THE IMPERFECT TENSE

Twenty-sixth lesson – Vingt-sixième leçon

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1. DEFINITION

- The imperfect tense, called **l'imparfait** (*m.*), is one of the main past tenses used in both spoken and written French.

- There is no tense in English that corresponds directly to it and its meanings vary depending on the context.

- The imperfect is formed by modifying the main verb and it does not require auxiliaries.

2. USES

- There are the three main uses of the imperfect:

2.1 A description of the past, whether of place, people, emotions, the weather etc.

- *C'était un jour d'hiver comme les autres. Il pleuvait beaucoup. J'étais encore sur le palier de ma porte quand j'ai aperçu mon voisin alors qu'il sortait de chez lui. Il portait un magnifique costume blanc mais il n'avait pas d'imperméable ni de parapluie. Il avait le dos courbé et ses cheveux étaient décoiffés. Son allure était celle d'un homme malheureux. Par ailleurs, tout le monde savait qu'il n'était pas heureux. Il m'a croisé sans me saluer. Depuis ce jour-là, je ne l'ai plus jamais revu.*

2. Uses

- *It was a winter's day like any other. It was raining a lot. I was still standing in front of my door when I saw my neighbour leaving his house. He was wearing a magnificent white suit but he didn't have a raincoat or an umbrella. His back was hunched and his hair was messy. He had the aspect of an unhappy man, and everyone knew that he wasn't happy. He walked past me without greeting me. Since that day I have never seen him again.*

2. USES

2.2 An action that happened often, habitually or repetitively in the past, and no longer happens in the present.

- *Quand mon frère **avait** dix-sept ans, il ne **sortait** jamais avec ses amis. Il **passait** ses journées seul dans sa chambre. Il **était** un adolescent timide et solitaire.*

- *When my brother was seventeen years old, he never went out with his friends. He spent his days alone in his bedroom. He was a timid and solitary teenager.*

→ in the above example it is implied that now my brother does go out and does not stay in his room all day. Plus, he is not a timid and solitary teenager anymore.

2.USES

2.3 An unfinished action in the past or an action 'in progress' in the past when interrupted by another shorter action.

- *La nuit dernière, Paul et moi **faisions** la cuisine lorsqu'il y a eu une coupure d'électricité.*
  - *Last night, Paul and I were cooking when there was a power outage.*

→ Doing the homework was interrupted by the power outage, which is a short completed event.

2.USES

- Note : it is difficult to equate the imperfect in French with English tenses. One rule to know is that the imperfect is not used for a once-off action in the past.

3. Forms

- The imperfect is formed using the **nous** form of a verb in the present tense, replacing the ending **-ons** with the appropriate subject ending:

Person	Subject pronoun	Subject ending	examples
1st sg.	Je	**-ais**	*I was/used to…*
2nd sg.	Tu	**-ais**	*You was/used to…*
3rd sg.	Il/elle/on	**-ait**	*He/she was/used to…*
1st pl.	Nous	**-ions**	*We was/used to…*
2nd pl.	Vous	**-iez**	*You was/used to…*
3rd pl.	Ils/elles	**-aient**	*They was/used to…*

3. FORMS

- To illustrate, look at the following table to see how the imperfect is formed in the examples **jouer** (*to play*), **garantir** (*to guarantee*), and **traduire** (*to translate*).

3. FORMS : OVERVIEW

	Jouer *(to play)*	**Garantir** *(to guarantee)*	**Traduire** *(to transate)*
Je	jou**ais**	garantiss**ais**	tradui**sais**
Tu	jou**ais**	garantiss**ais**	tradui**sais**
Il/elle/on	jou**ait**	garantiss**ait**	tradui**sait**
Nous	jou**ions**	garantiss**ions**	tradui**sions**
Vous	jou**iez**	garantiss**iez**	tradui**siez**
Ils/elles	jou**aient**	garantiss**aient**	tradui**saient**

3. FORMS

- **Note**: the conditional and the imperfect have the same subject endings.

  - The imperfect is a very regular tense, but note this spelling rule: verbs like **nager**, **ranger** and **manger** retain the **-e-** after the final **-g** of the stem when it is followed by **-a-**. This is to keep the soft *g* sound.

3. FORMS

Subject pronoun	Ranger *(to tidy up)*	
Je	rang**eais**	*I was tidying up…*
Tu	rang**eais**	*You were tidying up…*
Il/elle/on	rang**eait**	*He/she was tidying up…*
Nous	rang**ions**	*We were tidying up…*
Vous	rang**iez**	*You were tidying up…*
Ils/elles	rang**eaient**	*They were tidying up…*

3. FORMS

- The only verb that is irregular in the imperfect tense is **être**, whose imperfect stem is **ét-**.

	Être *(to be)*	
Je	**étais**	*I was…*
Tu	**étais**	*You were…*
Il/elle/on	**était**	*He/she was…*
Nous	**étions**	*We are…*
Vous	**étiez**	*You were…*
Ils/elles	**étaient**	*They were…*

C'est tout pour aujourd'hui!

Au revoir!

Merci!