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How Confusing!

by Bendi Benson Schrambach

THE FRENCH ARE NEVER CONFUSED. Is this because of an extraordinary mineral found in the *escargot*? Is it due to special “revelations” poured out upon those who regularly consume red wine? Is it the consequence of an educational system steeped in Cartesian rationalism? Nay, it is none of these. The French are never confused because they cannot be, since the adjective “*confus/e/s*” is not employed in French to describe a person’s mental state. Directions might be confusing, explanations cloudy, a passage of text confounding, but a perplexed human being can never be “*confus*.” It is simply syntactically impossible.

Things, on the other hand, may be *confus*. Late seventeenth century archbishop and poet François Fénelon somewhat ironically used this adjective to describe the French language itself, which was, according to him, a confluence of disparate and sometimes muddled linguistic influences: “Notre langue n’est qu’un mélange de grec, de latin et de tudesque, avec quelques restes confus de gaulois” (49). Symbolist poet Charles Baudelaire likewise employed this adjective to describe language. Yet in his famous sonnet, “Correspondances,” it is not the language of the Gauls but the words uttered by nature’s “living pillars” that are thus described:

La nature est un temple où de vivants piliers
Laissent parfois sortir de confuses paroles;
L'homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles
Qui l'observent avec des regards familiers. (11)

When the adjective *confus* is used in reference to a *person*, however, its meaning changes. A human designated as *confus* is not “confused,” but rather, according to the online dictionary WordReference, “sorry” or “embarrassed.” Novelist Anna Gavalda illustrates the former denotation of the French adjective in *Je l'aimais*:

J'avais envie d'une cigarette. C'était idiot, je ne fumais plus depuis des années.
Oui mais voilà, c'est comme ça la vie [...] Vous faites preuve d'une volonté
formidable et puis un matin d'hiver, vous décidez de marcher quatre kilomètres
dans le froid pour racheter un paquet de cigarettes ou alors, vous aimez un
homme, avec lui vous fabriquez deux enfants et un matin d'hiver, vous apprenez
qu'il s'en va parce qu'il en aime une autre. Ajoute qu'il est confus, qu'il s'est
trompé. Comme au téléphone: “Excusez-moi, c'est une erreur.” Mais je vous en
prie. (34)

Jean Rostand, twentieth-century biologist and member of the illustrious Académie
française, exhibits the latter definition in his *Pages d'un moraliste*: “Vis-à-vis de qui nous

loue, nous nous sentons à la fois gênés comme son supérieur et confus comme son obligé” (Citations et Proverbes).

It is likely that many a student of French has incited confusion (forgive the pun) in Francophone collocutors by the misappropriation of the adjective *confus*. The English cognate understandably invites misuse by beginners. My anecdotal experience as a teacher of the language has revealed that, unless I spend class time to explain this *faux ami*, a student will inevitably erroneously declare, “*Je suis confus/e!*” at some point in the semester. The challenge, then, is to find a literal equivalent in French. For, unfortunately, Americans seem to be perpetually confused. At least, the prevalence of this word in English—both in and outside of the French classroom—makes it appear so.

Americans are relatively quick to assign the label of confusion. Like a “Get out of Jail Free” card, confusion can be a means of discharging our obligation. We find a foolproof alibi in the vagueness confusion evokes. Both obscure and ambiguous, it exempts us from further inquiry. Consider the strategic use of this adjective by notorious American figure Lizzie Andrew Borden when on trial for patricide: “I don’t know what I have said. I have answered so many questions and I am so confused I don’t know one thing from another. I am telling you just as nearly as I know” (BrainyQuote). Her confusion, suggestive of mental weakness, exculpates her from the exertion of trying to remember, reason or rationalize. There is no use probing for additional information when the witness is confused!

Similarly, some students, under the duress of public inquisition, take refuge in an avowal of confusion. They would rather make a plea of “guilty” (of witlessness) than go to trial in an effort to prove their “innocence” (a.k.a. mental prowess) at the high cost of

rational exertion. Confusion becomes a figurative throwing in of the towel, a bowing out of the race, a raising of the white flag of surrender.

It is indeed notable that the French do not have a similar term.

Admittedly, according to popular usage, confusion *chez l'anglophone* is not always caused by intellectual weakness. It is sometimes the result of (the deliberate or unintentional ineptitude of) others. Celebrated journalist Bob Woodward once blamed media professionals for contributing to public confusion: "I think that everyone is kind of confused about the information they get from the media and rightly so. I'm confused about the information I get from the media" (BrainyQuote). English speakers can and do sometimes blame others for their befuddlement.

Confusion in America has even been touted as beneficial in some circumstances. Actor Dick York seemed to embrace this state when he quipped: "Fortunately, I was supposed to look confused and disoriented because, God, I felt that way" (BrainyQuote). While his portrayal of Darrin Stevens in the long-running television series, *Bewitched*, aptly represented the baffled character of this fictional persona, his suggestion that there are advantages to a lack of mental clarity would likely shock French sensibility.

Yet confusion in America appears quite common. Famous World War II reporter Edward R. Murrow endeavored to comfort the public by claiming that confusion was to be expected under the circumstances, reassuring them that, "Anyone who isn't confused really doesn't understand the situation" (Thinkexist). According to Murrow's formulation, confusion can be part-and-parcel of normal understanding. Oblivious to social hierarchies, Anglophone confusion is not a respecter of persons. It is as likely to affect the rich and famous as the poor and downtrodden. Actress Winona Ryder lamented

that, “You can’t pay enough money... to cure that feeling of being broken and confused” (Thinkexist). All may fall victim to its indiscriminating fury. Immortalizing the prevalence of confusion in the American psyche, Neil Diamond’s popular song, “Amazed and Confused,” suggests that confusion is simply part of the human condition that must be endured:

Somebody’s waitin’ on the River Jordan.
Somebody’s waitin’ on the other side.
I cast my stones on the way to Heaven,
But on the way you know that I will abide.
Yes, on the way you know that I will abide.
Yeah, walk that line boy.
I’m amazed, I’m confused,
I’ve been dazed, (yeah), I’ve been used... (Lyrics.Time)

According to these American icons, confusion is just part of existence, an inherent feature of our fragile humanity.

But *confus* is not the proper adjective to employ when endeavoring to convey this sentiment in French class. What adjective, then, should the student use to communicate misunderstanding when suffering from grammatical despair? Perhaps the best French approximation of the American notion of “confused” when assigned to a person is “*troublé/e*,” past participle of the verb *troubler*. According, again, to WordReference, definitions of this verb include:

1. (*brouiller*) to make [sth] cloudy, to cloud [*eau, vin*]; to blur [*vue, image*];
2. (*déranger*) to disturb [*silence, sommeil, personne*]; to disrupt [*réunion, spectacle*];
~ *l'ordre public [individu]* to cause a breach of the peace; [*groupe d'insurgés*] to disturb the peace; *en ces temps troublés* in these troubled times;
3. (*déconcerter*) to disconcert [*accusé, candidat*]; *quelque chose me trouble (rendre perplexe)* something's bothering or puzzling me;
4. (*mettre en émoi*) *liter* to disturb *euph [personne]*.

Coming closest to our American understanding of confused is the third definition, which suggests “disconcerted” as a synonym for *troublé/e*—but only in the context of a defendant or a candidate, and not a nonspecific person. More generic usage of this term requires that the disconcerted or perplexed person become the direct object of the verb *troubler*. To repeat, a “disconcerted” or confused person cannot be the subject of the sentence as in our English sentence, “I am confused.” One possible illustration of this usage for our students might be, “*La grammaire française me trouble.*”

According to the fourth meaning of *troubler*, a person described as *troublé* is perturbed. While not a suitable substitute for “confused,” this definition might also be useful in French class. I might even suggest it students wanting to label their state of emotional anguish when challenged by the nebulous nuances of the subjunctive (i.e. “*Que vous êtes troublés!*”).

The French, *confus*? Never! They are not confused because their grammar, developed in symbiosis with their culture over centuries, does not allow them to be. Yes,

they might doubt and waiver. They might remain uncertain about a deduction, conclusion, or course of action. They might even be troubled in spirit as they try to recollect proper subjunctive usage. Yet, they cannot blame their misgivings on confusion. It is simply morphologically impossible. It would be like saying that French teachers are *b6urwq&>b*; the word simply does not exist.

This lexical detail explains much about French composure or *sang-froid*. Indeed, the result of this seemingly trivial semantic idiosyncrasy (when compared to English) might be at least in part responsible for what Americans, who, in contrast to the French and by their own admission are often confused, have interpreted as extreme self-assurance and even French *snobisme*. It is, therefore, a linguistic—and cultural—lesson that must be shared with our students.

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