

WARE'S LANGUAGE NOTES

Glue words

French is full of what I call “glue words”, little words that don’t mean anything, but help to tie bits of the sentence together. The worst of them are “de” and “à”. They mean “of” and “to”, don’t they? Well, those are their first dictionary meanings, but the reality is that they most often don’t have any “meaning” at all.

One of the rules you hear is “The second verb is always in the infinitive”. Just so. In sentences like I must go to the loo (Je dois aller aux toilettes) the second verb aller is in the infinitive. I like annoying people (J’aime embêter les gens) You mustn’t spit on the ceiling (Il ne faut pas cracher sur le plafond) and I want to go to bed (je veux me coucher) are all very straightforward. But the last one gives a hint of complications to come, because in the English we didn’t say I want go, but I want to go. That “to” which we think of as part of the infinitive (don’t we call verbs “to be” “to sink” or “to swim”) is really a glue word in English. Sometimes it is needed to complete the sense, and sometimes it isn’t.

In French it’s the same thing. Some verbs you don’t need anything with – vouloir, pouvoir, devoir, falloir, aller and all the verbs about planning to do something or liking or hating doing something, for instance. But for the majority of verbs that are followed by a “second” verb, there is one of our two glue words needed to sew the sentence together. And it is not always easy to know which.

There is a kind of rule of thumb, but it does not always work by any means. I generally think that if it’s a positive or optimistic word, you use “à” and if it is negative or shrinking back then it is “de”. So you start (commencer + à), succeed (réussir + à), manage (arriver ou parvenir + à), get on with (se mettre + à), doing something, but you refuse (refuser + de), avoid (éviter + de), prevent (empêcher + de), finish (finir + de), regret (regretter + de) or stop (s’arrêter + de) doing something else.

But a fair few verbs go the other way – deciding is a positive idea but décider is + de, and so are trying (essayer + de) dreaming (rêver + de) and rushing (se dépêcher + de), whereas hesitating is a negative idea but it’s (hésiter + à). So the terrible truth is that you need to associate the little glue word which goes with the verb when you first come across it.

The glue word “de” also works a little like the “to” of the English infinitive. With adjectives - Delighted to meet you (Enchanté de faire votre connaissance). It’s hard to speak chinese (Il est difficile de parler chinois). With some nouns : J’ai besoin de maigrir (I need to lose weight) Le désir de plaire (the wish to please). What is odd is that the position of an infinitive in a sentence can determine if there’s a “de”: Marcher est bon pour la santé (Walking is good for your health) but Il est bon pour la santé de marcher (It is good for your health to walk).

For those who are really keen on grammar and syntax, Il est facile de parler français (It is easy to speak French) is beautifully complicated. The “Il” at the front of the sentence is standing in for the three words at the end. You could say Parler français est facile, but because you are delaying the subject of the sentence (Parler français) you have to use the fully fledged pronoun “Il” rather than “Ce” and the infinitive has “de” in front. But if you are talking about French and you want to say it’s easy to speak, it looks like this Le français? C’est facile à parler, mais c’est difficile à écrire. C’est and “à” ? Make of that what you will !

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