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# Paris Chamber of Commerce Exams and ACTFL/ETS Proficiency Levels

by Patricia W. Cummins

PROPOSERS OF ACTFL/ETS PROFICIENCY LEVELS believe one of the most important implications for the guidelines will be for use in international business.<sup>1</sup> Townsend Bowling of the University of Texas at San Antonio has written two articles on his own adaptation of the oral proficiency interview to the Paris Chamber of Commerce certificate's oral exam.<sup>2</sup> He gives a modified version of the interview that includes a warm-up, level check, probes, and wind-down. This marks the first time, to my knowledge, that anyone had tried to adapt the guidelines either to the lower level *Certificat Pratique* or to the higher level *Diplôme Supérieur* business French exams offered by the Chamber of Commerce.

## I. Purpose of the Paris Chamber of Commerce Exams

The Paris Chamber of Commerce (Chambre de Commerce et d'Industrie de Paris) exams are a combination of proficiency and achievement tests. The *diplôme supérieur* requires a high level of language proficiency with "superior" skills in reading, listening, and writing, and a minimum of "advanced" skills in speaking, if we use *superior* and *advanced* as described in ACTFL's terminology.<sup>3</sup> This means that no matter how much business knowledge and vocabulary the candidate demonstrates, he will not pass the test unless he possesses this high degree of language skill. Achievement is important because commercial letter format, knowledge of economic geography, and acquaintance with business practices all require a certain amount of study regardless of one's proficiency level.

The purpose of the diploma exam is to demonstrate 1) the candidate's knowledge of business practices and his or her ability to express that knowledge, 2) one's ability to write a business letter and to respond appropriately to the situation at hand, 3) one's awareness of economic geography and understanding of France's place in the world economy, 4) one's ability to understand and to write correct French, 5) the quality of translations from one's native language into French and vice versa, and 6) one's skills at oral communication in the business setting.

For the *certificat pratique*, the exam requires at least "advanced"-level writing, listening and speaking skills, "advanced plus" skills in reading.<sup>4</sup> As Bowling (1985 and 1986) has noted, the difficulty lies in separating proficiency from

achievement. The purpose of the test is to demonstrate 1) knowledge of business practices, 2) ability to write commercial correspondence in the correct format, 3) understanding of French grammar and sentence structure, 4) limited translation skills, 5) reading skills, and 6) some oral communication ability. By contrast with the diploma test, this test requires less writing, the business and grammar questions are presented more directly, and economic geography goes virtually uncovered except in reading comprehension passages.

A business employer who hires someone with either the *certificat* or the *diplôme* can rely on the person's ability to function in a business setting. However, greater responsibilities requiring a higher-level language skill should be assigned only to the person with a *diplôme's* level of competence and achievement.

## II. Chamber of Commerce Exams and ACTFL Guidelines

Although the Paris Chamber of Commerce has never tried to coordinate its testing practices with ACTFL guidelines or the similar Interagency Language Roundtable guidelines used by the American government, there are parallels that researchers like Buck and Lowe (see note 1) may want to consider before publishing their adaptations for business.

After examining *certificat* and *diplôme* tests and reviewing the Paris Chamber of Commerce's expectations statements,<sup>5</sup> I noted the following similarities with ACTFL standards:

### Diploma

#### 1. Reading

*Chamber of Commerce Exams:* 1) commercial letter requires understanding of implied information as well as fact, has specialized and sometimes unfamiliar vocabulary, often calls upon cultural background information; 2) economic geography essay requires background knowledge of culture and familiarity with graphs, journalistic abbreviations, and sometimes specialized vocabulary that the candidate has never seen; 3) the business questionnaire sometimes requires judgments involving total comprehension of nuances, and at other times it tests knowledge of specialized vocabulary.

*ACTFL Distinguished (higher than Superior):* "Able to understand a writer's use of nuance and subtlety. Can readily follow unpredictable turns of thought and author intent in . . . sophisticated editorials, specialized journal articles" (1986 Guidelines for quotes).

#### 2. Writing

*Chamber of Commerce Exams:* 1) commercial letter requires attention to format, tone, linking of paragraphs, correct word choice, standard formulas, and tailor-



ing of language; 2) dictation requires accuracy of grammar and spelling, and it sorts out the good candidates from the very best candidates with a knowledge of the language comparable to that of a French business leader; 3) economic geography essay questions evaluate ability to build arguments and construct paragraphs and ideas in logical sequence; they also test for factual knowledge.

*ACTFL Superior:* "Can write most types of correspondence, such as memos as well as social and business letters . . . Errors in writing rarely distract natives or cause miscommunication." In fact, the Chamber of Commerce exams allow as little deviation from the accepted norm as possible, whereas the ACTFL scale does not distinguish the high level designation which candidates might attain. Even the exactness of language expected by the Chamber of Commerce is not required for ACTFL superior.

### 3. Speaking

*Chamber of Commerce Exams:* The oral test consists of 1) questions on the socio-economic situation in France, 2) commercial practices, 3) translation from English to French and from French to English, 4) summarizing of a text and discussion of that text with the examining committee.

*ACTFL Advanced:* Able to participate in conversations, express facts, describe, report, and narrate in present, future, and past. Topics include social and professional interests, and errors do not interfere with understanding. (Only the Chamber of Commerce translation sections may require higher-level skills and control over interpretation of nuances and grammar; other parts of the oral could be done by a candidate at the advanced level.)

### 4. Listening

*Chamber of Commerce Exams:* 1) dictation requires comprehension of specialized passages on business and economics, including proper names that may be heard for the first time; 2) ability to converse on business and economic topics is demonstrated in the oral exam. The oral does not require authentic listening passages, although recorded announcements and news broadcasts would serve as good preparation.

*ACTFL Superior:* "Able to understand the main ideas of all speech in a standard dialect, including technical discussion in a field of specialization . . . Able to make inferences within the cultural framework of the target language . . . Rarely misunderstands."

### Four Skills

The four skills are linked one to another (see Larson and Jones), and the determination of proficiency is closely linked to achievement. The fact that a candidate can understand and react well to specialized information on business and economics does not guarantee his equally good performance in all special-

ized areas (Lowe 16–18). However, the need to tailor language within a cultural context and without knowing the situation in advance, the necessity for excellent control of grammar, and the requirement that one argue delicate questions and comprehend nuances that are impossible to know about before the test, all clearly require a high level of proficiency in all four skills.

### Certificate

#### 1. Reading

*Chamber of Commerce:* The reading comprehension test allows candidates to demonstrate superior skills, but it requires a minimum of advanced- or advanced plus-level skills. Questions on any business or economic topic are simple rather than complex, and candidates are required to summarize what they have read. In the summaries they may provide more or less complex sentences as they see fit. Vocabulary may be specialized. (Reading is also tested in the need to understand other parts of the exam.)

*ACTFL Advanced-Plus:* "Able to follow essential points of written discourse at the superior level in areas of special interest. Able to understand parts of texts which are conceptually abstract and linguistically complex . . . Able to comprehend the facts to make appropriate inferences . . . Misunderstandings may occur." If misunderstandings do not occur, the candidate will get a higher test score from the Chamber of Commerce that *may* show a superior level.

#### 2. Writing

*Chamber of Commerce:* Writing skills are tested in four parts of the exam: 1) a commercial letter, 2) translations from French into English and English into French, 3) responses to the reading section that call for paragraph-long opinions, and 4) grammar-based questions on the business test. The Chamber of Commerce allows for some errors but not many.

*ACTFL Advanced-Plus:* "Able to write about a variety of topics with significant precision and in detail. Can write most social and informal business correspondence . . . Can write about concrete aspects of topics relating to particular interests and special fields of competence . . . Generally strong in either grammar or vocabulary, but not both. Weakness and unevenness in [grammar, vocabulary, or spelling] . . . may result in occasional miscommunication. Some misuse of vocabulary . . . Style may still be obviously foreign." Of course better performance is allowed for, but it is not an absolute requirement for the Chamber of Commerce.

#### 3. Speaking

*Chamber of Commerce:* The oral exam is in two parts: 1) a reading comprehension passage is summarized orally, and committee members ask questions and



discuss the passage with the candidate, 2) translation from English into French. (Townsend Bowling substituted an oral interview for this typical format.) Whether one uses the traditional format or the Bowling interview, Bowling (1986, 4) seems correct in assuming that a candidate should have at least an advanced rating on the ACTFL scale to pass the test.

*ACTFL Advanced:* Able to converse in participatory fashion, to perform a wide variety of communicative tasks and to handle complications or unforeseen events, to respond to work situations. At this level one speaks in paragraphs but occasionally makes mistakes that make for miscommunication. Of course a superior level of discourse that is error-free is encouraged but is not required in order to pass the Chamber of Commerce oral test.

#### 4. Listening

*Chamber of Commerce:* Listening is tested only to the extent that the candidate must understand questions from examiners on his oral committee. Given the business and economic emphasis of questions, listening is for the most part limited to situations with which the candidate should be familiar. The candidate can also request explanations if a question is unclear.

*ACTFL Advanced:* "Able to understand main ideas and most details of connected discourse on a variety of topics . . . Comprehension may be uneven due to a variety of . . . factors, among which topic familiarity is very prominent." Clearly the ability to understand without requesting explanations is desirable, but it is possible to pass Chamber exams at the "advanced" level if the candidate eventually provides appropriate oral responses.

#### Four Skills

As in the case of the diploma exam the four skills tested in the certificate exam are also linked to one another, and achievement, that is knowledge of subject matter, has an important role in candidate performance for each skill. At the certificate level, teachers should strive to bring students at least to the advanced level and if possible to the superior level. However, the need to tailor language within an appropriate cultural context, the demand for a thorough knowledge of grammar, and the ability to present arguments and points of view on abstract topics are of far less importance at this level than for the diploma.

### III. Pedagogical Implications

Given the high level of skills required to pass Chamber of Commerce exams, it is necessary for students to have at least intermediate-high-level skills upon entering if they have to pass Chamber tests. It is not necessary to give students oral interviews, but if they cannot perform most advanced tasks by mid-

semester, teachers should not encourage them to take Chamber of Commerce tests.

During the semester, the teacher should focus most exercises at the advanced and superior levels with occasional exercises at the intermediate-high level for those whose skills are weak. If she is preparing students for both the diploma and the certificate in a single class, she may also want to vary some exercises to prepare each group for the test it will be taking.<sup>6</sup> As Heilenman and Kaplan have pointed out, to develop high-level proficiency skills, emphasis should be on transmittal of information rather than on consciously developing language skills.

### *Writing*

Early in the semester, a teacher rarely knows the writing level of all students. However, even when she is unsure of who will be taking diploma tests and who will be taking certificate tests, she does know that both groups must learn the basics of letter writing.

1. *Letter writing.* Both groups need to master French format and understand how punctuation, abbreviations, and various formulas differ from American format. Certain stock phrases need to be learned. Later in the year, when student levels are obvious, those students likely to take the diploma exam should be given more complex situations that require them to think about the appropriate response in cultural context and tailor language and link together paragraphs in the most suitable manner. Tone, word choice, and construction of arguments are more important at the diploma level. Students most likely to take the certificate exam should concentrate on format and grammatical accuracy.

To promote good letter writing, students should take advantage of what Claire Gaudiani calls peer-editing.<sup>7</sup> They bring their business letter done as homework to class the next day. In groups of two or three they evaluate format, grammar, spelling, ideas, appropriate expressions, and for the best students, tailoring of language.

If letters are not well done, students may revise them after the teacher sees the peer-edited version. The final version is used for a grade.

2. *Written reports.* In the commercial French class written reports can be used to reinforce reading and speaking activities. The text or the teacher can provide an open-ended question involving newly-learned materials. For example, in a lesson on the insurance industry, students can be provided with a situation in which they must choose between three types of policies with different advantages and disadvantages. More than one good answer is possible. To arrive at a decision, students discuss the matter in small groups and submit a report outlining what they have decided and why. This procedure is one that they will benefit from not only as reinforcement for a lesson but also for improvement of speaking and writing skills that they may one day call upon in business.

After peer-editing the teacher grades the report on 1) logic of the content, 2) grammatical and spelling accuracy, 3) word choice and tone. In some cases reports may be redone to improve a grade.

Teaching writing in combination with reading and speaking skills allows the teacher to bring in all of the concepts recommended by Sally Magnan in her advice on teaching writing: show students "how to organize, elaborate, define, argue, compare, contrast, explain, generalize, and use connotation to advantage" (118). As Magnan points out, good writers plan and revise more than poor writers. The class discussion in small groups may serve as a pre-writing activity to organize and elaborate ideas and to construct arguments to justify a decision. After writing, students have an opportunity to revise both through peer-editing and after teacher correction.<sup>8</sup>

3. *Grammar revision.* For those with weak language background, the teacher may provide grammar review as homework with time for questions and answers allowed only briefly in class. Ideally students would have access to answer keys so that class grammar discussions are held to a minimum.

4. *Reading summaries.* For those with strong backgrounds, especially those preparing for the diploma exam, outside readings on business and economics should be assigned—*L'Express*, *L'Expansion*, and other publications are good. Written summaries should be submitted to the teacher and graded for accuracy both in content and in grammar and spelling. In a mixed-level class, this homework could be assigned while weaker students worked on grammar lessons.

### *Listening Comprehension*

Listening comprehension requires a much higher skill level for the diploma than for the certificate, although it is important for the oral exam for both groups of students.

1. *Dictations.* Since the diploma uses a dictation for one part of the exam, dictations made more and more difficult throughout the semester are useful. Experience in using strategies for guessing spelling and in gaining vocabulary clues from context is good for both oral exams and the formal dictation on the diploma exam.

2. *Cassette tapes.* Students may take notes based on cassette tapes, either commercially prepared or furnished by the teacher, and give their oral reactions based on their notes. Cramer and Terrio recommend pre-listening activities, and on any technical passages, they feel the teacher should make an effort to supply adequate background.

3. *Video cassettes.* Video cassettes, like those produced by the Ecole Supérieure de Commerce de Lyon,<sup>9</sup> can be used in similar fashion. These video cassettes have the added advantage of broader contact with business settings and gestures that accompany the words.

4. *Oral exercises.* Small group discussions of open-ended questions, peer-

editing sessions, and interchanges between students and teacher all help to sharpen listening as well as oral skills. Understanding is directly related to decision-making or to responses expected in most oral exercises.

### *Reading*

Some reading objectives for Chamber of Commerce exams depend on familiarity with business and economic vocabulary. Other objectives depend on knowledge of grammar. Still others rely on good reading strategies.

Business and economic vocabulary should come as a part of textbook and outside assignments. Those students weak in grammar will profit from the grammar assignments recommended for improving writing. Good command of grammar enables students to understand complex ideas and nuances of meaning with a high degree of accuracy.

For good reading strategies, assignments in *L'Expansion* or *L'Express* can be used. Students are assigned an article on unfamiliar material. In some cases the teacher will want to provide key vocabulary, but in others she may provide guide questions that lead students to draw appropriate conclusions about ideas and meanings. The ability of students to guess meanings from context and to understand subtleties of point of view on political, economic, or business situations can be sharpened through knowing the kinds of questions they should ask themselves. If lower-level skills are needed, the teacher may follow Aspatore's advice on having students learn to recognize cognates, roots, prefixes and suffixes, or Geltrich-Ludgate's precise directions on telling students what to look for—gist, discrete points, or something else. Phillips (1985) also summarizes a number of strategies especially good for weaker students.<sup>10</sup>

### *Speaking*

The speaking skill interacts with reading, writing, and listening in many activities. In open-ended questions, small groups speak and listen in their discussion of a topic about which they have read; a written report follows. In peer-editing, students speak about and hear comments on what was written. In both these cases, speaking is used for its normal purposes—seeking and giving information, expressing reactions, and discussing ideas.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to open-ended questions and peer-editing, students may go over answers to textbook exercises in pairs while the teacher checks written assignments for which they will receive grades. Teacher-student talk is usually minimal, related mainly to explanations and to clarifying questions that students did not understand. The emphasis on student to student talk is a mirror reflection of the employee to employer talk students are likely to encounter if they work abroad, and the same small group talk will help students in their oral exams.

### Culture

Business French students need exposure to knowledge about regions, cities, agricultural products, industry, newer economic sectors, energy, social legislation and unions, commercial law, Chambers of Commerce, business and economic policies, the French economy and its place in the world in general and the Common Market in particular. A greater emphasis on economic geography is useful to students planning to take the diploma-level exam.

Textbooks rarely provide adequate information, as statistics and facts change so rapidly. In the case of diploma-level students, business magazines like *L'Expansion* or *Le Nouvel Economiste*, and news magazines like *Le Point* or *L'Express*, are virtually a necessity.

### IV. Conclusions

Paris Chamber of Commerce exams and ACTFL/ETS proficiency guidelines were devised independently. Both can be used to assess the language ability of individuals for a business setting. The Chamber of Commerce exams combine aspects of both proficiency and achievement, and the proficiency levels they require are similar to those described by ACTFL/ETS for the advanced through superior levels or higher. Teachers preparing students for Chamber of Commerce exams should design course objectives and teaching methodologies that will bring students to the advanced and superior levels; students in commercial French courses may be expected to have at least intermediate-high skills at the beginning of the course if they plan to take the international exams. The types of activities mentioned above can help students reach higher proficiency levels, and in some cases they may be varied to allow for two ability groups. While many methodologies can be used to improve both achievement and proficiency levels, this author recommends a combination of structured and creative activities in which reading, writing, speaking, listening, and culture interact. Such an approach will not only allow students to perform better on written and oral tests of the Paris Chamber of Commerce but also prepare them for the team efforts they will encounter in the business world.

NORTHERN ARIZONA UNIVERSITY

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> David Hiple of ACTFL headquarters and Kathryn Buck of Buck Translation Services made this argument forcefully in their article "The Rationale for Defining and Measuring Foreign Language Proficiency Programs for Business." Pardee Lowe of the CIA Language School and Kathryn Buck have done research with ACTFL on business uses of the guidelines. That volume was still not available in summer 1986, but it was cited in the Buck and Forsythe article in 1985 as forthcoming: *Provisional Business Foreign Language Performance Criteria*.

<sup>2</sup> When I first read about Bowling's adaptation, I was unsure of whether the Paris Chamber of Commerce had adopted OPI testing; upon inquiring, I learned that test centers have the option of oral testing procedures they choose as long as the basic areas are covered.

<sup>3</sup> ACTFL's 1986 revised guidelines, no longer labeled "provisional," may be requested from: ACTFL, P.O. Box 408, Hastings-on-Hudson, NY 10706.

<sup>4</sup> This is consistent with Bowling's findings for the oral interview given as the oral exam. His description is in "The *Certificat Pratique* Oral Examination."

<sup>5</sup> See the publication *Examens de français des affaires pour étrangers*. It can be obtained from the Service des Examens pour Etrangers, Relations Internationales, Direction de l'Enseignement, CCIP, 42, rue de Louvre, 75001 PARIS, FRANCE.

<sup>6</sup> Bette Hirsch orients her intermediate conversation classroom toward students at two different levels, striving to reach different proficiency levels in the same class. Student goals are set differently. The common subject matter for commercial French students makes homogeneity of level even less necessary than in other classes.

<sup>7</sup> Lucie M. Bryant provides similar suggestions. She believes grammar discussions come up in normal conversation as they check other students' spelling, syntax, idiomatic expressions, unnecessary repetitions, and creative alternatives. Virtually all of her suggestions on compositions are applicable to commercial French letters.

<sup>8</sup> We have a similar suggestion from Catherine P. Hewins. She recommends six steps: 1) prewriting (talking and asking questions, brainstorming, and providing vocabulary), 2) first draft, 3) feedback from peers or teacher, 4) second draft, 5) proofreading, and 6) final draft. In an advanced course like commercial French, two drafts are usually sufficient, but Hewins's recommendations seem appropriate.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Crane of the Ecole Supérieure de Commerce de Lyon is marketing such a series that became available in 1986. Contact: Dr. Robert Crane, Centre de Coopération Internationale, ESC-Lyon, 23, av. Guy de Collongue, 69130 ECULLY, FRANCE.

<sup>10</sup> June Phillips outlines a five-stage plan for reading instruction: 1) prereading, 2) skimming and scanning, 3) decoding and intensive reading, 4) comprehension, and 5) transferable and integrative skill. In commercial French classes, teachers deal mostly with the latter two stages. Phillips includes strategies for all five stages. However, as illustrated by Krashen et al., "even at an advanced level we read different sorts of materials for different purposes and . . . use different reading strategies . . . extensive reading, intensive reading, scanning, and skimming skills" (268).

<sup>11</sup> Both Jeannette Bragger and Wilga Rivers believe that this natural use of language will build students' proficiency levels as well as serve a direct application (Bragger 58).

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# Teaching the Skills of French Business Correspondence to American Undergraduates: Problems and Techniques

*by Gerald Herman*

IT IS COMMON KNOWLEDGE among language educators that most foreign language majors, even after four years of university study, do not possess the necessary skills to enable them to compose stylistically proper business letters in French. All too often, such a letter written by an American undergraduate to a foreign correspondent and patterned after an American model, will appear ludicrous, presumptuous, perhaps even seem impertinent to its recipient. The French epistolary style, unlike its English counterpart, is a highly structured mode of expression, and neither grammatical competence in the language nor a familiarity with American commercial correspondence are sufficient to help the student avoid the pitfalls associated with the writing of business letters in French.

The focus of interest on commercial foreign language in recent years, and the proliferation of such courses across American campuses, has given an importance to the study of business correspondence that the latter did not possess previously. It has legitimized it, as it were, as a valid component of the foreign language curriculum.<sup>1</sup> However, as with grammar, phonetics, or other such subjects that possess elaborate rules or mechanics, a course concerned strictly with the acquisition of business correspondence skills runs the risk of becoming monotonous in a rather short time. Care must be taken to provide a stimulating context within which the student can learn and practice the skills of letter-writing. Specifically, letter-writing should be integrated into the study of the business world, made an intrinsic part thereof. This presentation will focus on some of the problems encountered in teaching American undergraduates how to write French business letters, as well as on techniques that can be utilized in the classroom to make the study of French commercial correspondence a meaningful, if not an enjoyable, experience.

The objective being to show students how to express themselves correctly in French business correspondence, it is imperative that classroom assignments consist almost entirely of letters. In order to make such assignments interesting, the letters should all deal with specific problems or issues relating to one or more areas of the business sphere. Since the acquisition of correspondence skills constitutes a "practical" learning experience, one that the student may be called

upon to utilize in real-life situations, it is the instructor's responsibility to determine which areas of the business sector are most likely to be of relevance to the students' potential needs. Some suggest themselves to the mind at once, e.g., Banking, Communications, Government, whereas others such as the Stock Market, Agriculture, Customs and Duty, are apt to be of less pragmatic value. It is quite conceivable, for instance, that the student may find himself or herself in a French-speaking environment, having to open a bank account, transfer funds, place an overseas collect telephone call, or contact a government agency to secure a visa or work permit. It is less likely that that same individual might be engaged in the acquisition of stocks and bonds, be involved in civil court litigation, or in the purchase of real estate. Whatever the situation, the oral and written experience acquired in a Commercial French class can prove to be most beneficial.

For each area of the business world to be considered, the student should be provided with a functional vocabulary, general as well as specialized (see Appendix Section). In the absence of adequate textbooks, vocabulary lists can be distributed in class, such vocabulary to be utilized by the student and incorporated into the correspondence. The letters that the student writes should all enact real-life situations, as they might occur were he or she to be living in a French-speaking country. Thus, there may be letters to a bank regarding a loan or an error in a monthly statement of account, inquiries about various options of insurance coverage, the placement of an order with a manufacturer, etc. (see Appendix Section). Variety and interest can be imparted to such assignments by having the student assume different roles, e.g. writing a letter to an institution then changing identity and perspective to reply to that same letter. To maintain the illusion of reality, as well as to develop a sense of discipline, each business letter should be accompanied by a properly addressed envelope, and where appropriate, the student should be encouraged to devise informative and attractive letterheads.

Fundamental to any epistolary assignment is an understanding of the peculiarities and mechanics of French business correspondence. An initial segment of the course should therefore be devoted to a detailed examination and discussion of the French business letter, with an emphasis on contrastive analysis of French and American epistolary models. It is here that the student learns that the salutation in a French letter is followed by a comma, and not a colon; that the French letter generally places the name of the addressee to the right side instead of the left;<sup>2</sup> that months have an initial capital in the data of the letter, but nowhere else in the text, and so on. This learning will be reinforced, through repetition, in the numerous ensuing letter-writing assignments.

The principles of syllabification need to be discussed in this initial phase of the course, and always in a contrastive manner. The student should be informed that word division in French differs substantially from that in English, that it is dictated not exclusively by grammatical or phonetic considerations, but may on