A2. GRAMMAR (additional content) : tense (*temps*) and mood (*mode*) in French

1. Distinction between mood *(mode)* and *tense (temps)*

The form of a French verb is determined by the mood and the grammatical tense. The concept of mood (mode) is very difficult, perhaps even impossible, to define: it was once thought that mood expressed the speaker's attitude toward what was being said (this type of attitude is also called modality): for example, the ***indicatif*** would place a statement in reality, while the ***subjonctif*** would place a statement in a virtual, uncertain world. Unfortunately, all attempts to give an exact definition of the concept of mood (*mode*) are almost incomprehensible and incorrect, and therefore... largely useless to us. Thus, we consider the mood as a set of different forms in which a verb can appear. In French, we distinguish the following **five moods**:

(1) indicatif (indicative mood): *je parle, nous parlerons, il est tombé, elle avait mangé,…*

(2) subjonctif (subjunctive mood): *je parle, nous parlions, elle finisse, elle soit tombée,…*

(3) impératif (imperative mood): *parle, parlons; finissez; aide-moi, …*

(4) participe (participle): *parlant, parlé; dit; tombée; terminées;…*

(5) infinitif (infinitive): *parler, finir; être tombé; avoir terminé; joindre; ...*

Each of the aforementioned modes (or manifestations) of the verb must necessarily adopt a tense in order to accurately situate the expressed event or state in time—either in relation to the speaker or to another action. We distinguish three possible 'time frames':

(1) The **current time frame of the speaker** is called **the present** (*le présent*) :

- Je *mange* une tartine; je *veux parler* au directeur; elle frappe son chien; elle *craint* que son père *soit* devant la porte....

(2) A time frame that precedes the speaker's current time frame is called **the past** (*le passé*).

- Je *suis tombé*; elle *se levait* tous les jours; il *avait dit*...

(3) A time frame that takes place after the speaker's current time frame is called **the future** (*le futur*).

- J'espère que tu *réussiras*; elle *viendra* sûrement;…

Note that the present, past, and future as described above actually correspond to the concepts of *simultaneity*, *anteriority*, and *posteriority relative to the moment of speaking*.

2. Each mood has one or more (grammatical) tenses.

The five moods we listed above can be combined with the three time frames—*present, past, and future*—and *these combinations form the grammatical tenses*. Unfortunately, not every mood allows for the same number of possibilities. Some moods can express only a single time frame, while others can represent multiple versions of the same time frame.

Here are the possible combinations :

(1) *indicatif* :

-Présent: *présent, (futur proche, passé récent) , conditionnel présent*

-**Passé:** *passé composé, imparfait, passé simple, plus-que-parfait*
conditionnel passé

-**Futur:** *futur simple, futur antérieur, conditionnel présent*

(2) *subjonctif* :

-Présent: *présent (p.ex elle finisse; je veuille)*

-**Passé:** *passé (p.ex. j'aie dit; je sois tombé;…)*

-**Futur: -**

(**3) *impératif***

-Présent: *présent (p.ex. Viens!…)*

-**Passé:** -

-**Futur: -**

(4) ***participe*** **(***Does not truly situate an event in time; it always attaches itself to another verb. This category also includes the* ***gérondif****.)*

-Présent: *présent (p.ex. parlant; disant; accusant,…)*

-**Passé:** *passé (p.ex. parlé; tombé; pris)*

-**Futur: -**

(5) *infinitif* *(Does not truly situate in time; it always attaches itself to another verb.)*

-Présent: *présent (p.ex. finir; parler; dire…)*

-**Passé:** *passé (p.ex. avoir fini; avoir parlé; être tombé…)*

-**Futur: -**

From the combinations above, it becomes clear that the *indicatif* is the mood that yields the most tenses, closely followed by the *subjonctif*. The remaining moods have only a *présent* and a *passé*! Study this list carefully—especially the *indicatif, subjonctif,* and *impératif,* as these are the most relevant for us!

3. Overview of the use of tenses

3.1 the *indicatif présent*

The *indicatif présent* generally situates an event within the speaker's current time frame, meaning that the expressed action usually coincides more or less with the moment of speaking. For example, *elle mange une pomme* means that she is eating an apple while the statement is being made... This is probably not new to you, but what you might not always consider is that what is being said does not necessarily have to perfectly coincide with the act of speaking. With the *indicatif présent,* you can also express a future or past event. When this happens, however, you need to include the necessary adverbs and expressions to alert your conversation partner that you are talking about the past or the future:

> *(1) Luc arrive demain.*
>
> *(2) La semaine dernière, à neuf heures du matin, elle se lève.*

In summary: if there are no expressions in the sentence explicitly referring to the future or the past, the action of an *indicatif présent* always coincides with the (current) moment of speaking, the *present time*!

In terms of formation, the *indicatif présent* is the most difficult tense, and mastering it will require a lot of study. The great advantage of thoroughly studying this tense is that you will be able to form nearly all other French tenses with ease.

3.2 The tenses of the past: *indicatif passé composé, indicatif imparfait, indicatif plus-que-parfait.*

Just like in English, we can also speak about events that took place in the past, and in modern French, three tenses are used for this purpose (at least in the *indicatif*): *passé composé, imparfait,* and *plus-que-parfait*. Each tense has its own specialization, and the most challenging part will be using these three tenses correctly in different contexts.

The *passé composé,* a compound tense (*suis + tombé; avons + bavardé*...), is the most complex of the trio because it has various uses that may seem a bit strange to English speakers. It can express events such as:

(3) A completed event in the present, or...

(4) a completed event in the past

In (3), the *passé composé* often appears with the *indicatif présent* and expresses that an action or situation is completed in the present, meaning it conveys the result of a completed action.

Some examples of this use:

- *Nous avons emporté de quoi faire une pizza.*
  (-> We have everything to make a pizza!)

- *Regarde Luc, il a encore bu*
  (*-> Look, he's drunk again.*)

- *Elle est partie.*
  (-> She is gone.)

However, as soon as there is a clear reference point in the past, such as in *elle est partie hier* (= she left yesterday), the *passé composé* expresses a completed event in the past, which brings us to point (4), the *passé composé* as a past tense. When you use the *passé composé* as a past tense, you always present the action as completed and finished in the past. Adverbs and adverbial phrases referring to a past time are often, though not always, used for this purpose:

- *Hier, elle est tombée;*

- *Il y a deux jours, je me suis fait arrêter pour trafic d'armes.*

Let's repeat that the *passé composé* (4) always presents an action/event as a completed whole in the past.

The property mentioned above places the *passé composé* directly opposite the *indicatif imparfait*, which presents the action as unfinished in the past or as an event that was ongoing in the past! There is a significant difference between *Luc est mort* and *Luc mourait*: in the first sentence, Luc has indeed died (even if he comes back as a zombie!), while in the second sentence, this is not necessarily the case: in English, we would translate this as *Luc was dying*. For this reason, the *imparfait* is often used to express : habits, actions/events that are of secondary importance to the main action (main action = *passé composé*!), descriptions, and so on...

- *Elle fumait une cigarette quand la police a défoncé sa porte.*
- *Il buvait tous les jours 10 bières.*
- *Le soleil brillait violemment et on avait tous soif.…*

A summary of the main uses of the *imparfait* and the *passé composé*:

Indicatif imparfait	**Indicatif passé composé**
- a description (une description) > *Je dormais tranquillement quand quelqu'un a frappé à la porte.* - a habit / a repetition in the past (une habitude): > *Quand je sortais en hiver, je mettais toujours mes gants.* - An action that was ongoing in the past. > *Elle parlait de ses rêves et sa mère pelait les oignons.*	- A precise and completed action > *Je me suis levé et j'ai pris le petit-déjeuner* > *A 9h, j'ai appelé la police pour signaler…* - A sequence of actions that moves the 'story' forward. > *J'ai sorti mon revolver et j'ai ordonné à l'employé qu'il me rende l'argent de la caisse. Nerveux, je me suis laissé aller et j'ai appuyé sur la gâchette.*

The last past tense is the *indicatif plus-que-parfait*. This tense is often used in combination with another past tense and expresses an action that occurred before it and is completed:

- *Quand il m'a présenté à sa fiancée, j'étais sûr que je* ***l'avais*** *déjà* ***vue*** *quelque part. Mais où* ***l'avais****-je* ***rencontrée****?*

- *Quand la police est arrivée, les criminels* ***étaient déjà partis.***

3.3 The tenses of the future: *indicatif futur simple* and *indicatif futur antérieur*

When speaking about the future, you are essentially expressing promises, commands, or making predictions. To express these speech acts, we almost always use the *futur simple*:

- *J'arriverai à temps (promise);*

- *Tu copieras 100 fois 'je ne tricherai plus aux examens' (command, promise);*

- *Luc réussira certainement son permis de conduire (prediction).*

The *futur simple* faces much competition from the *futur proche*, which can also be used in each of the above examples:

- *Je vais arriver à temps.*

- *Tu vas copier 'je ne vais plus tricher…'*

- *Luc va certainement réussir....*

The *indicatif futur antérieur* is used to express a completed event that precedes another event in the future:

- *Quand tu l'auras vue, tu appelleras la police...*

3.4 Tense or mood? *Le conditionnel présent* and *le conditionnel passé*

Just like for the tenses we discussed earlier, we will focus on the use of the *conditionnel* as a tense and not on its modal use (e.g., *je voudrais un coca; j'aurais dû m'y attendre; tu aurais pu me prévenir*). The *conditionnel (présent)* expresses a future event relative to a past reference point. This may sound complicated... Compare the following two sentences:

(1) *Luc pense / espère que Marie* ***viendra*** *(ind.fut.simple)*

(2) *Luc pensait / espérait que Marie* ***viendrait*** *(conditionnel présent)*

In sentence (1), we are talking about a future event (*Marie viendra*) and the reference point in the sentence (*Luc pense...*) is situated in the present. Therefore, we can use the *futur simple*. Now, what happens if we use a past reference point (*Luc pensait...*)? Then, we are required to use the *conditionnel présent* (*Marie viendrait*) and drop the *futur simple*, as it can only be used relative to a present reference point. In English, we do exactly the same. Try translating sentences (1) and (2) into English!

3.5 Le subjonctif

The *subjonctif* is a mood and in modern French, it only has two active tenses: the *subjonctif présent* and the *subjonctif passé*. We will discuss the use of these tenses in section 3.5.2. First, a bit more explanation about the use of the mood.

3.5.1 Gebruik

The *subjonctif* is primarily used in subordinate clauses (or *subordonnées*). When a subordinate clause is introduced by the conjunction *que* (that), we are usually dealing with either a direct object clause or a subject clause (*une complétive: (A)*) or a relative clause (*une subordonnée relative: (B)*):

(A) *Je pense que sa mère est malade*
Il veut que je ramasse les déchets;
J'espère qu'elle réussira...
Il est étonnant que Luc ne se lave plus (subject clause!)

(B) *C'est le meilleur livre que j'aie jamais lu;*
Où est la clé que tu as trouvée ? ...

Another type of (finite) subordinate clauses is introduced by certain conjunctions or adverbs:

(C) Je *le ferai* ***avant qu****'elle ne soupçonne la vérité* .
Il dort ***pendant qu****'elle fait la vaisselle*...

The *subjonctif* is used in each of the three cases above, specifically in the following situations:

* (In complement clauses, case A above): We use the *subjonctif* when a direct object clause or subject clause is introduced by verbs or constructions that express the following: possibility, necessity, doubt, uncertainty, feelings, will, etc. Some examples:

- *Il faut que tu partes;*

- *Il est (im)possible qu'elle n'ait rien vu;*

- *J'ai peur qu'elle se soit trompée;*

- *Je voudrais qu'il s'en aille;*

- *Je regrette qu'il vienne ce soir; ...*

* (In relative clauses, case B above): We use the *subjonctif* in a relative clause when the clause completes a superlative or a noun phrase with *« le seul, le premier, le dernier, l'unique, le meilleur, le plus + adjective, ... »*:

- *le meilleur / le plus beau film que j'aie jamais vu...*

- *la seule solution que je puisse envisager…*

Additionally, we also use the *subjonctif* in relative clauses that follow an indefinite antecedent or that express an idea of hypothesis, will, or purpose:

- *Il n'offre rien qui puisse nous intéresser.*

- *Elle cherche quelqu'un qui veuille lui apprendre à parler l'italien.*

* (After certain conjunctions, case C above): Some conjunctions require the use of the *subjonctif*:

- *avant que (before...);*
- *jusqu'à ce que (until);*
- *en attendant que (until);*
- *à supposer que (supposing that...);*
- *bien que (although, even though) ;*
- *quoique (although, even though);*
- *quoi que (whatever:: Quoi que tu fasses = Wat je ook doet);*
- *qui que (whoever);*
- *pour que (so that);*
- *afin que (so that) ;*
- *sans que (without, unless:: Elle s'est échappée sans que ses parents ne le sachent);*
- *à condition que (provided that)* ;
- *après que* (here you have a choice: *indicatif* or *subjonctif*!)
- [complete the rest of the list yourself]

3.5.2 The use of the tenses: *subjonctif présent* and *subjonctif passé*

As you may remember, the *subjonctif* in modern French only has two tenses: the *subjonctif présent* and the *subjonctif passé*, which has significant implications for their usage! The *subjonctif passé* is formed by:

1. Taking the *indicatif passé composé* of a verb, and
2. Then placing the auxiliary verb in the *subjonctif*.

   -> elle SOIT tombée; nous AYONS mangé; ils AIENT fini;.

The key question, which many grammar books remain silent about, has still not been answered: when do I use a *subjonctif présent* and when do I use a *subjonctif passé*? Does the *présent* express the present and the *passé* the past? Unfortunately, not... **the names of both tenses no longer reflect their actual use in modern French. This means that the *subjonctif présent* does NOT automatically refer to an action in the present but can just as well refer to an action in the past or the future! Similarly, the *subjonctif passé* does not "automatically" refer to an action in the past either. The fundamental meaning of both tenses must be understood in relation to the timeframe of the main clause**: if the event in the subordinate clause (in the *subjonctif*) is simultaneous or subsequent to the main clause, we use the *subjonctif présent* (see case D below). If the action in the subordinate clause (in the *subjonctif*) is prior to that in the main clause, we use the *subjonctif passé* (see case E below). Note that in the examples below, we choose a litteral but clumsy translation just to illustrate the point.

(D) *-elle voulait que je sois heureuse*
*-> She wanted that I **was** happy / **would become** happy [clumsy translation...]*

- elle veut que je sois heureuse
-> She wants that I become happy / will be happy / be happy.

- elle craignait que son fils ne tombe malade
*-> She feared that her son **would become** sick.*

- Bien qu'elle soit malade, elle n'a pas manqué de nous aider
*-> Although she **was** sick, she still helped us.*

- Elle voudra que je l'aide ....
*- > She will want that I **help** her...*

Pay close attention to the differences between English and French: in English, we have (almost) all tenses available, whereas in French, due to the use of only the *subjonctif présent* and *subjonctif passé*, this is not possible:

(E) - *Il craint qu'elle ait eu un accident*
-> He fears that she has had an accident.

- *Il craignait qu'elle ait eu un accident*
-> He feared that she had had an accident.

In summary: the *subjonctif* in modern French uses only two tenses: the *présent* and the *passé*. The former expresses simultaneity or subsequent action relative to the main clause, while the *subjonctif passé* always expresses an action that is prior to the action in the main clause!

3.6 *L'infinitif* (the infinitive)

The *infinitif* also has two tenses: a *présent* and a *passé*. The use of the *infinitif présent* will likely not cause too many problems. Note that the *infinitif présent* expresses simultaneity or subsequent action in relation to the verb it is attached to:

(1) *il pensait avoir raison = il pensait qu'il avait raison*
il espère gagner le match = il espère qu'il gagnera le match

The *infinitif passé*, on the other hand, always expresses precedence in relation to the verb it is attached to:

(2) *il affirme avoir vu un fantôme = il affirme qu'il a vu un fantôme*
il a regretté de n' avoir rien fait = il a regretté qu'il n' ait rien fait.

3.7 L'impératif (the imperative mood)

The *impératif* (imperative) only has a present tense and is used to give a command to one or more people: *mange tes tartines* (eat your toast); *finissez votre travail* (finish your work); *trinquons à sa santé* (let's toast to his health); *sortez d'ici* (get out of here);...

3.8 *les participes passé* et *présent (past and present participles)*

Participe passé: joué / fini / tombé / entendu / craint / été / dit /...
Participe présent: jouant / finissant / ayant / étant / sachant / craignant / tombant /...

The *participe présent* is often combined with the preposition ***en*** to form a ***gérondif***. This construction expresses simultaneity with the action in the main clause. It's important to note that when using the *gérondif*, the subject of the main clause is assumed to be the same as the subject in the subordinate clause (the *gérondif* clause).

(3) *Elle est tombée **en glissant** sur une banane*
(Who slipped on a banana? : the subject of « *elle est tombée* »)

(4) ***En trichant** aux examens, il a déçu ses camarades*
(Who cheated? The subject of « *il a triché* »)