

Unit 37 - Adverbs and adverbial phrases

1 Definitions

An **adverb** is a word like *curieusement* that can modify most parts of speech apart from a noun. It is always invariable, i.e. it does not change its form according to gender or number :

Elle chante bien <i>She sings well</i>	⇒ the adverb <i>bien</i> modifies the verb <i>chante</i>
Il travaille très dur <i>He works very hard</i>	⇒ the adverb <i>très</i> modifies the adverb <i>dur</i>
C'est une personne très chaleureuse <i>He / she is a very warm person</i>	⇒ the adverb <i>très</i> modifies the adjective <i>chaleureuse</i>
La température est bien au-dessous de 0° <i>The temperature is well below 0°</i>	⇒ the adverb <i>bien</i> modifies the preposition phrase <i>au-dessous de</i>
Heureusement , le magasin était encore ouvert <i>Luckily the shop was still open</i>	⇒ the adverb <i>heureusement</i> modifies the clause <i>le magasin était toujours ouvert</i>

An **adverbial phrase** is a group of words such as *tout d'un coup* or *de temps en temps* acting as an adverb :

Tout d'un coup il s'est précipité vers la porte - *Suddenly he hurried to the door*

2 Function of adverbs and adverbial phrases

Adverbs and adverbial phrases carry out a broad range of functions.

2.1 Expressing manner

Il la regarda **fixement** - *He stared at her*

Most adverbs of manner and *longtemps, tard, tôt, souvent, loin, près* and *vite* can take comparative and superlative forms (e.g. *plus simplement, le plus souvent*). For more information on this form, see Unit 42).

2.2 Expressing degree

J'ai **assez** mangé - *I've had enough to eat*

2.3 Expressing time

Il se lève **toujours** tôt - *He always gets up early*

2.4 Expressing place

Ses livres se vendent **partout** - *His / her books are sold everywhere*

2.5 Expressing quantity

Il en reste **beaucoup** - *There are a lot of them left*

2.6 Affirming and negating

Oui, je le connais - *Yes I know him*

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2.7 Questions and exclamations

Ils en ont pris **combien** ? **Comme** elle est grande !
How many of them did they take ? How tall she is !

2.8 Linking sentences

Ils l'ont mal traité ; **pourtant**, il ne leur en veut pas.
They treated him badly ; nevertheless, he doesn't hold it against them

3 Adverbs formed using *-ment*

3.1 Regular formations

Adverbs are most commonly formed by adding *-ment* to the feminine form of the adjective :

<i>Masculine adjective</i>	<i>Feminine adjective</i>	<i>Adverb</i>
clair	claire	clairement
général	générale	généralement
doux	douce	doucement
dernier	dernière	dernièrement
complet	complète	complètement
vif	vive	vivement

Note that sometimes the *-e* preceding the final *-ment* takes an acute accent :

<i>Masculine adjective</i>	<i>Feminine adjective</i>	<i>Adverb</i>
précis	précise	précisément
profond	profonde	profondément

This is also true of many adverbs formed from adjectives which always take a final *-e* :

<i>Adjective</i>	<i>Adverb</i>
énorme	énormément
uniforme	uniformément

But it is not true of adverbs formed from adjectives ending in *-able* , hence adverbs such as *probablement, véritablement, valablement* and so on.

3.2 Irregular formations

Some adverbs are formed by adding *-ment* to the masculine form of the adjective. This is usually the case for adverbs formed from adjectives ending in a single vowel :

<i>Adjective</i>	<i>Adverb</i>
vrai	vraiment
infini	infiniment
absolu	absolument
horrible	horriblement
aisé	aisément

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Adverbs formed from adjectives ending in *-ant* or *-ent* generally end in *-amment* and *-emment* (pronounced like *-amment*) respectively :

<i>Adjective</i>	<i>Adverb</i>
évident	évidemment
violent	violemment
courant	couramment
suffisant	suffisamment

Exceptions to these irregular formations include *gaiement*, *lentement* and *gentiment*. There are also the wholly irregular formations *bien* (*well*) from *bon* (*good*) and *mal* (*badly*) from *mauvais* (*bad*).

4 Adjectives used as adverbs

Many adjectives are used as adverbs without the addition of *-ment*. These include *bas*, *bon*, *chaud*, *cher*, *clair*, *dur*, *faux*, *fort*, *frais*, *haut*, *juste*, *lourd*, *mauvais*, *net* :

Avec mes nouvelles lunettes je vois **clair** maintenant
With my new glasses I can see clearly now
Il a refusé tout **net** de l'aider
He refused point blank to help him / her

5 Other ways of forming adverbial expressions

The adverbial *-ly* form is far more commonly used in English than is the *-ment* form in French. Where the *-ment* option is not available or desired, the following structures can often be used :

5.1 Avec + noun

Il la regarda **avec amour** / **tristesse**
He looked at her lovingly / sadly

5.2 De façon / d'une manière + adjective

Il faut qu'on agissent **de façon** / **d'une manière décisive**
We must act decisively

6 Position of adverbs

The rules relating to the position of adverbs in French are fairly detailed and flexible, and are best learned through immersion in the language. Their main points are as follows :

6.1 Modifying an adjective, preposition or other adverb

Here the adverb is placed before the word being modified :

Le repas était **vraiment** bon
The meal was really good
Ce résultat va **bien** au-delà des ses espérances
This result is well beyond what he / she was hoping for
Les enfants se sont conduits **remarquablement** bien
The children behaved remarkably well

6.2 Modifying a verb

With simple tenses the adverb usually follows the verb :

Il travaille **souvent** à la maison - *He often works at home*

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With compound tenses, the adverb usually follows the auxiliary :

Il a **souvent** travaillé à la maison - *He often worked at home*

However, when adverbs of place are used with compound tenses, the adverb usually follows the participle :

Ils ont dîné **dehors** - *They ate out*

6.3 Modifying a sentence

Here the adverb can generally be placed in various positions in its clause :

Malheureusement il n'a pas pu venir

Il n'a pas pu venir **malheureusement**

Il n'a **malheureusement** pas pu venir

Unfortunately he was unable to come

7 Miscellaneous translation problems

7.1 *Vite and rapide*

Note that the adverb *quickly* is translated by *vite* or *rapidement*. The word **vitement* does not exist. The French word for the adjective *quick* is *rapide* and never *vite*.

They worked quickly

Ils ont travaillé vite / rapidement

I'm going to give him a quick phone call

Je vais lui passer un coup de téléphone rapide

7.2 *Hopefully*

Note the expression *avec un peu de chance* when *hopefully* is used to modify a sentence (this use of *hopefully* is disliked by some English users) :

Hopefully he'll come early

Avec un peu de chance, il viendra en avance

This compares with the expression *avec optimisme* when *hopefully* is used to modify a verb :

He looked at her hopefully - *Il la regarda avec optimisme*

7.3 *Surely*

This is most commonly translated by *n'est-ce pas, j'imagine* or (for greater emphasis) *quand-même* rather than by *sûrement* :

Surely you took down his address ?

Tu as noté son adresse, j'imagine / n'est-ce pas ?

You're **surely** not going to watch television on a nice day like this ?

Tu ne vas quand même pas rester devant la télé par un temps pareil ?

7.4 *Surprisingly*

The adverb *étonnamment* can be used when modifying an adjective (along with *étrangement* and *incroyablement*), but alternatives are necessary in the following contexts :

There were **surprisingly** few people at the party

C'est étonnant qu'il y avait si peu de gens à la soirée

Surprisingly, he did not know of the incident

Chose étonnante, il n'était pas au courant de l'incident