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The Importance of Diacritics in The Study of Languages: French Language as A Case Study.

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Abstract

The main purpose of communication is for the encoder and the decoder to have a mutual understanding of what has been communicated. Effective oral or written communication cannot take place if what is written or verbalised is not understood by the decoder or the interlocutor. This is why linguists toil day and night in a quest to make communication smooth, simple, concise, explicit and mutual like the philosopher who has a quest or love for knowledge, wisdom, with a view to contributing to human wellbeing. Most languages use punctuation marks to guide their spoken and written languages. French language uses both punctuation marks and diacritics to guide both oral and spoken French. Diacritics are graphic linguistic features placed above or under sounds to draw attention to the peculiar way they are to be pronounced. Diacritics play a crucial role in the study of language, particularly in languages with complex orthographies like French. This article examines the significance of diacritics in French language, exploring their impact on pronunciation, meaning, and language learning. Through a case study of French, we demonstrate the importance of diacritics in maintaining linguistic accuracy, preventing miscommunication, and facilitating language acquisition. We shall use the descriptive method as our methodology.

Keywords: Diacritics, Communication, Pronunciation, Phonetics, Linguists

Introduction

Effective communication is largely dependent on the understanding of the encoder and decoder. Most countries of the world have had crisis as a result of ineffective communication. The world has become a global village today as a result of effective communication. This is brought about by mutual understanding of what has been said and written through different means of communication: radio, television, fax message, internet, mobile hand set, film show, etc. These are done because the language of communication has been well structured to make it understood by the encoder. This is where linguistic which is the scientific study of human languages comes to play. The linguist's structure both spoken and written languages. Since 1916, when Ferdinand de Saussure published an article *Cours de Linguistique Général,* modern linguists have been working assiduously to improve on both oral and written communication. This result is visible today with clearer understanding of both oral and written documents worldwide.

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Like the linguists, the philosophers as a result of the 'philos'(love) and 'sophia' (wisdom) which means; love for wisdom, have had sleepless nights and days searching for knowledge of the ultimate. Right from the time of Aristotle in the 13th century, the philosophers have engaged themselves with the task of deliberately making efforts to provide reasonable and sincere answers to the principles of reality.

Diacritics are markings added to letters to indicate changes in pronunciation or meaning. In French, diacritics such as accents (é, è, ê, etc.) and dièresis (ï, ü) are essential components of the language. Despite their importance, diacritics are often overlooked or neglected in language study. Diacritics significantly impact French pronunciation, distinguishing between similar words and indicating vowel quality.

Diacritics can alter word meanings, as seen in pairs like "pres" (meadow) and "près" (near). Diacritics pose challenges for language learners, but mastering them is crucial for accurate pronunciation and comprehension.

There are so many signs that guide written and oral works which make them more explicit. Such punctuations marks are: the comma [,], hyphen [-], dash [_], parenthesis [()], quotation marks ['], accolade [{}], full stop [.], colon [:], semi-colon [;], suspension mark [….], interrogation mark [?], exclamation mark [!].

Apart from the punctuation marks mentioned above, French language has what is known as accents or diacritics. J. Dubois et al. (1973) define diacritics as ''un signe graphique adjoint à un graphème simple de l'alphabet afin de transcrire un phonème différent de celui que transcrit ce graphème''. This means that diacritics are signs added on letters of the alphabet which make it have a distinct pronunciation. Ade Ojo (2014) define diacritics as ''marks placed above or under some French letters to draw attention to the particular way that such letters are to be pronounced…''. Crystal David (1990) defined it as "a mark added to a symbol to alter its value... the signs of devoicing [ₒ] and nasalization [˙] in generative phonology. It is worthy to note here that these diacritics have very strong impact on the spelling, meaning, and even pronunciation of every French word which contain the letter(s) carrying the accent(s). Accents are so important in French that the refusal or failure to place them correctly above or under the necessary letters can easily falsify the meaning, pronunciation and spelling of the word. The five accents in French language are: the grave accent [\], the acute accent [ˊ], the circonflexe accent [^], the trema or diarises accent [¨] and the cedilla accent [¸].

> *Les auteurs de L'API, ainsi que les usager d'autres systèmes on ajouté à l'alphabet phonétique international un certain nombre de signes diacritiques pour préciser des variations de timbres vocalique ou consonantiques; des nasalisations, des changements d'aperture, la palatisation ou des phénomènes de la phonétique combinatoire, appelés assimilation; ou encore pour noter les durées, l'accentuation, les pause etc*[1].

[1] *Pierre R. Léon 1992*

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This implies that the authors of International Phonetic Association (IPA) as well as other systems have added to the existing alphabets certain number of diacritic signs to add precision to the variation of vocalic or consonantal sounds like nasalisation, the changes in the opening and closing of the mouth region, the combination of sounds like assimilation, duration, accentuation, stop, etc.

The French accents enable the decoder to have a clearer distinction between the standard and other varieties of French pronunciation. Accents guide pronunciation in such a way that the geographical origin, the educational background, the exposure as well as the social class of the encoder is determined. The Tourrain or Parisian French accents are however accepted worldwide as the purest and therefore the best model.

Accents

''En français, l'accent est un signe placé sur une voyelle. Il précise la prononciation ou différencie deux homonymes''[2].This means that in French, accents are signs placed on or under vowels which give a precise pronunciation or change the pronunciation of two homonyms.
There are five accents in French language: l'accent aigue [ʹ] , (the acute accent), l'accent grave [ˋ] (the grave accent), l'accent circonflexe [^], (circumflex), le tréma[¨] (the diarisis), la cédille[¸] (the cedilla).
- Acute accent (é): indicates a change in pronunciation, usually a higher pitch or longer vowel sound
- Grave accent (è): indicates a change in pronunciation, usually a lower pitch or shorter vowel sound
- Circumflex accent (ô): indicates a change in pronunciation, usually a longer vowel sound or a different vowel quality
- Tréma (ë): indicates that two adjacent vowels are pronounced separately, rather than as a diphthong
Dièreis (Tréma):
- ï (i with tréma): indicates that the "i" is pronounced separately from the preceding vowel
- ü (u with tréma): indicates that the "u" is pronounced separately from the preceding vowel
Examples:
- naïve (naïve) - the tréma indicates that the "i" and "e"

L'accent Aigu (The Acute Accent) [ʹ]

The acute accent indicates a pronunciation of 'e' closed (e) not followed by (d,r,z,f). This means that this accent is usually placed on 'é'. Example: thé – (tea), église – church, bébé – baby, été – summer, télévision – television, bonté – (kindness), beauté – (beauty), parlé – (spoken). This accent is the mostly used in French.

[2] Marie-Claire Bayou et al.1998

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L'accent Grave (The Grave Accent) [`]

This accent shows a pronunciation of 'e' half open [**ɛ**], 'a' open [**a**] and 'u' close [**Ù**]. It changes the meaning of the word on which it is placed. Example: père, mère, frère, là, où, etc. à-to, a – third person singular of the verb avoir (has), là – there (adverb), la – article (pronoun), où – where (adverb), ou – or (conjunction), à/a (to/has), la/là (the/there).

L'accent Circonflexe : (The Circonflexe Accent) [^]

This accent combines the two previous accents [/] and [\] to form [^]. It replaced the 's' since the 18th century as approved by the International Phonetic Association (IPA). It places the stress on the preceding vowel. It show's therefore a missing consonant and a phonetic value (sign of a long vowel). But the removal of 's' has not totally watered down the stress on vowel, from graphics of 'hôpital'(hospital), épître (epistle). C'est un accent in memoriam. Exemple: âge (aage), rôle (roole). It is placed on the letters, 'î', 'ê' 'ô', and 'â'respectively.

It indicates a pronunciation of 'e'open [ɛ]. For exemple: extrême (extreme), la forêt (forest), la fête (festival), bête (beast), une requête (a request). It also indicates 'ô'close [o] or of 'o'open [Ɔ]. This therefore changes the meaning of certain words. For exemple une côte sablonneuse (or sandy area). When placed on 'â' open [a] or on the 'a'closed [a]. This will therefore change the meaning of certain words. Example: une tâche délicate (a delicate task) une tâche de boue (stain of mud).

L'accent circonflexe selon Dubois et al (1973)

> *'est un signe diacritique indiquant en français, par exemple, en combinaison avec 'e'. la voyelle ouverte [ɛ], avec 'a'(â) la voyelle postérieure [a], avec o [ô] la voyelle fermée [o], dans forêt, mât, rôle, île'.*

This means that the circonflex accent is a diacritic sign indicating in French a combination of the sign with 'ê' to make it an open vowel [ɛ], a combinations with postérieure 'â' to make it long [a], and a combination with 'ô'to make it a close [o]. for example: forêt, île, rôle, l'âme, etc. . it helps to distinguish homonymes from one another. Exemple sûr/sur=sure/on, jeûne/jeune=yellow/young, etc.

Le Trema (The Diaresis) [¨]

The Tréma or Diaresis is a diacritic which serves as a distinction between two pronunciations of two vowels placed side by side. For example: héroïque, noël, inouï, camaïeu. This means that in the pronunciation of the four words below, 'oû', 'oê', 'uï', 'iê', the letter are pronounced to have different syllables.

La Cedilla

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The only accent one can think of that is placed under the vowel sound is the cedilla. It is placed directly below the consonant 'c' whenever it appears before the vowel 'o', or 'u' to produce the sound 's'[3]. For example: garçon – boy, maçon – brick layer, reçu – received, déçu – deceived.

Characteristics Of the Sound Affected by The Accents.

Acute Accent (é):
- Higher pitch
- Longer vowel sound
- More tense pronunciation
- Often indicates a closed syllable (e.g., "é" in "café" makes the "e" sound more closed)

Grave Accent (è):
- Lower pitch
- Shorter vowel sound
- More open pronunciation
- Often indicates an open syllable (e.g., "è" in "père" makes the "e" sound more open)

Circumflex Accent (ô):
- Longer vowel sound
- More rounded pronunciation
- Often indicates a change in vowel quality (e.g., "ô" in "hôtel" changes the "o" sound to a more rounded one)

Tréma (ë, ï, ü):
- Separates two adjacent vowels, indicating they should be pronounced separately
- Prevents diphthongization (e.g., "naïve" is pronounced as two separate sy…

SS/N	Phoneme	Characteristics
1.	é [e]	Ecartée (lips spread out) mi-fermée (half closed vowel) Antérieure (front vowel) Orale Vowel sound
2.	è[ɛ]	Ecartée(lips spread out) mi- ouverte (half open mouth) antérieure (front vowel) orale vowel sound
3.	à [a[	Ouverte (open mouth) Orale Vowel Antérieure (front vowel)
4.	ù [u]	Arrondie (round vowel) Orale Closed Vowel

[3] Ade Ojo 2014

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		Postérieure (back vowel)
5.	ô [o]	Arrondie (round vowel) Orale Half open vowel Postérieure (back vowel)
6.	î [i]	Ecartée (lips spread out) Fermée (closed vowel) Antérieure (front vowel) Orale Vowel sound
7.	ç [s]	Consonne Spirante Alvéolaire Sourde

Conclusion

The use of accents or diacritics has helped a lot in conjunction with the punctuation marks to shape the pronunciation of French words. Ability to distinguish amongst various regional, Parisian, northern, Canadian and African accents are determined by the diacritics. Accents make the same letter of the alphabet to be pronounced differently. For example, e[Ə], é [e], as in le thé – tea. We have also seen from the previous examples that the same word can mean different things with the use of diacritics. Homonyms like sur/sûr – on/sure, ou/où- or/where, la/là – the/there, etc are some of these examples. They also change the pronunciations of words as seen in: français, leçon, reçu, garçon, etc. which would have been pronounced as 'frankais' 'lekon' 'reku', 'garkon', respectively. The aperture of the mouth would definitely differ when the diacritics are used. For example, when placed on 'e' to be 'é' or 'e', the characteristic would change from close [e] to half open [ɛ]. It therefore means that there will generally be a change in spellings, meanings and pronunciations even with the same word.

This is why French language speakers use a lot of energy to be able to pronounce or articulate the accents placed on or under the letters of the syllables concerned. Unlike some other languages that are tonal (African languages), there is less stress in the pronunciation of its words. A lot of energy is required to produce the accent characterised with the ever produce nasalisation, over stressed terminal 'e' which is mute, but unproduced by others. While some are sharp (pointu), others are harsh and many others are drawing.

Diacritics are crucial in many languages, including French, for several reasons:
Accurate pronunciation: Diacritics indicate changes in pronunciation, helping learners and speakers to pronounce words correctly.
Meaning distinction: Diacritics can change the meaning of words, as seen in pairs like "pres" (meadow) and "près" (near).
Language identity: Diacritics are an integral part of a language's identity and cultural heritage.
Clarity and precision: Diacritics ensure clarity and precision in written communication, preventing misunderstandings.

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Language learning: Mastering diacritics is essential for language learners to read, write, and speak accurately.
Literary and poetic significance: Diacritics can affect the rhythm, meter, and overall aesthetic of a language.

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