

# Glossary of grammatical terms

**active (*actif*)** - see voice.

**abstract (*abstrait*)** - an abstract noun is one which names a quality, state, action or concept such as *la difficulté, le désespoir, la poésie*. Compare with **concrete** nouns.

**adjective (*adjectif*)** - an **adjective** is a word that gives information about a noun. Most often adjectives serve to indicate a quality possessed by a noun, and these are called **qualificative adjectives**. For example, in the phrase *the red book*, the qualificative adjective *red* modifies the noun *book*. The remaining adjectives give information about the scope of reference of a noun, and these fall under the category of **determiners**.

**adverb (*adverbe*)** - this is a word that can modify most parts of speech apart from a noun. For example, in the sentence *she sang beautifully*, the adverb *beautifully* modifies the verb *sang*; in *she has an extremely beautiful voice*, the adverb *extremely* qualifies the adjective *beautiful*; and in *she sang extremely beautifully*, the adverb *extremely* modifies the adverb *beautifully*.

**affirmative / declarative sentence (*phrase affirmative*)** - this is a sentence such as *Elle habite à Manchester* that affirms something: it is neither negative (*Elle n'habite pas à Manchester*) nor interrogative (*Habite-t-elle à Manchester?*).

**agreement (*accord*)** - this is a grammatical way of showing that a particular word or phrase relates to another. In French, adjectives agree with nouns and pronouns (*une maison blanche*), verbs agree with subject pronouns (*ils descendent*), participles can agree with subject pronouns (*elle est passée*) and occasionally direct object pronouns (*je ne les ai jamais vus*), and pronouns agree with nouns (*Cette femme, elle est belle*).

**article (*article*)** - this is a word such as *le* or *une* used before a noun to give information about its scope of reference (that is whether the noun referred to is specific or non-specific, a part or whole of a category, and so on). It may be **definite** (*le, la, les*), **indefinite** (*un, une, des*) or **partitive** (*du, de la*).

**auxiliary (*auxiliaire*)** - this is a verb which adds to the meaning of another verb. A **main auxiliary** (usually referred to simply as an **auxiliary**) is a verb used with a past participle in the formation of a compound tense (one like the perfect containing more than one verb). E.g. in the sentence *Je suis venu vous voir*, the word *suis* (from *être*) is the auxiliary. French compound tenses are formed using either *avoir* or *être*. A **semi-auxiliary** is a verb used with an infinitive to express a notion such as time, possibility, wishing etc. E.g. in the sentence *Elle veut aller au cinéma*, the verb *veut* is a semi-auxiliary.

**cardinal number (*nombre cardinal*)** - this is a number used in counting, such as *un, deux* or *trois*.

**clause (*proposition*)** - A **clause** is a group of words containing at least a **subject** and a **verb**. Sometimes a clause forms a sentence on its own, called an **independent clause**, as with the sentence *Sara will visit her mother tomorrow*. And sometimes a clause contains one or more

clauses within it. In this case the "containing" clause is called a **main clause**, and the clause being contained within the main clause is called a **subordinate clause**. For example, in the sentence *Sara will visit her mother before she goes home*, the main clause is *she will visit you* + subordinate clause, and the subordinate clause is *before she goes home*.

**comparative (*comparatif*)** - this is the form of an **adjective** or **adverb** that indicates that the quality being described is possessed to a greater extent. E.g. *Il est meilleur que moi en math*.

**concrete (*concret*)** - a concrete noun is one which names a thing rather than a quality, state, action or concept, such as *un poème, un livre*.

**conditional (*conditionnel*)** - this is a verb form used mainly when considering something as hypothetical or imaginary. For example, in the sentence *If I could afford it, I would go on holiday*, the verb in the main clause, *I would go*, is in the conditional. It can also be used to express the future in the past (as in *She said she would come by bus*), or to express a wish in polite discourse (*I would like to speak to Peter*). See **mood** also.

**conjunction (*conjonction*)** - this is a word that connects words, **phrases** or **clauses**. There are two types of conjunction. Coordinating conjunctions such as *et* or *mais*, which serve to link **coordinate clauses**. And subordinating conjunctions like *parce que*, which introduce **subordinate clauses**. A subordinating conjunction can be recognized in French by the fact that it is generally followed by *que* and is nearly always followed by a conjugated verb.

**definite article (*article défini*)** - (English *the*, French *le, la, les*). In French the definite article can have two functions:

- a) Equivalent of English *the*, it serves to define a specific item or items in a category: *Elle m'a donné le livre* - She gave me **the book**.
- b) It shows that the noun is being used in a universal sense to mean the whole of its category. *The* is rarely used in this way in English: *Il faut taxer les cigarettes* - **Cigarettes should be taxed**.

**demonstratives (*démonstratifs*)** - these are words which point out a particular thing or things. Demonstrative adjectives, like all adjectives, describe a noun: *ce livre, cette voiture, ces documents*, etc. Demonstrative pronouns, like all pronouns, take the place of a noun: *Voici deux voitures de sport: celle-ci est italienne et celle-là est allemande*.

**direct object (*complément d'objet direct*)** - this is a **noun** or **pronoun** which experiences the direct action of a verb: in the sentence *J'ai donné l'argent à ma mère*, the noun *argent* is the direct object of the verb *donner*.

**disjunctive pronoun (*pronom tonique/disjoint*)** - also called an emphatic, tonic or stressed pronoun, this is a **pronoun** that does not stand directly with the verb as its **subject** or **object**. These pronouns are usually used after **prepositions** or to create emphasis. E.g. *vers moi; comme toi; il ne disait rien, lui*.

**elision (*élision*)** - this is the process in written French whereby the final *e* or *a* of certain words is dropped and replaced with an apostrophe in front of vowels, an unaspirated *h* or the pronoun *y*. E.g. *j'étais, c'est*.

**gerund (*gérondif*)** - this is where the present participle is preceded by *en* (e.g. *en travaillant*).

**idiom (*idiotisme*)** - this is an expression which has a meaning which cannot be derived from the sum of the meanings of its elements, e.g. *en vouloir à quelqu'un de quelque chose* - to hold something against somebody

**imperative (*impératif*)** - see mood.

**impersonal pronoun (*pronom impersonnel*)** - this is a pronoun that does not take the place of a specific noun, but which refers to something implied in the context (such as the weather in *Il fait beau aujourd'hui*) or to something about to be mentioned (as in *Il est important que Pierre obtienne cet emploi*).

**indefinite article (*article indéfini*)** - (English singular *a, an*, plural *some, any* or omitted; French singular *un, une*, plural *des*). In both English and French this defines a non-specific item in a category e.g. *Il faut choisir un après-midi en mai*.

**independent clause (*proposition indépendante*)** - see clause.

**indicative (*indicatif*)** - see mood.

**indirect object (*complément d'objet indirect*)** - this is a **noun** or **pronoun** acting as the beneficiary of the action of a verb and its **direct object**. In French indirect object nouns are introduced by *à* or *de*: in the sentence *J'ai donné l'argent à ma mère*, the noun phrase *ma mère* is the indirect object of the verb *donner*.

**indirect speech (*discours indirect*)** - also known as reported speech, this is when a person's words are reported to a third party by means of an introductory verb followed by a **que clause**, as in *Il dit qu'il a faim*. This contrasts with direct speech, which involves quoting the exact words of that person to a third party, as in *Il dit «J'ai faim»*.

**infinitive (*infinitif*)** - this is the basic form of a verb such as *to give* in English or *donner* in French from which other forms are derived.

**interrogative sentence (*phrase interrogative*)** - this is a sentence such as *Habite-t-elle à Manchester?* that presents a question.

**invariable (*invariable*)** - an invariable adjective is one which does not decline, that is take feminine and / or plural forms. E.g. *Chic* in *Elle est très chic*. It is important to remember that all adverbs and prepositions are invariable.

**liaison (*liaison*)** - this is the linking of words for ease of pronunciation. It occurs when a usually silent final consonant is pronounced in front of a vowel as in *Les\_enfants* and *Elle est\_allée*.

**lower case (*minuscules*)** - a word written in the lower case is written in small letters.

**main clause (*proposition principale*)** - see **clause**.

**modals (*modaux*)** - these are the auxiliary verbs (other than *avoir* and *être*) that characteristically appear with a dependent **infinitive** and express a distinction of **mood**, e.g. *pouvoir, vouloir, devoir* etc.

**mood (*mode*)** - this is an area of verbal expression relating to the attitude with which a idea is expressed. It includes such forms as the **indicative** (used when considering something as a fact or probability), the **subjunctive** (used when the action of the verb is coloured with an attitude such as doubt, need, wishing, feeling or opinion), the **conditional** (used when considering something as hypothetical or imaginary) and the **imperative** (used when giving orders).

**negative sentence (*phrase négative*)** - this is a sentence such as *Elle n'habite pas à Manchester* that is neither affirmative (*Elle habite à Manchester*) nor interrogative (*Habite-t-elle à Manchester?*).

**noun (*nom*)** - this is a word which names an entity such as a person, thing, place, substance or state.

**ordinal number (*nombre ordinal*)** - this is a number which designates the place something occupies in a sequence, e.g. *deuxième, troisième*.

**part of speech (*catégorie grammaticale*)** - parts of speech are a set of linguistic terms such as *noun, adjective* and *adverb* that serve to categorize words according to their unchanging grammatical characteristics.

**participle (*participe*)** - there are two types of participle. The **present participle** (such *going* or *doing* in English) refers to an action or process. In French it is generally formed by adding *-ant* to the **stem** and it does not take an agreement: *J'ai vu Marie sortant du bureau de poste* (*I saw Marie coming out of the post office*). The **past participle** (such as *gone* or *done* in English, *allé* or *fait* in French) is mainly used in compound tenses in French such as the perfect (e.g. *je suis allé*).

**partitive article (*article partitif*)** - (English *some, any* or omitted, French *du, de l', de la*). This defines an undetermined part of a category. It is used before nouns that cannot be counted: *du beurre, du lait, de l'eau*.

**passive (*passive*)** - see **voice**.

**personal pronoun (*pronom personnel*)** - personal pronouns are generally subject or object pronouns referring to people or things and which indicate gender or number, e.g. *il, lui, eux*.

**phrase (*syntagme / groupe / locution*)** - this generally refers to a group of words such as *à neuf heures* that does not contain a verb.

**possessives (*possessifs*)** - these are words which are used to indicate possession. Possessive adjectives, like all adjectives, describe a noun: *mon livre*, *ma voiture*, *mes documents*, etc. Possessive pronouns, like all pronouns, take the place of a noun: *Nous avons tous les deux des voitures de sport: la mienne est italienne et la sienne est allemande.*

**prefix (*préfixe*)** - this is a linguistic unit added to the beginning of a word to create a particular meaning or grammatical function.

**preposition (*préposition*)** - Prepositions have two basic functions. First (usually involving *de* or *à*) to provide a transparent link between two words, as in *réussir à faire* or *le taux de chômage*. And second to express a distinct relationship between a word and the rest of its sentence, as in *Le livre est sur la table.*

**pronominal verb (*verbe pronominal*)** - also called **reflexive verbs**, these are verbs like *se lever* or *se permettre* which take a pronoun which refers back to the verb's subject.

**pronoun (*pronom*)** - a pronoun is a word such as *il*, *lui*, *que*, and *dont* which stands in the place of a noun.

**qualificative adjective (*adjectif qualificatif*)** - these are conventional descriptive adjectives such as *big* in English or *grand* in French.

**que clause (*proposition complétive*)** - also known as a "completive" clause, this is a clause which in French is always introduced by *que*, for example: *Il a dit qu'il serait en retard.*

**reflexive pronoun (*pronom réfléchi*)** - this is a pronoun which refers back to the subject of a verb. The reflexive pronouns are *me*, *te*, *se*, *nous*, *vous*, *se* and they generally come before the **main verb** or **auxiliary**, e.g. *je me lève*, *je me suis levé.*

**reflexive verb (*verbe pronominal*)** - see **pronominal verb**.

**relative clause (*proposition relative*)** - A **relative clause** is a type of subordinate clause that gives information about a preceding noun. The relative clause is linked to the main clause by means of a **relative pronoun**. For example, in the sentence *le médecin qui vous soigne est absent*, the words *qui vous soigne* are relative clause, and *qui* is the relative pronoun.

**reported speech (*discours indirect*)** – see **indirect speech**.

**sentence (*phrase*)** - this is a grammatically self-contained unit containing either a single word or a grammatically related group of words. When written it begins with a capital letter and ends with either a full stop (.), question mark (?), an exclamation mark (!) or suspension marks (...).

**sequence of tenses (*concordance des temps*)** - this describes the dependence of the tense of the verb in a subordinate clause on that of the verb in the main clause. For example, when reporting speech in the past, the tense used in the original direct speech is shifted one stage back in the past, so that *Il a dit «J'ai peur»* becomes *Il a dit qu'il avait peur.*

**stem (*radical*)** - the stem is the part of a verb which has unchanged spelling, to which different endings may be added to indicate tense, number etc. For example, to conjugate the verb *parler* in the present tense, take the stem *parl-* and add the appropriate endings.

**subject (*sujet*)** - this is the element of a sentence or **clause** about which something is stated. For example, in the sentence *The man kicked the ball*, the noun *man* is the subject.

**subjunctive (*subjonctif*)** - The subjunctive is a verb **mood** which is used not so much to report facts as to reveal the speaker's attitude towards the facts. It is used after constructions expressing notions such as possibility, doubt, need, wishing, feeling, opinion or hypothesis. Unlike in English where it is only used in a handful of set expressions such as *if I were you*, in French it is very common and used in all forms of language, both informal as well as formal.

**subordinate clause (*proposition subordonnée*)** - see **clause**.

**suffix (*suffixe*)** - this is a linguistic unit added to the end of a word or stem to create a particular meaning or grammatical function.

**superlative (*superlatif*)** - this is the form of an **adjective** or **adverb** that expresses the highest or a very high degree of the quality being denoted. E.g. *C'est le meilleur étudiant de la classe*.

**tense (*temps*)** - tenses are the forms of verb that serve primarily to situate a reported action or process within time, either relative to the standpoint of its utterance or relative to another event.

**upper case (*majuscules*)** - a word written in the upper case is written in capital letters.

**verb (*verbe*)** - this is a word such as *to give* or *to be* which can serve either to express a process such as an action or state, or else to modify another verb by giving information regarding tense (*I will go*) aspect (*he is standing*), voice (*she was informed*) or mood (*you must hurry*).

**voice (*voix*)** - this is the area of grammar relating to the active and passive forms. The **active voice** indicates that the grammatical subject carries out the action of the verb (as with *The dog chased the cat*). The **passive voice** indicates that the grammatical subject is the participant affected by the action (as with *The cat was chased by the dog*).