

WARE'S LANGUAGE NOTES

When self-awareness doesn't make you self-conscious

As I hinted a couple of months back, there is a whole group of actions that you do for yourself, such as daily routines like shaving or making up, dressing, and the like. The words for these are at the core of any list of what are called reflexive verbs. A reflexive verb is one where the action reflects back on the doer, to shave oneself, to dress oneself etc and in French this list is longer than in many languages, because whenever you do anything to or for yourself the verb suddenly takes on this reflexive dimension. Even make yourself a sandwich.

There are four kinds of reflexive verb – ones which always nearly always are reflexive, unless you need help with daily activities – Je me lève (I get up) je me couche (I go to bed) and a feast of morning routines preparing for the day and evening ones recovering from it. Others are: je me dépêche (I hurry), Asseyez-vous (sit down) Je m'en vais (I'm off) etc. These are seldom if ever used other than in this reflexive way. When you go up to someone On s'approche de quelqu'un and when you move away On s'éloigne. When you take care of something On s'occupe de quelque chose and when you don't care On s'en moque (or worse!)

Another group is where you do something mundane to yourself. Je me fais mal (I hurt myself) Je me regarde au miroir (I look at myself in the mirror) Je me déteste (I hate myself). The fact that it happens to be me I have done it to makes the verb reflexive. This group would include Je me demande = I ask myself = I wonder.

Then there are ones where something is being done mutually. Les deux amants se regardaient (The two lovers were looking at each other, not themselves). Vous vous connaissez? (Do you know each other?) Des gens se parlaient (People talked among themselves). Ils se racontaient des histoires (They used to tell each other stories).

The fourth kind is where the self is there for some completely different reason not related to the verb itself at all. This is where making the sandwich for yourself comes in – Je me fais un sandwich. Je me coupe toujours le doigt (I'm always cutting my finger – the “me” bit is only there to show whose finger I'm cutting, the French hating to say plainly *my* head or *his* finger with parts of the body). This kind is greatly enjoyed by French speakers who are constantly looking for new opportunities. Je vais me chercher une bière, me payer un séjour en Italie etc.

It's all not too bad until you start talking about things in the past. Then the horrid truth emerges – all these reflexive verbs take être to make up their Passé Composé etc. Whenever you start “Je me.....” the next word is going to be “suis”. Je me suis fait un sandwich (I made a sarny for myself). Je me suis coupé le doigt. (I cut my finger). Je me suis fait mal (I hurt myself – did myself a mischief). Nous nous sommes rencontrés au bar (we met up in the bar) – small wonder the French prefer to say “on” for “nous” – on s'est rencontrés au bar is so much easier!

For those who love grammar and written French the excitement doesn't stop there. Although these are “être” verbs and therefore agreement should be with the subject, the reality is that the rules for agreement are the ones for “avoir” verbs. They only agree with the subject if the reflexive pronoun – the “me, te, se etc” – is the direct object of the verb. Watch this: Elle a coupé le pain (She cut the bread); elle s'est coupée (She cut herself – direct object); Elle s'est coupé le doigt (She cut her finger - no agreement, as the s' is a kind of indirect object – saying who the finger belonged to). The really good think about this is that the French can't handle it either!

Et je me suis dit “Quel monde merveilleux”