

In this edition:
uses of the
imperfect tense

Lesson 64

Notes

J'allais à la piscine tous les samedis

The uses of 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.

Last week we learned how to conjugate verbs in the imperfect tense. In this week's lesson, we are going to be looking at the various uses of the imperfect.

Firstly let's look at the use of the imperfect tense that we have already covered. This is when it is translated as "was doing" or "were doing" something. Mark tests Anna on this use of the imperfect tense by asking her to translate some phrases into French.

I was speaking to your mother	je parlais avec ta mère
we were eating some bread	nous mangions du pain
they were drinking some wine	ils buvaient du vin

Note that the verb *boire* ("to drink") is irregular in the present tense:

boire (to drink) - present tense	
je bois	nous buvons
tu bois	vous buvez
il/elle boit	ils/elles boivent

Therefore to form the imperfect tense we take *nous buvons*, take off the *-ons* to give *nous buv-* and add the imperfect endings. So "they were drinking" becomes *ils buvaient*.

We also learned that the imperfect tense can be 'interrupted' and it is most likely to be interrupted by the perfect tense. This gives the idea that something was happening when something else interrupted it.

I was speaking to your mother when the telephone rang	je parlais avec ta mère quand le téléphone a sonné
we were eating some bread when I saw your father	nous mangions du pain quand j'ai vu ton père
they were drinking (some) wine when I arrived	ils buvaient du vin quand je suis arrivé(e)

The second use of the imperfect tense we are going to look at is similar to the first use, in a sense. It is used when talking about a habitual or ongoing action in the past. This is most commonly translated into English with the expression “used to do something”.

we used to eat cheese every day	nous mangions du fromage tous les jours
I used to go to the swimming pool every Saturday	j'allais à la piscine tous les samedis

The way in which the imperfect tense is translated depends very much on its context. For example, *nous mangions du fromage tous les jours* could be translated as “we used to eat cheese every day” or “we were eating cheese every day”.

Note that although *aller* is irregular in the present tense, it is perfectly regular in the imperfect tense.

We can add to the above phrases by using the phrase “when I was young...”. We would use the imperfect tense to translate “when I was young” as we are referring to the habitual action of “being young”.

quand j'étais jeune, j'allais à la piscine tous les samedis
when I was young, I used to go to the swimming pool every Saturday

quand nous étions en France, nous mangions du fromage tous les jours
when we were in France, we used to eat cheese every day

There is another way in which the imperfect tense can be translated, which can sometimes cause some confusion. In English, we can talk about a past memory by using “would”, for example, “we would walk on the beach in the evening and we would look at the stars and we would listen to the waves lapping on the shore...” This is very evocative of a time in the past. In this case, “would” could be replaced with “used to” without changing the meaning. Therefore we are still referring to a habitual action in the past. Be careful not to confuse this type of “would” with the conditional tense, which we will cover in a future lesson, eg. “I would travel around the world if I had lots of money”. For now, think of “would” as an equivalent of “used to”.

we would walk on the beach in the evening	nous nous promenions sur la plage le soir
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The final use of the imperfect tense we are going to look at is when we are describing things in the past, for example physical or emotional things. Mark uses a mnemonic to remember the types of things that can be described by the imperfect tense. The mnemonic is:

Prince Philip Changes His Wig Frequently

The first letter of each word of this phrase stands for something that can be described in the past with the imperfect tense.

P	People	Michelle était sympa Michelle was nice
P	Places	Le musée était intéressant The museum was interesting
C	Clothes / colours	il portait un pull rouge he was wearing a red jumper

H	hair	elle avait les cheveux noirs* she had black hair
W	weather	il faisait du soleil ce jour-là it was sunny that day
F	feelings	j'avais faim I was hungry je ne voulais pas y aller I didn't want to go there

*Note that to describe someone's hair in French, we use the plural of hair, *cheveux*, so the adjective has to agree.

It is important to point out that we do not always use the imperfect tense when describing things in the past. However if you are describing something's ongoing characteristics, you would normally use the imperfect tense.



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