

4. Verbs

1 Definition

We have seen in Unit 2 above that the verb indicates the action of a sentence. This action can be a physical activity such as *walking*, a mental activity like *thinking* or else a condition like *being* or *feeling*. Verbs can also be used with other verbs to give information about aspects such as time (*I will go*). In this case the verb *will* is said to **modify** the verb *go*.

2 Tenses

All actions of course happen in time, and verbs are situated in time primarily by means of **tense**. For example, in French the **present tense** can indicate that the action is happening at the time of talking or narrating:

Pierre **enseigne** dans un lycée
Pierre teaches in a Sixth Form college

The **perfect tense** can indicate that the action happened in the past and is completed:

Pierre **a enseigné** dans un lycée
Pierre worked in a Sixth Form college

The **imperfect tense** can indicate that the action happened in the past and is still continuing:

A cette époque-là Pierre **enseignait** dans un lycée
At that time Pierre worked in a Sixth Form college

The **future tense** can indicate that the action will happen in the future:

Pierre **enseignera** dans un lycée
Pierre will work in a Sixth Form college

3 Moods

The above forms are said to be in the **indicative mood** as they are used when considering something as a fact or probability. Other verb moods include the **subjunctive**, which is used when the action of the verb is coloured with an attitude such as doubt, need, wishing, feeling or opinion:

Je veux que tu **viennes** avec moi
I want you to come with me

The **conditional**, which is used when the action of the verb is seen as a hypothesis rather than real:

Je **viendrais** avec toi si j'avais le temps
I would come with you if I had the time

And the **imperative**, which is used when instructing or inviting someone to do something:

Viens avec moi!
Come with me

4 Simple and compound tenses

Tenses are also classified according to how they are formed. Some verbs are made up of one verb (as in *enseigne*, *enseignera*) and these are called **simple tenses**. Others are made up of two or more verbs (as in *a enseigné*), and these are called **compound tenses**.

In French compound tenses are made up of two elements. One (or more) **auxiliary** verbs, which in French will be a form of the verbs *avoir* or *être*: *il a enseigné*, *elle est allée*. And a **past participle** (such as *enseigné* or *allée*).

Past participles can also be used without auxiliaries, in which case they are like adjectives:

Le magasin est **fermé**

The shop is closed

Compound tenses in English differ in so far as the participle used can be a **present participle**:

Pierre is **teaching** in a Sixth Form college

Pierre enseigne dans un lycée

Note that French never uses the present participle in this way, i.e. you **cannot** write **Pierre est enseignant dans un lycée*.

However, in common with English, present participles in French are used to shorten a longer clause:

Etant fatigué, il est rentré chez lui (i.e. *Comme il était fatigué...*)

Being tired, he went home (i.e. *As he was tired...*)

5 The infinitive and conjugation

The **infinitive** is the basic form of a verb such as *to give* in English or *donner* in French from which other forms are derived. It is this form that is listed in dictionaries to name a verb (in English the *to* is not included). Infinitives are most often used with other verbs called **semi-auxiliaries** (verbs expressing notions such as possibility, wishing etc.):

Elle veut aller au cinéma [veut = semi-auxiliary, aller = infinitive]

She wants to go to the cinema

Infinitives can never be used with a subject (i.e. you **cannot** say **je donner*, *la femme donner*, etc.). When using a verb with a subject, the verb must be given a particular ending corresponding to the subject and the tense (i.e. *je donne*, *tu donnais*). This is called **conjugating** a verb.

The **stem** is the part of a verb, usually derived from the infinitive, which has unchanged spelling, to which different endings may be added. For example, to conjugate the verb *parler* (*to speak*) in the present tense, take the stem *parl-* and add the appropriate endings.

In addition to tense, the endings serve to indicate **number** (whether the subject is singular or plural) and **person**: **1st person** = *I, we*; **2nd person** = *you*; **3rd person** = *he, she, it, they*.

6 Voice

Voice is the area of grammar relating to the active and passive forms. The **active voice** indicates that the grammatical subject carries out the action of the verb:

Le chien a mordu le facteur [subject = *le chien*]

The dog bit the postman

The **passive voice** indicates that the grammatical subject is the participant affected by the action:

Le facteur a été mordu par le chien [subject = *le facteur*]

The postman was bitten by the dog