A Reference Grammar of French

*A Reference Grammar of French* is a lively, wide-ranging and original handbook on the structure of the French language. It includes new information on register, pronunciation, gender, number, foreign words (Latin, Arabic, English, Spanish, Italian), adjectives and past participles used as nouns, texting, word order, frequency of occurrence of words, and usage with all geographical names. Examples come not only from France, but also from Quebec, Belgium and Switzerland. Readers will appreciate the initial passages illustrating the grammatical features of a given chapter. Also included is a user-friendly introduction to the French language, from its Latin origins to modern times. A full glossary explains any terms that might confuse the less experienced reader, and the index leads the student through the detailed labyrinth of grammatical features. This handbook will be an invaluable resource for students and teachers who want to perfect their knowledge of all aspects of French grammar.

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The study of French grammar offers us a striking penetration into the national mind of France and into the French speaker’s sense of cultural identity and civilization. The year 2009 witnessed a passionate, national debate, launched by President Sarkozy, on the significance of being French. An integral contribution to this debate was made by a French economist who distinguishes below one feature above all others in the pursuit of national identity and consciousness: the French language with all its anomalies of pronunciation, spelling and grammatical inconsistencies. We make no apologies for quoting in full his most lucid article on what it means to be French. The emphasis in three sentences has been added by the authors.

Le billet d’Alain Minc
Essayiste

A chacun son identité nationale

Point n’est besoin d’aller dans les préfectures pour s’interroger sur l’identité nationale. C’est un jeu auquel chacun peut, seul, se livrer. Pour ma part, je ne crois plus à la vieille ritournelle de Renan : « La nation, un plébiscite quotidien. » Quand l’Allemagne était impériale, la Grande-Bretagne aristocratique, l’Italie monarchique, le « plébiscite » sur nos valeurs égalitaires et libérales avait un sens. Aujourd’hui, les Occidentaux partagent tous les mêmes idéaux de liberté et de contrat social. Il n’y a plus, de ce point de vue, d’exception française. Qu’est-ce qui fonde la France ? Une mémoire, une culture ? Dans un univers mondialisé et bouleversé par Internet, ces traits s’estompent. La racine de notre identité, c’est, aujourd’hui, à mes yeux, la langue. Le français est notre bien commun ; il nous différencie ; il sous-tend un esprit, une manière de penser, une façon d’être. Lui seul nous distingue des Allemands ou des Espagnols. Mais si nous faisons nôtre cette idée, il est alors impératif de préserver la langue comme un tabernacle, de lui garantir un enseignement de qualité, de la faire évoluer sans lui porter atteinte, de conserver ses bizarreries, y compris orthographiques ou grammaticales, d’en faire notre territoire de l’esprit. Réfléchissons. Y a-t-il un autre élément qui nous réunisse avec une telle force ? Aucun.

Directsoir No. 650, mardi 24 novembre 2009, p. 2
This volume is designed to provide a clear, practical and comprehensive guide to the grammar of the French language. The principal aim of the book is to be both as complete and as straightforward as possible, avoiding much technical terminology that risks clouding the understanding of the linguistic processes of the French language. It provides a point of reference for any serious student or teacher who seeks information on the broad sweep of French grammar and its intricate detail, and who has already covered its basic structures. It hopes to provide an instrument for all those attracted by the study and mastery of French grammar by supplying close and detailed guidance on the numerous linguistic elements associated with pronunciation, alphabet, register or levels of language, gender, number, syntax, parts of speech, word order, use of verbs, and the varieties within each of these elements. Its ambition is to demonstrate that, although French is not identical in all places, any more than English retains an easy global homogeneity, it is a possible and desirable vehicle for foreign students of the language in communicating across frontiers and establishing a meaningful dialogue with numerous peoples who have inherited a fruitful and powerful method of expression.

All grammatical features are accompanied with a wealth of natural and attested examples. These examples are often presented in the feminine form. The text avoids sexist bias and reaches out to females and males alike.

Many of the chapters start with, or/and include within them, a small piece of French illustrating the function and use of the grammatical features under consideration. The relevant points are highlighted in bold. The creative skill of one of the authors (Dr. Malliga Saadi) comes into play here. Inevitably, there exists an artificial element in these pieces, but an elegant and relevant creativity is guaranteed.

It may be contended that some of the subsections in Part X, such as proper names or foreign and indigenous terms, do not correspond to grammatical structures, but it is considered that they would be of great usefulness in the articulation of these structures.

It should be emphasized that constant cross-referencing will help the reader gain a clear and more rounded picture of all the grammatical points. A few grammatical points are developed in two different chapters, so that there is here some very slight overlapping. Needless to add, treatment of the same feature is angled differently in these separate chapters.

American English takes precedence over British English. American spelling is preferred to its English counterpart but this should present no problem whatever to the non-American learner. Where there could be lexical misinterpretation, both American and British terms appear side by side.

Translations are sometimes provided for complete sentences, and occasionally for individual words, when the meaning is not clear. Otherwise,
no translation appears. Furnishing a maximum amount of information on the French language had to be weighed against the systematic inclusion of translations which would have reduced the available space. As far as the vocabulary goes, modern dictionaries carry out this function more than adequately.

The book contains a general glossary which will help in understanding any semi-technical grammatical expressions that may arise. Regular use of this glossary will assist in understanding the terms appearing in the text. It is so much easier to come to grips with the grammar of a foreign language if an insight is gained into the way in which even the English language functions.

The text also has a comprehensive index designed for locating any particular point of grammar.

The book is up-to-date. For instance, it contains a section on the problems of gender now that females are working in fields once inaccessible to them. Compound nouns, once unusual in French, except for just a few, are springing up like mushrooms, and the text pays serious attention to them.

Register differences are not ignored. A regular preoccupation is the variation in colloquial or spoken language, as opposed to the written word, and a simple system of R1, R2, R3 is used, designating colloquial, standard and elevated or literary language respectively. It should be borne in mind that the present grammar does not simply offer a presentation of the standard language but, much more, it attempts to examine the state of the French language, a quite different preoccupation. In other words, we are not merely concerned with perfect grammatical accuracy promoted by the purist but also with varieties of register which any serious student will encounter at every turn. Where there are colloquial constructions that are unacceptable to many, and which could be clearly incorrect, this is indicated by the R1 assignation.

One of the authors’ aims is to avoid the “dry as dust” mentality, so excoriated by Hemingway (this is his quote), that risks blighting so many grammars of whatever language, and alienating the student or teacher. Numerous references of a cultural, historical, literary, artistic, geographical, scientific and even biblical nature combine with a lighter touch involving play on words, humor, witticisms and a colorful range of expression intended to invest the work with an attractive, engaging and unique style. References are also made to other Romance languages (Italian and Spanish) to offer a more rounded, comprehensive picture. To some extent, it is grammar in context. Such an approach does not detract in any way from the intellectual rigor of the work. The aim is to combine the serious study of French grammar with an exploration of the way in which French speakers view the world and of their understanding and expression of certain values. As Alex Taylor says in his Bouche bée tout ouïe… ou comment tomber amoureux des langues (2010, pp. 234–235): “Si l’on veut que les gens
apprennent les langues, il faut cesser de les présenter comme une suite laborieuse de règles grammaticales… mais plutôt comme une façon de voir le monde, forgées par les expériences et les valeurs uniques de tous ceux qui les parlent.”

The study of grammar is not a sterile and disafflicting pursuit. It does not exist in a vacuum. Grammatical accuracy in French will provide an entry into a splendid and admirable culture and civilization, the study of which will lead to an enrichment and flowering of one’s personality. It is the hope and expectation of the authors that a firm and fluent command of French, and its grammar, will form part of a felicitous and fertile relationship between the worlds of English and French speakers.
Acknowledgments / Remerciements

An indispensable contribution to this volume was made by two French-speaking university colleagues whose willingness to be submitted to a merciless bombardment of questions is only equaled by their passion for the English language: Mme Anne-Marie Antonouris and M. Philippe Lanoë. The latter carries a splendid and unrivaled Astérix baggage.

One of the authors would also like to thank for the first time Helen Barton, commissioning editor, who has encouraged him unflaggingly over the years in his numerous ventures with Cambridge University Press. Finally, this volume has benefited immeasurably from the excellent contribution made by our copy editor, Leah Morin, whose splendid sense of accuracy and awareness of the intricacies of French grammar have provided the text with its final polish.