait*), and *savoir* (*sait*). While it is difficult to offer a definitive explanation for the more frequent and productive use of these verbs in the third person, rather than the expected first person form according to the pronoun *je*, one hypothesis could be that students are less often exposed to sentences they produce in the first person. In contrast, they are more frequently exposed to third-person verb forms, particularly in texts and literature they encounter during their studies. This, however, remains a hypothesis and one that cannot be conclusively confirmed at this stage. As for Stage 4, or inter-phrasal agreement (H3) (e.g., subject + copula + attribute), we conclude that it is regular and productive, meaning it is produced after lexical and phrasal agreement (Stages 1 and 2). Although the main verb is separated from the noun and placed before the adjective which could complicate agreement in gender and number, we found only two examples of a silent morpheme in the corpus.

(23PI) Les espagnoles sont très polis et ouvertes.

(24PI) Je suis adulte et la vie est compliqué.

However, errors in agreement with the attribute do appear, but with adjectives that do not have silent morphemes in the feminine and plural forms. These are adjectives where a clear distinction is made between the masculine and feminine forms, such

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as *important / importante, merveilleux / merveilleuse*. This simply means that students have not fully mastered gender of noun and are unsure how to do the agreement with other sentence elements when selecting the determinant and that the audibility of the morphemes in this case is not the main difficulty.

## 5. CONCLUSION

It is not easy to draw a general conclusion in this study because we worked with a smaller corpus, which posed certain limitations. However, some conclusions are evident. The main goal of this paper was to examine silent morphology in the written corpus of students at the PI stage. Silent morphology, as an exclusively spoken phenomenon, interferes with and slows down the acquisition of written language because it does not align with pronunciation. The mere fact that the pronunciation of French is therefore unstable and unreliable cannot serve as a guide in written production. As an exclusively contextual phenomenon, silent morphology appeared frequently in the Didacquis corpus as a source of errors, particularly in the analyzed grammatical forms: combinations of determinant + noun + adjective, such as gender and number agreement. In this combination, we noticed a larger number of errors, but significantly fewer in the combination of determinant + noun. However, we must emphasize that we did not find the examples of a silent morphology when a noun agrees with first-group verbs, which in the third person singular and third person plural essentially lack perceptual salience, or audibility. Those kinds of forms are not a reliable indicator for audibility (e.g., *parle / parlent; travaille / travaillent*). The largest number of silent morphemes was observed with modal verbs, and to a lesser extent with other verbs (e.g., *aimer, souvenir, regarder*).

In conclusion all three hypotheses were confirmed according to PT. In the learners' texts, lexical agreement follows the norms of the target language with only a few rare exceptions (Stage 1 PT). It can be observed that creative constructions in plural marking are not produced by learners. Despite a post-initial level of French, the lexical agreement of plural nouns began to be produced in the learners' texts. H2 and H3 were clearly confirmed, which relate to phrasal and inter-phrasal agreement. It is also important to note that inter-phrasal agreement is productive and regular, as evidenced by the fact that not more than two examples of silent morphology were found for Stage 4 PT in the corpus.

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**Emir Šišić**

*emir.sisic@ff.unsa.ba*

Filozofski fakultet Sveučilišta u Sarajevu  
Bosna i Hercegovina

## Nečujni morfemi u tihoj morfologiji: primjer slaganja u broju i rodu u francuskom jeziku

### Sažetak

Pravopis i izgovor u francuskom jeziku, dvije su kategorije u potpunoj nepodudarnosti. Ovaj nesklad odražava se u činjenici da se pri izgovaranju francuskog jezika proizvodi znatno manji broj fonema nego što je to predstavljeno grafemima u pisanom tragu. Cilj ovog rada je predstaviti koncept tihe morfologije, odnosno nečujnih morfema u francuskom jeziku, koristeći primjere slaganja u rodu i broju. Za ovu studiju prikupili smo pisani korpus alofonskih učenika francuskog jezika (L2) pod nazivom Didacquis, koji se sastoji od 30 pisanih radova (narativni i argumentativni tekstovi na teme kao što su studije, putovanja i prijateljstvo) 12 učenika u post-inicijalnom (PI) stadiju, temeljenoj na gramatičkim profilima koji pokazuju razvojne puteve u usvajanju jezika (Bartning i Schlyter, 2004). U ovom kontekstu, alofonski učenici su osobe čiji prvi jezik nije francuski nego bosanski. Rezultate ćemo interpretirati kroz Pienemannovu Teoriju procesabilnosti (1998). Zaključak je da razumijevanje fonema i morfema u francuskom jeziku isključivo ovisi o kontekstu zbog prisutnosti tihih morfemskih završetaka i homofonije.

**Ključne riječi:** tiha morfologija, nečujnost, fonemi/grafemi, broj, rod

