

What are the Grammar Rules that Govern the Subjunctive in English?

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Abstract:

In this paper I intend to walk the reader through some historical changes in form and usage of the English subjunctive mood. Main different changes in time are spotted beginning in Old English, going through Modern English, and finally arriving to Contemporary English. As a conclusion, we can verify the changing nature of language and accept usage and simplicity as the only factors that mandate what is to be considered pragmatically proper or not in a language. This paper might be of usefulness for both translators and English teachers.

Key words: English subjunctive, English grammar and usage.

Resumen:

En este artículo intento conducir al lector a través de algunos cambios históricos en la forma y uso del modo subjuntivo inglés. Dichos cambios son ubicados comenzando en el inglés antiguo, pasando por el inglés moderno y finalmente arribando al inglés contemporáneo. Como conclusión podemos verificar la naturaleza cambiante de las lenguas y aceptar que el uso y la simplicidad son los únicos factores que en una lengua determinan lo que se considerará pragmáticamente apropiado o no. Este trabajo podría ser de utilidad tanto para traductores como para profesores de inglés.

Palabras clave: Subjuntivo inglés, gramática y uso del inglés.

Résumé :

Cet article essaie d'amener le lecteur à travers des changements historiques dans la forme et l'utilisation du subjonctif en anglais. Ces changements sont placés prenant comme point de départ l'anglais ancien, passant par l'anglais moderne pour finalement arriver à l'anglais contemporain. En conclusion, nous pouvons vérifier la nature changeante de la langue et accepter que l'utilisation et la simplicité sont les seuls facteurs qui déterminent ce qu'une langue juge approprié ou non du point de vue pragmatique. Ce travail pourrait être utile aux traducteurs et aux professeurs d'anglais.

Mots clés : le subjonctif en anglais, la grammaire et l'usage de l'anglais.

Introduction

In words of Kittredge & Farley (1913), “mood is that property of verbs which shows the manner in which the action or state is expressed” (p.115). On the other hand, Opdycke (1941) stands that mood, which he also calls mode, means manner. And he adds that, “applied to the verb, it means the manner in which an action or a state is expressed or is to be regarded” (p. 181).

Roberts (1954) adds a new dimension to the definition of mood when he argues that it needs to be defined from two different points of view: the notional and the formal. In his own words, “notionally, mood is the attitude we have toward the content of our sentence (whereas) formally, mood is the set of linguistic forms used to express these attitudes” (p. 160). In other words, it is important to see mood as the expression of an attitude, which can be done by using particular linguistic forms.

Depending on the language, those linguistic forms can be easily identified by specific verbal inflections and syntactic forms; however, English presents a particular difficulty to determine formal linguistic structures of mood that are consistent with its notional dimension. In words of Roberts, “English forms have been so worn down and have so often coalesced that it is frequently impossible to tell one mood from another by form alone” (p. 160).

This is particularly true when it comes to define and identify the English subjunctive mood. According to *The New Fowler’s Modern English Usage* (1996), the subjunctive mood is one of the more complex topics in English grammar. It also stands that “its complexity over the centuries is such that the standard reference work in Historical English syntax by F. Th. Visser (4 vols., 1963-73) devoted 156 pages to the subject” (p. 746). The same source defines the subjunctive mood as “a verbal form or mood expressing hypothesis, usually denoting what is imagined, wished, demanded, proposed, exhorted, etc.” (p.746).

Historical Facts

According to *The New Fowler’s Modern English Usage* (1996), “The subjunctive mood was common in Old English and until about 1600 (but) examples are harder to find in the period 1600-1900” (p. 747). The English language has gone through a process of changes in the inflections of its parts of speech that has made it more simplistic than any other European language. In terms of verbal inflections, Baught and Cable (1978), found that “the verb has been simplified by the loss of practically all the personal endings, the almost complete abandonment of any distinction between the singular and the plural, and the gradual discard of the subjunctive mood” (p. 10).

In Old English we can identify two tenses that were marked by inflections, present and past. Old English also distinguished inflections corresponding to two numbers and

three persons, and recognized three moods, indicative, subjunctive and imperative (Baught and Cable, 1978; Stevick, 1968). However, even in Old English, the verb inflections corresponding to the subjunctive mood were more simplistic than the ones corresponding to the indicative mood. Stevick (1968) offers a paradigm of three “consonantal” (weak) verb that illustrates it.

Indicative – Nonpast			
Singular	(iċ) fremme ‘I do, make’	nerie ‘save’	dēme ‘judge’
	(Ʒū) frem(e) st	nerest	dē (e) st
	(hē) frem (e) Ʒ	nerēƷ	dēm (e) Ʒ
Plural	(wē)		
	(ġē) fremmaƷ	neriaƷ	dēmaƷ
	(hīe)		
Subjunctive – Nonpast			
Singular	(iċ)		
	(Ʒū) fremme	nerie	dēme
	(hē)		
Plural	(wē)		
	(ġē) fremmen	nerien	dēmen
	(hīe)		

(Stevick, 1968, p. 184)

Notice that the inflections for the subjunctive mood corresponded to singular vs. plural; contrary to the indicative mood, in which the verbs inflected also for person in the singular. In the past subjunctive, the verbs will add the morpheme *-d-* or *-ed*, which marked the past tense for the weak verbs.

Subjunctive – Past			
Singular	(iċ)		
	(Ʒū) fremede	nerede	dēmde
	(hē)		
Plural	(wē)		
	(ġē) fremeden	nereden	dēmden
	(hīe)		

(Stevick, 1968, pp. 185).

Similar inflections would correspond to the “vocalic” (strong) verbs.

Singular	drīfe – drince – fare	}	Subjunctive – Non past for drive, drink and go
Plural	drīfen – drincen - faren		
Singular	drife – drunce – fōre	}	Subjunctive – Past for drive, drink and go
Plural	drīfen – druncen – fōren		

(Stevick, 1968, pp. 186-187)

Phonological changes occurred during Middle English affected the morphology of the verb simplifying its inflections to the extent that many of them disappeared (Stevick, 1968, pp. 193-211). In Modern English, there only remain few inflectional morphemes, which mark differences in tense and form basically. Most of the inflectional morphemes that would distinguish differences for person and number were simplified to the Φ form. There only remains the inflectional morpheme for third person singular in the indicative.

This tendency of English to simplify inflections has caused the subjunctive mood to rely mostly on its notional sense and certain syntactic structures for its identification and formation in Modern English. In the following chapters, those characteristics of the subjunctive mood are discussed.

The subjunctive mood in Modern English

According to different researchers, the subjunctive mood is found in sentences and linguistic structures that express different states of thought such as, concession, exhortation, condition, desire, wish, fearing, contrary to fact, propositions, commands and, in general, hypothetical situations (Chandler & Hefler, 1949; Fowler & Burchfield, 1996; Kittredge & Farley, 1913; Opdycke, 1941; Roberts, 1954).

Some examples of sentences expressing manner in the subjunctive are the following:

Concessions:	Though he <i>slay</i> me, yet will I trust in him. Though he <i>were</i> to beg this on his knees, I should still refuse.
Exhortations:	<i>Hear</i> we the king!
Condition:	If this <i>be</i> gold, our fortune is made.
Prayers or wishes:	God <i>bless</i> you! Thy heart <i>be</i> comforted Long <i>live</i> the king!
Fear:	They are scared lest they <i>be</i> struck by lightning.
Command:	He ordered that I <i>be</i> deported.
Contrary o fact:	If he <i>had done</i> as advised, he would now be a free man.

The previous examples have been taken from Kittredge & Farley (1913) and Opdycke (1941).

Kittredge & Farley (1913), by the beginning of the twentieth century, had already stood that the subjunctive was common in Old English but was rare in Modern English. They affirmed that its use in Modern English was still found in literature in styles such as poetry. In the following synopsis of the conjugation of *be* presented by the authors

(pp. 118-119), we could notice that even in Modern English the subjunctive forms continue to change.

Present Tense	
Singular	Plural
1. If I be	1. If we be
2. If thou be	2. If you be
3. If he be	3. If they be
Past Tense	
1. If I were	1. If we were
2. If thou wert	2. If you were
3. If he were	3. If they were
Perfect (or Present Perfect) Tense	
1. If I have been	1. If we have been
2. If thou have been	2. If you have been
3. If he have been	3. If they have been
Pluperfect (or Past Perfect) Tense	
1. If I had been	1. If we had been
2. If thou hadst been	2. If you had been
3. If he had been	3. If they had been

We can see that some inflections of the verb in the subjunctive mood from the beginning of the twentieth century have disappeared. Notice the conjugation in the present tense, which today is equal to the indicative form, and the second person singular in past and past perfect. The same writers also give examples of the subjunctive in wishes or prayers that already shown the use of the verb in the zero form even for the third person singular (p. 119).

Heaven *help* him!
 The saints *preserve* us!
 God *bless* you!

Frequently, modal auxiliaries are found supporting the subjunctive; that is the case of may, should, would and might.

May he never *know* such sorrow,
 I feared that he *might* (*would*) not *come* in time.
 If I *should fail*, all would be lost.

(Chandler & Hefler, 1949; Kittredge & Farley, 1913)

The New Fowler's Modern English Usage, in regards to the subjunctive mood, affirms that:

It is plainly recognizable in Modern English only in restricted circumstances: principally in the third person singular present tense by the absence of a final –s ... and in the use in various circumstances of *be* and *were* instead of the indicative forms *am/is/are* and *was*. (p. 746).

Fowler & Burchfield (1996) highlight that examples of these cases correspond to formal writing or speech, often in British English, after certain verbs that express demand or suggestion.

I demand that you *be* here at that time.

Or in subordinate clauses in the past subjunctive,

If I *were* you, I would be there early.

The subjunctive is still present today in dependent noun clauses after verbs expressing command, demand, request, proposal, suggestion, preference, prohibition, etc. The verb has no inflection even for the third person singular (Chandler & Hefler, 1949, p. 73).

I suggest that she *go* to see the doctor.
I demand that they *come* here right now.

However, in many cases the auxiliary *should* + infinitive is used instead without changing the meaning; as it is stated in Fowler & Burchfield (1996, p. 747)

“The report recommends that access to patent information *should be* widened and improved”

In nowadays English, the subjunctive mood has become more and more simplified. For instance, in many cases in which subjunctive is still used in Romance languages, English uses infinitive. That is the case of some structures in reported speech in which infinitive is used as an object of certain verbs.

She told me *to come* early. “Ella me dijo *que viniera* temprano” (Spanish).

Even when there is still the rule that mandates subjunctive after certain verbs in English, the tendency of the language to simplify might cause this use of the subjunctive to turn into the infinitive.

The modern structures that are currently used to express hypothetical situations are the corresponding to the conditional sentences. According to Parrot (2002), conditional sentences “consist of two clauses – a main (‘conditional’) clause containing a verb in a form with *will* or *would*, and a subordinate clause that is introduced by *if*” (p. 231).

I will go you if he asks me to.
I would go if he asked me to.

If we compare with the structures presented in the previous examples of subjunctive dependent clauses, we can conclude that the tendency is for the present subjunctive to become present indicative in such clauses. The past subjunctive still remains the same though.

Usage of the subjunctive in contemporary English

Bryant (1994) stands that language is changing in spite of the purists' wish to remain loyal to the belief that certain structures and vocabulary should be perpetuated as the proper form of a language. Bryant asserts that it is only necessary to take a look at old English literature to realize the many changes, occurred in English grammar and vocabulary, make it appear as a foreign language. The author supports her thesis by mentioning the appreciation of many authors. According to her, writers such as Horace, John Hughes, Dr. Johnson, Lord Chesterfield, Joseph Priestly and George Campbell have also highlighted the fact that usage is the "Sole Arbiter" that mandates what is going to be consider proper or not (p.264).

Parrott (2002) presents some interesting utterances taken from spoken contemporary American English (pp. 225-226).

She asked him did he like the music
 She said me she had to go
 She suggested me to go

The previous examples illustrated the fact that English continues to change and, as it has already happened. Changes in morphology are produced by changes in phonology, which means that spoken language mandates what will occur in terms of grammar.

Conclusions

The subjunctive mood is still present in Modern English but determined by its notional dimension. The inflections that used to mark the formal aspect of the subjunctive have yielded for the more simplistic verb forms to take over. We can determine that an expression is in the subjunctive mood by the fact that it expresses hypothetical situations and other manners. There are some syntactic structures that also correspond to the subjunctive such as dependent clauses preceded by subordinators such as that, if, though etc. However, the position and form of the verb in the sentence continue to change being the zero form, the infinitive and some modals such as would, may and should, the markers of subjunctive in Modern English. Nonetheless, distinctions between the indicative and the subjunctive become more and more difficult to make as if the mood itself was going to disappear.

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