

## WARE'S LANGUAGE NOTES

### Du, de la and des - when you are not saying how much.

One of the biggest hang-ups in French is the number of little words there are and how difficult it is to get a handle on them. The all-out favourite is DE and it's family (DU, DE LA and DES). They pop up everywhere and it takes a fair amount of time to get a feeling for when to use which. Much of the time, there is no corresponding word in the English version of what we want to say. I need eggs, sugar and flour to make this cake – Il me faut des oeufs, du sucre et de la farine pour faire ce gâteau.

Mind you, while English is quite happy to use nouns (names for things and people) without anything in front of them, this is very rare – and very modern – in French. Money doesn't grow on trees, we say, but they say "L'argent ne pousse pas sur les arbres" When you make a sweeping generalisation in French you say The money doesn't grow on the trees, or I love the honey (J'adore le miel). A sail boat is un bateau à voiles. It is as though everything has to carry a little sign to show what it is doing there. There are a few instances when this doesn't happen – for instance in Government-speak you get un Cheque Emploi (a cheque you use to pay someone for work).

Back to the DE family and its main use is where we would or could say "some". I want some bread, jam, apples – je voudrais DU pain, DE LA confiture, DES pommes. You aren't saying how much or how many, you are just saying "some". When you ask, it's the same thing – have you any stamps, any cheese, any cream? Avez-vous DES timbres, DU fromage, DE LA crème? So why does it have to be that when you are being negative they all are replaced by DE? Je n'ai pas DE fromage, il n'y a plus DE timbres, nous n'avons pas DE bananes, il n'y a jamais DE crème. I haven't any cheese, there aren't any more stamps, we haven't any bananas, there is never any cream.

It's quite logical really! When you say or ask if you have some bananas, you are not being precise about how much you want, but when you say there aren't any left, you are being very precise about the quantity – NIL!

And the follow-on to saying you use DU, DE LA and DES when you don't say how much you are talking about of whatever it is, and it all seems a bit vague, is that the moment you get at all precise about how much, you start using DE (= "of") just by itself. Just as you do in English – a teaspoon OF sugar, a little bit OF help, a lot OF thanks, a kilo OF tomatoes, a bottle OF wine. Une cuillerée DE sucre, un petit peu D'aide, beaucoup DE remerciements, un kilo DE tomates, une bouteille DE vin etc.

Add to this the odd phrases which in English don't have "of" in, enough wine, too much water (assez DE vin, trop D'eau) and even a dozen eggs (une douzaine D'oeufs) and your list is almost complete.

Committed wine drinkers should be careful to note the difference between une bouteille DE vin (which is definitely full of the stuff) and une bouteille À vin – which tells you about the bottle (a wine bottle), but not what is inside. Someone used the wrong preposition to join the two ideas with disappointing consequences!

These examples account for most of the times you will put DE rather than DU, DE LA or DES in front of nouns, but there is another situation in which this happens, and that is when the DU, DE LA, or DES comes up against a DE for some reason. An everyday example of this is if you need some glue from the DIY shop. I need is J'ai besoin DE ..... Glue is DE LA colle. Put the two together and you would end up with J'ai besoin DE DE LA colle. Well, even in French you can't have this kind of thing going on, so after a rapid barney, they go for the shortest option: J'ai besoin DE colle. J'ai envie DE cerises (I fancy some cherries)

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Another quirk is that DU. DE LA or DES change to DE if what they are referring to is described with the adjective in front of the noun. Most of the time in French you say what you are referring to and then describe it – une voiture rouge (a car red, oops! a red car) un bateau à moteur ( a motor boat) un cheque emploi (a cheque that's used for employment). But there is a short list of verbs that nearly always come first – un bon essai (a good try) un jeune homme (a young man) etc. When this happens and you want to say, for instance, some good wine DU.....vin becomes DE bon vin, DE jeunes gens (young people) DE mauvaise soupe etc.

It is worth knowing your way round the “DE” family and the only way to it is not to fudge it but choose what you think is the right member and say it very distinctly. The more you differentiate, the more others will correct you, and the more aware you will be of others using the different shapes. You will get the hang of it without thinking – after all that's what 55 million French people do!

The “DE” family is also a kind of club that gets special privileges in the French language, and there will be more article about EN and DONT and other little words that are linked with this family, not to mention.....