

WARE'S LANGUAGE NOTES

Are you d'accord with agreement ?

One of the golden rules in French is that if you know what you are talking about by the time you get to them, then things have to agree. It goes hand in hand with one of the greatest pains in French – that everything is either him or her, un or une, le or la, grand or grande, beau or belle.

Is this why they nearly always put the words they use to describe something after the thing itself? *Une rose blanche* – a white rose, *un vin blanc* – a white wine, *une bouteille à vin* – a wine bottle. Only a sprinkling of the most common adjectives go in front – *un bon vin*, *une jolie femme*, *une vieille maison*, *un beau gâteau* etc.

There are clues as to whether a thing is masculine or feminine, but an “e” at the end of the word is not one of them. – “homme” ends in an “e”. But it is best to make sure that when you come upon a new word for something you note if it is *un* or *une* or *du* or *de la* and say *un* and *une* in quite different ways, so your ear gets a clear model. That way, your brain will store away the gender with the word.

It is a pain, because whether something is masculine or feminine makes a big difference to the words around it – more so than whether it's singular or plural. The marker for more than one is nearly always an “s” and you don't hear it most of the time, but the marker for feminine is an “e” that nearly always makes the word sound different. It makes you pronounce the final consonant.

Sometimes the feminine form of an adjective sounds quite different – *blanc/blanche*, *heureux/heureuse*, *beau/belle* (this one even has a special form for masculine words beginning with a vowel – *un bel abricot*), but it's nearly always a heavier version of the masculine word. The only ones which don't change are the ones with an “e” on the end already – *suisse*, *sympathique*, *impossible* etc.

The really difficult area is when you use the Passé Composé talking about the past and then quite often the past participle (the word that stays the same and comes after the *avoir* or *être* bit) will have to agree with something. Even French people have difficulty with this, but the golden rule holds good. If you know the gender of the thing you are talking about then it has to agree. So if you are talking about someone who “is” gone (*Elle est partie*) then, yes there is a “e” on the end if it's a woman. And if you are talking about a thing you have seen, then you know what has been seen before you get to the word – *La voiture que j'ai vue est à Pierre* – and in this example “*vue*” has an “e” because it's the feminine car that has been seen..

Now most of the time, past participles end in a vowel, so adding an “e” to one doesn't make any difference to what it sounds like, but there are a small number of verbs which have a consonant at the end of their past participle, and they are, of course, used a lot. So you get that extra feminine sound on the end – *la robe que j'ai mise* (meez)(the dress I put on) – *la lettre que j'ai écrite* (aycreeet) the letter I wrote – *la bière que j'ai prise* (preez) the beer I had etc etc. This also pops up with those dreaded pronouns. *Avez vous la lettre?* *Non je l'ai mise à la poste.* The pronoun is a “*la*” for the letter, but it's in front of the verb so when you get to “*mis*” you know it's a feminine thing that got put, so it has to agree !