

WARE'S LANGUAGE NOTES

Running words together

People tell me the French run all their words together. But we all do it. The only reason we can distinguish words is that we are familiar with them already. At least the French pronounce every syllable, and where we live even some that aren't there! Whereas English speakers, especially from the Home Counties, tend to swallow all but the stressed words. If French speakers did this we would not have a hope!

There are some words which are just weak and feeble. "le", "de", "que", and even "la" just collapse when they come into contact with a vowel, or most "h"s come to that. You see this with things beginning with a vowel - l'animal, l'orange, une bouteille d'huile, l'hôpital etc. It can make life a bit easier, too - pronouns in the Passé Composé, for instance, where "it", "him" or "her" all collapse into "l'" in front of the appropriate bit of "avoir". "Je l'ai vu" could mean "I saw him/her or it" entirely depending on the context. "Me", "te" and "se" and "Ce" all do this, too. Almost the first things you learnt in French were: "Je m'appelle"; "C'est un stylo." What happens is that the collapsed fragment just becomes part of the following word - no hesitation or gap at all. "une bouteille d'huile" (bootay dweel) "beaucoup d'enfants" (bowcoo donfong) "Allez à l'hôpital" (a lopital) "C'est un stylo." (Saytun steelo - as you will see below, you get to say the "t" of "est").

You have to be a bit careful with "h"s. Some don't behave in the same way. I think of them as "hibou words" or "owl" words, as "le hibou" (note the "le" doesn't collapse) was the first word of this kind I met. There are quite a few more useful ones. The French's favourite veg is just one - "le haricot vert" - and I live in la Haute Vienne (not l'Haute Vienne). These "h"s are as strong as consonants and don't obey any of the rules of elision. So you talk about "des haricots" (day areecoe not day zareecoe). Which brings me to the next big group.

A feature of French is that the final consonants of words are mostly not pronounced unless they have an "e" after them. "F" is probably the only consistently pronounced final consonant, with doubts arising for almost all the others. One of the big exceptions to this rule is when the word is followed by a word beginning with a vowel. There are a surprising number of circumstances where this happens.

The most common occurrence is the "s" on the end of "les" or "des" in front of a thing beginning with a vowel - des_oranges (day zoranj); les_animaux (lay zanimu). The same thing happens with the "x" at the end of "deux", "six", and "dix". These three are silent in front of a consonant - deux pommes, dix pommes (deepom), six mille (see meal) - but become a "z" noise in front of a vowel - six_oranges (seezoranj), dix_arbres (deezarbr). This also happens to the pronoun "les" in front of the "avoir" of the Passé Composé - je les_ai vus (je layzay view) - I saw them.

It also happens in verb conjugations where the verb starts with a vowel - Nous_avons, vous_avez, ils_ont. It can even happen at the other end - C'est_un_homme (saytunomm) -

If you listen to the radio you will be aware how the French tend to carry on "singing" when they are thinking of what to say next. If they haven't chosen the word they are going to use next, and if it starts with a vowel, they will add the normally silent consonant at the beginning of the following word. "Au marché j'ai vu des.....anglais" (Oh marshay j'ay view daaaaaaaaay zarnglay)

A "d" on the end of a word behaves slightly differently when the next word starts with a vowel. It hardens into a "t" sound - "le grand hotel" (le granrtotel). This is nice when you are trying to find out when a reluctant builder is finally going to come - "Quand est-ce?" (karntess?) = When??? - easy to spit out and load with impatience.