

Unit 27 - Articles (1) - use of articles

1 Definitions

The **articles** are words such as *le* or *une* used before a noun to give information about its scope of reference (i.e. whether the noun referred to is specific or non-specific, a part or whole of a category, and so on). In French there are 3 types of article :

- **Indefinite article** : Singular *un, une*, plural *des*
- **Definite article** : Singular *le, la* (*de + le* contracts to *du*, *à + le* to *au*)
Plural *les* (*de + les* contracts to *des*, *à + les* to *aux*)
- **Partitive article** : *du, de l', de la*, no plural

2 The definite article *le, la, les*

2.1 Principal uses

The definite article in French has two main uses :

2.1.1 Equivalent of English *the*, making it clear that the noun refers to a particular thing. For example :

Les jeunes gens interrogés se sont dits prêts à accepter des heures de travail plus flexibles

The young people interviewed said they were prepared to accept more flexible working hours

2.1.2 It shows that the noun is being used in a general sense to mean the whole of its class or type. English generally **does not use the** in this context, but instead the **zero article** (∅), i.e. no article at all. For example :

Les jeunes gens sont souvent prêts à accepter des conditions de travail plus flexibles

(∅) *Young people are often prepared to accept more flexible working hours*

2.2 Use before names of languages

The definite article is present before names of languages :

Le français est une langue difficile - *French is a difficult language*

Je connais bien **le** russe - *I have a good knowledge of Russian*

But after the verb *parler* there is no article unless there is an adverb between *parler* and the language :

Je parle français - *I speak French*

Je ne parle pas **le** français - *I don't speak French*

Je parle couramment **le** français - *I speak French fluently*

2.3 Use before ranks and titles

The definite article is used before ranks and titles :

la reine Elisabeth, **le** cardinal Richelieu, **le** docteur Finlay, **le** père Ryan

Queen Elizabeth, Cardinal Richelieu, Doctor Finlay, Father Ryan

An **exception** is made after the religious titles *mère, frère* and *soeur* :

mère Teresa, frère Jacques - *Mother Theresa, Brother Jacques*

2.4 Before geographical names

2.4.1 The definite article is normally used with names of continents, countries, mountains, rivers etc. :

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l'Afrique, la France, le Mont Blanc, la Tamise
Africa, France, Mont Blanc, the Thames

2.4.2 When in English the prepositions *to, from, in* are used, the rules are as follows :

- With feminine singular names, *to* or *in* are translated by *en*, and *from* is translated by *de*. No article is present. E.g. *aller, demeurer en France, revenir de France*.
- With masculine or plural names, *to* or *in* are translated by *à*, and *from* is translated by *de*. An article is always present. E.g. *aller, demeurer au Canada, revenir du Canada*.

2.4.3 Note that in titles, or other expressions where the name of a country etc. has the function of an adjective, *de* alone is used :

la Banque **d'**Angleterre, le roi **de** France, les vins **d'**Australie
the Bank of England, the King of France, the wines of Australia

But when one is focusing on the political or geographical aspects of a country etc., *de* plus the definite article is used :

Manchester se situe dans l'une des plus grandes régions industrielles **de l'**Angleterre
Manchester is situated in one of England's biggest industrial regions

2.4.4 Towns do not have a definite article (*Je vais à Paris*) unless they are qualified by an adjective (*le Paris moderne*) or an article is part of the name as with *Le Havre, Le Mans, Le Caire (Cairo), Le Cap (Cape Town)*. Where the article is masculine, there is the usual contraction of *à / de* with the *le* - *Je vais **au** Havre*).

2.5 Use in times and dates

2.5.1 The definite article is used before days of the week for **habitual** actions :

J'y vais **le** samedi mais non **le** lundi
I go on Saturdays but not on Mondays

but not for **specific** actions :

J'y vais samedi mais non lundi
I'm going on Saturday but not on Monday

2.5.2 The definite article is used before a number of expressions of time :
in times of the day or the year :

le soir = *in the evening* (**but** jeudi soir = *on Thursday evening*)
la semaine dernière = *last week*
le mois prochain = *next month*

and in dates :

Nous sommes arrivés **le** 1er octobre
We arrived on 1st October
Nous sommes arrivés lundi **le** 1er octobre / **le** lundi 1er octobre
We arrived on Monday 1st October

2.5.3 The definite article is normally used before names of seasons, which are all masculine nouns. Note, however, *au printemps, en été, en automne, en hiver*.

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2.6 Musical instruments, sport etc

- 2.6.1 When expressing the idea of playing a musical instrument, French uses the verb *jouer* with the preposition *de* plus the definite article. English, by contrast, uses the definite article without a preposition :

jouer **du** piano - *to play **the** piano*

- 2.6.2 When expressing the idea of playing a sport or game, French uses the verb *jouer* with the preposition *à* plus the definite article. English, by contrast, has no article or preposition :

jouer **au** football / **aux** échecs - *to play (**ø**) football / chess*

When *jouer* is used in the sense of putting on an act it is often followed by a plural noun, where English would use a singular noun or an adjective :

jouer **les** imbéciles / **les** innocents / **les** héros - *to play dumb / innocent / the hero*

2.7 Use with parts of the body

The definite article is used before nouns referring to parts of the body in the following cases :

- 2.7.1 When it is clear from the context that the subject is the possessor of the part of the body :

Elle ferma **les** yeux pour mieux se concentrer

*She closed **her** eyes to concentrate better*

Elle marchait **les** yeux fermés

*She was walking with **her** eyes shut*

Il se tenait debout, les mains dans **les** poches

*He was standing with **his** hands in his pocket*

- 2.7.2 When the possessor is indicated by means of a pronominal (reflexive) verb. Pronominal verbs are used when indicating action done to one's own body :

Je me suis lavé **les** dents avant d'aller me coucher

*I brushed **my** teeth before going to bed*

- 2.7.3 When the possessor is indicated by means of an indirect object. This is used when indicating action done to another person :

Accidentellement, je **lui** ai marché sur le pied

*I accidentally stood on **his** / **her** foot*

Note, however, that the definite article (or an indirect object) is not so used if the part of the body is qualified by an adjective :

Accidentellement, j'ai marché sur **son** pied blessé

*I accidentally stood on **his** / **her** injured foot*

- 2.7.4 (With the preposition *à*) : to convey a more or less permanent characteristic by which a person or thing may be recognized :

L'homme **à la** moustache noire

The man with the black moustache

La maison **aux** volets verts

The house with green shutters

2.8 Words beginning with H

Remember *l'* is used in front of an **unaspirated H** (that is where H is treated like a vowel) : *l'heure, l'histoire* etc. But *le, la* is used in front of an **aspirated H** (where H is pronounced as in English, only without an audible release of breath) : *la hache*

3 The indefinite article *un, une, des*

3.1 Singular : *un, une*

- 3.1.1 *Un, une* are generally used in the same way as their English equivalents *a, an* : they refer to an item in a category that has not been specified. Take, for example, the following sentences :

Il faut choisir **un** jour où Marie est disponible
*We must choose **a** day when Marie is available*
 Va lui chercher une chaise de l'autre salle
Go and get him / her a chair from the other room

In the first example the indefinite article indicates to the reader that the day in question is not a specific day, but any day when Marie is available; and in the second it indicates that the chair in question any chair that is in the other room.

- 3.1.2 The indefinite article can also be used to refer to specific items that are qualified by a describing word or phrase. For example :

C'était **une** journée mouvementée
*It was **an** eventful day*
 C'est **une** chaise ancienne
*It's **an** antique chair*

- 3.1.3 The indefinite article is used when referring to a noun in a general sense to mean the whole of its class or type (it is often interchangeable with the definite article - see 2.1.2 above) :

Une jeune personne est souvent prête à accepter des conditions de travail plus flexibles
A young person is often prepared to accept more flexible working hours

- 3.1.4 French also uses *un, une* when an abstract noun is qualified by an adjective, and where English would often use the zero article :

Elle a fait preuve d'**un** courage extraordinaire
*She showed **(ø)** extraordinary courage*
 C'est une ville d'**une** beauté étonnante
*It's a town of **(ø)** astonishing beauty*

3.2 *Des*

Des is the plural form of the indefinite article :

Le 12 est **un** jour où Marie est disponible
*The 12th is **a** day when Marie is available*
 Le 12 et le 15 sont **des** jours où Marie est disponible
*The 12th and the 15th are **(ø)** days when Marie is available*

3.3 *Des v les*

- 3.3.1 Given that *des* and *les* can both be translated by no article in English, it can be confusing for English speakers to know which to use. Often it is possible to transfer a given phrase into the singular (if it would take *un*, then it is indefinite) or else to imagine the "zero" article in English being replaced by *some*. For example :

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They're (*some*) filterless cigarettes (**singular** : *It's **a** filterless cigarette*)
*Ce sont **des** cigarettes sans filtre*

This might be compared with the sentence *Ce sont **les** cigarettes sans filtre qui nuisent le plus à la santé* which clearly refers to cigarettes in general.

- 3.3.2 Sometimes, however, these devices are not conclusive, and it is necessary to work out the exact nature of the zero article's scope of reference. For example :

The Government has taken measures aimed at training (**Ø**) young people better
*Le gouvernement a pris des mesures destinées à mieux former **les** jeunes gens*
According to the Minister, the measures would help produce (**Ø**) well-trained young people
*Selon le ministre, les mesures permettraient d'engendrer **des** jeunes gens bien formés*

The *les* in the first sentence is used because the *young people* refers to the whole of its class, i.e. "young people in general", the use of the definite article set out in 2.1.2 above. The *des* in the second sentence is used because the *young people* refers to an unspecified part of its class rather than the whole, i.e. "some well-trained young people".

4 The partitive article *du, de la*

- 4.1 The partitive article *du, de la* (both forms contracted to *de l'* in front of a vowel) is used before nouns that cannot be counted or that indicate an undetermined quantity. It is usually translated by the zero article (**Ø**) in English, but can be translated by *some* (see 36:1.1.1) or in questions or after negatives by *any* (see 36:7.1.1). For example :

Pour faire le gâteau, il faut **du** beurre, du sucre et **de la** farine
*To make the cake you need (**Ø**) butter, (**Ø**) sugar and (**Ø**) flour*
Il faut **du** courage pour être alpiniste
*It takes (**Ø**) courage to be a mountaineer*

- 4.2 Note that the partitive is often used with *faire* when referring to activities :

faire **du** sport, faire **du** théâtre, faire **du** jogging
*to do (**Ø**) sport, to do (**Ø**) theatre, to do (**Ø**) jogging*