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## Le français interactif — Would, Should and Could: Using *le conditionnel*

*Le conditionnel* is a verb mood which expresses wishes, suggestions, or requests in a polite form; in other words, this tense is able to give the appropriate French equivalents of “could”, “should” and “would”. While there is a verb for “could” which is *pouvoir* and a verb for “should” which is *devoir*, there isn’t one for the modal “would”. The only way we can express the equivalence of “would” is by conjugating the main verb which follows “would” in the *conditionnel* tense (ex: I would like = *je voudrais*).

In English, “would” has a strong presence but in French it is used a lot less. For example, you may use it in English to express something you used to do in the past: “When I lived in the US, I would receive the newspaper every morning in front of my door”. Not in French, we cannot use “would” in this context. Since this action has taken place in the past, we would automatically use the *imparfait*. So how do we clearly use the *conditionnel* and in which contexts? Let’s first start with “should”:

### Should

As most of you know *devoir* in the present tense is translated as “have to” or “must”. Ex: *Je dois faire mon travail* = I must do my work. Nevertheless, when *devoir* is conjugated in the *conditionnel*, it becomes *je devrais* and its meaning changes into a suggestion rather than an obligation! Therefore, anytime you wish to give a suggestion to someone or to yourself, you need to use *je devrais, tu devrais, il/elle/on devrait, nous devrions, vous devriez, ils devraient*.

#### Examples:

*Je devrais faire mon travail* = I should/ought to do my work.

*Tu devrais appeler ta mère aujourd’hui, c’est la fête des mères* = You should/ ought to call your mother, it’s Mother’s Day.

*Je devrais faire le ménage aujourd’hui mais je n’ai pas envie* = I should/ought to do the house work but I don’t feel like it.

### Could

The French use “could” instead of “can” to create a more polite approach to the request. You can use “could” when giving a suggestion.

First, the conjugation of *pouvoir* in the *conditionnel*:

*Je pourrais, tu pourrais, il/elle/on pourrait, nous pourrions, vous pourriez, ils/elles pourraient*.

### Using it in a polite form context – examples:

*Est-ce que je pourrais vous poser une question ?* = Could I ask you a question?

*Est-ce que je pourrais avoir un verre d'eau avec mon café ?* = Could I have a glass of water with my coffee?

*Est-ce que vous pourriez me donner un peu de papier cadeau ?* = Could you give me some gift wrapping paper?

### Using it in a suggestion context – examples:

*Il n'y a plus de place dans le train mais vous pourriez prendre le bus ! Il part dans 10 minutes.* = there is no more space in the train but you could take the bus! It's leaving in 10 minutes.

*Vous ne savez pas lequel acheter ? Vous pourriez acheter ce téléphone portable et s'il ne vous convient pas, vous avez 10 jours pour l'échanger* = You don't know which one to buy? You could buy this cell phone and if it doesn't suit you, you have 10 days to exchange it.

Note: I often hear a common mistake with the conjugation of the verb *pouvoir*. As a reminder, *pouvoir* in the *imparfait* is conjugated as such : *je pouvais, tu pouvais, il/elle/on pouvait, nous pouvions, vous pouviez, ils pouvaient* and the conjugation of the verb *pouvoir* in the *conditionnel* is *je pourrais, tu pourrais, il pourrait, nous pourrions, vous pourriez, ils pourraient*. When you want to express something that you could or could not do in the past (was not able to do), make sure that you use the *imparfait* and not the *conditionnel*.

### Examples:

*Je ne pouvais pas travailler hier, j'étais trop fatigué* = I could not/ I was not able to work yesterday, I was too tired.

*Pourriez-vous me dire si je dois venir au travail demain ?* = Could you tell me if I must come to work tomorrow?

## **Would**

As mentioned earlier, no word in French translates into “would” – it simply does not exist. The notion of “would” is indicated in the main verb when it is conjugated in the *conditionnel*, and we use it mainly for 2 reasons. But first, let's learn how to conjugate this tense:

When conjugating a regular verb ending in *er* such as *parler* or *jouer*, for example, you just need to add the *imparfait* ending to the infinitive/future stem of the verb. The conjugation is simply a combination of using the endings for the *imparfait* with the stem for the *futur*.

**Parler** : *Je parler+AIS, tu parler+AIS, il/elle parler+AIT, nous parler+IONS, vous parler+IEZ, ils/elles parler+AIENT.*

**Venir** : *Je viendrais, tu viendrais, il/elle/on viendrait, nous viendrions, vous viendriez, ils viendraient.*

**Vouloir** : *Je voudrais, tu voudrais, il/elle/on voudrait, nous voudrions, vous voudriez, ils voudraient.*

**Etre** : *Je serais, tu serais, il/elle/on serait, nous serions, vous seriez, ils seraient* – you will notice that it is very close to the future...

**Avoir** : *J'aurais, tu aurais, il/elle/on aurait, nous aurions, vous auriez, ils auraient.*

**Aller** : *J'irais, tu irais, il/elle/on irait, nous irions, vous iriez, ils iraient.*

## 1) To communicate in a polite form

Whenever you have a request and you want to avoid saying *je veux* (I want) or *c'est possible de* (not very attractive..), you could change your request into a more elegant and polite form by saying *j'aimerais* or *je voudrais* (I would like), or *serait-il possible de* (would it be possible to)...

### Examples:

*Je voudrais 500 grammes de crevettes* = I would like 500 grams of shrimps.

*J'aimerais un peu de crème chantilly sur les fraises* = I would like some whipped cream on the strawberries.

*Préfèreriez-vous une voiture automatique ou avec boîte à vitesse ?* = Would you prefer an automatic or stick shift car?

*Est-ce que ça vous dérangerait de changer de place ?* = Would you mind changing seats?

## 2) To communicate a wish/ a hypothesis using the “if” construction:

When expressing a wish which most likely will not happen anytime soon, you will be working with the following construction: if + subject + verb conjugated in *imparfait* + second verb in *conditionnel*.

### Examples:

*Si j'étais vous, j'irais vivre en France !* = If I were you, I would live in France! (notice that *si* triggers the *imparfait*: “*si j'étais*” and the second verb “*j'irais*” is conjugated in the *conditionnel*).

*Achèterais-tu une voiture si tu avais assez d'argent ?* = Would you buy a car if you had enough money? Notice here that it is possible to reverse the order of the two clauses...

*Si je pouvais avoir plus de temps, je ferais de la peinture* = If I could have more time, I would do some painting.

*La vie serait plus agréable s'il y avait moins d'exigences dans la société* = Life would be more enjoyable if there were fewer demands in society.

The use of the *conditionnel* becomes clearer once we' hear it into different contexts... Listen to the 2 scenarios pages 4 & 6).

*Céline Anthonioz*

## Scénario N° 1 — Niveau débutant

**Christiane essaie d'obtenir des informations sur un gîte en France. Elle a regardé le site web du gîte mais il n'y pas de photos et que peu d'informations. Alors elle décide de téléphoner. M. Viton répond à l'appel.**

**Christiane :** Bonjour Monsieur, je vous appelle car je voudrais vous poser quelques questions sur votre gîte.

**M. Viton :** Bonjour Madame, je serais heureux de répondre à vos questions. Je vous écoute !

**Christiane :** Serait-il possible de recevoir des photos de votre gîte et des chambres par email ?

**M. Viton :** Oui, mais pourriez-vous remplir le formulaire de contact sur le site ? Ce sera plus simple. Je devrais pouvoir vous répondre dans les 24h.

**Christiane :** D'accord, merci, ça serait gentil. Aussi, pourriez-vous rajouter un lit supplémentaire dans une chambre ? Nous avons un enfant de 2 ans.

**M. Viton :** Hmm, ça serait possible mais vous risquez d'être un peu serrés. Si j'étais vous, je réserverais la chambre bleue, c'est la plus grande.

**Christiane :** Hmm, d'accord mais ce n'est pas le même budget alors je vais demander à mon mari.

**M. Viton :** Oui, bien sûr, je comprends. Aimerez-vous plus d'informations ?

**Christiane :** Oui, pourriez-vous me dire si vous avez de la place du 15 au 30 août ?

**M. Viton :** Oh la la, c'est la période la plus chargée de l'année. Je suis désolée mais nous n'avons aucune chambre de libre !

**Christiane :** Ah d'accord, je devrais commencer par cette question. Merci bien, Monsieur, et au revoir !

**Christiane is trying to get some information on a gîte in France. She visited a website but there are no pictures and very little information so she decides to call the place. Mr Viton answers the call.**

**Christiane:** Hello, Sir, I am calling you because I would like to ask you a few questions regarding your gîte.

**Mr Viton:** Hello, Madam, I would be happy to reply to any of your questions. Go ahead!

**Christiane:** Would it be possible to receive some pictures of your gîte and rooms by email?

**Mr Viton:** Yes, but could you fill out the contact form on the website? It would be easier. I should be able to respond within 24 hours.

**Christiane:** OK, thank you, that would be kind. Also, could you add an additional bed in a room? We have a 2 year old child.

**Mr Viton:** Hmm, that would be possible but you might be a bit cramped for space. If I were you, I would reserve the blue room, it's the biggest one.

**Christiane:** Hmm, OK, but it's not the same budget so I'm going to ask my husband.

**Mr Viton:** Yes, of course, I understand. Would you like more information?

**Christiane:** Yes, could you tell me if you have anything available from August 15th to the 30<sup>th</sup>?

**Mr Viton:** Oh dear, that's the busiest time of the year. I am sorry but we have no rooms available!

**Christiane:** Ah OK, I should start by asking that question. Thank you Sir, and good-bye!

## Scénario N° 2 — Niveau intermédiaire

**Deux étudiants, Frank et Eva, sont en pleine discussion : ils se demandent tout simplement ce qu'ils feraient s'ils étaient élus à la présidence de leur pays, et tentent d'imaginer un monde meilleur !**

**Eva :** Ben moi, si j'étais la présidente, je ferais en sorte qu'il y ait une taxe pour conduire les voitures en ville. Les gens pourraient prendre les transports publics gratuitement mais ils seraient obligés de payer très cher pour conduire en ville ! Il y aurait des métros aériens, des bus partout et bien sûr des vélos pour tout le monde !

**Frank :** Wow, c'est pas mal ça ! Moi aussi, je ferais la même chose que toi et je veillerais aussi à ce que le monde du travail soit plus sain et que les gens soient payés à leur juste valeur ! Et, évidemment, la discrimination au travail serait sévèrement punie.

J'encouragerais les gens qui ont des idées mais pas de moyens de lancer une petite activité.

**Eva :** Ah oui, et les riches devraient payer beaucoup d'impôts ! Car le partage est important.

**Frank :** Et je penserais aussi aux personnes âgées... Je leur trouverais des activités qui leur donnent une raison d'être et je ferais en sorte que les communautés les intègrent mieux et que les enfants et le troisième âge fassent des activités ensemble !

**Eva :** Oui, et puis il ne faut pas oublier les mamans avec leurs enfants ! J'obligerais toutes les grandes entreprises à avoir une crèche sur place – comme ça il n'y aurait plus de problèmes et de stress pour en trouver une !

**Frank :** Oui, c'était le problème de ma mère jusqu'à ce que j'aille au lycée. Tu as raison ! Il faudrait encourager tous types de garderies et aussi il faudrait que l'éducation en France soit plus positive.

**Eva :** Ah oui – c'est évident ! Oh la la, regarde l'heure ! Il faut déjà retourner en classe... On n'a pas eu le temps de complètement refaire le monde ! On pourrait continuer tout à l'heure ?

**Two students, Frank and Eva, are engaged in a very lively discussion: they simply wonder what they would do if they were elected to the presidency of their country, and try to imagine a better world!**

**Eva:** Well, if I were the president, I would make sure that there is a tax for driving cars in the cities. The people could use the public transportation for free but they would have to pay a lot to drive in town ! There would be an elevated subway system, buses everywhere and, of course, bicycles for everyone!

**Frank:** Wow, not bad! Me too, I would do the same thing as you and I would also make a project to see that the employment world is healthier and that people are appropriately paid according to their proper value! And, of course, discrimination at work would be severely punished. I would encourage those who have ideas but no financial means to become self-employed.

**Eva:** Oh yes, the rich would have to pay lots of taxes! Because sharing is a must...

**Frank:** And I would also think of the elderly... I would find activities for them which give them a reason for living and I would make sure that the communities integrate them better and that the children and the older people do activities together!

**Eva:** Yes, and we cannot forget about mothers with their children, I would require that all the big companies have child care onsite – this way, there would be no more problems and stress in finding one!

**Frank:** Yes, that was my mum's problem until I went to high school. You are right! It's necessary to encourage all types of child care and also education would need to be more positive in France!

**Eva:** Oh yes, that's obvious! Oh dear, look at the time! We must go back to class... We didn't have time to completely change the world! Could we continue later?

**Frank** : D'ac ! Je voudrais bien aussi !  
J'aime bien parler avec toi... A plus !

**Frank**: OK ! I would like that also! I like  
talking to you... Later!

## Quelques exercices

### I) Complétez avec la bonne conjugaison du verbe :

- 1) Si je \_\_\_\_\_ (pouvoir), je te \_\_\_\_\_ (acheter) une maison.
- 2) Je \_\_\_\_\_ (préférer) une chambre double s'il vous plaît.
- 3 Il me \_\_\_\_\_ (amener) faire le tour du monde s'il \_\_\_\_\_ (pouvoir).
- 4) \_\_\_\_\_ -vous (pouvoir) me montrer où est le restaurant indien ?
- 5) \_\_\_\_\_ (être)-il possible de livrer les bouteilles de vin demain ?
- 6) Je \_\_\_\_\_ (être) heureux de vous rencontrer ! \_\_\_\_\_ (aimer)-vous que l'on se retrouve au café La Grande Bouffe à 10h ?
- 7) Je \_\_\_\_\_ (devoir) faire les valises aujourd'hui ; nous partons dans 3 jours !
- 8) On \_\_\_\_\_ (cuisiner) plus si on \_\_\_\_\_ (avoir) le temps.

### II) Trouvez le verbe approprié et conjuguez-le dans le bon temps:

- 1) Si tu \_\_\_\_\_ un nouveau travail, est-ce que tu \_\_\_\_\_ plus heureux ?  
Oui, je \_\_\_\_\_ plus de joie !
- 3) Où \_\_\_\_\_ vous avant de vous installer ici ?  
Nous \_\_\_\_\_ en Australie.
- 3) Si tu \_\_\_\_\_ passer une journée avec un acteur français, qui \_\_\_\_\_ l'heureux élu ?  
Je la \_\_\_\_\_ avec Daniel Auteuil.
- 4) S'il vous plaît, je \_\_\_\_\_ un café crème mais \_\_\_\_\_ -vous aussi m'apporter le journal ?
- 5) Vous \_\_\_\_\_ voir un docteur ! Vous êtes très pâle !
- 6) Si je \_\_\_\_\_ 3 enfants, je ne \_\_\_\_\_ plus pour pouvoir rester à la maison avec eux.

## Media Wordplay: From *la crise* to *la grippe*...

While the world is constantly creating new fears for itself with the threat of a pandemic disease, journalists and linguists are faced with a new puzzle: finding the right word.

In France, in the past, the most serious flu epidemics were from *la grippe asiatique*. The most well-known exception was the flu that swept across the entire globe at the end of WWI and caused from 20 to 50 million deaths: *la grippe espagnole* – a flu which, by the way, was

caused by the virus A (H1N1), such as the present one\*. And more recently, we got used to hearing about *la grippe aviaire*, which also came from Asia.

However, the situation the world has been faced with during the last two months was totally unusual: this *grippe* is not propagated by birds but by pigs, and doesn't come from Asia but from Mexico. First, it was called *la grippe porcine*. However, the Jews who don't eat pork found it insulting, and the same problem appeared in part of the Muslim world, where people don't eat pork either: in Egypt the government used the pretext of the situation to order the slaughter of all the pigs in the country. This decision was obviously directly geared towards the catholic minorities... But those who dislike the expression the most are the French producers of *saucissons*, *boudins* and other *charcuterie* products. Why? Because people began to cut back on their consumption of pork products for fear of catching the flu! Then, some journalists starting to call it *la grippe porcine humaine*.

After that, it was called *la grippe mexicaine*, or *la grippe d'origine mexicaine*. This was before the World Health Organization declared it should be called *la grippe H1N1*, specifying that it was part of the A category. But most journalists didn't find the word dramatic enough, and found it easier to call it *la grippe A*. Some have even called it *la grippe grise*. But many simply call it *la grippe* – exactly in the same way that the financial crisis was eventually just referred to as *la crise*.

All of this linguistic gymnastics is really immaterial: what was most important was to make us feel that it was very serious, even if, in the end, it appears, so far, not to be as deadly and contagious as was suggested by many so-called experts and health organizations...

*Annick Stevenson*

\* It took that name because the Spanish media, which were not under any governmental censorship about the disease, were the first to acknowledge the pandemic and provide accurate information about its spread. The first documented cases were actually in the US.

## Le coin des branchés

**While everybody is talking about the famous *grippe* these days, it is interesting to look at the way the French express themselves when they are sick. A few examples:**

**Avoir chopé la grippe** = to have caught the flu (popular way to say: *avoir attrapé la grippe*).

*J'ai chopé une de ces gripes/une sacrée grippe* : I got a very bad flu.

**Une grippe de cheval** = a very strong flu (literally: a horse flu).

**Un sale rhume** = a bad cold.

**Etre malade comme un chien** = to be very sick (literally: to be sick as a dog).

**Souffrir comme une bête** = to suffer a lot (literally: to suffer like an animal).

**Parlez du nez** = to speak through your nose because of a cold.

**Avoir la goutte au nez** = to have a runny nose.

**Avoir les jambes en coton** = to have very tired legs because of a flu or after a long run or strenuous exercise (literally: to have legs of cotton).

**Avoir une sale tête/une petite mine** = to look very tired, to have a poor countenance.

**Avoir la tête comme une lessiveuse** = to have a terrible headache, frequently used in case of a sinus infection; or to be exhausted after a too long meeting or too much work

**Etre mal fichu/mal foutu/mal en point** = To be in bad shape.

**Etre douillet** = to be very sensitive to pain or to be afraid of suffering.

**Se tordre de douleur** = to be doubled over with pain.

**Etre bon/bonne à ramasser avec la petite cuillère** = to be extremely weak (literally: to be at a stage where you could be scooped up with a teaspoon).

**Etre HS** (hors service) = to be exhausted and unable to do anything.

**Etre claqué/vidé/éreinté/crevé** = to be exhausted (popular way to say: *être épuisé*).

**Tomber dans les pommes/tourner de l'œil** = to faint (popular way to say : *s'évanouir*).

**Avoir mal au cœur** = to be dizzy, carsick (and not: to have a pain in the heart, as it would seem if one were to translate literally).

**Etre mal dans sa peau** = to be dissatisfied with one's life, not to feel good about oneself.

**Avoir le cafard** = to have the blues (literally: to have the cockroach).

**Etre au bout du rouleau** = to be at the end of one's rope.

**Sucrer les fraises** = to have the shakes, to shiver (literally: to sugar the strawberries).

**En faire une maladie** = to take something too seriously. *Lorsqu'elle a appris qu'elle allait changer de bureau, elle en a fait une maladie !*

**Avoir compris sa douleur** = to have understood the consequences of something that has happened. *J'ai cru que je serais mieux dans ce nouveau bureau, mais j'ai vite compris ma douleur !*

**Une maladie imaginaire** = a non-existent or imaginary disease; to feel sick even when one is in a very good health. This expression has been used as the title of a very famous, and funny, play by Molière: *Le malade imaginaire*. (The Hypochondriac)

**Etre soigné aux petits oignons** = to be very well taken care of by someone when one is sick (literally: to be cared for with little onions).