THE SUBJUNCTIVE IN ENGLISH, LATIN AND GREEK

1. Mood. The grammatical term "mood" is an alteration of "mode," from Latin modus (measure or manner). It is only very distantly etymologically related to "mood" in the sense of feeling or disposition, which is from Old English mōd, akin to Latin mos (will or custom). "Mood" in grammar is a category for organizing certain systematic inflectional differences among verb forms, differences which reflect the speaker's state of mind about the action expressed. Mood is an obligatory category of English, Latin and Greek finite verbs. A verb form capable of being the only verb form in an independent utterance (a finite verb) must be either indicative, imperative, subjunctive (sometimes called conjunctive) or, in Greek, optative. Proto-Indo-European ("PIE") had these four moods.\(^1\) A typical characterization of the function of these moods is:

- indicative = fact
- imperative = command
- subjunctive = possibility
- optative = wish

but these functions are not exclusive in ancient or modern languages. Subjunctive and optative markers may originally have been stem-characterizing elements (in a class with other stem-forming elements called the desiderative, causative, stative, etc.) which eventually grew into full inflectional systems, capable of modifying stems of verbs with various functions and tenses. The optative survived as a complete mood in Greek\(^2\) and Sanskrit. In Italic and Germanic, the PIE optative became the subjunctive. In Italic, the PIE subjunctive became the future. In Germanic and Sanskrit, the PIE subjunctive disappeared altogether.\(^3\)

2. Meaning of the subjunctive. Just how does the subjunctive characterize the nature of a verbal expression? Among these three languages, the subjunctive expresses varieties of command, possibility, wish and indirect speech; the only mood function the subjunctive doesn't have is direct expression of fact. One useful theoretical framework is that, whereas the indicative characterizes verbal representations as being descriptions of a world (matching words to world), the subjunctive characterizes verbal representations as being descriptions of a mental construct which does not (yet) exist (matching world to words).\(^4\)

3. Historical Usage. Old English had numerous uses of the subjunctive, namely:\(^5\)

**Independent:**
- wish
- command
### Dependent:
- indirect question
- indirect statement, where the reported statement is not given merely on the authority of the speaker, usually with the subordinating conjunction "that" (þæt)
- after verbs of desiring and commanding, with "that" (þæt)
- after impersonal verbs denoting 'it is right' and the like, with "that" (þæt)
- purpose, with "that" (þæt)
- negative purpose, with "that . . . not" (þæt . . . ne) or "lest" (þylæs)
- hypothetical comparison, with "as if" (swelce)
- concessive, with "(al)though" (peah, peah þe)
- hypothetical conditions, with "if" (gif) or "unless" (butan = be-utan); or without conjunction if subjunctive verb is before its subject
- after conjunctions implying anticipation, e.g. "before" (ær), or intended result, e.g. "until (that)" (of þæt)

In Old English, the preterite (past) subjunctive was often replaced, especially after verbs of desiring, requesting or commanding, by the preterite indicative "should" (scolde) or "would" (wolde) plus the infinitive. This is now the standard Modern English construction, along with constructions using "may," "might" and "let," to replace the subjunctive. These Modern English auxiliary verbs are among the verbs called modal auxiliaries.

**Latin** had the following uses of the subjunctive:

### Independent:
- exhortation or command (hortatory or jussive)
- concession (concessive)
- wish (optative)
- question of doubt (deliberative)
- possibility or contingency (potential)

### Dependent:
- condition (future less vivid; contrary to fact)
- purpose (final)
- characteristic
- result (consequential)
- time (consequential)
- indirect questions
- causal clauses, concept not belonging to speaker
Greek had the following uses of the subjunctive (see Mastronarde or Smyth):

**Independent:**
- exhortation (hortatory)
- negative command (prohibitive)
- question of doubt (deliberative)
- doubtful assertion

**Dependent:**
- conditions
- relative clauses
- time (temporal)
- anticipation
- purpose
- object clauses after verbs of fearing

Greek had the following uses of the optative (there are no distinct optative forms in English or Latin):

**Independent:**
- potential
- wishes

**Dependent:**
- conditions
- purpose
- object clauses after verbs of fearing
- indirect statements

Notice how many of the uses are similar in Old English, Latin and Greek.

4. **Translation.** Modern English retains the ability to form the present subjunctive of any verb. To determine whether a Modern English verb is subjunctive, put the construction in question into the third person singular, since the subjunctive is, like the imperative and the infinitive, just the base form of the verb (no -s form). Only a few subjunctive constructions remain common outside of "frozen" phrases (phrases which remain in use but which, due to their obsolete diction, would be unlikely to come into use now if they did not already exist), formulaic phrases modeled on old phrases, and usages which sound somewhat literary, legalistic, formal or obsolete to many contemporary English speakers.
PLEASE NOTE that I do not practice prescriptive grammar, so I don't regard any natural use (one that sounds right to you) of the subjunctive or its substitutes as "correct" or "incorrect." I might characterize a usage as "incomprehensible" (to me) or "potentially misleading" or "ambiguous" or "nonstandard," etc.

It is frequently possible to use the English subjunctive to translate Latin and Greek subjunctives. In translating the subjunctive from Latin or Greek, I find literary and obsolete English constructions perfectly comprehensible for myself. But if you make such a translation for other people to use, you should keep in mind that (a) some English speakers find the subjunctive difficult to process, and (b) the Latin or Greek usage may not have sounded literary or obsolete to the ancient Latin or Greek speaker, so using the English subjunctive may impart a misleading tone to a literal translation. For most uses of the subjunctive in Latin and Greek, there is some standard way, shown in the textbooks, to translate them into common English diction, but these standard translations often fail to preserve the subjunctive mood, and hence also leave something to be desired. One common compromise is to use substitute constructions in English with modal auxiliaries.

EXAMPLES OF THE SUBJUNCTIVE IN (MORE OR LESS) MODERN ENGLISH

As you read through these examples, note that: (a) the present subjunctive in English is now identical in form to the imperative, even in the third person singular; and (b) the past subjunctive exists only for the verbs "to be" and possibly "have."

1. Present, independent: compare to Latin jussive and Greek prohibition. Substitutes: "let" and "may" + infinitive.
   - So be it. [not: So it is. Substitute: So let it be.]
   - God bless you and keep you. [not: God blesses you and keeps you. Substitute: May God bless you and keep you.]
   - God save the Queen! [not: God saves the Queen. Also not: (You,) God, save the Queen!]
   - Long live democracy! [not: Long lives democracy! Also not: (You,) democracy, live long!]
   - The devil take you. [not: The devil takes you.]
   - Danger be damned! [not: Danger is damned!]
   - Come what may, . . . [not: What(ever) may come, . . .]
   - God forbid that . . . [not: God forbids that . . .]
   - Heaven forfend! [not: Heaven forfends!]
   - Far be it from me to criticize, but . . . [not: It is far from me to criticize, but . . .]
   - Suffice it to say that . . . [not: It suffices to say that . . .]
2. **Present, noun clause**: compare Latin jussive noun clause. Substitute: "should" + infinitive. This subjunctive is sometimes called "mandative." This use of the subjunctive is more common in American English than in British, although it may be reestablishing itself in British as a result of American influence.

- I insist that he come with us.  
  [not: that he comes with us.  Substitute: that he should come.]
- The bar recommended that he be appointed to the court.  
  [not: that he is appointed to the court.  Substitute: that he should be appointed to the court.]
- He moved that the motion pass by acclamation.  
  [not: that the motion passes by acclamation.]
- I suggested that he play both parts.  
  [not: that he plays both parts.]

3. **Present, adverb clause**: compare Greek and Latin negative result clauses, conditions, temporal clauses. Substitute: "should" + infinitive, or a conjunction + indicative.

- I will write it down, lest he forget.  
  [not: lest he forgets.  Substitute: lest he should forget.]
- We will go, if need be.  
  [not: if need is.  Substitute: if there should be (a) need.]
- I do not know whether this be true.  
  [Substitute: whether this is true.]
- They will forget, before the week be out.  
  [Substitute: before the week is out.]
- Be he alive or be he dead, I'll grind his bones to make my bread.  
  [Substitute: If he is alive or if he is dead . . .]

4. **Past, independent**: compare Greek optative. Substitute: "would," "should" or indicative.

- If only it were so!  
  [not: If only it is so!]  (this may not be strictly independent)
- 'Twere best that you leave.  
  [not: 'Twas best . . .  Substitute: 'Twould be best . . .]
- He had better do this.  
  [identical to indicative forms, but the future sense with the past form may indicate a preterite subjunctive in use]
- Suppose I came.  
  [identical to indicative forms, but the future sense with the past form may indicate a preterite subjunctive in use]

5. **Past, noun clause**: Substitute: indicative.

- I wish that it were so!  
  [not: I wish that it was so.]

6. **Past, adverb clause**: compare Latin and Greek conditions contrary to fact. Substitute: indicative.

- I would go if I were able.  
  [not: I would go if I was able.]
- If I were king of the forest . . .  
  [not: If I was king . . .]
- If he were to call, I would not answer.  
  [not: If he was to call . . .]
- We speak, as it were, in riddles.  
  [not: as it was]
- He acts as if he were president already.  
  [not: as if he was president]
Note that the indicative "was" is increasingly accepted as a substitute for "were," even in conditional clauses, except where subject and verb are inverted (a conditional clause beginning with, for instance, "were I" instead of "if I were"). The past subjunctive is almost gone from modern English.

NOTES


2. Use of the optative diminished greatly in koine, and it eventually disappeared (see the following note).


4. This explanation is from Francis James, *Semantics of the English Subjunctive*, University of British Columbia Press, 1986.

