

WARE'S LANGUAGE NOTES

When one doesn't have a plum in one's mouth

In English we associate the word *One* with posh talk. The royal family and upper classes tend to talk about *One doing one's best* and it is best announced with a plum in the mouth, almost like the royal *We*. If one is not careful it can become a kind of mantra to learn: *je regarde, tu regardes, il regarde, elle regarde, on regarde....* Who is this *On* anyway? Well, in French, it certainly isn't posh but it is very useful, and there's even a bit of the royal *we* in there, too.

Basically, *on* has three different meanings.

The first is *someone or other but I don't know who*. In English, we might say *Someone has stolen my car, or nicked my bike* but we are more likely to say *My car's been stolen; my bike's been nicked*. In French it would be *On* who was responsible. He's that great anonymous villain who steals, breaks in, and can be blamed for all kind of mischief. *On a volé ma voiture. On a piqué mon vélo.* This bloke *On* gets around, *On a frappé à la porte* – There was a knock at the door, *On a sonné* – The bell rang. One might say *On m'a coupé le téléphone*, except we all know who did it!

It can also mean *people generally, you* in this general sense or even *They* as in: They've closed the road again (*On a barré la route enore une fois*). *On ne fume pas dans un restaurant*, it's not the done thing! *On y va pour acheter des fleurs* (people go there to buy flowers) *On dit que ...* (They say that....) *On peut acheter des timbres dans un Tabac*. (You can buy stamps in a tobacconist's) *On pourrait mourir de faim dans ce restaurant* (you could die of starvation in this restaurant)

But where it really comes in handy is making it mean *we* or *us*. *Nous* can be so cumbersome to use. Even at its most simple it means remembering to add *-ons* on the end of the verb, sometimes even having to change the stem. Enough to make us think Let's not talk about US!

On makes it so much easier. The Ware rule about if you're talking about one person it all sounding the same works with *On*, too. (*je fais, tu fais, il fait, elle fait, on fait* – each time *fais/fait* sounds the same, so why learn 5 of them? – more on this in a later article!) Go into a restaurant for a table for six, and say *On est six!* And your message is delivered promptly and efficiently. Hence *On y va?* (Shall we go) *Qu'est-ce qu'on fait* (What shall we do?) *Qu'est-ce qu'on mange?* (What shall we eat?) *On est là depuis une heure* (We have been standing here an hour!)

For the grammatically turned on, there is a strange phenomenon when you use *On* in this way – things start agreeing with the idea of us (plural) rather than the real *On* (singular) – *on est fatigués, on est allés à la plage*. It's almost as though they are feeling guilty about using this simpler form and want to make it more complicated.

It gets even better with those reflexive verbs, where you get two *nouses* one after the other. *Nous nous sommes rencontrés au bar* (We met in the bar) *On s'est rencontrés au bar* is so much neater. *On s'est vu hier* (We saw each other yesterday) *On se connaît déjà*. (We already know each other) nicer than *Nous nous connaissons déjà*.

Oneself is *se* or *soi*. *On est bien chez soi*, means one is well at home (home's the place to be) *Il faut s'occuper de soi-même* (You must look after yourself) *Chez nous on se lève à huit heures* (In our house we get up at 8).

There seem to be very few times when it matters if you say *On* or *Nous*, in everyday speech anyway, and you can mix and match as you go. Allons, on y va.....