What are the French prefixes?

WHAT ARE THE FRENCH PREFIXES ?

This question seems to have posed few problems for the authors of historical studies of the French language, and where it was recognized that there was some uncertainty as to whether a form was to be regarded as a root or a prefix, the point does not seem to have been regarded as of any great consequence. Nyrop, for instance, noted that whereas the forms *déveine, tressauter* and *découcher* were clearly derivatives of the root forms *veine, sauter* and *coucher*, the forms *malpropre, bienheureux* and *biscuit* were compounds rather than derivatives because the initial elements were also used in the language as independent forms. Whether one spoke of derivatives or of compounds, however, did not seem important : « On peut choisir, à discrétion, entre l'une et l'autre de ces dénominations ; c'est un choix qui présente un intérêt minime [1]. »

Nyrop was primarily interested in the etymological sources of affixes (prefixes are classified in terms of « popular », « learned » and « foreign » origin) [2]. The aims of modern synchronic linguistics are different. Structural linguists aim at a rigorous analysis of the system of a language (or of aspects of that system) at a given point in time (in practice, usually the present), without regard to the previous history of the elements which go to make up the system, but purely in terms of their functions and interrelationships at that moment. Having established what differences in sound are functional in the given language-system — i.e. having established what its phonemic system is — the analysis moves on to consider the structure of the signs which are built up by combinations of these phonemes. The basic unit at this level is not the word, but the morpheme [3]. The word *autrement*, for instance, will be analysed as

1. *Grammaire historique de la langue française*, vol. III, Copenhagen, 1908, p. 6.
2. Cf. *op. cit.*, p. 204-240.
3. French and other Continental linguists often distinguish *sémantèmes* (or *lexèmes*) and *morphèmes* : I am using the term in the sense of any word-component which cannot be broken down into smaller significant forms.

two morphemes, one of which, *autre*, is a « free » form, since it can occur in isolation in the language, and the other, *-ment*, is a « bound » one : it is only found in combination with some other element. Although in this case the free form is a root and the bound one an affix, the distinction between free and bound morphemes is not to be confused with that between root and affix. The distinction between the latter is basic to our question, but is not as clear-cut as one could desire. The authors of text-books on general linguistics appear somewhat reluctant to formulate definitions valid for all languages [1], and where they do, their definitions are not immediately helpful : cf. R. H. Robin's remark that « ... morphemes may be divided into *roots* and *affixes*, the root being that part of a word structure which is left when all the affixes have been removed » [2]. Although affixes are for some linguists by definition bound forms, roots can also be bound forms. In Latin, for instance, most flexional forms are composed of bound roots and affixes (*am-* in *amo*, *amabam, amavi*, etc., *amic-* in *amicus*, etc., are forms which never occur in isolation). Although bound roots are clearly not so frequent in English or French as in Latin, they represent a by no means negligible proportion, whatever method of analysis one chooses to employ [3]. Conversely, many forms normally classed as prefixes (*avant-, contre-, entre-, outre-*, etc.) are formally identical with elements which occur in the language as free forms. How, then, are we to distinguish between compounds (root + root) and derivatives (root + affix or affixes, affix + root, etc.) ?

The lack of any really precise or agreed criteria is reflected in the wide divergence between the lists of French prefixes given in different works : whereas Nyrop listed fifty, K. Togeby in his *Structure immanente de la langue française* reduced this number to a mere sixteen [4]; R. A. Hall, Jr.,

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1. Cf., for instance, H. A. Gleason, *An Introduction to Descriptive Linguistics*, 2nd ed., New York, 1961, p. 59.

2. *General Linguistics : An Introductory Survey*, London, 1964, p. 206.

3. What is a bound root will depend not only on one's premises about the distinction between root and affix, but also on such things as one's definition of the morpheme : whereas American and British structuralists describe the *-tain* of *contain, detain, retain, maintain*, as a bound root, André Martinet refuses to regard the *-cevoir* element of *recevoir, concevoir* and *décevoir* as a « monème » because of its lack of any precise meaning (*vide infra*, p. 331). Similar cases would be the *-couth* of *uncouth* or the *-chalant* of *nonchalant*. Straightforward examples of bound root forms are, in English, *crep-* in *crept, kep-* in *kept*, in French, *buv-* in *buvons, buvette, buvard, -tin* in *laurier-tin, rez-* in *rez-de-chaussée*.

4. 2nd ed., Paris, 1965, p. 167-70.

in his « Structural Sketch » of French, listed some 95 [1], while the *Petit Larousse* of 1961 in its table of « Préfixes » (admittedly with sub-headings such as « Mots grecs servant de préfixes ou entrant dans la composition de mots français ») lists 260 forms without even including the most common prefixes of the type *dé-*, *r(e)/ré*, *en-*, *mé(s)*, etc. [2]. These wide discrepancies are due mainly to the fact that the *Petit Larousse* lists with greater or lesser exhaustiveness Græco-Latin elements which historically are roots rather than affixes, while Togeby appears to have taken Nyrop's list of fifty as his starting-point — a rather dubious proceeding for an analysis of this kind — and eliminated all but sixteen of them on various grounds.

Let us start by considering Togeby's analysis in more detail. Many of Nyrop's 27 prefixes of « popular » origin are eliminated on the grounds that they are « particules » or « formes flexionnelles », i.e. exist elsewhere in the language as free forms. This is the least questionable of his points, although, as we shall see, it is by no means self-evident. On points of detail, however, we may note that *fors* and *sus* are not free forms in modern French, and that the *tré/tres* of *trépasser, tressaillir, tressauter*, etc., cannot easily be equated synchronically with the free form *très*, although historically they derive from the same Latin word. The list of « learned » suffixes is cut down by more questionable procedures; certain forms are rejected out of hand as « not French », others on the grounds that they are « learned » variants of particles which have already been eliminated, and finally, the three « foreign » prefixes are excluded, *ca-* on the grounds that it « is not a morpheme » (whatever that may mean), *for-* on the grounds that it has already been eliminated as a free form (which it is not), and *para-* on the grounds that it is to be analysed as a variant of the verbal form *parer* (as in *pare-brise*). The most unacceptable of the arguments is clearly that according to which *vice-, cis-, anti-, archi-, auto-, mono-* and *poly-* are not French. From a synchronic, and even from an historical point of view, the statement is clearly false : these forms have been integrated into the language, whatever their etymological sources, indeed *anti-* and *archi-* are among the most productive elements in modern word-formation. In any case, what are the criteria by which these forms

1. *Structural Sketches I : French*, Language Monographs No. 24, Baltimore, 1948, p. 40-43.
2. *Op. cit.*, p. 827-29.

are excluded, but « deprivative » *a-/ab-* (in *alone, absoudre*) and forms such as *circon-* and *pré-* included ? Almost equally unacceptable is the elimination of forms such as *anté-, per-, pro-, sub-* and *ultra-* on the grounds that they are « learned » variants of the previously excluded « particules » *avant, par, pour, sous* and *outre* [1]. Obviously, the two series are historically related, but this is quite irrelevant : synchronically, their semantic closeness is not sufficient to warrant their identification, since the first series consists of forms which do not occur in the language as free forms, and therefore cannot be classed as particles. Togeby may be identifying the two groups because they have in his view the same content and are in complementary distribution : at another point in his *exposé* on derivatives, he proposes that ten formally distinct suffixes should be regarded as variants of one suffix because they are all diminutive in function [2]. But if « content » is to be the criterion for the classification of prefixes, why stop at the identification of *avant-* and *anté-* ? It could be argued that *pré-* in *précurseur* has the same content as *avant-* in *avant-coureur*. « Content », surely, cannot determine the status of a morpheme : this must start from an analysis of forms as they function in the system. If we accept the view that *avant-* and *non-* are not prefixes because they also exist as free forms, then *avant-coureur* and *non-combattant* are compounds — but this does not make *antédiluvien* or *indistinct* compounds, although the content of their first elements is comparable to that of *avant-* and *non-*.

There is of course the question whether a form cannot be regarded as an affix if it occurs elsewhere in the system as a free form. This view is strongly contested by Jean Dubois in his *Étude sur la dérivation suffixale en français moderne et contemporain* [3]. He points out, quite correctly, that identity of form does not involve identity of function. It is easy to show that, say, the syntactical or syntagmatic use of the *sur-* of *surfaire* is different from that of the preposition *sur*, which does not precede verbs, or that in combinations like *à aménager* and *pour pourvoir* the free form precedes the element with which it is identified in a manner which would be impossible if they had the same function. It attempting to define the

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1. *Super-* also figures on the list of prefixes to be excluded for this reason, but somewhat inconsistently reappears because the difference between *super* and *sur* differentiates *superfin* and *surfin*.
2. *Op. cit.*, p. 167.
3. Paris, 1962, p. 2f.

suffix in functional terms, however, Dubois appears to destroy the distinction between derivative and compound. « Prenons des mots composés comme *position-clef, poste-clef, mot-clef, usine-pilote, classe-pilote, ferme-pilote,* etc., *marémotrice* (usine), *vaso-moteur* (muscles), *vélo-moteur,* etc., les éléments *clef, pilote, moteur* assurent une fonction analogue à celle à (*sic*) des particules comme *-ficateur, -ateur, -eur* ou *-ie.* Ils sont issus certes des lexèmes *clef, pilote, moteur,* mais ils sont profondément différents d'eux par leur emploi syntagmatiqme... »; «... pour la distinction entre base et suffixe, il faut s'en remettre au critère de reproduction analogique : si au sentiment des locuteurs l'unité linguistique est disponible pour des formations nouvelles, il s'agit d'une particule... » [1]. We can agree whith the point that function varies with syntagmatic use without regarding, say, *clef* in *position-clef* as a suffix because its function can be compared with that of certain suffixes. The function of elements in *compounds* can also differ from that of the same elements in isolation, and by abandoning formal criteria in favour of what is again basically the criterion of similary of content, Dubois is destroying, as I said above, the possibility of any clear distinction between compounds and derivatives.

But what is the difference between compounding and derivation ? In his *Éléments de linguistique générale* [2], A. Martinet has this to say about it : « La différence entre composition et dérivation se résume assez bien en disant que les monèmes qui forment un composé existent ailleurs que dans les composés, tandis que, de ceux qui entrent dans un dérivé, il y en a un qui n'existe que dans les dérivés et qu'on appelle traditionnellement un affixe ». By this criterion, forms such as *avant-coureur* are compounds, since both elements exist in isolation in the language. Martinet notes, however, that the distinction made does not cover forms such as *thermostat,* neither of whose elements occurs in isolation, and goes on to mention forms such as *téléguidé* and *télévision,* whose first element, *télé-,* « se comporte en effet comme un affixe ». Martinet continues : « On a là une situation linguistique particulière qui ne s'identifie ni avec la composition proprement dite, ni, de façon générale, avec la dérivation qui suppose la combinaison d'éléments de statut différent. On pourrait peut-être parler, dans le cas où l'on forme un nouveau syntagme, de ʻ recomposition ʼ à partir d'éléments dégagés par analyse [3]. » There is a

1. Paris, 1962, p. 3.
2. Paris, 1960, p. 134.
3. *Ibid.,* p. 135.

certain obscurity about the exposition at this point, since the use of the term
« recomposition » appears to refer to formations of the type *téléguidé* and
télévision, which synchronically can be regarded as derivatives, since their
elements *are* « de statut différent » : *guidé* and *vision* occur as free forms,
whereas, say, *graphe* in *télégraphe* does not. Probably, Martinet meant the
term « recomposition » to apply to both the *thermostat/télégraphe* and *télé-
vision/téléguidé* types of formation : this is certainly the sense in which
his suggestion is interpreted by H. Mitterand, for whom « recomposés »
contain at least one root which is incapable of functioning as an inde-
pendent form in French, except as an abbreviation [1]. But by what criteria
does one decide that *télé-* in *télévision* is a root rather than an affix ? As
Martinet says, it « behaves like an affix » : it is a bound form, it is pro-
ductive in word-formation, and if we remove it from the combination
télévision, we are left with a root, *vision*.

Obviously, the bound status of the element *télé-* is not on its own at
all a conclusive factor in determining whether it is to be regarded as an
affix. As Martinet goes on to point out, one cannot classify a bound form
as an affix unless it is (one might add « or has been ») productive in
derivation. For this reason, Hall is obviously wrong in classing the *auc-*
of *aucun*, the *au-* of *aussi* and the *ain-* of *ainsi* as prefixes [2] : *auc-* does not
occur anywhere else in the language as a morpheme, and although *au-*
and *ain-* (or rather its phonetic equivalent $\tilde{e}$) do, they must be classed,
for semantic reasons, as different morphemes. When we remove the *-un*
and the *-si* we are left with elements which are bound, but which are
not affixes because they cannot be identified as morphemes which are
productive in word-formation. Morphemes such as *buv-* in *buveur, buvette,
buvons, buvard* or *recep(t)-* in *reception, receptif, receptivité, receptacle*, are
bound forms which are used in word-formation but which we should
still refuse to class as affixes, any more than we should class the *am-* of
amo, amabo, etc. as an affix. No doubt this is because we instinctively
feel that these elements have a « basic » or « specific » meaning, and are
not « modifiers ». Unfortunately, the quality of meaning is not some-
thing which can be assessed in an objective way, and it is more satis-
factory to resort to the at first sight not very helpful dictum that a root
is what is left when affixes have been removed ; since there is no doubt

1. *Les mots français*, Paris, 1963, p. 49.
2. Hall, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

about the fact that *-eur, -ard, -ette, -ons*, etc., are affixes, there is no difficulty in showing that *buv-* and *recep(t)-* are roots. There *is* some difficulty, as Martinet realized, with *thermostat, télévision, polyglotte, socio-culturel* and the myriads of other formations of this general type which have proliferated in modern French. Nevertheless, I believe that an attempt should be made to decide which forms function as affixes and which as roots on the basis of some kind of formal analysis of French rather than on that of lesser or greater specificity of meaning.

If we take the word *thermostat*, for instance, we can clearly identify the first part, *therm-*, with *therm-* in *therm-al, therm-ique* and *iso-therme*, in the first two of which at least it clearly is a root according to the test just illustrated for *buv-eur*, etc. We can also identify the element *-stat* with the *stat-* which also functions as a root in *stat-ique*. This leaves us with an element *-o-* which acts as a link between the two roots, and which has no meaning in itself. There may be doubts about the validity of such an analysis, but if we accept the (hardly controversial) view that the *therm-* of *thermostat* can be identified with the root-morpheme *therm-* of *thermal*, etc., we cannot analyse *thermostat* as *thermo-stat*. We cannot satisfactorily analyse it as *therm-ostat* either, since a morpheme *stat* can be isolated by comparison with other word-forms, and we are forced by a process of elimination to distinguish three elements, *therm-, -o-* and *-stat*. It may be objected that *-o-* has a function, as a stem-formative, in Greek, but that we are dealing with French. This, however, appears invalid unless one is prepared, implausibly, to maintain that *thermostat, ethnologie, cardiologue* and the like are not French words. The use of *-o-* (or of *-i-*) as stem-formatives or links may have been taken over from the classical languages, but this is synchronically irrelevant : their function in French (and other modern languages) can be demonstrated by an analysis of the modern languages themselves [1]. *Thermostat*, then, is a compound, although of a type different from that represented by, say, *rouge-gorge*, in that it is composed of bound roots : it therefore merits a different label, that of « recomposé » proposed by Mitterand being as good as any. This term would also be applied to formations of the type *socio-culturel, anglo-français, vaso-moteur*, wherever the bound element can be related by formal comparison to a morpheme functioning in French as a root (i.e. what is left when affixes are removed) : *soci-* can be related to the *soci-* of *social*,

1. Cf. on this point Gleason, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

sociable, société, etc., *angl-* to *anglais* (*angl-* + ethnic suffix), *vas-* (somewhat less convincingly) to *vase* « receptacle ». Similarly, the *alt-* of *altimètre,* the *surd-* of *surdi-mutité,* the *carn-* of *carnivore* can be related to the root-morphemes of *altesse/altitude,* of *surdité,* and of *carnage/carnassier,* etc. If one accepts the validity of the approach outlined, it is possible to establish without reference to the « quality » of meaning of the elements, their status as roots rather than affixes [1]. Clearly, the approach will not be immediately acceptable to all linguists because of differences in the approach to morphemic analysis. Whereas the American descriptivits accept as a matter of course the analysis of *contain, retain, detain* into prefix + root *-tain,* André Martinet considers that it is incorrect to analyse forms such as *recevoir, percevoir* and *décevoir* as prefix + root *-cevoir,* « parce que l'usager ordinaire n'est jamais déterminé par le sentiment qu'il y aurait, entre ces mots, autre chose qu'une analogie formelle, et que pour faire un monème, il faut un signifiant et un signifié [2]. » This suggests that he would be unwilling, say, to analyse *aucun* as two units, but he might well be prepared to go along with an analysis of *thermostat* into root + stem-formative + root provided that the *-o-* were not accorded the status of a « monème », since the division is otherwise firmly based on meaning. The procedure would, however, raise fewer difficulties for those linguists who define the morpheme in a more formal way [3]. For these scholars, reference to meaning is an aid in the « labelling » of morphemes, but it is not necessary to gloss the meaning of a morpheme in order to identify it : cf. Robins's comment : « English *-ceive* and *-ing,* to mention only two [morphemes], would be virtually impossible to gloss in isolation, apart from the word forms wherein they occur, but

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1. To analyse all possible « recomposés » in this way would be a lengthy task, but here are a few examples of initial elements which can be related to morphemes functioning elsewhere as roots : *morpho-* (cf. *morphème*), *ethno-* (cf. *ethnique*), *phono-* (cf. *phonique, phonème*), *lacti-/lacto-* (cf. *lacté, lactique, lactose*), *cupro-* (cf. *cuprique*), *hippo-* (cf. *hippique*), *gastro-* (cf. *gastrique*), *hydro-* (cf. *hydrate, hydrique*), *psycho-* (cf. *psychique*), *nécro-* (cf. *nécrose*), *cosmo-* (cf. *cosmique*), *archéo-* (cf. *archaïque, archaïsme*), *oléo-/oléi-* (cf. *oléine*) *électro-* (cf. *électrique*). For the cases where the test fails, *vide infra,* note 1, p. 333.

2. *Op. cit.,* p. 135.

3. C. E. Bazell, in a number of cogently-argued publications, has urged his case against defining the morpheme as a semantic unit : cf. « On the Problem of the Morpheme », *Archivum Linguisticum,* I (1949), p. 1-15 ; « The Semene », *Litera,* I (1954), p. 17-31 ; « Meaning and the Morpheme », *Word,* XVIII (1962), p. 132-142 ; and the book, *Linguistic Form,* Istanbul, 1953.

their morphemic status is clearly established by the formal comparison
of word forms [1]. »

The whole purpose of the discussion has been to point out some of
the problems involved in the synchronic analysis of word-formation,
and if possible to provide more objective criteria for the division between
roots, affixes and compounds in the French language. If the arguments
so far advanced are accepted, a criterion has been found for the classi-
fication of a high proportion of the so-called « recomposés » which present
the biggest problem. What of the others? If we examine the forms in
auto-, *endo-*, *néo-*, *poly-*, to take some of the clearer cases, we appear to be
unable to relate them to other forms in which these morphemes, with or
without their final *o* or *i*, function as roots [2]. They are bound forms;
they are or have been productive in word-formation, and they all occur
in initial positions. It would therefore seem to me entirely reasonable to
classify them, in a purely synchronic analysis of the French language, as
prefixes. Martinet remarked of formations like *télévision* that *télé* « se
comporte comme un affixe » — and I should like to go further and say
that as far as the synchronic structure of modern French is concerned, it
is an affix. Martinet's tentative distinction between derivation and « recom-
position » is justified by the idea that « recomposés » are formed from
elements which are « dégagés par analyse » — but this does not really
supply a very satisfactory criterion (how does the process differ from that
by which new formations of the type *archi-mauvais*, *ultra-moderne* were
coined ?), and refers to the process of word-formation rather than to the
product. A reason for resisting any solution of the problem which
involves classing, say, *anthropo-* as a prefix rather than as a root is what
Martinet calls the « spécificité » of its meaning, but here again, we hardly
have a satisfactory criterion for deciding what is a root and what is an
affix. Affixes have meaning, and the meaning which is attached in one
language to an affix can be conveyed in another through a form which
will not be classed as an affix. *Co-* in *collaborateur* differs from the *Mit-*
of German *Mitarbeiter* not through its meaning, but through its status
as a bound form, and the relation of French *télévision* and *auto-défense* to
German *Fernsehen* and *Selbstverteidigung* would appear to be parallel in

1. Robins, *op. cit.*, p. 214.
2. Defined as « what remains when affixes are removed ». Obviously, there will be
borderline cases : see note 1, p. 333.

its opposition of derivatives to compounds : what decides which are derivatives and which are compounds is not the meaning of the elements, but the way they fit into the formal structures of their respective languages. The semantic content of *inter-* is comparable to that of *entre-*, but the first is clearly a prefix, the second can only be regarded as one if its existence as a free form is disregarded. And how specific must the meaning of an element be before one refuses to admit that it can be an affix ? Where does one drawn the line between the general and the specific ? If the meaning of *trans-* or *bis-* is not too specific, one can hardly claim that that of *auto-*, *micro-*, *mono-*, *néo-*, *omni-* or *poly-* is — and then where does one draw the line ?

The technique which I have tentatively outlined here would obviously produce some odd results when compared with traditional lists of affixes, and clearly there would be differences of opinion about the analysis of particular forms [1], about the degree of productivity which a form must have enjoyed before it can be classed as an affix, and so on. Suitably refined and developed, however, it could, I believe, provide a more truly objective and self-consistent means of sorting out the problems presented by a purely synchronic analysis of French derivatives, compounds and « recomposés ». The basic premise remains sound : that the method of analysis should as far as possible be based upon the comparison of forms and their occurrence in syntagms. Perhaps the approach will prove of no real assistance — but from the point of view of modern linguistics, it can hardly produce less satisfactory results than reference to, say, the quality of meaning, and it could stimulate someone to more fruitful efforts to solve a genuine problem.

<div align="right">N. C. W. Spence.</div>

1. Is one, for instance, to classify *micr(o)-* as a root because there is a word *micron* in which by the criteria suggested it clearly functions as a root ? This would produce the apparently absurd result that *micro-* is a root, but *macro-* is a prefix. Dare one resolve this incongruous treatment of parallel forms by regarding *micron* as a « lexicalisation » (to use a term favoured by J. Dubois) of a particle comparable to the use of *ultra* as a noun ? Is *mon(o)-* a root because of the existence of the term *monade* ? Is *-(o)logue* an affix ? — because if so, *gé(o)-* can be classed as a root. What degree of formal divergence between free and bound elements prevents one from identifying them as variants of the same morpheme ? (e. g. is *sin(o)-* identifiable with *chin-* in *chinois* ?) These are the sort of problems which would arise at many points, and which could not all be resolved without a certain amount of arbitrariness.