

Unit 31 - Possessives

1 Definitions

Possessives are words which are used to indicate possession. **Possessive adjectives**, like all adjectives, serve to describe a noun :

Ma voiture est italienne tandis que **sa** voiture est allemande
My car is Italian whilst his car is German

Possessive pronouns, like all pronouns, take the place of a noun :

On a tous les deux une voiture de sport : **la mienne** est italienne tandis que **la sienne** est allemande
We both have sports cars : mine is Italian whilst his is German

2 Possessive adjectives

2.1 In French, possessive adjectives agree in gender and in number with the noun they precede. They also vary according to the person of the possessor.

	Singular :		Plural :
	<i>masc</i>	<i>fem</i>	<i>masc and fem</i>
<i>my</i>	mon	ma	mes
<i>your</i>	ton	ta	tes
<i>his/her</i>	son	sa	ses
<i>our</i>	notre		nos
<i>your</i>	votre		vos
<i>their</i>	leur		leurs

2.2 The masculine forms *mon*, *ton* and *son* are used before a feminine singular noun or adjective beginning with a vowel or unaspirated *h* :

mon idée **ton** autre soeur **son** habitude

2.3 Possessive adjectives are usually repeated before each noun to which they apply :

Il a apporté **son** chapeau, **son** pardessus et **son** parapluie
He brought his hat, overcoat and umbrella

2.4 French tends to use the singular rather than the plural when several people possess one thing :

Les étudiants ont tous sorti **leur** manuel
The students all got out their manuals
Les enfants ont passé la plupart de **leur** vie en France
The children have spent most of their lives in France

2.5 The definite article and not the possessive is used before nouns referring to parts of the body in the following cases :

- 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 shut **her** eyes so as to concentrate better*
Elle marchait **les** yeux fermés

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*She was walking with **her** eyes shut*
*Il se tenait debout, les mains dans **les** poches*
*He was standing up, with his hands in **his** pocket*

- When the possessor is indicated by means of a pronominal (reflexive) verb :
*Je me suis brossé **les** dents avant d'aller me coucher*
*I brushed **my** teeth before going to bed*
- When the possessor is indicated by means of an indirect object :
Je lui ai tapé sur l'épaule pour le réveiller
I tapped him on the shoulder to wake him up

2.6 Note that the impersonal pronoun *on* and other impersonal expressions take the possessive adjective *son / sa / ses* :

On a le droit de faire **son** service militaire à l'étranger
You have the right to do your military service abroad
Avant d'aller à l'université **il faut** d'abord avoir **son** bac
Before going to university you must first have your baccalaureate

2.7 Use with the preposition *à*

To emphasize a possessive in French use *à* with the relevant emphatic pronoun :

Non, c'est ton avis *à* toi
*No, that's **your** opinion*
C'est bien mon livre *à* moi
*This is **my** book.*

Note that English achieves this through verbal emphasis, something which is not possible in French.

3 Possessive pronouns

3.1 As with possessive adjectives, possessive pronouns must agree in gender and in number with the noun to which they refer. Note that they are always used with the definite article *le, la* or *les* and that there is no hyphen.

	Singular :		Plural :	
	<i>masc</i>	<i>fem</i>	<i>masc</i>	<i>fem</i>
<i>mine</i>	le mien	la mienne	les miens	les miennes
<i>yours</i>	le tien	la tienne	les tiens	les tiennes
<i>his/hers</i>	le sien	la sienne	les siens	les siennes
<i>ours</i>	le nôtre	la nôtre	les nôtres	
<i>yours</i>	le vôtre	la vôtre	les vôtres	
<i>theirs</i>	le leur	la leur	les leurs	

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C'est sa maison, pas **la mienne**
It's his / her house, not mine
Tu veux une cigarette ? - Non merci, j'ai **les miennes**
Do you want a cigarette ? - No, I've got my own thanks
C'est votre voiture ? - Oui c'est **la nôtre**
Is that your car ? - Yes, it's ours

Note also that there is a circumflex accent on *le nôtre* and *le vôtre*, unlike the possessive adjectives *notre* and *votre*. This involves a difference in pronunciation, the circumflex creating a long vowel sound similar to the difference between *got* and *goat* in English.

- 3.2** The impersonal pronoun *on* and other impersonal expressions take the possessive pronoun *le sien* :
La literie n'est pas fournie, on doit / il faut apporter la sienne
Bedding is not provided, you must bring your own

4 Other ways of expressing possession

- 4.1** *Être à* + someone :
C'est à qui ce manteau ? - C'est à Marie
Whose is this coat ? - It's Marie's
- 4.2** Demonstrative pronoun + *de* + noun :
C'est à qui ce manteau ? - C'est celui de Marie
Whose is this coat ? - It's Marie's
- 4.3** *Appartenir à* :
Ce livre appartient à Richard
This book belongs to Richard
- 4.4** *Posséder, détenir* :
Posséder is more flexible than the English word *to possess* :
Il possède trois propriétés à l'étranger
He owns three properties abroad
Cette maison possède un escalier magnifique
This house has a magnificent staircase
- Détenir* is more limited in its use, and is commonly found in administrative or journalistic writing :
Seul les marchés détiennent la réponse à la question
The markets alone hold the answer to the question