

Fact Sheet – The Meaning of “Si” in French

“Si” is a small French word of many meanings. French people use it a lot, for totally unrelated sentences. It can be easy to feel confused!

How can you use the word “Si” in French? And what does it really mean? What rules does it follow, and in which sentences can it crop up?

Let’s dive in with these explanations and examples!

Learning goals: This is what you’ll be able to do after watching this lesson

- **Beginner:** Use “Si” to say “Yes”
- **Intermediate:** Use “Si” to say “If”
- **Advanced:** Use “Si” to say “So much”

1) “Si” = If

In most sentences, Si means “If.” We use it in sentences made of two parts. Those two parts can be:

- A part that starts with Si + le présent + a part with le présent → Si je gagne, j’achète une voiture. (= *If I win, I buy a car.*)
- A part that starts with Si + l’imparfait + a part with le conditionnel → Si j’étais riche, j’achèterais une nouvelle voiture. (= *If I were rich, I’d buy a new car.*)

We use le **conditionnel** in a sentence with “**Si**”, or on its own for politeness (to soften an affirmation) – just like in English! For example:

- Si j’étais là, je serais heureux. = *If I were there, I’d be happy.*
- Je voudrais une baguette, s’il vous plaît. = *I’d like a “baguette”, please.*

You can use Si (= “If”) in many everyday expressions or turns of phrases that you’ll find in English as well. For example:

- **Même si (= Even if):** Je viendrai même si je suis malade. (= *I’ll come even if I’m sick.*)
- **Si seulement (= If only):** Si seulement je pouvais ! (= *If only I could!*)
- **Comme si (= As if):** Comme si c’était une surprise ! (= *As if it were a surprise!*)

We also use “Si” in its contracted form (when it comes before the vowel i) in the expression s’il te plaît / s’il vous plaît (= *please*) !

2) “Si” = Yes ! (After a negative question)

In French, we use Oui to say “yes,” most of the time. For example: “Tu as faim ?” “Oui !” (= “Are you hungry?” “Yes I am!”)

We don’t add a verb after “Oui” ... which can be confusing after a negative question.

For example, take the question: “Tu n’as pas faim ?” (= *Aren’t you hungry?*)

- If you answer “Oui”, do you mean “Yes, I’m hungry,” or “You’re right, I’m not hungry” ?

- If you use “Non”, does it mean “No, I’m not hungry” or “No, you’re wrong, I’m not hungry”? It’s not a big problem, but it can make for blurry conversations.

French language **resolves that ambiguity** by using another word to mean “yes” after a negative question: **Si** !

For example:

- “Tu n’as pas faim ?” “Si !” (= “Aren’t you hungry?” “; Yes, I am hungry.”)

It’s also used to deny a negative affirmation!

- “Tu n’es pas allé à l’école aujourd’hui.” “**Si** !” (= “You didn’t go to school today.” “**Yes, I did!**”)

3) “Si” = So much

Finally, “Si” is also used to mean “So” or “So much.” For example:

- Je suis **si** heureux de te voir ! (= I’m so happy to see you!)

It is kind of formal, though. In everyday spoken French, we’d rather use “tellement” instead. For example:

- Je suis **tellement** heureux de te voir ! (= I’m so happy to see you!)

That’s how Si is used in the famous French jazz song C’est si bon (= “That’s so good!”) that’s been covered by Louis Armstrong or Yves Montand, among others.

Nowadays we could also say C’est tellement bon or C’est tellement bien in everyday French – but it doesn’t fit as well in a verse!

4) The extra mile : other uses of “Si” and “If”

Le “Si” is also a musical note in most languages. It’s part of la gamme (= the musical scale) Do Ré Mi Fa Sol La Si Do.

A French word with the same sound is la scie (= a saw.) You can make un si with une scie — a musical saw!

Finally, un if is a totally unrelated French word: it’s a tree, the common yew.

What we learned today:

- “Si” can mean “If,” and follows some grammar rules.
- “Si” means “Yes” after a negative question or affirmation.
- “Si” also means “So much”, like “tellement.”
- “Si” is a musical note in French music.