3. GRAMMAR: The noun and the article – masculine and feminine; singular and plural ; definite and undefinite articles ; contracted articles

In French, **every** noun (*un nom*) has a gender: masculine (*masculin*) or feminine (*féminin*). In addition to gender, a noun also has a number: singular (*singulier*) or plural (*pluriel*). A few examples:

-un livre → Gender: masculine
Number: singular
Translation: a book

-des vélos → Gender : masculine
Number : plural
Translation: bicycles (no article in English)

-une fille → Gender : feminine
Number : singular
Translation : a girl

-des filles → Gender : feminine
Number : plural
Translation : girls (no article in English)

Part 1: The gender of the noun

If a French noun refers to a person, the gender of the word often matches the gender of the person in reality:
- *vendeuse* (vendor (woman) → feminine in reality) → **une[1] / la vendeuse**
- *vendeur (*vendor (man) → masculine in reality) → **un / le vendeur**
- *homme* (man → masculine in reality) → **un / l'homme**
- *soeur* (sister → feminine in reality) → **une / la sœur**

1. The small words *un, une, le, la, les, des* are articles, and we will discuss them later. For now, remember that *un / le* are masculine and *la / une* are feminine.

The question now is whether and how we can form or recognize feminine words based on the masculine base words. Below, you will find some rules:

Difference between feminine and masculine words referring to people

(1) To form the feminine from a masculine word, generally, you simply add an '*e*' at the end of the word:

- *un étudiant (a student) → une étudiante*
- *un ami (a friend) → une amie*
- *un professeur (a teacher) → une professeure*

However, there are many exceptions to rule (1), and you can find them below [pay close attention to the differences!]

(2) The words ending in *-ien, -on, -eur, -teur* have a regular feminine form :

- *un musicien (a musician) → une musicienne (a musician)*
- *un champion (a champion) → une championne (a chapion)*
- *un vendeur (a vendor) → une vendeuse (a vendor)*
- *un chanteur (a singer) → une chanteuse (a singer)*
- *un acteur (an actor) → une actrice (an actress)*

(3) Words that already end in an 'e' remain unchanged, and only the article changes gender:

- *un ministre (a minister, secretary) → un**e** ministre*
- *un concierge (a concierge) → un**e** concierge*

(4) There are words for which the feminine cannot be formed by simply looking at the masculine word. You must memorize these well:

- *un garçon (a boy) → une fille (a girl)*
- *un fils (a son) → une fille (a daughter)*
- *un père (a father) → une mère (a mother)*
- *un homme (a man) → une femme (a woman)*
- *un mari (a husband) → une femme (a wife)*
- *un monsieur (a man) → une dame (a lady)*
- *un copain (a friend, boyfriend) → une copine(a friend, girlfriend)*
- *un roi (a king) → une reine (a queen)*

If a French noun refers to an object (non-human), its gender is largely arbitrary. This means that you must learn the gender along with every new noun. You can find this in a dictionary or deduce it from the sentence if there is an article with your noun: *une/la* are used with feminine words, and un/le with masculine words. More on that later!

Part 2: The number of the noun.

Nouns also have a number, meaning they can be in the singular or plural form. Let's take a look at how we form the plurals of French nouns:

Rules for forming the plural of the noun

(1) The standard rule: add an 's' at the end of the word:

- un policier → des policier**s**
- un homme → des homme**s**

Below are some exceptions to the standard rule:

(2) If your word ends in *'-s', '-x', or '-z'* in the singular, you don’t add anything to the word, and the singular and plural forms are identical:

- *un cas → des cas [a case → cases]*
- *un choix → des choix [a choice → choices]*
- *un gaz → des gaz [a gas → gases]*

(3) If your word ends in *'-al' or '-au'* in the singular, you usually add an *'-x'* to form the plural:

- *un journal → des journaux [a paper → papers]*
- *un tableau → des tableaux [a blackboard → blackboards]*

(4) If your word ends in *'-eu'* in the singular, you usually add an *'-x'* to form the plural:

- *un cheveu → des cheveux [a hair → hairs]*
- *un jeu → des jeux [a game → games]*

(5) Some words ending in *'-ou'* take an *'-x'* in the plural:

-un bijou → des bijoux [a jewel → jewels]

(6) Unfortunately, there are some very irregular plurals:

- *un oeil → des yeux [an eye → eyes]*
- *Madame → Mesdames [lady, madam (in an address) → ladies]*
- *Monsieur → Messieurs [gentleman (in an address) → gentlemen]*

Part 3: The definite and indefinite article

In parts 1 and 2 of this chapter, you already came across the small words *un, une, des, le, la, les* and *l'*. These small words that you always find before the noun are called **articles**. French distinguishes three types of articles based on meaning: indefinite articles (*articles indéfinis*), definite articles (*articles définis*), and partitive articles (*articles partitifs*). For now, we will limit ourselves in this chapter to the indefinite and definite articles.
Articles, like nouns, have a gender and a number:

	Article défini (bepaald lidwoord)	**Article indéfini (onbepaald lidwoord)**
Masculin singulier (masculine singular)	*le père [the father]*	*un père [a fatjer]*
Féminin singulier (feminine singular)	*la mère [the mother]*	*une mère [a mother]*
Plural	*les enfants [the children]*	*des enfants [children][1]*

1. The indefinite article 'des' is not translated into English

(a) The **definite article** (*le, la, les*) is always translated into English as 'the' and it is used to refer to a specific/known thing or a specific/known person:

- ***le*** *médecin traitant:* ***the*** *attending physician*
- ***la*** *femme du Président :* ***the*** *President's wife*
- ***les*** *enfants du Roi :* ***the*** *King's children*

Note that the plural (*les*) does not indicate the gender of the noun! Furthermore, the definite article can also express a generality:

- **L*a*** *santé est importante. [Health is important.]*
- ***Les*** *animaux domestiques rendent notre vie supportable. [Pets make our life bearable.]*

If the articles *le* and *la* precede a word that begins with a vowel (or an 'unpronounced' *h*), the articles *la / le* change to *l'*. This procedure is called *l'élision*:

- *le homme* → ***l'****homme* [The 'h' in 'homme' is never pronounced.]

- *la heure* → ***l'*** *heure* [The 'h' is also never pronounced in this word. pronunciation → [l' eur]]
- *le aéroport [airport]* → ***l'****aéroport* [The word 'aéroport' begins with a vowel]

(b) The **indefinite article** has the singular forms *un, une* which are translated into English as 'a(n)', and in the plural, French uses the form *des* which does not have a direct translation in English (perhaps '*some*'). Compare the following sentences and their translations:

-J' achète UN pain → I'm buying a loaf of bread.
-J'achète UNE tartelette. → … a small tart
-J'achète DES pains / DES pommes → ...loaves of bread / apples
|_> ***English*** doesn't have a word for 'des', although you can use 'some'

The indefinite article indicates one or more 'examples' of a specific category. For example, with the expression *un boulanger* (a baker), we mean: any person who belongs to the group of bakers. The plural *des* refers to multiple people from a group. The expression *des boulangers* means that there are several (an indefinite number of) people who belong to the category/group of bakers

(c) If the articles *le* and *la* precede a word that begins with a vowel (or an 'unpronounced' *h*), the articles *la / le* change to *l'*. This procedure is called ***l'élision*****:**

- *le homme* → ***l'****homme* [The 'h' in 'homme' is never pronounced.]

- *la heure* → ***l'*** *heure* [The 'h' is also never pronounced in this word. pronunciation → [l' eur]]
- *le aéroport [airport]* → ***l'****aéroport* [The word 'aéroport' begins with a vowel]

(d) If the definite articles (*le* and *les* **not** *la* or *l'*!) appear with the prepositions *à* or *de*, these two words must be contracted into one word. This is called **contracted articles**, and below you will find the rules:

à + le => au	**à + les => aux**	**de + le => du**	**de + les => des**[1]
*-Je vais **au** bureau de police [*I am going to the police station.*]* *-Elle parle **au** professeur. [*She is talking with the teacher. *]*	*- Je vais **aux** Etats-Unis [*I am going to the U.S.*]* *- Elle pense **aux** enfants. [*She is thinking about the children. *]*	*-Elle parle **du** ministre [She is speaking with the minister. .]* *-C'est le livre **du** frère de Luc ? [*Is that the book of Luc's brother? *]*	*- Il se moque **des** professeurs [*He is laughing with the teachers. *]* *-Le prix **des** cigarettes sontinue d'augmenter.[* The price of cigarettes continues to rise. *]* 1. *Don't confuse this contracted article with the plural of the indefinite articles! There is a difference between* **je veux <u>des</u> croissants** *and* **je parle <u>des</u> croissants**. *Can you explain this difference?*

The forms *à la, à l', de la* and *de l'* are never contracted :

- Je *vais **<u>à la</u>** bibliothèque [I am going to the library.]*
- *Elle parle **<u>de la</u>** defaite de son équipe.[She is talking about her team's defeat.]*