The Latin Verb System

The Characteristics of Latin Verbs

In addition to meaning, a Latin verb contains five different characteristics: person, number, tense, mood, and voice. Some forms also denote gender.

**Person**

*Person* refers to the relationship between the speaker and the subject of the verb.

* *First person* is the speaker himself.
* *Second person* refers to the person being spoken to.
* *Third person* is anyone or anything that is being spoken about.

**Number**

*Number* quite simply refers to *singular* or *plural*. This chart illustrates the result of *person* in conjunction with grammatical *number*.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Singular** | | **Plural** | |
| First person | **ego** | *I* | **nos** | *we* |
| Second person | **tu** | *you* | **vos** | *you* |
| Third person | **is, es, id** | *he, she, it* | **ei, eae, ea** | *they* |

PERSONAL ENDINGS. Because Latin employs personal endings on verbs to represent person and number, subject pronouns (in the nominative case) are redundant and are used to show emphasis. This is particularly true for first- and second-person singular and plural subject pronouns, since the personal endings of the verb for those persons are unique and cannot be confused with any other subject. For example, for the verb **dormieba*m*** *I was sleeping*, the personal ending **–m** shows quite clearly that the subject is *I*. In contrast, ***ego* dormieba*m*** states that *I* (as opposed to anyone else) *was sleeping*.

Personal endings are also used to signify grammatical voice (see below).

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Active Voice** |  |  |
|  | **Singular** | **Plural** |
| First person | **-o, -um** | **-mus** |
| Second person | **-s** | **-tis** |
| Third person | **-t** | **-nt** |

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Passive Voice** |  |  |
|  | **Singular** | **Plural** |
| First person | **-or, -r** | **-mur** |
| Second person | **-ris** | **-mini** |
| Third person | **-tur** | **-ntur** |

There are two endings given for the first-person singular, because one or the other is used, depending on tense.

The perfect indicative active has its own special set of personal endings:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Singular** | **Plural** |
| First person | **-i** | **-imus** |
| Second person | **-isti** | **-istis** |
| Third person | **-it** | **-erunt** |

**Tense**

*Tense* does not refer solely to the time when an action takes place. There is another dynamic involved, that of grammatical *aspect*. Aspect reflects the way a speaker views an action. There are two aspects. The *continuous aspect* (also called the *present system*) shows an action while it is happening or an action that happens repeatedly, for example, *I was running* or *I used to run*. In contrast, the *completed aspect* (also called the *perfect system*) refers to a single completed event, with the emphasis on completion rather than on process, for example, *I have run*, *I did run* or *I ran*.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Time** | **Aspect** |  |
|  | **Continuous**  **(Present System)** | **Completed**  **(Perfect System)** |
| Now | Present tense | Perfect tense |
| Before now | Imperfect tense | Pluperfect tense |
| After now | Future tense | Future perfect tense |

**Mood**

*Mood* reflects the way a speaker treats an action, whether as a fact, a command, or a wish or idea. There are three moods in Latin.

The *indicative mood* treats an action as a fact.

Ibis. *You will go*.

The *imperative mood* treats an action as a command.

I! *Go!*

The *subjunctive mood* treats an action as a wish or an idea.

Eas. *You might go.* or *I wish you would go.*

The translations in this example reflect only the spirit of the subjunctive mood. In Latin, the subjunctive mood is used in several different grammatical constructions for which English uses other verb forms, so there isn’t a single way to translate the subjunctive mood out of context.

**Voice**

*Voice* shows the relationship between a verb and its subject. It tells whether the subject performs or receives the action of the verb. There are three voices in Latin.

The *active voice* shows that the subject is performing the action.

Canem lavat. *He washes the dog*. *He is washing the dog. He does wash the dog.*

The *middle voice* shows that the subject is performing an action on himself or for his own benefit or in his own interest.

Lavatur. *He washes himself. He is washing himself. He does wash himself.*

The *passive voice* is used when the subject receives the action.

Lavatur. *He is being washed.*

The middle and passive voices are identical in form. Which voice is intended must be deduced from the context in which the verb appears.

Distinctions in voice are shown by the use of specific sets of personal endings (see above). The perfect system uses an altogether different construction in the active and middle/passive voices.

The Conjugations

Latin verbs are divided into four categories known as *conjugations*. All verbs within each conjugation are conjugated (i.e., make their various forms) in the same way. The most significant feature of each conjugation is the theme vowel it exhibits between its base and whatever ending is applied. The present tense is the only one in which each conjugation is unique.

Verbs are assigned to the four conjugations based on their present infinitive, which in dictionaries is listed as a verb’s second principal part. This chart shows how a verb’s conjugation can be recognized.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| First conjugation | **-are** | **laudare** | *to praise* |
| Second conjugation | **-(long-e)ere** | **manere** | *to stay* |
| Third conjugation | **-(short-e)ere** | **currere** | *to run* |
| Fourth conjugation | **-ire** | **audire** | *to hear* |

There is another category of verbs referred to as third-conjugation **–io** verbs. With few exceptions, these verbs make nearly all their forms in the same way as fourth-conjugation verbs; their present infinitive, however, ends in **–(short-e)ere**, and so, by the convention noted above, they are assigned to the third conjugation. They can be identified by their first principal part ending in **–io** and second principal part ending in **–ere**.

Finally, there is a small group of verbs that have their own peculiar forms and do not fit into any conjugation. They are called *irregular* and must be learned on a case-by-case basis.

Principal Parts

A Latin verb has four principal parts, which are found in its dictionary listing. These parts supply all the information needed to put a verb into any form, just like verb listings in English, such as *throw, threw, thrown* where *throw* is the present-tense form, *threw* is the past-tense form, and *thrown* is the past participle. The Latin version of the principal parts follows a similar pattern. Here are the principal parts of the Latin verb that means *throw*.

**iacio, iacere, ieci, iactum**

Translated literally, these forms would translate as follows:

*I throw (am throwing, do throw), to throw, I threw (did throw, have thrown), thrown*

The first principal part is, by definition, the first-person, singular, present indicative active *I throw, I am throwing, I do throw*. This form also tells whether or not the verb is an **–io** verb. The second principal part is, by definition, the present active infinitive *to throw*. As noted above, it tells which conjugation a verb belongs to. In the case of this verb, the ending **–(short-e)ere** classes it as a third-conjugation verb. The information provided by these first two principal parts enables one to make every possible present-system form, plus a few others.

The third principal part is, by definition, the first-person, singular, perfect indicative active *I threw, I did throw, I have thrown*, essentially making it the perfect-system equivalent of the first principal part. It supplies the information needed to create any form in the perfect system, but only for the active voice. To construct the perfect-system passive forms, one needs to look at the fourth principal part, which is also needed to make a few other forms.

There are two traditions regarding which form is provided as the fourth principal part of a verb. One tradition uses a verb form called the supine, which is recognized by the ending **–um**. The other tradition uses the perfect passive participle ending in **–us**, or, as is the case with most intransitive verbs, the future active participle ending in **–urus**. For some verbs, neither participle exists. In this situation, no fourth principal part is given. Regardless of the tradition, it is the stem left when the **–um**, **-us**, or **–urus** is dropped that is ultimately important.