

## WARE'S LANGUAGE NOTES

### Asking Questions

Fortunately there are quite a few ways you can ask the same question in French, depending on how brave you feel or how posh you want to sound. Brave, because some of them mean using your voice in a sing song to make the question work, and not everyone finds this easy.

In English, you ask a question by changing the word order. It is free becomes Is it free? We sometimes use helping words like 'do' and 'did' to help us change the verb around: You like chocolate > Do you like chocolate? But most of the time it's just moving words about: You have seen the film > Have you seen the film?

In French, you have the choice of doing the same thing: *Vous avez des timbres* > *Avez-vous des timbres?* (*Have you any stamps?*) It gets clunky, though, when you have long sentences or when the subject is a thing or person, as you can't just turn things round, you have to use a pronoun: *Le train pour Paris part-il maintenant?* *Is the Paris train leaving now?* While this sounds very posh to French ears it can lead to fearfully complicated sentences and needs a lot of mental agility.

You can just say it as if it is true – *Le train pour Paris part maintenant?* (and this is where the song voice comes in) – raising your voice towards the end of the sentence to make it sound like a question. The problem is that you have got half way through what you are saying before they realise you are asking a question, so you may not get an answer first time round. Quite an important part of conversation is prediction, so the more clues you can give early on the better.

That's why I prefer Est-ce que..(ESKA) This is a very clever little phrase that turns the verb round right from the beginning and is like a spoken question mark right at the start of the question. ESKA means 'Oy mate, here comes a question!' *Est-ce que le train pour Paris part maintenant?* As soon as you say ESKA the other person knows you are asking a question and that he is going to have to say something back – so he'll listen carefully. What comes after is in normal word order. No operatic vocals needed! Job done!

ESKA is just the Yes/No question, but you can stick almost any other question word in front of it. *Quand est-ce que le train part?* *When does the train leave?* *A quelle heure est-ce que vous partez?* *What time are you leaving?* *Pourquoi est-ce que vous dites cela?* *Why do you say that?* *Avec qui est-ce que vous venez?* *Who are you coming with?*

It has a twin brother – *Qu'est-ce que (KESKA)* - which you can use for What? *Qu'est-ce que vous faites?* *What are you doing?* *Qu'est-ce que vous voulez?* *What do you want?* *Qu'est-ce que vous avez comme glaces?* *What have you got in the way of ice-creams?* *Qu'est-ce que vous prenez à boire?* *What will you have to drink?*

If you want to vary it, you can put the question word at the end of the question, and leave Est-ce que out: *Le train part quand?* *Vous partez à quelle heure?* *Vous dites cela pourquoi?* *Vous venez avec qui?* This is very useful when the question word is a bit long *Vous êtes ouvert jusqu'à quelle heure?* *What time are you open till?* is easier to say than *Jusqu'à quelle heure est-ce que vous êtes ouvert?* But if you wait till the end to put the question word, they won't realise you are asking until you've almost finished!

Practising asking questions is one of the easiest things to do. You don't even have to have a reason for doing it. It is a wonderful way to get your own back on offhand supermarket staff! *S'il vous plaît, où est-ce que je trouverez un bocal de Marmite?* *Avez-vous la monnaie de 50 euros, s'il vous plaît?* *Pourquoi est-ce que vous ne vendez pas de McVities Chocolate Digestives etc*