

Etymology of the Adverbial Suffix in the Parisian French Dialect

An Exploration of the French Morpheme -ment

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ABSTRACT. In this paper, I sought to examine the etymological patterns found in regular and irregular adverbs in the Parisian French dialect, with a specific focus on the derivation of the regular adverbial suffix *-ment*. With French's Proto-Indo European roots, we would assume that the adverbial suffix *-ment* would be used similarly in Latin. However, its use differs in the two languages. As there is not extensive scholarly research on the specific questions I aimed to answer, the principal sources I consulted were French etymological dictionaries, as well as various linguistic publications covering related topics. I used Romance languages, Franconian (a dialect of High German spoken in the Lorraine/Moselle region), Latin, and Indo-European as points of comparison with the Parisian French dialect and examined the topic through the lens of Linguistic Anthropology, Comparative Linguistics, Contact Languages, and Morphology. I investigated George William Putnam's assertion that the French suffix *-ment*, as used in the Parisian French dialect, is derived from the Latin word for 'mood' (1919: 88).



INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND. French is an Indo-European Romance language, as are Italian, Spanish, Romanian, and Portuguese. All Romance languages have deep etymological roots in Latin, but French grammar, syntax, and morphology vary significantly from Latin, making it the most differentiated of the group. Grammar refers to the structure of a language and includes syntax, the arrangement of words necessary to form a sentence, and morphology, the study of word parts.

The first written examples of French are found in *The Oaths of Strasbourg* from 842 CE. There was a common misconception that *The Oaths of Strasbourg* were written in Latin. Through linguistic anthropology, or the study of the linguistic background of a language to give context to its historical changes, scholars found the language was in fact a dialect of Northern France (Posner and Sala 2024).

Today, French is the mother tongue or second language of over 60 million people across more than twenty-five countries in Europe, Africa, Asia, and North America (Posner and Sala 2024). The French language has influenced other languages around the world including various Creoles, in addition to global Francophone culture. I selected Parisian French for this research because it is the most widely studied and documented dialect in the French language. If I were to have selected a French Creole, for example, it would have been difficult to analyze as sources are more limited.

My research concerns adverbs in the Parisian French dialect. An adverb's purpose is to modify or qualify a preceding part of speech to indicate place, time, circumstance, manner, cause, degree, and other attributes. French adverbs are traditionally classified into two categories: regular (adverbs with the *-ment* suffix) and irregular (adverbs without the *-ment* suffix). Regular adverbs are formed by adding the *-ment* suffix after an adjective root. Any adverb that does not follow that structure—for example *bien* 'well'—is considered irregular.

Affixations are defined as morphemes connected to a stem to form a new variation of the word. They are separated into three levels: Level 1 (prefixes), Level 2 (infixes), and Level 3 (suffixes). An adverbial suffix is a group of letters added to an adjective to form a variation of that word, known as an adverb. The adverbial suffix *-ment* is classified as a Level 3 affixation (Zwanenburg 1995: 277-278).

This paper seeks to examine etymological patterns found in regular and irregular adverbs in the French Parisian dialect, including first known use and source language. It will also



investigate the derivation of the adverbial suffix *-ment*. I address morphological changes that have occurred over a nearly one-thousand year span to form adjectives into adverbs and when adverbs were introduced into the French language, from the first noted occurrence in 842 CE to the 1600s. This paper does not cover adverbs that emerged after the 1600s, as the majority of the most notable and commonly used adverbs were brought into French before 1700.

While there is little research pertaining specifically to the adverbial suffix in French, a 1995 article titled, "French Adverb Formation, Derivation Versus Inflection and Word Structure Levels," by linguist Weicher Zwanenberg, informed my research. Zwanenberg highlights the inflectional contexts, Level 1 and 2 affixations, and changes before and after Lexical Insertion, a process in which morphemes are replaced by semantic material in the derivation of a sentence (Zwanenberg 1995: 277-278).

Academic research examining the derivation of the adverbial suffix in other Romance languages also informed my analysis. In this paper, I briefly reference Italian and Spanish adverbial suffixes using comparative linguistics. I selected Italian and Spanish as they are national Romance languages with close ties to French.

I consulted various texts related to adverbial morphology, or how adverbs can modify the meaning of different words or phrases. I used texts written in both French and English, some of which concerned general linguistics theory and others pertaining specifically to French. I sought to contextualize adverbial morphology through history to gain a more thorough understanding of the language as we know it today, contributing to a richer understanding of etymological changes in the Parisian French dialect over time.

LITERATURE REVIEW. In my research, in addition to investigating etymological patterns in regular and irregular adverbs in the Parisian French dialect, I sought to identify the origin of the French adverbial suffix *-ment* and explore its relationship with Latin. The etymology of the French suffix *-ment* can be traced back to both the Indo-European root *men* and the Latin base *mens*, which correspond to the English terms "to think" and "mind," respectively (Picoche 1994: 349). *Mente* is the ablative of the noun *mens*; the ablative case is one of six cases of nouns in Latin and serves a similar function as an adverbial suffix (McCartney 1920: 214).

I studied derived adjectives and present participles of adjectives in relation to adverbs and their syntax to examine the linguistic classification of the parts of speech. The adverbial



suffix *-ment* is traditionally classified as a derivational rather than inflectional morpheme. While inflectional morphemes change the form of a word (e.g., singular versus plural, present versus past), derivational morphemes fundamentally change the part of speech (noun, verb, adverb). Notably, there is both an adverbial *-ment* and a nominal *-ment* in the French Parisian dialect. The nominal *-ment* is used to create a noun from another noun and is not related to the adverbial suffix (Merriam Webster 2024). For example, *conditionellement* 'conditionally' has an adverbial *-ment* suffix, while *arrondissement* 'district' or 'borough' has a nominal *-ment* suffix (Zwanenburg 1995: 284). This paper concerns the adverbial suffix *-ment* rather than the nominal suffix.

Contrary to previous linguistic scholars, Zwanenburg proposes that the adverbial suffix *-ment* is inflectional rather than derivational. His thesis rests on a proposed "split" between word formation and inflection, asserting inflection is tied to syntax. He argues that adverb formation using *-ment* should be characterized as contextual inflection, which is inflection dictated by sentence syntax, as opposed to inherent inflection which is not dictated by syntactic principles (Zwanenburg 1995: 277-278).

METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION. In my research, I primarily consulted journal articles and etymological dictionaries. As there were no human participants used, my research consisted of an extended literature review. When identifying sources, I used various methods to determine credibility. Choosing which dictionaries to reference was complicated by inconsistencies in the formation of definitions and etymologies. I selected the *Larousse Dictionnaire Étymologique* as it is widely cited and reputable. To find articles related to my subject, I consulted JSTOR, which provides access to linguistics journals such as *The Year's Work in Modern Language Studies* and *Akadémiai Kiadó*.

I selected the adverbs listed in *A Frequency Dictionary of French: Core Vocabulary for Learners,* by Deryle Lonsdale and Yvon Le Bras, which contains the most common adverbs in spoken French, fiction, and non-fiction works. Each of the words featured in this source falls in the top 10% of words in the formal and informal register. In linguistics, a register is defined as the circumstances in which speakers use language differently.

In total, there were 77 high-frequency adverbs listed across the three categories (spoken French, fiction, and non-fiction). These adverbs are listed in Appendix A. In my analysis, I



grouped them into regular and irregular adverbs, following the linguistic definitions (see Figure 1). To complete this categorization, I relied on my knowledge of French lexicon as well as dictionary definitions. Within the irregular adverb grouping, I placed each adverb in one of the following subcategories: location and position, question markers, numerical categorization (frequency or quantity), goodness, and other. There were a total of 47 (61.0%) regular adverbs and 30 (39.0%) irregular adverbs.

FIGURE 1: CLASSIFICATION OF THE MOST COMMON FRENCH ADVERBS FROM A Frequency Dictionary of French



I chose to break the adverbs into subcategories to allow for deeper analysis and comparison. Figure 2 depicts the distribution of the 30 irregular adverbs by the subcategories listed above. The subcategory Location and Position represents the most adverbs, with ten in total. Closely following is Numerical Categorization with nine, Goodness with four, and Question Indicators with two, and the Other (or unclassified) category with five.





FIGURE 2: CLASSIFICATION OF IRREGULAR ADVERBS FROM A Frequency Dictionary of French

Within both regular and irregular adverbs, the data collected includes the root language, the year of the first noted use of the word in French, and the original root word from the adapted language (Appendix 2). I chose to use these indicators as they cover the necessary topics and a sufficient level of data to reach meaningful conclusions. I consulted various etymological dictionaries to determine the derivation of irregular and regular adverbs in the Parisian French dialect.

Table 1 shows that of the 46 traceable regular adverbs, 43 had Latin listed as a root language and three did not. Of the 28 traceable irregular adverbs, 22 had Latin roots and six did not. The percentage of regular and irregular adverbs with Latin roots varies by fourteen percentage points (93% and 79%, respectively).



	Latin Root Language	Non-Latin Root Language	Percentage With Latin Root Language
Regular Adverbs	43	3	93%
Irregular Adverbs	22	6	79%

TABLE 1: ROOTS OF REGULAR AND IRREGULAR ADVERBS

Note: Of the 77 adverbs, three (one regular and two irregular) had no root language listed / were untraceable in the etymological dictionaries I consulted. Those three untraceable adverbs are omitted from this analysis. SOURCE: (Dubois et. al 2007)

Referencing etymological dictionaries, I also examined the etymology of this selection of regular and irregular adverbs. Table 2 shows the time periods when these adverbs were first introduced into the French language. Of the 23 high-frequency irregular adverbs with dates listed, 35% (eight adverbs) were integrated into the language before 1100 CE. Out of this group, five were first noted in 1080 CE, unrivaled for the most words integrated at one time for the irregular adverb group. Eight additional irregular adverbs were introduced into French in the 1100s, and the remaining seven irregular adverbs were first seen in French in the 1200s, 1400s, and after 1600 CE.

Three of the 43 high-frequency regular adverbs with dates, five adverbs (8%) were introduced into French prior to 1100 CE. The introduction of regular adverbs is more evenly distributed over time than the irregular adverbs in the dataset. While 70% of the irregular adverbs were first used in French before 1200 CE, 45% of the regular adverbs were introduced into French after that date.



	Irregular Adverbs		Regular Adverbs	
Time Period (CE)	Number	Percent of Total	Number	Percent of Total
980 - 1099	8	35%	5	12%
1100 - 1199	8	35%	14	33%
1200 - 1299	3	13%	5	10%
1300 - 1399	0	0%	2	5%
1400 - 1499	2	9%	5	12%
1500 - 1599	0	0%	6	14%
1600+	2	9%	6	14%
Total	23	100%	43	100%

TABLE 2: FIRST KNOWN USE OF FRENCH IRREGULAR AND REGULAR ADVERBS

Note: Of the 74 adverbs with a traceable root language, eight adverbs (three regular and five irregular) do not have a date listed in the etymological dictionaries I consulted. Those adverbs are omitted from this analysis. The percent of total for Irregular Adverbs sums to 101% due to rounding.

SOURCE: (Dubois et. al 2007)

Table 3 shows that out of the seven adverbs that do not have roots in Latin, one is rooted in Indo-European, Franconian, and Italian, respectively, and two are rooted in Greek and Ancient French, respectively. Of these, the earliest usage is the adverb *environ* 'about' or 'around' from Ancient French and *guère* 'hardly' from Franconian, both of which were integrated in 1080. The latest is *brusquement* 'suddenly' from Italian in 1534.



French Adverb	Etymological Root	First Known Use
Root Language: Ancient French		
environ	anc. fr. viron (eng. about)	1080
beaucoup	anc. fr. beau (eng. a lot)	1272
Root Language: Franconian		
guère	frq. waigaro (eng. hardly)	1080
Root Language: Indo-European		
dedans*	ind. eur. qualis (eng. inside)	N/A
Root Language: Greek		
automatiquement	gr. automatons (eng. automatically)	1300
économiquement	gr. Oikonomikos (eng. economically)	1690
Root Language: Italian		
brusquement	it. brusco (eng. suddenly)	1534

TABLE 3: SOURCE LANGUAGE AND FIRST KNOWN USE OF NON-LATIN ROOT ADVERBS

Note: anc. fr. = Ancient French; frq. = Franconian; lat. = Latin; ind. eur. = Indo-European; gr. = Greek; it. = Italian; gr. = Greek SOURCE: (Dubois et. al 2007)

As previously stated, the *-ment* ending on regular French adverbs originated from the Latin word *mens* (plural form *mentis*), meaning 'mind,' or 'frame of mind' (Picoche 1994: 349). However, *mens* is not an affix in Latin. Endings for adverbs in Latin are complex. Positive, comparative, and superlative adverbs each have different endings. For positive adverbs, the ending is $-\bar{e}$ (in first/second declension) and *-iter* (in third declension), while comparative adverbs take *-ius*, and superlative verbs use *-issimê* (irregular forms = *-rimê*, *-limê*) (Damen: 1).

This poses the question: How was the adverbial suffix *-ment* integrated into the French lexicon? In *The Relations Between French and Latin* (1919: 88), George William Putnam examines this topic. Putnam describes the introduction of the Latin affix *mens* (feminine), meaning 'mind,' added to the Latin base *gravi*, which translates to *gravement*, with the literal meaning of 'in a grave or serious mood,' which is also translated as 'seriously' in English. Below are two potential translations of a sentence using *gravement*:



(1) Elle lui parle gravement.'She speaks to him in a serious mood.''She speaks to him seriously.'

The adverb *franchement* 'frankly' could translate to a phrase meaning 'in a frank mood.' The following are alternate translations of a sentence using *franchement* with the adverbial and literal meaning, without changing the meaning of the sentence.

(2) Il m'a dit franchement ses problèmes en classe.'He told me in a frank mood about his problems in class.''He told me frankly about his problems in class.'

'Mind' in French is translated to **esprit** or **tête**, depending on the context, and does not originate from the Latin affix **mens** 'mind.' In my analysis, I will seek to expand on Putnam's assertion that the adverbial suffix **-ment** is derived from the Latin word for mind (**mens**). As Putnam states, there is a linguistic connection between the French suffix **-ment** and the Latin word **mens**, meaning 'mood' or 'sense' (1919: 88). I sought to examine how and when **-ment** emerged as an adverbial suffix in the French language.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION. Based on the research, we can confirm Putnam's assertion that the adverbial suffix *-ment* is derived from a Latin ablative noun (*mens*) rather than a Latin suffix. Unlike most Latin-derived suffixes found in Romance languages, the formation of adverbial clauses in Latin differs greatly from the formation in French. The suffix is not regular, in the sense that the formation is not that of its Latin counterpart. Therefore, we can view it through a lens more similar to that of an irregular adverb. This could have been the case for a variety of reasons, but we can assume that it is related to its more nuanced meaning. The Latin noun *mens* 'mood' changes the semantics of the word when adopted as an ending in French, as shown in Examples 1 and 2. Thus, it is logical that this was the adopted Latin suffix for regular French adverbs.



The data does not show a clear correlation between an adverb's classification as regular or irregular and its root/origin language (see Table 1). The vast majority of both regular and irregular adverbs in the French Parisian dialect have Latin roots (93% and 79%, respectively). While we might expect regular adverbs with the adverbial suffix *-ment* to have closer etymological ties to Latin than irregular adverbs, the difference is not as dramatic as one might anticipate. However, given that most languages take 70% to 90% of their lexicon from their root language, perhaps this finding is to be expected. For example, Italian and French take 89% and 87% of their lexicon from Latin, respectively (Bertrand 2024: 24). Notably, Italian and Spanish share the same adverbial suffix, derived from the same Latin root as the Level 3 affixation in French, *-mente*. This is not surprising, as two languages with similar levels of their parent language's lexicon, Latin in this context, should take similar grammar structures and affixations. Similarly, many Germanic languages use their own form of Latin-based Level 1 and 2 affixations.

While the percentage of a language drawn from its parent language's lexicon is always evolving as the language changes, any language will always remain primarily a product of its root language. This can be seen in French with the evolution of *verlan*, a French slang that takes much of its influence from Arabic. It is commonly studied by dialectologists as, despite regional Arabic influences, a similar verlan tends to be spoken all across France without a strong correlation to geographical influences. Verlan in the North of France is still very heavily influenced by Arabic despite regional differences from the South.

Various French irregular adverbs derived from Latin adverbs, changing in structure or meaning over time. For example, *lors*, a French adverb meaning 'during,' is an example of an irregular adverb that became linguistically varied because of its usage frequency in French. There is a tendency to shorten words for ease of speaking, which is seen in *lors* as it is derived from *illā hōrā* in Vulgar Latin, originally a compound adverb that developed by omission of the second half. These adverbs could also be irregular because they are not as varied from their root language, regardless of when they were introduced into the language or their root language.

Analyzing the dates when non-Latin-root adverbs entered French (see Table 2), there appears to be no strong correlation between origin language and year of integration. Most of the



non-Latin root and Latin-root adverbs were integrated from about 980-1300 CE, but there is not enough data to make a clear conclusion as to the relationship.

CONCLUSION. This paper examines the emergence of the adverbial suffix -ment in the Parisian French dialect by examining its morphosyntax and morphology through a lens of its parent language, Latin. I investigated this topic using comparative linguistics, linguistic anthropology, and different morphological components in the French language. I concluded that the suffix -ment, a Level 3 morphological affixation, is derived from the Latin word mens, meaning "to feel" or "in a(n) [insert adjective] mood," confirming George William Putnam's assertion. When adapted into French and other Romance languages, this gives us the modern day formation of the French regular adverb (see Examples 1 and 2). While French does not take the Latin adverbial suffix -ē, -ment is still a product of French's Latin-derived affixations. This finding is as expected, as most of the analyzed adverbs are derived from Latin (see Table 1). In all the Romance languages, the *-ment* suffix denotes a focus on adverb descriptions relating to mental states. In English, there is no relationship between adverbs and states of mind. Further research might examine this phenomenon in other languages spoken in Europe and around the world. Using a sociolinguistic lens, one might analyze how adverbial usage affects each society and conversely how societal factors influence the usage of adverbs. This paper intends to help those new to the discipline of linguistics expand their knowledge on the topic and foster greater curiosity about languages and linguistics.



APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: HIGH-FREQUENCY FRENCH ADVERBS

Regular Adverbs (47)	Irregular Adverbs (30)
vraiment	Location/Position (10)
simplement	par-dessus
exactement	au-dessous
tellement	arrière
absolument	là-dessus
complètement	loin
certainement	derrière
clairement	debout
justement	delà
évidemment	là-bas
malheureusement	dedans
extrêmement	Numerical Categorization (frequency/quantifiable) (9)
effectivement	quelquefois
personnellement	tantôt
énormément	lors
brièvement	aussitôt
naturellement	soudain
vivement	autrefois
lentement	maintenant
proprement	environ
longuement	beaucoup
doucement	Goodness (4)
brusquement	bien
infiniment	oui
assurément	juste
nullement	volontiers
économiquement	Questions (2)
sensiblement	combien



simultanément	pourquoi
initialement	Other (5)
fortement	guère
principalement	désormais
normalement	presque
nettement	voire
légèrement	jadis
officiellement	
progressivement	
éventuellement	
parallèlement	
automatiquement	
respectivement	
quasiment	
précédemment	
vraisemblablement	
largement	
notamment	
comment	
SOURCE: (Lonsdale and Le Bras 2009: 186)	

SOURCE: (Lonsdale and Le Bras 2009: 186)



Adverbs	Etymological Root Of Base	Date
Regular Adverbs		
quasiment	lat. <i>quasi-</i>	980
longuement	base -long- lat <i>longus</i>	1050
fortement	lat. base -fort-	1050
doucement	lat. 'dulcis' anc. fr. base - <i>douc</i>	1080
comment	lat. <i>cum</i>	1080
tellement	lat. (démonstration à indochine eur et en gr.)	1100
vraiment	ind. eur latin "vērus" germanique frq. "wahr"	1119
naturellement	lat. <i>naturalis</i>	1130
légèrement	lat vulg. <i>levarius.</i> der. of <i>levis</i>	1131
complètement	lat. completus	1138
brièvement	lat. eccl. <i>brevarium</i>	1138
simplement	lat. médiév. medicamentum	1160
lentement	lat. vulg. *lendītem, acc. de <i>lens, lendis, *oeuf de pou</i>	1170
sensiblement	lat. philos. <i>sensibilis</i>	1180
proprement	lat. proprius	1180
justement	base - <i>juste-</i> lat. <i>jūs, jūris</i>	1190
clairement	ind. eur *k(e)-lā 'appeler' gr. <i>kalein</i> lat. base - <i>clair</i> 'clarus'	1190
nettement	lat. nitidus 'brillant de propreté'	1190
principalement	<i>pro</i> gr., lat.	1190
largement	lat. largus	1200
nullement	lat. n <i>ūllus</i>	1200
personnellement	lat. 'persona'	1212
absolument	ab- lat. (from greek apo-, from ind. eur ap-)	1225
évidemment	lat. evitare	1265
automatiquement	gr. automatons 'qui se meut de lui-même	1300

APPENDIX 2: ADVERBS AND FIRST KNOWN USE AND ORIGIN/ROOT



énormément	lat. <i>enormitas</i>	1340
vraisemblablement	lat. verisimilis	1400
infiniment	lat. infinitus	1418
précédemment	lat. 'pré-salé'	1439
notamment	lat. notatio	1458
effectivement	lat. médiév. effectivus	1495
malheureusement	lat. <i>malus</i>	1526
brusquement	it. <i>brusco</i>	1534
respectivement	lat. respectivus	1540
exactement	lat. exactus	1541
extrêmement	lat. extremus	1549
parallèlement	lat. parallelus ; gr. parallêlos	1583
économiquement	gr. oikonomikos	1690
éventuellement	lat. eventus	1737
officiellement	angl. ; du lat. officialis	1778
progressivement	lat. progressio	1778
simultanément	lat. médiév. <i>simultaneus</i>	1788
initialement	lat. initialis	1867
vivement	ind. eur vivre origin 'vivre'	N/A
normalement	lat. norma	N/A
certainement	lat. pop. <i>cerstanus</i>	N/A
assurément		N/A
Irregular Adverbs		·
bien	lat. bene	900
loin	lat. lǒngē	1050
pourquoi	lat. <i>poqueit</i>	1050
oui	anc. fr. <i>o</i> ; lat <i>hoc;</i> prov. <i>oc</i>	1080
environ	anc. fr. <i>viron</i>	1080
guère	frq. <i>waigaro</i>	1080
arrière	lat. adreto	1080



derrière	lat. <i>deriere</i>	1080
combien*	lat. <i>cum</i>	1100
maintenant	lat. pop. <i>manutenēre</i>	1100
tantôt*	lat. tostum	1119
juste	lat. <i>justus</i>	1120
soudain	lat. subitanus	1120
autrefois*	lat. <i>alterui</i>	1160
voire	lat. veire	1130
presque*	lat. pressus, part. passe. de premiere	1190
aussitôt*	lat. alid sic	1200
volontiers	lat. voluntaire	1265
beaucoup*	anc. fr <i>beau</i>	1272
là-bas	lat. <i>lai</i>	1668
debout	lat. de	N/A
delà*	lat. de	N/A
au-dessous*	lat. de	N/A
là-dessus*	lat. <i>de</i> , lat pop. <i>derrain</i>	N/A
désormais*	lat. des-	N/A
dedans*	N/A	N/A
jadis	N/A	N/A

Note: Not every etymology had a root word listed. For the ones that did not, origin language is listed. SOURCE: (Dubois et. al 1994)



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