

## WARE'S LANGUAGE NOTES

### Telling people and getting things done

This month we are looking at getting your needs met by telling or asking someone to do something. In English we have a lot of different ways of doing this, from the peremptory *Stop making that noise* to the oh-so-mild *Would you mind awfully closing the window*. In French you have much the same kind of choice.

To begin with, let's tell 'em. Like swing doors do. They are always telling us to push or pull – *POUSSEZ* or *TIREZ* – the *EZ* on the end means they are talking to YOU. If you hear someone saying something to you with an *EZ* on the end, you can be sure they're telling you to do something. Just as the *EZ* word is the *Vous* form of the present tense with the *Vous* left off, so there is also a *Tu* form that you use for people you know well, children and dogs. *Regarde!* (but no *s* on the end!) *Fais attention* (watch out!) *Tais-toi!* (be quiet) *Va-t-en!* (go away) *File!* (shove off)

Sitting down in French is something you do to yourself – in some kinds of English we say Sit yourself down and so do the French. There's an extra *Vous* around the place for the yourself bit, and it becomes *Asseyez-vous!* (sit down) *Installez-vous!* (make yourself at home) *Allez-vous-en!* (go away).

It's not quite as blunt in French as it is in English, especially if there is something in it for them. For instance in a shop it is quite OK to say *Donnez-moi des croissants* once you have already asked more politely for something else. You are no longer asking for a favour, you are in the middle of a business transaction.

French has one more of these command forms than we have. You can include yourself in the instruction by using the *Nous* form of the verb without the *Nous*. The National Anthem begins *Allons enfants de la Patrie!* Let's go, us children of the Fatherland.. You'll find *Allons!* is used a lot to move things on to the next thing to do or talk about. *Allons, je m'en vais* – Right then, I'm off.

There are politer ways of asking someone to do something. Of course, you can add *s'il vous plaît*, but French people often use the Conditional to soften a request. When you ask for something in a shop you say *Je voudrais* or *J'aimerais* rather than *Je veux*, and in the same way you would say *Pourriez-vous (Pourrais-tu) (Est-ce que vous pourriez) ouvrir la fenêtre?* rather than *Ouvrez la fenêtre!*

These politenesses only apply to the needs of the speaker. In English we say *Would you like another biscuit?* But the French say *Do you want... Voulez-vous, est-ce que tu veux etc.* And *Could I* and *Can I* work the same way. *Est-ce que je peux regarder? (Could I have a look?)* The contorsions that some English speakers get into are completely unnecessary (*Would it be possible for me....*) *Est-ce que je peux* covers every possible need!

The other form of request that this use of the Conditional applies to is the one with *Il faut* It is necessary. If someone says to you *Il faudrait faire la vaisselle*, they are pointing out the need to do the washing up in such an apologetic way that you can be sure they are asking you to do it! More about this horrid verb in a future article!

An overweaning way, *Would you mind awfully?* is matched in French by *Ça vous ennuerait de fermer la fenêtre?* (Would it be a bore?) *Ça vous dérangerait de vous en aller ?* (Would you mind going away ?)