



BASIC CONCEPTS AND TERMS

This book may seem different from others that you have used in the past because it focuses on the *function* of grammar in discourse. Discourse, as you will learn below, has to do with the environment in which you find either spoken or written language. Therefore, the grammar descriptions that you find here will tell you exactly how grammar is *used in various contexts*. What is context? For example, imagine someone saying **J’aime les serpents**. Without context, we don’t know if this sentence means “I like snakes” (in general) or “I like *the* snakes.” The point of this book is to teach you how to look beyond a particular sentence to understand how grammar works within the bigger picture.

If you want to master French grammar, you first need to acquire a grasp of grammatical terms in general. As mentioned in the *Preface*, when you study your native language, you don’t always get the necessary background in grammar that you will need for studying a foreign language. Grammar just isn’t taught explicitly in a lot of schools anymore. So if you don’t know, for example, what a direct object or an article or an auxiliary is, don’t worry. All those topics will be covered. This chapter begins by reviewing the basics and then going a little further. Grammar isn’t all that difficult, once everyone is speaking the same language.

This chapter is broken up into three sections:

- Parts of Speech
- Parts of a Sentence
- Discourse

PARTS OF SPEECH

1.1 What are words?

Linguists consider *words* to be the smallest units of language that can exist on their own. The following are all English words: *our, new, car, is, under, the, tree, with, that, nasty, bird, I, hate*. Prefixes and suffixes (such as *un-*, *-est*, *-ly*, etc.), however, are not words since they can't stand alone and need to be attached to something. They are often called *bound morphemes* because they must be “bound” (attached) to a word. Linguists call words *free morphemes* since they can exist freely on their own, unattached to anything else.

1.2 What are nouns?

A noun is a word that is usually defined as “a person, place, or thing.” “Things” include not only physical items but also ideas or other concepts that you cannot touch (such as emotions, organizations, or states of being). There are two types of nouns: *common* and *proper*.

1.3 Common Nouns

If a noun refers to a person, place, or thing (including ideas, emotions, etc.) and is spelled with a lower case letter, it is called a *common noun*. Some examples of common nouns are:

la femme	<i>the woman (person)</i>
les parcs	<i>the parks (place)</i>
le livre	<i>the book (thing)</i>
le communisme	<i>the communism (thing—idea)</i>
l'amour	<i>the love (thing—emotion)</i>

Note that most common nouns are preceded by what is called a **déterminant** (*determiner*) in French. Briefly, a determiner, as you will see in *Chapter 2*, is a short word that *determines* the status of a particular noun, for example, whether the noun in question is identifiable or unknown to the speaker, or whether the noun belongs to someone. **Le/la/l'/les** are examples of one type of determiner—the *definite article*—which can be translated in English with either the word “the” or with no article (“the parks” or “parks”), depending on the context in which the expression is found.

1.4 Proper Nouns

Proper nouns refer to the *names* of individuals or places. Here are some proper nouns:

Madame Dinspel
Sylvaine
Paris
la France
le Portugal
les États-Unis

Note that proper nouns are normally capitalized, and those referring to people and cities do not usually have determiners preceding them. You will learn more about how to use determiners with geographical places in *Chapter 11*.

1.5 What are pronouns?

The function of pronouns is, quite simply, to replace nouns. They are used when it is redundant to repeat the noun in question. Think about pronouns in English and how prevalent they are. Consider, for example, the following paragraph about the baseball player Ted Williams, which probably sounds strange to you (as it would to most native speakers of English).

Ted Williams is the best hitter in the history of baseball. Ted Williams is the last batter to hit over .400. Pitchers were afraid of Ted Williams. They always tried to throw Ted Williams pitches that couldn't be hit. It is doubtful that fans of baseball will ever forget Ted Williams.

As a native speaker of English, after the first mention of Ted Williams, you would intuitively use pronouns to replace his name throughout the paragraph.

*Ted Williams is the best hitter in the history of baseball. **He** is the last batter to hit over .400. Pitchers were afraid of **him**. They always tried to throw **him** pitches that couldn't be hit. It is doubtful that fans of baseball will ever forget **him**.*

In *Chapter 10*, you will find a discussion of various types of French pronouns. For right now, try to remember the following four types, some of which are present in the English passage above.