
Are French NNs variants of N-PREP-N constructions?

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1 Introduction

The aim of this paper is to provide a thorough empirical examination of the hypothesis that French subordinate Noun-Noun compounds, such as *roman photos* ('photo novel'), are nothing more than variants of corresponding syntactic phrases or phrasal lexemes (such as *roman [avec (des) photos]_{pp}*) (cf. Fradin, 2009:433, among others). With reference to data from both synchronic and diachronic corpora (*FrWac*, *Frantext*, *Google Books*), it will be argued that the competition between the N-N compounding pattern, on the one hand, and the corresponding phrasal lexemes or noun phrases with the N-PREP-/ART/-N structure, on the other, is a complex phenomenon that documents a certain change in naming strategies in French, especially from the 1960s onwards.

2 State of the art

Romance subordinate NNs are said to appear progressively during the 19th-20th Centuries as instances of a new pattern that enters in competition with older and extremely profitable patterns of phrasal lexemes (N + PREP + N and N + A). As far as French is concerned, a recent study carried out on the *Frantext* corpus has showed that the profitability of French subordinate NNs increased very slowly from the beginning of the 19th Century to 1960s with an exponential increase observed afterwards (Radimský, 2019). Therefore, many binominals, such as (1a), (2a), are attested also as phrasal lexemes with a preposition between the two nouns, the preposition being either bare (1b) or accompanied by a determiner (2b). In other cases, the attested 'prepositional' equivalent of a binominal seems to be a free syntactic phrase, as in (3b) compared to (3a).

(1a) stylo-bille

pen_N ball_N – 'ballpoint pen'

(1b) stylo à bille

pen_N to_{PREP} ball_N – 'ballpoint pen'

(2a) bière pression

beer_N pressure_N – 'draught beer'

(2b) bière à la pression

beer_N to_{PREP} the_{ART} pressure_N – 'draught beer'

(3a) traffic voyageurs

traffic_N passengers_N – 'passenger traffic'

(3b) *trafic des voyageurs*

traffic_N of_{PREP} the_{ART} passengers_N – ‘traffic of the passengers’

These facts lead to a commonly shared assumption that French subordinate NNs could be mere variants of the corresponding prepositional constructions. Fradin (2009:433) even goes so far as to claim that the prepositional constructions are older, which could, in turn, provide a support for the assumption put forward by Hatcher (1946), according to which the origin of French subordinate NN’s lies in the instability of prepositions in N-PREP-N constructions.

Conversely, Arnaud (2015) claims that there are also many French subordinate NNs for which the corresponding prepositional construction is either attested in negligible numbers only, or even impossible to form, as in (4).

(4) *portrait robot*

portrait_N robot_N – ‘facial composite’

A thorough analysis of corpus data therefore seems necessary in order to determine, from both the qualitative and quantitative points of view, which NN’s have (or even *can* have) prepositional counterparts and if so, to compare their diachronic frequency curves.

3 Data analysis

The analysis will start out from a sample of more than 1700 non-coordinate French NNs that comprise, in terms of the Scalise-Bisetto (2009) classification, attributive NNs, subordinate grounding compounds, and subordinate verbal-nexus compounds. Concerning these macro-classes, data drawn from the *FrWac* corpus allow us to argue that the prepositional counterparts of NNs are attested for most of verbal-nexus compounds (more than 90% of types), but only for 2/3 of subordinate grounding compounds, and for a minor part of attributive compounds, which corroborates the observations of Baroni, Guevara and Pirrelli (2009) concerning similar data from Italian. Indeed, for the subordinate verbal-nexus type the prepositional syntactic construction (3b) seems to be always available, while for attributive NNs (such as *guerre-éclair* – ‘Blitzkrieg’) it is often impossible, provided that the attributive relationship is rather paraphrasable by a copulative construction.

Within the subordinate grounding class, which is of major concern, NNs will be carefully divided into the following categories: the prepositional variant is impossible (5), the prepositional variant is extremely rare (6), both variants are in free competition (7), the NN variant is extremely rare (8).

(5) *confiture (Ø) maison*,
homemade jam

yaourt (Ø) nature
natural yogurt

(6) *version (sur) papier*
paper version

(7) *profil (d' / de l') utilisateur*,
user profile

animateur (de) télé,
TV entertainer

bière (à la) pression
draught beer

(8) *boutique (de) souvenirs*
souvenir shop

On this basis, diachronic data from Frantext corpus and Google books will make it possible to draw frequency curves for the respective variants, as exemplified in Fig. 1 and Fig. 2.

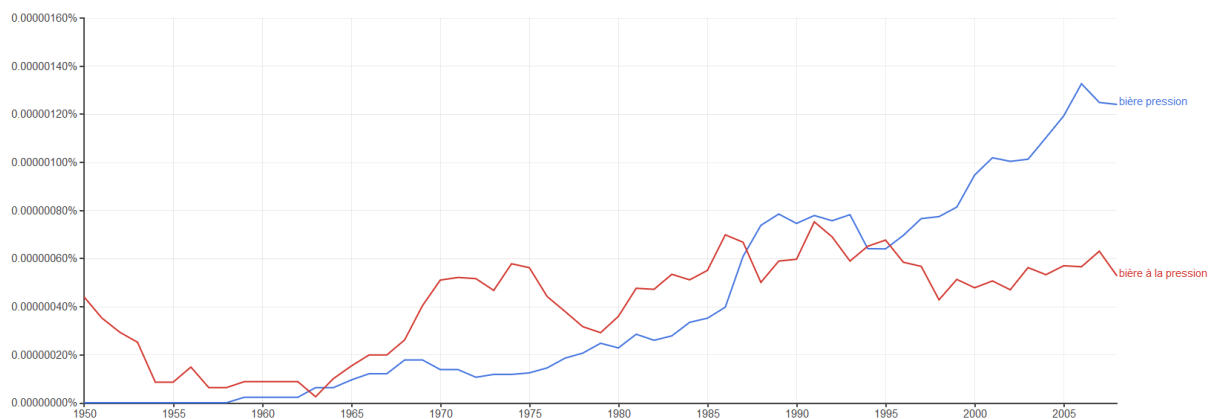


Fig. 1 – Relative frequencies of *bière pression* and *bière à la pression* from 1950s¹

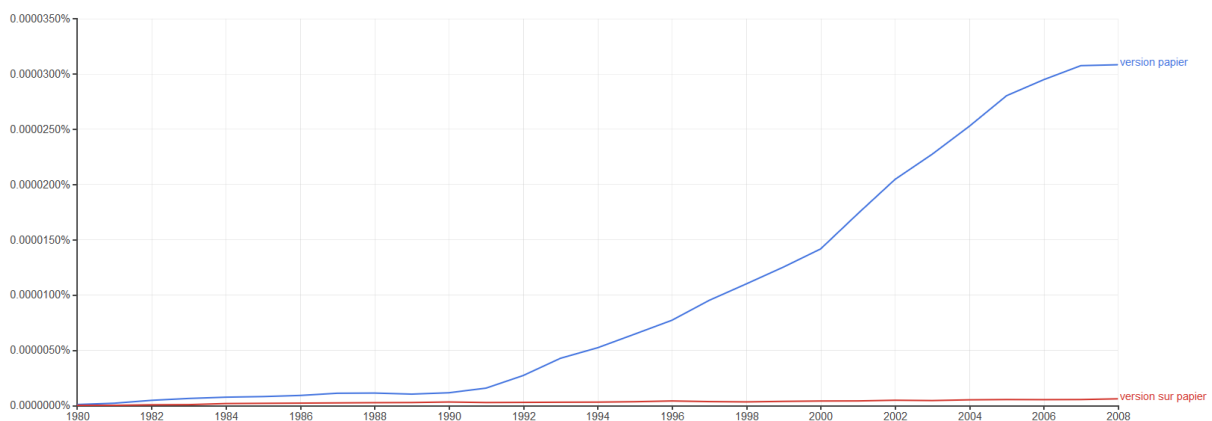


Fig. 2 – Relative frequencies of *version papier* and *version sur papier* from 1980s²

¹ <https://books.google.com/ngrams>

² <https://books.google.com/ngrams>

These data suggest that while some subordinate NNs might be considered as a reduced variant of a prepositional construction (Fig. 1), for others – and especially for those first attested after 1960s – the NN form was the default one from the origin (Fig. 2) or even the only form possible (see Examples (5)).

4 Conclusion

The data analysed in this paper suggest that during the second half of the 20th Century, French subordinate NNs progressively become instances of an independent word-formation pattern that cannot be directly linked to – or derived from – the corresponding N-PREP-N constructions, irrespective of the fact whether these prepositional constructions are intended to be phrasal lexemes or free syntactic phrases.

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