

Unit 26 - Qualificative adjectives

1 Definitions

Adjectives are words that give information about a noun. Most often adjectives indicate a quality possessed by a noun, and these are called **qualificative adjectives**. The remaining adjectives give information about the scope of reference of a noun, and these fall under the category of **determiners** (see 6:2).

2 Agreements

2.1 Adjectives must agree in number and in gender with the noun(s) to which they refer.

2.1.1 If there are two nouns of differing gender, the adjective used must be masculine plural :

Des hommes et des femmes **importants**
Important men and women

2.1.2 If there are two nouns in the singular, the adjective used must be in the plural :

Un homme et une femme **importants**
An important man and woman

2.1.3 When a plural noun is modified by more than one adjective, the rule is as follows. If the meaning is such that there is only one noun for each adjective, then each adjective is singular :

Les économies **française et britannique**
The French and British economies

2.1.4 But if the meaning is such that there is more than one noun for each adjective, then each adjective is plural :

Les différentes compagnies **françaises et britanniques** représentées au salon
The various French and British companies represented at the fair

2.2 Generally adjectives take an *-e* in the feminine and an *-s* in the plural. Adjectives which already end with an *-e* or *-s* remain unchanged in the singular and plural respectively :

un homme **maigre** - une femme **maigre**
un plafond **bas** - des plafonds **bas**

Many adjectives have irregular feminine and plural forms. Some follow distinct patterns of inflection :

<i>masc sing</i>	<i>masc plural</i>	<i>fem sing</i>	<i>fem plural</i>
-al	-aux	-ale	-ales
-as	-as	-asse	-asses
-c	-cs	-que	-ques
-eau	-eaux	-elle	-elles
-el	-els	-elle	-elles
-en	-ens	-enne	-ennes
-er	-ers	-ère	-ères
-eux	-eux	-euse	-euses
-f	-fs	-ve	-ves
-gu	-gus	-guë	-guës

UNIT 26 - QUALIFICATIVE ADJECTIVES

un projet gouvernemental <i>a government project</i>	des projets gouvernementaux <i>government projects</i>
une conférence internationale <i>an international conference</i>	des mesures internationales <i>international measures</i>
du foie gras <i>foie gras</i>	des matières grasses <i>fat (content)</i>
les services publics <i>public services</i>	une offre publique d'achat <i>a takeover bid</i>
des frères jumeaux <i>twin brothers</i>	des soeurs jumelles <i>twin sisters</i>
des motifs personnels <i>personal motives</i>	des méthodes traditionnelles <i>traditional methods</i>
un organisme européen <i>a European body</i>	une société européenne <i>a European company</i>
des appareils ménagers <i>household appliances</i>	des tâches ménagères <i>household jobs</i>
un choix malheureux <i>an unfortunate choice</i>	une coïncidence malheureuse <i>an unfortunate coincidence</i>
des moyens primitifs <i>primitive means</i>	des méthodes primitives <i>primitive methods</i>
un sens ambigu <i>an ambiguous meaning</i>	des idées ambiguës <i>ambiguous ideas</i>

However, some adjectives do not follow any of these patterns :

banal - banals (<i>pl</i>)	fatal - fatals (<i>pl</i>)	long - longue (<i>f</i>)
blanc - blanche (<i>f</i>)	faux - fausse (<i>f</i>)	naval - navals (<i>pl</i>)
bref - brève (<i>f</i>)	favori - favorite (<i>f</i>)	net - nette (<i>f</i>)
créateur - créatrice (<i>f</i>)	flatteur - flatteuse (<i>f</i>)	roux - rousse (<i>f</i>)
complet - complète (<i>f</i>)	fou - folle (<i>f</i>)	sec – sèche (<i>f</i>)
doux - douce (<i>f</i>)	frais – fraîche (<i>f</i>)	royal - royale - royaux (<i>mpl</i>) royales (<i>fpl</i>)
épais - épaisse (<i>f</i>)	grec - grecque (<i>f</i>)	vieux - vieille - vieux (<i>mpl</i>) - vieilles (<i>fpl</i>)

2.3 Note that some adjectives have special masculine forms ending in *-l* which are used before a vowel or an unaspirated *h* :

Un beau quartier *but* un **bel** animal
 Un nouveau rapport *but* un **nouvel** organisme
 Un vieux professeur *but* un **vieil** homme

2.4 Note that some adjectives are invariable :

2.4.1 **Nouns** used as adjectives of colour (**except** *rose*) :

des cheveux **marron**, des chaussures **orange**
brown hair, orange shoes

2.4.2 Adjectives of colours that are qualified by a noun or adjective :

une chaise **vert olive**, des yeux **bleu clair**
an olive-green chair, light blue eyes

UNIT 26 - QUALIFICATIVE ADJECTIVES

2.4.3 *Demi, nu, ci-joint* and *ci-inclus* when placed before the noun to which they refer :

Une **demi**-bouteille Il jouait **nu**-pieds

A half-bottle He was playing barefoot

Veillez trouver **ci-joint** la documentation que vous avez demandée

Pleased find enclosed the documents you asked for

2.4.4 When using the expression *avoir l'air*, the agreement is made with the subject :

La maison a l'air mal **entretenu** - *The house looks run down*

However, when the subject is a person, then the agreement can be either with the subject or the noun *air* :

Elle n'a pas l'air très **content** / **contente** - *She doesn't look very happy*

2.4.5 The adjectives *chic, plusieurs, snob, and kaki*.

3 Placement

Adjectives can be used in two different ways, **attributively** and **predicatively** : an **attributive adjective** is one which qualifies a noun within the same noun phrase, as in *un chapeau rouge* ; a **predicative adjective** is one which is linked to a head noun by a verb, as in *le chapeau est rouge*.

3.1 Most attributive adjectives are placed after the noun which they modify. However, a substantial number of commonly used adjectives are usually placed before the noun :

autre	double	joli	petit
beau	excellent	long	plusieurs
bon	grand	mauvais	prochain
chaque	gros	méchant	quelque
court	haut	meilleur	tel
demi	jeune	nouveau	vieux

- *Prochain* and *dernier* come after the noun in the case of *semaine, mois* and *année*.
Le mois **dernier** - *Last month*
- All ordinal numbers such as *deuxième* and *troisième* come before the noun :
La **deuxième** fois - *The second time*
- An exception to this is in titles of kings etc. :
Henri **I** (say "Henri premier") Henri **II** (say "Henri deux")
- Some adjectives of appreciation such as *magnifique, splendide, affreux* and *horrible* can be placed before or after the noun, but have a greater expressive force when placed before the noun.
- The adjective *new* is usually translated *nouveau / nouvelle* (coming before the noun - *une nouvelle politique*) but in the sense of *brand new* is translated *neuf / neuve* (coming after the noun - *une voiture neuve*).

UNIT 26 - QUALIFICATIVE ADJECTIVES

3.2 Some adjectives have a different meaning according to whether they are placed before or after the noun :

l' ancien premier ministre <i>the former prime minister</i>	une église ancienne <i>an old church</i>
un brave homme <i>a kind man</i>	un homme brave <i>a courageous man</i>
certaines personnes <i>Some people</i>	une idée certaine <i>a definite idea</i>
un cher ami <i>a dear friend</i>	une montre chère <i>an expensive watch</i>
une curieuse idée <i>a strange idea</i>	un regard curieux <i>an inquisitive look</i>
une pure coïncidence <i>a pure coincidence</i>	de l'or pur <i>pure gold</i>
une histoire drôle <i>a funny story</i>	un drôle d'air <i>a strange expression</i>
un gros problème <i>a major problem</i>	un homme gros <i>a fat man</i>
un grand artiste <i>a great artist</i>	un homme grand <i>a tall man</i>
sa propre voiture <i>his own car</i>	une maison propre <i>a clean house</i>
Pauvre Marie ! <i>Poor Marie !</i>	une famille pauvre <i>A poor family</i>
un de ses rares plaisirs <i>one of his few pleasures</i>	un oiseau rare <i>a rare bird</i>
un visage sérieux <i>a serious face</i>	une entreprise / fille sérieuse <i>a reliable company / a responsible girl</i>
un vrai problème <i>a serious problem</i>	une histoire vraie <i>a true story</i>

4 Adjectival nouns

Adjectives in French adapt very easily to use as nouns, in which case they are called **adjectival nouns**. Most commonly these refer back to nouns already mentioned.

Je préfère les rouges aux jaunes - *I prefer the red ones to the yellow ones*

They do not always have to refer back to specific nouns, however. They can be used with *les* to refer to categories of people, such as *les jeunes* (young people) or *les méchants* (the bad guys). They can also be used with *le* to express abstract concepts, as in *le beau* (beauty). Also falling into this latter category is the following construction, particularly common in spoken French :

Le + [adjectival noun], c'est de faire / c'est que + subjunctive

For example :

L'essentiel, c'est d'arriver à l'heure / c'est que personne n'ait été blessé
The main thing is to arrive on time / is that no-one has been hurt