

L'accent circonflexe transcript

L'accent circonflexe. Have you noticed the little symbols that you find on some letters in French, especially on the vowels: [in French] a, e, i, o, u? They are called 'accents', they are not here just to make a letter look nice, it changes the way you pronounce that letter for example e becomes é if you put an accent aigu on top of its head, comme l'été ou éléphant. E becomes è if you put an accent grave on top of it, par exemple le père, la mère, le frère.

My favourite accent though is at the centre of today's story, it's called 'l'accent circonflexe' but I call it chapeau chinois because it is a nicer word and if you draw it you will see that it looks like a Chinese hat. E becomes ê when you put it's little hat on - e, ê - in fact it is exactly the same pronunciation as è with accent grave.

So, why do we have two accents for the same sound? People are lazy when they talk, they swallow some letters. In French, over hundreds of years the letter 's' in the middle of some words became mute, people stopped pronouncing it, it was quicker to talk that way. One day, somebody decided that we should get rid of that silent 's' in the middle of words.

At that time it was decided, however, to pay tribute to that lost letter and the silent 's' was replaced by an accent circonflexe. Le chapeau chinois is placed on top of the vowel before the poor old sacrificed 's'.

Some people in France call it the 'accent souvenir', well it is true, it is a real witness of history, par exemple the word for 'to be' in French is 'être' spelt e accent circonflexe, t, r, e, used to be spelt in old French 'estre'. Estre ou ne pas estre is what Shakespeare could have said. But it becomes really interesting when you have a look at some French words imported into the English language by Guillaume le Conquerant in 1066. They haven't evolved in the same way and in fact we still pronounce the words in English with the original 's', although it has long been forgotten by the French.

Let's take the old French word 'forest', it was spelt '[in French] f, o, r, e, s, t' in 1066 but slowly the 's' disappeared and it is now spelt '[in French] f, o, r, e accent circonflexe, t' in modern French. The 's' has gone and it has been replaced by the little chapeau, but we have kept it in English and forêt is forest.

The same applies to arrêter which is French for 'to arrest', again the 's' is gone and the circonflexe has replaced it in French, but not in English. In fact, our little chapeau appears on other vowels too: [in French] a, o, i, and u.

Can you guess the meaning of hôpital, spelt '[in French] h, o accent circonflexe, p, i, t, a, l'? Oui, it means 'hospital'.