

Pointing at things and making a choice.

It is fairly basic body language to point at what you want. Babies do it from a very early age. But it is nice to be able to add a word or two to be polite and to make sure you are understood that you want this one and not that one.

The basic word for “this” or “that” in French is “*ce*”. It is a bit weak on its own, so it is common to add *-ci* or *-là* to give it a bit more body. In the good old days, *-ci* used to mean here (as in *ici* – here) and *là* used to mean there (as in *là-bas* – over there), but the distinction has faded over time. Which is why the man at the deli counter says “*avec ceci?*” – what else do you want with this? *Ça* (that you say in *Ça va*) is *ce + là* shortened. Does that go?

Of course, the usual French rule applies that if you know what you are talking about things have to agree. So when you want to say this book or this car or these people, there are three different shapes to match gender and how many there are. You say *ce livre* – this book, *cette voiture* – this car, *ces gens* – these people. There’s even a special shape for masculine things that begin with a vowel. It doesn’t sound good to say *ce artichaut*, not when you are pointing at it, so they pop a “t” in to make it work: *cet artichaut* – this artichoke and *cet homme* – this man. Mind you, the “t” disappears if you put an adjective beginning with a consonant in front: *ce grand artichaut* – that big artichoke. It all depends on what is coming straight after *ce*. You can add a bit of strength to your choice by adding *-ci* or *-là* to it: *ce livre-ci* – this book here, *ce jambon-là* – that ham there.

It’s indispensable if you are asking the price of something: *C’est à combien ce stylo? Quel est le prix de ces chaussures? Elle fait combien, cette robe?*

What about when you are choosing between, say, different types of ham or rosette or tomatoes or pencils, and you don’t want to keep repeating the word ham, rosette etc? In English you’d say “This one” or “that one” or “those”. Again, because you know what you are talking about, you have to use a word which matches it in gender and number (how many there are).

It’s LE jambon, so that one would be *celui-là*. It’s LA rosette so this one would be *celle-ci*. It’s LES crayons (masculine) so those would be *ceux-là* and LES tomates (feminine) so these would be *celles-ci*.

Your conversation might go like this:

Je voudrais du jambon s’il vous plait – I’d like some ham please.

Lequel? – Which one? (Lequel, laquelle, lesquels or lesquelles accordingly)

Celui-ci – This one

Celui, celle, ceux and *celles* can be tricky to use, as French is more fussy about sentence structure than English. If you were looking at a puppy in the window (*un chiot dans la vitrine*) and you wanted the one with the waggly tail you’d have to say “the one which...” – *celui qui frétille de la queue*. You can say *celui de Pierre* – Pierre’s one or *celui de gauche* – the one on the left and a few other place words like that, but for the most part, *celui* is often followed by *qui, que, dont* etc to explain just which one you mean.

Going back to the dog in the window, if you wanted the black one, French is simpler than English. Because an adjective has to agree with the thing it is describing, you can just use an adjective by itself. *Le noir* is the black one if you were talking about a pup. *Le blanc* would

be the white one. And that's where some people's names come from. Mr Brown in French is *Monsieur Lebrun* (Mr The Brown One). Mr Black is *Monsieur Lenoir*, and those people who are big in electrical bits are Messrs *Legrand*.