

Unit 49 - Expressing time and duration (3)

1 *Depuis*

- 1.1 The construction *since* + [date] is translated by *depuis*. Note that the tenses in French are different from those used in English :

Je **fais mes études** à Manchester depuis septembre 2000
I have been studying in Manchester since September 2000

Here whilst French uses the present tense (*je fais*), English uses the present perfect continuous (*I have been studying*). This happens in situations when the action is **continuing**, i.e. you started studying in September and are still doing so.

- 1.2 There is a similar difference when referring to actions taking place in the past :

Je **faisais mes études** à Manchester depuis septembre 1966
I had been studying in Manchester since September 1966

Here French uses the imperfect tense (*je faisais*) whilst English uses the past perfect continuous (*I had been studying*). This is because whilst the subject of the sentence is no longer studying, he / she was studying at the time the sentence refers to.

- 1.3 The construction *for* + [time period] can be translated by *depuis* or by *il y a ... que* and *ça fait ... que*, although these last two are generally restricted to spoken or more informal French. The same rules regarding tenses apply :

Tu as cette voiture **depuis** longtemps ?
Il y a longtemps **que** tu as cette voiture ?
Ça fait longtemps **que** tu as cette voiture ?
Have you had this car for a long time ?

This also applies to the construction *voilà ... que* (again restricted to spoken French), although it is generally not used in the interrogative :

Voilà 15 ans **que** j'ai cette voiture
I've had this car for 15 years

- 1.4 These tense rules do not apply where a negative is involved. Instead the tenses used are the same as in English :

Je ne l'**ai** pas **vu** depuis octobre
I haven't seen him since October
Il y a longtemps que je n'**ai** pas **fait** de ski
I haven't done any skiing for a long time

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Note that in some cases where *since* begins a clause in the affirmative (as in *It's been a year since I've been to France*) the equivalent clause in French is in the negative (*Ça fait un an que je n'ai pas visité la France*). This is because in these sentences there is an implied negative : if the sentence were rewritten using *for* instead of *since*, a negative becomes necessary (*I haven't been to France for a year*). Consequently the sentence structure :

It is / it has been + [period of time] since [affirmative clause]

is rendered in French by :

Il y a / ça fait / voilà [period of time] que [negative clause]

It's been 5 years since we last met

Ça fait 5 ans que nous ne nous sommes pas revus

2 *Pendant*

2.1 *Pendant* is used when expressing a **completed action**. The tenses used are the same as in English.

J'ai fait mes études à Manchester **pendant** quatre ans

I studied in Manchester for four years

2.2 *Pendant* is often omitted when used in front of a number when the verb has no other direct object :

Cette nuit j'ai dormi huit heures

Last night I had eight hours' sleep

J'ai travaillé un an à Paris

I worked in Paris for a year

2.3 *Pour* is generally used instead of *pendant* when expressing a proposed duration in the future :

Je vais à Manchester **pour** une semaine

I am going to Manchester for a week

Je suis à Manchester **pour** une semaine

I'll be in Manchester for a week

However, *pendant* is generally preferred after the verb *to be* used in the future :

Je serai à Manchester **pendant** une semaine

I'll be in Manchester for a week

2.4 Note the use of *dans* instead of *pendant* where *for* has the sense of *until* :

Je ne serai pas à Manchester que **dans** quelques semaines

I won't be in Manchester for a few weeks

3 *Depuis que / pendant que*

These conjunctions take the indicative and not the subjunctive. *Pendant que* is followed by the same tenses as in English :

Il a beaucoup changé **pendant qu'il était** à Manchester

He changed a lot when he was in Manchester

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Depuis que is followed by the present tense if the action of the verb is continuing :

Il est devenu beaucoup plus indépendant **depuis qu'il est** étudiant

He's become much more independent since he's been a student

Depuis que je **suis** ici je n'ai vu personne

Since I've been here I've seen no-one

Sometimes the difference between a continuing and a completed action can be hard to differentiate, as the meaning can be the same :

Depuis que Pierre **a pris** la retraite / **est** à la retraite, il est beaucoup moins fatigué

Since Pierre retired / has been retired, he's a lot less tired

4 *La première fois que*

This construction is followed by the present tense when English uses the perfect tense :

C'est **la première fois que** vous **venez** en Angleterre ?

Is this the first time you've been to England ?

C'est **la première fois que** je n'**assiste** pas à une réunion

It's the first time I haven't attended a meeting

This contrasts with the construction *le premier* (+ noun) ... *que* which is followed by the subjunctive (see 17.1.1.1).