

FOURTH EDITION

A COMPREHENSIVE
FRENCH
GRAMMAR

Claude Piron



A Comprehensive French Grammar

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A Comprehensive French Grammar

Sixth Edition

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Preface

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.

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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.

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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):

accusative (case)	17
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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

obj.	object
part.	participle
past ant.	past anterior
perf.	perfect
pers.	person
pluperf.	pluperfect
plur.	plural
poss.	possessive
pres.	present
pret.	preterite
pron.	pronoun
<i>q. ch.</i>	<i>quelque chose</i>
<i>q. un</i>	<i>quelqu'un</i>
ref.	reference
refl.	reflexive
rel.	relative
sing.	singular
subjunct.	subjunctive
transl.	translated

Introduction

Alphabet

1 French has the same alphabet as English:

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
[a]	[be]	[se]	[de]	[ə,ø]	[ɛf]	[ʒe]	[aʃ]
I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P
[i]	[ʒi]	[ka]	[ɛl]	[ɛm]	[ɛn]	[o]	[pe]
Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X
[ky]	[ɛr]	[ɛs]	[te]	[y]	[ve]	*	[iks]
Y	Z						
*	[zɛd]						

*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

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

Vowels

[i]	as in <i>lit</i>
[e]	as in <i>été, j'ai</i>
[ɛ]	as in <i>bête, faites</i>
[a]	as in <i>date</i>
[ɑ]	as in <i>pas, pâte</i>
[ɔ]	as in <i>botte</i>
[o]	as in <i>dos, beau</i>
[u]	as in <i>tout</i>
[y]	as in <i>tu</i>
[ø]	as in <i>feu</i>
[œ]	as in <i>peur</i>
[ə]	as in <i>je, premier</i>
[ɛ̃]	as in <i>vin, main</i>
[ɑ̃]	as in <i>un</i>
[ɔ̃]	as in <i>bon</i>
[ɑ̃]	as in <i>blanc, dent</i>

Semi-vowels

[j]	as in <i>yeux, pied</i>
[ɥ]	as in <i>huile</i>
[w]	as in <i>oui</i>

Consonants

[t]	as in <i>tout</i>
[d]	as in <i>dent</i>
[p]	as in <i>pomme</i>
[b]	as in <i>beau</i>
[k]	as in <i>camp, qui, kilo</i>
[g]	as in <i>goutte</i>
[f]	as in <i>fou</i>
[v]	as in <i>vie</i>
[s]	as in <i>sou, face</i>
[z]	as in <i>zéro, maison</i>

[ʃ]	as in chapeau
[ʒ]	as in je, rouge
[l]	as in lune
[r]	as in rouge
[m]	as in madame
[n]	as in nez
[ɲ]	as in signe
[ŋ]	as in parking

A colon, [ː], after a vowel indicates that the vowel is long, e.g.:

[myːr] *mur*, [paːt] *pâte*, [pœːr] *peur*, [mɔːd] *monde*.

The two varieties of ‘H’ in French

3 The French *h* is not pronounced. However, some words beginning with *h* (which is always followed by a vowel) function as if they began with a vowel, while others function as if they began with a consonant. These two varieties of *h* are known respectively as ‘mute *h*’ and ‘aspirate *h*’ (in French, *h muet* and *h aspiré*).

(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 ɔm] ‘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.:

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

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

<i>C’est un Espagnol</i>	He’s a Spaniard
<i>Les Allemands sont partis</i>	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 espagnoles*. 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 Allemand* ‘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 Élisabeth* ‘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 following 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.:

le Sénat ‘the Senate’, *la Bourse* ‘the Stock Exchange’, *la Réforme* ‘the Reformation’, *la Révolution française* ‘the French Revolution’, *l’Académie française* ‘the French Academy’, *la Sécurité sociale* ‘Social Security’, *la Légion étrangère* ‘the Foreign Legion’, *l’Institut géographique national* ‘the National Geographical Institute’, *l’Église catholique* ‘the Catholic Church’, *la Légion d’honneur* ‘the Legion of Honour’, *la Cour d’appel* ‘the Appeal Court’, *le Conseil de sécurité* ‘the Security Council’ (but notice *la Comédie-Française* [a theatre] and the names of government departments, e.g. *le ministère des Finances* ‘the Ministry of Finance’, *le ministère des Affaires étrangères* ‘the Foreign Ministry’, etc.).

(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:

.	<i>point</i>	full stop
,	<i>virgule</i>	comma
;	<i>point-virgule</i>	semi-colon
:	<i>deux points</i>	colon
?	<i>point d’interrogation</i>	question mark
!	<i>point d’exclamation</i>	exclamation mark

–	<i>tiret</i>	dash
-	<i>trait d'union</i>	hyphen
...	<i>points de suspension</i>	three dots
()	<i>parenthèses</i>	round brackets
[]	<i>crochets</i>	square brackets

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, murmurait-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 ! Il 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.

(Simenon, *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'informait. 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* [ɲ], 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*.