

WARE'S LANGUAGE NOTES

How long, did you say ?

Almost the first question anyone asks an expatriate, whether the person asking is English or French, is how long they have been living abroad or in France. And straightaway you are into the awkward area of how you talk about periods of time in French.

The French look at a stretch of time a bit differently from English speakers. The English speaker looks back and says “I have been living here for 2 years” as if it is a sort of achievement. The French speaker is much more attached to the here and now and says “I am living here since 2 years” – J’habite ici (en France, à Videix) depuis 2 ans. If you name the starting date or time, I have been living here since 2007 still stays present in French – J’habite ici depuis 2007. “depuis” stands in for both “for” and “since” when you are looking back over a period. If you pinpoint a time in the past and look back from there, the same sort of transformation takes place. English: In 2008 I had been living here for 1 year (pluperfect). French: En 2008, j’habitais ici depuis un an (imperfect).

The same thing happens however you express the time period – Ça fait deux ans que j’habite ici. It be 2 year as I’ve been a-living ‘ere.

What seems quite odd is that while this works for positive statements, French follows the English way of doing things for the negative. I have seen her every day for 2 years = Je la vois tous les jours depuis 2 ans (present). But I haven’t seen her for 2 years = Je ne l’ai pas vu depuis 2 ans (passé composé). I haven’t been there since 1968 = Je n’y suis pas allé depuis 1968. I haven’t eaten for 6 hours = Ça fait six heures que je n’ai pas mangé.

This has been all about looking back, either from now or from a point in the past, over something that has been going on throughout that period. If you want to pinpoint something that happened in the past and measure how long ago it happened, then you don’t have this difference in tense. It reverts to the English way, well sort of. I met her three years ago = Je l’ai rencontrée il y a trois ans, or Ça fait trois ans que je l’ai rencontrée. Three years ago we were living in Scotland = Il y a trois ans, nous habitons en Écosse. In other words, the usual rules about talking about the past apply.

What about talking about the periods of time you spent somewhere? Well, this depends on whether you are talking about an intention or just mentioning how long you spent somewhere, or doing something. I’m going to Rome for three days – i.e. you intend to spend three days there – is very English – Je vais à Rome pour trois jours. (“pour” nearly always has an underlying meaning of intention) But if you stayed in Rome for three weeks you would say “Je suis resté à Rome pendant trois semaines” (just mentioning it as the period you spent there). In fact this is one of the rare occasions when you can leave a word out in French that you use in English and say “Je suis resté à Rome trois semaines”

So there isn’t just one French word to translate the English word “for”. If you are talking about a stretch it will be “depuis” if that stretch is still going on, or “pendant” (or nothing) if the stretch was all in the past and it will be “pour” only if there is an intention behind it.

Je suis parti en Algérie pour un an, mais j’y suis resté pendant deux ans. Je n’y suis pas retourné depuis plus de trente ans = I went to Algeria for a year, but stayed there for two years. I haven’t been back there for more than thirty years.