

WARE'S LANGUAGE NOTES

Patching ideas together

My article about Glue words, some time back, was all about how in French you have to make it clear how individual content words tie into a sentence. You show this relationship using little words like “a” and “de”. (e.g. bateau à voile = boat with sail, boule de neige = ball of snow) and very rarely do you find two nouns together without something to show how they are related.

The same can be said for larger bits of language, the whole ideas that we want to express. In grammar terms these larger building blocks are called clauses if they have a verb in them (e.g. when he comes) or phrases if they don't (e.g. in a few minutes). In these two examples, the clause or phrases wouldn't make sense by themselves. They need something happening and they are just saying when: We'll see him when he comes in a few minutes. We'll see him is the happening – the main clause of the sentence. When he comes is called a subordinate clause, because it is not freestanding and not the main action in the sentence.

We are getting into the depths of grammar here, and they stopped doing that in schools in the UK a long time ago. It's fair enough, as the grammar of English is very loose compared with many languages. Compared with French, where things are masculine or feminine without any rhyme or reason, English speakers are always thinking about sex rather than gender (him or her is always about sex, not about identifying a bed or a table). And certainly in modern spoken English, in the same way that we only really listen to a quarter of what is being said (the stressed syllables which come out of the garbled rest) we also seem to be able to string the logic of how ideas are related by some means other than the actual words. In French, where every single syllable is pronounced fully, it seems that all the grammatical “i”'s have to be dotted and “t”'s crossed like their 7s. Get one sound wrong and you risk being misunderstood.

In English, the loose structure means you can string clauses together without any apparent links – he promised he would come, I thought it would be a good idea, he hoped I would do the work. These are modern, or sloppy (grumpy old man!), English, in that in the old days, there would have been a “that” in each statement. In French the “that” has to be there: Il a promis qu'il viendrait; Je pensais que ce serait une bonne idée ; Il espérait que je ferais le travail. Sometimes one clause can be inside another: The man he saw was blond. Or in older English, the man whom he saw.... Again, in the French you need “que” again, though this time it is a relative pronoun not a conjunction : l'homme qu'il a vu était blond. (see also the Tale of Que)

Sometimes one comes a cropper simply because a word has more than one function in English but not in French. “Before” can introduce a clause (as a conjunction) or come before a noun (as a preposition) : Before I discovered Smyrnoff (conj) ; before the game (prep). In French “Avant” is a preposition and can come in front of a noun: Avant le match, but it is not strong enough to introduce a clause. Again, there has to be a “que” added : Avant que j'aie découvert Smyrnoff. After/Après is the same. Après vous – after you; but After the light went out – apres que la lumière s'est éteinte. The “que” almost seems to warn of something more substantial on its way.

You can look up some of these link words in the dictionary – what about everyday ones like “because” and “although”? What do you find? “parce que”, “bien que”. There is even a posh “when” – “lors que”, though you'll more often find it in print.

You can't attach a phrase to a noun, either. It doesn't make a strong enough link. How much is that doggy in the window becomes How much is that doggy which is in the window – Combien vaut ce chiot qui est dans la vitrine? Quel est le prix de ce chiot qui est dans la vitrine? etc The one with the waggly tail becomes Celui qui a la queue qui remue.

Finally, you have ce que (“SKER”), as immortalised by Michel Thomas. It becomes necessary, amongst other places, when you want to say until something happens. This becomes an incredibly unwieldy “jusqu'à ce que” (JUICE-CASSKER). He waited until the bus came – Il a attendu jusqu'à ce que le bus arrive. This last provides a reminder that care has to be taken with a number of these “que”s. A number of them lead into a clause where the subjunctive is de rigueur.

How wonderful it is, therefore, and I am sure it is no coincidence, that French verbs have nice flexible noun forms, and that “Jusqu'à ce que le bus arrive” can be simplified to “jusqu'à l'arrivée du bus.” Almost makes grammar worth coming to grips with?