

WARE'S LANGUAGE NOTES

Little awkward false friends

People tell me they know a lot of French words, it's just the little words in between that are so difficult. The awkward little words in French that hold the sense together are talked about in my articles on Glue Words, Patching ideas together and the Tale of Que etc, though perhaps only some of them. They feel awkward and difficult because they are different from what happens in English and we don't feel at home with them – a lot of the time because these link words have dropped out in English, especially with “que”. But all languages have their own little foibles, and English is no exception. It, too, has its awkward little words. Where they work differently they cause difficulty in both directions. Especially to Google Fishermen who want to translate word for word, as we all do when we reach the edge of our comfort zone.

The first lot of these that form a group are going places words – in, out, up, down, up to, off etc. Yes it's the group of “verbs that take être”, that are used in 80% of situations where someone is moving about, and where the direction the person/thing is taking is expressed in French not by a little word from the list above, but with one of those verbs, with something added if necessary to say how it was done. He ran in – Il est entré en courant. He flew off – Il est parti en avion. The woman on the horse rode up to me – la femme à cheval s'est approchée de moi – we know she's on a horse, so in French you would not need the idea of ride.

In fact, English uses an enormous number of these little words to provide different meanings, even with the same core verb. Just look at the word “look”. Just by itself, it means use your eyes! But so many directions to choose from! Look at, look for, look forward to, look up in a dictionary, look into, look out for, look up to, or down on, look over etc. Regarder only covers the first one. The visual “look” link may be there still, but these little expressions mean very different things, and therefore there is likely to be a different French word for each of them, a different way of “looking” at them. Each of these words will have its own way of slotting in with the words around it. It's a little bit like a jigsaw puzzle and the mixture of tabs and slots is called the syntax of the word. So the list above becomes: regarder (qqch) i.e. no little word required, just a direct object (just like “watch” in English) chercher (qqch) just like old English “seek”, attendre (qqch) avec impatience, chercher again but dans un dictionnaire, guetter (qqn ou qqch) or faire attention, respecter (qqn), mépriser (qqn). (qqch = quelquechose - something, qqn = quelqu'un somebody).

So all our “look” list have equivalents in French that are just followed by the person or thing looked at, for, forward to etc) There are quite a few common expressions where this is true.

You don't wait for the bus, On attend le bus. You don't listen to some music, On écoute de la music. You don't pay for a beer, on paie une bière. In other words, it is the whole expression you need the equivalent of, not each little part of it. A lot of these combinations have more than one meaning in English, for each of which there may be a different French word. e.g. take on can mean accept (accepter) fight against (lutter contre) assume (prendre) take on board a load (embarquer) or hire someone (embaucher). You don't give up hope, On l'abandonne!

Another group is sensation words. When we say in English “I can see a bird” we are not saying how clever we are to be able to see it, we are most of the time just noting what our eye has picked up spontaneously. It's a bit old-fashioned to say I see a bird, or I hear music or I feel something crawling up my back. But pouvoir in French really means being physically able to do something. Je peux voir is something a person who has just had a cataract operation might say. So most of the time I can see is Je vois, I can hear is J'entends, and I can feel or I can smell is Je sens... While we are on the subject, we also ask Can you swim, can you ride a bike, can you drive, can you speak French? It isn't a case of physical ability, though, as anyone can do any of these things if they know how. So the French are more literal : savez-vous nager? savez-vous monter à vélo? savez-vous conduire? and just Parlez-vous français ?