

WARE'S LANGUAGE NOTES

The tale behind “*que*”

One of the difficulties with French is that it is full of little words that join ideas together but which are not always easy to get a handle on. English is so much more lax than French that we are not fussed about the exact choice of what I call “glue words”. Often British speakers and Americans use different ones (different from or different than?). Nowadays we often miss out words (that) our grandparents would have insisted on. We even forget (that) they are there in English, and this makes it especially difficult to remember (that) they are needed in French. French comes from Latin, a language which was dear to write down (written on expensive parchment or chipped into stone, you paid by the letter) and where a very tight structure meant that words that we find necessary (*the* and *a* to mention but two) could be left out, but what was left was terribly important if you were going to understand how the words hung together.

Que is one of these words. I've been asked several times what it means, but most of the time you meet it as a part of a more useful cluster (*Est-ce que...?* or even *Qu'est-ce que...?* for instance) and if you try taking these little phrases apart you are on the way to confusion and depression

Part of the game is to realise that English in former times was just as formal and people felt the need to say *that* and *which* much more often than they do nowadays. Those *thats* and *whiches* that you can leave out in English are nearly always a *que* in French. I know Father Christmas is going to come – *Je sais QUE le père Noël va venir*. He's the man I saw at the party – *C'est l'homme QUE j'ai vu à la fête*.

Another place *que* crops up is when you are making comparisons. It's the little word for as or than as in Your house is smaller than mine – *Votre maison est plus petite QUE la mienne*. He is as silly as his sister – *Il est aussi bête QUE sa soeur*. You earn less money than me – *Vous gagnez moins d'argent QUE moi* etc

But the one I have always found hardest to recognise and deal with is when *Que* means What? You only really ever hear it clearly in what the French call *langage soutenu* – posh language. *Que faites-vous?* What are you doing? *Que voulez-vous?* What do you want? *Que dit-il?* What is he saying? Everyone knows it's more comfortable to use *est-ce que* and not have to twist the subject and verb around. But what happens then? *Qu'est-ce que vous faites?* *Qu'est-ce que vous voulez?* *Qu'est-ce qu'il dit?* That *Qu'* at the beginning is the same *Que* as in the posh *Que* question form.

In fact it's even worse than that, because there are two *ques* in *Qu'est-ce que vous faites?* and they don't even mean the same thing! If I tell you that the second *que* is one of them ones you can leave out in English – What is it (that) you are doing? then I am sure you would agree you have to be a sad person like me to want to start taking these fixed phrases apart!

A little footnote is that just as *me* and *te* and *se* have strong versions for when they are not cosily tucked in front of the verb (*moi, toi and soi*) as in *Chez toi, venez avec moi* etc, so the same thing applies to *que*? when it means What? *Que faites-vous* can become *Vous faites quoi?* If you choose to opt for a more informal way of asking the question.