



UNDERSTANDING REAL FAST FRENCH

AUTHENTIC FRENCH VS MOVIE FRENCH

Authentic, real everyday French is very different from the French you hear in movies, podcasts and TV Shows.

Why? Because when you have an audience (as actors or broadcasters do in podcasts or TV shows, for example), your French becomes more formal: more articulate and more elegant. And when it's actors performing, the conversations become successions of punchlines.

They are a fun way to enjoy French culture, but not a reliable and efficient way to improve your oral comprehension of everyday spoken French.

The thing is, when compared to the exciting dialogues of movies and podcasts, real everyday conversation is... less structured, less catchy, and often boring. Or, at least, it would be boring if you weren't interested in what's being discussed. In real conversations, we catch up on children's school news, our partners' promotions at work, and dogs' health. If you're talking to your best friend, son or neighbour, these are interesting things, because you care about them. But it's dialogue that's far too "boring" or uninteresting for entertainment like films or TV shows.

You'd never want to watch a scene where James Bond asks where the toilet is. Yet knowing how to ask "where are the toilets?" in another language is a very important skill.

See what I'm getting at? ;)

Conversations between 2 French people happen in fast French, with specific spoken French grammar, vocabulary that can be impossible to follow if you don't already know the backstory of each person. It's the same in your language, you're just NOT learning your language anymore. You're learning French.

This type of French is what makes 99% of everyday spoken French. The 1% is the French we use to make presentations at work, talk to a doctor or our mother-in-law: a more formal, polite, stiff French. Like textbook French. But as a learner, focusing on this 1% of the French language is not productive.



In order to improve your comprehension of fast spoken French, you probably watch movies in French, with or without subtitles, listen to podcasts (France Inter and France Culture have fantastic podcasts) and enjoy French programs (TV5 Monde is the francophone TV channel with great programs from all over the French-speaking world).

Great idea. However, movies, podcasts and TV programs won't help you to improve your comprehension of real everyday spoken French. It's a good start but it's just a taste of it.

Let's see how authentic French is different from movies, podcasts and TV programs with case studies from great modern French movies.

CASE STUDY #1: LE PRÉNOM

Le prénom is a French movie from 2012. In it, two couples and their childhood friend discuss which name will be given to one of the character's future baby boy. It starts as a game and ends in a family drama with a happy ending.

[Click here to watch the trailer of the French movie "Le prénom"](#).

(Link if you need to copy-paste it: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FX2ukwKgWlo>)

Can you spot how it's different from real life French?

Let's look at the dialogues in the trailer:

- **C'est la seule femme que je connaisse qui ait commencé à fumer pendant sa grossesse.**
- **C'est mauvais pour ton fils.**
- **Bah tu lui diras tout à l'heure.**
- **Mais il risque d'être tout petit !**
- **Et bah il sera jockey.**

It's the only woman I know who started smoking during pregnancy

It's bad for your son.

You'll tell her later.



*But he might be small.
He'll be a jockey, then.*

Difference #1: Punchlines only

Like many great comedy movies (such as the wonderful “Le dîner de cons” or “La cage aux folles”), “Le prénom” is an adaptation from a play. So, each line of dialogue is carefully crafted to be fun and clever and make the theatre audience laugh. This is unrealistic in real life. As you know even in English, conversation goes back and forth but isn't just punchlines. Nobody is that witty ;)

Note: I know this is just a trailer so they take all the good lines. But I saw the movie several times (it's one of my favourites) and it is full of similar dialogues. Hilarious and clever but unrealistic.

Difference #2: Perfect pronunciation

The actors are theater actors (We say “des comédiens” for theatre actors in French) so their pronunciation is absolutely perfect. This is not the case in real life where French people eat letters, and sometimes entire words, as we'll see in the scene from Amélie. Here's an example:

- **J'ai suivi ta recette. Oui oui. J'ai le plat entre les mains, il n'en reste plus une miette.**

I followed your recipe. Yes, yes. I have the dish in my hands, there's nothing left.

The character says “ta r'cette”, which is how it would be pronounced in real spoken French. But, she pronounced the “n” when saying “Il n'en reste plus une miette”. In real spoken French, this would be dropped as well. Saying it makes the dialogue clearer for the audience, but in real life, talking to her mother, she probably wouldn't have said it.

You can also notice the over-pronunciation in **”Tu penses que je suis homosexuel, c'est ça ?”**. He articulating too much too. In real life, he'd say “Tu pens'que j'suis homosexuel, c'est ça ?”

A closer look at Le Prénom

In the movie, the characters are rich intellectuals from Paris. The dialogues are written to suit this idealist image of high-end vocabulary that is not expected in



everyday life. It's at the heart of the movie too, as they called their children "Apollin" and "Myrtille", which are very very "bobo" names. (bobo = bourgeois bohème, rich intellectual lefties, often Parisians). Because **it's very well written and suited for theatre, the dialogues are gems**. They're just not realistic for everyday French conversations.

Case study #2: Amélie

Amélie is a very popular French movie from 2001. It's a beautiful and poetic story, set up in an idealised version of Paris. Amélie (Audrey Tautou) likes to fix the lives of people around her. At some point, she helps a man, Dominique (Maurice Bénichou), who doesn't know she's his "**ange gardien**". Right after finding his long lost box of childhood toys, he enters a café and becomes overwhelmed by memories and regrets. This is one of my favorite scenes of the movie.

[Click here to watch the photo booth scene from "Amélie"](#)

(Link if you need to copy-paste it: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vD0h-Nb5qhs>)

Let's look at the monologue starting at 2:07.

In this scene, we don't have a series of punchlines like in Le Prénom. It's a longer "conversation" and that's what I wanted to show you. Here's a transcript:

Cognac, s'il vous plaît.

C'est incroyable ce qu'il vient de m'arriver. Ca doit être mon ange gardien, c'est pas possible. C'est comme si la cabine m'appelait. Elle sonnait, elle sonnait elle sonnait.

[Attendez, justement, ya le micro-onde qui m'appelle.]

Je peux avoir encore un petit cognac ?

C'est drôle, la vie.

Quand on est gosse, la vie en finit pas de se trainer puis du jour au lendemain, on a comme ça, cinquante ans.

Et l'enfance, tout ce qu'il en reste, ça tient dans une petite boîte. Une petite boîte rouillée.

Vous avez pas encore d'enfants, mademoiselle ?



Moi, j'ai une fille. Elle doit avoir à peu près votre âge. Ca fait des années qu'on s'est pas parlés. Il paraît qu'elle a eu un enfant. Un garçon. Il s'appelle Lucas.

Je crois qu'il serait temps que j'aie leur rendre visite avant de finir à mon tour dans une petite boîte. Vous croyez pas ?

Can you spot how it's different from real life French?

Difference #1: This isn't a real conversation

Ok, so maybe in this scene that's quite obvious. It's way too dramatic. Fortunately, in life, we're very rarely as emotional as the character! It's a very special moment in his life. But not relatable in everyday life.

But it's the longest scene of people speaking in a realistic way I could find for you, in *Amélie*. In the movie, the characters are wonderful but they're too polished and often too romantic, as well. This is what gives *Amélie* such a cute story. It's perfect for a movie but no one behaves and speaks this way in real life. Here, Dominique sounds very real. But this scene would almost never happen in real life.

Difference #2: Just look at the subtitles!

As you can see from the subtitles in English, some parts were cut in the translation: parts of phrases like "**C'est pas possible**" and the distress of the character, shown in his pronunciation. Because he's on the verge of tears, some sounds are muffled. When we're emotional, in French, the end vowels are eaten. For example, the R of avoir and the end C of cognac in "**je peux encore avoir un petit cognac**" can't come out, because you're struggling to breathe. It's pure anatomy. But, this is difficult to show in written subtitles.

A closer look at Amélie

Despite these differences from real spoken French, there is a lot you can learn from this scene. Even if the characters and speeches are unrealistic, **the pronunciation in Amélie is much better for learning everyday French than Le Prénom**. The characters come from more diverse backgrounds than in *Le Prénom* and have accents and emotions. For example, Dominique's spoken French grammar and eaten words and letters is extremely close to real life. It doesn't sound like a series of punchlines. It's authentic.



Spoken French grammar VS Textbook grammar

Spoken French grammar: Et l'enfance, tout ce qu'il en reste, ça tient dans une petite boîte.

Textbook grammar: Tout ce qu'il reste de l'enfance tient dans une petite boîte.

Spoken French grammar: Vous croyez pas ?

Textbook grammar: Ne croyez-vous pas ?

Spoken French pronunciation VS Textbook pronunciation

Authentic spoken French pronunciation: peux avoir 'cor un ptit cogna' ?

Textbook French pronunciation: Je peux avoir encore un petit cognac ?

Authentic spoken French pronunciation: Y parait qu'ell'a eu un enfant. Y s'appell'Lucas

Textbook French pronunciation: Il parait qu'elle a eu un enfant. Il s'appelle Lucas.

Note that the extreme case of "letter eating" of the first example is due to emotion. But if you speak like this without being emotional, you'd sound drunk or with the flu. Just sayin'. :)

Case study #3: Le Grand Bain

"Le grand bain" is a great French movie from 2018 about men who are a bit lost. They decide to get together and compete to become champions of synchronized swimming. It's a lovely story with sad moments and fun times about what it means to be a man and how we can heal each other's wounds through team effort.

[Click here to watch the trailer of the French movie "Le Grand Bain"](#)

(Link if you need to copy-paste it: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Je3C1hvUCA8>)

The first lines are from a conversation the characters have in the movie:



- Ça fait deux ans que je travaille pas.
- J'ai l'impression que tout ce que je touche se transforme en échec.

Can you spot how it's different from real life French?

Difference #1: Conversations are too short

What I like about this movie is that the characters have realistic conversations. But... they are way too short! We see them talk in lots of settings: together, with their wives, their children, etc., and each conversation lasts just 2-5 minutes or so -- enough to interest the audience. In real life, these conversations last 10 minutes, 1 hour, or an entire Sunday family meal! What makes most of French conversation is length and rhythm! And as a student of French, this is often the most overwhelming part of conversation.

Of course, a movie can't cover the "uninteresting" parts of conversations, but real life does. This goes back to what I mentioned in the introduction.

A closer look at Le Grand Bain

In *Le Grand Bain*, **you can see how important conversation is in the French culture.** Conversation is an art in French and has a very important social role. It has to have purpose and is built on the basis of how much you know the people talking to you. In this movie, the characters are friends, they have partners, children, other friends, colleagues. Look at the body language, the words, the pronunciation, the topics. From the outside, French conversation can look messy and disorganized, but that's how it should be. What's so interesting in this movie is that the characters become friends. In "*Le Prénom*", they've known each other since childhood. Here, you can see how conversation changes as you move from a simple introduction to a deeper level of friendship.

Fun fact about the movie: it was filmed in my region and some scenes were shot in Grenoble, 5 minutes from my home! The whole audience laughed when they saw it.



LET'S RECAP: AUTHENTIC FRENCH VS MOVIE FRENCH

Authentic, real everyday French is very different from the French you hear on movies, podcasts and TV Shows.

As we saw in these examples, the French you hear in movies is too clean, and much closer to textbook French than the conversations you'd hear on the metro in Paris, between friends. These dialogues are meant to be understood by everybody, clean from most spoken French grammar mistakes and full of punchlines. Real life isn't.

That's why practicing your oral comprehension of real everyday French conversation using movies is impossible. Well, not completely impossible, but very inefficient.

Conversations between French people happen fast, with specific grammar and vocabulary that can be difficult to follow. But this type of French makes up 99% of everyday spoken French. The other 1% is the formal, stiff French we use for work presentations, doctor visits and speaking to our in-laws. It's textbook French. But as a learner, focusing all your effort on this 1% is not productive. It's a good start, but it's just a taste of what real spoken French is.

If you're truly passionate about being able to actually understand real life French (and not just laugh and smile when you don't know what French people are saying, before awkwardly switching back to English), **learning this 99% of spoken French and improving your oral comprehension is key.**