

## Si: "whether" or "if"?

*Je ne sais pas s'il viendra. S'il vient, on sera 8.*

I don't know whether he will come. If he does, it will be 8 of us.

### LESSON

#### What is it?

In French, *si* has different functions. One is to introduce hypotheses or conditional clauses. Another one is to introduce indirect questions. It is important to determine what the function of *si* is in order to know which set of rules to apply for the tenses of verbs following *si*.

#### What is it like in English?

In English, to introduce indirect questions you can use "whether" or "if" interchangeably.

I was asked whether/if I had seen him. → *On m'a demandé si je l'avais vu.*

Note that the alternative between "whether" or "if" does not exist in French, both conjunctions are translated by *si*. To introduce an hypothesis, you can only use "if", and not "whether".

If the weather improves, we will go to the beach. → *Si le temps s'améliore, nous irons à la plage.*

#### What is it like in French?

##### 1. Definitions

An hypothesis, also called a *si* clause, introduces a possibility which might occur if the condition stated is fulfilled.

*Si tu réussis ton examen, je t'achèterai une console.*

→ If you pass your exam, I will buy you a video game. (= hypothesis)

An indirect question is a question which is reported. As a consequence, it has no question mark and the word order is the same as in a statement i.e. subject and then verb.

*Elle demande si tu es prêt.*

→ She is asking if you are ready. (= indirect question)

##### 2. How to differentiate between an hypothesis and an indirect question?

You can tell apart an indirect question introduced by *si* from an hypothesis by translating *si* with "if" or "whether". If *si* can be translated by both terms, it is an indirect question, if not, it is an hypothesis.

*Je vais lui demander si elle accepte cette offre.*

→ I am going to ask her whether/if she accepts this offer. (= indirect question)

*Si elle accepte, je serai très contente.*

→ If she accepts, I will be very happy. (= hypothesis)

Note that in this last example, it is impossible to translate *si* by "whether" as it wouldn't make any sense.

##### 3. Indirect questions are introduced by verbs such as: *dire, expliquer, comprendre, ignorer, demander, se demander, savoir, etc.*

*Nous nous demandons si la France gagnera le match.*

→ We wonder if/whether France will win the match.

In indirect questions, verbs following *si* can be in any tenses:

- Elle ne savait pas s'il avait fait ses devoirs. (plus-que-parfait)*  
 → She didn't know if/whether he had done his homework.
- Nous ignorons s'ils réussiront. (futur)*  
 → We don't know if/whether they will succeed.
- Je me demande s'il dirait la même chose aujourd'hui. (conditionnel)*  
 → I wonder if/whether he would say the same thing today.

**Watch out!** If *si* is followed by *il* or *ils*, it becomes *s'il* or *s'ils*.

#### 4. Hypotheses or conditional clauses are introduced by *si* but the conjugated verb after it cannot be in any tenses.

*Si* is never followed by a verb in the future or conditional tenses (contrary to indirect questions). The main sequence of tenses follows a specific pattern which cannot be altered:

##### a. *Si* + **présent** + **présent / futur / futur proche / impératif**

- Si elle vient, nous allons au cinéma ensemble.*  
 → If she comes, we're going to the cinema all together.
- Si elle vient, nous irons au cinéma ensemble.*  
 → If she comes, we will go to the cinema all together.
- Si elle vient, nous allons aller au cinéma ensemble.*  
 → If she comes, we will go to the cinema all together.
- Si elle vient, allons au cinéma ensemble !*  
 → If she comes, let's go to the cinema all together!

##### b. *Si* + **imparfait** + **conditionnel présent**

*Si elle venait, je resterais.* → If she came, I would stay.

##### c. *Si* + **plus-que-parfait** + **conditionnel passé**

*Si elle était venue, je serais restée.* → Had she come, I would have stayed.

Note that the order of the hypothesis does not matter. What is important is for the condition or hypothesis to be preceded by *si*:

- Si elle venait, je resterais à la maison. = Je resterais à la maison si elle venait.*  
 → If she came, I would stay home. = I would stay home if she came.

## EXERCISES

### 1 Indirect questions or hypothesis? Tick the right box.

	Indirect question	Hypothesis
a. Je lui demande s'il vient.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
b. Sais-tu si elle acceptera ?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
c. Je partirai si elle vient.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
d. Dites-moi si elle est déjà partie ou pas.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
e. Tu réussiras tes examens si tu travailles plus.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
f. Vous n'avez pas dit si vous vouliez participer.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
g. Je n'aurais pas accepté si j'avais su cela.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
h. Nous ignorons si ça marchera.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

2 Underline the correct tense in the following sentences.

- a. Si tu me [réponds / répondra] ainsi, je ne te parlerai plus.
- b. Elle se demandait s'il le [fera / ferait].
- c. Je pourrais partir si je [voudrais / voulais].
- d. Si elle [aurait pu / avait pu], elle serait venue.
- e. Vous ignoriez s'il [répondra / répondrait].
- f. Je lave ta voiture si tu me [donnes / donneras] les clés.
- g. L'avion décollera si le temps le [permettait / permet].
- h. Si vous [étiez venus / seriez venus], il n'y aurait pas eu de problèmes.
- i. Elle ignorait si cela [marcherait / marchera].

3 Translate the following sentences into French.

- a. I will do it if I can. → .....
- b. If he carries on like this, he will never achieve anything.  
→ .....
- c. I wonder if you could help me. → .....
- d. Had we known, we wouldn't have come. → .....
- e. If they pay us, we will do it. → .....
- f. If we had a dog, we couldn't keep it in the flat. → .....
- g. Let me know if she will accept or not. → .....

4 Free writing:

- a. A politician is campaigning to be elected, write the list of his/her manifesto pledge using:  
*Si + présent + présent / futur / impératif and Si + imparfait + conditionnel présent*

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- b. He/She has now lost the election, write a list of regrets he/she might have, using:  
*Si + plus-que-parfait + conditionnel passé*

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