

# French is a very fragile language, or at least it seems so from the stories I hear

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February 22, 2021



Raymond Chen

From anecdotal evidence, French is a very fragile language: The slightest deviation in grammar or pronunciation renders the language utterly incomprehensible.

Example 1: The wife of my friend the rocket scientist studied French in school and loved all things French. He agreed to go on a bicycle tour of France with her. (This is known in the business as being a good husband.)

As they cycled past a small town, they spotted an ice cream stand. My friend was volunteered to be the one to buy the ice cream. He approached the woman and said, “Une vanille et une chocolat, s’il vous plaît.”

The women sternly reprimanded him with a pointed finger. “Ce n’est pas français.” (“That’s not French.”)

My friend collected his thoughts and gave it another try. “Une vanille et une chocolat, s’il vous plaît.”

The woman gave the same reply. “Ce n’est pas français.”

He returned to his wife, who had been observing the transaction from afar. She asked, “What did you say to her? ... And what did she say? ... That should have worked. Let me try.”

His wife approached the woman and said, “Une de vanille et une de chocolat, s’il vous plaît.”

The woman looked right at my friend and punctuated her statement with an accusatory finger: “Une de vanille et une de chocolat!”

Example 2: One of my friends grew up in the English-speaking portion of Canada but learned French as part of the standard academic curriculum. During a trip to France, he got caught in an unexpected downpour and found a shop that had umbrellas. He went to the lady at the desk and asked to buy a “parapluie” (umbrella).

The woman could not understand what it was he wanted to buy.

He repeated his offer to buy a “parapluie“.

Once again, the woman did not understand what it was he wanted. My friend left the shop empty-handed.

My friend later checked his pronunciation with some native French speakers. Apparently, he did not pronounce the second “p” with a strong enough puff of air. This tiny mistake rendered the word completely incomprehensible. The contextual clues of a rainstorm were apparently of no use whatsoever.

Example 3: One of my friends grew up as a native French speaker in Canada<sup>1</sup> (though he is now a United States citizen). He was on vacation in France and observed at the next table some Japanese tourists trying desperately to place their order in French. They consulted their phrase book and did their best to ask for some water. “Eeeoooouuuuu?” Unfortunately, Japanese vowels and French vowels do not line up perfectly, and the waiter professed that he was completely unable to understand what they were trying to say.

Example 4: One of my colleagues went to school in Montreal, so he speaks French reasonably well. He was at a restaurant in France, and he asked to see the wine list, “la liste des vins.“

The waiter was perplexed and replied in French that he didn’t understand what my friend said.

My colleague repeated his request to see “la liste de vin,” and the waiter once again apologized in the most polite terms possible for his inability to derive any comprehensible meaning from the seemingly random stream of syllables emanating from my colleague’s mouth.

My colleague rephrased his request, asking to see, you know, the piece of paper that enumerates all the wines available for purchase so that it may be consumed in conjunction with the meal.

And then a grand epiphany struck the waiter, and he dramatically announced, “Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh. La carte des vins!“

My conclusion from these stories is that French is a very fragile language.

The Académie Française is the organization in France which is vested with official authority for matters relating to the French language. It was formally established on February 22, 1635. Happy birthday, Académie Française. Maybe you can work on making your language a little less fragile.

<sup>1</sup> He tells me that as a child, he learned English by watching *He Man and the Masters of the Universe*.

Raymond Chen

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