

## The Secrets of the Subjunctive Mood

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Most Indo-European languages, in addition to **verb tense** (which demonstrates time), and **verb aspect** (which indicates completeness), have **verb mood** (which indicates a state of being or reality). For instance, the most common moods in English include the *indicative*, the *imperative*, the *interrogative*, the *exclamatory*, and the *conditional*.

Another, much rarer mood is the **subjunctive** mood (indicating a hypothetical state or a state contrary to reality, such as a wish, a desire, or an imaginary situation). It is harder to explain the subjunctive. Five hundred years ago, English had a highly developed subjunctive mood. However, after the fourteenth century, speakers of English used the subjunctive less frequently. Today, the mood has practically vanished; modern speakers tend to use the conditional forms of "could" and "would" to indicate statements contrary to reality. The subjunctive only survives in a few, fossilized examples, so they can be confusing. Here are the most common uses:

1. By far the most common use of the subjunctive is the use of the subjunctive after "if" clauses that state or describe a hypothetical situation.

*Subjunctive: "If I were a butterfly, I would have wings."*

Note that in the indicative, we normally write, "I was." For instance, "When I was a young boy, I liked to swim." However, to indicate the subjunctive, we write, "I were." The subjunctive indicates a statement contrary to fact. In the butterfly example above, I am not really a butterfly, but I am describing a hypothetical situation that might occur if I were one.

*Indicative: "When I was a butterfly in a former life, I had wings."*

In this sentence, the author uses the indicative to indicate that she indeed was a butterfly in the past, and she is not just hypothetically speaking about a situation contrary to her reality. Note that the subordinate conjunction *when* usually takes the indicative after it, and *if* frequently takes the subjunctive.

2. The subjunctive also survives in a few idiomatic phrases in English as well. For instance, when someone sneezes, we say, "God bless you," or "Bless you," rather than "God blesses you." In this case, examine the subjunctive phrase and contrast it with the indicative.

*Subjunctive: "You sneezed! God bless you."*

In the subjunctive, the phrase indicates a hope or desire that God bless the sneezing individual. Obviously, God isn't blessing that person at the moment, because the person is sick, so the subjunctive indicates a wish contrary to current reality in the speaker's viewpoint.

*Indicative: "God blesses you each day."*

In the indicative, the author indicates that God really does bless the individual. This speaker uses the indicative to reflect what he sees as reality; i.e., God blesses people.

3. Finally, the subjunctive can also appear in restrictive clauses after phrases like *I wish that*, *I hope that*, *I desire that*, or *I suggest that*, when the speaker wishes to emphasize the tentative, contingent, suppositional, or unreal nature of that wish, hope, or suggestion.

*Subjunctive: "I suggest that John arrive on Tuesdays this month."*

The day for the weekly arrival is a suggestion, a hypothetical one that John might or might not follow. The statement does not necessarily mean he will arrive at that time each week.

**Indicative:** "I believe that the train arrives on Tuesdays during this month."

The indicative states a fact the speaker believes is true. The train indeed arrives on Tuesdays each week of this month.

**Subjunctive:** "She wishes that Americans in the South were more formal today."

The subjunctive indicates that, in fact, Americans are not formal today. The wish states a desire for an unreal state that does not reflect the current situation.

**Indicative:** "She thinks that Americans in the South are more formal than most people today."

Now the speaker has made a statement in the indicative, which implies that the statement reflects or indicates what reality is actually like.

Note, however, that sometimes the indicative appears after "if"-clauses when the speaker wishes to indicate that the possibility is quite realistic.

**Indicative:** "If he brings Martha to Kosovo for the honeymoon (and he probably will), she will be upset."

A good hint that the first clause should be indicative is the verb "will" in the second clause, which hints at a statement of reality.

**Subjunctive:** "If he were to bring Martha to Kosovo for the honeymoon, she might be upset."

In this example, he might or might not bring her; it is only a possibility. The verb *might* in the last part of the sentence strongly hints that the situation is hypothetical; accordingly, we use the subjunctive in the first clause.

4. Either the subjunctive or the indicative can appear after phrases or clauses including "might" and "may."

**Indicative:** "A car will crash into his house if he builds it on Interstate-40."

The sentence above indicates a real possibility that he is building his house on Interstate-40, and thus a car very likely will crash into it.

**Subjunctive:** "A car might crash into his house if he were to build it on Interstate-40."

The sentence above using the subjunctive suggests it is unlikely he actually is building his house on Interstate-40, but instead the speaker brings up the scenario as a hypothetical situation.

5. Finally, one more situation creates the subjunctive mood. The word "let" can be used to indicate the desire that some hypothetical situation come to pass. This formation is called the jussive subjunctive.

**Indicate:** That peasant eats cake every day.

**Subjunctive:** Let that peasant eat cake every day.