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## **Amon, Evelyne, Judith Muyskens, and Alice C. Omaggio Hadley. *Vis-à-vis*. 4th edition.**

**New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008. ISBN: 978-0-07-328945-8. Accompanied by an Instructor's Annotated Edition, a Workbook/Laboratory Manual, an Instructor's Manual, Testing Program, audio CDs and audiotapes, integrated video, and online ActivityPak.**

*Vis-à-vis* is a superb comprehensive, two-semester, college-level introduction to French and, in my opinion, one of the very best of its kind on the market today. Like its three predecessors, the fourth edition of *Vis-à-vis* comes with a zillion ancillaries, most of which, fortunately, are both extremely well conceived and easy to use. All the various components fit together like the pieces of a giant life-like three-dimensional puzzle. No doubt each of the sixteen chapters is rather on the long side (thirty pages or so), so the instructor will want to pick and choose judiciously from the abundance of materials and activities offered (or consider incorporating the last part of *Vis-à-vis* into a third-semester course, which is what I usually end up doing, finishing up *Vis-à-vis* in the third semester and throwing in some literature and film for good measure). In the past I found that I seldom had time to do the video in class, but it was available on CD-ROM and students could watch it in the language lab. Now that the "old" CD-ROM has been replaced by the ActivityPak online learning program, I no longer will have this problem and, presumably, students will do a lot of these well-integrated activities on their own. (NB: The CD-ROM that comes with the program contains the Blogs, which I will discuss below.)

*Vis-à-vis* is based on what veteran authors Evelyn Amon, Judith Muyskens, and Alice C. Omaggio Hadley call a “balanced four-skills approach to learning French through a variety of listening, speaking, reading, and writing activities, while introducing students to the richness and diversity of the Francophone world” (*Instructor’s Edition* xiii). The organization is clear and user-friendly almost to a fault, and the *Instructor’s Manual* is exemplary in its attention to practical matters. Inexperienced instructors entering the profession will find in it a gold mine of suggestions about everything from teaching and scheduling to testing and grading.

The 469-page text (not counting an assortment of appendices), making it *exactly* the same length as the third edition (!) text, is divided into sixteen chapters, each consisting of four *leçons*, easily located through a color-coded tabbing system, along with a central two-page cultural section (replacing the former *Correspondance* section) titled *Le blog de...* (named after the fourth edition’s new recurring characters — Léa, Hassan, Juliette, and Hector). Chapters in the fourth edition no longer feature an opening e-mail or postcard from the “old” recurring characters (seasoned users of *Vis-à-vis* mourn the passing of Caroline, Sophie, Michel and Malik, who have moved on, graduated, got a life, or whatever — Godspeed) but still retain a beautiful color picture and clear chapter outline detailing the communicative objectives of the chapter, along with the vocabulary, grammar and culture, all of which are well integrated with each other to teach a given theme (e.g., school, likes and dislikes, food, travel, media and society, to name only a few). Students like to know what is going to be covered in each chapter, especially since chapters are so long, and need to be reminded of what they are going to be doing in the next chapter. The lavish color photograph at the outset is spectacular, but I for one still miss the short e-mail or postcard of yesteryear that used to set the tone of the chapter and taught invaluable idiomatic expressions.

Releasing fundamentally very similar “new” editions every three years or so is like a last minute gate change in a large airport — exasperating, to say the least, for weary travelers such as myself because it necessitates the updating of syllabi and exams; and it is impossible for students to obtain used copies of the text (something that actually deters more than just a few of those who are financially strapped from enrolling in French). However, this reviewer feels that the fourth edition of *Vis-à-vis* is a significant improvement over the third and is sufficiently revised to merit the epithet “new.” Fortunately, topics have not been shuffled around much, if at all, making it relatively painless for instructors to make the transition to the new edition. And the changes make it worthwhile.

The fourth edition has retained most features of the third:

- the text is divided into sixteen chapters, each consisting of four distinct *leçons*;
- vocabulary, grammar, and culture are perfectly integrated;
- exercises are abundant and varied;
- the four skills approach informs every aspect of this program;
- the cultural video footage is up-to-date;

- the ancillaries are so numerous (and so well designed) that even a hardened addict to “supplements” like myself is left gasping for air!

Although the fourth edition retains so many features of the third, I cannot stress enough all the changes made in it which underscore how hard the *Vis-à-vis* team works to integrate new content and technology. Coverage of the Francophone world has been significantly expanded, especially in the context of the *Blog de...* section in each chapter; in the all-new Video program, shot entirely on location, the new recurring characters introduce us to life in their native France, Martinique, Morocco and Canada (the *Bienvenue* section in each chapter contains up-to-date cultural vignettes); the new, revised *Reportage* readings explore cultural, social, and historical topics addressing the interests of today’s students and are integrated with the content of the blogs (which students can explore on their own in the new Online Learning Center mentioned above); five new readings add to the contemporary character of the text and provide a good introduction to life across the Francophone world; finally, the online ActivityPak (which is also available for sale) replaces the former CD-ROM and offers students a potpourri of activities, games, and videos that review important grammar and vocabulary in context.

With regard to content, the only notable change I can see is that the *passé composé* is now presented in two separate chapters (7 and 8), rather than in one single chapter (8). Interestingly, this is the way it used to be in the second edition. Why this shuffling around? Additionally (and I fail to understand the reason), the authors decided to drop the review section, *Révissez*, which followed chapters 4, 8, 12 and 16, in previous editions and helped students review significant material from preceding chapters. However, the *Workbook/Laboratory Manual* retains this very useful feature.

As for the *Workbook/Laboratory Manual*, it is virtually unchanged from the third edition, except for the *Blog de* section, which replaces the *Correspondances* section in both text and *Workbook/Laboratory manual*. The format remains the same, and the veteran user of *Vis-à-vis* will breathe a sigh of relief, knowing that s/he will not have to redo the entire class syllabus. The exercises in the *Workbook/Laboratory Manual* have undergone some cosmetic changes (mostly for the better) and are basically the same, but they are splendid; it is hard to imagine how they could be further improved. The same goes for the audio program, which correlates perfectly with the audio portions of the *Workbook/Laboratory Manual*. This reviewer is of the opinion that Lab exercises are an integral part of any first-year program; I regularly assign most of the oral exercises, which, though sometimes tedious, give students the opportunity to improve their oral comprehension skills. I should point out that there is also the Online *Workbook/Laboratory Manual*, developed in collaboration with Quia, which provides “an enhanced and interactive version of the book version, including instant feedback, automatic grading and scoring, and a grade report feature that can be viewed online or printed” (*Instructor’s Edition* xxi).

Also, on a more positive note, teachers now have the option to include a reader, the recently published *C’est la vie* (2005), a wonderful anthology of short stories specifically designed with the “high beginners” (*Instructor’s Edition* xxi) in mind,

those proverbial *faux débutants* who always make up a sizeable portion of our first-year French students. This nifty reader by Evelyn Amos and Carolyn Nash consists of four original stories that bring the Francophone world to life through the experiences of students and young professionals in France, Guadeloupe, Belgium, and Canada. (It was reviewed in the pages of *The NECTFL Review*, no. 57, Spring 2005). I recommend that all instructors take a close look at this reader and try to make room for it in their syllabus; they will not be disappointed. Last year, I used one of the stories as an experiment, just to see how my students would respond, and their response was so positive that I have made *C'est la vie* required reading in the second semester of my first-year French course. The stories are so cleverly written that even the proverbial undergraduate sitting in the back row of your classroom wearing a baseball cap (backwards, *noblesse oblige*) can begin to make sense of them a month or two into the course and, what is more, want to know what the other stories are about. Just for the hell of it! Imagine that.

Just under half the readings (*Lectures*), which thankfully still come at the end of each chapter, are new; and *Lectures* from preceding editions have been revamped with new pictures. Let me point out that it is not a bad thing to keep readings that are up-to-date and capable of interesting the average 18-year-old American student. One complaint I have had in the past has been that many readings were not only dull but impossible to use in the classroom without resorting to major pedagogical acrobatics. I am happy to report that this situation has been remedied.

The new *Bienvenue* cultural video selection appears after every fourth chapter and presents cultural footage from various Francophone cities and regions throughout the world (Paris, Québec, Dakar, Brussels and Fort-de-France, and, new to the fourth edition, Louisiana, Morocco, Switzerland and Tahiti). The video is available on DVD, as well as in the ActivityPak at the *Vis-à-vis* Online Learning Center ([www.mhhe.com/visavis4](http://www.mhhe.com/visavis4)) These short video clips present a “day in the life” of each city and are linguistically more accessible to first-year students than many of the segments in previous editions. Overall, the video is simply superb and is integrated with the *Blog de...* section in each chapter: Léa, Hassan, Juliette, and Hector strike me as very “real” people and talk and behave the way “real” people do. The camera work and acting are first-rate, and the backdrop is always appropriate and culturally relevant to the chapter theme. Moreover, each video segment is accompanied by a host of follow-up activities. It is too bad that the authors have not included the scripts from the appendices in the *Instructor's Annotated Edition*, as was the case in the first two editions of *Vis-à-vis*; these were immensely useful to this instructor, who often needed to do some last-minute prep at home before class and who now must face the prospect of carting more than one component of the *Vis-à-vis* program home with him every day or perhaps keeping a copy of the *Instructor's Manual* (where, thankfully, the script is still available) on the kitchen table. Joking aside, it is nice to have at one's disposal in the teacher's edition of the text as much of this material as possible.

Furthermore, the *Vis-à-vis* Online Learning Center ([www.mhhe.com/visavis4](http://www.mhhe.com/visavis4)) has been updated and seems better integrated with each chapter, providing interesting links to Francophone sites throughout the world. This valuable online resource includes: daily French news feeds; self-correcting quizzes for each vocabulary presentation and structure in every chapter; links, keywords, and

search engines for the *On est connecté* feature referenced in the textbook; audio files for the *A l'écoute sur Internet* listening comprehension activities found at the end of each chapter in the textbook; and, finally, audio files for the complete Audio Program that accompanies the *Workbook/Laboratory Manual*.

Last but not least, I only discovered a little more than a handful of petty errata throughout the entire program (impressive when one considers that *Vis-à-vis* consists of a zillion different parts and that yours truly is a stickler for detail), but I expected as much from a text that has been around, in one form or another, longer than most of our students have been alive.

I teach the first-year sequence and have been a faithful user of *Vis-à-vis* (and the seven editions of its predecessor *Rendez-vous*) ever since I entered the profession in the mid-1980s. However, I have also used several other well-known first-year programs and therefore have a frame of reference. When I reviewed the second and third editions of *Vis-à-vis* for *The NECTFL Review*, I focused on the chapters I happened to be doing in class at the time. For the sake of consistency I will proceed the same way here and consider chapter 7 (which I just finished in French 101) and chapter 12 (in French 102), in order to examine a few specifics and discuss the changes made in the third edition.

The title of Chapter 7, *Les Plaisirs de la Cuisine*, remains the same, as does the chapter content and organization of material. This chapter continues the study of French food and introduces students to the delights of French cuisine. In the preceding chapter — on the vagaries of the *article partitif* — students learned basic food items and how to order a meal in a restaurant. Since prices were listed in euros, this is as good a time as any to introduce a cultural unit on the euro. In chapter 7 it is time to go shopping in the neighborhood stores and then cook a gourmet meal on one's own. The chapter's grammar lesson is unchanged and focuses on interrogative and demonstrative adjectives and the verbs *vouloir*, *pouvoir*, and *devoir*. The grammar and vocabulary exercises are the same as in the first three editions, but most cultural items (menus, photos, cultural vignettes, etc.) are new and introduce students to typical French dishes such as *fricassé de poulet aux champignons* and *côtes d'agneau*. Teaching French food is tricky, and the authors take a rather standard approach, relating it to pertinent grammar constructions such as the partitive article; however, the focus is consistent, thorough, and, I think, manageable even at the first-year level. The *Blog d'Hassan* takes us on a visit to a North African market in the Place Monge in Paris and the *Reportage* section, immediately following, introduces students to a variety of typical dishes from around the Francophone world. A lot of these skits are really useful, since they cover everyday themes such as shopping, ordering a meal in a restaurant, and finding one's way about town, and in many cases echo the chapter theme.

Chapter 12, *La Passion pour les Arts*, provides an introduction to the arts in France and, happily, still includes a review of the main *époques* and some of the masterpieces one associates with, for example, the medieval period or the seventeenth century. The grammar lesson continues the study of direct and indirect object pronouns, as well as the use of prepositions with verbs (which used to be covered in a later chapter). Most of the material remains unchanged from the previous two editions, and the reading selection is still Jacques Prévert's well-known

poem *Déjeuner du matin*, which, when one thinks of it, might find a better home in Chapter 8 in a future edition (which teaches the *passé composé, juste-ment*). In the *Blog de...* section, Juliette talks about how she learned to paint at a young age and in the *Vidéoblog* section gets together with a friend on the Pont des Arts just across from the Musée d'Orsay.

The *Instructor's Manual* contains helpful suggestions about how to use the text and its many ancillaries; even a seasoned teacher will find them useful, especially the ones about scheduling. The sections on language proficiency and ACTFL's guidelines help instructors implement assessment on a daily basis and contain many helpful suggestions about how instructors can use French in the classroom during every class. Finally, the accompanying Testing Program is exceptionally well conceived and provides a comprehensive selection of quizzes, exams, and dictations.

There are maybe three or four other comparable programs on the market today that do the job and teach students what they need to know to become proficient in French. If you are using one of them, fine. You probably do not want to complicate your life and have to set up the introductory year from scratch again. Dealing with new editions every three or four years is enough for most folks. Besides, why change a winning strategy at half time! However, if you are not happy with your current text or are looking for something that might inject a healthy dose of adrenaline in your students, then you might want to consider *Vis-à-vis*. Clearly it is a winner, and judging from my semester-end class evaluations, I can honestly say that the students love it.

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## **Publisher's Response**

McGraw-Hill is delighted to have the opportunity to respond to Professor Conner's review of the fourth edition of *Vis-à-vis*, a program he has used faithfully over many editions. He describes the program as "one of the very best of its kind on the market today." *Vis-à-vis* is a balanced, four-skills program with an emphasis on Francophone culture; the fourth edition has expanded the cultural coverage in both the print and digital components.

In his review, Professor Conner begins with an overview of the program, including its "zillion ancillaries" which are "extremely well conceived and easy to use," and highlights in particular the Instructor's Manual (a "gold mine for instructors"), and the Workbook/Laboratory Manual ("[the exercises] are splendid.") He also recommends *C'est la vie*, an anthology of short stories for high beginners, which can be used as a companion to *Vis-à-vis*.

Professor Conner briefly mourns the loss of in-text characters from previous editions, but welcomes the new cast that appears in the chapter openers, the "Le Blog de..." sections, and the videos themselves in the fourth edition. He calls the videos "superb," pointing out that the characters talk the way "real" people do, and

he graciously acknowledges the efforts of the *Vis-à-vis* team to integrate new content and technology into the program. Readers who are in search of a new introductory French text will find an excellent overview of *Vis-à-vis* and its ancillaries in this review.

McGraw-Hill World Languages is committed to publishing high quality foreign language print and digital materials, and we are proud to include *Vis-à-vis* and its ancillary program among our many titles. We again thank Professor Conner for sharing his review of *Vis-à-vis* with the readership of *The NECTFL Review*.

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