TALK TO THE SNAIL

STEPHEN CLARKE

TRANSWORLD
BOOKS

About the Book

By the bestselling author of *A Year in the Merde* and *Merde Actually*...

With useful sections on:

- Making sure you get served in a café
- Harassing French estate agents
- Living with bacteria
- Pronouncing French swear-words
- Surviving the French driving experience
- Falling in amour, Paris-style

And beaucoup, beaucoup more!

DON’T GO TO FRANCE WITHOUT READING THIS BOOK!

The only book you’ll need to understand what the French really think, how to get on with them and, most importantly, how to get the best out of them.

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Attentive readers may note that there are eleven, not ten, commandments here. But surely you didn't think you could fit a nation as fascinating and complex as the French into just ten commandments, did you?
Merde alors!

Talk to the Snail

Ten Commandments for Understanding the French

Stephen Clarke

To the French, with my sincerest apologies

Don’t get me wrong – France is a great place to live. It’s a country devoted to pleasure. And pleasure is one of my hobbies. No, it’s *all* of my hobbies.

But gaining access to that pleasure can sometimes be as fiddly, painful and ultimately frustrating as eating a lobster. You use a hammer, nutcrackers, surgical probes and a laser-powered meat detector, and you can still end up with lacerated fingers and a mouthful of lobster claw.

Many people visiting France, or coming to live here, get stranded in the pre-pleasure and partial-pleasure zones. They get little further than the moody waiter or the rip-off estate agent. They need advice on how to break into the total-pleasure zone. Because living in France is not a gift that you’re born with. Lots of French people never learn to do it properly. That’s why they’re known as a nation of complainers.

Living in France is a skill that you have to work at. I’ve spent half my adult life here, and I’m still learning.

This book sums up what I’ve learnt so far.

STEPHEN CLARKE, *Paris*

Nude pétanque, a French game that gives a whole new meaning to the phrase ‘playing with your boules’.

THE 1ST COMMANDMENT

Tu Auras Tort

THOU SHALT BE WRONG

(if you're not French)

THOU SHALT BE WRONG

(if you're not French)

WHEN DEALING WITH a Frenchman, you need to be aware that there is a voice in his head. It is constantly telling him, 'I'm French, I'm right.'

Even when he's doing something that is quite obviously illegal, antisocial or just plain stupid, he is sure that right is on his side.

Of course, the French aren't unique in this. We Brits think we invented Western civilization. The Americans are convinced that they live in the only place on earth where people are truly free. The Belgians are certain that they invented French fries. We're all sure that we're right about *something*. The difference with the French is that they not only think they're right, they're also convinced that everyone in the world is ganging up to prove them wrong. Why, they wonder, does everyone on the planet want to speak English instead of *le français*?[1] Why does no one else play *pétanque*? Why does the world prefer Hollywood blockbusters to French movies about Parisians getting divorced? *Ce n'est pas normal.*

Their reputation for arrogance comes from this. They're not sure of themselves. They've got something to prove to the rest of the universe.

Observe a Parisian driver when he or she comes up against a red light. 'How dare this coloured bulb assume it knows best whether it is safe to cross this junction?' the driver thinks. 'It's obviously safe to go through, there's nothing blocking my way except a few annoying

pedestrians.’[2] He ploughs through, certain that the universe is on his side.

It’s the same with much of the French service sector. How can the customers possibly be right? What do they know about the service industries?

The list goes on and on.

Pushing L’Enveloppe

One of the best ways of seeing the French person’s innate sense of rightness in action is to visit a crowded post office. The people who work here have even more reasons to be right than the rest of their compatriots. They have two layers of rightness that they wear like armour.

First, of course, they are French.

Second, they are state employees and therefore impossible to fire. Even if they were to snooze all day or feed all the letters through a shredder, the worst sanction they could expect would be a transfer to some distant outpost of the French empire like Tahiti or Calais.

In a relaxed rural post office, this can be to the public’s advantage, because the people working there will be able to take the time to help their customers (and thereby show how right they are about things).

But if you walk into a busy urban post office at nine a.m., things might not go so smoothly.

There will probably be a long queue of people wanting to withdraw money from their post-office bank accounts, pay their electricity bills in cash, or simply post a letter because they don’t have change for the automatic franking machine.

A post-office cashier who’s just coming on duty will enter the room, sum up the size of the queue, see the urgency of opening another window, and smile inwardly. Or sometimes outwardly. He or she will then proceed to interrupt their co-workers’ transactions in order to exchange good-morning kisses or handshakes.

Any grumblings from the queue will be answered with a look, or an overt comment, to the effect that, yes, we state workers are human beings and we have the right to greet our colleagues just like anyone else, *non*?

They are in the right and are therefore totally shameless.

Next, the new arrival will sit down at his or her counter and settle in, starting up the computer, slotting in the cash drawer, checking that the books of stamps are all in place.

Any customer who dares to venture from the 'wait behind this line' barrier up to the counter at this point will be politely told that the worker has to get properly prepared before receiving customers. That is normal, *non*? In what other job does a worker have to start work before things are properly prepared?

They are in the right and therefore completely unhurried. The only thing to do is stay patient. It can be tough.

Once, in my local post office, I was praying that fate would not send me to the counter nearest the door, because it was about to be manned by one of the worst cases of 'I'm Right, You're Wrong' I've ever met, even in France.

Monsieur Right was just coming on duty, and was apparently testing his seat for signs of bounciness deficiency that might oblige him to put in for a month's sick leave if he sat on it for a whole morning. He could see all the people waiting, and seemed to be relishing the groans of frustration emanating from his audience. I was next in line, hoping desperately that he'd keep bouncing until one of the other counters was free.

But no, fate decided to be cruel to me that day.

'*Bonjour*,' I said loudly, as you must.

'*Bonjour*,' he replied, slightly put out by my merriness. Outside of the post-office combat zone, I'm sure I would have got on fine with the guy, who was a fairly laid-back, jeans-and-earring type and probably listened to the same kind of music as I do. But on his throne, he was obviously a complete tyrant, the Sun King hoping to burn my fingers.

I told him that my postwoman had left a slip telling me to come to the nearest post office to fetch a parcel, which is the usual practice when a delivery is too big to go in the letter box.

‘Do you have ID?’ he asked me, which is also the usual practice.

‘Yes, I do, but there’s a problem. You see, the slip says that the parcel was addressed to Red Garage Books, which is the name of my company. But I don’t have an ID card in that name because there is no person called Red Garage Books.’ I attempted a little philosophical laugh, which is necessary in France when you want to show people that you are joking.

‘Ah,’ he said, grimacing as if I’d just pierced his other ear. ‘If you have no ID then I can’t give you the parcel.’

‘But I know it’s for me. I’m the only employee. Look, I’ve brought along a piece of stationery with the logo on it.’

‘That is not official ID. I can’t accept it.’

‘I understand that,’ I said, diplomatically acknowledging his rightness. ‘But I don’t know what else to do. I know what’s in the parcel, though. It’s books. Can’t you just check, please?’

The guy agreed to go and look. These counter assistants are human, after all. And, like all French counter assistants, if you show them – politely – that you aren’t going to go away and leave them in peace (yes, two can play at being in the right), they will back down.

He went off backstage with my paper slip. While he was away, I turned to the people waiting and gave them an apologetic wince. Not too apologetic, though. After all, he was the one who’d gone off. I was in the right.

Eventually, he returned with the package. It was obviously, as I’d told him, a parcel of books. The word ‘*livres*’ was clearly marked on the green customs form stuck on top of the parcel. He looked at the package, at the paper slip, at me, and came to a decision.

‘I shouldn’t really give this to you, but I’m going to,’ he said, putting the parcel on the counter.

‘Thank you very much,’ I said.

‘Sign here.’ He gave me the parcel register.

I signed, and as I did so, I saw that the address on the package was in fact ‘Stephen Clarke, c/o Red Garage Books, etc’. So it was in my name, after all. The postwoman had got it wrong on her paper slip. I looked up at the counter guy, who had obviously seen this, too, and seemed to be daring me to make an issue of it.

I didn’t bother. That postwoman possessed the same two levels of rightness as her colleague behind the counter, so it would have been totally counterproductive to suggest that she’d been in the wrong.

‘You must get some ID in your company name to avoid this problem in the future,’ he said.

‘You are right,’ I told him. I gratefully took possession of my parcel, wished him ‘*bonne journée*’ and left.

In France, a tactical retreat is often as close as you get to total victory.

The Right Stuff

Sometimes, the whole world gets things spectacularly wrong.

One of the most traumatic recent examples of this was the day the Olympic Committee announced the host city for the 2012 Games. London? *Non*! How could the Committee get it so completely wrong? The 2012 Games were destined for Paris, everyone knew that.

Yes, everyone in France. Which, unfortunately for the French, did not include the Olympic Committee.

And what made things even more unbearable in French eyes was that they had lost out to their dreaded rivals, the ‘Anglo-Saxons’, as they mistakenly call English-speakers. Because, as every French person knows, those evil,

globalizing Anglo-Saxons have been leading the conspiracy to prove the French wrong for centuries now . . .

In a Breton village called La Masse, on a hilltop near the Mont Saint-Michel, there is what looks like a miniature windmill with its sail jammed in the vertical.[3] This miniature windmill was part of a French communications system that was supposed to revolutionize the world back in the 1790s. It was one of a chain of similar structures on hilltops at fifteen to twenty kilometre intervals between Paris and Brest, on the west coast. The sails on top of the buildings were in fact arms that could be moved, semaphore-style, to send a message from Brest to Paris in only twenty minutes. The most frequent message was probably, 'It's really cloudy here in Brittany. If you sent us any messages recently, we didn't get them.'

The system was invented by a French engineer called Claude Chappe, who thoughtfully designed relay stations consisting of two buildings – one for the sending of messages, the other as a dining room for the messengers. Beautifully French.

The idea was simple and yet doomed to obsolescence in a combination that only the French seem to manage. At first, the Chappe telegraph spread outwards from France, with lines even extending as far as Amsterdam and Milan. Then in 1836 a Brit called Charles Wheatstone invented the gloriously simple wire telegraph that was adapted and adopted all over the world, and the French Chappe telegraph was dead. As was poor old Chappe – he killed himself in 1805.

Yes, the French have a perverse gift for inventing things that no other country wants to use, and then brooding about it.

The prime example is the Minitel.

Launched in 1983, it was a forerunner of the Internet. It was a lot like Teletext or Ceefax, except that it was more interactive, and instead of being accessed via a television

screen that most households already had, the French complicated things by forcing Minitel users to rent a small dedicated screen.

The Minitel was as slow as all computers were in the eighties, but earned a fortune for France Telecom and the French advertising industry when its sex chat sites caught on. Every billboard, TV channel and magazine in France was suddenly decorated with pouting topless models and Minitel server addresses like 3615 SEXY. Millions of French people spent their nights typing capital-lettered messages on to little fold-down keyboards attached to their cranky beige boxes, and then waiting minutes for the black-and-white screens to refresh themselves and the answers to come back. France, the country that loves conversation more than anything, conceived the online chat room fifteen years before its time.

But then an Englishman called Timothy Berners-Lee invented the World Wide Web to make the American Internet work anywhere, and killed the Minitel. The streets of France were littered with miniature beige screens, and once again those scheming Anglo-Saxons had inflicted a non-French idea upon the world.

Some other examples of this universally unwanted French inventiveness are:

- P*étanque*, the only sport designed to be played in a dogs' toilet.
- The Citroën DS – shaped like a flattened frog, it is the only road vehicle in the world guaranteed to give all passengers instant carsickness.
- The gear lever on a Renault 4L – perfectly capable of changing gear, but only when it felt like it.
- The primitive soap dispensers that used to be fitted in French café toilets. An oval cake of soap was loaded on to a curved metal bar screwed to the wall above the sink. In theory this was a good idea, as it saved the soap

> from falling on the floor or melting away in the sink. In practice it was disgusting, because the (usually bright-yellow) cake of soap mostly served as an exhibition space for the yuk that the previous occupant of the toilet had smeared on it. The world was very lucky that the liquid-soap dispenser was invented and killed off the French prototype.[4]

Of course, the French have many reasons to be proud of their creativity, because they have contributed some great inventions to the world – the bikini, scuba diving, Braille, pasteurization, the hot-air balloon (pretty apt, you could say), batteries, the parachute and photography, to name just a few.

And some of their versions of existing technology have become global success stories. Few Americans realize, for instance, that when they take the high-speed train from New York to Boston, they are getting on what is basically a cleverly camouflaged French TGV. [5]

France also conceived some typically French, and very successful, variations on an existing theme:

- The *château*, a building that pretends to have a military function but is in fact merely decorative. A lot like the French army in 1940.
- The Foreign Legion, a group of expendable ex-cons and unemployables who can be safely sent into danger zones to do the dirty work. If they don't come back, no influential person is going to kick up a fuss about a lost son.
- Not forgetting the *camping municipal*, that ridiculously cheap (or occasionally free) campsite in countless villages all over France that encourages the passing traveller to stay the night and spend some money in the local café. French hospitality at its best.

But top of this list of inventions that France is right to be proud of has to be a certain edible delicacy.

The farmer who conceived *foie gras* must have been a very inventive Monsieur indeed. You can imagine him explaining his new *pâté* to his friends:

'Oh, you don't just mince up offcuts of meat like you do with other *pâtés*. You take a goose or a duck, stick a funnel down its throat, and pour as much dried maize as you can into its gullet every day until it is so obese it can hardly walk. Then you rip out its grossly deformed liver and spread it on toast.'

'You've been at the absinthe again, Jean-Pierre,' his friends must have said. 'Come and get some fresh air over at the dogs' toilet.'

But old Jean-Pierre was right, and *foie gras* could only have been a French invention. If it had been an Anglo-Saxon idea and called 'fat liver', no one would have bought it.

Am I Right or Am I Right?

The Frenchman's favourite tool when showing how right he is is the rhetorical question. Why is it his favourite tool? Because it emphasizes just how right he is. Why does he use it so often? Because it makes his opinions sound so important that even he has to beg himself to reveal them. Isn't the rhetorical question annoying when it's overused? Yes, it bloody is.

When you arrive in France, if you're not used to the rhetorical question, it can make any kind of serious conversation a farce. You'll be trying to talk about, say, why some new French film is the usual navel-gazing dross about a poor, misunderstood *artiste* who has to smoke a lot and sleep with chic women in fabulous apartments. And at first you will get the impression that your French conversation partner is genuinely interested in what you think of the movie.

‘Why is this film almost exactly like his last film?’ the French person will ask.

‘Perhaps because—’ you’ll start to answer, but suddenly the French person is drowning you out with their own opinion. And just when you’ve recovered from your confusion, you hear another question apparently aimed at you.

‘And why do young French actresses seem to be contractually obliged to show their boobs?’

‘Because—’ you begin, but the same thing happens again. And you finally realize that the French person is not asking you a question at all. They’re having a conversation with themselves. During which, of course, no one will be able to interrupt them and tell them they’re wrong.

The funniest example of this is, apparently, the first day of lectures at Paris’s elite school, *Sciences-Po*[6]. It accepts lots of non-French students, who go nervously along to their first lecture, eager to participate in a debate with one of France’s most respected intellectuals. Inevitably, when the esteemed professor gets up to speak, he begins to pontificate in a typically French manner.

‘And when did France realize that a colonial war in Vietnam was unwinnable?’ he will ask the assembled young minds.

Non-French hands will shoot up, their owners keen to play their part in the exchange of ideas that is the very engine-room of French culture.

And they will be ignored, as the professor replies to his own question and moves on to the next one, that again only he has the right to answer.

The foreign students cringe in embarrassment at their intellectual faux pas. Meanwhile, the French students – who know what is (or isn’t) expected of them in these lectures – all lounge at the back of the auditorium, taking notes, rolling cigarettes and sending each other text messages along the lines of ‘Do you think I’m sexy? Yes you do.’

A Slice of Truth

The big question is, of course, where does this French sense of paranoid rightness come from?[7] Well, I'm no anthropologist or historian, but I think it goes back to 1789 and the Revolution. There is a French verb that means to decide who is wrong and who is right, to make the final decision. It is *trancher*. Not at all coincidentally, this also means to slice or cut off, as in *trancher la tête de quelqu'un* – to cut off someone's head.

Back in 1789, the French started letting the guillotine decide who was right and who was wrong. The king at the time, Louis XVI, was the great-grandson of Louis XIV, the man who had modestly declared himself the Sun King and espoused the theory of the divine right of monarchs to rule over a nation. By Louis XVI's time, this had become the divine right to waste all the country's money on wigs and garden parties.

Some Parisian intellectuals decided enough was enough, so they whipped the people into a frenzy and the guillotine started to make its decisions, first getting rid of the *aristos*, then anyone who dared to challenge the ideas of the clique of intellectuals that happened to be in power on any particular day.

The French Revolution was not just about replacing a monarch with a parliament. It imposed some extreme – not to say traumatic – ideas on the people.

For a start, the official language suddenly became French, whereas up until 1789 the vast majority of the nation had been happily speaking its various *patois* and was totally incapable of understanding the language used by the Parisians. When Molière, France's comic Shakespeare, toured the country in the seventeenth century, his troupe of actors often had to resort to putting on slapstick shows because no one could understand their spoken plays.[8] Then

suddenly, by decree, the *patois* was banned and everyone had to learn the new ‘right’ language. Anyone who disagreed had their quarrelsome brain detached from their body.

At the same time, in order to reduce the risk of local dissent, the central government started to displace people around the country. Instead of consisting of regional regiments, the army became a national force, mixing up people from different parts of the country, who were forced, of course, to communicate in French. This kind of thing still happens today, so that someone from Provence who qualifies as a teacher at the university of Nice, and who would love to stay on in their region, stands a very good chance of getting posted to Brittany.

The Republic also imposed a new calendar, with the year starting in September and the months getting descriptive names like *brumaire* (‘misty month’), *pluviôse* (‘rainy month’) and *thermidor* (presumably ‘the month in which lobsters are cooked’). Instead of weeks, the months were divided into three ten-day periods, and the ten days were renamed *primidi*, *duodi*, *tridi*, and so on, till *decadi*. Yes, the revolutionaries invented the *metric week*. [9]

In any case, what happened in the few years after 1789 was that everyone in the country had their value system cut off like a guillotine victim’s head. Everything they’d always assumed to be right was suddenly wrong. If they stayed in their own region, they were told they’d been speaking the wrong language. If they were shunted off to a different region, they were suddenly living like foreigners in their own country, eating the wrong foods, and talking with the wrong accent. In many ways, it’s the same experience as being an English expat in France today, and I for one know how disturbing that can be. The sense of alienation tends to push people towards two basic extremes. We expats can end up adopting French culture wholeheartedly, pretending that cricket and Marmite never existed and going to see Johnny

Hallyday live at the Stade de France. Or we can cling on desperately to our old truths, and may feel the sudden urge to write to English newspapers about the demise of the unsplit infinitive and the cucumber sandwich. Most expats try out both extremes for a while and then settle about halfway between the two.

As I said, I'm no historian, but it seems to me that over the two-hundred-odd years since the Revolution, the French seem somehow to have combined these two extreme reactions to being disconnected from their old values. They seem to have embraced the new values (or had them pounded into their brains by the French education system), and then decided that their perfect new way of doing things was under threat, adding the touch of paranoia that they are famous for.

And most of it is the fault of us Anglos. As soon as the French started cutting royalists' heads off, they added a new level of antagonism to their relations with the traditional enemy across the Channel. At first, it was easy for the revolutionaries to sneer at the Brits. Those ridiculous royalist English fops with their mad German monarchs – how could they possibly be right about anything? After all, they had just lost their biggest colony, America, to rebels aided by the French. *Huh*! But things soon started going wrong. Napoleon was beaten at Waterloo and sent to die on a colony that Britain hadn't lost, Saint Helena. And then, just a couple of decades after the French Revolution, how dare these *Anglais* have their own revolution – the industrial one – and start inventing machines that made French technology look outdated? And they even had the effrontery to call one of their first new railway stations *Waterloo*! It was more than enough to make a nation paranoid, *non*?

Things that the French are right about