

# Dyslexia and French as a Second Language

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## Dyslexia and French as a Second Language

### The difficulties of the French language

Recent studies reveal differences in the brains of dyslexic people<sup>1</sup>. These differences would explain the difficulties they experience reading and writing. My experience as a therapist working with dyslexic people over the past 10 years has shown me that in addition to this baseline difficulty among dyslexic people, there is a form of dyslexia that can further complicate the learning of the French language.

French is generally considered one of the most difficult languages to master, in particular in terms of its spelling, which is fraught with anomalies. For example, there are “all the consonants sometimes doubled, sometimes not. For example: *aggraver* and *agrandir*, *apparaître* and *apercevoir*, *bannir* and *banal*, (...) *courrier* and *coureur*, (...) *combattant* and *combatif*, (...) *colonne*, *colonel*, *colline*, (...) *personnel* and *personalisme*, (...) *résonner* and *résonance*, *rationnel* and *rationalisme* (too much!), *trappe* and *attrape*, *courir*

and *mourir* but *nourrir* and *pourrir*, etc.”<sup>2</sup>. These words from Paul Valéry say it all.

I will not even get into our spelling, unhappily fixed, in ignorance and absurdity, by 17<sup>th</sup> century pedants and which has continued ever since to *despair* the foreigner and vitiate the pronunciation of our words. Its very strangeness makes it a kind of *social test*: in France, they who write as they pronounce are looked down upon compared to they who write unlike they pronounce<sup>3</sup>.

There is no doubt that a reform of the French language to make spelling more phonetic would help many write better. But let us not hold our breath for this desired change. What can we do in the meantime?

Aside from French spelling which does not correspond to its phonetics, the absence of tonic accent on each word in a sentence or nominal group further complicates understanding. For example, the nominal group ‘trois beaux enfants’ becomes one *phonetic word* (troibozanfan). Because of this, out of context it can be impossible to understand by ear where the separations between words occur, as in ‘il est tout vert’ and ‘il est ouvert’<sup>4</sup>.

Such is not the case in the English language, where each word is emphasised. Pronouncing the nominal group ‘three nice children’, each word has a tonic accent, and it becomes possible to perceive three different words by ear. In short, the French language is especially designed for the eye, and the English language, for the ear.

People with visual dyslexia (dyseidesia) are particularly handicapped when learning French. Because of the deficits associated with this type of dyslexia, they can only read and write certain words by approaching the language auditively; that is, by focusing solely on its phonetics. But the French language is 80% visual. Would it be more beneficial therefore for these people to learn English, which is by comparison a phonetic language? On the other hand, might people with auditory dyslexia (dysphonesia) be benefitted by adopting the opposite strategy, that is, to go from English to French for analogous reasons? Indeed, the phonetic advantage of English is lost on people who cannot segment words into phonemes or sound units. Furthermore, the spelling of irregular French words has the peculiarity of generally presenting in words where “unnecessary letters give a unique look to words that identify them at a glance. For example: ‘*vos, veau, vault*’”. These words are very useful for people with auditory dyslexia.

Whether they perceive the word as a unit of meaning or as a sound element, all dyslexics need special education in order to understand the word as combining graphic, auditory, grammatical and semantic elements<sup>6</sup>. A judicious choice of the language can facilitate this process.

	Could this problem explain the high dropout rate in Quebec? Could this problem explain the insurmountable difficulty faced by senior officials who, having mastered their native language, cannot fulfill the requirements of bilingualism?
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### References

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- <sup>2</sup> Leconte, Jacques and Cibois, Philippe, *Que vive l'orthographe!* Paris, Seuil, 1989, p. 36.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.
- <sup>4</sup> Hagiwara, Michio P., Politzer, Robert L., *Continuons à Parler: A Workbook*, Waltham, Massachusetts, Blaisdell Publishing Company, A Division of Ginn and Company, 1967, p.116, 117.
- <sup>6</sup> Brazeau, Louise, *Ibid.*, p. 5.