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English words and nuances that don't exist in French

There are about six times more words in the English language than in French. As of 2021, the *Complete Oxford Dictionary* had 600,000 unique words against 100,000 words (totalling 350,000 meanings) for the *Grand Robert* (the most complete French dictionary). The majority of the people only know from 15,000 to 30,000 words, and even good writers rarely know more than 50,000 words (in the same language). This gives you an idea of the huge diversity of vocabulary and nuances available to users of English.

Languages lacking such a diversity convey the same meanings by using words with a broader sense. The drawback with words having a too broad meaning or too many completely different meanings is that the language can become ambiguous. Imagine a language that did not distinguish bored from annoyed, or a leg from a foot. Well, such languages do exist. Being bored or annoyed are both *ennuyé* in French, and Japanese has no different word for leg and foot (*ashi*). Besides, Japanese notoriously possess countless homophones, that is words that sound the same phonetically but are spelled differently and have different meanings. English only has a few of them (e.g. dear vs. deer), but most of the time they have a different function (noun, verb, adjective), therefore avoiding confusion.

French language also has numerous homophones (e.g. *vert, vers, ver, verre, vair*) because of the silent last consonant and the different ways to write the same vowel sound. Spelling is the key to distinguishing meanings in French. However, like for Chinese characters in Japanese, this only works in writing, leaving oral language ambiguous.

Being bilingual in French and English, I have often had arguments about which of the two languages was “better” than the other. Native French speakers will always always plead the superiority of the French language, while native English speakers will deliver the eulogy for their language. It's only natural. People want to believe that the language of their upbringing and culture is the best in the world. Although I grew up with French as my first language, it has long been clear to me that English was richer, more flexible, more nuanced and less ambiguous than French. It hasn't been easy to convince my fellow French speakers of this claim. Their first reaction is usually to deny it or ask me for “proofs.” It is in this spirit that I thought of making a list illustrating how English typically has several words, sometimes adding nuances, sometimes affecting the formality level, when French only has one.

For example, English has three words derived from the same Latin root for the French *horrible* : horrible, horrific, horrendous, each with a slightly different meaning and usage. One could say that “horrific” is closer to *atroce* in French; but then English also has the word “atrocious.”

The genius of English is to combine the way of making adjectives from nouns and nouns from adjectives using both Romance and Germanic methods. Adjectives can therefore be constructed using the Germanic -ful (e.g. beautiful, doubtful) or the Romance -ous (beauteous, dubious), the Romance -ed (occupied, belated) or the Anglo-Saxon -y (busy, tardy), the Latin -able (probable) or the Germanic -ly (likely). Nouns can be made the Romance way in -tion (facilitation), -ty, (scarcity), -cy (accuracy) and -our (splendour) or with the Old English -ness (preparedness, redness) and -hood (likelihood, childhood), among others. Besides, English uses these with greater flexibility than any other language. Romance languages rarely created two nouns or two adjectives from the same root with a different ending just to convey an additional nuance. English often does it, as in appearance vs. apparition, gracious vs. graceful, barbaric vs. barbarous.

A French speaker (or most non-English speakers) could be forgiven for mistakenly using the word “consummation,” which is the act of consummating a marriage (meaning “having sex”) instead of “consumption” (of a product), for there is only one word for either meaning in French, *consommation*, like in most languages.

Another interesting example is how English often has distinct adjectives for positive and negative connotations. The French adjective *terrible* therefore translates either as “terrible” (negative) or “terrific” (positive). The English language has an abundance of near synonyms with different connotations, usages or levels of formality that few other languages possess.

English nuances lacking in French

Here are just a few examples of the great diversity of near synonyms in English that add nuances.

Verbs

- **annuler**: cancel, annul, nullify, rescind, void, overrule
- **effacer**: delete, erase, rub out, efface, clear, wipe
- **escalader**: scale, escalade, climb (up), clamber (up), scramble (up)
- **marcher**: walk, pace, march, tramp, trek, hike, troop, stomp, tiptoe, crawl, trespass, swagger, lumber, lurch, pound, shamble, shuffle, stagger, mince, strut
- **regarder**: look, watch, behold, regard, view, gape, gawk, gaze, glare, glance, glimpse, goggle, peek, peep, peer, rubberneck, stare
- **se promener**: amble, stroll, saunter, promenade
- **crier, hurler**: shout, yell, scream, screech, squawk, howl, whoop, cry
- **trembler, secouer, tressaillir**: dodder, flutter, jar, jerk, jitter, jog, joggle, jolt, quake, quaver, quiver, rock, shake, shimmer, shiver, shudder, teeter, totter, tremble, wobble
- **agiter, remuer**: agitate, flutter, jerk, jiggle, jog, joggle, jolt, jostle, shake, sway, wag, waggle

Adjectives, Adverbs

- **antérieur, précédent**: former, previous, anterior, preceding
- **suisant**: following, next, succeeding
- **cher, coûteux**: dear, expensive, costly, pricey
- **dernier, ultime**: last, latest, late, latter, rearmost, bottom, ultimate
- **faux**: wrong, mistaken, false, fake
- **rapide**: brisk, fast, quick, rapid, snappy, swift
- **surpris, déconcerté, perplexé**: aghast, baffled, befuddled, bewildered, confounded, confused, disconcerted, perplexed, puzzled, startled, surprised, taken aback
- **étonné, stupéfait**: amazed, astonished, astounded, dazed, dazzled, open-mouthed, stunned, stupefied
- **effrayé**: afraid, frightened, scared
- **affreux, abominable, atroce, horrible, épouvantable**: abominable, appalling, atrocious, awful, dire, dreadful, frightful, ghastly, gruesome, harrowing, hideous, horrible, horrific, horrendous, vile
- **étrange, bizarre**: bizarre, eerie, strange, odd, outlandish, uncanny, weird

Nouns

- **capacité**: capacity, capability, ability, skills
- **fil**: string, thread, wire, yarn
- **fou**: crazy, mad, foolish, insane, lunatic
- **maladie**: disease, illness, sickness, ailment, malady

Single French word vs. multiple English words with different meanings

Words with the same root and the same original meaning have sometimes acquired a quite different modern usage, or even a completely different meaning. French usually kept a single word with a broad meaning covering all the usages, whereas English selected or developed another word from the same root, or used both the Germanic and Latin words to differentiate them. For example, it is impossible to say in French “you can tame a lion, but not domesticate it” because the words “tame” and “domesticate” are the same (*domestiquer*). In a more extreme manner, French language does not make the difference between “excuse” and “apology,” so for a French speaker it would not make sense to say that someone expect an apology rather than an excuse (or the other way around).

- **améliorer**: enhance, improve, make/get better, ameliorate
- **antenne**: aerial, antenna
- **appeler**: call, appeal
- **arrêter**: stop, quit, arrest
- **blanc**: white, blank
- **bureau**: desk, office, bureau
- **chasser**: hunt, chase
- **conducteur**: driver, conductor
- **conduire**: drive, lead, conduct
- **connaissance**: knowledge, cognizance, acquaintance
- **conseil**: advice, council, counsel
- **consommation**: consummation, consumption
- **critique**: criticism (general usage, usually negative), critic (literary), critique (a detailed analysis and assessment of something)
- **début**: beginning, début
- **décharger**: unload, discharge
- **déranger**: disturb, derange
- **domestiquer**: domesticate, tame
- **ennui**: annoyance, bother, boredom, ennui
- **essai**: try, trial, probe, essay
- **expérience**: experience, experiment, experimentation
- **excuse**: excuse, apology
- **fête**: party, fête
- **fort**: strong, forcible, forceful
- **fournir**: provide, supply, furnish
- **fusion**: merger, fusion
- **garder**: keep, wake, ward, guard
- **gentil**: kind, gentle, genteel, Gentile
- **guérir**: heal, cure
- **histoire**: tale, story, history
- **informateur**: informant, informer
- **s'identifier**: sign in, log in
- **s'inscrire**: sign up, register
- **intimité**: privacy, intimacy
- **jeter**: throw, throw away, dispose, hurl, cast, jettison
- **lecture**: reading, lecture
- **manteau**: coat, mantel
- **merci**: thank, mercy
- **moustache**: whisker, moustache
- **phrase**: sentence, phrase
- **pleurer, pleurnicher**: cry, weep, wail, bawl, sob, whine

- **plume:** feather, plume, pen
- **prix:** rate, price, prize
- **politique:** politics, policy, political, politic
- **portefeuille:** wallet, portfolio
- **prévenir:** warn, prevent
- **queue:** tail, queue, cue
- **régime:** diet, regime, regimen
- **répéter:** repeat, rehearse
- **(se) retirer:** withdraw, retire
- **route:** road, route
- **sensuel:** sensual, sensuous, sultry
- **signification:** meaning, significance
- **soirée:** evening, soirée
- **sortie:** exit, sortie (as in military sortie)
- **souvenir:** remembrance, souvenir
- **télécharger:** download, upload
- **testament:** will, testament, legacy
- **trésor:** treasure, treasury, trove, hoard
- **valeur:** worth, valour
- **vendre:** sell, vend
- **violer:** rape, violate
- **voyage:** travel, trip, voyage
- **vue:** eyesight, sight, view

English tends to differentiate animal species more accurately than French. For example, different terms are used to distinguish species based on whether they have a tail or not, whether they are land/sea animals, or whether they are diurnal or nocturnal.

- **singe:** monkey, ape
- **papillon:** butterfly, moth
- **tortue:** tortoise, turtle

Single French word vs. multiple English words with different usages

Some words basically mean the same, but have a different usage. You could say “give money to charity,” but the proper usage is “donate.” Likewise, the usage is to say that a poem is profound, but a lake is deep.

- **adolescent:** adolescent, teenager, teen
- **adulte:** adult, grown-up
- **aggraver:** worsen, aggravate
- **agrandir:** enlarge, aggrandize
- **amoureux:** in love, enamoured, amorous
- **anniversaire:** birthday, anniversary
- **appurtenance:** belonging, appurtenance
- **avocat:** lawyer/attorney, advocate
- **boucle:** loop, buckle
- **bouger:** move, budge
- **cil:** eyelash, cilium
- **calme:** calm, quiet
- **chambre:** room, chamber
- **chiffre:** figure, digit, numeral
- **coeur:** heart, core

- **complet**: full, complete
- **cru**: raw, crude
- **demander**: ask, request, query, demand
- **dérangement**: disturbance, derangement
- **doigt**: digit, finger, toe (*doigt de pied*)
- **donner**: give, donate
- **douloureux**: painful, sorrowful, dolorous
- **education**: upbringing, education
- **égoцентриque**: self-centered, egocentric
- **égoïste**: selfish, egoistic
- **enfant**: child, kid, infant, toddler
- **enragé**: enraged, rabid
- **enterrer**: bury, entomb, sepulcher, inter
- **entier**: whole, entire
- **faible**: weak, feeble
- **fidélité**: faithfulness, fidelity
- **frontière**: border, boundary, frontier
- **gagner**: win, earn, gain
- **gentil**: kind, genteel
- **gratuit**: free, gratuitous
- **habitat**: housing, habitat
- **habitation**: dwelling, habitation
- **hangar**: warehouse, hangar
- **(in)humain**: (in)human, (in)humane
- **illumination**: enlightenment, illumination
- **journal**: newspaper, diary, journal
- **judiciaire**: judicial (decision, general), judiciary (system)
- **jugement**: judgment (general), adjudication (legal)
- **logement**: accommodation, housing, lodging
- **magicien**: wizard, magician (note that the French *sorcier* is sorcerer and *enchanteur* is enchanter)
- **maison**: house, home
- **mariage**: wedding, marriage
- **marié(e)**: bride, groom
- **merveilleux**: wonderful, wondrous, marvellous
- **nourrir**: feed, nourish
- **occuper**: busy, occupy
- **odeur**: smell, fragrance, odour
- **ouverture**: opening, aperture, overture
- **pâle**: pale, pallid
- **plonger**: dive, plunge
- **port**: harbour, port
- **précoce**: early, precocious
- **président**: chair, president
- **proposition**: proposition, proposal
- **profond**: deep, profound
- **propriétaire**: owner, proprietor, landlord, landowner, renter, householder
- **(se) rappeler**: remind, remember, recall
- **réponse**: answer, response, reply
- **résumer**: sum up, summarize, resume
- **revenu**: income, earnings, revenue
- **sac**: bag, sack
- **salaire**: wage, pay, stipend, salary

- **seul**: only, sole, alone, lone, lonely
- **souder**: weld, solder
- **silencieux**: quiet, muffler, silent
- **tardif**: late, overdue, deferred
- **tristesse**: sorrow, sadness
- **urgence**: emergency, urgency
- **vide**: empty, void
- **vrai, veritable**: true, truthful, veritable, genuine
- **zero**: zero, naught, nought, nil, love (tennis)

Some words have the same meaning and usage, but carry a different connotation:

- **caprice**: whim (neutral), caprice (negative)
- **solitude**: solitude (positive, neutral), loneliness (negative)
- **terrible**: terrific (positive), terrible (negative)
- **tiède**: lukewarm (neutral), tepid (negative)

Other words express a nuance in size or intensity:

- **chaud**: warm, hot
- **frais**: cool, fresh
- **ville**: town, city

Single French word vs. multiple English words with different formality level

Sometimes the extra English word(s) add little or no nuance. In that case the word with a Latin root usually more formal than the one with a Germanic root.

- **aider**: help, aid
- **alerte**: warning, alert
- **amitié**: friendship, amity
- **arme**: weapon, arm
- **augmenter**: increase, augment
- **avarice**: greed, avarice
- **belliqueux**: warlike, bellicose
- **cache**: hide, conceal
- **cape**: cloak, cape
- **cartographie**: mapmaking, cartography
- **céleste**: heavenly, celestial
- **cimetière**: graveyard, churchyard, burial ground, cemetery
- **comestible**: eatable, edible, comestible
- **cravate**: neck-tie, cravat
- **dentifrice**: toothpaste, dentifrice
- **embouchure**: (river) mouth, embouchure
- **facile**: easy, facile
- **fantôme**: ghost, phantom
- **fiançaille**: engagement, betrothal, espousal
- **fraternité**: brotherhood, fraternity
- **humanité**: mankind, humanitarian, humankind, homo sapiens
- **incroyable**: unbelievable, incredible, amazing
- **infatigable**: tireless, untiring, indefatigable
- **interdire**: forbid, prohibit, interdict

- **interminable**: endless, interminable
- **intestin**: bowel, gut, intestine
- **irritable**: cranky, testy, irritable
- **liberté**: freedom, liberty
- **lisible**: readable, legible
- **magistral**: masterly, magisterial
- **maintenir**: keep, hold, maintain
- **manteau**: coat, overcoat, manteau
- **maternité**: motherhood, maternity
- **menace**: threat, menace
- **menottes**: handcuffs, manacles
- **morose**: gloomy, morose
- **notoriété**: notoriety, awareness, popularity, name recognition
- **orthographe**: spelling, orthography
- **pardoner**: forgive, pardon
- **partir**: leave, depart
- **paternité**: fatherhood, paternity
- **permettre**: allow, permit
- **piller**: plunder, pillage
- **(se) plaindre**: bemoan, complain
- **potable**: drinkable, drinking, potable
- **probable**: likely, probable
- **progéniture**: offspring, progeny
- **puissant**: mighty, powerful, potent
- **publicité**: advertising, advertisement, commercial, publicity
- **rarement**: seldom, rarely
- **(se) rassembler**: gather, assemble
- **repas**: meal, repast
- **répit**: break, time-out, respite
- **respirer**: breath, respire
- **repousser**: push back, repulse
- **rester**: stay, remain
- **risible**: laughable, risible
- **sainteté**: holiness, sanctity
- **signification**: meaning, signification
- **sinistre**: bleak, dreary, sinister
- **sombre**: dark, sombre
- **somnambule**: sleepwalker, somnambulist
- **somnolence**: drowsiness, somnolence
- **tempête**: storm, tempest
- **tombe**: grave(stone), tomb(stone)
- **vapeur**: steam, vapour
- **visage**: face, visage