

The subjunctive in English

The term *subjunctive* refers to a particular verb form. In Old English, special verb forms existed to communicate non-facts, e.g., wants, hopes, and hypothetical situations. The subjunctive is somewhat weak in Modern English. In many cases, the subjunctive is a form learned in school or through reading, so it is educated speakers who use it most.

The English present subjunctive is the plain, uninflected form of the verb, the same form as the bare infinitive and the imperative. For example, the present subjunctive form of the verb *to think* is simply *think*. The subjunctive is most distinctive in the verb *to be*. Here, there is not only a present subjunctive, *be*, but also a past subjunctive, *were*.

i. Mandative subjunctive

The subjunctive can be used as a directive or order. The mandative subjunctive is a very distinct kind of directive and it always takes the same form. In each of these sentences, the main verb makes some sort of demand, from very mild (*ask/suggest*) to very strong (*demand/insist*). In each case, the direct object of the main verb is a clause (the structure in brackets). Note that when the subject of the clause is third person, its verb does not take third person {-s} and *be* is in its infinitive form.

I suggest [that he **leave**].
I demanded [that she **give** me her files].
We asked [that Marsha **tell** the truth].
I insist [that you **be** quiet].
I require [that term papers **be** turned in on time].

ii. Hypothetical subjunctive

This usage of the subjunctive is called for whenever the situation described by the verb is 'hypothetical,' whether wished for, feared, or suggested; the common thread is that the situation is *not* the current state of affairs. This subjunctive can occur with or without a word like *if* or *whether* that specifically marks a phrase as hypothetical. When *if* is omitted, an inverted syntax is usually used:

Were I the President...
If I **were** the king of the world...
Be he alive or **be** he dead...
If I **were** the President...

In most varieties of English, this subjunctive can be replaced by an indicative when the *if*-form is used:

If I **was** the President ...
If he **was** a ghost...

Another use of the hypothetical subjunctive occurs with the verb *wish* – *I wish I **were** a bird*; *Joseph wishes he **were** a cowboy*. This too is often replaced with the unmarked form. *I wish I **was** a bird* expresses exactly the same meaning, but technically *was* is not a subjunctive form.

Some use the marked form even in the absence of a hypothetical situation – *Johnny asked me if I **were** afraid* – simply as a conditioned variant that follows *if* and similar words. This is commonly considered a hypercorrection.

iii. Formulaic subjunctive

English has a small set of phrases, generally learned as whole pieces, that still contain marked subjunctive verbs. The expression *God bless you* contains a third person subject and an uninflected verb. This sentence is communicating not a statement of fact, i.e., *God blesses you*, but rather something like *May God bless you*. Many of these are now often analyzed as imperative forms rather than as the subjunctive ones they are.

Heaven **forbid**.
God **help** him.
Be that as it may...
Come what may...
(God) **damn** it!
Far **be** it from me...
So **be** it.
Suffice it to say...

Adapted from:

Berk, L. M. 1999. *English syntax: from word to discourse*. New York: Oxford UP. 149-150.

"Subjunctive mood" on wikipedia.org