

## 10. The perfect tense

### 1 Formation of the perfect

#### 1.1 *Avoir* v *être* verbs

The perfect tense is a compound tense, which means that it is made up of more than one verb. With most verbs the perfect tense is formed by using the present tense of *avoir* as an auxiliary followed by the past participle of the verb in question.

Aujourd'hui nous **avons visité** le musée du Louvre  
*Today we visited the Louvre museum*

Some verbs having the sense of "coming" or "going" generally take *être* in the perfect. These are:

arriver - <i>to arrive</i>	partir - <i>to leave</i>	mourir - <i>to die</i>
aller - <i>to go</i>	revenir - <i>to come back</i>	naître - <i>to be born</i>
monter - <i>to go up</i>	descendre - <i>to go down</i>	tomber - <i>to fall</i>
venir - <i>to come</i>	retourner - <i>to return</i>	rester - <i>to stay</i>
entrer - <i>to enter</i>	sortir - <i>to go out</i>	passer - <i>to pass by</i>

For example:

Je **suis revenu** [and **not** \**J'ai revenu*] de mes vacances vendredi dernier  
*I got back from holiday last Friday*

In addition, all reflexive verbs take *être* in the perfect:

Il **s'est couché** tard hier soir  
*He went to bed late last night*

#### 1.2 Agreement of past participle

Agreement involves adding an ending to a word to indicate a grammatical link with another word. The endings are:

singular		plural	
masculine	feminine	masculine	feminine
-	-e	-s	-es

For *avoir* verbs used in the perfect or other compound tense there is generally no agreement unless there is a preceding direct object (see Unit 11 below):

Elle a **ouvert** les rideaux  
*She opened the curtains*  
Ils ont **dormi** tout l'après-midi  
*They slept the whole afternoon*

With *être* verbs the past participle always agrees with the subject:

Elle est **descendue** avec une valise pleine d'argent  
*She went down with a suitcase full of money*  
Ils sont **sortis** faire des courses  
*They went out to do some shopping*

Note, however, that these verbs take *avoir* when they take a direct object. In this case there is no agreement:

Elle a **descendu** l'escalier avec une valise [*l'escalier* = direct object of *descendre*]

*She went down the stairs with a suitcase*

Elle a **sorti** un carnet pour prendre des notes [*un carnet* = direct object of *sortir*]

*She got a notebook out to make some notes*

## 2 Use of the perfect

The perfect tense is used to express an action or state seen as completed. It is used as follows:

### 2.1 When describing completed actions:

Samedi nous **sommes allés** à la plage avec les enfants

*On Saturday we went to the seaside with the children*

Paul **a travaillé** à Paris pendant longtemps

*Paul worked in Paris for a long time*

### 2.2 When describing something that suddenly happens:

Soudain il **a su** qu'elle l'avait trompé

*Suddenly he knew that she had deceived him*

Au bout de quelque temps il **a vu** que...

*After a certain time he saw that...*

### 2.3 When describing something that has recently been completed:

Il **a fini** ses études

*He has finished his studies*