

## WARE'S LANGUAGE NOTES

### The language Tardis - viewing life from other times

One of the things that separates us from other primates, and certainly from the animal kingdom is our ability to imagine – to see into the future and to learn from the past, and, of course, the language to express these concepts.

I often find myself describing time as a boat moving inexorably through the water leaving a trail of disturbed water behind it and pointing unstopably into the future. And when we talk about the future or the past, we leave a marker buoy for the past or throw a line for the future – an expression that notes what moment we are talking about, what point in time the rest of what we say is based around – and then the way we configure the action – the tense of the verb that we choose – is centred on that marked moment.

For instance, if you had stopped me yesterday and asked what I was doing, I would have said “I am going to the shops to buy some food.” and that’s because yesterday I went to the shops to buy some food. If something happened on the way to the shops, I might tell it differently – I was going to the shops to buy some food, when I suddenly realised I d left my wife at home. We are wallowing in a little moment of time and describing either one thing or a sequence of things that happened in that long or short moment of time. When I was doing the shopping yesterday I met so and so and we went off to have a cup of tea and a chat. (Not a short sort of happening with some of my friends!) The different tenses that we use enable us to relate one event to another and to the present – i.e. the time we are opening our mouth and talking.

This first example of this kind of thing that the learner comes across is the hardest to come to grips with, as it involves two past tenses (-----ed and was ---ing). To do the same thing in French means conquering the Passé Composé for the story line (j’ai rencontré, je suis allé, Je me suis reposé etc – I met, I went, I had a rest) and remembering to use the Imperfect for the background (je pensais, je m’occupais de mes affaires, je faisais du lèche-vitrine – I thought, I was minding my own business, I was window-shopping). It doesn’t seem fair that the first “clash of the tenses” should be so different from the English way of doing things. Especially as most of the other ones – the ones you come across later in the course – seem so much more like English.

If the main thread of your story is about yesterday, but you want to mention an event prior to that, you would say in English I had seen him the day before. (Past bit of “have” plus past participle of “see”). What is it in French? Je l’avais vu la veille. (Past bit of “avoir” plus past participle of “voir”). Providing you can handle the future, even quite complex ideas follow the same sort of pattern in French as in English – If I had known I would meet him again I would have brought his passport with me. Si j’avais su (literally “had” + “known” que je le rencontrerais ( conditional = future with (past-dragging) imperfect endings) une deuxième fois j’aurais apporté (“will have” dragged back to the past with imperfect endings i.e. “would have” + “brought” ) son passeport.

This playing about with the “have” part of the Passé Composé to provide other time connections is almost completely in parallel with English and quickly becomes intuitive. If you are looking to the future, and think When I am 30 I will have bought a house, in French this thought would end up in the same way – j’aurai acheté une maison (I will have + bought).

There are two things to bear in mind, though. The first is that we English speakers do not find at all intuitive to use “To Be” to make past tenses. And just as the French say Je suis entré (I am come in = I came in) so they will say I was come in the day before (J’étais entré la veille) and I would be stayed a week if I was realised myself that my girlfriend wasn’t left (Je serais resté une semaine si je m’étais rendu compte que ma copine n’était pas partie.)

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The second is that French is much more precise about relating tenses to time. We look at Conditional sentences – If I see him I will say hello – and treat future time When sentences in the same way – When I see him I will say hello. The French do what we do with conditions – Si je le vois je lui dirai bonjour, but for things that will happen in the future they use the future tense – Quand je le verrai je lui dirai bonjour. So When I am 30 I will have bought a house becomes Quand j'aurai 30 ans j'aurai acheté une maison.

Now if you look inside 501 verbs or a Becherelle (sounds more like a sauce than a grammar book!) You will find each one of these “have” shapes labelled with a tense name (Pluperfect, Future perfect etc). But going back to my earlier article “Who says verbs are hard” you only need to know three present tense shapes, the future and the past participle and almost every thing else works to a fixed pattern with regular rules, most of which are more intuitive than one dares to believe.