Document generated on 10/12/2024 2:13 a.m.

Journal des traducteurs
Translators' Journal

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Volume 1, Number 4, April 1956

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1056514ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7202/1056514ar

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Publisher(s)

Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal

ISSN

0316-3024 (print)
2562-2994 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this article

Hanna, B. (1956). English Verbs. *Journal des traducteurs / Translators' Journal*, *1*(4), 106–109. https://doi.org/10.7202/1056514ar

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English Verbs

Blake T. HANNA

One of the principal differences between the French and the English is the fact that the French enjoy playing with nouns, whereas the English are interested in verbs. Most of the subtleties of French are expressed through the nouns, while in English, it is the verb system which has been developed with much loving care to the point where it can express the most delicate shades of meaning of which the language is capable. It is for this reason that the noun-verb transposition has become a rule of thumb to French-English translators.

At the risk of relating a twice-told tale, I should like briefly to analyze the English verb system, in order to demonstrate how typical it is of the English way of thinking—and how different it is from that of the French.

Most of the difference between French and English verbs arises from the fact that the English systematically make certain distinctions concerning **mood** and **aspect** that the French do not feel compelled to make. Let's look at these terms to begin with. **Tense** means, roughly, comparing the time the action happened to the time shown on the clook or calendar. **Aspect** means using the beginning of the action as a yardstick, rather than the calendar. **Mood** means changing the form of the verb in such a way that you betray the state of mind the person was in when he said or wrote it. **Tense** gives the difference between the present "I look" and the preterite "I looked". It differs very little from French. **Aspect** can tell us three things about the action. First, it can have a degree zero, in which you decide not to worry about aspect at all. It is the absence of aspect shown in the **simple form** "I looked". In the second place, you can point out that the action took a long time to happen. This is done with the **progressive form** "I was looking". Finally, you can indicate that the action happened over and over again, until it practically became a habit. This is called the **frequentative form :** "I used to look". **Mood** tells us more about the man who said the verb than it does about the action. For example, if he puts the verb into the indicative mood, "I look", he is simply stating a straightforward fact. If he puts it into the conditional mood, however, "I would look", he shows the action is dependent upon some other action or situation. There is little difference, however, between the use of these two moods and the corresponding French usage. What is different, however,

is the fact that he can insist on the action by using the **emphatic form** "I did look". This form is usually employed to contradict somebody who has just said the opposite. It has to be used for the interrogative and negative of all except auxiliary or defective verbs, whenever the simple form is not a compound tense. In other words, we say, "Did you look?" instead of, "Looked you?". Finally, in a great many cases, there is no emphatic form at all. The English have not invented any emphatic forms where they don't need them. They use intonation instead. In fact, if emphasis is all the person is worrying about, he can use intonation instead of the emphatic form wherever the tense is a compound one. In the two moods we are going to examine, the **simple present** and the **simple preterite** are the only forms that are not compound.

Fortunately, most of the fundamental differences between French and English verbs occur in the **indicative** and **conditional** moods. This is the most frequently used part of the conjugation anyway, so let's look at it more closely. If we cut across the distinctions of aspect and mood and make a list of all the different forms of each tense, it will look as shown on the following page.

In using these verb forms in translation, it is important to avoid setting up a list of equivalents. That is to say, it is dangerous to reason that the English present perfect corresponds to the French passé composé, etc. Sooner or later, such a list of equivalents breaks down. The best thing to do is to decide what **situation** the French verb describes, and then to locate the English verb which fits the same situation. The latter method is all the more valuable since the French may use a noun and not a verb to describe the situation in question. The necessity of examining the situation is illustrated by the transposition of, "Elle a traversé la Manche à la nage", into, "She swam across the English Channel". Let us therefore study the situations covered by the verb forms mentioned. The simple form, given in the first column after each tense, is used whenever there isn't any reason for using another form. For example: "These peaches taste funny, don't they." Often, it is used when the action is habitual, but the speaker doesn't wish to insist on the fact by using a frequentative form: "He eats his breakfast in a hurry every morning, so he can get to school on time." The progressive form insists on the duration of the action: "Have you got the tickets?" "I'm looking for them right now." Notice how this form corresponds to the French expression: "être en train de..." The emphatic form is most often used to contradict, unless there is a grammatical reason for using it, as explained above. For example: "Your brother doesn't go to school yet, does he?" "Oh yes, he does (go to school)!" The same distinctions are made all the way down the list of tenses. It is interesting to note that there is no emphatic form for the present perfect and pluperfect. We have to rely on intonation. The emphatic form of the future perfect should be "shall have been looking". However, I don't recall ever having heard it used. Likewise, the emphatic future (shall look) is itself rare, since people rely more on intonation. In fact, if you examine the indicative mood closely, you will find that the emphatic form is dying out everywhere except where the simple form is not a compound tense. This is not true, however, of the conditional mood.

In the conditional, usage seems to indicate that people classify all actions in this mood as either simple or progressive, with an emphatic form for each category which implies a moral obligation (should). In French, this requirement is met quite differently, through the use of the verb "devoir".

	SIMPLE FORM	PROGRESSIVE FORM	EMPHATIC FORM
PRESENT	I, we, you, they **look** he, she, it **looks**	I **am** he, she, it **is** we, you, they **are** **looking**	I, we, you, they **do** he, she, it **does** **look**
PRESENT PERFECT	I, we, you, they **have** he, she, it **has** **looked**	I, we, you, they **have** he, she, it **has** **been looking**	
PRETERITE	I, he, she, it, we, you, they **looked**	I, he, she, it **was** we, you, they **were** **looking**	I, he, she, it, we, you, they **did look**

From here on, the verb form is the same for all persons, so I have left out the list of pronouns.

PLU-PERFECT	had looked	had been looking	
FUTURE	will look	will be looking	shall look
FUTURE PERFECT	will have **looked**	will have been looking	

	SIMPLE		PROGRESSIVE	
	REGULAR	EMPHATIC	REGULAR	EMPHATIC
CONDITIONAL	would look	should look	would be looking	should be looking
CONDITIONAL PERFECT	would have looked	should have looked	would have been looking	should have been looking

All of these forms are in constant use. Here are some examples: "This hat would look good on you." "You should look where you're going." "Grandma would be arriving home just about now." "You should be doing your algebra instead of watching T.V." "I would have been here on time if the car hadn't broken down." "You should have looked to the left before crossing the street." "You would have been getting Plattsburg for months by now, if you had bought a decent antenna in the first place." "You should have been looking where you were going when you backed out of the driveway."

Up until recently, all the grammar books instructed the student to use **shall** and **should** in the first person singular and plural of the future and conditional, and to use **will** and **would** everywhere else, unless he wished to make an emphatic form, in which case the contrary rule was to be observed. Experience has shown, however that the average English-speaking person does not understand the subtleties of this rule, preferring to use these tenses as I have mentioned above.

Concerning the tenses themselves, they are much like the corresponding French ones. However, there is considerable difficulty centering around the English present perfect and the French imparfait. The present perfect forms a sort of bridge between the past and the present, and is used for any action begun in the past and extending right up to the present. That is why the English say, "He has been working here for two years", while the French say, "Il travaille ici depuis deux ans". The best thing to do is to decide whether the action is finished or not. If it isn't, use the present perfect. If the action is finished, decide whether the date is unknown or indefinite. If it is, you still use the present perfect. Ex.: "I have seen you somewhere before, but I can't remember when." If the action is finished, and the date is known, use the preterite: "I saw you at Myrtle's wedding." Sometimes it is difficult to determine whether the action is finished or not. For example, when the English-speaking person says, "This is the first time I have ever seen a giraffe", he is thinking of a long period of time, beginning in the past and extending right up to the present, during which he saw no giraffes.

Finally, before considering the French imparfait, we must take a look at the frequentative form, used to indicate that an action happened many times. In the present, it is the same as the future tense. For example: "Boys will be boys, won't they!" "Yes, they'll break a window every time they get a chance." In the past, it is formed with "used to" when a date is mentioned; "Men used to gather in coffee houses in Addison's time": or else it is just like the conditional, if no date is mentioned; "He would go to the window every morning and look at the weather." In the last example, notice the ellipse of the auxiliary "would" before "look".

Armed with this form, we can attack the French imparfait with more assurance. The French use this tense indiscriminately to cover a number of situations, for example, a past action, as viewed by someone who places himself mentally at the same time in the past: "Il m'a dit qu'il était malade". In this case, the English use a preterite: "He told me he was sick". The imparfait is also used to represent an action that takes a certain time to happen in the past: "La porte s'ouvrait lentement". Here, the English use a progressive form: "The door was slowly opening." The same tense is used for descriptions: "Le soleil brillait". The English would use the preterite, usually, but not always, in the progressive form: "The sun was shining." Finally, if the French text shows that the action was habitual, the English translation should be put into the frequentative form. Montesquieu furnishes a good example of this use: "Quand les Romains avaient plusieurs ennemis sur les bras, ils accordaient une trêve au plus faible . . ." : "When the Romans had several enemies on their hands at the same time, they would grant a truce to the weakest of them . . ." It is when dealing with such cases of the present perfect or the imparfait that it becomes most important to analyze the situation before attempting to translate. The important thing is to find out what the person who wrote the original had in mind while he was writing.