

Direct and Indirect Objects

Transitive and Intransitive Verbs

Preliminary Notions

The **subject** of a verb is the person or thing which accomplishes the action of the verb:

Nous dormons.

Georges a écrit un livre.

As you know, the subject determines the ending of the verb, according to the rules of agreement in French.

Direct objects

In grammar, a **direct object** is the thing or person upon which the verb acts. Most verbs have (or take) a direct object in French. The direct object may be either explicit or implicit. Consider these two sentences:

Je mange mon pain. *I'm eating my bread.*

Je mange bien. *I eat well.*

Both sentences refer to the act of eating, and the direct object is *what* one eats. In the first, the direct object, *bread*, is clearly stated (*explicit*), whereas in the second, there is no direct object expressed, but it is *implicitly* understood that the speaker is eating *something*.

Indirect objects

An **indirect object** is "an object *indirectly* affected by the action of a verb" (*American Heritage Dictionary*). In most instances, the indirect object will be a **person** (or an animal), rarely a thing. The indirect object always follows a **preposition** (usually **à**) which indicates the relationship between the subject and the person in question. Usually a direct object is also present (although this is not always necessary, as in example 3 below, with *parler*). In these examples, the direct object is in bold, the preposition and indirect object are underlined.

Tu écris **une lettre** à tante Lise. *You're writing a letter to Aunt Lise.*

On va donner **une photo** à maman. *We're going to give mom a photograph.*

Je parlais à mes amis. *I was speaking to my friends.*

Transitive verbs and Intransitive verbs

Verbs such as *manger* which take a direct object, either explicit or implicit, are called **transitive verbs**, as are verbs which take an indirect object, such as *parler*. In both cases the action of the verb is directed at someone or something distinct from the subject.

Intransitive verbs are verbs that do not take a direct or indirect object. That is, the action of the verb is not directed at someone else or at something distinct from the subject. In most cases, the action expressed by an intransitive verb is both carried out by and acts only on the *subject* of the verb.*

Nous allons à Paris. *We are going to Paris.*

J'ai bien dormi. *I slept well.*

Differences between verbs in French and English

Although many verbs behave in the same way in both languages, some high frequency verbs that take an indirect object in English take a direct object in French, and vice versa. Note these examples.

J'attends le bus. *I'm waiting for the bus.*

On peut écouter la radio? *Can one listen to the radio?*

Elles ont payé le repas. *They paid for the meal.*

Il joue du piano. *He plays the piano.*

* In the dictionary, transitive verbs will normally be indicated by the abbreviation *vb. tr.* or *vb. trans.*, while intransitive verbs will be marked *int.* or *intr.*

Application

Complete each of the following sets of exercises. Check your answers on page 3.

I. Transitive or intransitive? Examine the following phrases and decide whether the verb is transitive or intransitive. Does the verb act directly or indirectly on someone or something besides the subject (transitive), or is the subject the only thing affected by the action of the verb? Mark each either "TR" or "INTR". (Remember, an object may in some cases not actually be present, but may be *implicit*.)

- | | |
|---|-------------------|
| 1. Nous <u>cherchons</u> un appartement. | chercher: _____ |
| 2. <u>Téléphonez</u> à la police. | téléphoner: _____ |
| 3. Je veux <u>dormir</u> . | dormir: _____ |
| 4. Je dois <u>écrire</u> deux pages pour demain. | écrire: _____ |
| 5. Je vais <u>commencer</u> . | commencer: _____ |
| 6. Serge ne <u>parle</u> pas souvent à ses parents. | parler: _____ |
| 7. Le roi <u>est mort</u> . | mourir: _____ |
| 8. Qu'est-ce que tu <u>lis</u> ? | lire: _____ |
| 9. J'aime beaucoup <u>voyager</u> . | voyager: _____ |
| 10. N' <u>écoutez</u> pas. Cet homme est fou. | écouter: _____ |

II. Direct or Indirect Object? Now indicate whether the transitive verbs in the sentences above take a **direct** or an **indirect** object (DO or IO). Write the infinitive and the abbreviations **qqn.** (quelqu'un) or **qqch.** (quelque chose), and the preposition **à** if needed.

Example for *chercher*: chercher qqch. (DO)

- | | |
|----|-----|
| 2. | 6. |
| 4. | 8. |
| 5. | 10. |

III. Usage differences between French and English. Write sentences using the elements given. **Refer to the chart (Fiche 1b) to be sure about the verb usage.** Pay attention to whether the verb has a direct object or an indirect object in French. If a preposition is needed (for an indirect object), be sure to include it.

- Nous / chercher / clés.
- Paul / aimer / écouter / musique.
- Les enfants / jouer / football américain
- Je / attendre / autobus / depuis 10 minutes
- Zelda / téléphoner / ses amis / avec son portable.
- Est-ce que / tu / regarder / le journal?

IV. Translations. Translate the following sentences into French. Remember the differences between how these verbs are used in English and in French. Pay attention to the **verb tense** of the sentence.

- I phoned my sister yesterday.
- She looked at cars last week.
- We wrote a letter.
- Paul waits for Zazie.
- Zazie looks for Paul.
- They play basketball together on Saturdays. [*le samedi*]
- Who listens to jazz? [*le jazz*]
- We wrote to our parents.

Answers

I. Transitive or intransitive?

1. chercher: **TR**
2. téléphoner: **TR**
3. dormir: **INTR**
4. écrire: **TR**
5. commencer: **TR** Je vais commencer. [commencer **qqch.** *is implicit*]
6. parler: **TR**
7. mourir: **INTR**
8. lire: **TR** Qu'est-ce que tu lis? [**What** are you reading? *The object is what.*]
9. voyager: **INTR**
10. écouter: **TR** N'écoutez pas. Cet homme est fou. [écouter **qqn.** *is implicit*]

II. Direct or Indirect Object?

- | | |
|---------------------------------|---|
| 2. IO: téléphoner <u>à qqn.</u> | 6. IO: parler <u>à qqn.</u> |
| 4. DO: écrire <u>qqch.</u> | 8. DO: lire <u>qqch.</u> |
| 5. DO: commencer <u>qqch.</u> | 10. DO: écouter <u>qqch.</u> [<i>In Engl, it is IO</i>] |

III. Usage differences between French and English.

1. Nous cherchons les clés. [*chercher* takes a direct object in French; cf. *look for*]
2. Paul aime écouter la musique. [*écouter* takes a direct object; cf. *listen to*]
3. Les enfants jouent au football américain. [*jouer* takes an indirect object.]
4. J'attends l'autobus depuis 10 minutes. [*attendre* takes a direct object; cf. *wait for*]
5. Zelda téléphone à ses amis avec son portable. [*téléphoner* takes an indirect object.]
6. Est-ce que tu regardes le journal? [*regarder* takes a direct object; cf. *look at*]

IV. Translations.

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| 1. I phoned my sister yesterday. | J'ai téléphoné à ma soeur hier. |
| 2. She looked at cars last week. | Elle a regardé <u>des voitures</u> la semaine dernière. |
| 3. We wrote a letter. | Nous avons écrit <u>une lettre</u> . |
| 4. Paul waits for Zazie. | Paul attend <u>Zazie</u> . |
| 5. Zazie looks for Paul. | Zazie cherche <u>Paul</u> . |
| 6. They play basketball on Saturdays. | Ils jouent <u>au basket</u> le samedi. |
| 7. Who listens to jazz? | Qui écoute <u>le jazz</u> ? |
| 8. We wrote to our parents. | Nous avons écrit <u>à nos parents</u> . |