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Helping advanced L2 learners of French with article choice: indefinite 'des' vs. generic 'les'

Advanced Anglophone learners of French often have difficulty acquiring the semantic distinction between the indefinite plural article des and the definite plural article les in its generic use. This difficulty can be attributed to the fact that English does not require the marking of this distinction, as it generally uses no article in both cases:

I have friends (= Fr. *des amis*) who live in Paris.

French teachers (= Fr. *les professeurs de français*) speak French very correctly.

Informal observation of learners' interlanguage suggests a tendency to overgeneralize les in contexts where NS would use des.

Existing pedagogical explanations are of little help, as they never go beyond the clearest cases. For example, they do not address the use of articles in sentences which describe habitual actions (e.g. 'I like to work with young people'), which share some qualities of generic sentences.

The goal of this study is to identify the factors that account for the choice of indefinite des or generic les in nonsubject NPs in native-speaker discourse. The study employs three approaches: (i) informal examination of written and oral texts, (ii) a brief survey of native-speaker informants, and, most importantly, (iii) a quantitative study of indefinite des and generic les in nonsubject position in a corpus of informal spoken French.

Factors shown by the latter study to have the greatest predictive value are syntactic function of the NP and, for direct object NPs, the semantic category of the governing verb. There is a strong correlation between indefinite des and direct objects and predicate NPs, as opposed to prepositional objects, which are more evenly divided between indefinites and generics. The study also shows a strong correlation between indefinite (plural) objects and verbs whose semantic content may be described as denoting possession, creation, or transference of the direct object.

References:

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Data sources:

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Concordancier français en-ligne <http://132.208.224.131/Francord.htm>
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