

Nr 26 – August-September 2010

Le français interactif — *Il ou elle ?* The Mystery of Feminine or Masculine Words

Which one to choose: *il* or *elle*?... We don't usually think of words as having a sex. But, especially in French, they do have a gender, a grammatical gender more precisely, that we call *le genre grammatical*, or *le genre des mots*. They are either masculine (*masculin/e*), or feminine (*feminin/e*). Why and how was this decided? Globally, there is no specific reason for each word; the determination of its gender depends very much on its origin, which often has distant historical roots, the way it has been used, and sometimes, but not always, the suggestion that the word refers to something which is supposed to be more masculine or feminine. So, why is *camion* (truck) masculine and *grue* (construction crane) feminine? Why is *boulevard* masculine and *avenue* feminine? Why is *virilité* feminine and *féminisme* masculine? Why is *malheur* (misfortune) masculine and *peur* (fear) feminine? Why is *magazine* masculine and *revue*, which has exactly the same meaning, feminine? Idem for *vélo* (m.), and *bicyclette* (f.), which both mean bicycle, or for *profession* (f.), and *métier* (m.) which mean profession...

The problem of knowing which word is feminine and which is masculine is certainly one of the most puzzling for all English-speaking foreigners, and for persons who speak other languages as well, when they try to learn French. You almost have to be born in a French-speaking country, or raised with French as your mother tongue, to be able not to make any mistakes of gender. Even an intellectual or teacher who is totally fluent and who has been living in France for the major part of her* life cannot avoid hesitating from time to time, and wondering if such or such an infrequently-used word is masculine or feminine.

But the question remains: how can one know or recognize the gender of a particular word? For many nouns, it is totally arbitrary and it would be impossible to find anything close to a kind of logic. But still, there are a few rules or similarities or patterns that can provide a clue. Below, you will find a fairly extensive list of many of the most commonly used, together with some of the exceptions.

Annick Stevenson

NOTE: The list below, from 1) to 5) is valid only for single words. For the gender of compound nouns composed of 2 elements, see Nr. 6.

The Main Rules, and their Exceptions

1) Are masculine most of the words ending in:

-an: *an* (year), *écran* (screen), *océan* (ocean), *roman* (novel), *plan* (plan), *ouragan* (hurricane), *volcan* (volcano), etc. BUT there are a few exceptions: *maman* (mommy/mum), *sportswoman* (sportswoman), etc., are f.

-ou: *bijou* (jewel), *caillou* (stone), *chou* (cabbage), *cou* (neck), etc. BUT there is one exception: *nounou* (nanny), is f.

-phone: *téléphone* (telephone), *magnétophone* (tape recorder), etc., EXCEPT when a word ending in *phone* describes a person, in such case it is f. when it concerns a woman. Example: *un anglophone*, *une anglophone* (an English-speaking person).

-in: *destin* (destiny), *chagrin* (grief), *sapin* (fir/Christmas tree), *sein* (breast), *terrain* (piece of land), *bain* (bath), *pain* (bread), *grain* (grain), *frein* (brake), *coin* (corner), etc. BUT there are a few exceptions: *main* (hand), *fin* (end), etc., are f.

NOTE: some of them can become feminine by adding an “e” at the end: *coquin*, *coquine* (naughty person), *cousin*, *cousine* (cousin); or by changing slightly the end of the word: *copain*, *copine* (good friend/buddy), *écrivain*, *écrivaine*** (writer), etc.

-age: *courage* (courage), *sondage* (poll), *fromage* (cheese), *garage* (garage), *voyage* (travel), *ménage & nettoyage* (cleaning), etc. BUT there are a few exceptions: *plage* (beach), *cage* (cage), etc., are f.

-et: *alphabet* (alphabet), *arrêt* (stop), *projet* (project), *budget* (budget), *secret* (secret), *objet* (object), etc. BUT there are a few exceptions: *forêt* (forest), *basket* (basketball shoe), etc., are f.

2) Are ALWAYS masculine the words ending in:

-ment: *gouvernement* (government), *médicament* (medicine), *vêtement* (piece of clothing), etc.

-eu: *feu* (fire), *jeu* (game), *cheveu* (hair), *lieu* (place), etc.

-eau: *bureau* (office/desk), *couteau* (knife), *tableau* (painting), etc.

-isme: *socialisme* (socialism), *capitalisme* (capitalism), *fédéralisme* (federalism), *féminisme* (feminism), etc.

-al: *métal* (metal), *animal* (animal), *cheval* (horse), *journal* (newspaper), *total* (total), *canal* (canal, channel), *bal* (ball, dance), *festival* (festival), etc.

-er: *panier* (basket), *courrier* (mail), *baiser* (kiss), etc.

-ard: *cafard* (cockroach, or depression), *retard* (delay), *hasard* (chance), etc.

-oir: *couloir* (hallway), *espoir* (hope), *trottoir* (pavement), etc.

-ail: *travail* (work), *sérail* (harem), *corail* (coral), *épouvantail* (scarecrow), etc.

-eil: *sommeil* (sleep), *réveil* (waking up), *soleil* (sun), *conseil* (advice, council), etc.

-euil: *seuil* (doorstep), *fauteuil* (armchair), *écureuil* (squirrel), etc.

-ouil: *fenouil* (fennel) - which is also the only one with this ending.

3) Are very often feminine the words ending in:

-e (but, we have seen above that it is not the case with all the words ending in *age*).

Anyway, “e” usually marks the feminine, for example, for animals : *le chat*, *la chatte* (the cat), *le chien*, *la chienne* (the dog), *le boeuf*, *la vache* (the cow), etc., BUT for human beings there is an “e” at the end of both *homme* (man), m., as well as for *femme* (woman), f.

“e” also distinguishes if a worker is a man or a woman: *le boulanger, la boulangère* (the baker), etc.

Other exceptions : *problème* (problem), *système* (system), *programme* (programme), *volume* (volume), *modèle* (model), *groupe* (group), *domaine* (domaine), *rôle* (role), *parapluie* (umbrella), *immeuble* (building), etc., are m.

NOTE: countries ending in “e” are also feminine, with the notable exceptions of *le Mexique, le Cambodge et le Mozambique*.

-ée: *poupée* (doll), *destinée* (destiny), *pâtée* (dog food), *journée* (day), *matinée* (morning), *cuvée* (vintage), *couvée* (brood), etc. BUT there are exceptions: *lycée* (high school), *trophée* (trophy), *scarabée* (scarab), etc., are m.

-té: *société* (society), *beauté* (beauty), *liberté* (freedom), *autorité* (authority), *santé* (health), *réalité* (truth), etc. BUT there are exceptions: *côté* (side), *été* (summer), *comité* (committee), *sacré* (sacred), *pâté*, (sandcastle), *tollé* (outcry), etc., are m.

-oie: *oie* (goose), *joie* (joy), *soie* (silk), *voie* (way), etc. ONLY Exception: *foie* (liver) is masculine.

-oire: *bouilloire* (kettle), *baignoire* (bathtub), *armoire* (wardrobe), etc. BUT there are exceptions: *pourboire* (tip), *square* (square), *territoire* (territory) etc., are m.

NOTE: the word *mémoire* can be either masculine (dissertation) or feminine (memory), according to the context.

-ette: *bicyclette* (bicycle), *cigarette* (cigarette), *trompette* (trompet), etc. BUT there are exceptions: *squelette* (skeleton), *quartette* (quartet), *magnétocassette* (tape recorder), etc., are m.

-ade: *salade* (salad), *marmelade* (marmelade), *bousculade* (crush, jostling), *mascarade* (mascarade), *promenade* (walk), etc. BUT there are exceptions: *stade* (stadium), *jade* (jade); *grade* (grade), etc., are m.

NOTE: words such as *camarade* (school buddy), *malade* (sick person), *nomade* (nomad), etc., are masculine if the person you are talking about is a man or a boy, and feminine if she is a woman or a girl.

-ode: *ode* (ode), *méthode* (method), *commode* (dresser), *période* (period), etc. BUT there are exceptions: *code* (code), *épisode* (episode), etc., are m.

-ude: *étude* (study), *certitude* (certainty), *habitude* (habit), *attitude* (attitude), *fraude* (fraud), etc. BUT there are exceptions: *interlude* (interlude), *prélude* (prelude), etc., are m.

-ence: *différence* (difference), *présence* (presence), *intelligence* (intelligence), etc. ONLY Exception: *silence* (silence) is m.

-tion: *situation* (situation), *solution* (solution), *compétition* (competition), etc. BUT there are exceptions: *bastion* (fortification), *cation* (positive ion), etc., are m.

-ure: *culture* (culture), *peinture* (painting), *nourriture* (food), *torture* (torture), etc. BUT there are exceptions: *mercure* (mercury), *cyanure* (cyanide), etc., are m.

-eur: *couleur* (color), *odeur* (smell), *peur* (fear), *erreur* (mistake), *douleur* (pain), *fleur* (flower), etc. BUT there are exceptions: *moteur* (engine), *malheur* (misfortune), *bonheur* (happiness), *monsieur* (mister), *cœur* (heart), etc., are m.

NOTE: for categories of people or professions, **-eur**, used for men, is transformed into either: **-rice**, **-euse**, or even (more rarely) **-eure** for women : *un acteur, une actrice* (an actor); *un directeur, une directrice* (a director); *un coiffeur, une coiffeuse* (hairdresser), *un chômeur, une chômeuse* (an unemployed person); *un auteur, une auteure*** (an author), etc.

4) Are ALWAYS feminine the words ending in:

- ance**: *connaissance* (knowledge), *dépendance* (dependence), *élégance* (elegance), etc.
- sion**: *décision* (decision), *télévision* (television), *passion* (passion), *profession* (profession), etc.
- eille**: *bouteille* (bottle), *corbeille* (fruit basket), *veille* (day before), etc.
- elle**: *ficelle* (string), *nouvelle* (news), *poubelle* (garbage can), etc.
- aille**: *bataille* (battle), *broussaille* (bush), *racaille* (scum), etc.
- ouille**: *grenouille* (frog), *fouille* (search), *citrouille* (pumpkin), etc.

5) Can be either masculine or feminine the words ending in:

-**iste**: *dentiste* (dentist), *garagiste* (car mechanic), *raciste* (racist), *féministe* (feminist), *activiste* (activist), *cycliste* (cyclist), etc. can be both f. or m., because they refer to the profession, the specialty or the personality of an individual. They always have the same spelling, but their gender depends on whether the person you are talking about is a woman or a man.

Examples: *Jacques est un bon dentiste* (Jacques is a good dentist); *Marie est une jeune activiste* (Marie is a young activist); *mon voisin est un vrai raciste* (my neighbour is a true racist); *Jeannie Longo est une impressionnante cycliste* (Jeannie Longo is an impressive cyclist).

6) Mots composés

-**When a word is composed of two words**, joined by a *trait d'union* (= dash), the gender is most of the time that of the first word.

Examples:

pause-café (coffee break) is f.: *pause* (break) is f., and *café* (coffee) is m.;
station-service (gas filling station) is f.: *station* (station) is f., and *service* (service) is m.;
chou-fleur (cauliflower) is m.: *chou* (cabbage) is m., and *fleur* (flower) is f..

BUT there are exceptions:

une arrière-boutique is f., while *arrière* (back) is m. and *boutique* (shop) is f.
un terre-plein is m. while *terre* (ground) is f. and *plein* (full) is m..

-**When both words are masculine**, the word is the same: *bloc-moteur* (motor unit) is m. as well as the two words that compose it: *bloc* (block) and *moteur* (motor).

-**When both words are feminine**, the word is the same: *année-lumière* (light year) is f., as well as the two words which compose it: *année* (year) and *lumière* (light).

-**When a compound word is partly composed of a verb**, it is most of the time masculine.

Examples:

-*ouvre-bouteille* (bottle opener) is m., while *ouvre* is the conjugation of the verb *ouvrir* (to open) at the present tense and the 3rd person, and *bouteille* (bottle) is f.;
-*sèche-cheveux* (hair dryer) is m., while *sèche* comes from *sécher* (to dry), and *cheveu* (hair) is m..

-*chasse-neige* (snowplough) is m.: *chasse* (hunting) is m., and *neige* (snow) is f.;

NOTE: the word *après-midi* (afternoon) is considered both m. and f.! Whether you say **un** *après-midi* or **une** *après-midi*, you are never wrong...

Cases of changing of genders

It would be easier if words always kept the same gender. However, some words with the same spelling may have **different meanings** and corresponding different genders. This is one of the most tricky things to remember...

Examples:

- *une livre* (half a kilo) BUT *un livre* (a book),
- *une tour* (a tower) BUT *un tour* (a trick or a turn),
- *une moule* (a mussel) BUT *un moule* (a tin, a pan or a mold),
- *une mode* (a fashion) BUT *un mode* (a way),
- *une voile* (a sail) BUT *un voile* (a veil),
- *une pendule* (a clock) BUT *un pendule* (a pendulum),
- *la mousse* (moss, foam) BUT *un mousse* (a ship's apprentice),
- *une page* (a page - of paper) BUT *un page*, (a page - a young boy).

AND they can even change according to the **context**, or depending on whether they are used in **the singular or the plural**.

Examples:

- *amour* (love) is in principle always m. BUT it becomes f. in the plural when written in a literary text (ex: *les amours désespérées de Romeo et Juliette* = the hopeless love of Romeo & Juliet);
- *œuvre* (work(s), book) is f. BUT it can become m. when it is used for the totality of a building work (ex: *le gros oeuvre*) or the totality of the works of a major artist or author (ex: *l'œuvre de Monet*);
- *orgue* (organ) is m. when it refers to one single instrument BUT it can become f. when you talk of several instruments, or when the word is used in an emphatic way (ex: *les grandes orgues de la cathédrale*);
- *délice* (delight) is m. in the singular (ex: *ce gâteau est un délice* = this cake is a delight) and f. in the plural (ex: *les délices voluptueuses de la grasse matinée du dimanche* = the voluptuous delights of sleeping in on Sunday morning).

In the plural: Domination of the masculine

Even though old traditional ways of looking at things are changing, France remains a misogynist society. When you talk of a group of people, there only needs to be one man in the group for the group to be masculine when defining or describing it (we would definitely say *ils* and not *elles* when referring to the members of a mixed group).

This is the same for words. Each time you have an enumeration of words, if only one is masculine, it is enough for defining or describing all of them together as masculine.

Examples:

- *La robe, le manteau, la jupe et la veste sont bleus* (and not : *bleues* as if the m. word *manteau* were not there) = The dress, the coat, the skirt and the jacket are all blue.
- *La maison, la cabane, le château, et la grange sont habités* (and not : *habitées* if the m. word *château* were not there) *toute l'année* = The house, the cabin, the castle and the barn are inhabited the whole year long.

*An interesting example of exceptional efforts to overturn the often-centuries-long gender discrimination in language is that of the Indian Amartya Sen, recipient of the Nobel Prize in

Economics. He has decided to use only the feminine pronoun *she* when referring to a person.

** *écrivaine* et *auteure* are two examples of a new trend of *féminisation* of words describing professions, that are encouraged by the Government through the publication of several guidelines or recommendations over the last 20 years, respecting the principle of *parité* (parity or gender equality). Years ago, a French female writer would have said she was either *un écrivain* or *un auteur*, but now most of them describe themselves as *une écrivaine* or *une auteure*. □

Scénario : Une amie américaine

Cathia, 9 ans, parle à sa maman de Lea, une nouvelle copine d'école, qui est Américaine.

Cathia : Lea, elle parle pas mal français, mais c'est fou, elle ne sait jamais si un mot est féminin ou masculin !

La maman : Ce n'est pas facile de savoir ça, tu sais, pour une étrangère.

Cathia : Mais quand même, elle se trompe tout le temps ! Elle me dit des trucs du genre: "Tu me passes **ton** gomme ? On va **au** cantine ? Je vais acheter **une** poster pour **mon** chambre"... C'est n'importe quoi !

La maman : C'est normal de faire des fautes quand on ne sait pas, comment veux-tu qu'elle devine ? Ce n'est pas toujours logique, le français.

Cathia : Mais les mots qui se terminent par "e" sont féminins. Comme fille, route, école...

La maman : Souvent. Mais il y a aussi "cône", "problème", "collège", "lycée"...

Cathia : Ah oui, c'est vrai, pourquoi "lycée" est masculin ?

La maman : Personne n'en sait rien ! Alors tu penses comme c'est difficile pour Lea. Comment veux-tu qu'elle devine que "cartable" est un mot masculin et "ardoise" féminin, ou que "leçon" est féminin et "cours" masculin...

Cathia : Et puis il y a aussi **la** cour de récréation. Là aussi elle se plante sans arrêt. Mais c'est vrai, tu as raison, c'est pas facile de deviner...

La maman : Surtout que dans sa langue, les mots n'ont ni féminin ni masculin.

Cathia : C'est vrai ? Alors ça, c'est vraiment bizarre !

Cathia, 9 years old, is talking to her mum about Lea, a new schoolmate, who is American.

Cathia: Lea speaks quite good French, but it's weird, she can never tell if a word is feminine or masculine!

The mother: It's not very easy for a foreigner, you know, to be able to figure that out.

Cathia: Yes, but she makes mistakes all the time! She says things to me like: "*Tu me passes ton gomme ? On va au cantine ? Je vais acheter une poster pour mon chambre*"... She hasn't a clue.

The mother: It's natural to make mistakes when one doesn't know for sure. How do you expect her to guess the right one? French isn't always logical, you know !

Cathia: But the words that end in 'e' are feminine, like *fille, route, école*...

The mother: That's often the case. But there are also *cône, problème, college, lycée*...

Cathia: Ah yes, that's right. Why is *lycée* masculine?

The mother: Nobody really knows for certain! Well, you can imagine how difficult it is for Lea. How can you expect her to know that *cartable* is masculine and *ardoise* is feminine? Or that *leçon* is feminine and that *cours* is masculine...

Cathia: And then there is also **la cour de récréation**. She gets that one wrong every time. But, it's true. You are right, it isn't very easy to guess which one to use.

The mother: Especially when in her language words are neither masculine nor feminine.

Cathia: Is that true? Well, that's really strange!

Exercices

I. Dans les phrases suivantes, ajouter l'article correspondant au genre du mot (le, la, un, une...) :

1. _____ cours de tennis se trouve dans _____ plus grande avenue de _____ ville.
2. _____ lumière est encore éclairée dans _____ chambre des enfants.
3. Pourquoi y a-t-il eu _____ feu d'artifice hier soir? Parce que c'est _____ jour de _____ fête nationale.
4. Je trouve que _____ saxophone est _____ instrument de musique très harmonieux.
5. _____ peur n'est jamais bonne conseillère.

II. Complétez avec "le" ou "la" :

Quel bordel ! On ne trouve plus rien ici! Où est mon portefeuille?

- Sur _____ commode, sous _____ chapeau.
- Et _____ livre de recettes ?
- Sur _____ plan de travail, entre _____ machine à laver et _____ lave-vaisselle.
- Et où est _____ nouveau CD ? Dans _____ voiture, dans _____ boîte à gants.
- Et où est _____ clé du garage ? Dans _____ cuisine, sous _____ journal, je crois.

III. Complétez avec "le", "l'", "la", "les" ou "un", "une", "des" et faites l'éllision si nécessaire.

Dans _____ supermarchés aujourd'hui, _____ fruits et _____ légumes qu'on y trouve ne sont plus _____ produits naturels. Ce sont plutôt _____ produits de _____ agro-industrie. _____ agriculture moderne ressemble plus à _____ industrie chimique qu'à _____ vraie agriculture qu'on connaissait à _____ époque de nos grands-pères. _____ tomates, par exemple, avaient _____ vrai goût de tomate avec _____ bonne saveur. Celles qu'on trouve aujourd'hui sur _____ marchés ont bien _____ couleur _____ vraies tomates, mais elles n'en ont pas _____ goût. _____ meilleure, ou parfois _____ seule chose à faire, est de cultiver _____ tomates et _____ autres légumes soi-même dans _____ potager bio.

Media Wordplay: *Le mental*

It was Spain this time, and it came as a surprise that few of the favorites made it past the first round. But anyway, whatever team would have won the World Cup in South Africa, it had nothing, or little, to do with the way the players will have kicked the ball. Nothing, or little, related to their physical condition, their ability to run, jump, fall (and pretend to be badly injured), the number of hours of training they had completed beforehand, or the number of stars of the hotel where they stayed during the competition. The only important thing, the one that makes the difference between the winners and the losers, is *le mental* (the state of mind). These days, you can hardly read a French sports magazine or newspaper that doesn't refer to *le mental* of such or such a player, maybe of the whole team, as *le mental* is something contagious. This is not a totally new word, though, but, as always in France, the importance

attached to it and the way it is used have evolved considerably. *Mental*, in the past, was only an adjective - and it is still used as such whenever you speak of *calcul mental* (mental calculations), *malade mental* (mentally ill person), *âge mental* (psychological age) of a person. But the French began using it as a noun about 20 years ago. And little by little, it spread throughout the sports world to the extent that it is now considered just as indispensable as the ball itself in a football match. *Le mental* has become so important that a new profession has been created in recent years, that of *coach mental*: someone who helps prepare *le mental* of the players. The same thing exists, but more discreetly, for Heads of State. And, even better, many sports personalities even engage the services of a *psy* (psychologist) to ensure a better *mental*. Their function is not only to reinforce *le mental* itself, but also to build the confidence the players have in themselves. This is probably partly what *les bleus* (the French) were lacking, even long before the start of the World Cup, when they were defeated 0 to 1 by China in a friendly match. It was a blow to the *moral* as well as to the *mental*, and brought about some strong reactions from fans, such as this one: “*Il est où le mental maintenant ?*” (Where is the mental now?)... *Parti!* (Gone!). This proved true, all over the world event as so many teams, France included, failed to make it past the first round.

Céline Anthonioz

Le coin des branchés

Animals have always been a great source of inspiration for idioms in France. We have already given you in past issues examples of how dogs and cats provide some interesting expressions. The same is true with farm and wild animals. A few examples:

Sauter du coq à l'âne = to jump from one subject to another while talking to people (lit.: to jump from rooster to donkey).

Dire des âneries = to say stupid things.

Etre têtue comme un âne = to be stubborn as a donkey.

Un dos d'âne = a speed bump (lit. = a donkey's back)

Etre à cheval entre... = to be in between.... *Ce terrain est à cheval entre deux maisons* = This field is in between two houses. *Cet auteur a passé sa vie à cheval entre la littérature et la science* = This author has spent his life in between literature and science.

Etre à cheval sur les principes = to be very strict in applying one's principles.

Un cheval de Troie = A Trojan horse.

La vache ! = one of the several equivalents of "wow" - an interjection expressing surprise, either positive or negative. *Elle a réussi ? La vache ! Je n'y croyais pas* = She succeeded ? Wow, I wouldn't have believed it. *La vache ! Il a encore augmenté ses tarifs.* = Wow! He has raised his fees, again.

Une vacherie = a dirty trick, a rather nasty move. *Mon patron m'a fait une vacherie, il m'a refusé de prendre un jour de congé de plus* = My boss played a dirty trick on me, he refused to let me take one more day off.

Vachement = very, a lot, extremely. *Il est vachement beau, ce mec* = He is very handsome, that guy. *J'ai vachement faim* = I am starving. *Cette soupe est vachement dégueu.* = This soup is very disgusting.

Parler anglais comme une vache espagnole = to speak very broken English (lit.: to speak English like a Spanish cow).

Un mouton = someone who is easily impressionable and follows others without thinking for himself.

Ménager la chèvre et le chou = to be nice with two different/opposite parties to remain in good terms with both (lit.: to deal carefully with the goat and the cabbage).

Un poulet = a cop.

Poser un lapin = to stand someone up (lit.: to lay a rabbit). *Elle devait venir dîner ce soir, mais elle m'a posé un lapin* = She was supposed to come for dinner tonight, but she stood me up.

Mettre la charrue avant les bœufs = to put the cart before the horse (lit.: to put the plough before the oxen).

Prendre le taureau par les cornes = to have the courage to finally do something that has been necessary for some time (lit.: to take the bull by the horns). *Cela fait trop longtemps que je voulais ranger le grenier. J'ai pris le taureau par les cornes et maintenant c'est fait !* = I have wanted to straighten up the attic for too long. I finally took the bull by the horns, and now it's done!

Avoir mangé du lion = to have incredible energy (lit.: to have eaten some lion's meat).

Ne pas vendre la peau de l'ours avant de l'avoir tué = don't count your chickens before they hatch (lit: don't sell the skin of the bear before having killed it).

Un drôle de zèbre = a strange fellow.