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Difficulty Components in French Verb Tenses Imparfait and Passé Composé for Anglophone Learners

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Difficulty Components of a French Grammar Test

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Abstract

This study examined tests of two French verb tenses—imparfait and passé composé—of which represents a problem area for many native speakers of English. Twelve cognitive operations were hypothesized, which were proven to explain the difficulty of the test items that were calibrated with the linear logistic test model. The results of the study brought evidence that cognitive categories, such as "action in progress interrupted by a one-time event" and "achievement" were significant predictors of item difficulty and item easiness, respectively.

Background

The correct usage of the two past tenses passé composé and imparfait is one of the highlights of mastering the French language, allowing the learner to narrate and describe in the past and it is at the same time a stumbling point for native speakers of English attempting to learn French.

Sources of Difficulties

- Aspectual rather than tense difference
- Lack of perfect match in translation
- Learner preference for one aspect over another based on the lexical aspect of the verb
- Complex, long, and confusing explanations in traditional textbooks

Lexical Aspect - The Four Vender Verb Categories

Grammatical aspect is external to the verb, lexical aspect has to do with the meaning of the verb. Vender (1987) came up with four distinct categories corresponding to the four possible lexical aspects for verbs: 1) States: Je suis heureuse. (I am happy) 2) Activities: Je mange. (I eat) 3) Accomplishments: Je mange une pomme. (I eat an apple) 4) Achievements: J’entre dans la salle. (I enter the room).

Literature Review

Overall, studies of passé composé / imparfait acquisition have shown that it is a grammatical topic, which is difficult to master for Anglophones and that learners are influenced by the lexical aspect of the verb in their choice of grammatical form. No studies have conducted, however, a testing of item difficulty of a passé composé / imparfait grammar task, based on the psychometric structure of the items, with a relatively large number of participants. The present investigation is devised with the intention to bridge this gap.

Method

Participants

The participants were 205 second-semester students of French from several mid-western universities. However, the number of participants was brought down to 146 because of the missing data in many of the participant responses.

Results

In Table 3, positive estimates of basic parameters indicate that the cognitive operations associated with these parameters increase the item difficulty. Conversely, negative parameter estimates indicate that the cognitive operations associated with these parameters facilitate the correct answer on the respective items. Both Rasch and LTM estimates of the item difficulties for the test used in this study are provided in Table 4 (higher algebraic values indicate higher item difficulty).

Conclusions

All 12 difficulty components used by LTM in this study were statistically significant which validates their role in the hypothesized cognitive structure of French grammar tests. The complexity/easiness components were strong predictors of item difficulty or easiness because they were used in their most non-protopypical or prototypical contexts respectively. A new element in this study was the hypothesizing of several adverbial components as components of complexity for the reviewed items. The adverbials were (7) "precise moment of event indicated", (8) "precise span of time", (9) "frequency of repetition in the past", (10) "action in progress interrupted by a one-time event", (11) "Event interrupting action in progress", and (12) "Agreement of tense".

Contact information

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Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cognitive Operations Hypothesized to Explain Difficulty for the French Grammar Test</th>
<th>Rasch</th>
<th>LLTM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. States</td>
<td>0.0237</td>
<td>0.3972</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Activities</td>
<td>0.0023</td>
<td>0.3713</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Accomplishments</td>
<td>1.0675</td>
<td>0.6752</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Achievements</td>
<td>0.5767</td>
<td>0.2830</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Imperfective</td>
<td>-0.4749</td>
<td>-0.8503</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Past composé</td>
<td>-0.9789</td>
<td>-0.4986</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Precise moment of event</td>
<td>-0.0966</td>
<td>-0.1178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Precise span of time</td>
<td>-0.0311</td>
<td>-0.2635</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Frequency of repetition in the past</td>
<td>-0.0557</td>
<td>-0.8691</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Action in progress interrupted by a one-time event</td>
<td>-0.8988</td>
<td>-0.9786</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Event interrupting action in progress</td>
<td>-0.9085</td>
<td>-0.7572</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Agreement of tense</td>
<td>0.1479</td>
<td>0.4246</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The Pearson correlation between actual (Rasch) and predicted (LLTM) item difficulties was r = 0.794.