

WARE'S LANGUAGE NOTES

The Continu-ING Saga

Last month we looked at some of the difficulties around the English love of –ing as part of the Continuous tenses (I am/was/have been/will be eatING etc) and as the Gerund (I like eatING, I don't want you eatING that etc) and how French didn't have an exact equivalent, using the same tense for both I eat and I am eating etc (je mange etc). The exception being when you are telling a story and saying I was having a shower when the postman came je prenais (imparfait) une douche quand le facteur est passé (passé composé). And how for an –ING in English coming after another verb – I prefer receiving presents to giving them – follows the second verb rule and is nearly always an infinitive – Je préfère recevoir les cadeaux plutôt que de les donner. And how I don't want him doing that here invokes the subjunctive in French (Je ne veux pas qu'il fasse cela ici).

Well, inevitably they do have an ING form, it is just that they don't use it as much as we do.

The mechanics of it are that it has the same stem as the imparfait – take the nous form of the present (mangeons, faisons, finissons) and change the –ons to –ant (mangeant, faisant, finissant). It is not quite as fail-safe as the imparfait, where there really is only one exception to the rule (étais, and for this ING form étant = being), because there are one or two verbs that form this bit from the subjunctive (e.g. sachant = knowing; ayant = having).

So when do you use it? When you are talking it virtually always has “en” in front of it. It then enables you to talk about the same person or thing doing two things at once. Il travaille en écoutant la radio – He works listening to the radio. He bought a paper coming out of the underground – Il a acheté un journal en sortant du métro. You can exaggerate how simultaneous the two actions are (or how they don't seem to go together) by adding “tout” - Il a marché sur ses main tout en tenant un ballon entre ses pieds – He walked on his hands while at the same time holding a ball between his feet. Il est malheureux, tout en étant riche – He is miserable despite being rich.

It also solves the problem of the English addiction to using prepositions to express movement. He ran into the room. For the basic movements in and out, up and down, coming and going, arriving and departing etc, French only has a very small list of words, all using être to make their passé composé. They are tedious to learn, but work very hard, as almost any time English says “into”, French uses “entrer” in some form or other. En + =ANT can be used to show how it happens. Il est entré dans la pièce en courant.

En + =ANT can also explain how something happened. Je me suis cassé la cheville en tombant sur la glace – I broke my leg falling on the ice. Je suis tombé en glissant – I fell when I slipped, or I slipped over. Il a gagné tout son argent en jouant au poker – he won all his money at poker.

It can also give the idea of “by doing” something, especially in moralising statements – C'est en faisant de l'exercice qu'on se tient en bonne forme – it's by doing exercise that you keep fit. Ce n'est qu'en cherchant qu'on va trouver la vérité – It is only by searching that we will find the truth.

You do find it without “en” but mainly in written notices - Les personnes voulant prendre rendez-vous (people wanting appointments). But on the whole, when you are talking it is better to use a “qui” clause – Les personnes qui veulent prendre rendez-vous.