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Module: Initiation to Translation
Level 2nd Year – All Sections Translation
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An Introduction to Translating French Verb Tenses and Moods

This lesson is an overview of how **French and English verb** forms match up, and we illustrate points with examples: the *je* form of *prendre* (to take) and the *vous* form of *aller* (to go). Make sure you know **how regular verbs are fully conjugated** in the simple and compound tenses and how the irregular verbs **_prendre_** and **_aller_** are fully conjugated in the simple and compound tenses.

French has many different tenses and moods, which come in two forms: simple (one word) and compound (two words). Translating French verbs into English, and vice versa, can be difficult for several reasons:

- The two languages don't have the same verb tenses and moods.
- Some simple forms in one language are compound in the other.
- English has **modal verbs** (unconjugated auxiliary verbs such as "could," "might" and "must," that express the mood of the verb that follows), but French does not.
- Many verbal constructions have more than one possible equivalent in the other language, depending on the context.

1. Simple Verb Tenses

Simple tenses consist of only one word. Compound tenses consist of more than one word: usually an auxiliary, or helping, word and a past participle.

Present Tense
- *je prends* > I take, I am taking, I do take
- *vous allez* > you go, you are going, you do go

Future
- *je prendrai* > I will take
- *vous irez* > you will go

Conditional
- *je prendrais* > I would take
- *vous iriez* > you would go

Imperfect
- *je prenais* > I was taking
- *vous alliez* > you were going

Passé Simple (literary tense)
- *je pris* > I took
- *vous allâtes* > you went

Subjunctive
- *(que) je prenne* > (that) I take, "me to take"
- *Il est important que je prenne...* > It's important that I take...
- *Veut-elle que je prenne...?* > Does she want me to take...?
- *(que) vous alliez* > (that) you go, "you to go"
- *Il est important que vous alliez...* > It's important that you go...
- *Veut-elle que vous alliez...?* > Does she want you to go...?

Imperfect Subjunctive (literary tense)
- *(que) je prisse* > (that) I took
- *(que) vous allassiez* > (that) you went

2. Compound Tenses

As we did with simple (one-word) tenses, for compound tenses, which consist of an auxiliary verb and a past participle, we will be using examples: the *je* form of *prendre* (to take) and the *vous* form of *aller* (to go). Remember that these are irregular verbs and that *prendre* needs *avoir* as the auxiliary verb, while aller requires *être*. To properly absorb this lesson, make sure you understand how to fully conjugate compounds verbs in every tense and mood, in particular the compound versions of the example words: *prendre* and *aller*.

Passé composé
- *j'ai pris* > I took, I have taken, I did take
- *vous êtes allé(e)(s)* > you went, you have gone, you did go

Future perfect
- *j'aurai pris* > I will have taken
- *vous serez allé(e)(s)* > you will have gone

Conditional Perfect
- *j'aurais pris* > I would have taken
- *vous seriez allé(e)(s)* > you would have gone

Second Form of the Conditional Perfect (literary tense)
- *j'eusse pris* > I would have taken
- *vous fussiez allé(e)(s)* > you would have gone

The following French compound conjugations all translate to the English past perfect, because these tense distinctions, which are so important in French, aren't made in English. In order to understand how the French verb forms are different in meaning and usage, please follow the links.

Pluperfect
- *j'avais pris* > I had taken
- *vous étiez allé(e)(s)* > you had gone

Past subjunctive
- *(que) j'aie pris* > I had taken
- *(que) vous soyez allé(e)(s)* > you had gone

Pluperfect subjunctive (literary tense)
- *(que) j'eusse pris* > I had taken
- *(que) vous fussiez allé(e)(s)* > you had gone

Past anterior (literary tense)
- *j'eus pris* > I had taken
- *vous fûtes allé(e)(s)* > you had gone

3. Impersonals and Imperatives

To illustrate a comparison of these French and English verb forms, we will again use examples: the *nous* form of *prendre* (to take) and the *vous* form of *aller* (to go).

a. Imperatives

Imperatives are a verb mood that's used to:
- give an order
- express a desire
- make a request
- offer advice
- recommend something

Imperative
- *(nous) prenons* > let's take
- *(vous) allez* -> go

Past imperative
- *(nous) ayons pris* > let's have (something) taken
- *(vous) soyez allé(e)(s)* > have gone

b. Impersonals

"Impersonal" means that the verb does not change according to grammatical person. Why? Because no person or other living being carries out the action. Therefore, impersonal verbs have only one conjugation: the third person singular indefinite, or *il*, which in this case is equivalent to "it" in English. They include expressions like *il faut* (it's necessary) and weather terms such as *il pleut* (it's raining).

Simple impersonal conjugations:

Present participle
- *prenant* > taking
- *allant* > going

Past participle
- *pris* > took, taken
- *allé* > gone, went

Compound impersonal conjugations:

Perfect participle
- *ayant pris* > having taken
- *étant allé(e)(s)* > having gone

Past infinitive
- *avoir pris* > have taken, having taken
- *être allé(e)(s)* > have gone, having gone