On Monday this week French President Emmanuel Macron was greeting some high school students at a ceremony in western Paris to commemorate General Charles De Gaulle's call for resistance in the second world war. It became an unlikely lesson in French manners .

Greeting a group of boys, Macron said to them, "*Ça va?*", a phrase you'd use with your friends or people you know well to mean "How are you?". A boy, who'd tried to catch the president's attention by singing the Socialist anthem, The Internationale, then shouted "
Ça va, Manu?
". "Manu" is the shortened form of "Emmanuel".

He certainly got Macron's attention. The president responded:

No, no, no, I'm not your mate, no. You're here at an official ceremony, you behave *comme il faut* [as befits the situation]. You can carry on like an idiot, but today's about The Marseillaise and the Song of the Partisans . You call me "Mr President of the Republic" or "Sir", OK?

The student apologised, and Macron dished out some life advice on the importance of doing things in the right order, needing a degree and learning how to put food on the table. All the while he wagged his finger at the teen – a sign of social and power distance.

Following the encounter, Macron made a call for respect on his Twitter feed . The Australian media questioned whether leaders should be approachable, while the French media were unsurprised ; he's done things like this before . Twitter made fun of the president's words .

In Australia, the equivalent would be someone saying to our prime minister, Malcolm Turnbull, “How’s it goin’, Mal?” And in Australia, we could probably get away with it.

What a particular culture thinks are “normal” and good ways of behaving and interacting with other people are reflected in the language and the way it’s used. These cultural norms and values aren’t always obvious. It may take someone breaking the “rules” to reveal what they are and why they’re important.

Informality and familiarity are highly valued in Australia, and our language has phrases and ways of speaking that embody these values. For example, uni students often call their lecturers by their first names. Words are shortened – “sunglasses” become “sunnies”; people’s names are cropped – “Sophia” becomes “Soph”. In line with this, Australians don’t like hierarchy, and the use of titles is an explicit way to mark someone out as being above others.

The use of first names and casual expression reduces distance. It’s a way of saying to your listener “I’m like you; we’re the same”. The Australian distaste for hierarchy is seen in the phrase “cut down the tall poppies” . People who don’t like seeing others rise to the top may be afflicted with the “tall poppy syndrome”.

Australians work hard at presenting themselves as ordinary lest they be seen as thinking they are better than others or in some way special and not like other people. The use of titles, like Dr or Professor, is an explicit way to mark someone out as not like other people. When Macron insisted that the teen call him “Mr President”, he was demanding to be treated differently to everyone else.

Australian English has lots of ways to show disdain for specialness. Someone who wants to be seen as better than others could be described as being “up themselves”, “big-headed”, acting like they “have tickets on themselves”, or even “a bit of a wanker ”.

For the French, it’s good manners to acknowledge the hierarchy by using titles and particular word forms. English has one word for “you”, but French has two: a polite “you” and an informal or familiar “you”. People who are older, you don’t know well or are higher in social standing must be addressed with the polite *vous* ; *tu* is for mates, people you know well or are younger

than you.

Australian English doesn't have this linguistically embedded difference. Titles make us uncomfortable because they go against our egalitarian and matey outlook.

Macron had already established distance by addressing the teen with *tu*. As the older person, he reinforced this linguistic device with a condescending gesture by wagging his finger.

While a brave, and certainly cheeky, Aussie teen could get away with "How's it goin', Mal?", Turnbull couldn't dole out such authoritarian advice without copping an earful in return.

All translations are the author's own.

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Authors: Sophia Waters, Lecturer in Writing, University of New England

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