

WARE'S LANGUAGE NOTES

Do you speak –INGlish?

Even when your command of French is very good, it is still inevitable that you sometimes get caught trying to transfer ideas directly from English into French – sort of translating on the hoof. In English there are a whole load of instances when we use the –ing form of a verb, in fact we have a “continuous” form of every verb tense. I walk, and I am walking both are talking about the present. I have eaten and I have been eating, I ate and I was eating, even I had eaten and I had been eating. There is a difference, often quite subtle, of feel between the two forms; they place what we are talking about in time in different ways. By and large, in French, these subtleties are expressed differently.

There is one situation where these differences are very important – when you are telling a story and you want to indicate what is story line and what is the background – I was eating breakfast when the postman came by = Je prenais (imparfait) mon petit déjeuner quand le facteur est passé (passé composé). The “imparfait” is used quite a lot where we need more than one word in English to make up the tense – I used to eat, I would eat (habitually) – and it is also used for this idea of continuity – I was eating. For more about the “imparfait”, how to make it and how to use it, look at my earlier article about Starting to talk about the Past.

Otherwise, in French there is only one verb form for each tense. Je mange can mean I eat (as a habit) or that I am eating (now). Je le verrai can mean I will see him or I will be seeing him. If you really want to emphasise the idea of continuity, you can use “je suis en train de manger” which really means “I am in the process, in the middle of eating”, but most of the time this is unnecessary. So when you start off J’étais ... and scratch your brain for a French –ing, you can always bluff it out with ..juste en train de dire.... I was...oops..just saying..., but really you should be using l’imparfait!

“I like playing cards” is another way in which an –ing ending can show up in English. We use –ing words almost as an alternative to the infinitive. Playing tennis is good exercise. Try doing it like this. I like spending time with you (= also I like to spend time with you – is there a subtle difference in English?). I spent the afternoon reading a book. In most instances you would remember the old rule that for the second verb you use an infinitive in French : J’aime jouer aux cartes. Jouer au tennis, c’est du bon exercice. Essayer de le faire comme ça. J’aime passer du temps avec toi. J’ai passé l’après-midi à lire un livre.

Our lazy use of –ing can lead to some very complicated French : I don’t want you doing that here throws up the subjunctive – Je ne veux pas que vous fassiez ça ici. Here, there is no short cut to building up clunky clauses in the French. Sometimes it’s just French being more literal about time. After opening the window he pulled the curtain – après avoir ouvert (literally after to have opened) la fenêtre il a tiré le rideau. Don’t forget this also works to say After he opened the window, he pulled the curtain, which if you put across into French as it stands again produces clunky clauses. The other one in this pair (before doing = avant de..) is a bit easier – Avant de tirer le rideau il a ouvert la fenêtre. But for these to work it has to be the same person/thing doing the two actions.

We sometimes attach an –ing form to a person or thing, like an adjective. The lady wearing the blue dress. I saw him coming up to me. The man holding the gun is a policeman. In French you can’t do it. You have to use a who, which or whom to link the two ideas and a properly conjugated verb: La dame qui porte/portait la robe bleue. Je l’ai vu qui s’approchait de moi. L’homme qui tient le fusil est un flic.

We also use an –ing for describing where things are or to talk about different postures (what a horrid way to put it !) Something might be lying on the floor, someone might be sitting on a chair, or standing behind the door, or lying on a sunbed. For sitting, French is like Liverpudlian – sat – assis sur une chaise. The thing lying on the floor is perhaps situated there – situé sur le plancher. The person lying on the sunbed is probably couchée or allongée. In other words French prefers looking at it from how they got there rather than suggesting their are actually doing something, when they aren’t. Standing is even more interesting. The guy standing behind the door se tenait derrière la porte (he held himself there). If you really want to be sure people know he wasn’t sitting or sat, then you could say il se tenait debout – upright, on his feet!

So doesn’t French have the equivalent of an –ing form? Well, yes it does, but it’s used much more sparingly. More about that next month!