

WARE'S LANGUAGE NOTES

When was it? – Pinpointing time.

Saying when things happened or are happening is an everyday part of talking to people, but there are pitfalls in French. It involves using those little words that make life so difficult, prepositions, in both English and French and they do not always tally at all, especially if you try to translate word for word.

Take “On Tuesday I’ve an appointment at the dentist.” There is no word for On at all. It’s just “Mardi, j’ai rendez-vous chez le dentiste.” On Friday we went out for supper – Vendredi nous avons mangé au restaurant.

If you are talking about something you do every Wednesday, in English we say On Wednesdays, but in French it is Le mercredi. Le Mercredi, il y a un marché à Piégut (Pyay-gyou). You could also say “Tous les mercredis” or “chaque mercredi”

This “le” appears in dates, too. When you sign a cheque you put the place and date and printed in small letters you will find À..... for the place and Le..... for the date. A Videix, le 20 mai 2009 or something. When you want to add the day of the week as well, the “le” stays there. Le jeudi 20 mai is Thursday the 20th of May. You are pointing to a very particular and unique Thursday, and there will never be another one! What is rather quaint is that when two days and dates are mentioned the “le” becomes “les”: les jeudi vingt et vendredi vingt-et-un mai. Thursday the twentieth and Friday the twenty-first of May is rather a mouthful in English.

Telling the time of day something is going to happen is quite straightforward – Le spectacle commence à 20 heures – always providing you can get your head round the 24 hour clock. And shop opening times are OK, too. On est ouvert de 8h à 12h et de 14h à 19h (from – to)

Sometimes a more elaborate pair of words is used for the spread of time : à partir de 8h jusqu’à 19h sans interruption (not closing at lunchtime) Just look at the little word just before the time and you can see it says exactly the same thing.

That “à partir de” is useful to express the idea of “any time after” Vous pouvez venir à partir de dix-sept heures – you can come any time after 5pm. Watch for the words when they are telling you how cheap something is, as there is always a catch: à partir de 5 euros – from 5 euros – will probably mean it’s 15 euros in the size you want!

Last Friday and Next Wednesday are like On Friday etc, as there are no extra words: vendredi dernier il y a eu un orage – last Friday there was a storm – mercredi prochain il y aura un film anglais en version originale – next Wednesday there will be an undubbed English film. Only when you are counting from the time your speaking, dernier and prochain come after the noun – La semaine dernière, le mois prochain, l’an dernier, l’année prochaine – last week, next month, last year, in the course of next year. (Notice the “le” or “la” have crept back in!) But otherwise they go in front – La dernière fois, le prochain bus, les dernières frites – last time, the next bus, the last chips.

À la prochaine!

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