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A Comprehensive French Grammar

Sixth Edition

GLANVILLE PRICE

Emeritus Professor of French
University of Wales Aberystwyth
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*page 559*
This new edition of *A Comprehensive French Grammar* corresponds in most respects to the previous edition (2003). The principal change consists in the addition of a section on ‘Register and medium’ (13) and of references to these topics here and there throughout the text. Elsewhere in the ‘Introduction’, the sections on ‘Capitals’ (4), ‘Punctuation’ (5) and ‘Hyphens’ (8) have been substantially modified and expanded. I have also taken advantage of this new edition to update the bibliography and to make a few other modifications to the text. However, apart from the addition of the new section (13) and the consequential combining of the previous sections (13) and (14) as (14), the paragraph numbering and the pagination of the last edition have been retained.

I am grateful to all those colleagues and others from whose comments and advice I have benefited, not least to my wife who has read successive editions in typescript and made helpful observations based on her experience of teaching advanced students of French. Professor Maria Manoliu of the University of California at Davis made a number of suggestions for improving my discussion of points of grammar in the last edition. This new edition has benefited greatly from advice offered by Dr Mari C. Jones of the University of Cambridge. None of these, of course, are in any way responsible for any errors or omissions that may remain.

G.P.
Selective Bibliography

This list of works likely to be of interest to the advanced student of French includes only titles of which the most recent edition is dated 1993 or later.

Grammars


**Dictionaries**


**General**


Technical Terms and Abbreviations

It is assumed that most users of this grammar will be familiar with the basic traditional terminology for the parts of speech (noun, adjective, verb, etc.) and a few other concepts such as ‘clause’, ‘subject’, ‘gender’, ‘tense’, ‘active’, ‘passive’, etc.

Among the terms (some of which, though now in general use, are not traditional) defined in particular sections of the book are the following (the list is not complete):

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The following abbreviations have been used:

- adj. adjective
- adv. adverb
- art. article
- compl. complement
- condit. conditional
- conjug. conjugation
- constr. construction
- def. definite
- demonst. demonstrative
- disjunct. disjunctive
- Eng. English
- fem. feminine
- Fr. French
- fut. future
- imper. imperative
- imperf. imperfect
- indef. indefinite
- indic. indicative
- infin. infinitive
- masc. masculine
<table>
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<td>pret.</td>
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<td>pronoun</td>
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<td>q. ch.</td>
<td>quelque chose</td>
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<td>q. un</td>
<td>quelqu’un</td>
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<tr>
<td>ref.</td>
<td>reference</td>
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<tr>
<td>refl.</td>
<td>reflexive</td>
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<td>rel.</td>
<td>relative</td>
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<tr>
<td>sing.</td>
<td>singular</td>
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<td>translated</td>
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### Introduction

#### Alphabet

1. French has the same alphabet as English:

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<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>G</th>
<th>H</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[a]</td>
<td>[be]</td>
<td>[se]</td>
<td>[de]</td>
<td>[œ,ø]</td>
<td>[œf]</td>
<td>[œe]</td>
<td>[af]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>J</td>
<td>K</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[i]</td>
<td>[œi]</td>
<td>[ka]</td>
<td>[œl]</td>
<td>[œm]</td>
<td>[œn]</td>
<td>[o]</td>
<td>[œe]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[œy]</td>
<td>[œr]</td>
<td>[œs]</td>
<td>[œt]</td>
<td>[œ]</td>
<td>[œ]</td>
<td>[œ]</td>
<td>[iks]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Z</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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*The letters w and y are known as double v and i grec (‘Greek i’). For the values of the phonetic symbols used above to transcribe the names of the other letters, see 2. (Note that w is pronounced [v] in le wagon ‘(railway-)carriage’ and in a few other, relatively uncommon, words but [w] in other borrowings from English, e.g. le week-end, le whisky, and in wallon ‘Walloon’.)

The names of all the letters are now usually considered to be masculine, e.g. un a bref ‘a short a’, « Londres » s’écrit avec un s ‘Londres is written with an s’, Le d de « pied » ne se prononce pas ‘The d in pied is not pronounced’.
Phonetic transcriptions

To indicate pronunciation, we use symbols of the International Phonetic Alphabet’s follows:

**Vowels**

- [i] as in *lit*
- [e] as in *été, j’ai*
- [ɛ] as in *bête, faîtes*
- [a] as in *date*
- [ɑ] as in *pas, pâte*
- [ɔ] as in *botte*
- [o] as in *dos, beau*
- [u] as in *tout*
- [y] as in *tu*
- [ø] as in *feu*
- [œ] as in *peur*
- [ɔ] as in *je, premier*
- [ɛ] as in *vin, main*
- [œ] as in *un*
- [ɔ] as in *bon*
- [ɥ] as in *blanc, dent*

**Semi-vowels**

- [j] as in *yeux, pied*
- [ɥ] as in *huile*
- [w] as in *oui*

**Consonants**

- [t] as in *tout*
- [d] as in *dent*
- [p] as in *pomme*
- [b] as in *beau*
- [k] as in *camp, qui, kilo*
- [ɡ] as in *gouffe*
- [f] as in *fou*
- [v] as in *vie*
- [s] as in *sou, face*
- [z] as in *zéro, maison*
(i) Mute $h$. Words (most of them of Latin or Greek origin) beginning with mute $h$ function as if it were not there, i.e. as if they began with a vowel. (Indeed, in many such words it used not to be there but has been introduced under the influence of Latin spelling, e.g. medieval French *erbe* ‘grass’, *abiter* ‘to dwell’, *ier* ‘yesterday’, which have since had an $h$ added to them, i.e. *herbe*, *habiter*, *hier*, because it was realized that they came from Latin *herba*, *habitare*, *heri*.) Like other words beginning with a vowel, these words give rise to the processes of elision (see 12) (e.g. *l’herbe*, *j’habite*) and liaison (see 7,c) (e.g. *les hommes* [lez ɔ̃m] ‘the men’), they take the masculine demonstrative *cet* not *ce* (e.g. *cet homme* ‘this man’ – see 235) and the feminine possessives *mon*, *ton*, *son* not *ma*, *ta*, *sa* (e.g. *mon habitude* ‘my custom’ – see 223).

(ii) Aspirate $h$. On the other hand, a number of words beginning with $h$ function as if they began with a consonant. (In fact, though...
the h is now silent, it was pronounced until perhaps the sixteenth century, and still remains in some provinces.) These are mainly words borrowed from languages other than Latin or Greek and, in particular, words borrowed in the early medieval period from the Germanic speech of the Franks, or, much more recently, from English. Such words do not give rise to elision (e.g. le hêtre ‘beech-tree’, la hache ‘axe’, je hais ‘I hate’, je le hais ‘I hate him’) or liaison (les hiboux [le ibu] ‘the owls’), and they take the masculine demonstrative ce (e.g. ce hachoir ‘this chopper’) and the feminine possessives ma, ta, sa (e.g. ma honte ‘my shame’).

**Capitals**

4 Capitals (in French, majuscules) are used at the beginning of a sentence and with proper names (Jean, Paris), but elsewhere are much less widely used than in English. In particular, small letters (minuscules) are used:

(i) for months and days of the week, e.g. septembre ‘September’, samedi ‘Saturday’

(ii) for adjectives corresponding to proper names, e.g. la côte méditerranéenne ‘the Mediterranean coast’, un printemps parisien ‘a Parisian spring’, l’ère napoléonienne ‘the Napoleonic era’. This includes adjectives of nationality and also applies when they are used as nouns denoting a language, e.g.:

- le gouvernement français the French government
- la langue italienne the Italian language
- Il comprend l’anglais He understands English
- Le russe est une langue difficile Russian is a difficult language

but, when used as nouns with reference to people, they take a capital, e.g.:

- C’est un Espagnol He’s a Spaniard
- Les Allemands sont partis The Germans have left

In English, utterances consisting of a part of the verb ‘to be’ and an expression of nationality, or other local or ethnic origin, can take
either an adjective, as in ‘I am American’, ‘He is Norman’, ‘Are you
Norwegian?’; ‘They are not Spanish’, or a noun, as in ‘I am an
American’, ‘He is a Norman’, ‘Are you Norwegians?’, ‘They are not
Spaniards’. The French equivalents of the expressions quoted
above are Je suis américain(e), Il est normand, Êtes-vous
norvégien(ne)s ?, Ils ne sont pas espagnols/Elles ne sont pas espa-
gnoles. Note that the forms in question are adjectives and so take
a small (i.e. not a capital) initial. (The convention of taking the
words in question as adjectives is, however, sometimes breached
and they are treated as if they were nouns, with a capital initial.)

Likewise, with expressions characterizing religion, which in
English (especially in the singular) are usually treated as nouns, e.g.
‘I am a Buddhist’, ‘They were Christian(s)’, but Je suis bouddhiste,
Ils étaient chrétiens.

After C’est, Ce sont, C’était, etc., however, when the indefinite
article is used, the words in question are nouns and take a capital
initial, e.g. C’est un Français ‘He is a Frenchman’, C’était un Alle-
mand ‘He was/It was a German’, Ce sont/C’est des Japonais (see
251).

(iii) for titles, e.g. le colonel Blanc, le docteur Dupont, le duc de
Bourgogne ‘the Duke of Burgundy’, le président Sarkozy ‘President
Sarkozy’, le professeur Mornet ‘Professor Mornet’, la reine Élisa-
beth ‘Queen Elizabeth’, saint Paul. Note too monsieur, madame,
mademoiselle Dupont, without capitals except (a) when addressing
someone, e.g. in a letter (Mon cher Monsieur Dupont), (b) when
abbreviated to M., Mme, Mlle.

For capitalization of titles in names of streets, etc., see 8,iii.

In other contexts, usage fluctuates. Note in particular:

(iv) Titles, including preceding adjectives, applied to God, any of
the persons of the Trinity or the Virgin Mary, the names of religious
festivals, sacred writings, etc., are usually capitalized, though fol-
lowing adjectives are not, e.g.:

Dieu ‘God’, le Rédempteur ‘the Redeemer’, le Tout-Puissant
‘the Almighty’, le Saint-Esprit, ‘the Holy Spirit’, Notre-Dame
‘Our Lady’, Noël ‘Christmas’, la Pentecôte ‘Whitsun’, le
Nouveau Testament ‘the New Testament’, le Coran, ‘the
Qur’an’, le Pentateuque ‘the Pentateuch’, le Rigveda ‘the Rig-
Veda’, la Torah ‘the Torah’, l’Écriture sainte ‘Holy Scripture’,
Mardi gras ‘Shrove Tuesday’
(v) In names of institutions, organizations, unique events, etc., head nouns and adjectives preceding the noun are usually capitalized (e.g. la Grande Guerre ‘the First World War’, le Nouvel An ‘New Year’), but following adjectives or nouns linked to the head noun by de are usually not capitalized, e.g.:


(vi) Note the lack of capitals in words for street, road, square, etc., in names, e.g.:

la rue de la Paix, le boulevard Saint-Michel, l’avenue des Champs-Élysées, la place de la Concorde, le carrefour de l’Odéon. (In the Channel Islands, capitals are used as in English, e.g. la Rue des Fontaines, la Grève de St Clément in Jersey, la Route de la Lague, la Pointe de Pleinmont in Guernsey.)

Punctuation

5 Most French and English punctuation marks are the same:

. point full stop
, virgule comma
; point-virgule semi-colon
: deux points colon
? point d’interrogation question mark
! point d’exclamation exclamation mark
However, French makes considerable use in addition of guillemets, i.e. « . . . » (see below).

One notable difference between the two languages relates to the use of quotation marks:

(i) The beginning of a passage in dialogue may be indicated either by guillemets or by a dash. In either case, each change of speaker is indicated by a dash and not by guillemets, which, when used, mark only the beginning and end of the complete exchange. Note, too, that there is no formal indication (i.e. neither a dash nor guillemets) that phrases such as dit-il ‘he said’, répondis-je ‘I answered’, do not form part of the quotation.

(ii) Passages in direct speech are often broken up, within sentences and even at the end of sentences (including questions), by points de suspension.

(iii) Brief quotations incorporated in the text and other items that in English would be enclosed in inverted commas are usually placed between guillemets in French (though single or double inverted commas are sometimes used):

These points are illustrated by the following extracts:

(a) Elle balbutia. Mais lui, comprenant, s’abandonna à une colère épouvantable.
   — Quelle honte ! cria-t-il. Vous voilà voleuse, maintenant ! Et qu’arriverait-il, si l’on vous surprenait ? Je serais la fable de la ville.
   — C’est pour toi, Ovide, murmura-t-elle.
   — Voleuse, ma mère est voleuse ! Vous croyez peut-être que je vole aussi, moi, que je suis venu ici pour voler, que ma seule ambition est d’allonger les mains et de voler ! Mon Dieu ! quelle idée avez-vous donc de moi ?

   (Zola, La Conquête de Plassans)

(b) La réponse vint, catégorique:

« Non !
— Alors, qui est-ce ? On ne l’a jamais vu dans le pays ! II ne vient pas d’étrangers ici . . .  
— Je ne sais pas . . . »

Elle s’obstinait, avec une subtilité instinctive de femme.  
« Le maire t’a toujours détesté . . . C’est vrai que tu as dîné chez lui ce soir ? . . .  
— C’est vrai . . . »

Elle trépigna d’impatience.  
« Mais alors, dis-moi quelque chose ! Il le faut ! Ou je te jure que je vais croire que . . . »

Elle n’allait pas plus loin.

(Simenaon, Le Port des brumes)

(c) Au bout d’un moment, il m’a regardé et il m’a demandé :  
« Pourquoi ? » mais sans reproche, comme s’il s’informent. J’ai dit :  
« Je ne sais pas. » Alors, tortillant sa moustache blanche, il a déclaré sans me regarder : « Je comprends. »

(Camus, L’Étranger)

(d) A la lumière du théâtre afghan, quel doit être le rôle de l’alliance atlantique ? A la conception française s’oppose la vision américaine d’une organisation appelée à devenir une alliance « globale », qui se transforme peu à peu en une « communauté des démocraties ».

(Le Monde, 28 November 2006)

Division into syllables

6 (i) The following rules apply to the written language:

(a) A single consonant between vowels goes with the following syllable, e.g. au-to-mo-bi-le, ra-pi-di-té; note that, for this purpose, the groups ch [ʃ], ph [f], th [t], gn [ŋ], which each represent one sound, count as single consonants and are never split, e.g. ma-chi-nal, té-lé-pho-ner, ma-thé-ma-ti-que, si-gner.

(b) Except for the groups mentioned under a and c, two consonants occurring together are divided, the first going with the preceding syllable, the second with the following, e.g. ar-gent, por-ter, ap-par-te-ment, al-ti-tu-de, oc-cu-per.