BonPatron: An Online Spelling, Grammar, and Expression Checker

Reviewed by

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PRODUCT AT A GLANCE

Product Type:
Grammar/spell checker

Language:
French

Level:
Any level, though primarily intended for beginning/intermediate students (nonnative and heritage)

Media Format:
Online, web based

Operating Systems:
Windows and Mac; any OS that supports current web browsers

Hardware Requirements:
whatever amount of RAM required by the OS; no hard disk space required; VGA+ video

Supplementary Software:
Firefox, Internet Explorer (5.5+) for Windows, Safari, Opera, Konqueror

Documentation:
Integrated online help

Price:
Currently free (http://bonpatron.com)

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

Originally developed in Canada at the University of Alberta and McMaster University for anglophone learners of French, BonPatron (formerly LePatron) is hailed as a tool for anyone who is trying to improve writing skills, purportedly K-University. It is freely available from the developers’ website (http://bonpatron.com).

1 I would like to thank Kathryn Murphy-Judy for her contributions to an earlier draft of this review.
In the lower right hand corner of the log-on screen (see Figure 1), one can choose the interface language using the links for either English or French.

Figure 1
BonPatron Log-on Screen

The top of the window features a user testimonial and a More button linked to other user comments. Most of all the commenters, teachers and students alike, note how BonPatron has helped them and how pleased they are that it exists.

Links are provided to a FAQ, an email address, and internet bookmarks. The FAQ runs the gamut from pricing (it’s free), to accuracy (it has foibles as all such programs do), to competitor comparison, to future plans. In other words, it is a typical FAQ.

Links to BonPatron announcements and handy tips about the use of the program are given at the bottom of the screen. Links are also given to various external websites offering grammatical correction, text revision, and help with French.

The heart of the BonPatron screen is the large white window for text input. Two text editors are offered. One is more basic in the sense that it does not integrate the mark-up into the original text box and works with less advanced versions of certain browsers. Text can either be typed in directly (a virtual keyboard for French accents for lower and uppercase letters is provided) or pasted in from an external document. When pasting text, formatting is lost, however. The maximum amount of text that BonPatron can handle is limited to what it can process in 60 seconds, about 1,500 words.

Once the text is entered into the field, clicking on one or the other of two Vérifier le texte (‘Check Text’) buttons, located above and below the text box, begins the checking
process. The area below the input window contains two links, one that pastes in an example text (with common anglophone mistakes) and a reset link (effacer) that erases any currently pasted text.

In the lower left-hand corner, below the text window, are two checkbox options: the first selects the gender of the user in order to assign the correct gender to je. The second checkbox indicates whether or not the user is Francophone. Selecting Francophone decreases the program’s sensitivity to typical learner errors.

EVALUATION

In evaluating grammar checkers, one needs to be aware of the kinds of errors they can and cannot correct. According to the developers of BonPatron, “a pedagogically-oriented grammar checker like BonPatron is at least as good as human correction for helping students improve their L2 writing skills” (Nadasdi & Sinclair, 2007).

While this may be true with respect to surface morphology and syntax, the same most definitely does not apply to semantically based errors. Aside from commonly confused words or faux amis, grammar checkers cannot recognize errors in vocabulary. Tense usage and pronominal reference are equally beyond their ability to correct. Of necessity, they operate on the assumption that the underlying syntactic structure of a text is sound. Because of the risk of misidentification of errors when the syntax of a text is faulty, they pass over in silence the entirety of structures they are unable to recognize. Although this works reasonably well for native speakers, it is problematic in the case of language learners. Grammar checkers like the one in Word, which makes no allowance for the imperfect grammars of learners, tend to miss what to a teacher are very obvious mistakes. The Antidote program, on the other hand, allows users to indicate their relative degree of linguistic competence and adjusts its error detection to respond to mistakes when it would otherwise not do so to avoid miscorrection (see Burston, 1998). A few producers offer grammar checkers for French that specifically target the interlanguage of anglophone learners. This is the case of Sans-Faute (see Murphy-Judy, 2003), Le Correcteur Didactique, and BonPatron. Unlike general purpose grammar checkers, the latter incorporate into their checking algorithms underlying grammars which take typical learner errors into account.

The BonPatron program was evaluated using a Mac PowerBook G4 (1.67 GHz, 2 GB RAM) running OS 10.4.9. The speed of operation was quick (~10 seconds for a 250 word composition), and no problems were encountered.

The program was tested against a subset of 10 student compositions that were used in previous CALICO reviews of the above mentioned French grammar checkers (Murphy-Judy, 2003). The compositions were written by students in their second year of university level French with at least high school study of the language. In all, the compositions contained 335 surface-level morphosyntactic errors out of a total of 2,643 words. This equates to a rate of about one error for every eight words, which is very typical of students at this level. The composition below is representative of the kinds of errors found in the set used for this evaluation.

C’est la voyage que je me souviens aussi que le concert. On à arrivé deux heures avant commencement, et ça c’était bien car la concert était en plein air. On a eut de la chance aussi, parce que les temps faisait beau. On buvait de la biere et mangait des sandwiches - moi un sandwich poulet hawaienne - ils me manquez maintenant, les sandwiches poulet hawaienne. Eventuellement, le concert à commencé, et c’était super. Ils ont eux les lasers qui faisait des dessins, et des grand ballons en style des animaux.

La musique était fantastique, tout le soir était fantastique - mais peut-être je me souviens que c’était beaucoup mieux que c’était en vérité - c’était mon premier concert, j’adore Pink Floyd, et j’étais avec ceux-lui qui j’aimais les plus du monde apart de ma famille bien sûr! Mais je suis content que c’est comme ça - je ne vais pas vivre cette nuit encore jamais - alors ça ne fait pas, du mal - ça fait des bons souvenirs.

Marking code:
Underlined words = detected and correctly identified errors.
Red italicized words = detected errors, insufficient information given to correct
Bold/red highlighted words = detected errors, but source misidentified
Bold/green highlighted words = false correction
Blue highlighted words = undetected morphosyntactic error

The output screen of BonPatron for this composition is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2
BonPatron Output Screen
By design, BonPatron flags possible errors but does not correct them for the user the way most grammar checkers typically do. Instead, it identifies possible errors according to whether they are grammatical or orthographic. Grammatical problems are indicated in bold text surrounded by a text box. Unrecognized spellings are indicated in italics. Within each category, a further distinction is made between forms that need to be modified (i.e., definite mistakes), which are indicated in red, and those that need to be verified, which are indicated in yellow. Passing the cursor over grammatical errors pops up an explanation of the probable cause of the problem and an example of correct usage. With spelling problems, a list of possible correctly spelled words is offered (see Figure 3).

Figure 3  
Grammar Explanations

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 **ils me manquent** maintenant, les sandwiches poulet **käseløgel**.

Si le sujet est suivi d’un verbe conjugué, il faut un verbe qui termine par *-ent ou -ont*, par ex. **ils disent**, etc., **elles font** etc.
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As can be seen with the example *meillieur* in Figure 4, the list of spelling alternatives is often surprisingly long, indicating just how difficult it can be for a spell checker to second guess the user’s intent (and how easy it is for the algorithm to make a miscorrection).

Figure 4  
Spelling Alternatives

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 Faute d’orthographe - suggestions: *meilleurs, meilleur, meilleurs, miellé, miellés, mille, maille, maillié, millés, millet, pellle, sellle, tellle, veillé, veillié, mailler, mailles, maillés, m’aille, m’ailler, m’ailles*
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In keeping with the pedagogical intent of BonPatron, multiple instances of the same error require multiple corrections, there is no “apply to all” option. Thus, for example, all six instances of *etait* in the sample text have to be individually corrected.

While more work for learners, and more time consuming, flagging errors instead of correcting them has the definite advantage of requiring users to reflect on what they are doing and actively use their knowledge of the language to make their own corrections. Aside from its intuitive attractiveness, it also allows the checking algorithm to operate in murky grammatical waters with less chance of making miscorrections since it is easier to detect anomalies than to correct them.

**Performance**

Of the 335 errors contained in the ten sample compositions, BonPatron successfully detected 296 errors (88%) (see Table 1).

Table 1  
BonPatron Performance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Correct identification</th>
<th>Errors detected</th>
<th>+ Information</th>
<th>- Information</th>
<th>Miscorrections</th>
<th>False corrections</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In 268 of the detected errors (91%), the source of the error was correctly identified and sufficient information (e.g., grammatical explanation, example, or word list) was made available to allow learners to rectify the mistake. In 28 instances (9%), the help offered would probably not have sufficed to lead to a correction, as illustrated in following examples:

Error: “Parmi les comédies auxquel j’ai participé”
Comment: L’adjectif doit probablement être au pluriel, par ex.: des livres intéressants.

Error: “je ne vais pas vivre cette nuit encore jamais”
Comment: À l’écrit, la négation se forme avec ne + verbe + pas/jamais/rien/personne.

Another type of insufficient help involved spelling errors for which the correct form was not included in the list of suggestions. In 12 cases (4%), the source of a detected error was misidentified. In 3 instances (1%), a false correction was made.

For purposes of comparison, the sample student text was submitted to *BonPatron*, *Antidote Prisme* (Mac ver. 6) and *Word* 2004 (Mac ver. 11.3), with the following results:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Correct identification</th>
<th></th>
<th>Miscorrections</th>
<th>False corrections</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Errors detected</td>
<td>+ Information</td>
<td>- Information</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>BonPatron</em></td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Antidote</em></td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Word</em></td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As has been the case with other grammar checker comparisons, *Word* fares the least well with student texts. It made no miscorrections or false corrections, but only because it passes over in silence structures that it does not recognize, resulting in an error detection rate only half of that of the other two programs. It also gives considerably less information about the errors it detected. The *BonPatron* program compares quite favorably to *Antidote*, though in detecting a greater number of errors it provides less helpful information about some of them.

Aside from quantitative differences, grammar checkers rarely, if ever, detect the same errors. Gender errors and misspellings are intrinsically the easiest to spot, so these are the areas of greatest overlap between grammar checkers. But even here, differences can be observed. The *Antidote* program, for example, picked up the incorrect gender of *la concert* and the separation of *auto route* into two words which neither *BonPatron* nor *Word* detected. Surprisingly, although *BonPatron* correctly detected that there was something wrong with *mangait*, it did not offer the obvious (to a teacher at least) correct spelling of the verbal form. Likewise, it could detect the anomaly in *les temps faisait beau* but could not identify the correct spelling. On the other hand, it had no difficulty offering correct alternatives for *bougait*, *le concert à commencé*, *on les à cherché* (including past participle agreement) or *on a eut*. When confronted with *ils ont eux les lasers*, however, *BonPatron* misidentified the source of the error as a misplaced pronoun object. Neither *Antidote* nor *Word* spotted the anomaly.

Owing to its semantic nature, prepositional usage is an area that grammar checkers usually do not try to correct. However, *BonPatron* is aware of some typical student errors and
was able to correctly identify the incorrect direct object in *Je ne me souviens plus le nom*. So, too, in another composition, it correctly queried the use of the preposition *avec* in *Le reste du monde n’est pas *content avec* cette idée*.

Determiner errors are another semantic area with which grammar checkers typically do not deal effectively. Yet, *BonPatron* was able to detect violations of the “pas de” rule in *ça ne fait pas du mal* as well as the “de + plural adjective” rule in *ça fait des bons souvenirs*.

Failure to use the subjunctive is also a semantically related error that *BonPatron* attempts to identify. It performs very well when the subjunctive is triggered by the occurrence of a specific verb or adjective, as in *Mais je suis *content que c’est comme ça*. But the correcting algorithm can also go astray, as it did when making a false correction of the subordinate verb after *c’était beaucoup mieux que* in *je me souviens que c’était beaucoup mieux que c’était en vérité*.

Being web based, *BonPatron* has the ability to collect data from the compositions that are submitted to it for correction, which the developers systematically analyze to improve their correction algorithms. So, too, the web format allows program changes to be made on a continual basis without the need to wait for update releases. As a consequence, it is to be noted that most of the correction shortcomings indicated above have in fact already been remedied.

A particularly useful feature of *BonPatron* is the Résumé des fautes which categorizes all the errors in a text according to their nature. The summary also includes links to online exercises which allow learners to practice grammatical points, as can be seen with the négation error report under *le choix des mots* in Figure 5.

Figure 5
Résumé des fautes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Faute de grammaire</th>
<th>le choix des mots</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>la forme des mots</td>
<td>préposition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>adjectif</td>
<td>ne me souviens plus le nom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tout la verbe</td>
<td>pronom relatif</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On été a eut</td>
<td>lui qui j’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>à cherché content que c’est</td>
<td>négation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On été déterminant</td>
<td>nuit encore jamais (exercices)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>du ville pas du mal</td>
<td>l’ordre des mots</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>préposition</td>
<td>pronom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>des bons souvenirs</td>
<td>ont eux</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>l’accord</th>
<th>Faute d’orthographe</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>adjectif - substantif</td>
<td>j’étais</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>grand ballons</td>
<td>C’était</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sujet - verbe</td>
<td>meilleur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ils me manquez</td>
<td>était</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>déterminant - substantif</td>
<td>c’était</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>des monde</td>
<td>meilleur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>la jour</td>
<td>meilleurs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>la voyage</td>
<td>bougait</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n’était</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>meilleur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>chocolate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>préparé</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>apart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>faissait</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Teacher Fit**

The use of spelling/grammar checkers as a pedagogical tool has been explored by a number of researchers (Charnet & Panckhurst, 1998; Jacobs & Rodgers, 1999; Tschichold, 1999; Vernon, 2000; Fandrych, 2001; Nadasdi & Sinclair, 2007). As far as English is concerned, such tools have not proven to be very useful. Aside from verb/subject agreement, there is very little surface level grammar to check in English, which essentially limits their usefulness to spell checking. In comparison, without morphosyntactic analysis, it is impossible to spell check a French document. In the absence of grammatical context, a spell checking algorithm cannot detect any errors in a sentence like

*Les petit filles sont parti.*

Taken in isolation, there is nothing wrong with the spelling of any of these words. French grammar checkers have thus always had to deal with surface level morphosyntax. As a consequence, they have consistently shown more pedagogical promise.

To the extent that French grammar checkers are capable of detecting surface level errors, which the best products do quite well indeed, the question becomes how best to use them. In principle, two basic approaches can be taken. The first is for a grammar checker to identify errors and give correct forms. The second approach is for the grammar checker to detect errors but then require users to make any necessary corrections.

With regard to giving correct forms, it is important to bear in mind that even the best French grammar checkers (which have consistently proven to be the best performing of any language) cannot automatically correct all surface level errors. The more a grammar checker tries to do so, the more miscorrections and false corrections it is likely to make. Consequently, all grammar checkers require the intervention of users in the correction process to some extent. That being said, it remains an open pedagogical question whether or not a grammar checker should make corrections for users when it is able to do so.

A basic tenet of interactionist theories of language acquisition is that learners must "notice the gap" between their interlanguage and the language they are attempting to learn (Schmidt, 1990). Moreover, according to the output hypothesis (Swain, 1985, 1993), active engagement in language production is critical to language acquisition.

The approach taken by *BonPatron*, which systematically requires learners to note and correct their own errors, is thus very much in conformity with these theories. Learners, however, are not simply left on their own to figure out what is wrong but, rather, are provided with both metalinguistic explanations and illustrative examples to guide them. So, too, where the system has several possible spelling and grammar corrections to offer, these are presented for users to choose from. In conformity with Baddeley’s work (1990) on the critical role of memory retrieval in learning, learners are thus required to consciously delve into their own linguistic resources to make correct choices.

**Learner Fit**

The claims of *BonPatron*’s developers notwithstanding, no spelling/grammar checker is likely to be able to serve a target audience as broad as that of K-University. As far as *BonPatron* itself is concerned, while it is in fact used in Canadian elementary schools, the conscious attention to language rules and forms which it demands of users make it more suitable for older learners.
As previously indicated, *BonPatron* targets anglophone learners and, in particular, heritage speakers. It is likely to prove most useful to beginning-advanced intermediate level learners (A1-B1 on the Common European Framework scale). However, given the choice between *BonPatron* and *Word’s Proofing Tool*, left to their own devices students are likely to prefer *Word*. While *BonPatron* is unquestionably the better tool, the *Word* spelling/grammar checker makes corrections whereas *BonPatron* does not. It is therefore much less demanding to use. *Word* is also locally accessible, whereas *BonPatron* can only be accessed over the internet.

If students are going to benefit from what *BonPatron* has to offer, they need to be made to understand that, unlike *Word* (and most other grammar checkers), *BonPatron* is primarily a facilitative learning tool. They need to understand that it will not only help them make much better corrections but also assist them in learning how to avoid the mistakes in the first place. As with any grammar checker, students need to be taught how to use *BonPatron*, in particular how to understand the explanations it gives and how to choose among the options it proposes.

For maximum effectiveness, the error summaries *BonPatron* provides need to be studied after a composition has been corrected. While this can be done by copying and pasting into a text document, a useful improvement to *BonPatron* would be to provide an option to save the error summary as an external file. Although intended for personal use, the error summary could equally well be submitted to instructors along with submitted work. This would allow teachers to track progress and focus on the writing (and learning) process and not just the product. Used in this way, the error summary could help guide the content of an entire class or indeed a whole curriculum.

**SUMMARY**

The *BonPatron* program is a very competent tool for identifying the kinds of surface level morphosyntactic errors that typically occur in the writing of beginning- to advanced-intermediate-level mature anglophone learners of French. It can, of course, prove equally useful to francophone speakers. At the linguistic competence level it targets, *BonPatron* is capable of performing on a par with *Antidote*, arguably the best general purpose French grammar checker on the market. While no currently available French grammar checker can deal with the range of errors a human corrector can, the developers of *BonPatron* are quite justified in claiming that it can also hold its own compared to teacher correction of surface level grammatical errors. However, performing at this level presupposes that students recognize its pedagogical function and learn to work with it actively, that is, not just to correct errors but also to learn the language. The developers of *BonPatron* are to be commended for their considerable efforts and especially for making the program freely available.

**SCALED RATING**

(1 low - 5 high)

- Implementation Possibilities: 5
- Pedagogical Features: 4+
- Use of Computer Capabilities: 5
- Ease of Use: 5
- Overall Evaluation: 5
- Value for Money: 5+
REFERENCES


PRODUCERS’ CONTACT INFORMATION

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The *BonPatron* program is available at http://bonpatron.com

**REVIEWER’S BIODETA**

Jack Burston is a foreign language specialist. He is the Director of the Language Center at the University of Cyprus. Jack has a particular interest in faculty development, software evaluation, and language center design. He has been the Software Review Editor of the *CALICO Journal* since 1996. He has served on the CALICO Editorial Board since 1995 and is a former member and chair of the CALICO Executive Board. He is also the Editor of the IALLT *Language Center Design Kit* and the *Digital Language Lab Solutions* manual.

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