

Reading tone, irony and hidden criticism

French B2 (upper intermediate) · Lesson

Quick answer: Register is the level of formality of a text: familier, courant or soutenu. At B2 you must also read between the lines. Irony says the opposite of what is meant, a litote such as Ce n'est pas mauvais understates praise, and polite phrasing can hide a reproach. Context and word choice reveal the true message.

Level: French B2 (CEFR upper intermediate) · **Standards:** CEFR B2, Reading

How do you recognize the three registers?

A register is the degree of formality of your language. French has three main levels, and a B2 reader must switch between them, because the choice of a word often carries a judgment. The same idea changes with the words around it.

Idea	Familier	Courant	Soutenu
tired	crevé	fatigué	harassé
work	le boulot	le travail	le labeur
I don't know	Chais pas.	Je ne sais pas.	J'ignore.
children	les gosses	les enfants	la progéniture
Do you want some?	Tu veux du thé ?	Vous voulez du thé ?	Souhaiteriez-vous du thé ?

le niveau de langue

soutenu : J'ignore la réponse.

courant : Je ne sais pas, je suis pressé.

familier : Chais pas, j'ai pas le temps.

Each step up makes the sentence more formal.

Choosing the register

Ask three questions: who is speaking to whom, in what place, and for what purpose. A letter to a prefecture asks for soutenu or at least courant; a text to a friend accepts familier. Mixing

levels in one text sounds like an error or a joke.

How does irony work in French?

L'ironie

Irony says the opposite of what the speaker thinks, and the reader must notice the gap between the words and the situation. In writing, the clues are exaggeration, quotation marks, a word that is too grand for the facts, and a contradiction with the context.

After three hours on a platform in the rain, a traveler says: *Quelle ponctualité remarquable !* — What remarkable punctuality! The compliment is false, and the real message is a complaint.

« Quelle ponctualité !
Ce train est génial. »

Sens réel : le train
a trois heures de retard.

Indices : ton exagéré, situation contraire,
mot trop beau pour la réalité.

Irony: the words say one thing, the situation shows the opposite.

What are understatement and implicit criticism?

A litote says less to mean more, usually by denying the opposite: *Ce n'est pas mauvais* means it is quite good. Implicit criticism works the other way around: polite words hide a reproach.

What is written	What it may mean
Votre rapport est... complet.	It is too long.
Vous auriez peut-être pu prévenir.	You should have warned us.
Chacun ses goûts.	I do not like it at all.
Il fait de son mieux.	The results are poor.
Ce n'est pas donné.	It is expensive.

Common mistake

English speakers read *Ce n'est pas mal* as lukewarm, like “not bad”. In French it is often real praise. In the other direction, *C'est intéressant* is not always a compliment: the pause before it and the word *peut-être* often signal doubt.

Culture note

In France, a first email to a stranger normally opens with Madame, Monsieur, and closes with a formula such as Cordialement. Skipping both can be read as cold or even rude, even if the content is polite.

Zoé's tip

Before you decide what a sentence means, read it twice: once for the words, once for the situation. If the two disagree, look for irony or a hidden reproach.

Key points to remember

- French has three registers: familier (casual), courant (standard) and soutenu (formal).
- Irony is recognized by a gap between the words and the situation.
- A litote denies the opposite to say more: Ce n'est pas bête means "it is clever".
- Polite openers such as Vous auriez peut-être pu... often carry a reproach.
- Official letters use vous, Madame, Monsieur, and Cordialement.

Reading tone, irony and hidden criticism: frequently asked questions

What are the three registers of French?

They are familier (casual, among friends), courant (standard, everyday and neutral) and soutenu (formal, written or ceremonial). A text should stay within one level unless the writer wants a special effect.

How can I spot irony in a French text?

Look for a mismatch between the praise and the facts, exaggerated words, quotation marks and a situation that contradicts the sentence. If the compliment feels too big for the event, it is probably ironic.

What is a litote?

It is a figure of speech that says less to suggest more, often by negating the opposite. Il n'est pas très aimable can mean that someone was rude, and Ce n'est pas mal du tout means it is good.

Does «intéressant» always mean interesting?

No. After a pause or with disons it can politely mean that the speaker is not convinced. Read the tone and what follows to decide whether it is praise.

When should I use «tu» and when «vous»?

Use tu with friends, family and peers who invite it, and vous with strangers, clients, superiors and in any formal writing. When in doubt, begin with vous and let the other person propose tu.