

## WARE'S LANGUAGE NOTES

### Starting to talk about the past.

Quelle Horreur ! I hear you say – all that hassle with avoir and être and all those awkward irregular bits, and for what? But there is quite a lot you can talk about in the past using just one or two verbs, and not using that uncomfortable Passé Composé tense at all.

When we tell stories in English we talk about what happened using one kind of verb shape and we describe what was going on in the background using another. Look at the words **happened** and **was going on**. They are different patterns.

The French do the same thing, they use the Passé Composé – it's called composé because it is composed of two words – to tell the story and the Imparfait (one word) for the background. The opposite of what we do (two words for background and one for the storyline). The imparfait is also used for nostalgia (used to ...) again, more than one word in English.

Coursebooks always seem to start with the Passé Composé because people like telling stories – a lot of conversation is made up of telling people where you have been and what you have done. But you probably can get away with telling stories in the present tense – *This guy comes up to me and he says.... Ce type vient vers moi, et dit....* And there are lots of things you can say using the easier, regular imperfect tense. *That was wonderful – C'était formidable! The weather was bad – il faisait mauvais! I knew it – je le savait! I was nackeded J'étais crevé etc*

The recipe is simple – take the NOUS form of the present, which in every verb except one (être) ends in ONS. Knock off that ONS and add the sound AY and you are almost home and dry. For être it's Etay (étais, etc) The proper endings are spelt differently from each other according to who was doing or being it, but they nearly all sound the same. Curiously, its the NOUS and VOUS bits of the imperfect that sound different – they've got to have the ONS and EZ on the end, so they grow an I on the front to make them different from the present. (*Étions, étiez*)

To see this working, look at FAIRE:

*Nous faisons* (noo fizzong) > *fais...* (fizz)> (Fizzay) *faisais, faisais, faisait and faisaient*, BUT *Nous faisons* (noo fizzyong) *Vous faisiez* (voo fizzyay), all of which mean that someone or other used to do or make something or was doing or making it at the time!

The most useful ones are *faire, être, avoir* and perhaps *vouloir*. Here are a few things you can do with them:

*Il faisait beau – the weather was fine* (how's that for nostalgia?) *C'était difficile – it was difficult*  
*J'avais faim – I was hungry* *Mon père avait 70 ans - My father was 70* *Il y avait beaucoup de monde – there were a lot of people*  
*L'avion était bourré – the plane was packed* *Je voulais prendre le train – I wanted to take the train*  
*C'était trop cher – It was too expensive* *Il n'y avait pas de place – there wasn't any room*  
*Il pleuvait – it was raining* *Quand j'étais jeune, l'Angleterre, c'était le Paradis. Maintenant, c'est l'Enfer.*