

WARE'S LANGUAGE NOTES

Un Chou-fleur – a cabbage or a flower?

It's a curious thing, but in French you nearly always mention what something is before you start describing it. Partly, I think, it is so that the adjectives can be seen to agree properly. It seems to be an essential feature of the language that if you know what you are talking about by the time you reach a related word, then it has to agree. Just as one senses that the French tend to conform to the rules so as to be « tranquille » - so their language leaves little or no room for uncomfortable doubt.

The result is that you end up with cars grey dark driving along roads rainy at limits of speed reduced. Des voitures grises (talking about the cars) foncé (talking about the tint of grey) qui roulent sur des routes pluvieuses (talking about the roads) à des limites de vitesse réduites (the limits are reduced, not the speed!).

Words which describe things are called adjectives, just as words describing the way things are done are called adverbs. But it isn't always an adjective that is used to describe something. It may be one of its attributes. A motor boat is a boat with a motor; stewing steak is steak for stewing a wine glass is a glass for wine etc. In English we hold back on mentioning what we are talking about until after all the other things we want to say about it. But in French it is the other way round - « un bateau à moteur; du steak à bourguignon; un verre à vin ». Always the thing first and the description, the attribute or the purpose after. There is an important difference between « une bouteille de vin » and « une bouteille à vin ». Give me the first one every time!

It even works for possession. We talk about my father's house, Fred's motorbike, Picasso's paintings; in French it's « la maison de mon père; la moto de Fred; les peintures de Picasso. » You can use both « de » and « à » for possession, especially in spoken French. Both follow the thing that belongs to whoever.

In English, we often talk of something in terms of what it is doing – the laughing cow, changing times, unthinking politicians etc. Here, too, in French you mention the thing first and then say what it is doing – « la vache qui rit, les temps qui changent, les politiques qui ne réfléchissent pas »

There are just a few adjectives that do go in front of what they are describing. They are few enough to be able to list them: grand (big), petit (little), gros (large), beau (beautiful, fine), bon (good), mauvais (bad) premier (first) dernier* (last) prochain* (next) vieux (old) jeune (young) ancien* (old-fashioned) joli (pretty) and nouveau (new).

The ones with the asterisk are a bit special, as they can be found before or after the thing they are describing, and have different meanings accordingly. « Une maison ancienne » is an old-fashioned or older-style house. « Mon ancienne maison » is my last house, or my former house – the one I used to have. « La semaine dernière » is last week, speaking from now. « La dernière semaine des vacances » is the last week of the holidays. « L'an prochain » is next year, 2009. « La prochaine fois » is next time. After the time reference you are counting from the present (this week, next week, sometime, never) Anything else and you put it in front.

So is a cauliflower a flower or a cabbage? Well the French obviously think of it as a cabbage – un chou-fleur a cabbage with a flower. The Germans, who think much like we do, call it a Blumenkohl, a flower cabbage, but a cabbage nonetheless. For us to call it a cauliflower suggests that English speakers think of it as a flower first and cabbage second. After all you don't tend to eat the cabbage bit.