

Gilles Asselin & Ruth Mastron,  
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# 8

## ***With Friends***

French people and Americans both value their friends, but ideas about who is a friend, how friends are made, and what friendship means are very different. Since these differences are the source of frequent misunderstandings on both sides, it is important to analyze and clarify them.

### ***The Language of Friendship and Love***

In English, we can distinguish among acquaintances, colleagues, and friends, at least linguistically. In the United States, though, people rarely do so, using the word *friend* to refer to someone they met yesterday or to someone they have known since childhood. About the only distinction normally made in the U.S. is between a "casual" friend and a "close" or "best" friend.

The French language allows for the most subtle of gradations in the nouns we use to speak of people we know, and French culture requires they be used.

*un(e) ami(e)*: a friend

*une connaissance*: an acquaintance, someone you know superficially

*une relation*: mainly a colleague or other professional contact  
*un(e) camarade*: a good pal from youth, school, university, or military service  
*un copain* (f. *une copine*): a buddy; etymologically someone you share bread with  
*un(e) pote*: like *copain*, but more familiar  
*un(e) petit(e) ami(e)*: boyfriend or girlfriend; may be in a romantic sense depending on the context  
*un(e) ami(e) d'enfance*: a friend from childhood  
*un(e) ami(e) de toujours*: an always and forever friend  
*un(e) meilleur(e) ami(e)*: best friend  
*mon ami(e)*: normally means "my lover" but depends on the context  
*un(e) cher(e) ami(e)*: a dear friend—more distant than a simple friend, oddly enough

Notice that the gender is evident in written French, but it may be obscured in spoken French.

Paradoxically, the French verbs of friendship and love offer a much smaller choice than English. One French verb, *aimer*, does yeoman's duty, expressing all the gradations of feeling from mild affection to passionate love. This may seem odd given the French romantic reputation. The French do not use the word *love* outside a fairly intimate relationship. French friends do not say that they love each other or sign their letters with "love" or "lots of love from," as American friends do. They might say "*Je t'aime bien*," but this means only "I like you." In fact, most adverbs used with *aimer*—for example, *bien*, *beaucoup*, *infiniment* (literally, "well," "a lot," "infinitely")—actually weaken the verb rather than intensify it, as is usually the case in English.

An American woman who had lived in France for some years enjoyed a very pleasant—and platonic—relationship with one of her neighbors, an older Frenchman. Before she left to return to the States, she wanted to tell him how much she had enjoyed their friendship and how much she liked him. She said, "*Monsieur, je vous aime*." His reaction to her

passionate declaration was probably "She's getting ready to leave, and *now* she tells me!"

Another example revealing the differences between French and American usage comes from Michel, a young Frenchman studying for a master's degree at an American university. He had briefly met the twenty-year-old sister of a classmate during a visit to the classmate's home. Some of their discussions included what struck Michel as deeply personal revelations on her part. They wrote to each other after he returned to school and she signed each letter "Love, Laura." She even sent a greeting card signed "Love always, Laura." The intimacy of her tone suggested to Michel that her feelings for him were very romantic indeed, and he found himself falling in love with her. He even wrote her two or three love letters but received no response. He was horrified to learn through his classmate that she already had a steady boyfriend.

### ***Making and Being Friends***

Americans "play it by ear" with their friends and take friendships as they come. Most American friendships begin with some kind of physical proximity, often involving a shared activity. While working out at the gym, chatting over coffee after church, arranging carpools to kids' soccer practice, hanging out at the mall, borrowing garden tools, and similar everyday connections, Americans discover common interests and affinities they can pursue with invitations to meals, to a movie after work, or to a football game on Saturday. American friendships may last a few weeks or a lifetime; they may be superficial or deep.

The French, with their passion for classification, have very clear boundaries for their relationships with specific people in specific situations. For example, French neighbors are not automatically counted as friends or even as acquaintances. Because most French people, particularly in large cities, lack the personal space that Americans take for granted, regula-

tions exist to protect people's privacy. And these regulations are strictly enforced, as any foreigner who takes a shower after ten at night is reminded by apartment neighbors. A Parisian joked that French children grow up traumatized because they are constantly told to avoid disturbing the neighbors: "In the U.S., you scare kids with the Bogeyman, but I think French kids imagine the Neighbor as a child-eating creature with bloody fangs and claws. Maybe that's why we avoid neighbors when we grow up."

A good French neighbor does not disturb others, follows rules concerning common areas of the building, and generally keeps a low profile. An Englishman living in France reported this story to us:

A neighbor in the next flat, a psychiatrist (I knew this only because of the plate on his door), saw me frequently for about a year. One evening we entered the lift together. He asked, "*Quel étage?*" ("Which floor?") I replied, "*Cinquième, comme d'habitude*" ("Fifth, as always"). At the time I felt I had struck a small blow for Britain.

Whatever the cause, the virtue of neighborliness is not appreciated in France as it is in other cultures. An American woman living in a small town in southwestern France learned that her landlady's elderly mother was very ill. The landlady had gone to another region to look after her, leaving her husband and adult son to fend for themselves. "I put together a big lasagna, took it across the street in a pretty casserole dish, and told them that they could leave the empty dish on our stoop. They looked confused and a little embarrassed. They thanked me profusely, though, and so did my landlady when she got home, but I think they were really baffled by the whole thing."

While colleagues from work may become well acquainted in France, the relationship may be limited to drinks or dinner after work. It is not normally expected that people who work together will develop close friendships. It's fine if workmates

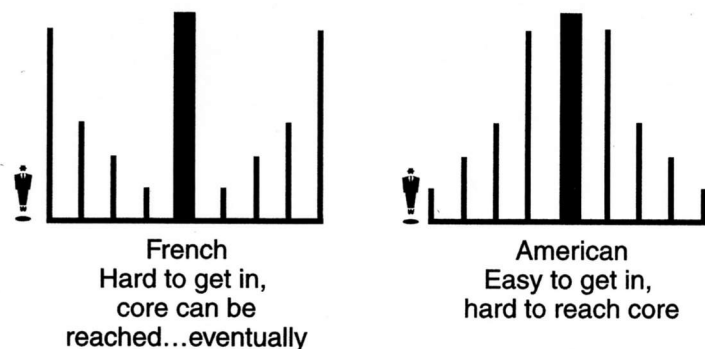
do happen to become friends—and it indeed happens—but there is no expectation that they will nor is there any obligation to do so.

Close friendships are rarely made across social classes. An interesting exception to this is Le Club Med, which advertises itself as "the antidote to civilization." A story tells of two Frenchmen who met during a vacation at a Club Med village in Greece. They developed a warm friendship and spent a great deal of time together during their stay. In keeping with the French tendency to separate work and private life, they did not even mention what they did back in France. It was only when they exchanged addresses just before leaving that they discovered one of them was the director of a company while the other was a night watchman at the same company. The story does not reveal what happened once they got home, but chances are they both understood they could not possibly maintain the friendship (Ardagh 1970, 441).

So, where do French people make friends? French friends are often made early in life, at school or university, in the workplace to a lesser extent, and, until recently, during mandatory military service for men. The French tendency to stay close to home and the small size of the country, compared with the United States, make it easier to maintain such long-term friendships, particularly at the depth French friends expect. Once French people have struck up a friendship, they have made an emotional investment in each other. This is something that must be attended to and not taken lightly. The French do not confer the status of *ami* quickly or easily, and rightly so. Friends in France are bound by mutual obligations and mutual responsibilities. They expect friends to do certain things for them in certain circumstances, and they expect friendships to be deep and long-term.

Different conceptions of the nature of friendship sometimes create problems in French-American intercultural interactions. The following diagram shows this difference

graphically: the walls surrounding the core personality in each culture are in fact concentric circles, so you would see two target-shaped figures if you looked down on the diagram from above.



Americans are open, friendly, easy to approach. They are instantly on first-name terms, and invite virtual strangers into their homes with a generous ease that amazes the French. But if the first walls are easy to step or jump over, the barriers rise as you get closer to the core. The core itself may never be reached, even by a spouse, children, and intimate friends. Because the bonds that link friends do not necessarily go very deep, American friendship is not necessarily considered a major commitment—although it may be, depending on its duration and the circumstances. Coworkers may share some fairly deep revelations with each other, but once one of them moves on to another company, they do not necessarily spend much time together or even keep in touch.

The French, on the other hand, are not so easy to get to know. There is a tall barrier between those who are outside and those who are inside. But once you have scaled the outer barrier, they become lower and lower, so that you may, after a considerable amount of time and shared history, reach the core. To return to the diagram, there may be a difference between which level you think you are in and which level someone from the other culture thinks you are in. For ex-

ample, French visitors to the United States are astounded to be admitted quite readily into the family circle. They take this as evidence that the other person has made his or her psychic investment and that the potential for a deep friendship is there—which is normally not in fact the case.

Friends in France operate according to the unspoken rule, "Say what you mean and mean what you say." They expect promises to be followed up and do not understand that "I'll give you a call" or "We'll get together sometime for lunch" in the United States can easily mean "We may never see each other again." Many French people living in the United States, after finding that such statements are not firm commitments, hastily conclude that Americans are phony and unreliable. From the American perspective, on the other hand, such a comment reinforces a pleasant and positive encounter without an obligation to follow through. Autonomy is maintained and respected, and the choice of continuing the relationship by getting together again is left open.

### *That's What Friends Are For*

As mentioned earlier, the American culture is strongly oriented to doing. Accordingly, American friends often get together to share a specific activity. If friends share a particular hobby or interest such as quilting or fishing, it is likely that this activity will be the focus of their time together.

Friends in France may also share specific activities or tasks, but they do not always feel the need to do so; simply being together is enough. This reflects the French cultural orientation toward being. A group of friends may get together with no particular purpose in mind. During their time together they may discuss possibilities such as a picnic at the beach or a film. These plans are hashed out and critiqued by the entire group, perhaps in a café over endless cups of coffee, and may or may not be followed up; the discussing is more important than the doing.

Rick, a young American, was puzzled by this when, as a foreign student newly arrived in Poitiers, he was invited to spend an evening with a group of French students:

I thought, "Great! The natives are friendly." So all of us—about a dozen kids altogether, male and female—met up at this café and started to talk about what to do. Somebody suggested a movie, but a couple of other people had seen it already, or heard from someone else that it wasn't very good, and then everyone talked about movies for awhile. Then somebody else suggested we go out someplace to dance, which led to a critique of every dance place in town, but no consensus. Same thing when I suggested we could go out and grab a bite somewhere. In the end, we spent the whole evening supposedly deciding what to do until about three in the morning, when everybody went home.

What this young American could not see was that the group was doing something very important: developing and reinforcing the ties of friendship that held them together.

The important thing [in a French conversation] is to establish ties, to create a network, tenuous as it may be, between the conversants. The exchange of words, in the "thread" of conversation, serves to weave these ties between the speakers. If we imagine a conversation as being a spider's web, we can see the exchanging of words as playing the role of the spider, generating the threads which bind the participants. The ideal (French) conversation would resemble a perfect spider's web: delicate, fragile, elegant, brilliant, of harmonious proportions, a work of art.... We [French] create the fabric of our relationship in the same way and at the same time that we "make" conversation. (Carroll 1987, 25–26)

While Americans value their connections to family and friends, they feel that ultimately they must act in their own best interest and stand on their own two feet. The individual

is the basic building block of society. In a culture that values independence and autonomy, close and interdependent relationships may seem dysfunctional, if not actually pathological.

In contrast, as far as the French are concerned, Marx was right about at least one thing: the smallest unit into which humanity can be divided is two, not one. One is a fiction. A friendship in the French sense blurs the boundaries between friends. It develops as an organic whole: two people merge with nothing in between. A relationship has no existence beyond the people who live it, since they simply embody it. Friendship in French culture cannot be understood as a step-by-step approach where both parties are making progress toward an implied goal of becoming friends. As French people spend time together and get to know each other, their *cercles* simply begin to overlap.

In the United States, even very close friends are careful to respect each other's individual space. Balance and reciprocity based on mutual respect for the other's independence and individualism are vital foundations for friendships among Americans, who generally act on the principle that adults are—should be and want to be—independent, not beholden to anyone. "Owing" someone as a result of the other person's kindness is a debt Americans take seriously. Accordingly, they strive to maintain harmony in the nature and type of their exchanges.

French friends see obligations not in the context of reciprocity but rather as elements in the network of their relationships. "Perhaps Emmanuelle will not 'return' what I do for her today, but she will certainly do something for someone else when the chance comes up, and someone else may do something for me, or for another person altogether." In the end it's not important, because the goal is not to maintain some kind of cosmic bookkeeping. For those outside your network, your obligations are minimal; for those inside, you simply don't count up what you do or receive.



Raymonde Carroll suggests that, for the French, their networks are what defines them, whether the actual effect of the network is positive or not.

The cultural premise which might take the form "I exist in a network" molds my French way of seeing. I am as much fed, carried, made significant by the network of relationships which defines me as I can be trapped, stifled and oppressed by it. Without this network, I am out of my element, and I suffer all the more as I am not conscious of this.

Similarly, an American cultural premise...could take the following form: "I exist outside all networks." This does not mean that these networks do not exist or that they have no importance for me (an American), but that I make myself, I define myself. Whoever I am in American society, wherever I come from, whatever I have, I create the fabric of my identity, as is evoked, in a more limited context, by the expression "self-made man." (1987, 145)

The importance of networks or webs in a French person's life can hardly be overstated. Perhaps the closest equivalent in American culture would be a large and very close-knit family. Imagine, then, that a French person operates within several overlapping webs of this nature. We can see that working this way requires an enormous effort in relationship building and maintenance, in responding to the needs of others in the network, and in directing requests to the proper person in the proper way. But speed is not of the essence, since it is the relationship that counts, after all—how good you feel and not so much what you have achieved; the process, not the task.

A French person also needs to be quick to operate in this way, and very intuitive. Life looks like a vaudeville plate-spinning act: one has to keep an eye on all of the plates at once, giving them enough of a turn to keep them going without knocking them off the stick. But things don't always go smoothly, and sometimes one has to step carefully over shattered crockery.

Friendships in the United States, based as they are on shared tastes, opinions, or interests more than on commitment, need to be relatively free of friction. Edward T. and Mildred Reed Hall suggest,

The American drive to be liked, accepted, and approved of by a wide circle of friends and associates means they must inevitably sacrifice some of their individuality. The French are less likely to hide their real selves, and hence the French are equally less likely to be good team players in business or elsewhere. (1990, 152)

American friends try to offer positive support to each other and to establish harmony. If they disagree, they may downplay their differences, agree to disagree, or try to smooth things over to maintain good relations. Bickering, argument, and open disagreement are signs that people are not getting along well and that the relationship may be in danger of falling apart.

French friends do not seek to maintain harmony but rather to cultivate distinction and avoid boredom. They expect to disagree, to criticize, even to argue. A friend may be very direct, even frankly critical, but this is part and parcel of interpersonal relationships and not necessarily meant or taken as insulting. The French find it tedious to always be in agreement and for this reason may be attracted to friends who are quite different from themselves. Since the relationship is not based on agreement, it is not threatened by disagreement, and French friends expect one another to comment honestly on their actions and choices. Support can be expressed in confrontation as well as by acquiescence. The bond between friends is not fragile and can stand up to this tension, even be strengthened and deepened by it.

Americans, raised to avoid sensitive subjects in conversation, are often taken aback by the vehemence and even rudeness (as they see it) of French conversations about precisely those sensitive topics, for example, politics. One Ameri-

can woman had gone to a great deal of trouble to prepare a special meal for her first dinner party in France. While her cooking was a success, the evening, she thought, was catastrophic:

I almost died when everybody started arguing about politics. It got so bad I just about crawled under the table and waited for the battle to end. But later, as everyone was leaving, they all said what a terrific time they'd had, how delicious the meal was, and how much they looked forward to getting together again.

### ***Friendly Suggestions***

As Americans looking to make French friends, you would do well not to rush the process. Take your cue for pacing from your French acquaintance, and try not to "come on too strong" in the early stages. Remember the implicit personal commitment inherent in French friendships, and either take it seriously from the beginning or make it clear you are not interested.

Once you have decided to pursue the friendship, by all means put your heart into it. Your French friend certainly will. However, you do not need to stress this overtly as you might in the United States with statements such as "It's great to get together with you. I really enjoy the time we spend fishing (or shopping)." The explicit way in which Americans talk about their friendship sounds artificial to the French, almost like you are trying to convince them of something.

Keep in mind the obligations of friendship from a French perspective, and the fact that you and your friend are part of each other's inner circle. You may be fortunate enough to be included in get-togethers with your friend's old classmates or family. When this happens, try to "go with the flow" and don't get anxious if things seem vague or are not moving forward. Just being together is an important part of friendship.

Finally, try to be consciously aware of your unstated assumptions and expectations in personal relationships, and watch for signs that these match—or don't match—those of your friend. The Golden Rule does not apply in intercultural relationships, since the other person may not want to have done to him or her as you would have done to you. Find out what it is your friend *does* want—celebrating a birthday at happy hour with a bunch of coworkers or a quiet dinner with family and close friends—before taking off in the wrong direction.