

Unit 46 - Expressing quantity (2)

1 Approximation, proximity

French has various ways of expressing approximate values.

- 1.1** Through the addition of the suffix *-aine* to various numbers. The resultant nouns are all feminine : *une dizaine, une douzaine, une vingtaine, une trentaine, une quarantaine, une cinquantaine, une soixantaine, une centaine*. In the case of *mille*, *un millier* is used. When modifying nouns, they always take the preposition *de* :

une centaine de personnes - about / around a hundred people, a hundred or so people
des milliers de francs - thousands of francs

- 1.2** When approximating other values, a range of expressions are available, such as *près de, autour de* or *quelque* :

*Le projet a coûté **près de** dix millions de francs*
The project cost around ten million francs
*On a reçu **autour de** deux cents candidatures*
We received about two hundred applications
*Il y avait **quelque** 150 personnes présentes*
There were about 150 people present

Note that <i>quelque</i> used in this sense is an adverb and therefore does not take an -s.

- 1.3** When expressing distance or time, the expressions *environ* and *vers* are preferred :

*Manchester est à **environ** 250 kilomètres / à 250 kilomètres environ*
Manchester is about 250 kilometres away
*Le projet sera fini **vers** l'an 2002*
The project will be finished around the year 2002

- 1.4** Other ways of expressing approximation include the expressions *dans les* and *de l'ordre de* :

*Il a **dans les** soixante ans*
He's about sixty
*Cela coûte **dans les** mille francs*
It costs about a thousand francs
*La compagnie a subi des pertes **de l'ordre de** 2 millions de francs*
The company incurred losses in the order/ region of 2 million francs

Approximation can also be expressed by the verb *avoisiner* :

*La compagnie a subi des pertes **avoisinant** 2 millions de francs*
The company incurred losses of around 2 million francs

- 1.5** To express a range between two values one can use *entre* or *de...à* :

*Cela coûte **entre** 1000 et 2000 francs / de 1000 à 2000 francs*
It costs between 1000 and 2000 francs
*La compagnie a subi des pertes **de 2 à 3** millions de francs*
The company incurred losses of between 2 and 3 million francs

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- 1.6** Note also the construction *à quelque chose près* is used to express various notions of proximity. In addition to *à peu près* meaning *about*, there is :

Au kilomètre / à 10 kilomètres près - *to the nearest kilometre / 10 kilometres*

En tout cela a coûté 100 francs, à quelques centimes près

It all came to 100 francs, give or take a few centimes

Il l'a calculé au centime près - *He calculated it down to the last penny*

Être précis à un milligramme près - *To be accurate to within one milligram*

À une exception près - *with only one exception*

À peu de chose près - *as near as makes no difference*

2 High / low values

- 2.1** When characterizing numerical values or trends as high, French has a variety of adjectives : the most common are *haut*, *élevé*, *fort* and *important* :

Le taux de chômage est très **élevé** / **haut** en ce moment

Unemployment is very high at the moment

Il y a un **fort** taux de chômage en ce moment

There are high levels of unemployment at the moment

La société a affiché des bénéfices **importants**

The company showed high profits

When characterizing numerical values or trends as low, *bas* and *faible* are most common :

En l'Extrême-Orient les salaires sont nettement plus **bas** qu'en Europe

In the Far East salaries are significantly lower than in Europe

Leur **faible** rentabilité s'est traduite par de mauvais résultats

Their low profitability resulted in poor results

- 2.2** When expressing these notions as comparatives, French uses *plus de* and *moins de* when the values are not introduced by *être* or other linking verbs :

L'inflation a baissé de **plus de** 2% depuis les dernières élections

Inflation has fallen by 2% since the last election

When the comparative comes after a value, *plus de* and *moins de* are introduced by *de* :

L'inflation est à 1% de **moins de** la moyenne européenne

Inflation is 1% below the European average

When the values are introduced by *être* or other linking verbs, French prefers *supérieur à* and *inférieur à* :

L'inflation est nettement **inférieure à** la moyenne européenne

Inflation is significantly lower than the European average

French has a variety of ways of avoiding the comparative:

Le gouvernement a promis **une réduction** des impôts

The government promised lower taxes

Les bénéfices **ont largement dépassé** ceux de l'année dernière

Profits are much higher than they were last year

3 Increasing, decreasing and equivalent values

3.1 to go up (by) / go down (by)

To express the idea of a value increasing by a specific amount, the most common verbs are *augmenter de*, *progresser de*, and *s'accroître de*. Note that the preposition *by* is translated by *de* and not *par* :

La production **a augmenté / a progressé / s'est accrue de 3%** depuis mai
Production has increased by 3% since May

To express the idea of a value decreasing by a specific amount, the most common verbs are *diminuer de / baisser de* (or *chuter de* to describe a sharp fall) :

La production **a diminué / a baissé de 3%** depuis mai
Production has fallen by 3% since May
 La production **a chuté de 20%** depuis mai
Production has plummeted by 20% since May

To express the idea of increasing or decreasing from one value to another, *passer* is used :

L'inflation **est passée de 2 à 3% / de 3 à 2%** depuis mai
Inflation has risen from 2 to 3% / fallen from 3 to 2% since May

Note that the other constructions listed cannot be used in this context as the *de* which follows them has the meaning of *by* and not *from*. If they were used they would indicate a **range** between the two figures, and not a **change** from one to the other :

L'inflation **a augmenté / a baissé de 2 à 3%**
Inflation has risen / fallen by between 2 to 3%

With the exception of *passer*, all the above expressions can be used to express the idea of increasing or decreasing without the inclusion of a specific value :

L'inflation **baisse** tandis que la production **augmente**
Inflation is falling whilst production is rising

However, when referring to a general state rather than to changes in value, it is often preferable to use a construction such as *être en hausse / baisse*, *être à la hausse / baisse*.

L'inflation est **en hausse / en baisse** depuis mai
Inflation has been rising / falling since May

The construction *être en hausse / baisse* can also be used to express a degree of increase :

L'inflation est **en légère / forte hausse / baisse** depuis mai
Inflation has been rising / falling slightly / significantly since May

3.2 a rise / fall in

The most common nouns for an increase are *une augmentation* and *une hausse*, whilst for a fall are *une réduction*, *une baisse* and *une chute*. These can be used in conjunction with verbs such as *connaître* and *subir* to translate verbal constructions in English :

In the 1980s inflation went up sharply / there was sharp rise in inflation
Dans les années 80 l'inflation a connu / subi une forte hausse

Note that when the preposition *in* follows the noun in English, this is followed by *de* in French :
 The fall **in** the level of unemployment - *La chute **du** niveau du chômage*

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3.3 to bring up / down

To express the process of increasing in the sense of bringing up a numerical value or rate, *augmenter* and *accroître* can be used in most contexts :

La société a pu **augmenter** / **accroître** ses bénéfices / sa rentabilité
The company has increased its profits / profitability

Relever means to raise a numerical indicator rather than to cause an economic or social trend :

Le gouvernement a **relevé** l'impôt sur le revenu - *The government raised income tax*

To express the process of decreasing in the sense of bringing down a numerical value or rate, *réduire* and *baissier* can be used in most contexts, whilst *ramener* and *abaisser* are used when indicating a specific value to which the reduction has led :

Le gouvernement a **réduit** / **baissé** l'impôt sur le revenu
The government reduced income tax

Le gouvernement a **ramené** / **abaissé** l'impôt sur le revenu à 25%
The government reduced income tax to 25%

4 Expressing values, equivalence

In general when presenting individual figures, use *être à* when indicating a level, and *être de* when simply presenting a figure :

En 1984 le chômage / l'inflation **était à** 12%
In 1984 unemployment / inflation was 12% [i.e. at 12%]
L'investissement initial **était de** 50 000 francs
Initial investment was 50 000 francs [i.e. one of 50 000 francs]

Alternatives to using *être* are *s'élever à* and *atteindre* :

Le déficit du budget **s'élève à** / **atteint** 10 milliards
The budget deficit is 10 billion

Représenter and *constituer* are used to express proportion :

Le déficit du budget **représente** / **constitue** plus de 3% du produit national brut
The budget deficit accounts for more than 3% of the gross national product