Fluent French

Experiences of an English speaker

by Erik T. Mueller


Read more about French

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What would it be like to speak French fluently?

I fell in love with the French language when I began studying it in high school. After visiting Paris for a week and living with a French family for three weeks, I loved it even more. I wondered what it would be like to learn to speak French fluently:

Is there a single moment when the language finally clicks and you understand it? When can you speak it? How long does it take? Once you can understand and speak it, does it feel as natural as English? Can you distinguish different dialects—both accents and vocabulary? In the same way as English dialects? How much are the differences between English and French cultural?

I didn't know whether I would ever find out the answers to these questions. Then years later, I was given the opportunity by my employer to transfer to their Paris office. I lived in France for three years, during which I kept a record of words, expressions, and perceptions.

I have organized this into three major sections, each consisting of short chapters. The first section discusses various French words and expressions, the second concentrates on comparisons between French and English (though such comparisons are made in the other sections as well), and the third discusses some of the finer points of French. At the end, I will review the above questions and attempt to answer them.

It is assumed the reader knows some basic French, though translations will be provided. Examples will be given in Parisian French and American English—what I am familiar with. I have tried to provide translations which are as accurate and idiomatic as possible in my dialect of English. (Though some readers will undoubtedly find them "too American").

Section 1: Words and expressions

The basics of spoken French

When I first arrived in France while in high school, I was surprised to learn that ne is often omitted in spoken French:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>written French</th>
<th>spoken French</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Il n'est pas trés cher.</td>
<td>Il est pas trés cher. It's not very expensive.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Je ne sais pas.</td>
<td>Je sais pas.</td>
<td>I don't know.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Je ne vois plus Corinne.</td>
<td>Je vois plus Corinne. I don't see Corinne anymore.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cela ne sert à rien.</td>
<td>Ca sert à rien.</td>
<td>It's of no use.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ne bouge pas!  Bouge pas!  Freeze!

ne is never deleted in written French.

In French before a vowel, le and la become l', que becomes qu', and so on. In spoken French there are even more contractions:

Je ne sais pas.  J'sais pas.  I don't know.
Tu es fou.  T'es fou.  You're crazy.
Il ne faut pas le dire.  Faut pas le dire.  You shouldn't say it.
tout ce qu'ils font  tout ce qu'i'font  everything they do
peut-être  p'têt'  maybe

J'sais pas is pronounced jsaispas. It is often contracted further to ché pas and in the extreme becomes simply chpas. To sound authentic, you must pronounce the ch sound twice, and say chché pas. Je suis is also shortened to chchuis.

Questions are formed without the inversion or est-ce que usually taught in French class:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>written French</th>
<th>spoken French</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Qui est-ce?</td>
<td>C'est qui? or Qui c'est?</td>
<td>Who is it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Où vas-tu?</td>
<td>Où tu vas? or Tu vas où?</td>
<td>Where are you going?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comment t'appelles-tu?</td>
<td>Tu t'appelles comment? or Comment tu t'appelles?</td>
<td>What's your name?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quel âge as-tu?</td>
<td>T'as quel âge? or Quel âge t'as?</td>
<td>How old are you?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A rising voice pitch or intonation is used in yes/no questions such as the following, to distinguish them from declarative sentences:

Ne trouves-tu pas?  Tu trouves pas?  Don't you think?
Est-elle sortie?  Elle est sortie?  Did she leave?

Extra pronouns at the beginning or end of the sentence are very often used for emphasis:

Ché pas, moi.  I dunno.
Moi, ché pas.  I dunno.
Moi, j'pense que...  I think...
C'est important, ça.  That's important.
Ça, c'est important.  That's important.

Conversational tics

There are some very common reflex-like phrases. To express agreement:

C'est ça.  That's right.
Effectivement.  Indeed.
En effet.  Right.
Justement.  Exactly./As a matter of fact, yes./That's the thing.
Tout ŕ fait.  Absolutely.
Absolument.  Absolutely.
Exactement.  Exactly.
Exact./C'est exact.  That's right./That's correct.
Voilà. Right./There you are.
Bien sûr. Of course.
Eh oui. I'm afraid so./You got it.
Bon. Fine. (can also mean "fine!" as in not fine)
D'accord. OK.

"oui" is pronounced a variety of ways. Listening to my coworkers talking on the phone, I noticed they would say "oui (yes)" at first and then "ouais (yeah)." The first "oui" was more of a "Yes, how may I help you?" or "Yes, got it" and the later "ouais" more of a "Yes, right."

The "ee" sound in "oui"-for that matter all final "ee" and "oo" (as in "tout") sounds in French-are often pronounced with an extra air hissing/blowing sound or constricted flow of air.

"oui" is often pronounced with what sounds to me like a "smiling" sound.

When interjecting "ouais" while the other person is speaking, to indicate you are following, it is often pronounced by inhaling air into the mouth instead of exhaling from the lungs as is normally the case.

Ways of saying "what":

- Comment? What?
- Quoi? (less formal) What?
- Hein? (even less formal) Huh?
- Pardon? (more formal) Pardon?
- Oui? What?
- Comment ça? What do you mean?
- C'est que dire? What do you mean?
- C'est quoi, ça? What's that?

Some other very frequent short phrases:

- Ah bon? Really?
- Bien sûr. Yeah, right. (said ironically to express disbelief)
- Ca va? So, are you ready?/Are you all set/?Got it?
- Ca va. There we are./That's it./I'm all set./Got it!
- Ca va. I'm OK.
- Ca se voit. It shows./You can tell.
- Ca va de soi. That goes without saying.
- Ca n'a rien d'voir. That has nothing to do with it./No comparison./It's like night and day.
- C'est ça? Is that it?
- C'est pas grave. That's all right./It doesn't matter.
- C'est evident. It's obvious.
- C'est pas évident. It's not so easy. (to do, to figure out)
- C'est pas vrai! I can't believe it!/You've got to be kidding!
- Je n'en sais rien. I have no idea.
- Je ne sais plus. I don't know anymore.
- Je m'en fou. I couldn't care less.
- Même pas. Not even.
- On y va? Shall we go?
- Où ça? Where?
- Qu'est-ce que tu racontes? What are you talking about?
- Vas-y ! Go ahead!
Synonyms for good

In English, every few years the word for good changes: Before I was born, things were jim-dandy, hun-dy-dory, peachy-keen, nifty, the cat's pajamas. In the 60's, they were groovy, heavy, in, and neat. In the 70's, cool, hip, the most, and out of this world. In the 80's, awesome, killer, happening, hot, and totally rad. In the 90's, rockin, slammin, huge, fat, strong, and to die for (with cool making a comeback). There are many such words and they vary regionally and from crowd to crowd. Life is (was?) wicked pisser in Boston, bitchen and tubular in California, brill, grand, smashing, and glitter in England.

The same is true in French. Besides bien and bon, the most frequent adjectives meaning good nowadays are génial, sympa, sublime, super, and cool. C'est génial ! C'est sympa ! Ta robe, elle est sublime ! Young kids say extra and géant. (There's a cereal called Extra and the slogan for La Géode, a planetarium dome in Paris, is C'est géant ! Géant does also mean giant.)

The word extrême (extreme, total) is currently very popular in the mass media. There is a television series called Extrême Limite (Extreme Limit) and an ice cream called Extrême. Even insurance is advertised as being extrême.

Slightly older expressions still used are: chouette, épantant, fabuleux, formidable, formide, fumant, impeccable, impec. Using the prefixes hyper-, super-, méga-, archi-, and ultra-, more words can be formed: super-bon, super-bien, hyper-chouette, super-sympa, méga-génial.

terrible can mean good or bad depending on the context. Originally the word meant inspiring terror and it is still used with this meaning. Then around 1587 it acquired the meanings of dreadful and awful. And since 1664, the word also means tremendous, so that more recently one might hear c'est un type terrible (he's a fantastic guy) or c'est pas terrible (it's not so great). terrible is not so different from the English mean and bad, which can also mean either good or bad.

C'est le pied ! means It's a blast! or It's the most!

C'est le top ! or C'est top ! means It's the best!

C'est classe ! means That's classy!

More lasting and neutral words-similar to English fabulous, fantastic, great, incredible, marvelous, sensational, superb, wonderful, and so on-are: excellent, exceptionnel, extraordinaire, fabuleux, fantastique, incroyable, louable, magnifique, merveilleux, sensationnel, and superbe.

On a cereal box with a bear on it, it says C'est oursement bon ! inventing the new adverb oursement by analogy to vachement (slang for very)-vache means cow and ours means bear.
There are also many ways of saying bad. Ca craint is That's no good or That's worrying and craignos means scary/worrying. C'est chiant is That sucks, and Ca me fait chier means That pisses me off. C'est con is That's stupid. (The French expressions in this paragraph are stronger than the English translations I have given. Use with discretion.)

**Hedges**

English speakers punctuate their sentences with like, well, um, and you know. Words such as these might seem meaningless but there is a certain utility to them. French has similar words.

You very often hear quoi at the end of a sentence. It's an exclamation and hedge word which doesn't have a single equivalent in English:

Elle est jolie, quoi. She's sort of pretty.
La vie, quoi! Life, you know what I mean?
Voilà quoi./Et puis voilà quoi. And that's about it. (= no more to say)
C'est une espèce de légume quoi. It's kind of a vegetable thingy.
You often hear quoi at the end of a summarizing sentence after a long explanation-similar to in short and in other words in English.

espèce de, which means kind of or type of, is also very frequently used for insults:

Espèce de con! You stupid idiot! (stronger in French)
Espèce d'imbécile! You fool!

Another very frequent expression is quand même, which translates differently to English in different situations:

Je crois que les choses sont claires quand même. I think that things are clear, aren't they?
Le pain c'était quand même délicieux. The bread was actually quite delicious.
C'est quand même trés trés génant. This is still very very annoying.
C'est quand même extraordinaire! That's really fantastic!
Oui, mais quand même! Yes, but still!
Quand même! Really!
A frequent expression is en fait, with the t pronounced:
Ce n'est pas mal, en fait. It's actually not so bad.
En fait, elle est assez sympa. Actually she's quite nice.
Another frequent word is enfin:
Yves-et-Simone répondent à une interview en anglais-enfin c'est Simone qui répond...
Yves and Simone answer an interviewer's questions in English—well
actually it's Simone who answers...

Avec la Marquise, enfin la veuve du Duc, ...
With the marchioness—that is, the Duke's widow—...

Elle est blonde, enfin plutôt rousse.
She's a blond—mmm, more of a redhead.

Mais enfin, arrêtez!
Come on already! Stop it!

Enfin, je crois.
At least I think so.

Mais enfin.
But really now.

Mais enfin bon.
But anyway.

The exact meaning of quand même and enfin depends a lot on what tone of voice is used.

There is no exact equivalent to English like which can be inserted almost anywhere in a sentence, although comme is sometimes used in a similar way:

Il y a comme une similitude de situation ...
which means:
There's like a similarity in the situation ...
There is sort of a similarity in the situation ...
There's a certain similarity in the situation ...

In French you might also say:
Il y a une sorte de similitude de situation ...
Il y a une espèce de similitude de situation ...
Il y aurait comme une similitude de situation ...
On dirait qu'il y a une similitude de situation ...

truc (thing, thingy) and machin have various meanings:

Ce n'est pas son truc.          That's not his thing.
Elle a le truc.                She's got a knack for it.
J'ai trouvé ce machin par terre. I found this thingy on the ground.
J'ai un truc f te dire.        I have something to tell you.
Il y a un truc.                There's a trick to it.
Les prix sont-ils truqués?    Are prices rigged?
Machin/Machin-truc            what's-his-face/what's-his-name
Machine                        what's-her-face/what's-her-name
trucage                        special effects (in a film)

disons (shall we say) is another hedge word:
Disons deux fois par semaine.  About twice a week.

Interjections

If you say oh l'ir in an annoyed tone, it means come on or give me a break. If you say it in a consoling tone, it means there there. If you say it in a positive tone, it means oh boy!
bof is an interjection expressing indifference or slight negativeness. This is similar to an interjection used by some English speakers on occasion and difficult to reproduce in print—something like *eh* or *ieh*. La bof génération is the Whatever generation.

You hear hop, et hop, and allez hop more often in French than you hear alley-oop in English (which comes from the French). The *h* is sometimes pronounced as in English.

Other common French interjections:

- ade ade ade uy uy uy/oh dear/oy
- chiche ! I dare you!
- coucou peek-a-boo
- et tac ! so there!
- eh ben tac ! so there!
- hélas alas
- miao meow
- ooo ooo ! yoo-hoo!
- ouch
- oups ! oops!/whoops!
- youpi ! yippie!/yay!

### Inventing new words

Just as you can make up new words in English, you can do this in French.

One common way is to lop off the end of word. The words below are all commonly heard:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clipped form</th>
<th>Complete form</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>appart</td>
<td>appartement</td>
<td>apartment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bac</td>
<td>baccalauréat</td>
<td>baccalaureate (diploma, age 17-18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bénéf</td>
<td>bénéfice</td>
<td>profit, advantage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cata</td>
<td>catastrophe</td>
<td>disaster</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>certif</td>
<td>certificat</td>
<td>certificate (various diplomas)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chrono</td>
<td>chronomètre</td>
<td>stopwatch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>compil</td>
<td>compilation</td>
<td>compilation (CD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>conf</td>
<td>conférence</td>
<td>conference, lecture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d'ac</td>
<td>d'accord</td>
<td>OK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>démago</td>
<td>démagogue</td>
<td>popularity seeker, demagogue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dispo</td>
<td>disponible</td>
<td>available, in stock</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fac</td>
<td>faculté</td>
<td>university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>frigo</td>
<td>frigidaire</td>
<td>(old trademark for) refrigerato</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gauche</td>
<td>gauchiste</td>
<td>leftist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>impec</td>
<td>impecçcible</td>
<td>perfect, great</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>imper</td>
<td>imperméable</td>
<td>raincoat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>intello</td>
<td>intellectuel</td>
<td>intellectuel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>labo</td>
<td>laboratoire</td>
<td>lab/laboratory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>manif</td>
<td>manifestation</td>
<td>protest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>manip</td>
<td>manipulation</td>
<td>manipulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mécano</td>
<td>mécanicien</td>
<td>mechanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mélo</td>
<td>mélodrame</td>
<td>melodrama</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mob</td>
<td>mobylette</td>
<td>(trademark for) moped</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>para</td>
<td>parachutiste</td>
<td>parachutist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>parano</td>
<td>paranôda</td>
<td>paranoia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>périf</td>
<td>périphérique</td>
<td>beltway (around Paris)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>petit-déj'</td>
<td>petit-déjeuner</td>
<td>breakfast</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
fisc is commonly used as an abbreviation for administration fiscale (the French equivalent of the IRS). It sounds (even to native French speakers) as if it is a clipped form of fiscale, but it has a separate existence, having come directly from the Latin fiscus.

distinguo (fine distinction) is directly from Latin.

The linguist Henriette Walter points out that clipped words are not a 20th Century phenomenon-words such as rep (reputation) and incog (incognito) were very popular in 18th Century English.

In a restaurant, the waiter asks the cook for un jour (= plat du jour/today's special).

Another way of creating new words is by adding suffixes. age is a very commonly used to form new masculine nouns out of nouns or verbs:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original word</th>
<th>Derived word</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>bruit (noise)</td>
<td>bruitage (sound effects)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>déraper (to skid)</td>
<td>dérapage (skidding, loss of control)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>essorer (spin-dry)</td>
<td>essorage (spin-dry cycle)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>redémarrer (restart)</td>
<td>redémarrage (recovery, said of economy)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The installation instructions for a curtain rod said:
Pour scier la tringle, retirer le pouliage.

I couldn't find pouliage in the dictionary, but I did find poulie which means pulley. So pouliage means something like pulley mechanism. This is a rare word-a search of the web using the French search engine éclia turned up only once use: pouliage

Harken de contrôle de la trinquette.

collage, a word already very familiar to English speakers, comes from coller (to glue, stick).

There was a movie on TV having lots of fun with the word cocu (cuckold in English, a man whose wife has cheated on him). They used a number of derived words which are in the dictionary-cocuage, cocufier-but also one which wasn't-cocuficateur.

**Everyday differences**

At the same time I was learning French, I was also learning various little differences between the way things are done in France versus the U.S. They seem trivial in retrospect, but they were definitely noticeable at first. For example, when dining in
France, you put the napkin in your lap right before the waiter sets down the dish or right before taking the first bite of food, while in the U.S., you put the napkin in your lap immediately after sitting down.

There is a kind of Melba toast I like which is available in any grocery store in France. The only problem is that the toasts are always breaking on me. I always wondered why such good toasts weren't available in the U.S. and then one day I noticed on the package:

Le Truc
Pour beurrer vos biscottes sans les briser, empilez en trois et tartinez celle du dessus avec un beurre pas trop ferme.

The Trick
To butter your Melba toasts without breaking them, stack them three-high and butter the top one with butter which is not too firm.
That's when I understood that this product is just too user-unfriendly to survive in the American market.

At many places which sell food and have tables, with the exception of Quick and McDonalds (nicknamed MacDo, pronounced MagDo, analogous to the English Mickey D's), you are expected to sit down and be waited upon. You only buy at the counter if you are taking out. No tip is generally expected at the counter.

In restaurants in France, a service charge is either added to the price of each dish (service compris), or added to the total bill (service non compris). So either way, a service charge is already included in the total. In addition to the service charge, you leave an additional 5-10% tip on the table for the waiter/waitress (serveur/serveuse). You are not supposed to tip the patron (owner).

You tip taxi drivers and hairdressers about the same way you would in the U.S.

In many shops and department stores in France, you don't pay the salesperson, obtain the desired items, and leave. First the salesperson gives you a ticket for the items and you then go to a cashier (caisse) to pay. Then you bring the payment receipt back to the salesperson who gives you the purchased items. In a smaller shop the salesperson may bring the items to the cashier for you. (Since returning to the U.S. I have noticed that this model exists here as well: In Sam Ash music stores in Manhattan, you pay at the cashier and the salesperson brings you your merchandise. Or when ordering takeout at the Carnegie Deli, you order your sandwich at the counter, pay at the cashier, and bring back a ticket to get the sandwich.)

The cover story often appears at the beginning of a French magazine. In the U.S., the cover story is never at the front—the advertisers get to try to sell you a few products first. In French magazines the beginning of an article is often reused verbatim as the squib which appears in the table of contents. In the U.S. if it is reused it is more heavily edited.

Even in one of the more respected newspapers such as Le Monde, headlines are designed more to grab your attention than to give the key point of the article. Instead
of a lead which elaborates on the headline, you may have to read all the way to the end of the article to find what the headline was referring to. Headlines in French are ordinary noun phrases or sentences, unlike headlines in English which are in an abbreviated, telegraphic style (obtained by removing articles and be).

In French newspapers, the journalist is permitted—perhaps even expected—to editorialize in every article, whereas in the U.S. articles are supposed to at least convey an impression of objectivity. In January 1995, Le Monde began a separate Op-Ed page patterned after those of Anglo-American newspapers, in a halfhearted attempt to separate editorial from informational articles.

There seem to be topics which come in waves in all the electronic and print media. One week incest was everywhere. The next week it was the origin of the human species in evolution. And the next it seemed everyone was debating the origin of the number zero. If you flip between two television news shows, you will often find they are on the same story at the same time. I'm not exaggerating—in fact Jean-François Kahn recently came out with a whole book on this copycat phenomenon called La Pensée Unique.

In France typewriter and computer keyboards have the A and Q keys reversed, Z and W reversed, and M moved to the right of L. I find it's not that difficult to learn the new key locations. Even after years of typing on a qwerty keyboard, in a few days my fingers adapt to azerty. If I switch back to qwerty, I make mistakes but then re-adapt.

When I moved back to the United States, I noticed the various differences in reverse. One thing I had to unlearn was giving my last name first, instead of my first name first. (The last name is given first in French when filling out a form. Otherwise, the normal order in French is the same as English—first name followed by last name.) I also found myself starting to say What are we? analogous to On est le combien aujourd'hui? instead of What's today's date?. (In English we also say What is it today? or even just What is it?.)

**Television**

French TV show hosts say voici les publicités (here are the commercials) or we'll be back après les pubs (after the commercials)—an American host would never even think the word commercial. Only rarely is a euphemism such as pause (break) used.

Technical things are referred to more often than in American broadcasting:

Les Nationaux de Tennis continuent après le générique.
The French Open will continue after the titles.

Ce journal est terminé.
This news show is over.

On France 2 and France 3 commercials don't usually interrupt a show—they are instead shown in several-minute blocks between shows. On TF1, commercials are shown within a show and between shows as in the U.S.
According to French government regulations, commercials must be clearly separated from programming. Before and after commercials a title saying *Publicité* (commercials) is always shown. Regulations specify how many commercials may be shown, when, and on what channel. The CSA (French FCC equivalent) pursues violations. When one channel crosses the line, another files a complaint, reminiscent of the way the phone companies are always battling it out in the U.S.

Prime time for *sitcoms* (sitcoms) on French TV is around 5 to 7 p.m. Some popular French sitcoms produced in video such as *Le miracle d'amour* (The Miracle of Love) and *Premiers baisers* (First Kisses) are in a serial format and shown every weekday, like soap operas in the States. Others such as *Classe mannequin* (Model class) are shown weekly. Quite a few French-made *TV movies* (téléfilms) and mini-series are shown, but very few French series are produced in film. The quality of French series is lower on average than American ones-to be expected since there is a smaller market over which to collect advertising revenue and amortize production costs.

Many American series such as *Beverly Hills* and *Madame est servi* (Who's the Boss) are shown, dubbed in French (*version française*). Some series such as *Seinfeld* are shown in *version originale* (in the original language with French subtitles), but only on cable. Series from other countries such as Germany are also shown.

The equivalents of the American late-night talk show are on in France each evening from about 6:30 to 8 p.m. *Coucou!* (Peek-a-boo!) and *Nulle part ailleurs* (Nowhere else) are the most popular ones. The talk shows shown later at night, such as *Bouillon de culture* (Culture Hotbed/Broth) or *Le Cercle de minuit* (The Midnight Club), are more serious discussions about books or theater, similar to Charlie Rose on PBS in the States.

It's funny to see American stars appear on French talk shows. Usually they wear a tiny earphone giving a simultaneous English translation and the audience hears a simultaneous French translation of what they say (as in the case of Woody Allen). Other times the host asks questions in English and briefly summarizes their response in French (as in the case of Suzanne Vega, who disappeared during a commercial break, apparently upset about being ignored among the guests or being forced to sing her hit song Luca). Some American stars such as Jodie Foster speak fluent, flawless French, others such as Lauren Bacall speak passable French, while a few brave souls decide to struggle through with whatever little French they may know.

*Local news* (journal régional) is shown on France 3 at around 7 p.m. and national news (nicknamed le vingt heures) is shown at 8 p.m on TF1 and France 2.

Here are some expressions commonly used on TV or in advertising:

- **Audimat** - French Nielsen ratings
- **banc d'essai** - product evaluation (actually test bed)
- **bon de commande** - order blank
- **coffret** - jewel box (for CD or book)
- **dans la limite des stocks disponibles** - while supplies last
- **dans un instant** - next
Merci de votre confiance.             Thank you for your trust.
Merci de votre fidélité.              Thank you for your loyalty.
une page de publicité                 a commercial break

K7 is short for cassette: if you pronounce the letter k and number 7, it sounds like cassette-like EZ (easy) in American English.

Some product names are altered:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>United States</th>
<th>France</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Calgonite</td>
<td>Calgonit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dannon</td>
<td>Danone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oil of Olay</td>
<td>Oil of Olaz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ovaltine</td>
<td>Ovomaltine</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the U.S., Calgonite is a dishwasher powder, while in France, Calgonit gets rid of the calcaire (calcium deposits) in your sink caused by Parisian water.

Common knowledge

Though a French person might know what SNL (Saturday Night Live) is, because old reruns are shown on French cable, few in the U.S. have heard of Patrick Poivre d'Arvor, the news anchor on TF1, much less his popular nickname PPDA. A parody of him named PPD is shown on the nightly Guignols de l'info (or Guignols for short) comedy puppet show on Canal +.

There is a satirical/investigative newspaper called Le Canard Enchaîné, literally The Chained Duck, though canard is also a slang word for newspaper and enchaîner la presse means to shackle the press, so actually The Shackled Rag. When Balladur was prime minister, this paper would refer to him as Ballamou (balle ŕ mou or ball of slack; also, mou means wimp). President Chirac is sometimes referred to as Chichi (fuss).

Some other common knowledge words and phrases in France:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2CV</th>
<th>popular tinny car, pronounced deux chevaux (two horsepower)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DST</td>
<td>French FBI equivalent (Direction de la surveillance du territoire); also the DPSD, SGDN, DGSE, DRM, and COS</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Tu versus vous

When a native French speaker says you in English, mentally it is either a translation of tu (the familiar and singular form) or vous (the formal and plural form). Some expressiveness is lost, but there is no major problem. For the native English speaker learning French, deciding whether to use tu or vous is a bit of a problem.

You might start by using vous, until the person you are speaking to lets you know you can use tu with (or tutoyer) them (though using vous with someone you should use tu with can be just as embarrassing). They will say on se tutoie? Adults always use tu with small children. In many younger circles (less than 25 years old) and when participating in certain sports (other than golf, squash, and tennis) it is natural to use tu right from the start. On Fun Radio, a station on which teenagers call in to discuss their problems, people of all ages tutoyer each other. On the other hand, using tu inappropriately can seem presumptuous-too intimate too soon.

One strategy is to wait until the other person uses tu or vous with you, and follow suit. The trouble is that native French speakers sometimes also do this and they are far more skilled at it.

One time someone who normally uses tu with me used vous and I wondered what was going on. Then I realized she was talking to me and the person next to me-it was the plural vous.

The tu-vous thing isn't just an issue for English speakers. One of my French friends was complaining that when calling perfect strangers within her company they would use tu. She didn't want "to have to use tu." Recently there has been call for a law requiring policemen to use vous when apprehending someone.
Although **tu-vous** is sometimes a hassle, it can sometimes add an extra dimension of interest to a dramatic work: In the movie *L'Effrontée*, the 13-year old heroine visits with a virtuoso concert pianist the same age who uses **vous** with her, underscoring the difference in their worlds. A few seconds later, she uses **tu** which then seems close in a false way. In the play *Le visiteur* in which God visits Freud, the God character transitions between **tu** and **vous** resulting in a powerful schizophrenic effect: Is it an imposter? Is it really God (who uses **tu** with humans, as in *tu ne tueras point/thou shalt not kill*)?

**Meeting and parting**

There was more to meeting and parting than I had thought.

For hello you say **bonjour** during the day and **bonsoir** after sunset. **bon matin** (**good morning**) is **not** used. With close friends you use **tu** with, you say **salut**.

When greeting friends or friends of friends, men and women or women and women exchange **bises**—usually two but sometimes one, three, or four kisses on alternate cheeks. Men and men usually shake hands; good friends might also exchange **bises**. In business settings, men and women generally shake hands. If you are meeting someone for the first time, you say your name.

To say **How are you?** it's **Comment allez-vous?** or for people you use **tu** with, **Comment ça va?** or **Ca va?** The response is **Bien, et vous/toi?** or sometimes even just **Et toi?**

The basic goodbye is **au revoir** or **salut** with someone you use **tu** with.

Various phrases depending on the time of day are also very commonly used:

**Bon après-midi.** Have a nice afternoon.
**Bonne journée.** Have a nice day. (not made fun of in French)
**Bonne soirée.** Have a good night. (used after sundown)
**Bonne nuit.** Good night. (used late at night)

At the end of the week, you would say **bon week-end** (**have a nice weekend**).

It is very frequent in French to say goodbye indicating when you are likely to see the person next:

- **À tout de suite.** See you in a few minutes.
- **À tout f l'heure.** See you shortly./See you in a bit.
- **À t'f l'heure.** See you shortly./See you in a bit.
- **À tout'.** See you shortly./See you in a bit.
- **À bientôt.** See you soon.
- **À plus/A+.** See you later.
- **À onze heures.** See you at 11.
- **À cet après-midi.** See you this afternoon.
- **À ce soir.** See you tonight.
- **À demain matin.** See you tomorrow morning.
- **À demain.** See you tomorrow.
- **À la semaine prochaine.** See you next week.
- **À cette semaine.** See you in the week.
- **À lundi, mardi, ...** See you Monday, Tuesday, ...
À la prochaine. See you next time.
Adieu. Farewell./Have a nice life.

(In a more formal English, until is substituted for see you.) The above may be
combined with au revoir:
Au revoir et f bientôt. Bye. See you soon.
Au revoir can be translated as goodbye in most cases, except:
... et au revoir peut-être.
... and perhaps we'll meet again.

A conversation with a friend might be closed this way:

Bon ben écoute, bon week-end et f lundi.
OK, have a good weekend and I'll see you Monday.

ben is pronounced as if it were written bin. It was originally a variation of bien and is
now a kind of interjection used in certain canned expressions such as bon ben (OK
well), ben oui (well yes), ben non (well no), and eh ben (well).

Another common closing phrase is je te laisse or je vous laisse (similar to I have to
go or I'll let you go).

Also:

Allez, au revoir. All right, goodbye.
Allez, salut. OK, see you.

Note that allez is used here even with people you use tu with. It is more of an
interjection than a command. Allez ! means Come on!

As part of saying goodbye, you again exchange bisé (see above) or handshakes.

Before leaving a store, as a rule you say Merci, au revoir. The shopkeeper will either
say that or au revoir, merci for (slight) variety.

Politeness

There are a number of very frequent formules de politesse (polite phrases) in French.

Ways of saying thank you:

Merci. Thanks./Thank you.
Merci bien. Thank you very much.
Merci beaucoup. Thank you very much.
Merci les garçons. Thanks, guys.
Je vous remercie beaucoup. Thank you very much.
Je te remercie beaucoup. Thank you very much.
Merci infiniment. Thank you very much.
Mille mercis. Thanks a million. (not ironic)
Merci mille fois. Thanks a million. (not ironic)
Merci quand même. Thanks anyway.
Non, merci./Merci. No thanks.
Oui, merci. Yes, thank you.

In the polite style, you must specify who you are addressing, as in Merci, monsieur
and Merci, madame.
Ways of saying you're welcome:

Je vous en prie.                  Don't mention it.
Je t'en prie.                    Don't mention it.
De rien.                        Not at all.
Il n'y a pas de quoi.           Not at all.
C'est moi qui vous remercie.    Thank you.
C'est moi.                      Thank you. (A shopkeeper might say this.)
Tout le plaisir est pour moi.   The pleasure is mine.

The verb in *je vous en prie* is *prier*, literally *to pray* or *to beg*. *I beg of you* may seem excessively polite, but you have to realize the phrase is not perceived (*sentie*/felt) this way by a French speaker. Similarly in English you sometimes say *I beg your pardon?* without thinking about begging or pardons at all.

At first when I would say something like

> Je vous propose d'aller voir un film.

it would seem too formal. The word *propose* in English is used mostly in business meetings or to refer to marriage proposals, but in French it is very common and simply means *suggest*.

*Je vous en prie* and *je t'en prie* are used in other situations: In response to a request for permission to do something it means *please go ahead* or *please do*. When asking someone to stop doing something it means *please*. It can also mean *after you*.

When making your way through a crowd or after bumping into someone, you say *pardon*, *excusez-moi*, or *je m'excuse*.

When asking for something it is standard to include *s'il vous plaît* or *s'il te plaît* (please). In written French there are a number of phrases for saying *please*:

- Prière de ...         Please ... (used on signs)
- Veuillez ...          Please ... (used on signs)
- Je vous prie de ...   Kindly ...

*Je vous serais reconnaissant(e) de bien vouloir .../*
*Je vous prie de bien vouloir ... I would be grateful if you would ...*

*Nous vous saurions gré de .../*
*Nous vous prions de bien vouloir ... We would be grateful if you would ...*

*Vous êtes prié(e)(s) de ... You are cordially invited to ...*

These phrases do tend to be longer in French—a simple *please* can become *nous vous saurions gré de bien vouloir*.

On signs the infinitive is generally used instead of the imperative:

- Ne pas fumer.       Do not smoke.
- Bien fermer la porte. Close door carefully.

Sometimes the third person singular is used:

- Se boît très frais.   Serve chilled.
- Peut être ouvert par le service postal. May be opened by the postal
At the end of a letter, where in English you use *Sincerely* or *Sincerely yours*, there are a number of longer phrases in French.

A man writing to a man uses:

- Recevez, Monsieur, l'assurance de mes sentiments les meilleurs.
- Recevez, Monsieur, l'assurance de mes sentiments distingués.
- Recevez, Monsieur, l'assurance de mes sentiments cordiaux.

More formally:
- Veuillez agréer, Monsieur, l'assurance de mes sentiments les meilleurs.
- Je vous prie d'agréer, Monsieur, l'assurance de mes sentiments les meilleurs.
- Je vous prie de croire, Monsieur, en l'assurance de mes sentiments respectueux.

The classic formal version is:

- Je vous prie d'agréer, Monsieur, l'expression de mes sentiments distingués.

A literal translation of these expressions would run something like *please accept the assurance of my best feelings* but really they are just a way of saying *yours faithfully*. They remind me of obsolete English phrases such as *your obedient servant*.

A woman writing to a woman uses formulas similar to the above, with *Monsieur* replaced with *Madame* of course.

Formal letters between men and women are not supposed to use the word *sentiments*. Instead you write:

- Veuillez agréer, Madame, mes plus respectueux hommages.
- Veuillez agréer, Monsieur, l'expression de ma considération distinguée.

There are many slight variations of the above and vague rules about what to use in different situations. Only rarely will you see a more creative version:

- Nous vous prions de croire à notre envie de danser avec vous.

This was the closing of an invitation to the *Bal Moderne (Modern Ball)* - a yearly event in Paris where established choreographers teach new dances to any interested amateur.

When writing to close friends, it's *je t'embrasse* (literally *I kiss you*).

**Yuppies**
The largest elevators in France would be considered small in the States. Once I collided a woman as she was coming out of one and I said *excusez-moi* to which she responded *décidément!* (decidedly!). This is yuppiespeak in French.

Some yuppe or related words:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>French</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>arriviste</td>
<td>careerist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bon chic bon genre, BCBG</td>
<td>preppie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>carriériste</td>
<td>careerist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fou de boulot</td>
<td>workaholic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jeune cadre dynamique</td>
<td>yuppe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NAP</td>
<td>preppie from Neuilly, Auteuil, or Passy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nouveau riche</td>
<td>nouveau riche</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>parvenu</td>
<td>nouveau riche</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>requin</td>
<td>shark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yuppe</td>
<td>yuppe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yuppiste</td>
<td>yuppe (adjective)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Cyberspeak**

The information superhighway is *l'autoroute de l'information* or *l'autoroute numérique* or *l'autoroute électronique* or *l'infoduc*.

The Internet in French is *Internet*, usually without the definite article but sometimes with, depending on the speaker. It is also known as *le Net (the net)* or *le Réseau (the net)*. *Internet* is not to be confused with *internat*, which can mean boarding school and internship.

The word for email in French is *email*, not to be confused with *émail* (enamel), though the more officially recognized term is *courrier électronique* (electronic mail).

Usenet news is *les news de Usenet*. A newsgroup is *un forum, un groupe Usenet, un groupe*, or *un niouzegroupe*. A résospectateur is a passive reader of net news or lurker in English, by analogy to *téléspectateur* (television viewer). réso is short for réseau (network). A FAQ (frequently asked questions) is a FAQ or *foire aux questions*.

A fax is *un fax* or *une télécopie*.

**pas assez de garde-fous contre les fausses manoeuvres** means insufficient idiot-proofing. Otherwise, *garde-fous* means railing.

Some other cyberterms:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>French</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>bouché</td>
<td>hosed (as in <em>the system is hosed</em> or <em>wedged</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>enfilade</td>
<td>thread (sequence of messages on same topic)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>envoi multiple</td>
<td>crosspost</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>multipostage</td>
<td>crossposting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professeur Nimbus</td>
<td>mad scientist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>plantage</td>
<td>a crash</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>se planter</td>
<td>to crash</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>visiophone</td>
<td>videophone, picturephone</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When discussing technology, native French speakers don’t always know the French term. A coworker said she would check *ma mailbox* instead of *ma boîte à lettres*. (I asked her, *Why ma mailbox* and not *mon mailbox*? By analogy to *la poste.*) Another coworker knew the word *bug* in French, but not the officially recommended term *bogue*. Chine Lanzman writes in *Univers >interactif* (one French equivalent to *Wired* magazine):

> Pour bug, il faut dire bug, et non bogue, parce que ce n'est au fond pas la même chose... Qui a jamais marché sur un bogue? tandis que les bugs, les cafards, c'est vraiment commun et emmerdant. Il faut garder les mots anglais, cela ajoute quelque chose au français...

> For bug, you should say "bug" and not "bogue" which really isn't the same thing. Who has ever worked on a "bogue"? Whereas "bugs", cockroaches, are really common and annoying. We should keep English words—they add something to French.

A zero-coupon bond known as a *strip* in English is often called *un strip* in French, instead of the more cumbersome, official *obligation démembrée*.

A VCR is called a *magnétoscope* in French, and *magnétophone* means *tape deck*.

Some objects referred to by abbreviations found in French are: TGV (*high-speed train*) which is short for *train à grande vitesse*, and VMC (*ventilation* system in apartment) which is short for *ventilation mécanique contrôlée*.

### The newness of language

Many words which seem new and unique have in fact been around for quite a while. *To veg out in front of the TV* seemed like an ultramodern expression to me, so I was surprised to read in *Les liaisons dangereuses*, published in 1782:

> au moins, je parle à quelqu'un qui m'entend, et non aux automates près de qui je végête depuis ce matin.

> at least that way I'm talking to someone who hears me—not those automatons I have been vegetating alongside since this morning.

> je végête depuis si longtemps !

> I have been vegetating so long!

The *Oxford English Dictionary* shows this meaning of *vegetate* to have existed in English since 1740. OK, the form *veg out* is probably more recent.

To say that something is just a little too *precious* is something said either by Chrissie Hynde or a yuppie, right? No, this use of the word was popularized by Molière's *Précieuses ridicules* in 1659.

*pour sûr* (**for sure**) is not Valley Talk, but literary French.

The French version of *Mr. Clean* is *Mr. Propre*. A recent English borrowing? Though the purists would prefer otherwise, *Mr.* has been used as in addition to *M.* as an abbreviation for *Monsieur* at least since the 1731 edition of *Manon Lescaut*.

Sometimes I would think a word corresponded to a more modern English word than it actually did: *arrière-pensée* is not *hidden agenda* (**programme secret**) but *ulterior*...
motive. clochard is not homeless person (sans-abri) but bum. patins ŕ roulettes is not rollerblades (des roller blades), but roller skates.

Language change and "bad" grammar

English grammarians such as Fowler consider It's me (rather than It is I) to be technically wrong. But C'est moi has been considered correct in French since the 16th century, before which Ce sui je (sui = suis) was used.

Another case where "bad" English grammar is correct in French is this here watch, those there watches: cette montre-çi, ces montres-là.

There is no progressive tense in French corresponding to the English I am running. Depending on the situation, you would say either Je cours or Je suis en train de courir (I am in the process of running). Until the 17th century, however, a progressive did exist in French and you could in fact say something like Je suis courant.

In English the verb do is heavily used and in French class one learns various do-less equivalents:

Do you speak French? Parlez-vous français?
You speak French, don't you? Vous parlez français, n'est-ce pas?
You don't speak French, do you? Vous ne parlez pas français, n'est-ce pas?
Yes, I do. Si, je parle français.

However when do is used to avoid repeating a previously mentioned verb in English, it is sometimes possible to use faire in French:

Il court moins bien que je ne le faisais à son âge.
He doesn't run as well as I did when I was his age.

In informal English, words which are normally adjectives are employed as adverbs (good instead of well, slow instead of slowly, and so on). This also occurs in French: il faut parler clair aux français is literally it is necessary to speak clear to the French. travailler dur is to work hard and boursicoter sérieux is to trade stocks seriously.

Learning new words

Generally the first time I hear a new French word I don't notice it. It's only after hearing a new word several times that I start to take notice and finally decide to look it up in the dictionary. Then I usually forget it. But then I hear it or read it or need to use it again, go back to the dictionary, and at this point I start to retain it. I can sometimes figure out what words mean from context, but not always very precisely.

After force feeding lots of words and phrases into the brain, I find they start to come back out spontaneously.

At first I can't keep straight similar sounding words such as
When I saw the phrase *le brevet du fil ŕ couper le beurre* I skipped it at first because it seemed like some idiom I wouldn't know. But it literally does mean the *patent for the wire butter knife*. Though the phrase *Il n'a pas inventé le fil ŕ couper le beurre* means *he's no genius*.

As in your native language, after you've learned a new word you notice it everywhere and wonder how you ever did without it. This happened to me for:

- *à plusieurs reprises* several times
- *atout* asset, feature, strong point
- *susciter* give rise to, provoke, create

Occasionally when seeing a word such as *or* or *but*, I will first interpret it in the wrong language. So if I am reading a French text and I see *or*, I might think I am seeing English *or* instead of French *or* which means *and yet or now*. Or if I am reading an English text and I see *but*, I might think I am reading the French word for *goal*. This generally happens only in a text with frequent quotes in the other language, or if I start reading something without first thinking about what language it is in.

**Cute words and expressions**

An *amuse-gueule* (amuse the mouth) or *amuse-bouche* is a little sandwich or cracker served before dinner. The order of courses in a complete French meal (*repas*) is:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>French</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>apéritif + amuse-gueule</td>
<td>before-dinner drink + hors d'oeuvre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hors d'oeuvre</td>
<td>starter/appetizer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>entrée</td>
<td>starter/appetizer (also, entrée in British English)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>plat principal</td>
<td>main course (also, entrée in American English)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>entremets</td>
<td>dessert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fromage</td>
<td>cheese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dessert(s)</td>
<td>dessert(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>digestif</td>
<td>after-dinner liqueur</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The *entremets* (which usually involves cream) may also come after the cheeses.

Note the different distributions of *entrée* and *hors d'oeuvre* in French and English.

The expression *entre la poire et le fromage* refers to the time of the meal when the discussion becomes less serious. Yes, it's true!

How would you like a *tartine de pain complet*? This is just (*whole wheat*) bread and butter. Actually, it is good.

And how about a *hot dog nature*? Wow, I didn't know they came out with a new health-food hot dog. Sure, I'll try it! Actually this just means a *plain hot dog (without mustard or ketchup)*. And a *café nature* is a *coffee black, without sugar*. 
Imagine my pleasure when I found out that my stove had a **minuterie**! Oh, it's just the word for **timer**.

Other fun words and phrases:

**Elle se sent bien dans sa peau** (she feels good in her skin) translates roughly as **she is at peace with herself** or **she is comfortable with herself**. This is very common expression in French and it sometimes also occurs in English:

I've been learning about being happy in my skin, you know?
- rock musician Flea in an interview.

...comfortable in his own skin...
- Oliver Stone in an interview

They move as if they were comfortable inside their skin.
- self-help book

**métro, boulot, dodo** (subway, job, sleep) was a slogan popularized in 1968 summarizing the situation of a routine uncreative life in Paris. Recently the Paris metro began an ad campaign using the slogan **métro, boulot, expo, resto, disco, dodo**, meaning if you buy the monthly **Carte Orange** pass, you will have convenient access to many museums, restaurants, and clubs.

**recoller les morceaux** is **pick up the pieces** (literally, **stick the pieces back together**).

**pianoter** means to **tap at** a computer keyboard as if playing the piano, or to **drum** on the table. You can also say **tapoter**.

**nuancer** means to express a thought taking into account the slightest nuances or to moderate one's stance.

There's no word which corresponds exactly to the English **cute**. Some approximations: **mignon** (cute-looking), **craquant** (irresistable), and **chouette** (wonderful).

The adjective **petit** (little) is often used as a softener when making suggestions:

**une petite signature**  a signature
**un petit café**          a coffee

Some other random words and expressions which struck me as fun at the time:

- **fléché**       "arrowed", signposted (road)
- **coup de coeur** special favorite, choice pick
- **coup de foudre** love at first sight (literally, strike of lightning)
- **doudou**       security blanket
- **micmac**       scheming, mess
- **sans tamboures ni trompettes** "with neither tambourines nor trumpets", without fanfare
- **tonton**       uncle
- **Vivement vendredi!** I can't wait till Friday!
Section 2: Comparisons with English

French sounds more complicated

Everyday French sounds more technical or intellectual than everyday English. On a cereal box, it says:

Ce produit a bénéficié de tous les soins apportés aux produits Kellogg's. Si toutefois vous constatiez une anomalie, veuillez nous retourner ce paquet, nous vous l'échangerons. (Merci de nous indiquer l'adresse du magasin où vous l'êtes procuré et la date limite d'utilisation optimale indiquée sur le dessus du paquet). Depuis toujours, notre premier souci est de vous satisfaire.

My English ear hears:
This product has benefited from all cares brought to Kellogg's products. If however you observe an anomaly, please return this package to us, we will exchange it. (Please indicate to us the address of the store where you procured it and the limit date of optimal utilization indicated on the bottom of the package.) As always, our first concern is to satisfy you.

A more natural English translation of the above, which is more like what the native French speaker actually perceives, would be something like:
SATISFACTION GUARANTEED. Kellogg's has taken every attention to ensure the quality of this product. If you are dissatisfied for any reason, please return the cereal box and we will replace it. (Please include the name of the store where purchased and the best-before date shown on the box bottom.)

(After coming back to the U.S. I see they use different phrases than the ones I came up with: not satisfied, adjustment of equal value, and dated box top. I was surprised to read Your continued satisfaction with NABISCO Shredded Wheat is our most important goal which has the overly formal ring of the French notre premier souci est de vous satisfaire.)

There's an explanation for this psychological effect as shown by Otto Jespersen in his book The Growth and Structure of the English Language: After the conquest of England by the Normans (1066–69), many French words relating to government, law, the military, religion, cuisine, leisure, fashion, and art were adopted in English. Sometimes French words displaced existing Old English words, while in other cases—especially in the case of commonplace words—both types remain. Here are some of Jespersen's examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>native</th>
<th>borrowed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>begin</td>
<td>commence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hide</td>
<td>conceal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>feed</td>
<td>nourish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>look for</td>
<td>search for</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>friendship</td>
<td>amity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Jespersen shows that in general the colloquial-sounding words are the original Germanic ones, while the refined-sounding words were brought in by the upper class or educated from Latin, Greek, or French (which itself is derived from Vulgar Latin). So the technical sound of French results from all its Latin words, many also in English, but for which English also has more commonly used non-Latin equivalents.

In French and other Romance languages, two words are known as **doublets** if they both derive from a single Latin word, one having evolved in the spoken language, the other having been later borrowed directly from Classical Latin. Some examples given by linguist Henriette Walter:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Latin</th>
<th>French via Vulgar Latin</th>
<th>French via Classical Latin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ministerium</td>
<td>métier (profession)</td>
<td>ministre (ministry)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>securitatem</td>
<td>sûreté (security, safety)</td>
<td>sécurité (security, safety)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In English we have **artist** and **artiste**, **esteem** and **estimate** (both **estimer** in French), and **plastic** and **plastique** (a type of explosive).

Some single words in French map to apparent doublets in English:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>French</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>séminaire</td>
<td>seminar/seminary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gentil</td>
<td>gentle/gentile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>noeud</td>
<td>* node/knot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mode</td>
<td>* mood/mode</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pairs preceded by an asterisk ("**") are not actually doublets.

Some single English words map to French doublets:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>French</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>palm</td>
<td>paume/palmier</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In some cases it may simply be an accident that one word sounds more technical than another. The word **anomaly** came into English and **anomalie** into French from Latin at roughly the same time (the earliest citation in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is from 1571, the earliest in *Le Petit Robert* from 1570), yet the word seems to be more common in French.

Here are some other French words and expressions which sound technical to the English ear, but are really commonplace in French:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>French</th>
<th>English impression</th>
<th>more accurate English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a priori</td>
<td>a priori</td>
<td><strong>offhand, right now, on the</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>face of it</td>
<td>coordinates</td>
<td><strong>phone number (possibly</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>coordonnées</td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>plus address)</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In dance class, the teacher told me to increase the **amplitude** of my movements-to make broader movements.

Of course, some English words may sound overly technical to the French ear: an ice cream **cone** is not usually a **cône** (of mathematics) in French, but a **cornet** (though there is now a brand called the **Royal Cône**).

French seems to have a number of seemingly redundant **re** verbs:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>French</th>
<th>English</th>
<th>English impression</th>
<th>more accurate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>redoubler</td>
<td>reduplicate</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>refroidir</td>
<td>cool down</td>
<td>(compare refrigerate)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>remercier</td>
<td>thank</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>retrouver</td>
<td>meet again</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

But these also occur in English and there is usually a basis for the **re**.

**French sounds simpler**

Sometimes I would have the opposite impression—that French sounds simpler than English:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>French</th>
<th>English translation</th>
<th>English impression</th>
<th>more accurate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Le livre vient de sortir.</td>
<td>The book has just left.</td>
<td>The book was just</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>released.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Le soleil se couche.</td>
<td>The sun goes to sleep.</td>
<td>The sun sets.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>allumer le poste</td>
<td>light the post</td>
<td>turn on the TV</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>éteindre le poste</td>
<td>extinguish the post</td>
<td>turn off the TV</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>une société</td>
<td>a society</td>
<td>a company</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>une marque</td>
<td>a mark</td>
<td>a brand, brand name</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I would think, How can **sortir** (**to go out**), one of the most common verbs in French, have such a specialized meaning as releasing a product?

Again, there's a linguistic explanation: As a learner of a foreign language, I was simply not perceiving the **polysemy**—multiple meanings loaded on top of each and every word. What to the foreigner seems like a simplistic, awkward word in a given context is to the native that word's specialized meaning in that context. To the native speaker different meanings of a word are perceived almost as different words.
French speakers learning English have a similar experience: After viewing the film *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* in English with French subtitles, a French person commented that the simplistic spoken English was translated into a much richer French. I had the opposite impression—black-eyed peas became *petits pois (green peas)*, for instance, but this may just be because they don't have black-eyed peas in France.

You can imagine how words in English could seem simple if the learner doesn't know their varied senses. Is *turn on/tturn off* any less simplistic than *allumer/étendre*? Not really. I can just hear a learner complaining, "Why do you English speakers say turning? You're pressing the On/Off button on the remote, silly." According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* *turn on* means "to induce a flow of (water, steam, gas, electric current) by turning a tap or stop-cock ... or by opening a sluice ..." Turning was once involved, just as lighting once was.

In English you can also say *she turns me on* or *she turns me off*-expressions using the same simple words but with distinct meanings.

In *the book was released*, in English just as in French, you could interpret this literally to mean that somebody let go of the book. You can also say *the book just came out* which is not much different than the French version.

The English word *company* can also mean a group of people, a sort of society. The noun *raise* can also be used as a verb, in which case it simply means to lift. English has the word *trademark* and the word *brand* once referred to a mark made with a hot iron. One tends to forget these things.

Some other words in English are kind of silly if you think about them:

- We don't carry it.
- Salad dressing
- What's the matter?
- the horizontal sweep (of a TV set)

**French sounds too categorical**

French sometimes sounds overly categorical. One time I asked a vendor for a strawberry ice-cream bar and he said

*Ca n'existe pas.*

Gee, even if nobody's ever made this kind of an ice cream bar, at least the idea of it exists! Telling me that this kind of ice cream *doesn't exist* may seem a little extreme, but actually this expression simply means *we don't carry it* or *it is not available in that flavor*. And this is not just a loose translation-*Le Petit Robert* actually mentions *en stock (in stock)* as one of the meanings of *exister*.

Once my mail stopped for a week, so I went to the post office to find out what was wrong. *C'est normal*, they said, since there was a strike. In addition to its usual meaning, *normal* can also mean *to be expected given the circumstances*.

In the introduction to a French synonym dictionary it says:
French gives a more negative impression

In the introduction to a book on sexism in language, it said:

Ce livre présente, sous une forme aussi vulgarisée que possible ...
(Initial impression: ) This book presents in the most vulgar way ...
Bzzzt! Then I remembered the original meaning of vulgar-common to the great mass of people in general. An ouvrage de vulgarisation is the term for a popularized book on an academic topic.

Here are some other cases where the English ear receives a more negative or unintended impression:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>French translation</th>
<th>English impression</th>
<th>more accurate English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>égoûste</td>
<td>egotistical</td>
<td>selfish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limonade-pur sucre</td>
<td>Lemon soda-pure sugar</td>
<td>Sprite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sacs vomitoires</td>
<td>vomit sacks</td>
<td>air sickness bags</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>prolongation</td>
<td>prolonged</td>
<td>extended, carried over</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(exhibit, play)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3615 CUM</td>
<td>3615 CUM</td>
<td><a href="http://www.with.com">www.with.com</a> (online</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In English, quasi-religious organizations such as the Moonies are called cults but in French culte simply means religion. A cult is called a secte in French, which also means sect.

entrer en lice means enter the lists.

Learning new words in English via French

Learning French sometimes helps me brush up on infrequent English words:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>French</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>avatar</td>
<td>avatar (reincarnation; in French also mishap, change)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>béler</td>
<td>to bleat (to cry like a sheep, goat, or calf; to whine)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>émacié</td>
<td>emaciated (very lean from starvation or disease)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* embrouillé</td>
<td>embroiled (confused, muddled)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>exaltation</td>
<td>exaltation (elation, rapture, glorification)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fléau</td>
<td>scourge (cause of serious trouble or affliction)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fontanelle</td>
<td>fontanel (boneless areas in skull in baby or young animal)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>inculquer</td>
<td>inculcate (impress upon the mind by frequent repetition)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The words preceded by an asterisk ("*") above are very common in French. Since returning to the U.S. I have noticed that the word interlocutor is used quite frequently in English—especially in magazines.

An explosion of words

Take the word pumpkin in English. How do you say this in French? Should be simple enough, right? The Robert & Collins dictionary lists citrouille and potiron (bigger). Which is the right word? I look in the Mémo Larousse encyclopedia and find out that citrouille and potiron are the fruit of different plants—citrouille from Cucurbita pepo and potiron from Cucurbita maxima. Then I notice in the Webster’s New World Dictionary that pumpkin in British English refers to these two types of plants as well as Cucurbita moschata. And then I see that the Hachette-Oxford dictionary claims a potiron is called a winter squash in American English. I guess the answer is citrouille?

The real problem here is that there is not just one meaning of the word pumpkin—there are in fact several species of pumpkin and quite possibly the pumpkins in France aren't the same as the ones in the States anyway. (By the way, the English word pumpkin comes from the Middle French word pompon, unfortunately obsolete.)

You are not really aware of how many different meanings (or gradations of meaning) a favorite word has until you try to translate it. Each word in a given language only applies to certain situations and there are few words for which there is a word in the other language which applies to the exact same situations!

Some French words explode into many English words, none of which seems quite right: subir means to be subjected to or undergo an operation, to go through a change, to put up with something you don't like, and to suffer or sustain an injury. Depending on the context, aménagement can mean adjustment/adjusting, building, construction, conversion, converting, creation, development/developing, equipping, fitting out, fixing up, improvement, laying out, making, planning, putting in, or working out.

Justement is translated by as a matter of fact, it just so happens, correctly, exactly, just, and justifiably depending on the context.

The lack of correspondence can be disconcerting at first. I want to say "my apartment is in a convenient location." The correct word is pratique which seems wrong—it sounds more like practical than convenient. But in French, pratique really does mean convenient (for locations), handy (for devices), and practical (for training). I just have to learn all the over loadings of French words, to perceive the many
meanings directly and in their full glory. (I wonder, is it easier to learn a language which has few words each with lots of meanings, or a language with lots of words each with few meanings? French sure seems to have more meanings per word than English.)

Here are some more common examples:

| accuser       | accuse, acknowledge, emphasize |
| agrément      | approval (of registered dealer), agreement, charm (of person), pleasure (of anything) |
| baguette      | beading/casing (in construction), (French) bread, (conductor's) baton, chopstick, clock (woven ornament on sock or stocking), drumstick (for percussion instrument), stick, (magic) wand |
| chemise       | shirt, undershirt, folder |
| coller        | adhere (rice), be "it" (in a children's game), (a course), glue (paper), hang (wallpaper), paste (a poster, some text in word processor), press (nose against window), splice (film), stick (a stamp) |
| contrôle      | audit, check, check-up, control, monitoring, search, supervision, test |
| équipe         | crew, shift, staff, team, unit (in film) |
| étiquette      | label, sticker, tag |
| exploitation   | exploitation, business concern, operation |
| facteur        | postman, factor |
| farouche       | bitter (enemy), driving (ambition), fierce (look, savage (warrior), shy (child), unsociable (person) |
| fil strand     | cord, filament, fissure, floss, grain, lead, line, string, thread, wire, yarn. |
| génére         | annoy, bother (a person), disrupt (an event), disturb object or a person), embarrass (a person), hamper progress |
| manifestation  | appearance/symptom, demonstration/expression (of an emotion), large public event or gathering (art/music/sporting), protest/demonstration/rally, revelation |
parole speech, word, lyrics
récuperer fetch/go get (an object), make up (days at work), recover/get back (an object), recover (from anything), recuperate (from an illness), salvage (an object)
sage good/well-behaved (young child), sensible (adult), wise (person)
témoignage story, account, evidence, testimony, token, expression
tirage draw/drawing (in games), friction (disagreement), hard copy (from computer), printing run/impression, (in photography)
print

Here are some examples going from English to French:

concrete béton, concret
fat corps gras (in chemistry), graisses (of animals or vegetables), gras (of meat), lipides (technical term), matières grasses (in diet)
flavor flaveur/sapidité (literary or technical terms), parfum (for ice cream), saveur/goût (general terms)
hair cheveux (on head), poil (on body)
room pièce, salle, chambre
star étoile, star, vedette
string ficelle, corde, fil
test analyse (medical), devoir de contrôle/interrogation écrite (exam), épreuve (ability), essai (new technology), examen (driving), test (intelligence)

Even in a single context it's sometimes hard to say what a word really means: funny (drôle, marrant) could mean amusing (amusant), witty, makes you laugh, makes you laugh at its expense, odd (bizarre), or eccentric. marrant also means fun (amusant)-another hard-to-translate word.

Trying to untangle the correspondences between French and English words can be mind-bending, but fun. For example, starting with the word accord, you can follow meanings in the dictionary until you get tired:

accord agreement (understanding)
accord agreement (in linguistics)
accord consent
accord understanding (agreement)
accord harmony
accord chord (in music)
When I was in France it would sometimes bother me that there was no single, exact equivalent in French for a favorite English word. I felt that French speakers, in using several vaguely equivalent French words for an English word, were clearly missing something. But upon coming back to the U.S. I noticed French words which don't have an exact equivalent in English. For example, *revendiquer* is expressed clumsily in English as either claim responsibility for or take credit for (a terrorist attack). English doesn't have the standard word *revendiquer* so speakers are forced to invent various paraphrases. But English speakers don't notice this and it doesn't seem to make much of a difference. Another example: Something that is *payant* in French is something for which you have to pay in English.

**Nonexistent words in French or English**

In a few instances a word just doesn't exist in one of the languages and when translating you are forced to give an explanation. For example, these words don't seem to exist in English:

- **cache-miscère** good clothes worn to hide shabby clothes underneath
- **dégustation** dining and really savoring and appreciating it
- **normalement** if all goes as planned
- **vedettisation** pushing someone into the limelight

The French word *promenade* is a general term for an outing, where an English speaker would normally use a more specific word such as walk, bike ride, boat ride, cruise, drive, or ride.

**amont** and **aval** are much more common in French than their English translations:

- **en amont (de)** upstream (from)
- **en aval (de)** downstream (from)

The following words don't seem to exist in French:

- **serendipity** trouvaille au hasard
- **miscast** ne pas être fait(e) pour le rôle de
- **name-drop** citer des gens célèbres qu'on prétend connaître
- **procrastinator** qui a tendance à toujours remettre au lendemain (though the word procrastination is used in literary French).

**jetlag** seems to have no short French equivalent. From *Le Monde* (November 1995):

Une hormone naturelle active contre le << jet-lag >>
... la lutte contre les méfaits du décalage horaire, a laquelle de nombreuses études ont été consacrées.

The English *whatever*, as in:

"Those aren't pork dumplings, they're Shao Mai."
"Whatever." (= So what?/Call it what you want.)

"Would you like the door open or closed?"
"Whatever." (= I'm easy./I don't care either way.)
could be translated as *Peu importe* or *Ca m'est égal*, but these don't feel the same.

Sometimes there is a more precise word in one language. For example, you could call a *calepin* a notebook in English, but more specifically it's a pocket-sized notebook or pad used for recording information, ideas, or impressions.

Of course there are many cases where an exact translation doesn't exist because the object in question isn't known or isn't common in the other culture:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>French</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>raď</td>
<td>type of modern popular music from Algeria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cadre</td>
<td>a certain level of executive/professional employee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>diablelo fraise</td>
<td>lemon soda with strawberry syrup</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kir</td>
<td>aperitif made of white wine and blackcurrant liqueur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>museau</td>
<td>headcheese with vinaigrette sauce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>petit salé</td>
<td>streaky salted pork with lentils</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(I could go on and on with the foods.)

**And from English to French:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>French</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>bagel</td>
<td>petit pain en forme d'anneau</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wonder Bread</td>
<td>pain de mie américain</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some words have a simple translation, but the translated word just doesn't feel the same. According to the dictionary, the translation of *flustered* is *énervé*, but *énervé* means *edgy, irritated, nervous, or overexcited*-not quite right. *plenty* is translated as *beaucoup de* (a lot of) or *suffisamment* (enough)-and again neither is quite the same as English *plenty*.

The English words *pattern* and *clue* are difficult to translate into French.

Sometimes it's difficult to translate an English sentence into a single French one. I dare you to translate:

*Click on the name of the person whose calendar you want to insert the appointment into.*

**Number of words for expressing a given concept**

In owner's manuals printed in both French and English, the French usually takes up more space than the English.

Some things take longer to say in French: **Footnote** is *note de bas de page*. To **volunteer** is *s'engager comme volontaire* (in the army) or *se proposer pour*. 
A cereal box which says ñ consommer de préférence avant fin 0893 or la date limite de consommation in French merely says best before 0893 in English.

A native French speaker is a sujet parlant de langue maternelle française.

to lock is fermer ñ clé (close by key), but there is also boucler, slang for lock, and verrouiller which means bolt shut, or simply fermer.

A sundial is a cadran solaire.

Some common phrases in French are best translated into a single word:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>French</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>en colère</td>
<td>angry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(il y a) beaucoup de monde</td>
<td>(it is) crowded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mettre ñ jour</td>
<td>to update</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mettre en oeuvre</td>
<td>to implement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>laisser tomber</td>
<td>to drop</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the same way, there are a number of French words which translate to several in English:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>French</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>actualité</td>
<td>current events (also: news)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>actuellement</td>
<td>now playing (also: currently)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>alliance</td>
<td>wedding ring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>anglophone</td>
<td>English speaker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>animer</td>
<td>bring to life (party)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>annuaire</td>
<td>phone book</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>attentat</td>
<td>assassination attempt, terrorist attack, bombing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>attention !</td>
<td>watch out!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aveugle</td>
<td>blind person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chômeur</td>
<td>unemployed person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>climatiseur</td>
<td>air conditioner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cohabiter</td>
<td>live together (also, more technically: coexist)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>culpabiliser</td>
<td>to make someone feel guilty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>défricher</td>
<td>lay the groundwork</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>désormais</td>
<td>from now on (also, more technically: henceforth)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>détartrage</td>
<td>teeth cleaning (also, more technically: scaling)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>élu</td>
<td>elected official</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fonctionnaire</td>
<td>government employee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>francophone</td>
<td>French speaker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>glacier</td>
<td>ice cream store, ice cream vendor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>guichet</td>
<td>teller window, ATM window, ticket window/booth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gyrophare</td>
<td>rotating emergency light</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hypercultié</td>
<td>extremely learned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>inédit</td>
<td>previously unreleased, previously unpublished</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>infirmier</td>
<td>male nurse (also: nurse)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nouveauté</td>
<td>new release, new product</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nuque</td>
<td>nape of the neck</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>papeterie</td>
<td>stationery store</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pupitre</td>
<td>music stand (also music rest, control panel)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rédaction</td>
<td>editorial staff (also editing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>récidiver</td>
<td>do it again, commit a second offense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(English has a noun recidivist, but no verb.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>surenchëre</td>
<td>higher bid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>surtout</td>
<td>above all (also: especially)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The 8-syllable it isn't raining anymore only takes 3 or 4 in French: il (ne) pleut plus.
plus and rien are short in French, unlike anymore and anything in English, which allows a phrase such as je ne comprends plus rien to develop. This has a nice ring to it in French, unlike I don't understand anything anymore in English, which you probably wouldn't say. You would just say I'm clueless.

In English you can say things such as my roommate's sister's stereo instead of la chaîne hi-fi de la sœur de mon camarade de chambre (the stereo of the sister of my roommate).

**Inversion in statements**

Inversion of the verb and subject is normally used for questions in written French, but it is also used in statements:

Peut-être est-ce la solution. Maybe that's the solution.
Il travaille, aussi réussit-il. He works, and as a result he succeeds.
(In spoken French you avoid inversion by saying peut-être que c'est la solution or c'est peut-être la solution.)

This type of inversion may seem quaint, but English has the same thing:

Or so say the experts.
and so is this book
Never in my life have I seen such a thing!
Not since ... did I ...
So speak purist intuitions.
I don't like tennis; nor do I like football.
No sooner had I left than the ceiling caved in.
No way am I going to ...
Only if I study it, will I truly understand.
In none of my dictionaries is the word octothorpe mentioned.
In a more formal, older style of English writing, inversion is sometimes used in case of a long subject noun phrase (as is done frequently in current French):
I did not know what was the problem with this work (formal, old)
I did not know what the problem with this work was (standard)

If English inverts the verb and subject in a given case, it doesn't mean French does:

Jamais je n'ai vu ... Never have I seen ...
Pas une fois il ne tourna. Not once did he turn.

**English-sounding French expressions**

Some words and phrases have such an English ring to them I have trouble believing they are really French:

Bienvenu au club. Welcome to the club.
(figuratively)
Pas de problème./Aucun problème. No problem.
Tu peux compter sur moi. You can count on me.
Cette idée n'est plus dans le vent. That idea is no longer in the wind/air.
Tu es collé? Are you stumped/stuck?
Je viens de manger is translated I just ate. The first time I heard someone say Je viens juste de manger (I just ate a second ago) I thought the just had wended its way to French from English. But juste comes from Latin and has been in French since 1120. English just came from Old French.

In English you can say Who are you speaking to? instead of To whom are you speaking? But in French you can't say Qui est-ce que tu parles ? Still, you can omit the object of the preposition in certain cases, so that the sentence ends with a preposition:

Il faut bien vivre avec.
her/him/it.
inventer la vie qui va avec
along
brûler les arbres et leurs occupants avec
burn the trees along with
their

Vous vous demanderez comment vous
avez pu vivre sans !
C'est fait pour !

This is a slang construction which is only done with avec and sans.

Le camion lui a passé dessus (the truck ran him over) seemed like another example but dessus is an adverb, not a preposition. sauter dessus means to jump on someone (sexually).

Many proverbs such as pierre qui roule n'amasse pas mousse (a rolling stone gathers no moss) have been around since time immemorial, so it's no wonder they occur in both English and French.

The expression tel que (such as) sounded very English to me, but this phrase has been in use since at least the 1700's and tel comes from Latin.

The word krach in French (crash of a financial market) has been around since 1881 and came from German, not English!

I was surprised to hear the word trafic (traffic) since circulation is what I was taught in French class. But English traffic comes from the French trafic which in turn comes from Italian traffico. One meaning of trafic is the same as circulation (traffic, as in a lot of it), but it also has the more neutral meaning of the flow of vehicles, and also is used to refer to drug trafficking (trafic de drogue).
Speaking of Italian, *primo* (first of all), *secundo* (second of all), and *recto verso* (on both sides, said of photocopy) sounded Italian to me, but actually they are from Latin.

According to *Le Petit Robert*, *planifier* (to plan, make plans) appeared in 1949. It is derived from *plan*, which it turns out English borrowed from French.

*choc* entered French in 1521, derived from *choquer* which comes from Middle Dutch *schokken*. The English noun *shock* is said to come from the French *choc*.

*hobby* was borrowed from English in 1815. But English *hobby* originally came from Old French *hobe*. Other expressions for *hobby* in French are: *Violon d'Ingres*, *passe-temps favori*, and *centres d'intérêet*. For serious *hobby* the word *passion* is often used.

Other borrowings from English also originally came from Old French:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>French borrowing from English</th>
<th>English borrowing from Old French</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>budget (1764)</td>
<td>bougette</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>test (1893)</td>
<td>test, tët</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stressant (from stress, 1953)</td>
<td>estresse</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The following French words are from English, without having previously come from French:

- black (1980)  black (person)
- bluff (1840)  bluff
- bluffer (1884) to bluff
- bluffeur (1895) bluffer
- boss (1869)  boss
- building (1895) large office building or skyscraper
- business (1876) business
- hard (1975)  hardcore (rock, pornography)
- job (1950)  job, summer job
- non-stop (1932) non-stop
- relax (1955)  relaxed, relaxation (originally from Latin)
- slow (1925)  slow dance
- stop! (1792)  stop! (this is an interjection, so you say *stop* even to people you use *vous* with—not *stoppez*.)
- stopper (1841) halt, stop (also arrêter)
- squeezer (1964) to put the squeeze on (an adversary)

*soft* is often used, meaning the opposite of *hard*.

These words came directly from Latin in both languages:

- selectionner (1899)  to select
- collectionner (1840) to collect
- contrée  country (land)

Under the influence of English, the verb *réaliser* has been used in French to mean the same thing as *se rendre compte* (realize) since 1895. Though common, it is still a criticized usage. Similarly *opportunité* has been used to mean *occasion* (opportunity) since 1864.
Do native French speakers use English borrowings with me because they know I speak English and will understand? Or does any native French speaker understand them? Yes. Most of the borrowed expressions are now entirely French.

Once a French person asked me if I understood the expression _profil bas_. Of course I did. As documented in _Le Petit Robert_ this expression is a translation of the English _low profile_ which entered French in 1970. But one is not always aware that a given word or expression is a borrowing: few English speakers are aware, for example, that _low profile_ was borrowed from the Japanese motto _tei-shisci_ in 1964. _High profile_ is also a Japanese borrowing.

For some French words and expressions it is clear an anglicism is involved:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>French</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>bondage</td>
<td>bondage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bowling</td>
<td>bowling alley, bowling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fair-play</td>
<td>sporting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>flashback</td>
<td>flashback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>talk-show</td>
<td>talk show</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>un fitness club</td>
<td>a health club, a fitness club</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There is a proliferation of English words now commonly used in French with apparently the same meaning as existing French words:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English word</th>
<th>French word</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>bug (in software)</td>
<td>bogue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cool</td>
<td>détendu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fax</td>
<td>télécopie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>feeling</td>
<td>sentiment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hard/soft</td>
<td>dur/doux</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>network (in TV)</td>
<td>réseau</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shopping</td>
<td>courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>weekend</td>
<td>fin de semaine</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

But ask French speakers whether _feeling_ has the same meaning as _sentiment_ and they will say, No, it has a different "feeling". Borrowed words undergo a semantic shift so that they never have quite the same meaning as the original English word, nor the French word that the English word would normally translate to. _faire du shopping_ in French is to go window shopping in English, whereas _faire des courses_ is the more utilitarian to go shopping (for groceries, say).

So when the French government coins a new official term to replace an anglicism, instead of simplifying or standardizing the language, they are enriching it with more words able to take on various new meanings. For example, the official _fin de semaine_ refers to the end of the week, as in Friday, whereas _weekend_ refers to Saturday and Sunday.

When getting a free T-shirt, I was asked if I wanted L or XL—they just say the English size abbreviations (whereas in English I think one would say _extra large_, not XL).

English borrowings are generally not pronounced as if they were French words. Nor are they pronounced the way they are in English. Rather, an effort is made to anglicise the pronunciation, but the accent remains neutral or on the last syllable, as always in French.
Bill Clinton is pronounced as if it were written Bil Clintonne in French. Fun Radio is pronounced Foen Radio. The Gymnase Club (a health club) is the Gymnase Cloeb. In general, all u's in English words are pronounced with an oe sound. A trade (financial transaction, also called an opération or transaction in French) is pronounced trêde. Un trader is pronounced trêdeur. The er at the end of an English word is usually pronounced eur in French, sometimes ěre.

Jazz and Jack are pronounced with a dj sound at the beginning as in English (and not simply the French j sound). Actually in Old English the j sound was allowed only after vowels-not at the beginning of a word-and the initial j in English comes from French in the first place. Jack comes from the Old French Jaque.

I was discussing the pronunciation of English names with some French friends and they asked me how an American would pronounce François Mitterand. With a straight face I said in my best American accent FRAN-swu-MIT-uh-rand. They couldn't believe it. They thought it was horrible.

Some borrowed words such as marketing have the same meaning. Others don't:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>French</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>un planning</td>
<td>A schedule or sign-up sheet (for example, for reserving a block of time in a conference room)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>baskets</td>
<td>sneakers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>catch</td>
<td>wrestling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cool</td>
<td>relaxed (also cool)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>flip</td>
<td>depression following drug use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>flipper</td>
<td>to freak out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>flipper</td>
<td>pinball machine (with the r pronounced)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>laser</td>
<td>CD player</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>off</td>
<td>off-off-Broadway, avant-garde theatre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pin's</td>
<td>pin, button</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>play-back</td>
<td>lip-sync</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

French nouns ending with English ing are always masculine.

Substituting one English word for another, the translation of A Streetcar Named Desire is Un tramway nommé désir (where French tramway = English tram/streetcar).

A supermodel is called a top model in French (as sometimes in English as well). The plural is generally top models, but one magazine printed tops models on their cover.

A relookage is a makeover and relooker is to do a makeover.

French people sometimes say bye-bye, kind of the way Americans say ciao. (French people also say ciao/tchao.) But in English, only very young children say bye-bye. Adults usually just say bye.

In France there was a magazine called SPORT'S MAGAZINE.

The English phrase last but not least is often used, italicized, in French articles discussing the U.S.
Some very English words originally came from French:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>French</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>aboard</td>
<td>ŕ bord (on board)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>apart</td>
<td>ŕ part</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>puny</td>
<td>puis né (born later)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>very</td>
<td>verai, varai, vrai (true)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Also:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>French</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>affair</td>
<td>ŕ faire (to do)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>arrive</td>
<td>arriver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tennis</td>
<td>tenez (hold)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With time I am starting to recognize more common roots: The word for gather in French is **cueillir**. After a while it dawned on me that the English **cul** must have come from **cueillir**. I realized that **pré** and **prairie** must have the same root. I never noticed before that just as French has **venir** and **de-venir**, English has **come** and **become**.

Shifted meanings and spellings of borrowed terms is not unique to French:

English has the word **arbitrageur** which looks French, but the word in French for someone who simultaneously buys and sells in two different markets to make a profit or speculates in takeover stocks is **arbitragiste**.

**prix fixe** is fairly infrequent in France. Here a **fixed-price meal** is almost always called **un menu** or **une formule**.

Though commonly heard, **cul-de-sac** is not the most refined French, as **cul** is an informal term for **rear end**. More standard would be **chemin sans issue** or **impasse**.

**toilette** in French means **outfit**, **appearance**, or **wash** (as in **la toilette du matin**, **washing up in the morning**). Only the plural **toilettes** means **toilet**.

**Bastille Day** is **le quatorze juillet** or sometimes **la Fęte Nationale** in French.

**La Ville Lumičre (the City of Light)**, a nickname for **Paris** often used in English, is not used very often in French. Some French people I queried said it referred to Paris; others said it was an expression that could be applied to any city.

To **French kiss** is **embrasser avec la langue** or **rouler un patin ŕ**.

Borrowed French words in English often have a shifted or wider application in French:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>word</th>
<th>meaning in English</th>
<th>meanings in French</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>affluence (Latin)</td>
<td>wealth, abundance</td>
<td>crowds, abduration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aide-mémoire</td>
<td>record of a discussion</td>
<td>cliff notes, crib sheet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>allure</td>
<td>the power to entice</td>
<td>pace, speed, appearance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>look</td>
<td></td>
<td>photographic plate, negative, photograph, trite concept</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cliché</td>
<td>trite concept</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The word for *risqué* in French is *osé*.

Similarly, borrowed English words in French have a wider application in English: a **quartet** or **quartet** in French refers only to a **Jazz quartet**. A **string quartet** is called a **quatuor à cordes**.

**profond** means literally **deep** more often in French than **profound** in English means literally **deep** in English.

In France, the (dated expression) **quart d'heure Américain** (American 15 minutes) is the designated time during a dance when women ask men to dance.

One time I was conducting a job interview in English with a French colleague, and toward the end she asked the candidate, **What are your pretensions?** I thought that was kind of an strange question to ask. But the candidate who was also French didn't bat an eye. **Pretensions** in French means **salary requirements** in addition to **pretensions**.

Once I was having some food delivered and giving the order taker the codes needed to get to my apartment. He joked, "Vous habitez Fort Knox?" I chuckled and it wasn't until after I hung up that this struck me as odd. I mean that's something my uncle Jack might have said back in the States, and Fort Knox is in Kentucky! Go figure... (**Allez savoir!**) 

British English sometimes seems to be closer to French than American English. (England is closer to France after all!) A few examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>American English</th>
<th>British English</th>
<th>French</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>color</td>
<td>colour</td>
<td>couleur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>skeptic</td>
<td>sceptic</td>
<td>sceptique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gram</td>
<td>gramme (also gram)</td>
<td>grammae</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yard</td>
<td>garden</td>
<td>jardin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>math</td>
<td>maths</td>
<td>maths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eggplant</td>
<td>aubergine</td>
<td>aubergine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>zucchini</td>
<td>courgette</td>
<td>courgette</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>trillion</td>
<td>billion (obsolete)</td>
<td>billion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>research</td>
<td>researches</td>
<td>des recherches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>set up a meeting</td>
<td>fix a meeting</td>
<td>fixer un rendez-vous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 Drouot Road</td>
<td>20, Drouot Road</td>
<td>20, rue Drouot</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**On the other hand:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>American English</th>
<th>British English</th>
<th>French</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>rutabaga</td>
<td>swede</td>
<td>rutabaga</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(for scores of a game:)</td>
<td>nil</td>
<td>zéro (but match nul)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Upon return to the United States, I had trouble believing the expression with a view to (= in order to) was really English. I had first noticed it in French, where the expression en vue de is used more frequently.

**Proto-Indo-European**

After having been in France two years, I began taking a linguistics course at Université de Paris 7, where I learned that perhaps trying to figure out whether a word was "really French" or "really English" was silly, since both languages are Indo-European and derive most of their vocabulary from a common stock.

Compare the words for **foot** and **tooth** in various Indo-European languages, in addition to the common ancestor language reconstructed by linguists known as **Proto-Indo-European**:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Proto-Indo-European</th>
<th>Sanskrit</th>
<th>Greek</th>
<th>Latin</th>
<th>French</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ped</td>
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<tr>
<td>pad</td>
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<td>podos</td>
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<td>pedis</td>
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<td>pied</td>
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<td>foot</td>
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<td>edont</td>
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<td>dant</td>
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<tr>
<td>tooth</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**ped** and **pied** may seem quite different from **foot**, but actually there was a set of regular sound changes which occurred between Proto-Indo-European and Germanic (among which is English), called **Grimm's Law**:

- p -> f
- t -> th
- k -> h
- b -> p
- d -> t
- g -> k
- ...

Around two-thirds of English and French words (and an even larger fraction of the most frequently used words) can be traced back to common roots which existed in 2000 B.C. or earlier. Since then, the meanings of those roots have shifted. For example, **distress**, **stress**, **stare**, and **strict** all came from **ster** meaning **rigid**.

The different forms of the verb **to be** came from different places: **am/is** from **es** (meaning **be**), **was/were** from **wes** (meaning **remain**), and **be** from **bheu** (meaning **become**). **es** also led to **est/sont/**... (the present tense of **be** in French), while **bheu** led to **fut/fût/**... the simple past and imperfect subjunctive in French.

French **vouloir** (**want**) and English **will** (as in **you will**) both come from the Proto-Indo-European root **wel**. French **connaître** (**know**) and English **know and can** (as in **you can**) come from the roots **gen/gno**.
The *Webster's New World Dictionary*, sitting on my parents’ or my own bookshelf all along, turns out to be a fantastic source of information on Proto-Indo-European roots.

**False friends**

There are many words which don't mean what you think they mean, called **deceptive cognates** or **false friends** (*faux amis*). Here are some of the more common or interesting ones:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>French</th>
<th>Wrong English</th>
<th>Right English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>actuellement</td>
<td>actually</td>
<td>currently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>éventuellement</td>
<td>eventually</td>
<td>possibly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>préservatif</td>
<td>preservative</td>
<td>condom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shit</td>
<td>shit</td>
<td>hashish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>English</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>blâmer</td>
<td>blame (but also: criticize)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>correct</td>
<td>correct (but also: proper, decent, adequate, acceptable)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ignorer</td>
<td>ignore (but also: be unaware of)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>libéral</td>
<td>free-market (~capitalist, conservative)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>conservateur</td>
<td>conservative, preservative</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>de gauche</td>
<td>leftist (~liberal, progressive)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>important</td>
<td>important, large (quantity)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>intéressant</td>
<td>interesting, attractive (price)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mystère</td>
<td>mystery, secrecy, rite, type of ice-cream pastry</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>expérimenté</td>
<td>experienced</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>expérience</td>
<td>experience, experiment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>expérimenter</td>
<td>to experiment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>expérimentation</td>
<td>experimentation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>Usually</td>
<td>Less frequently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>frais</td>
<td>cold</td>
<td>fresh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>clair</td>
<td>bright</td>
<td>clear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>contrôler</td>
<td>check, verify</td>
<td>control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>obscur</td>
<td>dark</td>
<td>obscure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>discuter</td>
<td>talk</td>
<td>dispute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>moral</td>
<td>emotional</td>
<td>moral</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Visit* in English is *visiter* (a place), *rendre visite à* (friend), and *aller chez* (the dentist).

*militant* is not pejorative in French—perhaps this reflects a difference in attitudes. It can be translated as *activist* or *campaigner*.

Some false friends are more true than they seem. For instance, you can say *I don't blame him*, which doesn't really mean you don't assign the blame for something to
him. It means you don't criticize him. When you say we need an experimental control, this is closer to the French meaning of verification. English has controller and comptroller, for the person in charge of auditing, not controlling, the books. English has the word moral support, which is emotional support. English has eventuality which means possibility. One says politically correct, which is politically acceptable.

Or maybe under the influence of French I'm just starting to forget what the English words really mean...

**Phrasal verbs**

French speakers learning English often complain about its many phrasal verbs—combinations of a verb and particles such as make out, take on, and put up with. French has phrasal verbs too.

The first time I heard Tu t'en sors? I had no idea what the person was talking about even though I knew all the words in the sentence. Translated literally this is You leave yourself of it? but what it means is Are you managing OK? or How are you getting along?

Here are some other common French phrasal verbs:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>French</th>
<th>literally</th>
<th>actually</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>se casser</td>
<td>break oneself</td>
<td>leave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>se douter de</td>
<td>doubt oneself of</td>
<td>suspect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>se faire ŕ</td>
<td>make oneself to</td>
<td>get used to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>s'en faire</td>
<td>make oneself of it</td>
<td>worry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jouer de</td>
<td>play of</td>
<td>exploit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>se passer</td>
<td>pass itself</td>
<td>happen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>se passer de</td>
<td>pass itself from</td>
<td>do without</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>en pincer pour</td>
<td>pinch of it for</td>
<td>be stuck on (in love with)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>s'en prendre ŕ</td>
<td>take oneself of it to</td>
<td>take it out on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>s'y prendre</td>
<td>take oneself there</td>
<td>act, go about it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>se sauver</td>
<td>save oneself</td>
<td>leave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>s'en tenir ŕ</td>
<td>hold oneself of it to</td>
<td>stand by, keep to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>s'en tirer</td>
<td>pull oneself of it</td>
<td>cope, get by</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>en vouloir</td>
<td>want of it</td>
<td>be determined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>en vouloir ŕ</td>
<td>want of it to</td>
<td>to hold a grudge against</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>se vouloir</td>
<td>want itself</td>
<td>try to be</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vouloir de</td>
<td>want of</td>
<td>have anything to do with</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Beware of the following verbs:

- ćchapper ŕ get away from
- emprunter ŕ borrow from

There are some phrasal conjunctions:

- French literally actually

  alors que then that while, when
  bien que well that although

and phrasal adverbs:

- tout ŕ fait all at done totally, completely
- on ne peut plus one cannot anymore totally, completely
## Noun-noun combinations

In English you can put two nouns side by side and create a new one: **college roommate, car seat, stairway railing**. In French you usually separate the nouns with a preposition:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Noun combinations</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>carte de crédit</td>
<td>credit card</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>boîte de nuit</td>
<td>nightclub, club</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I was surprised to learn that (probably under the influence of English) the preposition has started to disappear! At least in some cases—especially in advertising:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Noun combinations</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>+ allocation chômage</td>
<td>unemployment check</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>couloir vélos</td>
<td>bike lane</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>date commande</td>
<td>order date (on invoice)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>date livraison</td>
<td>delivery date</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>désignation article</td>
<td>item code</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>désignation produit</td>
<td>product code</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ entrées vidéo</td>
<td>video inputs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fiches télévision</td>
<td>television connectors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>formule poulette</td>
<td>chicken special (fixed-price meal with chicken main course)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ idées cadeaux</td>
<td>gift ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lait corps</td>
<td>body milk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>listing produits</td>
<td>product list, list of products</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>numéro client</td>
<td>client number</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* pause jus'orange</td>
<td>orange juice break</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ point vente</td>
<td>(sales) outlet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>promotion déjeuner</td>
<td>lunchtime special</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* renseignements abonnements</td>
<td>subscription information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* renseignements concerts</td>
<td>concert information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* sandwich jambon</td>
<td>ham sandwich (ham on buttered French bread)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ sauce chili</td>
<td>chili sauce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ service abonnements</td>
<td>subscription department</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* soirée cobayes</td>
<td>guinea pig night (trial run at Bal Moderne)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>solutions rangement</td>
<td>storage space solutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ supplément chien</td>
<td>dog supplement (fee paid at an inn if you keep a dog in your room)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>**+ticket restaurant</td>
<td>restaurant ticket (coupon accepted by many restaurants purchased for half face value from employer)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Only the phrases preceded by an asterisk ("*") however, are judged by one native French speaker as completely natural. Only those marked with a plus sign ("+") were judged by another native French speaker as having become common.

The plural of phrases such as the above is formed by pluralizing only the first noun (more exactly, the part which is outside the implied prepositional phrase).

Sometimes this can even be done with three nouns:

**ticket restaurant assistance**  restaurant ticket assistance (hot line)

However if an appropriate adjective exists, you use it instead:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Right</th>
<th>Wrong</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ticket restaurant</td>
<td>assistance</td>
<td>restaurant ticket assistance (hot line)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Actually French has always allowed two nouns to be placed side by side in the case of apposition:

- avocat-conseil (trial lawyer and legal advisor)
- enfant-fleur (flower child)
- gaine-culotte (panty girdle)
- oiseau-mouche (hummingbird)
- satellite-espion (spy satellite)

An avocat-conseil is both a lawyer and a counselor. A oiseau-mouche is both a bird and a fly. Well, sort of. The plural of these forms is formed by making both nouns plural.

French also has nouns formed out of verbs and nouns:

- casse-croûte (snack)
- casse-pieds (pain in the neck)
- casse-tête (headache, puzzle)
- fixe-majuscules (shift lock)
- guide-touches (keypad casing)
- lance-pierres (catapult)
- presse-papiers (paperweight)
- tourne-disque (turntable)
- tournebroche (rotisserie)

These tend to have masculine gender and form their plurals by making the noun plural (and not touching the verb).

**Punctuation differences**

There are a number of differences between French and English punctuation and there is more variation in French than in English.

The standard quotation marks (guillemets) in French are « and ». Quotations are often set in italics as well:

Mêmes les gens qui ont un ami à Mouchotte ajoutent assez souvent :
« Et comment tu peux vivre dans ce grand truc moche ? »

Even people with friends in Mouchotte often ask, "How can you stand living in that big ugly thing?"

Quotation marks (or italics) can be used in French and English to enclose words or short phrases with special meanings or to give them extra emphasis:

Nul ne connaît précisément l'objectif final du "petit roi ".
Nobody knows the exact objective of the "little king."
SVM Mac, a computer magazine, uses French-style quotes for quotations and English-style quotes (" and ") for enclosing words and short phrases. Paris Match uses English-style quotes in headlines. Le Nouvel Economiste and Vogue have switched over to English-style quotes entirely, although the comma appears outside the closing quote:

Réservé ŕ quelques créatures ultra-sophistiquées qui "avaient toujours quelque chose ŕ cacher", le cake ...

Reserved for a few ultrasophisticated creatures "always with something to hide," the cake ...

In Vogue periods are actually underneath the closing quote.

Some publications use English-style quotes when quotes are nested inside other quotes. Most but not all use a space after the left guillemet and before the right guillemet.

In French there is usually a space before a colon, semicolon, question mark, or exclamation point but not a comma or period:

Qui parle ? C'est moi qui parle.  
Who's talking? I'm talking.

An exclamation point can sometimes occur within a sentence, in which case the letter following the exclamation point is in lower case. For example:

Ah ! mes amis.  
Ah! My friends.  
(This also occurs in literary English.) There are some differences in the use of dashes in French:

- the dashes are shorter
- they are preceded and followed by a space, and
- commas may also be introduced if they would have otherwise been there:
  - dotée d'un corps asymétrique - de longues jambes maigres et un torse
  - abondant -, qui se retire dans une banlieue invraisemblable
  - possessing an asymmetrical body-long skinny legs and a large chest-
  - withdrawing into an improbable suburb

In English, an ellipsis (or three dots) is usually used to indicate that material has been omitted from a quotation or as a replacement for and so on. But in French dots are also often used to simulate a suspenseful delay in print:

se consoler avec... un tas d'or  
console themselves with a pile of gold

Though this is sometimes done in English as well. From Musician magazine:

Kevin Johnson played ... pocket change.
The use of commas and decimal points in numbers is reversed, so that \textbf{86,283.10} becomes \textbf{86.283,10} or \textbf{86 283,10}. But when announcing the frequency of an FM radio station, you will often hear \textit{quatre-vingt douze point un} instead of \textit{quatre-vingt douze virgule un} (for 92,1).

In French there is no serial comma before the conjunction in a list of three or more items:

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textit{lundi, mardi et mercredi}
  \item Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday
\end{itemize}

In French two sentences are often joined together by a comma instead of a semicolon. If translated literally into English, many of these would be considered frowned upon \textit{run-on sentences}.

In an informal writing style it's not uncommon to use sentences which aren't sentences, but I have noticed this even in newspapers with a more formal style such as \textit{Le Monde}:

\begin{itemize}
  \item Une vie qui s'est identifiée à l'histoire de la gauche pendant presque cinquante ans.
  \item A life identified with the history of the Left for almost fifty years.
\end{itemize}

In French style, subject headings often cannot be removed, since they sometimes provide information not in the text itself. In English style, subject headings typically can be removed-information in the heading is repeated in the text.

**Acronyms**

French acronyms (called \textit{acronymes} and \textit{sigles} in French) have a different-less aesthetic to me at first-ring to them than English ones: \textbf{SMEREP} is the \textit{Société mutualiste des étudiants de la région parisienne} (Student's Mutual Insurance Company of the Greater Paris Area). \textbf{COFRABO} is \textit{Compagnie française du bouton} (French Button Company). Some other company names from the phone book: \textbf{COFAP, COFICINE, COFIXEL, COGEMA, COGIFEST, SOCODA, SOCOTEC, SOFIPAR, SOFREGAZ, SOGETEX, SOGETRONIC}.

Some common acronyms are:

\begin{table}
  \begin{tabular}{lll}
    \textbf{acronym} & \textbf{short for} & \textbf{English} \\
    \hline
    \textbf{ASSEDIC} & Association pour l'emploi dans l'industrie et le commerce & organization managing unemployment benefits \\
    * B.P. & boîte postale & P.O. Box \\
    \textbf{CAC} & Compagnie des agents de change & the Paris Dow index \\
    40 & contrat de durée déterminée & fixed-term employment contract \\
    * \textbf{CDD} & Communauté économique européenne & European Economic \\
    Community (EEC) & contrat à durée déterminée & Community (EEC) contract \\
    \textbf{MATIF} & Marché à terme international de & financial futures market \\
  \end{tabular}
\end{table}
France
SICAV Société d'investissement & mutual fund
capital variable
SMIC Salaire minimum & minimum wage
interprofessionnel de croissance

The initials are pronounced in the words preceded by an asterisk ("*"); the others are pronounced as if they were normal words.

By 1994 the European Community was being called l'Union européenne (The European Union). I noticed the use of the abbreviation EU in English for about a year before UE turned up in French (on April 13, 1995 in Le Monde).

The plural of an acronym is unchanged in French:

les Fnac Fnacs (electronics and audio/video stores)
* des IBM IBMs
* des PC PCs
* vos P-D G your CEOs

In fact, invariant plurals are more common in French than I had imagined:
les Baudry the Baudrys (family)
les Prisunic Prisunics (similar to Woolworth's and K-Mart)
des Virgin Megastore Virgin Megastores
(There are a few invariant plurals in English as well: take two aspirin/take two Aleve.)

Rules of thumb:

- Plurals are invariant for person names, works (of art, literature) referred to by person name, book names, names of periodicals, trademarks, and upper-case acronyms.
- Plurals are inflected as they normally would be for place names, person names referred to metaphorically, names of inhabitants of places (such as Parisiens), and acronyms in lower-case.

Common mistakes made by English speakers in French

There are a number of common mistakes made by English speakers in French:

- using the wrong gender article or adjective
- using the indicative or subjunctive mood inappropriately
- pronouncing English names the English way instead of the French way
- je vais instead of j'y vais (I'm going/I'm off)
- peut-être il a raison (maybe he's right) instead of peut-être qu'il a raison
  or better yet, il a peut-être raison
- il est fini (he is finished, for example as an artist or politician) instead of il a fini (he is finished with whatever he was doing)

There are some handy methods of guessing the gender of a word: Words ending in age, ier, in, isme, ment, and oir are almost always masculine. Some exceptions: cage, image, plage, fin, main.
Words ending in ade, ance, ée, ence, esse, sion, té, tion, and ure are almost always feminine. Some exceptions: grade, stade, centigrade, coryphée, lycée, silence, découleté, étè, doigté, feuilleté, côté, sauté, pâté, comté, himation, ligure, bromure, mercure, tellure (all masculine). (For more detailed information, see the web page Le Truc de Genres at http://www.fourmilab.ch/francais/gender.html).

If you are really stuck and the word ends in e, feminine is a good guess-this works about 66 percent of the time.

The gender of an acronym is the same as the gender of whatever it is derived from-assuming you know that. So la société nationale des chemins de fer français (the French national railroad) is la SNCF.

A brand name often has the same gender as the generic word:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>French</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mercedes</td>
<td>une Mercedes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>car</td>
<td>une voiture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leica</td>
<td>un Leica</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>camera</td>
<td>un appareil photo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The gender of English borrowings is generally the same as the gender of the corresponding French word:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>French</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>grosse news</td>
<td>une grosse news</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a juicy piece of news</td>
<td>une nouvelle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Intelligence Agency</td>
<td>la Central Intelligence Agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>la CIA</td>
<td>la CIA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institute of Technology</td>
<td>le Massachusetts Institute of Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MIT</td>
<td>le MIT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>un institut</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An exception is le NASDAQ (probably a shortening of le marché NASDAQ), where NASDAQ stands for National Association of Securities Dealers Automated Quotations.

In French, the letters of English-language abbreviations are often pronounced in imitation of English pronunciation:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>French</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EMI</td>
<td>Emmanuel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MIT</td>
<td>Massachusetts Institute of Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NBC</td>
<td>National Broadcasting Company</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Even if you know the gender of a noun, it may be hard to get your mouth to use the agreeing article or adjective. If you speak a little more slowly you have more time to prepare mentally before uttering the word. I find this ability improves with time.

There is a transfer of ability from one language to another, so I am better at agreements that are the same in English. For example, there is no problem with il (he) and elle (she). But English only has they where French has ils and elles. So sometimes I incorrectly use ils when referring to a group of women. But since English distinguishes between the third-person singular and plural, I have no trouble making the same distinction in French. More difficult are son, sa, and ses which agree with the noun they modify, while his and her agree with the possessor. Again this improves with time. Think noun agreement!

The more you try to translate English expressions directly-instead of using common French collocations or words commonly found together-the more English you will sound:
J'aime bien ça. Ça me plaît beaucoup. I like it a lot.

*Le Petit Robert* is a gold mine of collocations and expressions such as *cela se vend comme des petits pains* for they are selling like hot cakes. You also pick these up through experience: A woman I had met asked for my telephone number, saying *ça peut servir*, which I realized meant that might come in handy.

At first it seemed to me that English would make more of an attempt to avoid canned phrases such as *thank you for your understanding*—very often seen in French as *merci de votre compréhension*. For example, in the U.S. when renovations are being done you might instead see a sign saying *excuse our appearance*, which is somewhat humorous—as if someone hadn't put on makeup. But of course *excuse our appearance* is also a canned phrase. In any case, these kinds of standards of communication are fairly superficial and can be quickly overturned. Language trends in the mass media spread like wildfire internationally and many of the trends you see in English—magazine articles incorporating the style of spoken speech or advertising copy with short incomplete sentences—you also see in French.

**Every day** is *tous les jours*. *Chaque jour* has the slightly different meaning of each day.

All this is not to say that native French speakers don't also make mistakes with their language. You sometimes hear false starts such as:

- J'ai fait de le ... du vélo-stop.
- un nouveau ... une nouvelle technique
- a new technique
- tous les données ... toutes les données
- all the data

Adjectives in French usually come after the noun which is convenient because the adjective must agree with the noun and you often think of the noun first. There are also a few cases in English where the adjective comes after the noun:

- bargains galore
- something comfortable
- Prince Charming
- the girls next-door
- Coke Classic
- battle royal
- and other matters political

One restaurant in Paris catering to English speakers displayed *conditioned air* instead of *air-conditioned*.

*Signaux* is the correct plural of signal, but this speaker thought it was wrong and mistakenly corrected it to *signals*:

... des signaux—des signals (laughs)

In print, an *n* elision from *en* became a nonexistent *ne*:

Elle n'en n'avait pas eu le temps.
The book *Pièges et difficultés de la langue française* (Pitfalls and difficulties of the French language) says the t should not be pronounced in *en fait* (actually, in reality), but almost everyone does.

Everyone says *c'est de ma faute* (it's my fault) but *c'est ma faute* is considered more correct (though Grevisse in *Le bon usage* shows this to be valid and have a slightly different meaning).

## Section 3: Fine points

### Tense agreement

One time I said *je pensais que tu l'as vu* (I thought you saw it). I was told this sounds wrong in French—since the seeing is prior in time to the thinking, the pluperfect must be used: *je pensais que tu l'avais vu* (I thought you had seen it).

French has rules about what tenses go together (called *concordance des temps* or tense agreement) which can be found in grammar books. The basic idea is, if the time is the same, the verbs are in the same basic tense-past, present, or future. So unlike in English where you say *when they arrive, we will start*, in French you say *quand ils arriveront, nous commencerons* (when they will arrive ...). And if you want to say *when they arrive, we start*, you can: *quand ils arrivent, nous commençons*. However the tense agreement rules are not always maintained in informal spoken French.

Particularly difficult is the choice between the passé composé and the imperfect, since these tenses do not correspond to the simple past and past progressive respectively in English. Here are some rules of thumb:

- To describe a stable state of affairs, use the imperfect:
  - En 1965, la maison appartenait à ma grand-mère.
  - In 1965, the house belonged to my grandmother.
- Il y a une semaine, j'étais content.
  - A week ago, I was happy.
- To describe a change of state, use the passé composé:
  - Tout à coup, j'ai été content.
  - All of a sudden, I was happy. (= I became happy)
- To describe a process or action which was in progress or unfolding at the time being focused upon, use the imperfect:
  - Hier soir, Jean écrivait un roman.
  - Last night, Jean was writing a novel.
- À 8 heures précises, je jetais un coup d'œil à ma montre.
  - At exactly 8 a.m., I was glancing at my watch.
- To describe a completed process or action, use the passé composé:
  - Jean a écrit un roman, et puis...
  - Jean wrote a novel, and then...
If you would use the present perfect in English, it is probably correct to use the passé composé in French:

*Viens voir! J'ai repeint le mur.*
*Come take a look! I've repainted the wall.*

The future tense is sometimes used in past narratives where English would use the simple past or *would* + infinitive:

*Pendant quatorze ans ... il dirigera les opérations secrètes ... il ne sera libéré qu'en 1968.*

*For forty years ... he directed the secret operations ... he was not released until 1968.*

*Jacques Cartier découvrit le Canada. Il y retournera plusieurs fois.*
*Jacques Cartier discovered Canada. He would return there several times.*

*(or He was to return...)*

It may seem strange for the future tense to be used to refer to a past event, but tenses don't correspond to time in English either. One example is *at the laundromat, you will often find detergent*. This isn't really in the future-it's a generalization about past events. (Linguists study something they call verb aspect-much more complicated than simply past, present, and future.)

### Antecedents

In English the word *it* is often used without any clearly expressed antecedent:

*OK, so we're getting together for lunch on Tuesday? I'll make a note of it.*  *(it = appointment)*

In French you would say *Je note le rendez-vous* *(I'll make a note of the appointment)*. You would not say *Je le note* unless *le rendez-vous* has been explicitly mentioned.

Where English uses *it*, French often uses *ça*:

*It isn't worth it.*  *Ca vaut pas la peine.*

Instead of using a vague *it* as in English, in French one sometimes omits the direct object of a verb-provided it is clear what is being referred to. So one may say *Je note* in the above example, and one may say *j'aime pas* *(I don't like)* instead of *j'aime pas ça* *(I don't like that).*

French though does not always require the antecedent to come before the pronoun which refers to it:

*redonne leur beauté naturelle aux cheveux*
*(literally, restores its natural beauty to hair)*
*restores hair's natural beauty*
Negatives

Words such as *jamais* and *personne* to me meant *never* and *nobody*. I soon learned they can mean *ever* and *anyone* as well:

le plus beau texte jamais écrit par Cocteau
the most beautiful passage ever written by Cocteau

Je la connais mieux que personne au monde.
I know her better than anyone in the world.

C'est plus vrai que jamais aujourd'hui.
This is now truer than ever.

I was originally taught to use *ne ... ni ... ni* for the English *neither ... nor* but there are at least three possibilities, with slightly different meanings:

Je n'aime ni le tennis ni le football.   I like neither tennis nor football.

Je n'aime pas le tennis ni le football.  I don't like tennis nor do I like football.

Je n'aime pas le tennis et le football.  I don't like tennis or football.

In an infinitive construction:

Ne pas utiliser de lessive ŕ la main, ni en paillettes.
Do not use hand detergent or soap flakes.

For *either ... or* you can use *ou bien ... ou bien ...* as well as *soit ... soit ... or even soit ... ou bien*.

Numbers and letters

In English, a phone number such as **555-3401** is typically pronounced *five-five-five* (slight pause) *three-four-one*. In France, phone numbers are broken up into a series of two-digit numbers such as **01 36 27 66**. (France switched from 8 to 10 digits on October 18, 1996.) Each two-digit number is pronounced as if it were a regular number-you don't say *trois-six* (pause) *six-cinq* and so on, but rather *trente-six* *soixante-cinq* and so on. However, if one of the two-digit numbers is a zero, then the English method of pronouncing the individual digits is used: **01 36 00 02 47** is pronounced *zero-un* *trente-six* *zero-zero* *zero-deux* *quarante-sept*. Especially in an advertisement, you might hear *trente-six deux fois* (*thirty six twice*) for **36 36**.

For long bank or customer numbers, if printed in groups of numbers, you pronounce each group as a number. If a long string of digits is shown without grouping, you revert to the English method of pronouncing each digit separately.

"Quatre vingt" in French is ambiguous—it could mean **80** or **420**, though **80** is much more likely. Same in English—"twenty one" could mean **21** or **20 1**. Still, *soixante-dix*, *quatre-vingt*, and *quatre-vingt* *dix* are sufficiently error prone that Parisian financial traders use the regional terms *septante* (*seventy*), *octante* (*eighty*) and *nonante* (*ninety*) when quoting prices.
When spelling my name, Mueller, I learned to say *deux els-el el* and *double el* do not seem to be common.

**Pronouncing vowels**

To pronounce the word *tu* properly, round your lips as if you were saying the English word *who* and without changing your lips from this position, say the English letter *T*.

Once you have the front *u* sound down, to pronounce the even more difficult glide sound of *huit*, start to pronounce *ut* (*do*, as in *do re mi*) but think *huit* at the same time. Some other practice words: *suis*, *bruit*, *bruyant* (as distinguished from *brillant*).

English vowel sounds are generally *diphthongized*-the tongue and jaw glide from one position to another as you are pronouncing the vowel. For example, in *time* the *i* is pronounced gliding from the *ah* sound to the *ee* sound, and *tee* is pronounced gliding from something like an *ih* sound to an *ee* sound. In contrast, French vowel sounds are generally pure-you keep your mouth in one and only one position for the duration of the vowel.

The vowel sound in *vous* is similar to the *oo* sound in English, except that it is not diphthongized and your lips are more rounded.

Remember to use the same very rounded lips for the *w* sound in words such as *moi* and *toi*.

The *a* sound in words such as *d'accord* and *Madame* is pronounced not with a back *ah* sound as in *father*, but closer to the front *æ* vowel sound in *hat*-actually a good approximation is the vowel sound in the Boston pronunciation of *car*.

The final sound of *Brassens* (the name of a popular French singer/songwriter) and other similar names such as *Thorens* is the nasal vowel sound of *fin* followed by an *s* sound.

In Paris, the vowel in *enfant* and *francs* and is much more rounded than I had imagined (or is implied by the International Phonetic Alphabet transcription provided in dictionaries). It's a nasalized, rounded, back *aw* sound, not the less rounded, more front sound used in Canadian French.

Because the vowel in *enfant* is very rounded in Parisian French, you need to round the vowel in *bon* even more to distinguish it. A good practice phrase is *son temps*: start very very rounded for *son* and then let up a bit for *temps*.

We may be witnessing the beginning of the disappearance of the distinction between these two vowels. In the history of languages, vowel distinctions are continually created and destroyed over time. Nobody knows exactly why-laziness or a kind of "mumbling tendency" is usually cited as an explanation of the destruction of vowel distinctions, while the need to be different is cited as a reason for their creation. The
distinction between brun and brin is almost gone in French. The distinction between cot and caught is gone in many American English dialects.

Nasal vowels in French (as in the words amant, bien, and bon) arose historically via the following sequence of events:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>in general</th>
<th>pronunciation of bon</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 1: vowel + nasal</td>
<td>b + o + n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2: nasalized vowel + nasal</td>
<td>b + nasalized o + n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3: nasalized vowel</td>
<td>b + nasalized o</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

That is, the m's and n's in such words were once pronounced, then the vowel started taking on the nasal quality (lowering the soft palate so that air passes through the nasal passages) of the m or n, and finally the m and n disappeared altogether. English is at Step 2 for some words—compare the pronunciation of pat and pan. Some African-American dialects of English take it to Step 3 and drop the final consonant, just like French.

Vowels in Canadian French and Parisian French seem to be moving in opposite directions: In Paris the vowel of bien is becoming lower so that it sounds more like byah, while in Canada the vowel is becoming higher and the nasalization reduced so it sounds more like byih.

e's which are present in the spelling of a word and pronounced in the South of France but not normally pronounced in Parisian French are called mute e's (e muet in French). They are revived when reading traditional poetry or singing songs. The classical rule is to pronounce a mute e if it is before a consonant inside a line or if it is at the end of a line. Though I've noticed in some rock songs mute e is not pronounced when followed by an s or z sound.

In Parisian French, a mute e is retained when dropping it would create a series of three consonants (where the third is not an r or l). Thus the mute e is pronounced in n'importe quoi (anything, nonsense).

English is said to have difficult spelling, but French is difficult too—for example there are 30 ways of spelling the ċ sound: e, é, ê, ai, ais, ait, ay, ei, ey, ... Some such as this French engineer of speech understanding systems quoted in Actuel magazine—believe it to be more complicated than English:

Une des grandes difficultés du français, c'est la non-homogénéité entre la phonétique et l'alphabetique ... Ce qui est loin d'être le cas de l'anglais ou de l'américain.

A big problem in French is the inconsistency between sounds and spelling ... Which is far from the case in British or American English.

The reason spelling doesn't always correspond to pronunciation is that pronunciation changes more quickly than spelling. For good reason—you wouldn't want to have to reprint all books every time there is a sound change, and you wouldn't want to have to produce different books for every dialect! (Perhaps computer technology will someday make customized spelling feasible?) Here is the evolution of roi and loi according to the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure:
## Pronouncing consonants

I had always concentrated on getting the French r, l, and vowel sounds right since they seemed the most different from English. But I soon learned there are a number of differences in the articulation of other consonants.

The consonants t, d, and n are normally articulated in English by placing the tongue against the ridge in back of your teeth. In French they are articulated where the ridge meets the teeth, or even slightly on the teeth. To learn the French articulation, compare how you pronounce the English tree with the way you pronounce at three.

The dental articulation of the t in at three is similar to the way t's d's and n's are always articulated in French. It almost sounds like a slight lisp to the English ear.

Some practice words: thé, toit, doit.

**Voicing** is the technical term for vibrating your vocal cords. When you whisper, you aren't voicing. b is the voiced version of p, d is the voiced version of t, and so on. The consonants b, d, and g are voiced for their entire duration in French, whereas in English they start out unvoiced for an instant and then become voiced. To pronounce the French b, d, or g, make sure you start your vocal cords vibrating the instant you start to pronounce the sound. I think of it as pronouncing the sound "more strongly."

Some practice words: bois, doit.

The consonants p, t, and k at the beginning of a word are pronounced in English with an extra burst of air from the mouth, called **aspiration**. To see what is meant by aspiration, try pronouncing pin and spin. pin is aspirated and spin isn't. There is no aspiration in the French pronunciation. Thus-as the linguist Sapir put it-the French p, t, and k have a "precise, metallic quality." I think of it as pronouncing the sound "more lightly" and "more crisply." The French t sound is just a quick tongue tap. When pronounced properly, the French p actually sounds closer to an English b than an English p, and the t closer to d. Some practice words: paix, pois, thé, toit.

The r in words such as trois and droit must be pronounced strongly to distinguish them from toit and doit.

Many of the French articulations are actually simpler. It's just a question of unlearning your more complicated English articulations (only when speaking French of course!). Here is a practice sentence incorporating some of the sounds discussed above:

Et qu'ils doivent vivre désormais dans une société de proies et de prédateurs.

And that they have to live from now on in a society of predator and prey.
The consonants that should be pronounced "more strongly" are shown in boldface and those that should be pronounced "more lightly" are in italics.

The French l is articulated nearer to the English n: balle de set (set point) sounds slightly like banne de sette.

In the history of the French language, many consonants at the end of a word have disappeared from pronunciation. Some surprises: You do pronounce the final consonants of amer (bitter), Boulez (the French composer), fier (proud), and net (clear). But you do not pronounce the final e in tabac (tobacconist's shop)-though you do use a k sound at the end of sac and tic. You can pronounce but (goal) with or without the t-it hasn't disappeared for everyone yet.

Whether to pronounce or not pronounce the final consonant of numbers is a bit tricky. The t is pronounced in vingt (twenty) in the numbers 21 through 29, and when there is liaison with the following word: vingt ans (twenty years). In other cases such as vingt personnes (twenty people) and il y en a vingt (there are twenty of them), the t isn't pronounced.

The t in huit is pronounced if there is liaison with the following word, if it is being used as an ordinal adjective as in le 8 janvier (January 8th), if it is begin used as a noun as in multiplier par huit (multiply by 8), or if it is part of a compound number as in dix-huit (eighteen) and vingt-huit (twenty eight). The t is not pronounced if it is used as a cardinal adjective as in huit jours.

When plus is used to mean more or most the s is not sounded, except before a vowel, at the end of a sentence, and in plus que. When plus is used to mean not anymore, the s is never sounded. The s is sounded when plus is used to mean plus (as in deux plus quatre font six or two plus four is six).

Some French words begin with two consonants in a row that would not both be pronounced in English. In French they are both pronounced:

- Fnac
- pneu
- pseudo
- psychologue
- psy

Some more observations: observateur is pronounced with an ops sound, not an obz sound as in English. version is pronounced with an s, not a z sound. The w in interviewer (to interview) is pronounced with a v sound. The p is pronounced in beaucoup ī faire (a lot to do). There is never liason between et (and) and the following word.

**Intonation**

In French, the accent of a word is usually on the last syllable. A declarative sentence in French is generally spoken with a rising intonation for each phrase, except the last phrase of the sentence which is spoken with a descending intonation.
For short standard phrases such as *au revoir*, *bonjour*, *bonsoir*, and *merci* it is very common to use a rising intonation on the last syllable even when a question is not being asked.

When saying *tous les* or *toutes les*, a high tone is often used on the word *tous* or *toutes* for extra emphasis. This does sound good.

In English it is common to use intonation for emphasis, where French instead uses additional words:

```plaintext
Qu'est-ce que c'est que cette histoire? What are you talking about?!
C'est ma chatte f moj./C'est ma chatte. It's my cat.
C'est moi qui vous remercie. Thank you.
Ca, c'est sûr. That's for sure.
```

Intonation can also be used for emphasis in French, but the rules are different:

```
Il n'existait pas. Maintenant il existe.
It didn't exist. Now it exists.
```

*C'est* son devoir.
It's his duty.
(And of course words can be used for emphasis in English as well, as in *this does sound good.*)

**Looking Back**

Now I can answer the questions I asked at the beginning.

Q: Is there a single moment when the language finally clicks and you understand it?

A: No. It's a gradual and continuing process. When I first started learning French, I could immediately understand *oui* and *non* to mean *yes* and *no*. At that point I understood less than, say, 1 percent of the French language. Since then, a greater and greater percentage of French is understandable to me directly, without having to think about it or translate it into English.

It takes a while to tune in to all the exact sounds required to distinguish different words: the *u* sound in *jus* and *vous* is different, but when someone said *jus d'orange* (orange juice) I thought they were saying *je vous dérange*? (is this a good time?/did I catch you at a bad time?). This distinction is often critical, as in the case of *ci-dessous* (below) and *ci-dessus* (above). Or when they said *pour aller où?* (where are you going?) I thought they said *pour l'avion?* (for the plane?).

I'm still not sure I understand the difference between *un nouveau film* and *un film nouveau*, but for other adjectives I started to feel the difference: *une certaine violence* is a certain type of violence while *une violence certaine* is a violence that is certain.

I would guess my percentage of comprehension is now around 75-99 percent, depending on the situation. There were moments when I thought to myself, "Wow, I'm actually understanding and speaking French and not really aware of it," but no single moment for me where it all clicks.
Q: When can you speak it?

A: Learning to speak in a foreign language is also a gradual and continuing process. In the beginning the problem is that you are always hitting up against concepts you don't know how to express. In that case you have two choices: You can pause to think, in which case the person you are talking to may try to help you out with the missing word or expression. But listeners are impatient with silence and if they can't guess what you mean they will just go onto something else. Or you can try to express the idea in a very awkward manner using words that you do know. This is the best strategy. The person you are talking to may or may not correct you.

One time I wanted to buy a fan (ventilateur) but I didn't know the word, so I asked for an éventail électrique (electric handheld fan). OK, they may have looked at me a little askance, but they had no trouble understanding. Unfortunately, fans were sold out in France that summer. Eh oui. (I'm afraid so.)

Another time, I could not remember the word for straw (paille), so I asked for a petit tuyau (little pipe). Strange looks, but I got the straw.

As you learn more French words and expressions by reading and listening, you find that they start to come to you naturally in speaking. And through speaking you reinforce words and expressions so that they come to you more quickly in the future. The speed improves with time. I can speak quickly only if everything I want to say is already on the tip of my tongue. I'm still not able to talk about a broad range of topics competently in French, but at a party with a lot of noise I can fool a French person into thinking I'm French for about 15 seconds! Not bad!

Certain words which seem not to have an exact equivalent in English, such as the conjunction or (and yet, now), took me quite a while to get used to.

Q: How long does it take?

A: After about a month of immersion in a foreign language, you can start to communicate in it. But there is a lot to learn after that.

Q: Once you can understand and speak it, does it feel as natural as English?

A: The portion I understand feels no different than if it were expressed in English. It's the portion I don't understand which makes French still seem fuzzier to me than English, as if there were a slight fog. Understanding feels more natural than speaking, where I am always aware of my accent.

When I read a book in French and suddenly there is a quotation in English, the contrast is striking. It's hard to describe what it seems like for that instant—the English seems quaint, silly, over-simplified, vulnerable, or as if too much weight is being given to some mundane English text. I can almost hear the English words being pronounced with a French accent.

Q: Can you distinguish different dialects—both accents and vocabulary? In the same way as English dialects?
A: So far I can detect foreign and Canadian accents, but I'm not usually aware that a person is from Toulouse or Lille-I'm busy just understanding. I sometimes notice differences in pronunciation of words, such as au revoir pronounced as three syllables instead of two, but have no idea where they are from.

Q: How much are differences between English and French cultural?

A: The relationship between language and culture is a classic debate among linguists. I will just offer some observations:

The greatest majority of words and expressions are directly translatable between French and English, which I attribute to the commonalities and cross-pollination between the two 20th century Western cultures. Even Murphy's Law has an equivalent: la loi de l'emmerdement maximum (the law of maximum shit).

There are some difficult-to-translate words and expressions-you can come up with a translation for any given situation, but there is nothing which works in all situations. When there is only one word in your language, you get the impression there is only one concept. Upon further reflection, you may acknowledge the different meanings or nuances of meaning, but the boundaries are often hard to draw. If you are used to using a certain blanket word in your native language, it can be frustrating to learn that the word doesn't exist in the foreign language. You're forced to think harder about what you actually mean!

Sometimes there isn't a word for something-as noted above there's no word for dégustation in English and no word for serendipity in French. Different cultures do concentrate more than others on refining certain areas of meaning.

Acknowledgements

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And thanks to everyone else who made this possible!

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Further Reading

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**Additional commonly-used words and phrases**

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<tr>
<th>Adjectives</th>
<th>Meanings</th>
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<tr>
<td>coincé</td>
<td>inhibited, boring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>crevé, épuisé, nase</td>
<td>beat, burned out, exhausted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>décontracté</td>
<td>relaxed</td>
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<td>efficace</td>
<td>efficient</td>
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<tr>
<td>fou, cinglé, dingue, zinzin</td>
<td>crazy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>insupportable</td>
<td>unbearable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>marginal</td>
<td>fringe</td>
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<tr>
<td>mignon à croquer</td>
<td>cute as a button</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Yorkais</td>
<td>of New York</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pénible</td>
<td>annoying (person), painful, unpleasant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>répandu</td>
<td>widespread, commonly found</td>
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<tr>
<td>semblable</td>
<td>similar</td>
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<td>singulier</td>
<td>unique</td>
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<td>Adverbs</td>
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<td>plein de</td>
<td>lots of</td>
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<td>quasiment</td>
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<td>quelque peu</td>
<td>rather, somewhat</td>
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<tr>
<td>toujours</td>
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<td>garbage, nonsense, stupidity</td>
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<td>bouffe</td>
<td>food</td>
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<td>a pain in the neck</td>
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<tr>
<td>centre commercial</td>
<td>mall, shopping center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chiottes</td>
<td>toilets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>commérages</td>
<td>gossip</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>copain/copine</td>
<td>friend, boyfriend/girlfriend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>courants d'air</td>
<td>breeze</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>enfant gâté</td>
<td>spoiled brat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fouteaise totale</td>
<td>total crap</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>frimeur</td>
<td>showoff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gâchis</td>
<td>mess, waste (as in gâchis politique)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jouissance</td>
<td>pleasure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>le strict nécessaire</td>
<td>the bare essentials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>les sans domicile fixe</td>
<td>the homeless</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>les S.D.F.</td>
<td>the homeless</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>les sans-abri</td>
<td>the homeless</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>merde, caca, crotte</td>
<td>shit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nounou</td>
<td>food (used with children), nanny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nounourse</td>
<td>teddy bear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nuitée</td>
<td>night (spent in a hotel)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ours en peluche</td>
<td>teddy bear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>petit ami, petit copain</td>
<td>boyfriend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>petite amie, petite copine</td>
<td>girlfriend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pièce de théâtre</td>
<td>play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>point de repère</td>
<td>point of reference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pote</td>
<td>friend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>siège social</td>
<td>main office, national headquarters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>une boum</td>
<td>a party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vernissage</td>
<td>opening (at an art gallery)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verbs</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>annuler un rendez-vous</td>
<td>cancel an appointment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>avoir (un) rendez-vous</td>
<td>have an appointment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bachoter</td>
<td>cram (for a test)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bouquiner</td>
<td>read</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>briser</td>
<td>break</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>décaler un rendez-vous</td>
<td>reschedule an appointment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>déchirer</td>
<td>tear up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>déposer</td>
<td>to deposit (a check)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>être de retour</td>
<td>come back</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>faire ça</td>
<td>do it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>faire la fête</td>
<td>party, celebrate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
faire la grasse matinée  sleep in
faire la tête  sulk
filer  give
filer  leave
fixer (un) rendez-vous  set an appointment
jouir  enjoy, savor, climax
lâcher  dump (a boyfriend/girlfriend)
prendre la parole  take the floor, speak
prendre son pied  get a kick out of something
prendre (un) rendez-vous  make an appointment
prendre un pot  go for a drink
prendre un verre  go for a drink
rater  miss (a plane, a TV show)
s'éclater  have a ball
s'occuper de  take care of, worry about
se régaler  feast, regale
se remémorer  recollect
supporter  stand, bear
tricher  cheat
tromper  deceive, cheat on
zonner  hang around

Expressions
à 3 heures pile  at 3 o'clock sharp
à 3 heures tapant  at 3 o'clock on the dot
à merveille  wonderfully
à peu près  almost
à une exception près  except for one thing
à un franc près  give or take a franc
à l'issue de  at the end of
d'emblée  immediately
d'ici un an  within a year, a year from now
d'occasion  used
dans les mois qui viennent  in the upcoming months
de quoi  means, reason
en effet  that's right
en particulier  in private
en passe de  about to
en permanence  permanently
en voie de disparition  endangered (species)
faire gaffe  watch out
faire une gaffe  blunder
huîtres à volonté  oysters—all you can eat
jusqu'à présent  so far
jusqu'au bout  all the way, to the very end
laissez tomber  forget it, never mind, let it go
le Français moyen  the average Frenchperson
mercredi 12  Wednesday the 12th
ne fût-ce que pour  even if only to
oublie, oubliez  forget I even said it
ouverture exceptionnelle  holiday hours (department store)
patatras !  crash!
petit à petit  little by little
pas à pas  step by step
que sais je  what have you
quitte à  even if it means
rupture de stock  out of stock
sauf erreur  unless I am mistaken
si je comprends bien  if I understand correctly
si je ne m'abuse  unless I am mistaken
si je ne me trompe  unless I am mistaken
soit (t prononcée)  so be it
soit (t not pronounced)    which brings/makes a total of
tandis que                 whereas, while
tant mieux                 good for him/her/them
tant pis                  too bad, never mind		
taratata!                bullshit! I don't believe you!
tout ŕ coup             suddenly, all of a sudden	
tout ŕ l'heure           in a second, a second ago
tout de suite          immediately, right away
Allez les enfants.     Come on, kids.
Avec ceci?/Avec ça?   Will that be all? (at grocery counter)
Ca me fait chier.      That really pisses me off.
Ca vous dérange si je ... ? Do you mind if I ... ?
Ca vous va?            Is it OK with you?
Ca va s'arranger.     Things will work themselves out.
C'est faux.            That's wrong. (a word, a dance step, ...)
C'est impossible ŕ louper. You can't miss it. (when giving directions)
C'est juste?          Is that correct? (said of change)
C'est la raison pour laquelle ...
C'est pas trop tôt !   Never too soon!
C'est pour ça que je ... That's why I ...
C'est un petit peu dommage. It's a bit of a shame.
C'était bien vous.     It was you all right.
Comme ça.             Just because.
Elle est en ligne.     She's on another line.
Est-ce que ça te branche? Sound good to you?
Est-ce que ça te dit?  Sound good to you?
Faut pas rêver!        Get real!/In your dreams!
Il n'y a pas de quoi rire. There's no reason to laugh.
J'ai beau essayer, je peux pas. Try as I might, I can't do it.
J'ai du mal ŕ ...      I have trouble ...
J'ai toujours su que... I've always known...
Je suis plus accommodant que vous ne le pensez.
Je ne sais que faire.  I don't know what to do.
Je ne sais pas quoi faire. I don't know what to do.
Je n'arrive pas ŕ ...   I am having trouble ..., I can't seem to ...
Lŕ, vous allez fort!    You're really going off on a limb there!
Moi je déconne.       I'm talking nonsense.
On est bien comme ça.  I'm happy.
On est en démocratie!  It's a free country!
On est en république!  It's a free country!
On se retrouve au café. We'll meet at the café.
Parce que parce que.  Just because.
Parisien de souche    Parisian born and bred
Pas question!         Out of the question!/No way!
Pourquoi tu dis ça?    Why do you say that?
Qu'est-ce que vous faites dans la vie? What do you do for a living?
Qu'est-ce que tu me racontes? So what's up?
Soit.             So be it.
Surtout pas.         Certainly not.
T'as bien dormi?     Did you sleep well?
T'as qu'ť suivre.    All you have to do is follow. Sheesh.
T'as qu'ť venir.     Just come along, silly.
Tu fais bel avoir... It would be good for you to have...
Tu l'as fait exprès?
Veuillez patienter.

Did you do that on purpose?
Please hold. (on telephone)