

16. Semi-auxiliaries

1 Definition

A semi-auxiliary is a verb used with an infinitive and which most commonly expresses a distinction of time (past, future etc.) or mood (possibility, wishing etc.).

2 Semi-auxiliaries of time

2.1 These include the verb *aller* and the expression *être sur le point de* to express the near future:

Il **va** lui en parler demain

He is going to speak to him / her about it tomorrow

Elle **est sur le point de** partir

She is about to leave

2.2 And the expression *venir de* to express the recent past:

Ils **viennent de** partir en vacances

They have just gone on holiday

3 Modals

Semi-auxiliaries of mood are more commonly known as **modals**. These include:

3.1 The verb *pouvoir* to express possibility:

Il **peut** y avoir beaucoup de monde à la soirée

There may be a lot of people at the party

Fais attention! Cela **pourrait** exploser

Be careful! It could / might explode

J'**aurais pu** être tué!

I might have been killed!

Il **aurait pu** m'aider!

He could have helped me!

3.2 The verb *devoir* to express probability:

Il **doit** avoir dix ans maintenant

He must be ten years old now

Nous **devrions** arriver vers minuit

We should be there by midnight

Je ne trouve pas mes clés. J'**ai dû** les laisser dans la cuisine

I can't find my keys. I must have left them in the kitchen

3.3 The verbs *vouloir*, *souhaiter*, *désirer* to express a wish:

Je **voudrais** / **souhaite** / **désire** le voir

I would like to see him

3.4 The verbs *devoir* and *falloir* to express obligation:

Il **doit** se présenter à quatorze heures

He should turn up at 2.00 pm

Tu **devrais** lui écrire pour t'excuser

You ought to write to him / her and apologize

Il **faut** arriver une demi-heure en avance

You should arrive half an hour early

Note also the expression *être censé faire* which means *to be supposed to do*:

Elle **est censée** être au travail

She's supposed to be at work

3.5 The verbs *pouvoir* and *savoir* to express ability:

Vous **pourrez** le voir dans une demi-heure

You can see him in half an hour

Savez-vous nager?

Can you swim?

Note that *savoir* means to know facts:

Je **sais** qu'il est malade - *I know he's ill*

This contrasts with *connaître* which means to know or be acquainted with people, places:

Je **connais** bien Pierre / Manchester

I know Pierre / Manchester well