

THE MOST COMMON MISTAKES OF FRENCH LEARNERS

My background as a French teacher made me realize a lot of things. Everyone learning a language despite of their nationality has his or her difficulties. You will find here what you need to be careful with, false friends and the most common mistakes of language learners, so you can avoid them!

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1 FALSE FRIENDS

Since English and French have thousands of common words, it is easy for people with an English background but tricky at the same time. Words may look alike but do not have the exact same meaning. These words are called False Friends.

However, there are English words that can be used in French. Such words are often not adapted to the context or are usually used in a different language level. They are frequently used in a formal context instead of spoken French. For instance: politics, economics, law and diplomacy.

Below is a short list of common mistakes.

>> not "visiter" (to visit) but "rendre visite"

"Visiter" is used for monuments, countries, or place you can enter.

"Je visite ma mère" is **wrong** (and weird)

"Je rends visite à ma mère" is **right** (and nice for your mom)

>> not "j'ai réalisé" (realize) "je me suis rendu compte, je me suis aperçu"

"Réaliser" is less common, more formal and also means "faire" in a more formal way.

>> not "commun" (common) but "répandu/courant"

"Les gens qui parlent anglais, c'est très répandu, c'est très courant."

>> not "actuellement" (actually) but "en fait"

A classic mistake even made by French people. Remember this one as it is frequently used!

"Actuel" means "present, currently"

>> not "société" (society) / compagnie (company) but "entreprise"

"Entreprise" is the most common word when talking about job.

"Société" is used but more towards describing the type of legal entity.

"Company" can be used for specific fields, like airlines (compagnie aérienne).

>> not "classe" (class) but "cours"

"Classe" exists in French but it means classroom. So if you attend a class, you'll say « je vais assister à un cours ».

>> not "opportunité" (opportunity) but "chance, occasion"

"Opportunité" is too formal. It is also used for an important job opening. For example, "une opportunité professionnelle", "une opportunité financière".

>> not "spécifique" (specific) but "particulier"

"particulier" sounds just more natural and less formal.

>> not "attendre" (attend) but "assister à"

"attendre" is "to wait"

> « *j'assiste à un cours* »

>> not "retirer" (to retire) but "prendre sa retraite"

"retirer" is "to withdraw"

> « *je prends ma retraite* »

>> not "location" but "situation"

"une location" is "a renting"

> « *La Tour Eiffel est située à l'ouest de Paris* »

>> not "journée" (journey) but "voyage"

"journée" is "a day, a day's work".

2 PREPOSITIONS AND STRUCTURE DIFFICULTIES

It's easy to make yourself understood quickly, but hard to understand every subtle rule. Especially in oral French, it really makes a difference. Here is a list of the most common difficult words for grammar and structures.

>> IL EST or C'EST?

c'est/ce sont

C'est and **ce sont** are followed by:

C'est + noun, including modified nouns: C'est un chien. C'est un français. Ce sont des chats.

C'est + proper noun, pronoun: C'est Jean. C'est moi.

C'est + dates: La fête nationale c'est le 14 juillet, c'est lundi prochain.

C'est + adjective for non-specific referents: C'est super! C'est génial! C'est incroyable!

il/elle est, ils/elles sont

Use **il/elle est** introduce the following:

Il est + adjective alone: Il est gentil. Il est français.

Il est + nationality, occupation, religion (used as adjectives in French): Elle est étudiante. Il est docteur.

Remember that "il(s)" and "elle(s)" refer to a specific person or thing. "Ce" doesn't refer to a specific person or thing. It can be translated as "that".

Still hesitating?

Remember if you use "c'est" you will be right 95% of the time.

If you use "il est", you will be right 5% of the time.

>> ETRE or AVOIR?

Remember that:

- majority** of French verbs build on composed tenses with the **AVOIR** auxiliary
- reflexive verbs are built with **ETRE**
- if the verb is about a **movement**, of the subject, chose the auxiliaire **être**
- > "il est retourné », « il est reparti » all with verbs of action (aller, devenir, monter...)

>> PARLER or DIRE?

"Parler" is more mechanical, and talks about something, but does not refer to the exact words.

"Parler" can be translated as "to speak, talk", which refers to general speaking.

On parle français.

On parle de quelque chose.

"Dire" is used to specify what you are talking about exactly.

"Dire" means more "to say", which refers to a precise sentence or a dialogue.

Il dit qu'il a sommeil.

Il a dit « oui ».

There's a famous expression "**parler pour ne rien dire** », meaning "speaking without saying actually anything interesting".

>> Conjugation after a relative pronoun (QUI,QUE):

QUI stands for the **subject** and is followed by a **verb**

QUE stands for the **object** and is followed by a **subject**

Remember that: If the subject doing the action is the same doing the action after and before you will use QUI:

« **L'armoire qui est** très chère »

« **La fille qui est** à côté de moi est très jolie. »

« **Le garçon qui m'a servi** un café »

If another pronoun is doing the action after, then it's QUE

« Le chien **que tu as acheté** »

« Le garçon **que j'ai rencontré** »

« Le livre **que tu me donnes** est trop épais »

So when using a relative pronoun, **make sure the verb agrees with the subject:**

« **les employés qui vont** (not « va ») travailler. »

« **les élèves qui ont** (not « a ») un manuel. »

>> DEPUIS, PENDANT or POUR?

DEPUIS

"Depuis" means "since" or "for." It is used with a French verb in present tense to talk about an action that **happend** in the past and **continues** in the present.

« J'habite en France depuis 3 ans. »

PENDANT

"Pendant" means "for" and refers to the entire duration of an action. It can be used with all tenses.

« J'ai attendu pendant une heure. »

« Je vais habiter en France pendant 1 an. »

POUR

The preposition pour is used in a variety of contexts, however when expressing the duration of an event it can only be used in the future action.

« Nous allons chez moi pour deux semaines. »

>> VITE or RAPIDE?

"Vite" is an adverb (quickly) and **rapide** is an adjective (quick).

You can also translate them both to "fast", since "fast" can be either an adjective (He's a fast runner) or an adverb (He runs fast)

« Une voiture rapide, un rythme rapide. »

« Le train va vite, Ils ont vite mangé, Viens vite. »

> Listen to the Intuitive French podcast episodes to improve this faster:

<https://pod.link/1604563562>

>> CONNAITRE or SAVOIR?:

"**Connaître**" is to know that something exists, and to know what it is about. It's also used to talk about people, or places.

"Connaître" is never followed by a verb nor subordinate clause starting with: que/ qui/ où/ quand/ pourquoi/ comment/ si ..

« *Je connais le Louvres* »

« *Je connais mes voisins* »

"**Savoir**" is used for facts, things we know deeply, abilities, and informations we are aware of. « *Je sais écrire* »

« *Je sais skier* »

« *Je sais que t'aimes parler français* »

>> Beaucoup de:

Beaucoup is always followed by "de", with no article:

« *J'ai beaucoup de temps* »

« *Tu as beaucoup d'amis* »

>> Manquer:

This word can be very confusing, because it's not enough to translate « to miss » as "manquer"

For example, if you translate « I miss you », you get « *Je te manque* ». Which is exactly the opposite (You miss me)

The right sentence should be "*Tu me manques* » = "You are being missed by me ».

AND...

>> "Gens" (people) is plural, "tout le monde" (everybody) is singular

« *Beaucoup de gens sont bilingues.* »

« *Tout le monde est étonné.* »

>> Use the infinitive when it comes to modal verbs

Je vais + inf

Je veux + inf

Je peux + inf

Je dois + inf

>> Watch out when using a negative word like "personne, plus, aucun, jamais".

As they replace the « PAS » , **no need to use both!**

Say: "*Personne ne pouvait y arriver*" and not "*personne ne pouvait pas y arriver*"

« *J'ai **plus** faim.* »

« *J'ai **aucun** problème.* »

« *J'ai **jamais** été en France.* »

« *Je connais **personne**.* »

>> Pleuvoir / Pleurer:

This is a tough one. It's absolutely normal to mix both.

Our first clue here is the first R at the end of the verb PLEURER (to cry), keep in mind to stress it. The second one is that the verb PLEUVOIR (to rain), is only conjugated at the 3rd person of singular masculine. You can only pronounce or listen "IL" before.

« il pleut / il pleure »

« il a plu/ j'ai pleuré »

>> "Sur" (on) or "dans"?

A quite funny one, when you say « je suis sur le train » (I'm on the top of the train), it looks like you are James Bond. We say « je suis dans le train » (I'm "in" the train).

>> Don't say "Je suis 22 ans" but "J'ai 22 ans"

Since it has a different verb, remember that in French, you « have » 22 years.

>> Don't say "pour exemple" but "par exemple"

>> Don't say "demander une question" but "poser une question"

« Poser » is the verb you'll use when asking a question. "Poser" and "question", are good friends, and actually married!

« *Je peux vous poser une question?* »

« *Je peux vous demander quelque chose* »

>> Don't forget the relative pronoun:

« Je pense (QUE) c'est vrai »

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3 PRONUNCIATION

>> No long vowels in French, and no puff of air when using P, T, or K.

To avoid a diphthong, it's better to pronounce all vowels short.

Say "écho" not "échow"

Say "écouter" not "ekoutay"

French K is more pronounced like the K in skate, not in Kate.

French P is more like the P in Spain, not the one in Pain.

French T sounds like the T in Stack, not the one in Tack.

>> There are a lot of words ending with "-tion" in English and French.

In French it's pronounced like S and not SH.

The same with the endings in "-sion", with the S between 2 vowels:

It's pronounced like a Z and not like a ZH

« Vision, illusion, confusion, invasion... »

>> Contrary to English, there is only one way to pronounce the A letter itself

No "è", "ay", but only A, the way you learn it in the alphabet as a beginner.

Example : Bahrahk Obahmah > all A's sound the same.

>> The ending "-ent" is muted if it's a verb:

« Des polémiques qui me semblent (sembl') indignes. »

« Des images qui évoquent (évoqu') des souvenirs. »

« Certains expliquent (expliqu') ce déclin par l'exposition universelle de 1886 à Paris.»

« Certains continuent (continu') à utiliser ce mot.»

To teach this difference to children in France we use the following sentence:

« *Les poules du couvent couvent* »

INTUITIVE FRENCH

"Learn French without realizing it!"