

In this edition:  
more on the  
imperfect tense

# Lesson 63

## Notes

## Je rangeais mes affaires

### More on the imperfect tense

#### Programme Notes

Welcome to Coffee Break French, the podcast aimed at independent learners of French. Our regular podcasts will introduce you to the French language in easy steps.

In last week's lesson we were looking at the imperfect tense. We are going to continue with this tense in Lesson 63. Mark starts with a review of what we know about the imperfect tense so far.

To form the imperfect tense, we take the *nous* form of the verb in the present tense. Last week we looked at the imperfect tense of *-er* verbs. Let's take *bavarder* ("to chat") as an example. The *nous* form of the present tense is *nous bavardons* so we take off the *-ons* and add the following endings:

imperfect tense - verb endings	
-ais	-ions
-ais	-iez
-ait	-aient

So the full conjugation of *bavarder* in the imperfect tense would be:

bavarder (to chat) - imperfect tense	
je bavardais	nous bavardions
tu bavardais	vous bavardiez
il/elle bavardait	ils/elles bavardaient

Last week we translated the imperfect tense as "was/were doing something". So *je bavardais* would mean "I was chatting".

We also introduced the idea of the imperfect tense being interrupted by the perfect tense. For example, *nous bavardions quand elle est arrivée* ("we were chatting when she arrived").

Today we are going to take a further look at the formation of the perfect tense for different types of verbs. We have already looked at *-er* verbs. Let's now look at *-re* verbs. The good news is that *-re* verbs work in exactly the same way as *-er* verbs. We simply go to the *nous* form of the present tense, take off the *-ons* ending and add exactly the same endings as before.

Let's take the verb *vendre*, meaning "to sell". The *nous* form of the present tense is *nous vendons*. We can therefore form all parts of the imperfect tense.

vendre (to sell) - imperfect tense	
je vendais	nous vendions
tu vendais	vous vendiez
il/elle vendait	ils/elles vendaient

Notice the very slight difference between the *nous* forms of the imperfect tense and the present tense. The only difference is the presence or absence of the letter *-i-*.

**nous vendions la maison**  
we were selling the house

**nous vendons la maison**  
we are selling the house

A similar thing happens with the *vous* forms.

Moving onto look at *-ir* verbs, we find that they work in exactly the same way as *-er* and *-re* verbs. However we need to remember how *-ir* verbs work in the present tense in order to form the imperfect tense. To help us do this, let's look at the present tense of *finir* ("to finish").

finir (to finish) - present tense	
je finis	nous finissons
tu finis	vous finissez
il/elle finit	ils/elles finissent

In the case of *-ir* verbs, we need to remember that the ending for the *nous* part in the present tense is *-issons*. Therefore if we take the *-ons* off *nous finissons*, we are left with *nous finiss-* as a stem to which we add the imperfect endings.

finir (to finish) - imperfect tense	
je finissais	nous finissions
tu finissais	vous finissiez
il/elle finissait	ils/elles finissaient

We now know how to conjugate *-er*, *-re* and *-ir* verbs in the imperfect tense. There are a few verbs which have slight changes, depending on the *nous* form in the present tense. We looked at one of these verbs last week: *manger*. We have to keep the *-e-* in for the *je*, *tu*, *il/elle* and *ils/elles* parts to keep the *-g-* soft.

Two other verbs which work in the same way as *manger* are *nager* (“to swim”) and *ranger* (“to put away”).

nager (to swim) - imperfect tense	
je nageais	nous nagions
tu nageais	vous nagiez
il/elle nageait	ils/elles nageaient

ranger (to put away) - imperfect tense	
je rangeais	nous rangions
tu rangeais	vous rangiez
il/elle rangeait	ils/elles rangeaient

**rangez vos affaires**  
put away your things  
(eg. teacher talking to class)

**je rangeais mes affaires**  
I was putting away my things

Another group of verbs that have spelling changes are verbs that end in *-cer*, for example, the very common verb, *commencer*, which means “to start/begin”. In the present tense of *commencer*, the *nous* form is *nous commençons*. We have to add a cedilla to the *-c-* so that it maintains its soft sound (ie. as *s-* in ‘silk’), as it would otherwise have a hard sound when followed by an *-o-*. The full conjugation of *commencer* in the present tense is:

commencer (to start / begin) - present tense	
je commence	nous commençons
tu commences	vous commencez
il/elle commence	ils/elles commencent

Therefore, to form the imperfect tense, we go to *nous commençons*, take off the *-ons* to give *nous commenç-* and add the endings.

commencer (to start / begin) - imperfect tense	
je commençais	nous commencions
tu commençais	vous commenciez
il/elle commençait	ils/elles commençaient

In the *nous* and *vous* parts, we do not need the cedilla as the *-c-* is followed by an *-i-* which keeps the *-c-* soft.

*Annoncer* (“to announce”) and *menacer* (“to threaten”) work in the same way as *commencer*.

The good news for French learners is that there is in fact only **one** verb with an irregular stem in the imperfect tense. That verb is *être*. The stem is *ét-* and we can simply add the same endings to this stem.

être (to be) - imperfect tense	
j'étais	nous étions
tu étais	vous étiez
il/elle était	ils/elles étaient

*J'étais* could be translated as "I was being" but it is also very commonly translated as "I was". For example:

**j'étais malade**

I was ill / I was being ill

We can also form reflexive verbs in the imperfect tense by simply adding the correct reflexive pronoun before the conjugated part of the verb, exactly as we would do in the present tense.

**je me lavais quand le téléphone a sonné**

I was washing myself when the telephone rang



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