

WARE'S LANGUAGE NOTES

Sounding French

We were looking at words running together a few months back and noticing how, for instance, an “s” or “x” on the end of a word only gets heard, most of the time, when there is a vowel at the beginning of the next word. Des animaux = Day zaneemo but Des animaux adorables = Day zaneemo zadorahble.

There are other things that make French difficult to understand to English speakers and vice versa. English is a language that is “stress-timed” – there is an equal amount of time from stress to stress and the speed of delivery depends on how many words there are between the stressed syllables. Boring people like book reviewers on radio stress **every other syllable** and **if** you are **talking to someone** who **talks** like **this** you can **easily get a headache**. If you keep the same pace in the stresses, you can **actually get** quite a lot of **words** in between the **stresses**. The more you have the more they are gobbled and the individual vowel-sounds become less distinct.

French is “syllable-timed” – every syllable gets the same amount of time however unimportant. The result is like slow machine gun fire and what stresses there are do not affect the speed of delivery, which depends simply on how many bullets are being fired a minute. The vowel-sounds are not gobbled up as there is time to give each its full value. This in itself limits the speed that a French speaker can talk at. So speaking your French in a monotonous evenly spread way is a key to being authentic and being understood. It also gives you time to make the vowels sound right.

There are some things you can mimic. The noise a French speaker makes when s/he’s thinking. Rather than let anyone else interrupt them while they choose the next word, there is this noise like a child playing with a car or an aeroplane - Eh ben, euh.....,moi, je pense, euh....., que euh....., qu’on devrait euh.....faire attention. This is particularly useful if you are hunting for the French word for something, but the vowel sound must be a hard French one, not a soft imprecise English urr.....

I always compare this continual noise to the drone on a bagpipe – the continuous bottom note that seems to come from the bag under the piper’s arm. It’s a good comparison, as the bag under the arm serves the same purpose as the drone in the French speaker’s voice. It provides the controlled air and hum to enable the vowels to be pronounced the way they need to be. It’s not unlike singing. By rationing the amount of air, you also project your voice and this combined with a very tightly shaped mouth enables you to make authentic French vowel noises and vocalise the nasal sounds. If an English speaker uses his voice this way, he is being assertive or aggressive, which is why it always seems that the French are arguing with each other. You don’t often hear French people whispering to each other, as the breathy southern English whisper doesn’t allow the vowels to be articulated properly.

The last bit is to tighten your mouth to make a single pure sound each time. If you take the average English vowel – something like the one in “mouse” – it is made up of more than one sound. It starts as mah and slides into oose – mah-oose. Sight = sah-eet. Boat = beuh-oh-oot.

French vowels have one sound and a French speaker shoots his mouth into whatever shape is needed and holds it there for the split second it’s needed before moving on to the next one. This is why French elderly ladies often have deep lines around their mouths. They use muscles we didn’t know we had. You may have seen photos of French politicians, speaking with their lips pushed right out in front. This is because most French vowels are made in the middle of the lips. This tight lip movement makes lip-reading easier but gives ventriloquists a hard time!

Try this experiment. Pinch the ends of your mouth between the thumb and index finger of each hand, leaving only the middle of your mouth openable. Then try and read the previous sentence out loud. It takes a lot of effort to make yourself understood, and you have to form all the sounds much more distinctly and speak much less breathily. You are using those mouth muscles to articulate the vowels. Now try some French expressions. Doesn’t it sound better? (NB not to be practised while driving a car!)