
The Noun Phrase

Introduction

14 A noun phrase always includes either

(a) a **noun** (e.g. *book, truth, elephants*), which may be accompanied by a determiner (see 23) and/or an adjective or adjectives, and/or an adjectival phrase (e.g. ‘a *coffee cup*’, ‘une tasse à *café*’) or adjectival clause (e.g. ‘the man *who came to dinner*’), or

(b) a **pronoun** (e.g. *I, him, these, mine, someone, nothing, themselves, who?*), some of which may (like nouns, but much less frequently) be accompanied by adjectival expressions, or

(c) a **noun-clause**, i.e. a clause fulfilling similar functions to a noun (e.g. ‘I believe *what he says*’ = more or less ‘I believe *his statement*’, ‘*that he is angry* distresses me’ = more or less ‘*his anger* (or *the fact of his anger*) distresses me’).

The functions of a noun phrase in a sentence, as far as English and French (but not necessarily other languages) are concerned, can be classified as follows (15–22). The noun phrase may be:

15 (i) The **subject**, e.g.:

The boy is reading a book
My friends work well
 When **his brother** was killed
 Where are **the books**?
These will never please him
 If **she** speaks French
It is raining
 Have **you** finished?

which in French would be:

Le garçon lit un livre
Mes amis travaillent bien
Quand son frère fut tué
Où sont les livres ?
Ceux-ci ne lui plairont jamais
Si elle parle français
Il pleut
Avez-vous fini ?

(In Latin, the subject was expressed by a form known as the *nominative* case, and the term is retained in some grammars with reference to English or French.)

16 (ii) The **complement of the subject**, after the verb ‘to be’ or another linking verb (see 518), e.g.:

He is a doctor	<i>Il est médecin</i>
It’s me!	<i>C’est moi !</i>
He became a soldier	<i>Il est devenu soldat</i>

17 (iii) The **direct object**, e.g.:

The boy is reading a book	<i>Le garçon lit un livre</i>
Do you know them ?	<i>Les connaissez-vous ?</i>

(In Latin, the direct object was expressed by the *accusative* case. Since both English and French have a distinct form of the personal pronouns (though not of nouns) to indicate the direct object – ‘I see **him**, je **le** vois, he sees **me**, il **me** voit’ – the use of the term ‘accusative case’ as it occurs in many grammars of English or French is defensible.)

Note that verbs that have a direct object are known as **transitive**

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verbs while those that do **not** have a direct object are known as **intransitive** verbs.

18 (iv) The **indirect object**, e.g.:

I am sending **my brother** a book (= ‘to my brother’)
He will give **you** it (= ‘to you’)

or, in French:

J’envoie un livre à mon frère
Il vous le donnera

Note that, except with personal pronouns, the indirect object in French always requires the preposition *à* ‘to’ (or occasionally *pour* ‘for’) (see 21).

(In Latin, the indirect object was expressed by the *dative* case. Since, in the case of the third person pronouns, French has distinct forms for the direct object (**le, la, les** ‘him, her, them’) and the indirect object (**lui**, ‘[to] him’, ‘[to] her’, **leur** ‘[to] them’) (see 198), the use of the term ‘dative case’ is defensible with reference to French.)

19 (v) The **genitive**, e.g.:

the lady’s book (= ‘the book of the lady’)
my brother’s children (= ‘the children of my brother’)

Note that in French, there is no genitive – the construction with *de* ‘of’ must be used (see 22) – so the equivalents of the above phrases are:

le livre de la dame
les enfants de mon frère

(Latin also had a *genitive* case. Our reason for retaining this term is that English nouns do have a special genitive form, viz. a form ending in ‘apostrophe s’ (**boy’s**) or in an apostrophe alone (**boys’**) (see 22).)

20 (vi) The **complement of a preposition**, e.g.

with his friends	<i>avec ses amis</i>
under the table	<i>sous la table</i>
without me	<i>sans moi</i>

The indirect object

21 English in certain circumstances expresses the indirect object (i.e. the person or – occasionally – thing to whom or for whom something is given, sent, lent, shown, told, bought, etc.) merely by using the appropriate noun or pronoun without any preposition, e.g.:

- (a) He gave John a present = He gave a present to John
- (b) How many letters have you sent your brother = to your brother?
- (c) He won't lend anyone his video-recorder = He won't lend his video-recorder to anyone
- (d) You'll have to show someone your passport = You'll have to show your passport to someone
- (e) He has bought his wife a car = He has bought a car for his wife.

This is not possible in French – the indirect object is always (except for personal pronouns, see 198) indicated by the preposition *à* 'to' (or, with some verbs, *pour* 'for'). So the equivalents of the above sentences are:

- (a) *Il donna un cadeau à Jean*
- (b) *Combien de lettres avez-vous envoyées à votre frère ?*
- (c) *Il ne veut prêter son magnétoscope à personne*
- (d) *Il vous faudra montrer votre passeport à quelqu'un*
- (e) *Il a acheté une voiture pour sa femme*

The possessive relationship

22 English often expresses a possessive relationship between two nouns by means of the 'genitive case' (see 19), i.e. by a form of the noun ending in 'apostrophe s' (*the boy's book* = 'the book of the boy', *the children's toys*, *Thomas's business*) or, in the case of some nouns (mainly plurals but also some personal names) ending in -s, by the apostrophe alone (*the boys' books* = 'the

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books of the boys', *Euripides' plays* = 'the plays of Euripides'). French has no such construction and expresses the possessive relationship by means of the preposition *de* 'of', e.g.:

<i>le père de Jean</i>	John's father = 'the father of John'
<i>la maison de mon ami</i>	my friend's house = 'the house of my friend'
<i>le livre du garçon</i>	the boy's book
<i>les jouets des enfants</i>	the children's toys
<i>le sommet de la colline</i>	the top of the hill

(For *du* = *de* + *le* and *des* = *de* + *les*, see 25,b.)

Similarly when the possessor is a pronoun:

<i>la maison de quelqu'un que je connais</i>	the house of someone I know
<i>Je n'aime pas cette robe, je préfère la couleur de la mienne</i>	I don't like this dress, I prefer the colour of mine
<i>Moi, je préfère la couleur de celle-ci (de celles-ci)</i>	I prefer the colour of this one (of these)

Note that English phrases in which a pronoun relating to the object possessed is omitted must be rendered in French by the construction *celui de . . .*, *ceux de*, etc. 'the one(s) of' (see section 245), e.g.:

<i>Ce jardin est plus grand que celui de Jean</i>	This garden is bigger than John's
<i>nos enfants et ceux de mon frère</i>	our children and my brother's

Determiners

23 French has a variety of forms that serve to introduce the noun, and which, in most cases, also indicate the gender and number of the noun. These are known as determiners. They are:

(i) the definite, indefinite and partitive articles (24–46), e.g. *le livre* 'the book', *une belle maison* 'a beautiful house', *du pain*

‘(some) bread’, *les enfants* ‘the children’, *des enfants* ‘(some) children’

(ii) the so-called ‘possessive adjectives’ (222–230), e.g. *mon chapeau* ‘my hat’, *leurs crayons* ‘their pencils’

(iii) the so-called ‘demonstrative adjectives’ (234–237), e.g. *cette maison* ‘this/that house’, *ces disques* ‘these/those records’

(iv) the relative determiner, *lequel* (as in *laquelle somme*) (270)

(v) the interrogative determiner, *quel* ? ‘which?’ (279)

(vi) the negative determiners, *aucun* (546) and *nul* (547)

(vii) various indefinites and quantifiers, viz. *certains* (294), *chaque* (295), *différents* and *divers* (297), *maint* (324,viii), *plusieurs* (331), *quelque(s)* (306), and *tout* (317)

(viii) the cardinal numerals (178).

Articles

Introduction

24 Whereas English (like many other languages) has only two articles, viz. the definite article *the* and the indefinite article *a, an*, French has three, viz. the definite, the indefinite and the partitive articles. The forms of the partitive article are identical with the construction ‘*de* + definite article’ (see 25,b,c). In none of the articles is there a distinction between masculine and feminine in the plural. The basic forms are:

	masc. sing.	fem. sing.	plur.
Definite article	<i>le</i>	<i>la</i>	<i>les</i>
Indefinite article	<i>un</i>	<i>une</i>	<i>des</i>
Partitive article	<i>du</i>	<i>de la</i>	<i>des</i>

Notes:

(a) for *l’* and *de l’*, see 25 and 3

(b) views differ as to whether (i) the indefinite article has no

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plural, or (ii) the partitive article has no plural, or (iii) the plural form *des* is both an indefinite and a partitive; in practice, it makes no difference which view we adopt; purely for convenience, we shall deal with it under the heading of the partitive.

Definite article

25 The definite article is:

masc. sing.	fem. sing.	plur.
<i>le</i>	<i>la</i>	<i>les</i>
<i>le livre, les livres</i>		the book, the books
<i>la porte, les portes</i>		the door, the doors

Before a vowel or ‘mute *h*’ (see 3), *le* and *la* become *l’*, e.g.:

<i>l’arbre</i> (m.), <i>l’homme</i> (m.)	the tree, the man
<i>l’autre maison</i> (f.), <i>l’heure</i> (f.)	the other house, the hour

Note, however, that an aspirate *h* (see 3,ii), though not pronounced, counts as a consonant and so is preceded by the full form of the article, i.e. *le* or *la*, e.g.:

<i>le hibou</i> , owl	<i>la honte</i> , shame
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Note too that:

(a) the preposition *à* combines with the articles *le* and *les* to give *au* and *aux* respectively, e.g.:

<i>au père, au hasard</i>	to the father, at random
<i>aux professeurs, aux enfants</i>	to the teachers, to the children

(b) the preposition *de* combines with the articles *le* and *les* to give *du* and *des* respectively, e.g.:

<i>le prix du billet</i>	the price of the ticket
<i>Il vient du port</i>	He’s coming from the harbour
<i>la fin des vacances</i>	the end of the holidays

(c) *à* and *de* do not combine with *la* and *l'*, e.g.:

<i>à la maison, à l'enfant</i>	at the house, to the child
<i>au sommet de la colline</i>	at the top of the hill
<i>à la fin de l'hiver</i>	at the end of (the) winter

Position of the definite article

26 As in English, the definite article usually comes at the beginning of a noun phrase, e.g. *le virage dangereux* 'the dangerous bend', *la petite maison* 'the little house'. However, it follows *tout* 'all, the whole' (see 317), e.g.:

<i>tout le comité</i>	the whole committee
<i>toute la journée</i>	all day (long), the whole day
<i>tous les enfants</i>	all the children

Article in English but not in French

27 Generally speaking, if a definite article is used in English there is likely to be one in the corresponding French construction also. There are, however, some exceptions to this. In particular:

(a) The article is regularly omitted in appositions such as the following, in which the apposition provides additional information about the head noun:

Alain-Fournier, auteur du « Grand Meaulnes »
Alain-Fournier, the author of *Le Grand Meaulnes*

Tolède, ancienne capitale de l'Espagne
Toledo, the former capital of Spain

If the article is used (*Alain-Fournier, l'auteur du « Grand Meaulnes »*; *Tolède, l'ancienne capitale de l'Espagne*), this serves to give greater prominence to the word or phrase in apposition.

(b) When read out in full, titles such as *François I^{er}, Élisabeth II, Pie XII* become *François premier, Élisabeth deux, Pie douze* (contrast 'Francis the First', 'Elizabeth the Second', 'Pius the Twelfth').

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Article required in French but not in English

28 (i) French uses the definite article with various categories of nouns used in a generic sense, including:

(a) abstract nouns, e.g.:

<i>La beauté n'est pas tout</i>	Beauty isn't everything
<i>Aimez-vous la musique ?</i>	Do you like music?
<i>Elle s'intéresse à l'art moderne</i>	She's interested in modern art

(b) names of languages, e.g.:

<i>Il apprend l'anglais</i>	He is learning English
<i>Comprenez-vous le russe ?</i>	Do you understand Russian?
<i>Le danois ressemble beaucoup au suédois</i>	Danish is very like Swedish

But the article is not usually used with the verb *parler*, e.g. *Parlez-vous français ?* 'Do you speak French?', *Il parle très bien anglais* 'He speaks English very well' (though the article also occurs, e.g. *Il parle l'allemand sans accent* 'He speaks German without an accent'), and never after *en*, e.g. *en français* 'in French', *en japonais* 'in Japanese'.

(c) nouns denoting substances, e.g.:

<i>L'or est un métal précieux</i>	Gold is a precious metal
<i>J'aime mieux le vin que la bière</i>	I prefer wine to beer

(d) plural nouns referring to a class, e.g.:

<i>Les insectes ont six pattes</i>	Insects have six legs
<i>Les magnétoscopes coûtent cher</i>	Video-recorders are expensive

Note, however, that in literary French the article is sometimes omitted in enumerations such as *Vieillards, hommes, femmes, enfants, tous voulaient me voir* (Montesquieu) 'Old people, men, women, children, they all wanted to see me', or when two nouns linked by *et* complement one another, e.g. *Patrons et ouvriers sont d'accord* 'Bosses and workers are in agreement'.

(ii) The article is used with words meaning 'last' or 'next' in expressions of time, e.g.:

<i>le mois (l'an) dernier</i>	}	last month (year)
<i>le mois (l'an) passé</i>		
<i>la semaine prochaine</i>		next week

and with the names of religious festivals, fasts, etc., such as *la Saint-Michel* ‘Michaelmas (Day)’, *la Saint-Jean* ‘St John’s Day, Midsummer Day’, *la Toussaint* ‘All Saints’ Day’ (in these examples the article is *la* because the full form is *la fête de saint-Michel*, etc.), *la Pentecôte* ‘Whitsun’, *le Carême* ‘Lent’, *la Pâque* ‘Passover’, *le Ramadan* ‘Ramadan’, etc. Note, however, that *Pâques* ‘Easter’ has no article (see also 72) and that the article is optional with *Noël* ‘Christmas’ (*à Noël*, *à la Noël* ‘at Christmas’).

(iii) Most titles followed by a proper name require the article, e.g.: *le président Kennedy* ‘President Kennedy’, *la reine Élisabeth* ‘Queen Elizabeth’, *le pape Léon XIII* ‘Pope Leo XIII’, *le capitaine Dreyfus* ‘Captain Dreyfus’, *le général de Gaulle* ‘General de Gaulle’, *le docteur Martin* ‘Dr Martin’, *le professeur Fouché* ‘Professor Fouché’, *la mère Thérèse* ‘Mother Teresa’. This does not apply to the titles *saint(e)* (e.g. *saint Paul*, *sainte Geneviève*), *Maître* (used with reference to certain members of the legal profession, e.g. *Maître Dupont* – note the capital *M*-), or the English title *lord* (no capital, e.g. *lord Salisbury*).

(iv) The definite article is sometimes used with an exclamatory value, similar to that of *quel* ‘what (a)’ (see 36, 279), e.g. *Oh! la belle fleur!* ‘Oh! what a beautiful flower!’

(v) The definite article is sometimes used when hailing or addressing people, as in La Fontaine’s *Passez votre chemin, la fille* ‘Continue on your way, girl’, or in the Communist anthem, *L’Internationale* (E. Pottier):

Debout! les damnés de la terre!
Debout! les forçats de la faim!

the equivalent of which in the English translation is ‘Arise, ye starvelings from your slumbers! Arise, ye criminals of want!’

29 (i) French uses the definite article where English uses the indefinite article:

(a) To express measures of quantity in relation to price, e.g. *quinze euros le mètre* ‘fifteen euros a metre’, *deux euros le kilo/la douzaine* ‘two euros a kilo/dozen’.

(b) After the verb *avoir* with nouns referring to parts of the body

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or mental faculties and followed by an adjective, e.g. *Il a le nez pointu* ‘He has a pointed nose’, *Il avait les lèvres gonflées* ‘He had swollen lips (His lips were swollen)’, *Elle a la mémoire fidèle* ‘She has a retentive memory’. But the indefinite article may also be used with reference to permanent or lasting features, e.g. *Il a un nez pointu et des yeux bleus* ‘He has a pointed nose and blue eyes’, and must be used if the adjective precedes the noun, e.g. *Il a un grand nez* ‘He has a big nose’, *Elle avait une très jolie voix et une excellente mémoire* ‘She had a very pretty voice and an excellent memory’.

(ii) In contexts in which articles of clothing or other items normally carried on one’s person are mentioned as part of the circumstances accompanying the action, the definite article is frequently used in French where English uses either ‘with’ and a possessive determiner, e.g.:

Il est entré dans la cuisine le chapeau sur la tête et la pipe à la bouche

He came into the kitchen with his hat on his head and his pipe in his mouth

or no determiner at all, e.g.:

Il courait le long de la rue la serviette à la main

He was running along the street briefcase in hand

For the use of the definite article in French where English uses the possessive determiner with reference to parts of the body, see 228–229.

30 The article is repeated with each of a series of nouns regarded as separate entities, e.g.:

J’ai mis le beurre et le fromage dans le frigo

I’ve put the butter and cheese in the fridge

Les Belges, les Hollandais et les Allemands s’y opposent

The Belgians, Dutch and Germans are opposed to it

but not when they are regarded as forming a single entity, e.g. *les ministres et secrétaires d’état* ‘the ministers and junior ministers’.

Geographical names

31 The definite article is used with most names of continents, countries, regions and rivers, e.g.:

(a) (masculine) *le Brésil* ‘Brazil’, *le Portugal*, *l’Anjou*, *le Périgord*, *le Transvaal*, *le Valais*, *le Yorkshire*, *le Danube*, *le Nil* ‘Nile’, *le Rhône*

(b) (feminine) *l’Afrique* ‘Africa’, *l’Europe*, *l’Égypte*, *la France*, *la Grande-Bretagne* ‘Great Britain’, *l’Andalousie* ‘Andalusia’, *la Bavière* ‘Bavaria’, *la Bohême* ‘Bohemia’, *la Moldavie* ‘Moldavia’, *la Normandie* ‘Normandy’, *la Sibérie* ‘Siberia’, *la Toscane* ‘Tuscany’, *la Seine*, *la Tamise* ‘Thames’

But it is not used:

(a) after the preposition *en* – see 656,ii,1

(b) with *Israël* (which was originally a personal name, that of the patriarch Jacob)

(c) with the names of the following islands (see 33) that are also countries: *Chypre* ‘Cyprus’, *Cuba*, *Malte* ‘Malta’ (all feminine).

32 There is some fluctuation in the use of the definite article with names of countries and regions after the preposition *de* ‘of, from’, but in general the following indications apply:

(a) with masculine singular names, the article is used, e.g.:

<i>Il revient du Portugal</i>	He’s coming back from Portugal
<i>la reine du Danemark</i>	the Queen of Denmark
<i>l’histoire du Japon</i>	the history of Japan
<i>l’ambassade du Brésil</i>	the Brazilian Embassy
<i>les vins du Languedoc</i>	Languedoc wines

(b) with feminine singular names, the article is not used when *de* means ‘from’ e.g.:

<i>Il revient de Grande-Bretagne</i>	He’s coming back from Britain
<i>Il arrive d’Espagne</i>	He’s arriving from Spain

and after certain nouns such as *roi* ‘king’, *reine* ‘queen’, *ambassade* ‘embassy’, *histoire* ‘history’, *vin* ‘wine’, e.g.:

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<i>le roi d'Angleterre</i>	the King of England
<i>l'histoire de France</i>	the history of France
<i>les vins d'Italie</i>	Italian wines
<i>l'ambassade de Suède</i>	the Swedish Embassy

But, on the other hand, note for example *l'histoire littéraire de la France* 'the literary history of France', *la géographie de la France* 'the geography of France', *le président de l'Italie* 'the President of Italy', *le nord de la France* 'the north of France', *la politique agricole de la Grande-Bretagne* 'Britain's agricultural policy'. The distinction seems to be that expressions like *le roi de . . .*, *les vins de . . .*, etc., in most cases go back to a period when the article was not normally used with names of countries ('France' was just *France*, not *la France*), while those that involve the use of the article are usually of more recent coinage.

(c) with plural names, masculine or feminine, the article is used (as it is in English), e.g.:

<i>l'ambassade des États-Unis</i>	the United States Embassy
<i>l'histoire des Pays-Bas</i>	the history of the Netherlands
<i>Il arrive des Philippines</i>	He's arriving from the Philippines

33 As a rule the definite article is not used with the names of towns and islands, e.g. *Londres* 'London', *New-York*, *Paris*, *Aurigny* 'Alderney', *Bornéo*, *Corfou* 'Corfu', *Guernesey* 'Guernsey', *Java*, *Jersey*, *Madagascar*, *Madère* 'Madeira', *Majorque* 'Majorca', *Sercq* 'Sark', *Taiwan*.

The principal exceptions to this rule are:

(a) a considerable number of towns in France, e.g. *Les Andelys*, *La Baule*, *Le Creusot*, *Le Havre*, *L'Isle-Adam*, *Le Mans*, *Le Puy*, *La Rochelle*

(b) a few foreign towns, e.g. *Le Caire* 'Cairo', *La Havane* 'Havana', *La Haye* 'the Hague', *La Mecque* 'Mecca', *La Nouvelle-Orléans* 'New Orleans'

(c) certain islands, some of which are also countries, e.g. *la Barbade* 'Barbados', *la Grande-Bretagne* 'Great Britain', *la Grenade* 'Grenada', *l'Irlande* 'Ireland', *l'Islande* 'Iceland', *la Jamaïque* 'Jamaica', *la Nouvelle-Zélande* 'New Zealand', *la Trinité* 'Trinidad', and some of which are not, e.g.: *la Corse* 'Corsica',

la Crète, la Guadeloupe, la Martinique, la Réunion, la Sardaigne ‘Sardinia’, *la Sicile* ‘Sicily’.

34 There is a certain amount of inconsistency in the use of *de* + definite article on the one hand and of *de* alone on the other, e.g.:

<i>le vent du nord, le vent du sud</i>	the north wind, the south wind
<i>l’armée de l’air</i>	the Air Force
<i>le mal de la route, le mal de l’air</i>	carsickness, airsickness
<i>l’office du tourisme</i>	tourist office (in some towns)

but, on the other hand:

<i>le vent d’est, le vent d’ouest</i>	the east wind, the west wind
<i>l’armée de terre, l’armée de mer</i>	the Army, the Navy
<i>le mal de mer</i>	seasickness
<i>l’office de tourisme</i>	tourist office (in other towns)

In general, however, if the prepositional phrase functions more or less as an adjectival phrase, *de* alone is likely to be used, e.g. *un vaisseau de guerre* ‘a warship’ (cf. *un vaisseau marchand* ‘a merchant ship’) but *le ministère de la Guerre* (= ‘the War Office’).

For similar inconsistencies in relation to place-names, see 32.

Indefinite article

35 The forms of the indefinite article in the singular are:

masc.	fem.
<i>un</i>	<i>une</i>

Its use corresponds broadly to that of the English indefinite article, ‘a, an’; see 36 to 39 for exceptions.

On the form *des* as the plural of the indefinite article, see 24, note b, and 40.

36 The indefinite article is not used in French:

(i) In apposition, e.g. *Son père, boucher de son état, est mort en 1950* ‘His father, a butcher by trade, died in 1950’.

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(ii) After *être* 'to be', *devenir* 'to become', *paraître* 'to appear', *sembler* 'to seem', and verbs such as *faire* 'to make', *nommer* 'to appoint', *élire* 'to elect', *croire* 'to believe' } when the noun that follows denotes nationality, profession, rank, family status or some other long-term situation in life,

e.g. *Le père était avocat. Son fils est devenu général pendant la guerre. Plus tard, il a été élu sénateur, et finalement de Gaulle l'a nommé ministre* 'The father was a barrister. His son became a general during the war. Later, he was elected a senator, and finally de Gaulle appointed him a minister'.

<i>Elle est Française</i>	She is a Frenchwoman
<i>Je vous croyais citoyen américain</i>	I thought you were an American citizen
<i>Il est grand-père</i>	He is a grandfather

But the article is inserted if the noun is qualified, e.g. *Son père était un avocat distingué* 'His father was a distinguished barrister'.

(iii) After *quel* (m.), *quelle* (f.) 'what a . . .!', e.g. *Quel homme intelligent!* 'What an intelligent man!', *Quelle famille!* 'What a family!'.

(iv) When the direct object of a verb in the negative is introduced by *pas de* (or, but much less usually, *point de*) (see 568), e.g.:

<i>Je n'ai pas de crayon</i>	I haven't got a pencil
<i>Il n'a pas acheté de voiture</i>	He didn't buy a car

(v) When the subject of the verb is preceded by *jamais* 'never', e.g. *Jamais enfant n'a été plus charmant* 'Never was a child more charming'.

(vi) In a number of miscellaneous expressions where the English equivalent has an indefinite article, e.g.:

<i>nombre de</i>	a number of
<i>C'est chose facile</i>	That's an easy thing (easily done)
<i>C'est mauvais signe</i>	That's a bad sign
<i>porter plainte contre</i>	to lodge a complaint against
<i>à grande/faible allure</i>	at a great/slow speed
<i>en lieu sûr</i>	in a safe place

37 French uses *par* where English uses the indefinite article in a distributive sense in such contexts as the following:

<i>trois fois par semaine</i>	three times a week
<i>gagner trois mille euros par mois</i>	to earn three thousand euros a month
<i>dix euros par personne</i>	ten euros a head (per person)

Le son . . . se propage à une vitesse de 340 mètres par seconde
(*Petit Larousse*)

Sound travels at 340 metres a second

Note, however, the constructions *une fois tous les trois mois* ‘once every three months’, *rouler à cent kilomètres à l’heure* ‘to travel at a hundred kilometres an hour’.

38 French makes considerable use of adverbial expressions of the type preposition + noun, e.g. *par hasard* ‘by chance’, *en hâte* ‘speedily’, *avec soin* ‘with care, carefully’, *avec patience* ‘with patience, patiently’, *sans difficulté* ‘without difficulty’, *sans enthousiasme* ‘without enthusiasm, unenthusiastically’. In appropriate contexts, the noun may be modified by the adjective *grand*, e.g. *en grande hâte*, *avec grand soin*, *sans grande difficulté*. Nouns introduced by *sans* are also sometimes modified by other adjectives, e.g. *sans raison valable* ‘without good reason’, *sans difficulté excessive* ‘without inordinate difficulty’. Otherwise, if the noun is modified by an adjective, the indefinite article is introduced, e.g. *par un hasard malheureux* ‘by an unfortunate chance’, *avec un soin particulier* ‘with special care’, *avec une patience admirable* ‘with admirable patience’.

39 The indefinite article is repeated with each of two nouns linked by *et* ‘and’ or *ou* ‘or’, e.g.:

Il a cassé une tasse et une soucoupe
He broke a cup and saucer
Je sais qu’il a un fils ou une fille
I know he has a son or daughter

Likewise with a series of three or more nouns:

Vous trouverez sur la table un stylo, un crayon et une règle
You’ll find a pen, pencil and ruler on the table

Partitive article

40 The forms of the partitive article are:

masc. sing.	fem. sing.	plural
<i>du, de l'</i>	<i>de la, de l'</i>	<i>des</i>

The form *de l'* is used instead of *du* or *de la* before a vowel or a mute *h* (cf. 25, notes b and c), e.g. *du pain* 'bread', *de la viande* 'meat', but *de l'or* (m.) 'gold', *de l'eau* (f.) 'water'.

The form *des* can also be considered as the plural of the indefinite article (see 24, note b).

41 English has no partitive article and no plural of the indefinite article, and nouns taking either of these forms in French often stand alone in English, e.g.:

<i>Il boit de la bière</i>	He's drinking beer
<i>Elle a des cousins au Canada</i>	She has cousins in Canada

Not infrequently, however, English uses 'some' or 'any' where French has a partitive article, e.g.:

<i>Il y a du pain sur la table</i>	There's (some) bread on the table
<i>Il a acheté des biscuits</i>	He bought (some) biscuits
<i>Voulez-vous du vin ?</i>	Do you want (some/any) wine?
<i>S'il y a de l'eau chaude, je vais prendre un bain</i>	If there's any hot water, I'll have a bath

42 The distinction between these and the definite article (which can also be used when English has no article, see 28) is that the definite article indicates that the noun is being used in a general sense whereas the partitive article refers to only a part of the whole (and, likewise, the plural indefinite article indicates 'some' as opposed to 'all' members of a class), e.g.:

<i>J'aime le café</i>	I like coffee (in general)
<i>J'aimerais du café</i>	I'd like (some) coffee
<i>Je bois du café</i>	I'm drinking coffee
<i>Les moutons ont quatre pattes</i>	Sheep have four legs

<i>Il y a des moutons dans le champ</i>	There are (some) sheep in the field
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43 After (*ne . . .*) *pas* or *point* ‘not’, *guère* ‘scarcely, hardly’, *jamais* ‘never’, *plus* ‘no longer, no more’, the partitive article is normally replaced by *de* alone (see 568 – but see also 569–570), e.g.:

<i>Je ne veux pas de fromage</i>	I don’t want (any) cheese
<i>Je n’ai pas acheté de pain</i>	I haven’t bought any bread
<i>Ils n’ont guère d’argent</i>	They have hardly any money
<i>Vous ne buvez jamais de bière ?</i>	Don’t you ever drink beer?
<i>Nous ne mangeons plus d’œufs</i>	We don’t eat eggs any more

Note that this does not apply to *ne . . . que* ‘only’ which is not negative but restrictive in sense, e.g.:

<i>Il n’achète que du vin</i>	He only buys wine
<i>Nous n’avons que des cerises</i>	We only have cherries

44 The plural partitive (or indefinite) article *des* is replaced by *de* when an adjective precedes the noun, e.g.:

<i>Il nous a dit d’affreux mensonges</i>	He told us (some) dreadful lies
<i>Vous avez de belles fleurs dans votre jardin</i>	You have (some) beautiful flowers in your garden

This does not apply when adjective and noun are virtually combined, expressing one idea, e.g. *des jeunes gens* ‘youths, young men’, *des petits pains* ‘rolls’, *des petits pois* ‘peas’. The rule is often ignored elsewhere, especially in speech, e.g. *des vieilles chansons* ‘old songs’, *des petits yeux* ‘small eyes’. A similar rule used to apply in the singular (*de bon vin* ‘good wine’, *de belle musique* ‘beautiful music’), but nowadays it has virtually ceased to apply, in writing as well as in speech, e.g. *du bon vin*, *de la belle musique*.

45 The partitive article is not used after *de*, in the following circumstances in particular:

(a) after expressions of quantity such as:

36 The noun phrase 45

assez, enough
autant, as much, as many
beaucoup, much, many, a lot of
combien? how much? how many?
moins, less
peu, little, few
un peu, a little
plus, more
tant, as much, so much, as many, so many
trop, too much, too many

e.g. *assez de pain* 'enough bread', *J'ai autant de problèmes que vous* 'I have as many problems as you (have)', *beaucoup de difficulté* 'much (a lot of) difficulty', *beaucoup de gens* 'many (a lot of) people', *combien de fois ?* 'how many times?', *peu de difficulté* 'little difficulty', *un peu de difficulté* 'a little (= some) difficulty', *trop de temps* 'too much time'.

Similarly after nouns expressing quantity, e.g.:

<i>une bouteille de vin</i>	a bottle of wine
<i>un kilo de viande</i>	a kilo of meat
<i>l'absence de témoins</i>	the absence of witnesses
<i>son manque d'intelligence</i>	his lack of intelligence
<i>un certain nombre de personnes</i>	a certain number of people
<i>une tranche de jambon</i>	a slice of ham

(b) when *de* means 'with' or 'by' after one of the verbs listed in 526 (which see for further examples), e.g.:

<i>Nous étions entourés d'ennemis</i>	We were surrounded by enemies
<i>Il me comble d'amitié</i>	He overwhelms me with friendship
<i>couronné de succès</i>	crowned with success
<i>couvert de boue</i>	covered with mud
<i>rempli de sable</i>	filled with sand

(c) after certain adjectives, e.g.:

<i>Le verre est plein d'eau</i>	The glass is full of water
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La place était vide de passants
 The square was empty of passers-by
dépourvu d'intelligence
 devoid of intelligence

But if *de* is followed by a definite article, then it combines with it in the normal way (see 25,b), e.g.:

La boîte est pleine du sable que j'ai rapporté de la plage
 The box is full of the sand that I brought back from the beach
Beaucoup des timbres qu'il a achetés sont sans valeur
 Many of the stamps he bought are worthless

In these examples, *pleine du sable* = *pleine de* 'full of' + *le sable* 'the sand' (so not 'full of sand'), and *beaucoup des timbres* = *beaucoup de* 'many of' + *les timbres* 'the stamps' (so not 'many stamps').

46 The partitive article can, however, be used after prepositions other than *de*, e.g.:

Il m'a écrit sur du papier à en-tête
 He wrote to me on headed paper
On le fait avec de la farine
 You make it with flour
Il l'a pris pour de l'or
 He thought it was gold (*lit.* He took it for gold)
Il réfléchit à des problèmes graves
 He is thinking about some serious problems
Nous allons passer par des chemins dangereux
 We are going to travel by dangerous roads

Note, however, the existence of numerous expressions of the type preposition + noun, including:

(a) *à* indicating either purpose, e.g. *une cuiller à café* 'a coffee spoon', *un verre à vin* 'a wineglass', or a characteristic feature, e.g. *un verre à pied* 'a stemmed glass', *une bête à fourrure* 'an animal with fur', *une chemise à rayures vertes* 'a shirt with green stripes'

(b) *avec* with an abstract noun forming an adverbial expression,

38 The noun phrase 46–47

e.g. *avec difficulté* ‘with difficulty’, *avec patience* ‘with patience, patiently’ (but *avec du sucre* ‘with sugar’, etc.)

(c) *en*, especially with abstract nouns, e.g. *être en colère* ‘to be angry’, *en guerre* ‘at war’, *en réparation* ‘under repair’, *en théorie* ‘in theory’, or to indicate the substance that something is made of, e.g. *une cuiller en bois* ‘a wooden spoon’, *une jupe en laine* ‘a woollen skirt’, *une statue en bronze* ‘a bronze statue’

(d) *sans*, e.g. *sans arrêt* ‘ceaselessly’, *sans difficulté* ‘without difficulty’, *sans délai* ‘without delay’, *une robe sans manches* ‘a sleeveless dress’, *sans sucre* ‘without sugar’

(e) a number of fixed expressions involving other prepositions, e.g. *par pitié* ‘through pity’, *sous verre* ‘under glass’, *fait sur commande* ‘made to order’.

Gender

Introduction

47 Although the two grammatical genders of French are referred to by the terms ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’, in the case of most (though not all) words these terms are utterly meaningless and, were it not for the fact that they are so well established, we might do better to abandon them altogether and use some such terms as ‘class A’ and ‘class B’. It is impossible to give simple – or, indeed, complicated – rules that will enable learners to determine the gender of each and every noun they come across. However, it is possible to draw up certain categories of words that are likely to be of one gender rather than the other. In particular:

- (1) Words standing for male or female human beings are likely to be masculine or feminine respectively – but not necessarily so (see 48). (For animals, see 49.)
- (2) Words falling into certain other categories depending on their meaning are likely to be of one gender rather than the other even though, in this case, sex is not a relevant factor (see 50–52).
- (3) Words with certain endings are likely to be of one gender rather than the other (see 53–55); in most cases, not only sex (as in 1 above) but meaning in general (as in 2 above) is irrelevant.
- (4) Special rules apply to compound nouns (see 57–63).