

33. Articles (1) - the definite article

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, l'*, plural *les*
- **Partitive article:** *du, de l', de la*, no plural

de + le contracts to *du*, and *à + le* to *au*:

Elle va **au** supermarché / Elle revient **du** supermarché

She goes to the supermarket / She comes back from the supermarket

de + les contracts to *des*, and *à + les* to *aux*:

Il va aux Etats-Unis / Il revient des Etats-Unis

He goes to the United States / comes back from the United States

2 The definite article *le, la, les*

2.1 Principal uses

The definite article in French has two main uses:

- First, the equivalent of *the* in English, making it clear that the noun refers to a particular thing:
Les gens qui habitent à côté ont un chien
The people who live next door have a dog
- Second, it shows that the noun is being used in a general sense to mean the whole of its class or type. Here English generally uses **no** article:
Les gens doivent faire plus pour protéger l'environnement
People should do more to protect the environment

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 word between *parler* and the language:

Il parle français

I speak French

Il parle couramment **le** français

I speak French fluently

2.3 Use before titles

The definite article is used before most titles:

la reine Elisabeth, **le** docteur Lecler
Queen Elizabeth, Doctor Lecler

2.4 Before geographical names

The definite article is normally used with names of continents, countries, mountains and rivers. Towns, however, do not usually have an article:

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

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 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 au Canada, revenir du Canada*.

2.5 Use in times

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

2.6 Use 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

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*.

2.7 Musical instruments, sport etc

When expressing the idea of playing a musical instrument, French uses the verb *jouer de* plus the definite article:

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

When expressing the idea of playing a sport or game, French uses the verb *jouer à* plus the definite article:

jouer **au** football / **aux** échecs - *to play football / chess*

2.8 Use with parts of the body

The definite article is often used where English would use a possessive (e.g. *his, her*):

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*

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

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

2.9 Words beginning with *h*

The article *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 treated like a consonant): *la hache*.