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imperfect tense

Lesson 62

Notes

Je parlais avec ta mère

Introducing 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.

We have already learned to talk about the past using the perfect tense. However the perfect tense is only used in certain situations, for example, telling a story where you are simply stating what happened.

il est arrivé à la maison
he arrived at the house

il est entré
he went inside

il a parlé avec Sidonie
he spoke to Sidonie

In this week's lesson, we learn another tense used to talk about the past: the imperfect tense. This tense is used to fill in all the other details of the "story" as it is used to describe things in the past. There are a number of situations in which the imperfect tense would be used but we are going to concentrate on one of these situations in this lesson.

Let's think of a situation where something is happening and then all of a sudden something else happens which interrupts the ongoing activity. For example, "as he was speaking to Sidonie, the vampire appeared at the top of the stairs." In French, the ongoing activity uses the imperfect tense and the interruption uses the perfect tense. This is because the interruption is part of the narrative whereas the ongoing activity is setting the scene, in a sense. In the lesson, Mark uses the invented word "thtoom" to represent this interruption of the perfect tense.

This idea is represented in the diagram below:



The imperfect tense can be translated as “was doing something” or “were doing something”. When the perfect tense ‘interrupts’, it can be translated using a straightforward past tense in English, eg. “the vampire appeared.”

Let’s now move on to conjugate the imperfect tense. We’ll take a regular *-er* verb as an example: *parler* (“to speak”). To form the imperfect, we take the *nous* form of the conjugated verb in the present tense, take off the *-ons* ending and add a new ending. The new endings are as follows:

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

So to say “we were speaking” we take the *nous* form of the present tense: *nous parlons*. We then take off the *-ons* ending to give *nous parl-* and add the new ending to give *nous parlions*.

The full conjugation of *parler* in the imperfect tense is given below:

parler (to speak) - imperfect tense	
je parlais	nous parlions
tu parlais	vous parliez
il/elle parlait	ils/elles parlaient

Note that the *-ais*, *-ait* and *-aient* endings all sound the same as each other, but sound different from an *-é* sound. Listen to Mark’s pronunciation of the different sounds in the podcast.

Below are some examples of the perfect tense ‘interrupting’ the imperfect tense.



je parlais avec ta mère quand tu es arrivé(e)

I was speaking to your mum when you arrived

tu parlais avec ton copain quand le téléphone a sonné

you were speaking to your friend when the telephone rang

il parlait en espagnol quand il a éternué

he was speaking Spanish when he sneezed

Mark puts Anna to the test by giving her some phrases in English to translate into French using regular *-er* verbs in the imperfect tense.

she was speaking French	elle parlait (en) français
I was playing the piano	je jouais du piano
we were playing tennis	nous jouions au tennis

Marie and Évelyne were singing in the church	Marie et Évelyne chantaient dans l'église
I was working at the market	je travaillais au marché
they were eating in the restaurant	ils mangeaient au restaurant
were you listening to the radio this morning?	est-ce que tu écoutais la radio ce matin? / tu écoutais la radio ce matin? / écoutais-tu la radio ce matin?
I was dancing with Jean-Claude last night	je dansais avec Jean-Claude hier soir

Note that *jouer de* is used when talking about playing an instrument and *jouer à* is used when talking about playing a sport.

Manger is an interesting verb as the *nous* form in the present tense is *nous mangeons*. We have to keep in the *-e-* so that the *-g-* keeps its soft sound. If the *-e-* was not there, the *-g-* would be hard sounding. To form the imperfect tense of *manger*, we take the *nous* form of the present tense (*nous mangeons*), take off the *-ons* (*nous mange-*) and add the endings. Note that for the *nous* and *vous* forms of the imperfect tense, the *-e-* is not needed as *-i-* performs the same function as *-e-* in that it keeps the *-g-* soft.

manger (to eat) - imperfect tense	
je mangeais	nous mangions
tu mangeais	vous mangiez
il/elle mangeait	ils/elles mangeaient



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