

PARADIGMATIC RELATIONS OF MONOSYLLABIC WORDS IN FRENCH

Nasimova Dilbar Baxodurovna

Teacher at Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages

Uzbekistan, Samarqand

Dilbarbeki7@gmail.com

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Abstract. This paper explores the paradigmatic relations of monosyllabic words in the French language, emphasizing their phonetic, lexical, morphological, and grammatical dimensions. Despite their brevity, monosyllables represent a highly dynamic and multifunctional element of the linguistic system. It also highlights their role in grammatical organization through prepositions and pronouns, as well as their contribution to phonetic contrasts and stylistic effects in literature. Furthermore, the paper demonstrates that monosyllables play an essential role in maintaining linguistic economy, rhythmic harmony, and semantic precision in French. By analyzing their associative relations, this study reveals the cognitive and structural significance of monosyllabic paradigms in shaping the expressiveness and balance of the French linguistic system.

Introduction

In the French language, monosyllabic words occupy a special position within the linguistic system. Their phonetic brevity and semantic richness make them dynamic units capable of interacting in various structural relations. Among these, paradigmatic relations play a key role, as they highlight associative links between words belonging to the same grammatical or semantic category. The aim of this paper is to analyze how monosyllabic words participate in the paradigmatic organization of French, taking into account lexical, morphological, and phonetic aspects. Through examples, we will explore how these short but expressive elements contribute to the structure and rhythm of the French language.

In structural linguistics, the term *paradigm* refers to a set of linguistic units that can replace one another in the same grammatical or syntactic position. According to Ferdinand de Saussure, paradigmatic relations are relations of association, in contrast to syntagmatic relations, which are based on linear combination. For example, in the sentence: *Je bois du thé* (I drink tea) the word *thé* can be replaced by *café*, *lait*, or *jus*. All these words form a lexical paradigm, as they belong to the same category and

can occur in the same context. In the case of monosyllabic words, these relations are especially interesting, since their short form allows for high flexibility in meaning, sound, and structure.

Lexical Monosyllables and Their Paradigmatic Relations

French contains many monosyllabic lexical words such as nouns (*mur* – wall, *pain* – bread, *feu* – fire), adjectives (*grand* – tall, *court* – short), verbs (*prends* – take, *fais* – do, *vois* – see), and adverbs (*bien* – well, *mal* – badly). These monosyllables organize themselves into different paradigmatic systems: synonymic, antonymic, and morphological.

Synonymic Paradigms

Some monosyllabic words form sets of near-synonyms, expressing similar meanings with subtle nuances:

- *froid* ↔ *glacé* (cold ↔ icy),
- *sec* ↔ *aride* (dry ↔ arid),
- *dur* ↔ *ferme* (hard ↔ firm).

For example: *Un pain dur* (“hard bread”) / *Un pain ferme* (“firm bread”) The substitution preserves the general meaning while slightly modifying tone or style. This shows how synonymic paradigms allow variation within expression.

Antonymic Paradigms

Other paradigms are based on semantic opposition:

- *haut* ↔ *bas* (high ↔ low),
- *fort* ↔ *faible* (strong ↔ weak),
- *plein* ↔ *vide* (full ↔ empty).

Example: *Un mur haut* (“a high wall”) / *Un mur bas* (“a low wall”)

Here, substitution produces an opposite meaning while maintaining identical syntax. Such antonymic paradigms are fundamental in organizing contrasts in meaning.

Morphological Paradigms

Monosyllabic words also display morphological paradigmatic relations, especially within verb forms. Consider the following participles: *pris*, *mis*, *dit*, *fait*. All are monosyllabic past participles ending in *-i* or *-t*, showing regularity within verb morphology. These words form a morphological paradigm of similar structures differing by lexical roots but sharing grammatical function.

Grammatical and Functional Monosyllables

Besides lexical words, French also contains numerous grammatical monosyllables: articles (*le*, *la*), prepositions (*à*, *de*, *en*), pronouns (*je*, *tu*, *il*), and conjunctions (*et*, *ou*, *mais*). These words, though semantically light, are essential for sentence structure and form closed paradigmatic systems.

The Paradigm of Personal Pronouns

Personal pronouns form one of the clearest paradigmatic sets:

je, tu, il, elle, nous, vous, ils.

Even though some are disyllabic, their spoken forms (*j', t', l'*) are often monosyllabic in natural speech. Example: *Je parle - Tu parles - Il parle*

The substitution of the pronoun changes grammatical person but not the overall structure, illustrating paradigmatic alternation.

The Paradigm of Simple Prepositions

Simple prepositions such as *à, de, par, sans, sur* form another closed paradigmatic set. Each expresses a spatial, temporal, or logical relation:

aller à l'école (go to school), *venir de Paris* (come from Paris), *passer par le pont* (go through the bridge). Their substitution changes the relation but preserves syntactic structure, showing their paradigmatic nature within grammar.

Phonetic and Semantic Relations Among Monosyllables

Monosyllabic words are also connected through phonetic paradigms - sets of words that share similar or contrasting sound structures. These phonetic relations often generate semantic contrasts or wordplay.

Examples include:

- *peu / peur / pur,*
- *mer / mère / maire,*
- where a single vowel change produces entirely different meanings.

Such cases are known as minimal pairs, e.g.: *beau ↔ peau* (beautiful ↔ skin), *dos ↔ mot* (back ↔ word), *fou ↔ sous* (crazy ↔ under).

Minimal pairs illustrate how one phonemic change within a monosyllable can completely alter meaning, showing the precision of the French phonological system.

Monosyllables in Idiomatic and Fixed Expressions

Monosyllabic words frequently occur in idioms and fixed expressions, where their paradigmatic relations extend to stylistic and figurative levels.

Examples:

- *tout ou rien* ("all or nothing"),
- *ni vu ni connu* ("neither seen nor known"),
- *à tort ou à raison* ("wrongly or rightly").

Here, the pairs (*tout / rien, tort / raison*) are linked through semantic opposition, forming expressive binary paradigms typical of French idiomatic style.

Stylistic and Rhythmic Functions of Monosyllables

Beyond grammar and meaning, monosyllables play a significant stylistic and rhythmic role in French literature and speech. Their alternation gives sentences musicality and balance.

In Apollinaire's famous line:

Sous le pont Mirabeau coule la Seine ("Under the Mirabeau bridge flows the Seine"), monosyllabic words like *sous*, *pont*, *coule*, and *Seine* contribute to the poem's rhythm and fluidity.

Through their short, regular beats, monosyllables form part of a phonetic paradigm of sound harmony, enriching the aesthetic texture of French poetry.

Cognitive and Structural Aspects

From a cognitive viewpoint, monosyllabic paradigms simplify word retrieval and association in speech. Because they are short and frequent, these words activate strong associative networks in the mental lexicon. For instance, hearing *feu* immediately evokes *eau*, *air*, *terre* — forming a conceptual paradigm of the four classical elements.

Structurally, this interconnectedness demonstrates how even minimal linguistic forms participate in complex semantic systems. Monosyllabic paradigms thus act as building blocks of both linguistic economy and expressiveness.

Conclusion

Although monosyllabic words may appear simple, they form a complex and organized subsystem within French. Their paradigmatic relations operate on several interconnected levels:

- **Lexical level:** synonymy and antonymy (*fort* / *faible*, *haut* / *bas*).
- **Morphological level:** shared inflectional patterns (*dit*, *mis*, *pris*).
- **Grammatical level:** prepositions and pronouns in closed paradigms (*à*, *de*, *je*, *tu*).
- **Phonetic and stylistic level:** minimal pairs and rhythmic alternations (*peau* / *beau*, *tout* / *rien*).

Through these relationships, monosyllables contribute to the structural balance, semantic precision, and poetic beauty of the French language. Their study not only reveals the logic of linguistic organization but also highlights the creativity of speakers who use minimal forms to achieve maximum expressiveness.

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