

WARE'S LANGUAGE NOTES

The way things are done in French

Describing people and things is perhaps one of the first things one learns in French – all that stuff about how adjectives or describing words have to agree with the things they are describing; for the most part adding an “e” if the thing or person is feminine and/or an “s” if there are more than one of them; and remembering that where in the masculine form of the word you may well have a consonant you don’t pronounce on the end of the adjective (e.g. grand, petit), the “e” on the end of the feminine form forces the pronunciation of that consonant (grande, petite).

Describing how something is done in English is fairly straightforward. If someone is a quick learner, you can say he learns quickly. When someone has enough money to be comfortable, you say he is comfortably off. The -ly stuck on the end of the adjective makes it into an adverb – a word that describes how the action is carried out. In the second example, there is a slight spelling adjustment because there is an “l” at the end of the word already, but otherwise the rule works pretty well.

In French it is rather similar, and you add -ment to the end of the adjective to match the -ly of the English. But in French you have two forms to choose from, the masculine and the feminine. If you look up an adjective in a dictionary you’ll find the masculine form. Visually, because you are reading you can see any consonant on the end of the word, but if you asked someone instead of looking it up, they would still tell you the masculine form, and you wouldn’t hear that final consonant. For an awful lot of adjectives the masculine form spoken doesn’t let you hear the whole of the word. You are left open-mouthed at the end of it. So to get a complete word, a decent stem you can stick a solid ending onto, you have to use the feminine version – the one with everything there. It is this stem that you add the -ment to.

The results are things like:

Heureux > heureusement (fortunately, happily) as opposed to malheureusement (sadly, unfortunately)
 Soigneux > soigneusement complet > complètement (completely) attentif > attentivement (attentively)
 vif > vivement (livelily, or part of vivement les vacances ! = can’t wait for the holidays !)
 naturel > naturellement (naturally) rapide > rapidement (quickly) Where the masculine form has an “e” already, the feminine is the same anyway. Possible > possiblement (possibly)

There is one group of words that behaves slightly differently, and that is ones where the masculine version ends in -ent or -ant. Instead of adding the -ment onto the feminine (~~différentement~~) they shorten it down:

différent > différemment (differently, but “autrement” is easier to say) récent > récemment (recently)
 évident > évidemment (evidently !) etc constant > constamment etc

I have often said that French speakers often go for a longer option, as they are not in any hurry to finish what they are saying and allow someone else to have their say. So there are other ways of saying how things are done. Phrases like our “in a way”. So you can say “Nous avons passé la soirée très agréablement” or you can say “Nous avons passé la soirée d’une manière très agréable”. We spent the evening very pleasantly. Or “Il nous a traités très gentiment” (Well, there are always going to be exceptions !) “Il nous a traités d’une façon très gentille” He treated us very kindly (or is it kindly ?)

There are times when we want to relate the way we do something to some purpose or other. This is dangerous ground, as being able to see the hills is initially only in his mind, and he can’t be sure it will work until he has finished. Last month we saw that when things only exist in the mind, the dreaded subjunctive rears its ugly head. He did it in such a way that his wife could see the hills from the window. > Il l’a fait de façon à ce que sa femme puisse voir les collines par la fenêtre. If it is him doing it and him seeing it, then this, too, can be simplified to > Il l’a fait de façon à pouvoir voir les collines de la fenêtre. But avoiding the subjunctive is another story...