
Advanced French Grammar

MONIQUE L'HUILLIER



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Contents

Acknowledgements	<i>ix</i>
Introduction	<i>1</i>
1 Framework	
1. Parts of speech	<i>5</i>
2. Syntax and grammatical functions	<i>20</i>
3. Pronunciation, spelling, registers, punctuation	<i>46</i>
2 Verbs	
4. Introduction to verbs	<i>65</i>
5. Present indicative	<i>77</i>
6. <i>depuis</i> and other tense markers	<i>92</i>
7. Future	<i>104</i>
8. Imperfect	<i>115</i>
9. Perfect	<i>126</i>
10. Past historic	<i>139</i>
11. Other past tenses	<i>148</i>
12. Subjunctive	<i>153</i>
13. Conditional and the expression of hypothesis	<i>183</i>
14. Imperative	<i>192</i>
15. Infinitive	<i>202</i>
16. Present participle	<i>221</i>
17. Past participle	<i>234</i>
18. Active and passive voices	<i>237</i>
19. Impersonal verbs and the impersonal voice	<i>252</i>
20. Pronominal verbs	<i>262</i>
21. Modals: <i>devoir, pouvoir, vouloir</i>	<i>273</i>
22. <i>savoir</i> and <i>connaître</i>	<i>293</i>
3 Determiners and prepositions	
23. Articles	<i>303</i>
24. Possessive adjectives, possession, attribution	<i>336</i>
25. Demonstrative adjectives	<i>350</i>
26. Prepositions	<i>354</i>

4 Nouns, pronouns and modifiers

- 27. Nouns 387
- 28. Qualifying adjectives 410
- 29. Adverbs 436
- 30. Comparatives and superlatives 461
- 31. Personal pronouns 488
- 32. Relative pronouns 517
- 33. Possessive pronouns 533
- 34. Demonstrative pronouns 538
- 35. *c'est/il est* 550
- 36. Indefinite words: adjectives, pronouns, adverbs 559
- 37. Numbers 592

5 Sentences and text

- 38. Negative structures 621
- 39. Interrogative and exclamative structures 636
- 40. Coordination and juxtaposition 660
- 41. Reported speech 672

Appendixes

- 1 *Les rectifications de l'orthographe* (1990) 683
- 2 Cardinal and ordinal numbers 685

Bibliography 688

Index 691

1 Parts of speech

1 Introduction

It is generally considered by most grammarians that there are eight grammatical classes of words or ‘parts of speech’, or nine if one includes interjections.

They are:

- nouns
- verbs
- determiners
- qualifying adjectives
- adverbs
- pronouns
- prepositions
- conjunctions
- interjections

However, in order to define the part of speech which a word belongs to, three criteria should be considered: semantic, morphological and syntactic. Hence the part of speech depends not only on the word selected but the way in which it is used (see 11 below).

2 Nouns

See also chapters 23 Articles and 27 Nouns.

2.1 Definition

- (i) Traditionally, the noun is described as representing what is called a **substance**, hence its other name: substantive (*substantif*), i.e. ‘what is’. However, nouns do represent all sorts of other things, for instance abstract notions (*l’amour*) or actions (*la natation*). They are an open or non-finite class of words, i.e. new ones can be invented or borrowed from other languages.

Ex: *l’intégrisme (religieux), la gouvernance; le zapping*

- (ii) They have a gender and a number.
- gender: masculine **un** homme
 - feminine **une** femme
 - number: singular **un** chat
 - plural **des** chats

NB: Some nouns are only used in the plural, e.g. *les fiançailles*.

- (iii) They can be simple (*un chou, une fleur*) or compound (*un chou-fleur, un gratte-ciel*).

2.2 Properties

Nouns can be organized in sub-classes with different semantic and syntactic characteristics called lexical features (*traits lexicaux*). They can:

(i) **be common or proper**

– common:

Ex: *un homme; un chat; une table*

– proper:

Ex: *Marie, Médor; la France, la Seine, la rue de Rivoli, Paris; le Conseil d’Etat*

NB(1): The first letter of a proper noun is a capital.

NB(2): Common nouns are generally preceded by an article (*le chat*) whilst proper nouns referring to animates (*Paul*) are generally used by themselves, but see exceptions in chapter 23 Articles.

(ii) **represent animates or inanimates**

– animates (human or non-human):

Ex: *un homme, une femme; un chat*

– inanimates, including concrete or abstract (see below):

Ex: *une table, la natation, la philosophie*

This distinction is important in several contexts, e.g. relative, interrogative and personal object pronouns, or the use of *c’est/il est* (see relevant chapters).

(iii) **be concrete or abstract**

– concrete (can be seen, felt or heard):

Ex: *la table, du vin, le vent*

– abstract:

Ex: *la force, l’amitié, la psychologie*

(iv) **be countable or uncountable**

– countable (can be counted):

Ex: **un** pain complet (**a** wholewheat **loaf**)

– uncountable (refer to quantities):

Ex: **du** pain complet (wholewheat **bread**)

(v) **be collective or individual**

– collective (refer to groups of the same category):

Ex: *la famille, la vaisselle*

– individual:

Ex: *un père, une assiette*

3 Verbs

According to the traditional definition, verbs express actions (e.g. *marcher*) or states (e.g. *être*). The set of forms that a verb can take is called its conjugation. An introduction to verbs is given in chapter 4.

4 Determiners

The determiner introduces the noun, with which it agrees in gender and number. Determiners constitute a closed or finite class, i.e. new ones cannot be invented or borrowed.

There are seven classes of determiners:

- articles
- demonstrative adjectives
- possessive adjectives
- interrogative and exclamative adjectives
- relative adjectives
- numeral adjectives
- indefinite adjectives

A specific determiner (*déterminant spécifique*) cannot be combined with another.

The specific determiners are:

- articles: **le chat, un chat, du lait**
- demonstrative adjectives: **ce chat**
- possessive adjectives: **mon chat**

Other determiners (*déterminants complémentaires*) can be combined with another, and with specific determiners according to precise rules (see relevant chapters).

For instance:

- numeral adjectives: **les trois chats**
- indefinite adjectives: **tous mes chats**

The article is the most common determiner of the noun.

Note that the above ‘adjectives’ are also called ‘non-qualifying adjectives’ or ‘determiners’ to distinguish them from ‘qualifying adjectives’ (see 5 below).

4.1 Articles

An article marks the gender and the number of the noun it determines. There are three kinds of articles:

- (i) definite (**le, la, l’, les**)

The use of the definite articles implies that the interlocutor can **identify** that referent, i.e. the ‘object of the world’ the word refers to.

Ex: *Passez-moi le livre qui est sur la table.*

Pass me the book that is on the table.

- (ii) indefinite (**un, une, des**)

Indefinite articles imply the **existence** of a set of referents. They extract one or several elements from that set, without identifying them.

Ex: *J'ai acheté **des** oranges.*
I've bought [some] oranges.

- (iii) partitive (**du, de la, de l'**)

The partitive article is used with uncountable nouns.

Ex: *Vouslez-vous **du** fromage?*
Would you like [some] cheese?

The choice of articles depends on whether the noun is concrete or abstract, countable or non-countable, considered in its generic sense, etc. See chapter 23 Articles.

4.2 Demonstrative adjectives

- (i) The **simple** demonstrative adjectives are: **ce (cet), cette, ces**. These can be translated as 'this' or 'that', 'these' or 'those', depending on the context.

Ex: ***ce** livre; **cet** hôtel; **cette** robe; **ces** gens*

- (ii) The **compound** adjectives add **-ci** or **-là** after the noun, to indicate distance from or proximity to the speaker.

– distance from the speaker in time:

Ex: ***Ce** jour-**là**, je ne me sentais pas très bien.*
That day, I wasn't feeling very well.

– proximity to the speaker in space:

Ex: ***Ces** fleurs-**ci** me plaisent.*
I like these flowers.

See chapter 25 Demonstrative Adjectives.

4.3 Possessive adjectives

The possessive adjectives are:

mon, ma, mes	my
ton, ta, tes	your
son, sa, ses	his/her
notre, nos	our
votre, vos	your
leur, leurs	their

They agree in gender and number with the element possessed **and** in person with the possessor.

Ex: *les livres de **Marie**: **ses** livres*
Marie's books: **her** books

*la maison de **Paul et Marie**: **leur** maison*
Paul and Marie's house: **their** house

la cravate de Paul: sa cravate

Paul's tie: his tie

For details regarding possessive adjectives, and their use with parts of the body, see chapter 24 Possessive Adjectives.

4.4 Interrogative and exclamative adjectives

- (i) Interrogative adjectives: *quel, quelle, quels, quelles*

Interrogative adjectives enable one to ask a question about the noun.

Ex: *Quelle personne demandez-vous?*

Which person are you asking for?

- (ii) Exclamative adjectives: *quel, quelle, quels, quelles*

Exclamative adjectives are used to express surprise, indignation, joy, fear, etc. Their forms are the same as those of the interrogative adjective.

Ex: *Il ne vous a pas prévenu? Quel sans-gêne!*

Didn't he warn you? **What** a nerve!

See chapter 39 Interrogative and Exclamative Structures.

4.5 Relative adjectives

Relative adjectives are constructed with *quel*, preceded by the definite article (→ *lequel, laquelle, lesquels, lesquelles*).

They are used as relative determiners, particularly in literary and administrative styles. The group 'relative adjective + noun' is the equivalent of a relative pronoun (see 7.4 below).

Ex: *Je lui ai envoyé un dossier, lequel dossier ne lui est jamais parvenu.*

(= *Je lui ai envoyé un dossier, qui ne lui est jamais parvenu.*)

4.6 Numeral adjectives

- (i) Also part of the 'quantifiers' (see 4.7 Indefinite Adjectives below), they are used before nouns which refer to elements that can be counted (see countable nouns above), to specify the number or quantity of elements.

Ex: *Il y avait cent dix personnes à cette conférence.*

- (ii) Combinations:

They can be preceded by a specific determiner.

Ex: *mes deux chats; les trois mousquetaires; ces six roses rouges*

4.7 Indefinite adjectives

- (i) As determiners, they generally imply a certain quantity of elements, which may be countable or uncountable (they are also called 'quantifiers').

6 Adverbs

- (i) Adverbs provide extra information about the meaning of a verb, adjective, other adverb or whole clause.
 Ex: *Tu marches **lentement**.*
*Vous êtes **trop** gentil.*
*Il conduit **si** vite!*
***Hier**, je suis allée au cinéma.*
- (ii) Adverbs are normally invariable (but see exceptions in chapters 28 Qualifying Adjectives, 29 Adverbs and 36 Indefinite Words).
- (iii) Adverbs can be simple (e.g. *bien*, *mal*, *vite*) or compound (e.g. *avant-hier*, *tout à fait*). They constitute an extremely varied class from the point of view of their morphology, but the largest category is that of adverbs in *-ment*.
- (iv) Adverbs which modify a clause are optional elements of that clause. They can be moved around according to certain rules (see chapters 2 Syntax, section 2.13 and 29 Adverbs, section 5).

Adverbs of negation (e.g. *Elle **ne** parle **pas***) are treated in chapter 38 Negative Structures. Interrogative and exclamative adverbs (e.g. ***Combien** coûte ce fauteuil?* ***Comme** c'est beau!*) are treated in chapter 39 Interrogative and Exclamative Structures. Indefinite adverbs (e.g. *Il est **tout** content*) are treated in chapter 36 Indefinite Words.

7 Pronouns

In principle, the purpose of a pronoun is to **replace** another element in a text. To this end, they form an essential part of text cohesion. However, they do not all replace something, hence the traditional distinction between 'nominal' and 'representative' pronouns.

- **Nominal** pronouns:
 - Some refer **directly** to their **respective referents** (i.e. not through a noun or anything else). It is the case for the first and second persons of the discourse. Indeed, *je* and *tu* do not refer to anybody else but the speaker and his/her interlocutor.
 - Others do not replace any expressed words either but refer **directly** to an **undetermined referent** (e.g. *quelqu'un*).
- **Representative** pronouns refer to an element already present in the context, called its **antecedent**.
 - This antecedent can be a noun (hence the term 'pro-noun').
 - But it can also be a lengthy noun phrase (see chapter 2 Syntax), another pronoun, an adjective, a verb in the infinitive, a clause or even a whole sentence (which is why some grammarians prefer to call them '**proforms**').

- The antecedent is normally placed **before** the representative pronoun: we have an **anaphor**.
Ex: *Un homme est arrivé. **Il** est entré dans le café.*
- It can sometimes be placed **after** the pronoun, generally for stylistic effect: we have a **cataphor**. However, what is represented by the pronoun is still its ‘antecedent’.
Ex: ***Elle** est vraiment sale, ta voiture.*
‘Elle’ refers cataphorically to ‘*ta voiture*’.
- The antecedent and its pronoun generally have the same referent, i.e. they refer to the same ‘object of the world’ (*un homme* and *il*, *elle* and *ta voiture*): there is **co-reference** between the antecedent and its pronoun (but see relevant chapters for cases when there is anaphora without co-reference).

There are seven classes of pronouns:

- personal and impersonal
- demonstrative
- possessive
- relative
- interrogative and exclamative
- indefinite
- numeral

In most cases, these can be either nominal or representative, but see relevant chapters for details. Agreement and syntax of pronouns are also treated in the relevant chapters.

7.1 Personal and impersonal pronouns

- (i) Personal pronouns refer to the persons of the discourse.
 - 1st person = the speaker: *je, moi (me); nous*
 - 2nd person = the interlocutor: *tu, toi (te); vous*
 - 3rd person = the one, or what, the speaker and/or interlocutors are talking about: *il, ils, lui, eux, elle, elles, le, la, les*
- (ii) The pronouns of the 1st and 2nd persons refer to or ‘name’ themselves.
Ex: ***Je** pars en vacances la semaine prochaine. Et **toi**?*
- (iii) In contrast, the pronouns of the 3rd person most of the time refer to or ‘represent’ another element with the same referent, expressed previously in the context (this is an example of anaphor).
Ex: *J’ai vu Pierre ce matin. **Il** était très content.*
‘*Il*’ refers to ‘*Pierre*’ in the preceding sentence.

The forms of the personal pronoun (clitic, e.g. *je* or tonic, e.g. *moi*) and its functions (e.g. subject, object) are treated in chapter 31 Personal Pronouns.

- (iv) The impersonal pronoun *il* is treated in detail in chapter 19 Impersonal Verbs.

7.2 Demonstrative pronouns

There are two types of demonstrative pronouns, simple and compound.

7.2.1 Simple demonstrative pronouns

celui, celle, ceux, celles (+ the neutral pronoun *ce, c'*)

- (i) These are mostly representative but not 'complete' in the sense that, in most cases, they must be accompanied by a complement (e.g. prepositional phrase, relative clause) which identifies the referent.
- identification with a prepositional phrase:
Ex: *Vous cherchez un dictionnaire? Prenez celui de Marie.*
 - identification with a relative clause:
Ex: *Vous voulez un dictionnaire? Prenez celui qui est sur l'étagère à droite.*
- (ii) They can also be nominal. They are used by themselves as **animate** introducers to a relative clause with no antecedent.
- Ex: *Malheur à celui qui n'aime pas les chats!*
Ceux qui ont fini peuvent partir.

7.2.2 Compound demonstrative pronouns

celui-ci, celui-là, celle-ci, celle-là, ceux-ci, ceux-là, celles-ci, celles-là (+ the neutral pronouns *ceci, cela, ça*)

For details on the opposition *-ci/-là*, and the neutral forms *ce, ceci, cela, ça*, see chapter 34 Demonstrative Pronouns.

7.3 Possessive pronouns

Possessive pronouns are the nominalized forms of the now obsolete stressed possessive adjectives. The nominalization is made explicit by the presence of the definite article.

le mien, la mienne, les miens, les miennes
le tien, la tienne, les tiens, les tiennes
le sien, la sienne, les siens, les siennes
le nôtre, la nôtre, les nôtres
le vôtre, la vôtre, les vôtres
le leur, la leur, les leurs

Possessive pronouns agree in gender and number with the element possessed, and in person and number with the possessor.

7.4 Relative pronouns

- (i) The relative pronoun has simple and compound forms:
- The simple relative pronouns are: *qui, que, quoi, dont, où*.
 - The compound relative pronouns are: *lequel, laquelle, lesquels, lesquelles*, which form the basis for further compounds with prepositions, e.g. *à laquelle, sur lequel*, etc.
- See chapter 32 Relative Pronouns.

- (ii) A relative pronoun links two clauses, a main clause and a subordinate relative clause (see chapter 2 Syntax, section 3.2.2).

Ex: *J'ai retrouvé le livre **qui** me manquait.*

'qui' represents 'livre', which is its **antecedent**; 'livre' is the object of 'ai retrouvé' in the main clause, and the subject of 'manquait' in the subordinate clause.

7.5 Interrogative and exclamative pronouns

The forms of the interrogative pronouns are based on those of the relative pronouns (see also interrogative adjectives and adverbs in chapter 39 Interrogative and Exclamative Structures). Interrogative pronouns can be nominal or representative.

- (i) Nominal interrogative pronouns are used to ask questions about the identity or the quality of elements: **qui? que? quoi? qui est-ce qui? qui est-ce que? qu'est-ce qui? qu'est-ce que?**

Ex: ***Qui** est là? **Qu'est-ce que** vous voulez?*

Who's there? What do you want?

- (ii) Representative interrogative pronouns are used to ask questions about elements already mentioned in the context: **lequel, laquelle, lesquels, lesquelles.**

Ex: *De ces deux voitures, **laquelle** préférez-vous?*

Of these two cars, which one do you prefer?

Note that the latter are also used as exclamative pronouns.

Ex: *Je n'ai qu'un chat mais **lequel!***

I've only got one cat, but what a cat!

7.6 Indefinite pronouns

Indefinite pronouns are a motley collection! For details, see chapter 36 Indefinite Words. Most indefinite pronouns imply:

- (i) either the imprecision of the element
Ex: *Vous avez entendu **quelque chose**?*
Have you heard anything?
- (ii) or a certain quantity of elements
Ex: ***Tous** sont arrivés à l'heure.*
Everybody arrived on time.

7.7 Numeral pronouns

- (i) Cardinal numbers are normally used as determiners. However, they can also be used as pronouns.

Ex: *Marie avait invité **quarante** personnes. **Dix** sont venues.*

determiner

pronoun

Marie had invited forty people. Ten came.

- (ii) Ordinal numbers are used as adjectives or pronouns.

Ex: *C'est la **troisième** maison à droite.*

adjective

It's the third house on the right.

***La troisième!** Vous êtes sûr?*

pronoun

The third one! Are you sure?

See chapter 37 Numbers, section 2.

8 Prepositions

Prepositions are subordinating words. They introduce a new element and place that new element in relation to an element already present in a phrase, clause or sentence. They are invariable. Prepositions can be simple (e.g. *sur, sous*) or compound (e.g. *à côté de*).

- (i) They can be part of a verb and form a prepositional phrase introducing an indirect object:

Ex: *Nous parlons souvent **de** Paul.* (*parler de qn*)

*Nous pensons souvent **à** vous.* (*penser à qn*)

- (ii) They can be part of a noun phrase and form a prepositional phrase introducing:

- another noun *une bague **en** or*
- a pronoun *les besoins **de** chacun*
- a verb in the infinitive *une machine **à** laver*
- an adverb *la vaisselle **d'**hier*

- (iii) They can be part of an adjectival phrase introducing:

- a noun *couvert **de** neige*
- a pronoun *satisfait **de** rien*
- a verb in the infinitive *facile **à** faire*

- (iv) They can introduce a prepositional phrase which modifies a sentence (adverb phrase).

Ex: *J'ai posé les livres **sur** le bureau.*

*Je ne sais pas encore où je vais **pour** les vacances.*

The function of the prepositional phrase depends on its position in the sentence (see chapters 2 Syntax and 26 Prepositions).

9 Conjunctions

Conjunctions are invariable. There are two types of conjunctions.

9.1 Conjunctions of coordination

- (i) Coordination establishes a non-hierarchical relation (addition, opposition, etc.) between the elements which it links together. Conjunctions of coordination in frequent use include: *mais, ou, et, donc, pourtant, cependant, ainsi*.

- (ii) They link terms with the same function (e.g. subjects, objects, whole clauses or sentences).

Ex: *Il a mangé une pomme **et** une poire.*
(‘*et*’ links two noun objects)

*Mon chat **et** mon chien s’aiment beaucoup.*
(‘*et*’ links two noun subjects)

*J’ai acheté le journal **mais** je n’ai pas trouvé votre magazine.*
(‘*mais*’ links two sentences).

- (iii) Some grammarians make a distinction between conjunctions of coordination and disjunctive conjunctions. The latter express an alternative (e.g. *ou*, *tantôt . . . tantôt*). For details, see chapter 40 Coordination and Juxtaposition.

9.2 Conjunctions of subordination

- (i) Conjunctions of subordination introduce a **subordinate clause**.
- (ii) Conjunctions of subordination can be:
- simple (e.g. *que*, *quand*, *comme*, *si*)
 - compound with *que* (e.g. *avant que*, *après que*, *pour que*, etc., and also *lorsque*, *puisque*, *quoique*).
- (iii) The conjunction **que** introduces *que*-clauses (*propositions complétives*).
- (iv) Other conjunctions introduce an adverbial clause (*circonstancielle*) of time, place, aim, consequence, condition, etc.

Ex: **Lorsqu’il fait mauvais temps, personne ne sort.**

See also chapter 2 Syntax, section 3.2.3.

When using a conjunction of subordination, it is important to know which **mood** should be used in the subordinate clause: indicative or subjunctive. This is treated in chapter 12 Subjunctive, section 4.

10 Interjections

Interjections are fixed words or phrases which express a comment made by the speaker.

Ex: *Attention! Au secours!*

See chapter 2 Syntax, section 2.14.1.

11 Synonyms, homonyms, derivation and word class shifts

11.1 Synonyms and homonyms

11.1.1 Definitions

- **synonyms** are different words with similar or identical meanings.
Ex: *redouter, craindre, avoir peur de*
- **homonyms** can be subdivided into:
 - **homophones**, i.e. words which share the same sound (but not the same spelling), and have different meanings (they are unrelated).
Ex: *saint, sein, seing, sain* [sɛ̃]
vin, vain [vɛ̃]
Troie, Troyes, trois [trwa]
au, eau [o]
mer, mère, maire [mɛʁ]
 - **homographs**, i.e. words with the same spelling but different meanings (they are unrelated).
Ex: (*un boulet de*) *canon*, *un canon* (*de beauté*)

11.1.2 Examples of homographs in parts of speech

(i) **que**

- relative pronoun object; introduces a relative clause; has an antecedent:
Ex: *Je vais vous montrer les photos **que** j'ai prises l'année dernière.*
- conjunction of subordination; introduces a *que*-clause (*complétive*):
Ex: *Il est essentiel **que** vous soyez à l'heure demain.*
*Je pense **que** les Dupont viendront.*

(ii) **leur**

- personal object pronoun (indirect):
Ex: *Elle parle à ses chats → Elle **leur** parle.*
 - possessive adjective; the possessor is plural, the thing possessed is singular:
Ex: *C'est **leur** chat.*
- NB: If the thing possessed is plural, *leurs* is used.
Ex: *Ce sont **leurs** chats.*

Hence *leur* can appear as two different parts of speech in the same sentence.

Ex: *On **leur** a rendu **leur** chat/**leurs** chats.*

(iii) **en**

- preposition:
 - before a noun:
Ex: *C'est une montre **en** or.*
 - before a present participle (gerund):
Ex: ***En** allant au marché, j'ai rencontré . . .*

- personal object pronoun:
 - direct:
Ex: *J'ai acheté des cerises → J'**en** ai acheté.*
 - indirect:
Ex: *J'ai besoin de la voiture → J'**en** ai besoin.*
- adverbial pronoun:
Ex: *Je reviens juste de Paris → J'**en** reviens.*

Hence *en* can appear as two different parts of speech in the same sentence.

Ex: *Ne prenez que quatre comprimés: **en en** prenant plus, vous risqueriez des ennuis.*

(iv) **y**

- personal object pronoun (indirect):
Ex: *Mes prochaines vacances? J'**y** pense souvent.*
- adverbial pronoun:
Ex: *Je vais à Paris demain → J'**y** vais demain.*

(v) **le, la, les, l'**

- definite articles:
Ex: ***le** chat, **la** chèvre, **les** animaux, **l'**asticot*
- personal object pronouns (direct):
Ex: *Mon chat? Je **le** fais garder quand je pars en vacances.
Tu as les mains sales. Va te **les** laver.*

(vi) **du, des**

- partitive article (*du*), indefinite article (*des*):
Ex: *J'ai acheté **du** chocolat et **des** bonbons.*
- contraction of preposition *de* + definite article *le*; contraction of preposition *de* + definite article *les*:
Ex: *Le bureau **du** (= de + le) directeur est à votre gauche.
C'est le chat **des** (= de + les) voisins.*

11.2 Derivation and word class shifts

One part of speech may derive from another, by proper or improper derivation.

(i) Proper derivation

Ex: noun: *courage* → adjective: *courageux*
verb: *conserver* → noun: *conservateur*
adjective: *conservateur*
verb: *aimer* → adjective: *aimable*

adjective: *beau* → verb: *embellir*

adjective: *jaune* → verb: *jaunir*

In the above cases, the suffixes help to distinguish a verb from a noun or adjective, for example.

(ii) Improper derivation

Ex: verb: *effrayer* → adjective: *effrayant* (from present participle)

verb: *passer* → noun: *un passant* (from present participle)

verb: *percevoir* → adjective: *perçu* (from past participle)

verb: *mourir* → noun: *un mort* (from past participle)

verb: *devoir* → noun: *un devoir* (from infinitive)

adjective: *rouge* → noun: *le rouge*

In the above cases, a given word may be one part of speech or another, depending on the syntactic context.

Ex: *Elle porte un pantalon **bleu**.*

adjective

She's wearing blue trousers.

*Je n'aime pas le **bleu**.*

noun

I don't like (the colour) blue.

NB: In contemporary French and particularly in the world of advertising, there is a tendency to use nouns as predicative or attributive adjectives.

Ex: *des sous-vêtements classe*

un manteau confort

une femme enfant

un cocktail évasion

Elle fait un peu zone.

Ce travail, c'est galère.

See also adjectives used as adverbs or even prepositions in chapter 28 Qualifying Adjectives, section 5.2.