

Lesson 55

Notes

Nous avons compris

The perfect tense: irregular verbs

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.

Over the past few weeks we have been looking at the perfect tense: how to say “I have done something” or “I did something.” We are going to continue with the perfect tense in this week’s lesson but we are now going to take a look at some irregular verbs in the perfect tense.

As we already know, in order to construct the perfect tense in French, we conjugate the auxiliary verb (which in this case is *avoir*) and add the past participle.

Here is a reminder of all the parts of *avoir* (“to have”) in the present tense.

| avoir (to have) - present tense | |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|
| j'ai | nous avons |
| tu as | vous avez |
| il / elle a | ils / elles ont |

The formula for regular past participles is as follows:

-er verbs: take off -er and add -é

-ir verbs: take off -ir and add -i

-re verbs: take off -re and add -u

Today we are going to look at some verbs which are irregular in the perfect tense since they have irregular past participles. In looking at the present tense in previous lessons, we found that some verbs do not follow the conventional patterns of -er, -ir and -re verbs. Verbs can of course be regular in one tense but irregular in another, for example a verb could be regular in the present tense but irregular in the perfect tense.

One of the most common French verbs is *faire* (“to do”). It is often the case that the most commonly used verbs of a language are in fact irregular. Irregular past participles do not follow any clear patterns so as a result we simply have to learn them. The past participle of *faire* is *fait*. So “I have done” is *j’ai fait*. For example, to say “I have done my homework” we would say *j’ai fait mes devoirs*.

Let's now look at some other verbs with irregular past participles.

| Infinitive | Meaning | Past Participle | "I have..." |
|-------------------|------------------|-----------------|---------------------|
| faire | to do | fait | <i>j'ai fait</i> |
| comprendre | to understand | compris | <i>j'ai compris</i> |
| prendre | to take | pris | <i>j'ai pris</i> |
| mettre | to put | mis | <i>j'ai mis</i> |
| écrire | to write | écrit | <i>j'ai écrit</i> |
| dire | to say / tell | dit | <i>j'ai dit</i> |
| boire | to drink | bu | <i>j'ai bu</i> |
| pouvoir | to be able to | pu | <i>j'ai pu</i> |
| savoir | to know (a fact) | su | <i>j'ai su</i> |
| lire | to read | lu | <i>j'ai lu</i> |
| vivre | to live | vécu | <i>j'ai vécu</i> |
| voir | to see | vu | <i>j'ai vu</i> |
| être | to be | été | <i>j'ai été</i> |
| devoir | to have to | dû | <i>j'ai dû</i> |

Notice that some verbs are linked to others in that their past participles have the same ending. For example:

- *comprendre*, *prendre* and *mettre* all have past participles that end in *-is*;
- *faire*, *écrire* and *dire* have past participles that end in *-it*;
- *boire*, *pouvoir*, *savoir*, *lire*, *vivre*, *voir* and *devoir* have past participles that end in *-u* (or *-û* in the case of *devoir*)

Être would be the "odd one out" in the table above.

J'ai pu can mean "I have been able to" but could also be translated as "I could" in some situations. For example, *j'ai pu lire le livre* could be translated as "I could read the book" which sounds more natural than "I have been able to read the book." We need to take care when translating *j'ai pu* as "I could", as the exact translation depends very much on the context.

Note also that *savoir* means "to know" when we are referring to facts, whereas we would use the verb *connaître* (past participle *connu*) when we are talking about knowing a person.

At the end of the lesson, Mark gives Anna a test on the irregular past participles we have looked at in today's lesson.

| | |
|--------------------|---------------------------|
| she has been | elle a été |
| we have understood | nous avons compris |
| they have drunk | ils ont bu |

| | |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------|
| you (informal, singular) have done | tu as fait |
| you (plural) have said | vous avez dit |
| they (female) have written | elles ont écrit |
| I have put | j'ai mis |
| you (formal, singular) have taken | vous avez pris |
| he has read | il a lu |
| we have lived | nous avons vécu |
| I have seen | j'ai vu |
| you (informal, singular) have known | tu as su |
| she has been able | elle a pu |
| we have had to | nous avons dû |

Note that the information listed below is part of the test in the bonus podcast. We would advise you to listen to the podcast before you read the content below.

Bonus episode test

| | | |
|----|--|---|
| 1 | Est-ce que tu as fait tes devoirs? | Have you done your homework? |
| 2 | Elle a vécu en Espagne. | She has lived in Spain. |
| 3 | Nous avons dû partir ce matin. | We have had to leave this morning. |
| 4 | J'ai été malade aujourd'hui. | I have been ill today. |
| 5 | Ils ont bu du café. | They have drunk some coffee. |
| 6 | They have seen the film. | Ils ont vu le film. |
| 7 | He put the chicken in the fridge. | Il a mis le poulet dans le frigo. |
| 8 | Have you not understood? | Vous n'avez pas compris? |
| 9 | She has written a letter this morning. | Elle a écrit une lettre ce matin. |
| 10 | I've been able to see Élise, but I've not been able to see Claude-Michel. | J'ai pu voir Élise, mais je n'ai pas pu voir Claude-Michel. |



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