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Part Three

What else did we get from the French, aside from photography, aviation, the metric system, oleomargarine, Pasteur, Lavoisier, the Curies, and indeed all the discoveries of one of the world's most powerful scientific traditions, as well as one of the world's great bodies of literature?

Well, we can start with our language. We are accustomed to hearing that English is a Germanic language. I can't see it. It has neither the grammatical structure nor the rhythmic character of German and the related languages, such as Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, and Dutch. German has a strict grammatical structure, including the combining of separate words into one (John Dos Passos tried it in English and it seemed a little coy) and the placement of verbs at the ends of clauses and sentences, which makes it rhymically different from English.

And the vocabulary of English is about seventy percent French.

The simple words of everyday life — hand (Hand), foot (Fuss), fist (Faust), water (Wasser), milk (Milch) — tend to be German, and these are the words we learn first. It has been rather aptly said that we speak German until we are about three, and then learn French, which means the vocabulary of abstraction. Probably because of the roots of these German words in early memory, they tend to have poetic power. We are told, in learning to write, always to use small words. In fact they have an emotional effect deriving from our childhood learning. Cole Porter could use French vocabulary with great wit, but when he wanted to make a simple and powerful emotional statement, he reverted to a Germanic simplicity, as in *In the Still of the Night*, one of the most beautiful of all lyrics. If you know it, recite it in your head. It contains only two French words, *number*, from *nombre*, and *content*, which is exactly the same word though pronounced differently.

This French content of the English language comes from two historical sources: the Norman conquest of England in 1066; and the continuing influx of French words due to the tremendous prestige of the French culture in England, for all the continuing rivalry of the two countries.

Recently I saw an Internet ad for a CD-Rom by which one is supposed to learn French. It said that the French word for cabbage is *choux*, which it is, and that it is pronounced like *shoe*, which it isn't. *Choux* has a very short oo and *shoe* has a long oo. The former is an abrupt word; the latter is a lazy one. But in any event, the sample of lessons revealed to me what is an almost monstrously stupid way to learn a language. There is a better way: connecting what you don't know to what you do know. And by that technique you can acquire a French vocabulary of seven or eight thousand words in the next twenty minutes, and if not that, certainly within an hour.

I decided to write this after a conversation with my friend Oscar Castro-Neves, the wonderful Brazilian guitarist, arranger and producer. Oscar speaks French already, as well as Portuguese of course. He was amazed at some of what I told him, and urged me to impart it to you.

Here we go.

There are three verbs you *must* acquire when you start to learn *any* language. They are the verbs *to be* and *to have* and *to go*. They have their obvious and instant utility, but more than that, when used as auxiliary verbs, they allow you to express the past and future tenses. These verbs are irregular in every language with which I am even slightly familiar, the theory being that they are so commonly used that over time they become battered out of shape.

To be conjugates idiotically in English: *I am, you are, he is*; and in the plural, *we are, you are, they are*. We encounter one of the gravest losses of the English language, that of the second-person singular *thee* and *thou*, leaving us with only the plural *you*. Compensations for this loss have been invented in common speech, including *youse* in Brooklyn, *you-all or y'all* in the South, and the peculiar *yuns* in Pittsburgh, which I presume is a contraction of *you ones*.

The French infinitive for *to be* is *être*. It is pronounced eh-truh. The circumflex accent over that first e indicates that it once was followed by an s. The French Academy tried to abolish the circumflex a few years ago, because it has no effect on the sound of a vowel. A great many people howled with indignation, and they were right. Incidentally, inserting

the s in *être* gives you not the English infinitive of the word, but the Spanish: *estar*. Spanish has two forms of the verb, which is confusing to beginning students, but it needn't be. *Estar* is a temporary condition, *ser* is permanent. Thus *Estoy triste* means I am sad, but I won't be sad tomorrow. *Soy Mexicano* means I am Mexican (and always will be). It's a nuance I wish we had in English, and in French too.

Être conjugates as follows: *je suis* (zhu swee), *tu es* (tyuh eh, the same e as in met), *il* (eel, masculine) or *elle* (el, feminine) *est* (eh), *nous sommes* (noo sum), *vous êtes (voo zet) ils sont* or *ells sont*, pronounced eel sohn or el sohn. If you want to get the French "je" sound think of the s in *casual*.

You'll notice a principle here: terminal consonants in French words have fallen silent, except when followed by a word starting with a vowel. Before you throw up your hands and say, "Oh but that's stupid!" remember all the silent letters we have in English, including the guttural endings in through and though, the l in palm and the d in Wednesday. You will soon come to say that French is stupidly spelled. Absolutely correct. Its only rival for orthographic idiocy is English. The Italians and Spanish have reformed their spelling, so that it is consistent, simple, and logical. Any language in which *water* doesn't rhyme with *later* but does rhyme with *otter* and *daughter*, and *laughter* doesn't rhyme with *daughter* but does rhyme with *after,* has no business deploring the spellings of another language. Silent letters in English include the w of write, the h of when (although very precise speakers sometimes use it), the t in often, the n in autumn, and so forth. These are no doubt confusing to people coming to English from another language. Who among us says, "I'm going to"? It comes out "I'm gonna" even in literate speakers. And who says, "I don't want to"? We say, "I duwanna."

Now, there are a couple of French sounds you will need to master. The so-called French nasal defies those Anglophones learning French. It needn't. It's quite simple, really. Say the English word *pan* very slowly, and observe the motions in your mouth. It is actually a two-syllable word. You will notice that at the end of it, the tip of your tongue flicks down from the ridge of gum behind your incisors. Say *pan* again, but don't let your tongue do that, and keep your mouth open. We now have a word that sounds like *pahn*; I know of no other way to spell it. And you have just pronounced (correctly, I would imagine) the French word for bread. *That* is the key to the French nasal sound. However: if an -e follows the n, you say it as one does in English, for example the adjective or noun *jaune*, pronounced zhoan. The word means *yellow*. It does not carry over into English, except in the form of *jaundice*.

(Before we continue, there is a French suffix you ought to know: -atre. *Yellowish* is *jaunâtre*. *Bluish* is *bleuatre*. And so on. The -re is almost silent, but not quite.)

While we are on the subject of bread, let's dismantle the word *companion*. The French word for *with* is *comme*, the Spanish is *con*. Words with the prefix *con* are about things that are *with* something. *Comme* is pronounced *cum*. The French word for bread, as noted, is *pain*, the Spanish is *pan*. So a companion is someone with whom you take bread.

Words that end in -ia in English usually end in -ie in French, such as *encyclopédie*. And that word, if you trace it back through Latin to Greek, means encircled by children.

Julian Jaynes has argued, in that strange and brilliant book *The Emergence of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind,* that there are no abstract words, only symbolic uses of words with concrete meanings. For example, *inspire*, which is the same word in French, means to draw in one's breath. Gasp.

Words that end in -ible or -able end the same way in French, as in *possible* and *détestable*. The -le in modern French is semi-swallowed, almost silent. You barely tick it off your tongue.

A letter you should try to master now is the French r. A French friend named Alain Braun (whose parents, you will be charmed to know, died at Auschwitz) long ago taught me that all you have to do is try to pronounce the English r while slightly clearing your throat.

Double -ll- is sometimes pronounced as y, as it is in Spanish, but not always. It is pronounced that way in *travailler*, to work, from which we get travail. It is pronounced as y in *fille*, meaning girl or daughter. The male form, *fils*, pronounced feese, means son or descendant. We get "filial" and "affiliation" from this source. It is from the Latin *filius*, meaning son. We also get the Irish names beginning with Fitz. They are Norman French, descended from *fils de*, son of. *Fils de Gérald* evolved into Fitzgerald.

The double -ll- is, however, often pronounced as in English. *Ville* (veel) means city, and *village* (vee-lazh) has the same -l- sound. I know of no rule that will clarify this. One learns the difference by ear and practice.

Here is some easy stuff. All words that end in -ion are derived from the French, and spelled the same way in both languages, as for example, "nation". We pronounced it *NAY-shun*. The French pronounce it with the *na-* of *natural* and then *syohn*. So too all the words that rhyme with it, such as

observation, inflation, condamnation, création. All the other -ion words exist in French, as for example *infusion, transfusion, intrusion.* Remember that you pronounce the n as an open consonant; don't flick your tongue off your teeth.

Words that end in y in English end in e-acute, é, which is pronounced ay. Indeed, I think of it not as an e with an accent but as a separate letter entirely. You can see at a glance then the meaning of *liberté, fraternité, cité*. The i in each of these words is pronounced ee, as it is almost always in French. The words usually mean the same thing, but not always. Publicity is *publicité* in French, but it means paid advertising. Incidentally, you might as well pick up a little Spanish while we're at it. The -é and -y endings of French and English are -ad in Spanish, as in *libertad,* and in Portuguese *libertade*.

Now for that circumflex (spelled *circonflexe* in French), indicating that once upon a time there was an s after the vowel. And if, mentally, when you see one of those words, you put the s back into it, you will usually get the English word or something close to it with a variant spelling. Thus *fête* is feast. *Maître* is master. You can figure out *bâtard, île, forêt, tempête* easily enough. An interesting word is *tête.* Insert the s and you get not the English word for *head* but the Italian word for it, *testa*. We don't have the word itself in English, but we have it in combination forms, such as *testimony, testify, testicle* and *testament*.

The Spanish word for *fête* is *fiesta. Bête* in French is beast in English. *Prêtre* is priest, which was still spelled *prestre* in Middle English. *Pâté* is paste or dough, an related to *pasta* in Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese. *Pâture* is pasture. (We get *pastoral* from it.) Arrêt, or *arrêter* in the infinitive, means *arrest,* but not in the legal sense in which we use it; it merely means *stop.* There are some words that we have imported from French twice, including *hostel* (the older form) and *hôtel. Fenêtre* means window. It is not found in English, except in the peculiar verb *defenestrate*, which means to throw something out of a window. I have only seen it used once in my lifetime. Handel once defenestrated a tenor, for which I have always admired him.

Now, the e-acute *at the beginning of a word* means that here too there was an s that has disappeared from modern French. Insert it and you usually will know what the word means. In most of these cognates, while the French let the s fall silent, we dropped the é. *École* becomes *éscole*. Knock off the é and you've got school. And incidentally, this yields up *escola* in Portugese and *escuela* in Spanish.

Consider *échapper* in French. That's the infinitive form, pronounced ay-sha-pay. Put in the s. Pronounce the ch hard, as we do in *character*. You've got *escape*. Don't forget that while we pronounce *schedule* with a hard ch, the British pronounce it with a soft sh sound. The word derives from Latin ex-, meaning out of, and cappa, meaning hood.

Étage means stage (or floor or storey; we were stupid to throw out that e in American spelling), *étable* means stable, *état* means state, both in the political sense and in the meaning of *condition*, *étendre* means extend, but *éteindre* means extinguish, as in putting out a fire, *étoffe* means stuff, or fabric, *étudier* (ay-tyoo-dyay) means study, *étranger* (pronounced ay-trahn-zhay) means stranger. And on and on and on. But a word of caution. Don't trust this principle. It doesn't always work.

And *éthique* means exactly the same thing in English: *ethic*. All words, nouns and adjectives, that end in -ic in English end in -ique in French. We pronounced it ick, they pronounce it eek. Thus *critique, publique, sarcastique, nostalgique.* The last word has a soft g, or zh sound, like the s of casual.

Fanatic is *fanatique* in French, *fanatico* in Spanish. French *atomique* is *atomico* in Spanish. But *bombastique* doesn't exist in French today; other words are used. Once you know those endings -ic, -ique, and -ico endings, you can make a reasonable guess at what these words will be in both French and Spanish.

We have considered the vanished s in French. Now we must consider the vanished l. Again, before you say "Oh that's stupid," consider how the words from which it has vanished in English, including palm, calm, and salmon, all of which we get from French of course.

This gets kind of cute. The French substituted the letter u for the vanished l, as in *saumon* (so-mohn). We substituted nothing; we just dropped the l sound. Now, when you look at a menu, you know immediately what *veau* means, veal. *Peau,* which means skin, is used in English mostly to mean the rind of a fruit, although there is a dermatological procedure known as a peel. (We changed the spelling to double ee.) *Faucon* is falcon, *dauphin* is dolphin. Americans have adopted the French word *faux*, silent x. That's the masculine form of the adjective. The feminine is *fause*. Insert the l for the u.

A particularly interesting word, applying some of the aforementioned principles, is *château.* (The *eau* is pronounced *oh* in French.) Take it in pieces. Pronounce the ch-hard, as in character. Insert the s after the â, and now replace the u with l. You've got *castle*, with a silent t.

The aspirated h has disappeared from French, and for that matter from much of English, as in *honest* (*honête* in French)

and *honor.* (My English grandmother could not pronounce the aspirated h at all.) The Italians got rid of it entirely. Hospital (*hôpital* in French) is *ospidale* in Italian, the t having been vocalized to d. A lot of American southerners do this, Charlie Rose among them. Important is pronounced *impordant.* A vocalized consonant is one accompanied by a buzz in the throat. B is a vocalized p, d is a vocalized t, v is a vocalized f, z is a vocalized s. The -th sound of English (very difficult for the French to pronounce; my son still can't say it) in *with* is not vocalized but it is in *weather*.

The word *honor* brings us to yet another point. Words that end in -or in English for the most part end in -eur in French: *honeur, labeur* and so on. But the original Latin did not include the u: it was just plain *honor*, and the English (who still use it) got it from the French. In America we have, sensibly, I think, dropped it. So in French it's *professeur, docteur, extérieur, torpeur*, and so on. The Italians apparently can't pronounce -ct- and have turned it into a double t, as in *dottore*. In Spanish, it's, well, *doctor*. But for a medical man, the French say *médicen* (pronounced may-tsahn, with that open n) and the Spanish say *medico*.

The professions and positions that end in -or in English, end in *-eur* in French, as in *exécuteur*. Those that end in -er in English end in -ier in French, as in *forestier* (for-eh-styay).

The words ending in -ism and -ist, as *communist*, largely are the same in French, although they take an -e at the end, as in *socialiste* and *existantialiste*.

Nouns ending in -ory in English usually end in -oire in French, as in *histoire*, pronounced eest-wahr, *territoire* and *répertoire*. Adjectives ending in -ary in English tend to end in -aire, as in *imaginaire* and *populaire* in French. Adjectives ending in -ous in English usually end in -eux, as in *furieux, gracieux* and *joyeux*. This is the masculine form, and the x is silent. The feminine form is -euse, and the s is sounded like the z of English. The vowel here is hard to capture for an Anglophone. Purse your lips and shape your mouth to say ee and then try to say uh.

Adjectives ending in -ar, such as *regular* and *singular*, end in -ier in French, *regulier* and *singulier*, the ending pronounced *yay*. Adjectives ending in -al in English end in -el in French, as for example *universel, sexuel, casuel, intentionnel,* unless the noun modified is feminine, in which case the ending is *-elle*.

Whereas adverbs are formed in English with the suffix -ly, they are formed in French with -ment, as in *rapidement* (rapeed-mohn, silent t) and *immediatement*. Spanish is almost the same, -mente, as in *inmediatemente*. It is pronounced men-tay.

Verbs that end in -er in French usually end in -ate in English. *Oblitérer* (oh-blee-tay-ray), obliterate, *créer*, pronounced cray-ya, to create, *infiltrer, abominer, excaver.* You can easily figure them out for yourself once you know the principle. However, they don't all do that. *Décider* is simply "decide." *Briller* (bree-lay), to shine, doesn't exist in English except in derivative forms such as *brilliant*, which really means *shining*. And where do you think they got the name for Brillo pads?

A lot of words that are not spelled or pronounced the same in the two languages can be deduced or guessed. *Avantage* means advantage. *Flamme* is indeed flame, and we retain the double mm in inflammable. Almost all our legal terms, such as *tort* (meaning wrong in French) and judiciary (*judiciaire*) are French or Latin.

You will need the conjunction *que* immediately. It means that, which, and other things. You will also need the relative pronoun *qui*, meaning who, what, which. They are pronounced kuh and kee. One of the most useful expressions you can learn at the start is *Que veux dire*? It translates: "What wishes to say . . . ." You use it to ask what a word or expression means, as in *Que veux dire 'chevalier?'* It's pronounced kuh vuh deer. Sort of. And the direct translation of the phrase is: What means to say *chevalier? Chevalier* is *cavalier* in English and *caballaro* in Spanish, all of them descended from one of the Latin words for horse, *caballus*. In other words, he is a man with a horse, and therefore a gentleman. The other Latin word for horse was *equus*, which descends from the prehistoric Indo-European root *ekwo.* We get *esquestrian* and *equerry*, master of the horse, from it.

Questions in French are formed by reversing the noun and the verb. This was once common in English and can still be used, though it sounds archaic (*archaique* in French). We use auxiliary verbs, as in "do you" and "will you" and "does he". You can do that in French too, using the expression *est-ce que*, which means "is it that," as in *Est-ce que vous habiter à New York?* "Do you live in New York?" *Habiter* is found in English in "habitate" and "habitation." That question is pronounce eh-skuh voo-zabee-tay a New York.

French is spoken with a kind of serene equanimity. There is little stress on syllables. "Habitation" is pronounced in English with a strong stress on the penultimate syllable, "tay." All the syllables in that word are pronounced with the same emphasis in French: a-bee-ta-shohn. You will find that the nature of the rhythmic character of a language strongly influences the character of its music, I would presume

because the language determines the character of the folk music and the folk music underlies its art music. Consider the music of Manuel de Falla and Joaquin Rodrigo. Mexican Spanish, for example, has the sound of triplets; the original Spanish does not. And I think you will find that difference in the music of the two countries. French feels to me as if it flows in even eighth notes, and the music — from Rameau and others through Debussy and the better popular songs — have that even quality. This, incidentally, makes the job of the lyricist a lot easier in French than it is in English *because you don't have to match stressed syllables to stressed notes.*

You no doubt know that "parole" in English comes from the French word for "word" — you gave your word, so you are on parole. The French have a wonderful word for lyricist, and I wish we had it in English. It is *parolier*, meaning a "wordist".

This is all the easy stuff. But if you have followed this closely you already have a *recognitional* vocabulary of many hundreds of words in French, perhaps several thousand. That doesn't mean you can pronounce or use them, but you'll recognize a lot of them when you see them.

Now we must deal with the second of the three essential but irregular verbs: *avoir*, the infinitive, meaning *to have*. I have, you have, he has, we have, you have, they have. In French they are *j'ai, tu as, il a, nous avons, vous avez, ils ont.*

In French, when two vowels collide, as in *je ai*, they are combined with an apostrophe, as in *j'ai*. So it's *zhai, tyu a, eel a, noo-zavon, voo-zavay, el zohn*. The t is silent. Please take the time to commit this conjugation to memory now, because it's incredibly useful. Pause. Do it. This verb gives you the ability to speak about the past.

I walked is our simple past tense, or the past perfect. *I have walked* is the imperfect, because the act is not completed: *we have walked four miles since we left this morning.* It's a past act continuing right up until now.

But the French have a peculiar habit. There is, as in English, a past perfect verb, and it is used in writing. But in everyday speech the French, somewhat sloppily, to my mind, use the imperfect in discussions of the past. There are two ways, then, to talk about the past: by using *avoir* or *être* as auxiliary verbs, usually *avoir*, although there are instances in which *être* is correct, as in *Je suis arrivé*, pronounced zhu swee za-ree-vay. We'd say, "I have arrived." The French say "I am arrived." In other words, it is a condition. We once used that construction in English, and it survives in such a construction as "Jesus is risen."

And, bite the bullet, we need to get into the third of those highly irregular verbs: *Aller*, to go. The reason you need it immediately is that, as in English, you can use it to express the future, as in "I am going to leave now." When you speak French well, you don't do that; you use the true future tense, which English doesn't have. That's right, English has no future tense. We'll get to that in a minute. But you can use the auxiliary *aller* and the French won't have you arrested for doing so. It will get you by.

So the conjugation of *aller* is as follows: *je vais, tu vas, il va, nous allons, vous allez, ils vont.* Pronounced zhu vay, tyu va, eel va, noo-zallon (silent s), eel vohn, with the nasal we have already discussed.

You can get a lot done with these three verbs. Incidentally, when you say, "Je vais," think of the Spanish word for *go*, as in *Vaya con dios*, go with God.

Now, unfortunately, we have to discuss the articles and gender. Start with gender. It is in this area that I become incensed with the idiocies of the American women's lib movement, which displays nothing so much as an ignorance of language. English is the only language I know whose nouns do *not* have gender. Nouns in Latin had two genders, masculine and feminine. And French, Spanish, Portuguese, and Italian still do. In fact the genders of nouns in these languages still are those they had in Latin, with one puzzling (to me) exception: the word for *sea* in French and Portuguese. It is *la mer*, feminine, in French, but it is *o mar*, masculine, in Portuguese.

If you grow up in the French language, you don't give the genders a thought: they're built into your brain. But if you learn the language as an adult, you're going to have to learn a lot of them. And think of it this way: if you learn German, you have to learn three genders, masculine, feminine, and neuter. And gender has nothing whatsoever to do with sex. For example, the German word for girl, maiden, is *Mädchen*, and it's neuter. In Swedish, it gets worse: the language has masculine, feminine, and two neuters.

The articles, definite and indefinite, present a problem to many people learning English or French. The Slavic languages have no articles at all, which one can deduce from the way Russians, Poles, and other Slavic peoples speak English. *I read book, I drive car, I sleep on sofa.* Latin didn't have articles either. The articles are a little hard to explain to someone coming to the modern languages that do use them. But there is a very considerable difference between "I read a book" and "I read the book."

Incidentally, we can suspend the articles in English, but you cannot suspend them in French. They must always be used. We can say "in the summer" or simply "in summer" but in France you must use the article. The British say someone "is in hospital" while the American custom is to say "in the hospital," but I think the British practice is more apt. There are exceptions to the rule in French, one of which applies to professions. You don't say "I am a doctor," you say, "I am doctor" or "He is musician," *Il est musicien*. It makes sense. If you say, "I am a musician" it means any old musician. Which one?

Adjectives must agree with the nouns they modify in both gender and number. That is, if the noun is feminine, the adjective modifying it must be too. *La France* is feminine, so you say, *La belle France*, meaning beautiful France. But if the noun is masculine, you use *beau*, not belle. *Good* is *bon* in the masculine, pronounced *bohn*, and *bonne* in the feminine, pronounced bun. So it's *le bon livre* for *the good book*, but in the plural, *les bons livres*. Feminine adjectives, except the irregulars, take an -e at the end. So you would speak of *la grande maison*, the big house, but *les grandes maisons* in the plural. Adjectives that end in -ive in English are derived from feminine forms of the adjective. If they are in the masculine, they end in -if, as in *aggressif, massif, sportif*, and so forth, *aggressive* and *massive* in the feminine.

Adjectives may be placed before or after the nouns they modify, which once was true in English. In his lyric *The Folks Who Live on the Hill*, Oscar Hammerstein wrote "a view of meadows green" but we rarely do that now in English: our adjectives precede the nouns. But whether the adjective comes before or after the noun makes a difference in French. If the adjective comes after the noun, it is used to differentiate between that and something else. And sometimes it alters the meaning: *un homme brave* means a brave man; *un brave homme* means a good guy.

The possessive pronouns follow the same rules as the articles. They are *mon*, my in the masculine, *ma*, my in the feminine, and *mes* (pronounced may) in the plural. When *mes* is followed by a vowel, the s is sounded, as in *mes amies*, my friends, *may-zamee*. Otherwise it is silent, as in *mes compagnions*. Logically, in the feminine, you would say *ma ambition*, but that would sound strange, so in cases of a noun preceding a feminine word that starts with a vowel, you use the masculine form and say *mon ambition*. It is for the sake of sonority, and French has a lot of rules such as that to contribute to the flow and sound of the language. That's one of the things that makes it so beautiful, and a marvelous language in which to write lyrics. The endings -er, -et, -es, -ez, and é are all pronounced *ay*. It gives the lyricist an enormous number of rhymes in French!

All words ending in *-ion* in French are feminine, as in *la nation*. If you want to pick up a little collateral knowledge, substitute a c for the t in that word and you have the Spanish, *nacion*. Spanish does not use the French nasal. The n, in that case, is resoundingly completed, as in English: *na-see-oan*. If you want to go still farther, substitute -zione and you've got the Italian, *nazione*. Also feminine in French: all words that end in -y in English and é in French, such as *liberté*. Caution: some words that end in -y in English end in -ie in French, such as *democratie*.

Words ending in -ance, such as *tolérance*, or -ence, such as *différence*, will usually be found in both languages, the difference being that we don't use the acute é. These words are invariably (so far as I know) feminine. The adjectives from such nouns end in -ant (-ante in the feminine) or -ent (ente in the feminine) and are the same in English, as in *tolérant* and *urgent*.

There are hundreds of nouns that are spelled exactly the same in French and English, such as *usage, sextant* and *silence*. Sometimes in English they take a -y in place of the -e at the end, as in *urgence* and *fréquence*, pronounced fray-kahnse.

English has two articles to precede its nouns: *the*, the definite article, and *a*, the indefinite article, which becomes *an* when the noun that follows it begins with a vowel, as in *an advantage*. French has two forms of each article. The definite articles are *le*, masculine, pronounced luh, and *la*, the feminine, pronounced like the first syllable of *Latin*. The plural form of the definite article is *les*, pronounced lay, unless it is followed by a vowel, in which case you sound the s, in z form, as in *les amis*, pronounced lay-zamee. The indefinite article is *un* in the masculine, and a little like *an* in English, a bit like a grunt, and *une* in the feminine, which sounds as een, but not quite. There is a plural form of the indefinite article too, but the rules for it are a little complicated, and I wouldn't mess with it now.

The masculine and feminine definite articles, *le* and *la*, become *l'* when the following noun begins with a vowel, as in *l'ami*, masculine, and *l'amie*, feminine.

There is no word in French for *it*, because there is no neuter gender. You use *il* or *elle*, depending on the gender of the noun to which it refers — *he* or *she*.

Like English, French has what are called indefinite adjectives. *Quelque* (kel-kuh) means "a little, some, few," or

it can mean "any kind of." *Il a quelque talent* means "he has a little talent." In the plural, it means "a few, some", as in I ate some apples: *J'ai mangé quelques pommes*. *Plusieurs* (pluh-zyur) means several. *Chaque* (it is almost pronounced shack) means each, as in *chaque homme*, each man. "All, every," is designated by *tout* (masculine singular, pronounced like a short "too"), *tous*, masculine plural, *toute* (femine singular, pronounced close to "toot"), and *toutes*, feminine plural. It means "each" unless it is followed by an article, as in *tout le pays* (pronounced too luh pay-yee), meaning "the whole country." *Même* means "the same" or "itself." Note the missing s. In Spanish it's *mismo*. *Le même jour* means "the same day."

There are many more, but these are a start.

And one must deal with some of the basic prepositions, for without them you can't string a sentence together. Some of the most important:

A, with a "grave" accent, meaning "to," is pronounced like the a in *bat*. When Debussy was studying under César Franck, who was steeped in German compositional methods, he got bugged, stood up in class, and said, "*Monsieur Franck, vous êtes une machine à moduler,*" and, legend has it, walked out. Mr. Franck, you're a modulating machine.

Je vais à Paris, pronounced zhu vay a Paree, means I'm going to Paris. *De*, which is very close to *duh* in sound, means "of". It can also mean *from*. *Je suis de Paris*, I'm from Paris. *Sous*, pronounced soo, means "under", while *sur* means "on", or on top of. It's pronounced somewhat like "sear" in English. We get *surcharge* from that, and many other French words, such as *surface*, meaning on-the-face, *surpass, surplus, survey,* and *survive*, which (the French infinitive for live is *vivre)* means live over. *Pour*, pronounced pretty much like poor, means "for". *Après* with silent s means "after". *Avant* means "before." *Depuis*, pronounced *de-pwee,* means "since." *Vers,* pronounced "vair", means toward. *Dans* means "in". *Par* means "by," and *parce que* means "because." *Donc* (the c is pronounced, "donk") means "therefore."

Now, for some of the other verbs. The basic one is First Conjugation, verbs whose infinitives end in -er, pronounced ay. These are the verbs that are most easily translated into English, or recognized by Anglophones. They are usually (but by no means always) found to end in English with -ate. *Abominer* abominate, *fabriquer* fabricate, *exonérer* exonerate, *assimiler* assimilate. But there are many exceptions, such as *evoquer*, which is evoke in English, and *diner* (dee-nay) which is simply dine. Take a chance when you see such words. Guess. You'll usually be right.

Next come the Second Conjugation verbs, those ending in -ir, pronounced eer. Many of these verbs end in -ish in English: *accomplir, embellir, finir, établir, punir, demolir,* but a lot of them don't, such as *applaudir*, which is merely applaud, *envahir*, to invade, *obéir*, to obey. Often you can guess the meaning. *Réunir* means, as you might think, reunite.

Third Conjugation verbs end in -re. *Entendre* is to hear, and also to understand. *Défendre* is to defend. *Vendre* is to sell. (Think of vendor.) *Perdre* is to lose. It is related to *perdido*, which means lost in Spanish, not to mention an Ellington tune. We get perdition from it.

Now you should learn to conjugate these verbs, at first only in the present tense. Our verbs are conjugated with only one variation, the s attached to the third person singular: *he speaks*. French First Conjugation verbs have five written endings in the present tense, but only three in speech: *Je parle, tu parles* (but the s is silent), *il, elle, on* (meaning one) *parle, nous parlons* (noo par-lohn, silent s), *vous parlez* (plural, voo par-lay), and *ils, elles parlent*, with silent -ent.

Other First Conjugation verbs, such as *donner*, to give (from which we get donation), use the same endings.

The past participle drops the r from the infinitive and substitutes é. Now you can take the verb *avoir*, to have, and construct sentences in the past tense, such as *il a donné,* which is, precisely, he has given. But in everyday speech the French, as we have noted, use it as the simple past, he gave.

And if you use *aller* as an auxiliary in front of the infinitive of a verb, you can express futurity. *Je vais donner*, I am going to give, pronounced zhu vay donnay, you can speak of the future, albeit a little sloppily. But you will be understood. Incidentally, they use an inversions of this, which we don't have in English. The verb for "come" is *venir*. So in that inversion of *aller*, you say something like *Je viens de finir mon travail*, which in English is "I have just finished my work."

This brings us to a fine point that is far bigger in its import than one at first would think. I have never read this anywhere, but simply figured it out from observation, as indeed many of the principles thus far expressed came to me that way. *English has no future tense*. This startles people when you first say it to them. But of course we do! We can say, "I am going to give" or "I will give." Yeah, but that isn't the future. That is directionality: I am heading toward giving. Or it is determination. There once was a distinction between "shall" and "will" but the rules for their use were involuted and obtuse, and "shall" has almost disappeared, particularly since

the contraction is so often used, as in "I'll see to it."

French does indeed have a future tense. If you want to learn it, it is formed by adding to the infinitive the endings,-ai, -as (silent s) , -a, -ons (silent s), -ez, and -ont (silent t). Thus *je marcherai* is "I walk" in the future tense. If you pause and invest the time in learning these future-tense endings, you will have a grip on something important. Otherwise you can use *aller* as a sloppy future tense.

Now, one of the advantages of learning a language, any language, is that it teaches you a different way to think. We think only what we *can* think and since most thought is verbal, each of us lives in a trap of what can be expressed in one's own language. When you learn another language, your thought expands explosively, which is why I think it is criminal that there is not an emphasis on languages and music (yet another language) in our schools.

When the French think *Je dinerai avec lui,* I will have dinner with him, it isn't an intention, it is act occurring in the future. We can't do that. It is the precision of French that made it for so many years the international language of diplomacy, and the reason the Russian aristocracy spoke French as commonly as they did their own language. Of course, cultural admiration had a lot to do with it too.

Don't hesitate to guess. The worst that can happen is laughter. A few years ago, my French Canadian conductor friend Marc Fortier asked me to do some seminars at a summer camp for musicians in Québec. I had to do them in French, since quite a number of the musicians spoke little or no English. I had not spoken French in some time, and languages, like musical chops, slip if you don't use them. My French was pretty clunky for the first couple of days, and as we all sat at the breakfast table, I wanted to ask for the peanut butter. I couldn't remember the word for peanut, which is *cacahouète,* and dredging my memory, I came up with something that was close and asked for *le beurre de caoutchouc,* which means "rubber butter." That table of guys went up in flames, with no one laughing harder than I.

Neuf in French means both new and nine. When I was first in Paris, my French pretty primitive, I expressed admiration for one of the bridges to a lovely young woman. She said it was the Pont Neuf, meaning new bridge. But I thought that it meant Bridge Nine, assuming the bridges of the Seine in Paris must be numbered, like New York streets. I asked in which direction on the river was Bridge Eight. She found that very funny, and when I understood, so did I.

Contrary to all the anti-French propaganda we've been hearing — and it doesn't seem to be letting up, even though the present administration has begun to realize that it *needs* the French and the Germans — the French usually are delighted if you even make the effort to stumble along in their language. And they'll almost always be happy to help you.

All this is an introduction to French, designed to show the close relationship rather than the differences between our two languages. And there are differences. If you should wish to pursue the subject further, you will need two things: something equivalent to the Linguaphone records, and a good text book. The French company ASSiMiL publishes an excellent series of small books on most languages. *French Without Toil* is one of them. McGraw-Hill published in its *Schaum's Outline Series* a book called *French Grammar*. It is first rate, although whether it is still available, I do not know.

Among the very first words you need to know are the names of foods, and of course everyday objects, which may or may not be the same as they are in English. That means you need a French-English dictionary, and immediately. You need to know the numbers system.

There are two other superb aids to learning French (or any language). Get some French films with English subtitles and watch them repeatedly. As you become familiar with the sounds, you will be surprised at how much of the language you will understand. Try *Indochine* with Catherine Deneuve. It's a great picture, she's gorgeous to look at, and she enunciates the language exquisitely. And try *Le Coeur en Hiver*, meaning the heart in winter, which is about a violin maker. It's excellent, and the French spoken in it is beautiful.

The other thing is to get some good French records from the classic period. Try Juliette Greco, Gilbert Bécaud, Jacqueline François, and Charles Trenet. Especially interesting is the score to *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg.* As you come to know the records phonetically, try singing along with them. Singing is used in speech therapy because, for example, someone who stammers does not do so when singing. No one knows why. If you can get copies of the lyrics (and French records often provide printed lyrics) and really *learn* the songs, and sing along, imitating the pronunciation, and looking up in a dictionary every word you don't know, you will assimilate the language with amazing rapidity.

If France, its people, its magnificent culture, and one of the most exquisite languages on earth, have survived nearly a thousand years of English and German attack, I think they may survive the current American racist slander.