

Chanson&Grammaire : DANSER SANS COMPRENDRE par Steve Riley & the Mamou Playboys

LA GRAMMAIRE : the infinitive form of verbs ~ regular vs irregular verb conjugations in the present tense ~ the present progressive with après ~ some notes about language variation in Louisiana

In the previous *Chanson&Grammaire* exercises (*La Cheminée* & *Je m'endors*) you learned to conjugate the verbs *avoir* and *être*. When a verb isn't conjugated, we say that it's in the infinitive. We'll often translate this as "to (verb)":

parler to talk/speak	travailler to work	avoir to have	The 12 verbs in the left box are regular verbs. That means they follow a pattern when you conjugate them (walk+s=walks). The 6 in the middle box are irregular . Their forms change a lot "j' <u>s</u> us, il <u>est</u> , ils <u>son</u> t..." / "I <u>am</u> , he <u>is</u> , they <u>are</u> ..."
danser to dance	commencer to start	être to be	
chanter to sing	écouter to listen to	faire to do/make	
jouer to play	arriver to arrive	aller to go	
manger to eat	rester to stay/to live	dire to say	
oublier to forget	aimer to like/love	vouloir to want	

Let's look at the pattern that regular verbs follow. The 12 verbs in the regular verb box above are called regular -er verbs because the ending dictates how you change them.

First, you cut off the -er: **parler**. Then, when writing, you add the appropriate ending:

je parle (I speak)	il parle (he speaks)	ils parlent (they speak)
tu parles (you speak)	elle parle (she speaks)	or, ils parlont*
	on parle (we speak)	
vous parlez (you speak) formal	vous-autres parlez (y'all speak)	

Other forms:

eux-autres parlez (they speak) eusse parlez (they speak) ça parle it/that speaks OR they speak

*The -ont ending for *ils*, which we may sometimes call the "Acadian" ending, exists still in some parts of Louisiana. We call it "Acadian" because it can also be heard in some parts of Acadia. When learning new verbs, we'll generally focus on the "-ent" for several reasons: (1) it's more common in Louisiana, (2) it is understood better by International French speakers, and (3) it can often make conjugating simpler. Why does it make it simpler? Well... to understand that, we need to look at the differences between written and spoken language.

Written vs. spoken. As we touched on in *Chanson&Grammaire: Je m'endors*, French shares a pretty pesky habit with English: both languages make you write letters that you do not pronounce when speaking. So while the conjugations above seem to have several different spellings/endings. There's really only one of them that doesn't sound like the others.

(vous) parlez is pronounced the same as the unconjugated infinitive form, parler. (Both "par-lay")

All the other forms are pronounced the same: "parl"

That's right, for regular -er verbs like this, all the other forms sound the same when spoken: *parle*, *parles*, and even *parlent* are pronounced "parl". The -ent for *ils* is silent.** It is weird. We won't pretend it isn't. In times like this it is good to remember how weird English is, too. (Or should we say "to" ? Or maybe "two"? ←What? Why does this word have a W in it? ...You see what we're saying?)

Some verbs will have more variation than these very predictable regular -er verbs, but where appropriate we'll add a little 'sounds like' section like this:

Sounds like...

parler (to speak)	"par-lay"
(je) parle , (tu) parles , (il, elle, on, etc.) parle , (ils) parlent	"parl"
(vous) parlez	"par-lay"

**Note that the rarer 'Acadian' ending -ont is not silent and is pronounced as a nasal vowel:

ils parlont ("ee par-lonh")

I.P.A. = [i parlõ]

This same system works for the other regular -er verbs:

écouter (to listen to)	“ay-koo-tay”
écoute, écoutes, écoutent...	“ay-koot”
(vous) écoutez	“ay-koo-tay”
travailler (to work)	“tra-va-yay”
travaille, travailles, travaillent...	“tra-vye”
(vous) travaillez	“tra-va-yay”

Variation: There’s actually a number of people in Louisiana who pronounce the *vous* form just like the others: “parl,” “ay-koot,” etc. If someone wants to say “*Vous parlez français?*” they certainly can, but in these exercises we will always put the -ez form for *vous* for a few reasons: (1) there are Louisianians who say it this way, (2) it helps to learn it this way when you want to give commands to a group later on in your learning, and (3) it is used this way by French speakers around the world, and you’re more likely to be in a formal (*vous*) situation with a foreign stranger than with someone from your Louisiana community (We are pretty laid back, after all.)

Translating infinitives. Let’s get back to the infinitive form, the unconjugated form of the verb. When you are translating this form into English (out loud or simply working it out in your head) you might translate it as “to ____” or “____ing.” For example, *Elle aime voyager* could be “She likes to travel” or “She likes traveling.” In some cases, only one version sounds normal in English: *Je veux jouer* would be “I want to play” not “I want playing.” Translate it in the way that sounds the most natural to you.

Present progressive with “après”: In International French *je danse* could mean *I dance, I do dance, or I am dancing*. In Louisiana French, when we want to say that we are doing something right now we use the word *après*.

APRÈS + VERB IN THE INFINITIVE = (VERB)ING *Anna est après danser* = Anna is dancing.

On est après parler = We’re talking.

C’est ça j’sus après dire = That’s what I’m saying.

As you can see from the examples, you take the subject - *Anna, on, je* - you conjugate *être* for that subject and then you add *après* and the verb in the infinitive.

Pratiquez! Take these sentences in the present and make them progressive (is doing X) using *après*.

Ex: *Anna danse. (Anna dances.)* → *Anna est après danser.* *Answers at the bottom of the page.*

1. Je mange du gombo. (*I eat gumbo*) → _____
2. Cédric chante. (*Cedric sings*) → _____
3. T’écoutes KRVS? (*You listen to KRVS?*) → _____
4. Ils jouent aux cartes. (*They play cards*) → _____
5. Louise travaille. (*Louise works*) → _____
6. Eux-autres parle français. (*They speak French*) → _____

We think the song on the next page is a great one for Louisianians who are trying to reclaim their family’s heritage language, plus it has a few instances of the present progressive with *après*. Enjoy!

Answer key for the Pratiquez! section:

1. *J’sus après manger du gombo. (I’m eating gumbo.)*
2. *Cédric est après chanter. (Cedric’s singing.)*
3. *T’es après écouter KRVS? (You’re listening to KRVS?)*
4. *Ils sont après jouer aux cartes. (They’re playing cards.)*
5. *Louise est après travailler. (Louise is working.)*
6. *Eux-autres est après parler français. (They’re speaking French.)*

LA CHANSON

This song alternates between French and English and was co-written by Steve Riley and Louisiana poet Jean Arceneaux. When you listen to people sing things like “t’es après danser” or “j’sus après chanter” you may notice that at times people say the words together in a way that it almost becomes “t’après” or “j’après.” Other times, it might sound more clearly like separate words. We try to give you structure when you’re learning and things are new, but obviously things can always vary. As usual, there’s an answer key at the bottom.

LINK: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kzEOXWng0Wl>

Comment ça se fait

How come

J’sus après chanter, bébé

¹ _____, *baby*

In a language you don’t understand?

T’es après danser

You ² _____

Et t’amuser, jolie

And having fun, pretty one

While my words just echo across the land...

What’s at stake? What does it take?

C’est pas assez, danser sans comprendre. *It’s not enough,* ³ _____ *without understanding*

Tout l’temps en anglais

Always in English

Jamais en français, bébé

Never in French, baby

Can’t understand the boys in the band

Qui c’est toi, t’es?

Who are you?

Quoi c’est tu fais, jolie?

What do you do, pretty one?

Yeah, you just try to understand

What’s at stake? ... etc.

Answer key:

1. I’m singing 2. are dancing (You’re dancing) 3. dancing (or to dance, if you prefer)