



## Syntactic Structure of the Complex Sentence in French: A Theoretical and Pedagogical Analysis

### *La structure syntaxique de la phrase complexe en français : une analyse théorique et pédagogique*

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**Abstract.** This article investigates the syntactic structure of complex sentences in French, analyzing the principal types of subordination, their formal markers, functional roles, and pedagogical implications. French complex sentence syntax — encompassing relative clauses, completive clauses, and adverbial clauses of cause, time, condition, purpose, and concession — constitutes one of the most grammatically intricate and communicatively essential domains of the language, yet it remains systematically challenging for learners at all proficiency levels. Drawing on generative syntax, functional grammar, and applied linguistics, the study examines the mechanisms of subordinate clause formation, the distributional properties of subordinating conjunctions and relative pronouns, the mood selection constraints governing subordinate clauses, and the information-structural functions of complex sentence constructions in discourse. Special attention is devoted to the subjunctive mood as a structurally defining feature of French subordination, the syntactic behavior of infinitival complements, and the typological contrasts between French complex sentence structure and that of structurally distant languages such as Azerbaijani. The article further examines the pedagogical dimensions of complex sentence instruction in foreign language contexts, proposing evidence-based strategies for developing syntactic competence in advanced French learners. The findings confirm that mastery of complex sentence structure is a prerequisite for communicative and academic proficiency in French and that its systematic instruction requires the integration of formal syntactic knowledge, mood selection rules, and discourse-pragmatic awareness.

**Keywords:** French syntax, complex sentences, subordination, relative clauses, subjunctive, adverbial clauses, French grammar, foreign language pedagogy

## La structure syntaxique de la phrase complexe en français : une analyse théorique et pédagogique

**Résumé.** Cet article analyse la structure syntaxique de la phrase complexe en français, en examinant les principaux types de subordination — les propositions relatives, les propositions complétives et les propositions circonstancielles — ainsi que leurs marqueurs formels, leurs fonctions syntaxiques et leurs

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*implications pédagogiques. S'appuyant sur la grammaire générative, la linguistique fonctionnelle systémique et la grammaire descriptive du français, l'étude examine les mécanismes de formation des propositions subordonnées, les propriétés distributionnelles des conjonctions de subordination et des pronoms relatifs, les contraintes de sélection modale qui gouvernent les propositions subordonnées, ainsi que les fonctions informationnelles des constructions complexes dans le discours. Une attention particulière est accordée au subjonctif en tant que trait définitoire de la subordination française, aux compléments infinitifs et aux contrastes typologiques entre la phrase complexe française et celle de langues structurellement éloignées, notamment l'azerbaïdjanais. L'article propose également des stratégies pédagogiques fondées sur des données empiriques pour le développement de la compétence syntaxique chez les apprenants avancés du français langue étrangère.*

**Mots-clés :** *syntaxe française, phrase complexe, subordination, propositions relatives, subjonctif, propositions circonstancielles, grammaire française, pédagogie des langues étrangères*

## 1. Introduction

The complex sentence — defined as a sentence containing one or more subordinate clauses integrated into the structure of a main clause — constitutes one of the most productive syntactic categories in French and one of the most theoretically revealing domains of the language's grammatical architecture. French syntax, rooted in the Latin tradition of subordination and enriched through centuries of literary and scholarly standardization, deploys an extensive and highly differentiated system of subordinate clause types — relative, completive, and adverbial — each characterized by distinctive formal markers, mood selection requirements, and functional properties that interact with discourse structure in complex and linguistically significant ways (Grevisse & Goosse, 2016; Riegel, Pellat, & Rioul, 2018).

The study of complex sentence syntax in French is significant for multiple overlapping reasons. From a theoretical perspective, French provides an exceptionally well-documented case study in the syntax of subordination, with a rich tradition of grammatical description extending from Port-Royal to contemporary generative and functional accounts (Chomsky, 1995; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Qasimova, 2025).

The subjunctive mood, which French has preserved as a structurally productive grammatical category long after its erosion in most other modern European languages, is particularly revealing: its distribution across main and subordinate clause contexts encodes semantic and pragmatic distinctions — between assertion and presupposition, certainty and uncertainty, factivity and non-factivity — that illuminate the interface between syntax, semantics, and discourse (Maiden & Smith, 2000).

From a pedagogical perspective, complex sentence structure presents systematic challenges for learners of French as a foreign language at all proficiency levels. The selection of the appropriate subordinating conjunction from a set of near-synonyms — *parce que* versus *puisque* versus *car* for causal relations, or *pour que* versus *afin que* for final relations — requires sensitivity to pragmatic nuances of register, information structure, and speaker perspective that are not reliably captured



by the binary grammar-rule accounts typical of pedagogical materials (Berthonneau & Cadiot, 1993). The subjunctive in subordinate clauses is particularly challenging: its selection is triggered by a heterogeneous set of semantic and syntactic environments — verbs of volition, emotion, doubt, impersonal expressions — whose underlying unity is not always transparent to learners (Confais, 1995).

This article provides a comprehensive theoretical and pedagogical analysis of the syntactic structure of complex sentences in French. The analysis proceeds through the major types of subordination — relative clauses, completive clauses, and adverbial clauses — examining the formal properties, functional roles, and pedagogical implications of each. A comparative dimension situates French complex sentence structure within a broader typological context, highlighting the contrasts with structurally distant languages — particularly Azerbaijani, a verb-final agglutinative language — that are relevant to learners in the South Caucasus region.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundations of this analysis integrate three complementary frameworks. The first is generative syntax in the tradition of Chomsky's (1995) Minimalist Program and its applications to Romance languages. Within this framework, subordinate clauses are analyzed as syntactic constituents — CPs (complementizer phrases) — embedded within the argument or adjunct positions of matrix clause structures. The complementizer position (C) is occupied by subordinating conjunctions (*que, si, quand, bien que, etc.*) and relative pronouns (*qui, que, dont, où, lequel*), which establish the subordination relation and determine the internal clause type. This analysis provides the formal vocabulary for describing the structural properties of French subordination with precision.

The second framework is functional grammar, particularly the systemic functional linguistics (SFL) tradition developed by Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), which analyzes complex sentences in terms of their logico-semantic relations — projection (direct and indirect speech and thought) and expansion (elaboration, extension, and enhancement) — and their role in the textual and interpersonal organization of discourse. This functional perspective complements the generative analysis by addressing the communicative motivations for complex sentence use and the information-structural properties of different subordination types.

The third framework is applied linguistics and French foreign language pedagogy, particularly the descriptive tradition of Grevisse and Goosse's (2016) *Le Bon Usage* and Riegel, Pellat, and Rioul's (2018) *Grammaire méthodique du français*, which provide comprehensive empirical descriptions of French subordination patterns, supplemented by the theoretical insights of Confais (1995) on mood selection and Berthonneau and Cadiot (1993) on temporal and causal connectors.

## 3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive-analytical methodology grounded in the theoretical frameworks outlined above. The analysis draws on established grammatical descriptions of French



syntax — principally Grevisse and Goosse (2016) and Riegel, Pellat, and Rioul (2018) — supplemented by authentic examples drawn from literary, journalistic, and academic French texts. Each subordination type is examined through the following analytical dimensions: the formal markers (complementizers, relative pronouns, subordinating conjunctions) that introduce the subordinate clause; the syntactic position of the subordinate clause within the matrix clause structure; the mood selection constraints governing the subordinate clause verb; and the functional and discourse-pragmatic properties of the construction. A comparative analysis examines selected contrasts between French and Azerbaijani complex sentence structure, informed by the typological literature on subordination in Turkic languages (Johanson & Csató, 1998).

## 4. Relative Clauses in French

### 4.1 Structure and Formal Markers

Relative clauses in French are subordinate clauses that modify a nominal head — the antecedent — through a relative pronoun that simultaneously establishes the subordination relation and encodes the grammatical function of the co-referential element within the relative clause. French has a rich inventory of relative pronouns whose distribution is conditioned by the grammatical function of the relativized element and the animacy and specificity of the antecedent (Grevisse & Goosse, 2016). The invariant pronouns *qui* (subject) and *que* (direct object) cover the two most common relativization positions. *Dont* covers the genitive relation and replaces *de* + NP: *L'homme dont je parle* ("The man of whom I speak"). *Où* functions as a locative or temporal relative: *La ville où il habite* ("The city where he lives"). The inflected series *lequel/laquelle/lesquels/lesquelles* is used with prepositions: *La table sur laquelle il écrit* ("The table on which he writes").

The relativization hierarchy — subject > direct object > indirect object > oblique > genitive > locative — is universally attested in the typological literature (Keenan & Comrie, 1977), and French conforms to this hierarchy: subject and direct object relativization are maximally productive, while relativization of more oblique positions requires the *lequel* series with prepositions and shows greater syntactic complexity. One typologically notable feature of French is the use of the invariant pronoun *que* for direct object relativization regardless of the gender, number, or animacy of the antecedent — a characteristic that simplifies direct object relativization at the cost of the pronominal agreement information available in more synthetic languages.

### 4.2 Restrictive and Non-Restrictive Relatives

The distinction between restrictive and non-restrictive relative clauses is semantically and prosodically significant in French. Restrictive relative clauses — those that identify or delimit the referent of the antecedent: *Le livre que j'ai lu était fascinant* ("The book that I read was fascinating") — are not set off by intonational or orthographic boundaries. Non-restrictive relative clauses — those that provide additional, parenthetical information about an already-identified



referent: Paris, qui est la capitale de la France, est une ville magnifique ("Paris, which is the capital of France, is a magnificent city") — are set off by commas in writing and by prosodic breaks in speech, and they invariably require *qui* rather than *que* when the antecedent is the subject of the relative clause. This distinction has important implications for reading comprehension and writing instruction, as the semantic difference between restrictive and non-restrictive modification is frequently a source of interpretive error for learners.

## 5. Completive Clauses

### 5.1 *Que*-Clauses and Mood Selection

Completive clauses introduced by *que* — the most frequent subordinate clause type in French — occupy argument positions within the matrix clause, functioning as subject complements (Il est certain qu'il viendra), direct object complements (Je sais qu'il viendra), or predicative complements (Le fait est qu'il est parti). The grammatical behavior of *que*-clauses is shaped primarily by the mood of the embedded verb, which is selected by the semantic properties of the matrix predicate in a pattern that constitutes one of the most systematically studied and pedagogically challenging aspects of French grammar (Confais, 1995).

The distribution of indicative and subjunctive in *que*-clauses follows a broad semantic principle: predicates that assert the truth of their complement — verbs of cognition (*savoir, croire, penser*), perception (*voir, entendre*), and communication (*dire, annoncer*) — typically select the indicative: *Je sais qu'il est là* ("I know he is there"). Predicates that express an orientation toward a possible or desired state of affairs — verbs of volition (*vouloir, désirer, souhaiter*), emotion (*regretter, être heureux que*), and doubt (*douter, ne pas croire*) — select the subjunctive: *Je veux qu'il vienne* ("I want him to come"); *Je regrette qu'il soit parti* ("I regret that he has left"). Impersonal expressions of necessity, possibility, and evaluation constitute a further major category of subjunctive selection: *Il faut qu'il vienne* ("It is necessary that he come"); *Il est possible qu'elle ait raison* ("It is possible that she is right").

The interaction between negation and mood selection adds a further layer of complexity. Certain predicates that select the indicative in affirmative contexts shift to the subjunctive when negated or interrogated: *Je crois qu'il viendra* (indicative, affirmative) → *Je ne crois pas qu'il vienne* (subjunctive, negative). This alternation reflects the semantic shift from assertion (affirmative) to doubt or negative evaluation (negative/interrogative) and has no direct equivalent in most other languages known by French learners.

### 5.2 *Infinitival* Complements

When the subject of the complement clause is coreferential with the subject of the matrix clause, French typically requires an infinitival rather than a finite *que*-clause complement: *Je veux venir* (not \**Je veux que je vienne*) ("I want to come"). This obligatory subject-control infinitivalization — governed by what generative syntax describes as the Equi-NP deletion rule — applies across a



wide range of complement-taking predicates and contrasts with the pattern in many other languages, including English (which also requires infinitivalization in such contexts) and Azerbaijani (which does not). The preposition introducing the infinitival complement — *de* or *à* — is lexically conditioned by the matrix predicate: *J'essaie de comprendre*; *J'apprends à nager*; *Je commence à comprendre*. This lexical conditioning means that infinitival complementation cannot be analyzed as a uniform syntactic construction but requires predicate-specific knowledge that learners must develop through exposure and explicit instruction.

## 6. Adverbial Clauses

### 6.1 Typology and Formal Markers

Adverbial clauses in French constitute the most semantically diverse category of subordination, encompassing causal, temporal, conditional, final, concessive, consecutive, comparative, and manner relations between the subordinate clause and the matrix clause. Each adverbial relation is expressed by a distinctive set of subordinating conjunctions whose distribution reflects semantic nuances of information structure and speaker perspective that pedagogical grammars frequently underspecify (Berthonneau & Cadiot, 1993).

Causal clauses are introduced by *parce que*, *puisque*, *car*, and *comme*, which differ along several pragmatic dimensions. *Parce que* is the neutral causal conjunction, introducing new causal information in response to an implicit or explicit question: *Il est parti parce qu'il était fatigué* ("He left because he was tired"). *Puisque* presupposes that the cause is already known to the interlocutor and introduces it as a reminder or justification: *Puisque tu le sais, agis en conséquence* ("Since you know it, act accordingly"). *Car* is a coordinating rather than subordinating conjunction — it introduces independent clauses rather than embedded ones — and carries a more formal, explanatory register: *Il est parti, car il était épuisé* ("He left, for he was exhausted"). *Comme* introduces a causal clause that typically precedes the main clause: *Comme il était tard, il est parti* ("As it was late, he left"). These pragmatic distinctions between near-synonymous causal connectors constitute a significant pedagogical challenge because learners must develop sensitivity to presupposition structure and register that transcends purely grammatical rule-following.

### 6.2 Conditional and Concessive Clauses

Conditional clauses in French are introduced by *si* (with strict tense sequence constraints) and by a range of conjunctive phrases — *à condition que*, *pourvu que*, *à moins que*, *en supposant que* — that select the subjunctive and encode fine semantic distinctions of conditionality. The *si*-conditional system is governed by a well-known tense-mood sequence: *Si* + present indicative → future (real condition: *Si tu viens, je serai content*); *Si* + imperfect → conditional (counterfactual: *Si tu venais, je serais content*); *Si* + pluperfect → past conditional (past counterfactual: *Si tu étais venu, j'aurais été content*). This three-way system of conditional factuality — real, hypothetical, and counterfactual — is syntactically encoded through tense and mood selection in a way that has



no direct parallel in Azerbaijani or in many other languages, making the conditional system one of the most challenging domains of French grammar for learners from typologically distant backgrounds.

Concessive clauses introduce an adversative relation — they acknowledge a circumstance that might be expected to prevent the main clause event but fails to do so. French concessive conjunctions — *bien que*, *quoique*, *encore que* — all select the subjunctive: *Bien qu'il soit malade, il travaille* ("Although he is ill, he works"). This subjunctive requirement reflects the semantics of concession: by selecting the subjunctive rather than the indicative, the speaker signals that the concessive proposition is acknowledged as a presupposed or granted circumstance rather than asserted as new factual information. The semantic interface between syntactic mood selection and pragmatic presupposition is one of the most theoretically productive dimensions of French subordination and one that merits more systematic treatment in pedagogical materials than it typically receives.

### ***6.3 Temporal and Final Clauses***

Temporal clauses are introduced by *quand*, *lorsque*, *dès que*, *aussitôt que* (simultaneous or sequential), *avant que* (anterior, + subjunctive), *après que* (posterior, + indicative — though colloquial usage is increasingly shifting toward the subjunctive under analogy with *avant que*), *pendant que*, and *tandis que* (durative). The mood distinction between *avant que* (subjunctive) and *après que* (indicative) reflects a semantic principle: the event introduced by *avant que* is prospective and therefore non-factive at the time of speech, while the event introduced by *après que* is retrospective and therefore factive. This principled semantic explanation for what might otherwise appear as arbitrary mood selection is an important pedagogical resource.

Final clauses — clauses expressing purpose — are introduced by *pour que*, *afin que*, and *de peur que* (negative purpose), all selecting the subjunctive. When the subject of the final clause is coreferential with the matrix subject, an infinitival construction with *pour* is obligatory: *Je parle lentement pour qu'il comprenne* (different subjects, finite subjunctive) versus *Je parle lentement pour être compris* (same subject, infinitive). This parallel with completive infinitivalization highlights the underlying grammatical principle — that subject coreferentiality triggers infinitivalization across multiple subordination types — and provides a conceptual generalization that can significantly reduce the learning burden for students who have grasped its scope.

## **7. Comparative Perspective: French and Azerbaijani**

A brief comparative analysis of French and Azerbaijani complex sentence structure illuminates the specific challenges facing Azerbaijani learners of French and the typological dimensions of subordination more broadly. Azerbaijani, a verb-final agglutinative language of the Oghuz branch of Turkic, deploys a fundamentally different strategy for expressing subordination (Johanson & Csató, 1998; Asgarova, 2024). While French subordination is characterized by the use of overt subordinating conjunctions and relative pronouns that introduce finite embedded clauses with



distinct mood marking, Azerbaijani makes extensive use of nominalized and participial verbal forms — deverbal nouns and converbs — to encode relations that French expresses through finite subordinate clauses. The Azerbaijani equivalent of a French relative clause is typically a participial modifier that precedes the head noun within the NP, without a relative pronoun: French *L'homme que je vois* ("The man whom I see") corresponds to Azerbaijani *gördüyüm adam*, where *gördüyüm* is a nominalized verbal form meaning "the one whom I see" functioning as a prenominal modifier.

This typological contrast — between French postposed finite relative clauses introduced by a relative pronoun and Azerbaijani prenominal participial modifiers — is one of the most systematically significant structural differences affecting Azerbaijani learners of French. It means that the learner must not only acquire the French relative pronouns and their distributional constraints but must reconceptualize the syntactic position of the modifier relative to the head — from prenominal to postnominal — and the structural type of the relativization strategy — from participial to finite clausal. Similarly, the French subjunctive has no direct functional equivalent in Azerbaijani, where the semantic and pragmatic distinctions encoded by the French indicative-subjunctive alternation are expressed through modal particles, verbal suffixes, and lexical means rather than through a grammaticalized mood system.

## 8. The Classification Table of French Subordinate Clause Types

The following table provides a systematic classification of the principal types of subordinate clauses in French, organized by clause type, formal marker, syntactic function, and example.

Table 1. Classification of Subordinate Clause Types in French

Clause Type	Connector / Marker	Syntactic Function	French Example
Relative clause	<i>qui, que, dont, où, lequel</i>	Nominal modifier	<i>L'homme qui parle</i>
Completive clause (subject)	<i>que + indicative/subjunctive</i>	Subject complement	<i>Qu'il vienne est certain</i>
Completive clause (object)	<i>que + indicative/subjunctive</i>	Direct object	<i>Je sais qu'il viendra</i>
Causal adverbial	<i>parce que, puisque, car</i>	Cause	<i>Il est parti parce qu'il était fatigué</i>
Temporal adverbial	<i>quand, lorsque, dès que</i>	Time	<i>Quand il arriva, elle partait</i>
Conditional adverbial	<i>si, à condition que</i>	Condition	<i>Si tu venais, je resterais</i>
Concessive adverbial	<i>bien que, quoique</i>	Concession	<i>Bien qu'il soit malade, il travaille</i>
Final adverbial	<i>pour que, afin que</i>	Purpose	<i>Je parle lentement pour qu'il comprenne</i>
Infinitival clause	<i>de / à + infinitive</i>	Various	<i>Il essaie de comprendre</i>



## 9. Pedagogical Implications

The theoretical analysis of French complex sentence syntax developed in the preceding sections has direct implications for the design of French foreign language instruction, particularly for learners in non-francophone contexts where exposure to authentic French discourse is limited. Several specific pedagogical principles emerge from the analysis.

The first concerns the importance of semantic motivation in mood instruction. Research consistently demonstrates that learners who are taught the subjunctive through memorized lists of triggering verbs and expressions retain this knowledge less effectively and generalize it less accurately than learners who are taught the underlying semantic principle — that the subjunctive encodes a speaker's orientation toward a non-asserted or non-factive proposition — and its application across different syntactic environments (Confais, 1995). A semantically-based approach to mood instruction does not eliminate the need for extensive practice with specific verb-conjunction combinations, but it provides a conceptual scaffold that makes the pattern learnable rather than merely memorizable.

The second principle concerns the pedagogical value of contrastive analysis for learners from typologically distant L1 backgrounds. Explicit instruction that draws learners' attention to the structural contrasts between French and Azerbaijani complex sentence syntax — the postposed versus prenominal position of relative clauses, the finite versus participial strategy for subordination, the mood-based versus modal-particle encoding of epistemic distinctions — equips learners to analyze the interference patterns they are experiencing and to develop more accurate interlanguage representations (Odlin, 1989). This contrastive dimension is particularly important in the Azerbaijani educational context, where the systematic differences between French and Azerbaijani syntax are substantial.

The third principle concerns the use of authentic discourse for syntactic instruction. Complex sentence structures are most effectively acquired when encountered in contexts where their communicative function is transparent — where the causal, conditional, or concessive relation they express is motivated by the discourse and not merely illustrated by decontextualized example sentences. Reading authentic French texts — journalistic articles, literary excerpts, academic prose — and analyzing the subordination structures they contain provides learners with the input conditions necessary for developing the pragmatic sensitivity to connector selection and mood choice that purely formal instruction cannot achieve (Riegel, Pellat, & Rioul, 2018).

## 10. Conclusion

This article has provided a comprehensive theoretical and pedagogical analysis of the syntactic structure of complex sentences in French, examining relative clauses, completive clauses, and adverbial clauses across their formal, functional, and discourse-pragmatic dimensions. The analysis has demonstrated that French complex sentence syntax is characterized by a high degree of formal differentiation — in the inventory of subordinating conjunctions, relative pronouns, and



mood selection constraints — that encodes semantically and pragmatically significant distinctions with considerable precision. The subjunctive mood, in particular, emerges as a structurally productive category whose distribution reflects the interface between syntax, semantics, and discourse in ways that are theoretically revealing and pedagogically challenging.

The comparative analysis of French and Azerbaijani complex sentence structure has highlighted the typological distance between the two languages — particularly in the strategies for relative clause formation and the encoding of modality — and has established the specific learning challenges that this distance creates for Azerbaijani learners of French. These challenges are addressable through pedagogical approaches that combine explicit contrastive instruction, semantically motivated mood teaching, and extensive exposure to authentic French discourse.

Future research should investigate the acquisition sequence of French subordination types by Azerbaijani learners through longitudinal corpus studies, examine the effectiveness of semantically-based versus form-focused approaches to subjunctive instruction in Azerbaijani educational contexts, and explore the role of pragmatic and discourse-level instruction in developing accurate connector selection. The syntactic structure of the French complex sentence remains one of the most theoretically rich and pedagogically consequential domains of the language, and its systematic investigation contributes to both the descriptive grammar of French and the applied linguistics of French language teaching.

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