

WARE'S LANGUAGE NOTES

Keeping it simple

You will have noticed by now that the structure of French is more a bit complicated than that of English. For instance, in English you can talk about “the man I spoke to” or “I don’t want him doing that” whereas in French you have to say “the man to whom I spoke” or “I do not want that he do (subjunctive) that” – *l’homme à qui j’ai parlé – Je ne veux pas qu’il fasse cela*. English is more flexible than French and meaning is often carried other than strictly by the words we use. Most often, where there is a word that needs to be there in French but which is omitted in English, there will be a “que” in there somewhere (see my article about the Tale of que). If you try to go straight from the way you say things in English and transfer it into French, you can find yourself building some incredibly complex sentences and erring into the dark alleyways of the subjunctive. But there are a number of ways in which you can make it simpler without losing any of the meaning of what you want to say.

One way of doing this is to use a noun for the action rather than a verb. Not “after the boss left – *après que le patron était parti*” but “after the departure of the boss – *après le départ du patron*.” Nothing to conjugate, no complexities at all. And there are many more of these verbal nouns in French than there are in English. Everyone waited for him to arrive – *Tout le monde attendait son arrivée*. He had to wait until the show ended – *Il a dû attendre la fin du spectacle* – a bit nicer than : *Il a dû attendre jusqu’à ce que le spectacle finisse*.

There are lots of these verbal nouns in French. Some come from the present tense (*une offre, une rencontre*), others involve an ending such as *–ment* (*un engagement, un déménagement, un commencement*) or *–ure* (*une ouverture*) or *–tion/sion* (*proposition, émission, autorisation*) and nearly all of them can be wheeled into service and once you start using them you’ll be making them up as you go along, and be right most of the time!

Saying one thing happened after another can be very que-lunky. He saw me before I finished the work – *Il m’a vu avant que j’avais fini le travail*. After Jean had gone, I sat down in front of the TV – *Après que Jean était parti, je me suis assis devant la télé*. But you don’t always need to have a “que” there. If the same person is doing both things, you just sequence it a bit differently. Before he saw her he’d never known how beautiful she was – *Avant de la voir il n’avait jamais apprécié comment elle était belle*. After he had shut the door, he realised the key was still inside – *Après avoir fermé la porte, il s’est rendu compte que la clé était toujours à l’intérieur*.

There are a few link words that always involve the subjunctive. One of my least favourite is “bien que – although.” Even when you are stating the obvious, you still have to resort to the subjunctive although there is (may be?) no doubt or spin being expressed. Although she is 18 I don’t think she should go clubbing – *Bien qu’elle ait 18 ans, je ne crois pas qu’elle doive aller en boîte*. There are some useful little words you can use to avoid even this – *Malgré ses 18 ans, je...* (in spite of her 18 years). In fact you can avoid the second subjunctive, too, by saying “à mon avis” instead of “je ne crois pas.” *Malgré ses 18 ans, à mon avis elle ne devrait pas aller en boîte*.

There are few cases where it is more obvious that someone’s wish, rather than reality is being expressed, then when you say for what purpose something is being done. “so that ” is “afin que” and is followed by the subjunctive. It even has “should” or (watered down) “would” in what comes after in English – a relic of the subjunctive in English. His wife shut the door so he shouldn’t be able to hear the noise. *Sa femme a fermé la porte pour qu’/afin qu’il n’entende (subjunctive) pas le bruit*. But if he had done it himself, you could say : *Il a fermé la porte pour ne pas entendre le bruit, or afin de ne pas entendre le bruit*.

Not that you will necessarily remember these short cuts at the time you are talking. Starting out from simple, intuitive English and trying to work what you want to say in the same way into French and fight with the syntax/grammar if it all is guaranteed to twist your tongue and leave you speechless. So the secret is to work out a few ready-made expressions and practice them on the trees in the garden or on other road users as you drive!