French to English Phrases: A Military Perspective

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FRENCH TO ENGLISH PHRASES: A MILITARY PERSPECTIVE

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PART ONE: BACKGROUND

1.0 Introduction

As much as 30% of the English language, approximately one in three English words, is believed to be derived directly from the French language.

It is a surprisingly high figure due, in part, to the Norman Conquest of 1066 which made French the language of the government, law, finance, the military and the ruling classes in England. It effectively doubled the English vocabulary overnight.

However, the popularity of French culture and French literature among English speakers has also given the English language a whole host of other words and phrases such as mardi gras, avant garde, déjà vu and femme fatale that are now so naturalised in English that they can be used without a second thought.

Alongside everyday examples like these, however, the English language has also adopted a number of much less familiar French phrases that, despite their potential usefulness, go tragically underused.

The aim of this article is to twofold:

1. Outline the impact of the French language on the English language; and
2. From a military perspective, present some of the words, phrases and expressions in use.

So, why not add a little je ne sais quoi to your everyday (military) conversation with some little- and well-known French phrases and expressions?

1.1 The Impact of French on English: Language of the Ruling Classes

The main period for the introduction of French words into the English language was after the Norman Conquest of 1066.

For the next 300 or so years, the language of the royal court, and therefore of authority, was Norman, a variety of French.

The ruling classes spoke what came to be known as Anglo-Norman, while the rest of the population (i.e. the peasantry) continued to speak English.

French quickly became the language of law and government and this continued until, approximately, the end of the 14th century when English reasserted itself as the language of authority. However, the French language had made its mark on the English language, and many of its words remain in use in English today. Therefore, it is no surprise that many English words relating to government, law, money and warfare come from French. Here are just a few:

- Attorney from the Old French atourné.
- Fee from the original French word fie, 14th Century.
Finance from finer to end or settle by payment.
Guard from garde, 15th Century.
Inherit from Old French enheriter, 14th Century.
Jail from Old French jaiole (meaning cage), 13th Century.
Jury from Old French juree, originally from jurer (meaning to swear), 14th Century.
Lieutenant from Old French, literally (meaning place-holding), 14th Century.
March from Old French, from Latin Martius (month) of Mars.
Medal from French médaille, probably from Italian medaglia, ultimately from Latin metallum (meaning METAL), 16th Century.
Mutiny from obsolete mutine, from Old French mutin (meaning rebellious), from meute (meaning mutiny), ultimately from Latin movère (meaning to move), 16th Century.
Parliament from Anglo-Latin parliamentum, from Old French parlement, from parler to speak, 13th Century.
Royal from Old French roial, from Latin régālis, (meaning fit for a king), from rēx (meaning king), 14th Century.
Soldier from Old French soudier, from soude (army pay), from Late Latin solidus (a gold coin), 13th Century.
Treaty from Old French traité, from Medieval Latin tractātus (meaning treaty), 14th Century.
### PART TWO: DESCRIBING THE WORDS

#### 2.0 From French to English

Table 1 provides translations of the French words discussed within the article; note that the French For (column two) refers to the military usage of the word.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>French For</th>
<th>Can Also Be Translated As</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coup</td>
<td>Blow</td>
<td>Shot, kick, stroke, hit and move.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>de</td>
<td>Of</td>
<td>des, d’ or du.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main</td>
<td>Hand</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grâce</td>
<td>Mercy</td>
<td>Beauty, pardon, blessing, reprieve and charm.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foudre</td>
<td>Lightning</td>
<td>Thunder.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tour</td>
<td>Tower</td>
<td>Tour, round, turn, lap, ride, trick, lathe, spin and walk.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Force</td>
<td>Strength</td>
<td>Force or power.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Major</td>
<td>Superior.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(relating to size, not the military rank)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Majeure</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fait</td>
<td>Fact</td>
<td>Done or made.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accompli</td>
<td>Accomplished</td>
<td>Done, achieved, completed, fulfilled or performed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourager</td>
<td>Encourage</td>
<td>Foster, support and urge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autre</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reculer</td>
<td>Step back</td>
<td>Turn back, move back, retreat, recede and recoil.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mieux</td>
<td>Better</td>
<td>Best.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sauter</td>
<td>Jump</td>
<td>Skip, leap, pop, jump up, blow and blow up.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2.1 Learning about the Word Coup

The word ‘coup’, meaning a sudden bold and/or brilliant act, also serves as a truncation of ‘coup d’état’ and comes from the French word coup, meaning ‘stroke’ or ‘blow’; ultimately, it is from the Greek term kolaphos (meaning a blow or slap) by way of the Latin borrowing colaphus (meaning a cuff or box on the ear) (Harper, 2016).

There are a number of terms utilising the word coup which have military connotations, including (Dictionnaire Linguee, 2016a):

- Coup de feu: gunfire.
- Coup de fusil: gunshot.
- Coup de fouet: strong boost.
- Coup de pied: punt.
- Coup bas: low blow.
- Coup de canon: cannon fire.
- Attraper un coup de soleil: get sunburnt.
- Coup fatal: death blow.
- Jeter un coup d’oeil: have a look.
- Coup mortel: final blow or fatal blow.
- Donner un coup de bec: peck.
- Coup sèvère: crushing blown.
- Sale coup: dirty trick.
- Coup double: double shot.
- Beaucoup: a French term meaning ‘many or a great number’, which entered general usage in American English by way of military personnel who had served in Vietnam, which had until recently been part of French Indochina (Nichol, 2014).
PART THREE: DESCRIBING THE PHRASES

3.0 Introduction

Table 2 provides translations of the French phrases discussed in this Section of the article; note that the English translation (column two) refers to the military usage of the phrase.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>French Phrase</th>
<th>English Translation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coup D'état</td>
<td>Military coup</td>
<td>A sudden illegal, often violent, taking of government power, especially by part of an army.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coup de Main</td>
<td>Helping hand</td>
<td>An offensive operation that capitalises on surprise and simultaneous execution of supporting operations to achieve success in one swift stroke.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coup de Grace</td>
<td>A final or decisive stroke</td>
<td>An action that ends something that has been gradually getting worse, or that kills a person or animal in order to end their suffering.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coup de Foudre</td>
<td>A lightning flash or thunderbolt</td>
<td>A sudden and amazing action or event.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tour de Force</td>
<td>Tower of strength</td>
<td>An achievement or performance that shows great skill and attracts admiration.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Force Majeure</td>
<td>Major force</td>
<td>Chance occurrence, unavoidable accident.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fait Accompli</td>
<td>Done deal</td>
<td>Accomplished fact.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pour Encourager Les Autres</td>
<td>In order to encourage the others.</td>
<td>Often used ironically.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reculer pour Mieux Sauter</td>
<td>To give way a little in order to take up a stronger position.</td>
<td>Step back for a better jump.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.1 Coup d'état

Coup d'état means a group of people seize power in a country, and in a literal translation from French means stroke concerning the state (Dictionary.com, 2016b), stroke of state (Collins, 2016a) or blow to the government (Hirsch et al., 2002).

A coup d'état can also be known as:

- A coup;
- A military coup;
- A constitutional coup;
- An overthrow;
- A takeover;
- A putsch;
- A rebellion;
A seizure of power; or
A palace revolution.

From a military perspective, a coup d’etat can be defined in a number of ways:

- A sudden violent or illegal seizure of government (Collins, 2016a).
- A sudden and decisive action in politics, especially one resulting in a change of government illegally or by force (Dictionary.com, 2016a).
- The sudden, violent overthrow of an existing government by a small group (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2016).
- A sudden illegal, often violent, taking of government power; especially by part of an army.
- A quick and decisive seizure of governmental power by a strong military or political group.

The chief prerequisite for a coup is control of all or part of the armed forces, the police and any other military or paramilitary elements.

However, unlike a revolution, which is usually achieved by large numbers of people (in a mass uprising) working for basic social, economic and/or political change, a coup is a change in power from the top that merely results in the abrupt replacement of leading members of the government. Typically, a small group of politicians or generals arrests the incumbent leaders, seizes the national radio and television services, and proclaims itself in power.

A coup rarely alters a nation’s fundamental social and economic policies, nor does it significantly redistribute power among competing political groups.

Among the earliest modern coups were those in which Napoleon Bonaparte overthrew the Directory on 09 November 1799 and also Louis Napoleon who dissolved the assembly of France’s Second Republic in 1851.

Coups were a regular occurrence in various Latin American nations in the 19th and 20th centuries, and in Africa after those countries gained independence in the 1960s.

### 3.2 Coup de Main

Coup de main means a surprise attack or a sudden development, and in a literal translation from French means blow from the hand (Dictionary.com, 2016b) or blow with the hand (Collins, 2016b). The phrase can also be translated as helping hand (Dictionnaire Linguee, 2016b).

From a military perspective, a coup de main can be defined in a number of ways:

1. “An offensive operation that capitalises on surprise and simultaneous execution of supporting operations to achieve success in one swift stroke.” (US Army, 2004, p.1-48);
2. “An attack that achieves complete surprise.” (Collins, 2016b); or
3. A swift attack that relies on speed and surprise to accomplish its objectives in a single blow.
However, coup de main originally meant “par attaque directe plutôt que par l’artillerie” or by direct attack rather than by artillery (Academie Francaise, 1765, p.291).

A well-known example of a coup de main is Operation Deadstick, part of Operation Tonga which was the codename for the British Airborne landings in Normandy in World War II. Operation Deadstick was the codename for an operation by British Airborne forces that took place on 06 June 1944. The objective of the operation was to capture, intact, two road bridges in Normandy that crossed the River Orne (Ranville Bridge) and Caen Canal (Bénouville Bridge) which provided the only exit eastwards for the British forces from their landing zone on Sword beach.

Intelligence reports suggested that both bridges would be heavily defended by the Germans, and were wired for demolition. Once the bridges were reached and captured, the para’s would need to successfully hold the bridges against any counterattacks until relieved by other British forces advancing from the landing zone.

Failure to capture the bridges intact, or to prevent their demolition by the Germans, would leave the British 6th Airborne Division cut off from the rest of the Allied armies, and if the Germans retained control over the bridges they could be used by their armoured divisions to attack the landing zones.

The assault force was composed of a reinforced company of six Infantry platoons (D Company of the 2nd (Airborne) Battalion, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, 6th Airlanding Brigade, 6th Airborne Division) and an attached platoon of Royal Engineers. Flying from the South of England, six gliders delivered the assault force and after a brief exchange of fire, “took just 10 minutes to take the bridges.” (This is Cornwall, 2009). The assault force then successfully defended against a number of counterattacks until relieved by advancing British forces.

The Bénouville Bridge was renamed Pegasus Bridge after the emblem of the British airborne forces and the Ranville Bridge was renamed the Horsa Bridge (This is Cornwall, 2009). The road across them is now known as the ‘Esplanade Major John Howard’, after the commander of the assault force.

Another example, again involving bridges and paratroopers, was the Battle of Fort Eben-Emael. This was a battle between Belgian and German forces that took place between 10 May and 11 May 1940, and was part of the Battle of Belgium and Fall Gelb (Case Yellow or Operation Yellow), the German invasion of the Low Countries and France.

An assault force of German paratroopers, known as Fallschirmjäger, was tasked with assaulting and capturing Fort Eben-Emael; a Belgian fortress whose strategic position and strong artillery emplacements dominated several important bridges over the Albert Canal. The easterly roads led into the Belgium heartland and the rest of the Low Countries, and German forces intended to use them to advance into Belgium.
Elements of the German airborne forces assaulted the fortress and disabled the garrison, and the artillery pieces inside it, whilst others simultaneously captured three bridges over the Albert Canal. Having disabled the fortress, the airborne troops were then ordered to protect the bridges against Belgian counterattacks until they linked up with ground forces from the German 18th Army.

Other examples of coup de main operations include:

- **Operation Rösselsprung (Knight’s Move):** was a combined airborne and ground assault by the German XV Mountain Corps and their allies on the Supreme Headquarters of the Yugoslav Partisans located in the Bosnian town of Drvar in the Independent State of Croatia during World War II. The operation was launched on 25 May 1944 and was aimed at capturing or killing Marshal Josip Broz Tito and destroying the HQ, support facilities and co-located Allied military missions. The airborne assault itself is also known as the Raid on Drvar. Although the operation achieved complete surprise, failures of intelligence sharing and contingency planning meant Tito, his principal HQ staff and allied personnel escaped.

- **The Tatsinskaya Raid:** was a Soviet armoured raid deep into the German rear conducted by 24th Tank Corps under the command of Major General Vasily Mikhaylovich Badanov in late December 1942, during the last phases of the Battle of Stalingrad (Operation Little Saturn). The raid was designed to force the Germans to divert forces attempting to relieve the 6th Army trapped in Stalingrad. The Soviet force captured its objective, the Luftwaffe’s airfield at Tatsinskaya, destroying over 72 aircraft on the ground, but was left cut off and without supplies. Despite the loss of most of the tank corps during the ensuing breakout, the raid was a great operational victory.

### 3.3 Coup de Grâce

Coup de grâce means a final, finishing or decisive stroke, and in a literal translation from French means a blow of mercy (Collins, 2016c; Dictionary.com, 2016c).

A coup de grâce can also be known as:

- A final blow;
- The clincher (informal) (slang);
- A kill;
- A knockout blow;
- A mortal blow;
- A deadly blow;
- A finishing blow;
- A fatal blow;
- A decisive blow;
- A quietus;
- A deathblow; or
- A mercy stroke.

From a military perspective, a coup de grâce can be defined in a number of ways:

- A mortal or finishing blow, especially one delivered as an act of mercy to a sufferer (Collins, 2016c).
- A death blow, especially one delivered mercifully to end suffering (Dictionary.com, 2016c).
An action that ends something that has been gradually getting worse, or that kills a person or animal in order to end their suffering.

Its use was to give the coup de grâce, the final blow, to the foe who would not surrender.

Originally referring to a merciful stroke putting a fatally wounded person out of misery or to the shot delivered to the head of a prisoner after facing a firing squad.

The loan phrase from French is useful in all sorts of contexts, for example, “it’s often used in reference to competitive sports to describe a move or a score that effectively ends the match, and it’s often used in reference to works of art, describing a novel touch that gives a work a strong finish.” (Grammarist, 2014).

Coup de grâce is French for stroke of grace. In French and in its early English use, the phrase usually referred to a blow meant to quickly end the misery of one who is mortally wounded. In English, the phrase is still occasionally used this way, but it is most often used figuratively.

Some English speakers, aware that some final consonants are dropped in French, overcompensate by dropping the final /s/ sound in grâce, making this sound like the French coup de gras (or strike of grease).

This mispronunciation is quickly becoming ubiquitous and is being popularised by the media. For example it occurs twice in Quentin Tarantino’s Kill Bill Volume 2.

### 3.4 Coup de Foudre

Coup de foudre means a sudden and amazing action or event, and in a literal translation from French means lightning flash (Collins, 2016d; Dictionary.com, 2016d) or thunderbolt (Dictionnaire Linguee, 2016c).

A contemporary meaning for coup de foudre is any sudden or unforeseen event, or perhaps idiomatically a bolt from the blue. Coup de foudre also has a figurative meaning which is love at first sight (Dictionary.com, 2016d); the most common usage.

### 3.5 Tour de Force

Tour de force means an achievement or performance that shows great skill and attracts admiration, and in a literal translation from French means a feat of skill or strength (Collins, 2016e; Dictionary.com, 2016e).

A tour de force can also be known as:

- A feat;
- Feat of strength;
- Considerable or marvellous feat;
- Stunt;
- Triumph;
- Masterpiece;
- Supreme example;
- Feather in one’s cap;
- Wonder or sensation;
3.6 Force Majeure

Force majeure means a major force, and in a literal translation from French means a superior force (Collins, 2016f; Dictionary.com, 2016f).

Force majeure can also be known as:

- Superior strength; or
- Vis major (Latin).

In principal, force majeure is a legal term meaning:

- An irresistible force or compulsion such as will excuse a party from performing his or her part of a contract (Collins, 2016f).
- An unexpected and disruptive event that may operate to excuse a party from a contract. (Dictionary.com, 2016f).

Force majeure is also known as cas fortuit (French) or casus fortuitus (Latin) meaning chance occurrence or unavoidable accident, and is a common clause in contracts that essentially frees both parties from liability or obligation when an extraordinary event or circumstance beyond the control of the parties, such as a war, strike, riot, crime, or an event described by the legal term act of God (hurricane, flood, earthquake, volcanic eruption, etc.), prevents one or both parties from fulfilling their obligations under the contract.

In practice, most force majeure clauses do not excuse a party's non-performance entirely, but only suspend it for the duration of the force majeure. As such, a force majeure is generally intended to include occurrences beyond the reasonable control of a party, and therefore would not cover:

1. Any result of the negligence or malfeasance of a party, which has a materially adverse effect on the ability of such party to perform its obligations;[4]
2. Any result of the usual and natural consequences of external forces (for example, predicted rain stops an outdoor event); and
3. Any circumstances that are specifically contemplated (included) in the contract.
4. Under international law, it refers to an irresistible force or unforeseen event beyond the control of a state making it materially impossible to fulfil an international obligation, and is related to the concept of a state of emergency.
Although force majeure is predominantly a legal term, it does have a military context (as alluded to in point 4).

In a military context, force majeure has a slightly different meaning. It refers to an event, either external or internal, that happens to a vessel or aircraft that allows it to enter (normally) restricted areas without penalty.

An example of a military force majeure would be the Hainan Island incident where a US Navy aircraft landed at a Chinese military airbase after a collision with a Chinese fighter in 01 April 2001 (PBS, 2014). Under the principle of force majeure, the aircraft must be allowed to land without interference.

### 3.7 Fait Accompli

Fait accompli means a done deal, and in a literal translation from French means an accomplished fact (Collins, 2016g; Dictionary.com, 2016g).

Fait accompli can also be known as:

- A thing already done; or
- A given fact.

Fait accompli can be defined in a number of ways:

- Something already done and beyond alteration (Collins, 2016g).
- The enemy’s defeat was a fait accompli long before the formal surrender. (Dictionary.com, 2016g).
- Something that has already been done or occurred.
- The battalion commander did not discuss the attack with the divisional commander; instead the plan was put into effect and presented to the division as a fait accompli.
- A thing that has already happened or been decided before those affected hear about it, leaving them with no option but to accept it.
- Often said of something irreversible and/or performed without going through standard procedure, completed before those affected by it are in a position to query or reverse it.
- An accomplished, presumably irreversible deed or fact.

### 3.8 Pour Encourager Les Autres

The expression ‘pour encourager les autres’ meaning so as to encourage the others is an ironic expression (Jones, 2014; Collins, 2016h). Ironic because it actually refers to an action performed in order to discourage any future unrest or rebellion.

Jones (2014), tells us the expression was first used in this context by French journalists in the 18th century following the execution of John Byng, a British Admiral.

After a long and well-respected naval career, Admiral Byng was brought home to be tried by court-marshal by the Royal Navy in 1757 for breach of the Articles of War; citing he had not done enough
to prevent the French from invading the British-held island of Minorca in the Western Mediterranean.

The Articles of War - which had recently been revised to mandate capital punishment for officers who did not do their utmost against the enemy, either in battle or pursuit – were revised following an event in 1745 during the War of the Austrian Succession, when a young Lieutenant named Baker Phillips was court-martialled and shot after his ship was captured by the French.

His Captain had done nothing to prepare the vessel for action and was killed almost immediately by a broadside. Taking command, the inexperienced junior officer was forced to surrender the ship when she could no longer be defended. The negligent behaviour of Phillips’s Captain was noted by the subsequent court martial and a recommendation for mercy was entered, but Phillips’ sentence was approved by the Lords Justices of Appeal.

This sentence angered some in parliament, who felt that an officer of higher rank would likely have been spared or else given a light punishment, and that Phillips had been executed because he was a powerless junior officer and thus a useful scapegoat. The Articles of War were amended to become one law for all: the death penalty for any officer of any rank who did not do his utmost against the enemy in battle or pursuit.

Some suggest the charges brought against Admiral Byng were trumped-up and politically motivated (Jones, 2014), but others dispute this (Cavendish, 2007).

Although acquitted of personal cowardice and disaffection, Admiral Byng was convicted of “failing to do his utmost” (Cavendish, 2007). As the court-martial had no discretion over punishment under the Articles of War, it therefore condemned Admiral Byng to death. However, the court-martial recommended that the Lords of the Admiralty ask King George II to exercise his royal prerogative of mercy.

The British government ignored the court's unanimous recommendation to mercy and George II declined to use his prerogative to spare Admiral Byng. Consequently, on 14 March 1757, Admiral Byng was executed by firing squad on board his own ship in Portsmouth Harbour.

Voltaire, in Candide (1987, p.90), when visiting Portsmouth and asking about Admiral Byng’s death is told:

“...but in this country it is a good thing to kill an admiral from time to time to encourage the others.”

An old Chinese proverb provides a similar message 'hang one, warn a thousand', and the person answering Voltaire's question may have been right according to Rodger’s (2004, p. 272), a naval historian:
“A culture of aggressive determination which set British officers apart from their foreign contemporaries, and which in time gave them a steadily mounting psychological ascendancy. More and more in the course of the century, and for long afterwards, British officers encountered opponents who expected to be attacked, and more than half expected to be beaten, so that [the latter] went into action with an invisible disadvantage which no amount of personal courage or numerical strength could entirely make up for.”

Although Clowes & Markham (1996, p.278) argue against this:

“Far from encouraging anyone at all, this judicial murder had the opposite effect.”

Understandably, the entire situation proved hugely controversial in England and, at the height of Britain’s Seven Years’ War against France, became a major news story and source of much anti-British propaganda all across Europe.

### 3.9 Reculer Pour Mieux Sauter

If you reculer pour mieux sauter, then you literally ‘draw back in order to leap better.’ (Jones, 2014).

The phrase can also be translated as:

- To draw back in order to make a better jump;
- To run back in order to give a better jump forwards;
- To give way a little in order to take up a stronger position.

The phrase, derived from an old French proverb, is used figuratively in both French and English to refer to a temporary withdrawal or pause in action that allows for time to regroup or reassess a situation, and therefore make a better attempt at it in the future.

Although, as noted in a forum on WordReference.com (2008) discussing the phrase, the context of the sentence is also important.
PART FOUR: MISCELLANEOUS

4.0 Summary

This article has outlined the impact of the French language on the English language, noting its effect on the language of the government, law, finance, the military and the ruling classes in England after the Norman Conquest of 1066.

The article has also highlighted how the English language has adopted a number French phrases that, despite their potential usefulness, go tragically underused. It has also defined their meaning and presented contextual statements to demonstrate their linguistic versatility.

Finally, the article has presented a variety of phrases and expressions in use, from a military perspective.

*bonne nuit vieux soldat*

4.1 Useful Books and Papers

- Hegemony Constrained: Evasion, Modification, and Resistance to American Foreign Policy by Davis B Bobrow published in 2008 by University of Pittsburgh Press. Fait accompli mentioned on pages 14, 96, 97 and 120.

4.2 Useful Links


4.3 References


