



10. Dealing with 'h' in French...

Learn about the two different types of h in French and how to use them correctly.

Elision and Liaison

Before we start let's make sure that we are clear on a couple of terms: elision and liaison.

- Elision = The elimination of a vowel when the next word also starts with a vowel (or *h muet*). We show the omission in French with an apostrophe. Example:

le + éléphant becomes l'éléphant



Listen to the above

- Liaison = Linking the normally unpronounced sound made by the final consonant of one word with the first vowel sound of the next word (including y and *h muet*). We are in effect adding a new syllable which smoothes the transition from one word to the next, aiding pronunciation. Example:

les_éléphants pronounced le-z-éléphants



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Pronouncing an h

Let's start with a nice simple rule: h is always silent in French.



Although silent when combined with a vowel, an h does affect the pronunciation of the word. Look at these letter combinations:

- c + h: English approximation = *sh* e.g. *chat*



Listen to 'ch' and *chat*

- p + h: English approximation = *f* e.g. *pharmacie*



Listen to 'ph' and *pharmacie*

- t + h: English approximation = *t* e.g. *théâtre*



Listen to 'th' and *théâtre*

'*h muet*': a silent h

An *h muet* is not pronounced and is treated more or less like a vowel. It allows elision and liaison.

Elision example:

- *l'hôpital*



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Liaison examples:

- *Les_hôpitalaux*
- *Ils_habitent*



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The good news is that a higher percentage of words starting with h are *h muet* words so if you have to make a guess try using the rules relating to *h muet*!

'*h aspiré*': an aspirated h

Unlike *h muet*, an *h aspiré* stops elision and liaison so in many ways, it acts like a consonant.

Examples of no elision:

- *le hérisson*
- *le haricot*
- *le héros*



Listen to the above

Examples of no liaison:

- *un hérisson*
- *les haricots*
- *le huit*



Listen to the above

Distinguishing ‘*muet*’ from ‘*aspiré*’

The bad news is that unfortunately there is no rule to identify words which have an *h aspiré* from words which have an *h muet*. It is generally the case that *h aspiré* words derive from Germanic languages where the h’s used to be pronounced. You will see from the list further down this *Boost* that a fair number of *h aspiré* words haven been borrowed from English, Dutch etc



In French dictionaries, words with an initial aspirated *h* are traditionally prefixed with an asterisk. In general, if you know that a word is borrowed from another language and starts with a pronounced h you can assume that it is an *h aspiré* word.

Examples of *h aspiré* nouns

This is not an exhaustive list but a selection of common *h aspiré* words to learn.

Nouns			
Masculine		Feminine	
le hamburger	hamburger	la haie	hedge
le haricot	green bean	la halle	hall
le hamster	hamster	la honte	shame
le hasard	chance/ accident	la housse	cover
le hibou	owl	la hanche	hip
le hérisson	hedgehog	la hotte de cuisine	oven hood
le huit	number eight		
le hurlement	howl/ yell		
le husky	husky		
le hurricane	hurricane		
le hardware	hardware		

Practice is the best way to proceed with words beginning with an h and when in doubt remember that a higher percentage of words starting with h are *h muet* words so try that first 😊