

The pluperfect tense

7

Like the **passé composé**, the French *pluperfect* (also called past perfect) is a compound past tense, i.e., it consists of two words, the auxiliary and the past participle. In English, this tense is expressed by *had + past participle* (had given) or *had been . . . -ing* (had been giving). In French as in English, the pluperfect describes *what had happened before* another action in the past.

In the English sentence "I *had studied* French before I went to France" for example, the action of studying occurred prior to going to France and is therefore in the pluperfect. After we review the formation of the pluperfect, we will study its use.

The formation of the pluperfect tense

To form the pluperfect, use the imperfect tense of the auxiliary (**avoir** or **être**) and add the past participle of the verb in question.

donner to give

j'avais donné
tu avais donné
il/elle/on avait donné
nous avions donné
vous aviez donné
ils/elles avaient donné

*I had given
you had given
he/she/it/one had given
we had given
you had given
they had given*

partir to leave

j'étais parti(e)
tu étais parti(e)
il/on était parti
elle était partie
nous étions parti(e)s
vous étiez parti(e)s
ils étaient partis
elles étaient parties

*I had left
you had left
he/it/one had left
she/it had left
we had left
you had left
they had left
they had left*

se réveiller to wake up

je m'étais réveillé(e)
tu t'étais réveillé(e)
il/on s'était réveillé
elle s'était réveillée
nous nous étions réveillé(e)s
vous vous étiez réveillé(e)s
ils s'étaient réveillés
elles s'étaient réveillées

*I had woken up
you had woken up
he/it/one had woken up
she/it had woken up
we had woken up
you had woken up
they had woken up
they had woken up*

Note:

- ◆ In the pluperfect the verb takes the same helping verb (auxiliary) as in the **passé composé**.
- ◆ The pluperfect is formed just like the **passé composé**, except that the auxiliary is in the imperfect.
- ◆ The agreement of the past participle in the pluperfect follows the same rules as in the **passé composé**.

EXERCICE

7-1

Traduisez en français les mots entre parenthèses.

1. (They [masc.] had returned) _____ la veille.
2. (We had come) _____ chez eux.
3. (They [fem.] had chosen) _____ de retourner.
4. (You [pol.] had promised) _____ de le faire.
5. (I had laughed) _____ de ses plaisanteries.
6. (We had learned a lot) _____ à l'école.
7. (They [masc.] had been) _____ absents.
8. (The proposition [La proposition] had fallen) _____ à l'eau.
9. (It had rained) _____ toute la journée.
10. (You [fam.] had written) _____ un petit mot.
11. (He had wanted) _____ danser avec elle.
12. (They [masc.] had hurried) _____.

The uses of the pluperfect tense

The uses of the pluperfect in French and English are very similar. There are only two instances where the English past perfect will not be translated into French by the pluperfect, but rather by the imperfect.

- ◆ In an *affirmative* statement after **depuis, il y avait + time + que**, and **ça faisait + time + que**, the imperfect is used to refer to an action that was going on for a certain time in the past, prior to another action that interrupted it.

He had been working in New York for five months when they offered him a job in Paris.
Il **travaillait** à New York **depuis** cinq mois quand on lui a offert un poste à Paris.

- ◆ To express the English *had just* (+ *past participle*), French uses the verb **venir** in the imperfect tense + **de** (+ *infinitive*).

He had just left.

Il **venait de partir.**

A. The pluperfect tense is used to express an action, event, or situation which happened *before* another past action, event, or situation which may or may not be mentioned in the same sentence.

Elle était déjà partie quand
je suis arrivé.
L'avion avait atterri.

She had already left when I arrived.

The plane had landed.

EXERCICE

7-2

Traduisez en français les phrases suivantes.

1. Robert was looking for the suitcase (that) he had lost. _____
2. She finally gave me back the money (that) I had loaned (**prêter**) her a long time ago. _____

3. He had an accident because he had been drinking. _____
4. The teacher was disappointed because the students had not done their homework. _____

5. When they had sold their house, they moved. _____
6. When Napoleon decided to leave Moscow, the Russian winter had already started. _____

7. She had lived in Africa before she came (**avant de venir**) to the United States. _____

8. They (*masc.*) thought (that) he had died in the war. _____
9. She was happy because she had received an award. _____
10. I did not know where I had put my wallet. _____

B. The pluperfect is used after **si** to express a regret about something that can no longer be changed.

Si seulement j'avais su cela!

If only I had known that!

EXERCICE

7-3

Traduisez en français les phrases suivantes.

1. If only I had listened to him! _____
2. If only they (*masc.*) had not said that! _____

3. If only he had not driven so fast! _____
4. If only we had followed his advice! _____
5. If only you (*fam.*) had arrived on time! _____
6. If only you (*pol.*) had told me (= said it to me) earlier! _____

C. The pluperfect is used with **depuis** (*ça faisait... que, il y avait... que*) in a *negative* statement for an action which started in the past and continued up to a certain point in the past.

Je ne lui **avais** pas **parlé** *depuis* trois mois quand je l'ai rencontré.

I had not talked to him for three months when I met him.

Or: *Ça faisait* trois mois **que** je ne lui **avais** pas **parlé** quand je l'ai rencontré.

Or: *Il y avait* trois mois **que** je ne lui **avais** pas **parlé** quand je l'ai rencontré.

EXERCICE

7-4

Traduisez. (Use *depuis* in all sentences.)

1. I had not heard from him (**avoir de ses nouvelles**) for two years when he called. _____
2. They (*fem.*) had not cleaned the apartment for eight weeks when the landlord (= owner) came. _____
3. He had not paid his bills for three months when he received the warning. _____
4. She had not gone to work for several days when her boss fired her. _____
5. I hadn't seen my friends for a long time when I met them at a party. _____

D. The pluperfect is used to express a *habitual action* which happened before another habitual action (expressed by the imperfect tense) in clauses introduced by a conjunction of time such as **quand**, **lorsque** (*when*), **dès que**, **aussitôt que** (*as soon as*), **après que** (*after*), and **une fois que** (*once*).

Une fois que Brice **avait fini** de travailler, il *faisait* la sieste.

Once Brice *had finished* working, he *would take* a nap.