

THE SUBJUNCTIVE AS A SUBVERSIVE ACTIVITY

No attempt should be made to compare the use of the subjunctive in French to its use in English. Such a comparison would be more harmful than beneficial for the following reasons:

1. The uses of the subjunctive in English are limited.
2. Some forms of the subjunctive in English are similar to those of the indicative and the conditional.
3. The uses of the subjunctive seldom coincide in both languages and throw no light on the many cases which call for the subjunctive in French and not in English.

What the student should try to understand is not so much the grammatical function of the subjunctive in French but rather *its value as a means of expression compared with the indicative*.

This understanding is essential, for the subjunctive is indispensable as a mode in French. Indeed, it would be hardly possible, even in the most commonplace conversations, to avoid the use of the subjunctive without resorting to complex paraphrasing.

There are ***three MODES in French:***

THE INDICATIVE is used both in subordinate and independent clauses. It is the mode which denotes ***conviction, certainty, results, or attained needs***. The action expressed by the indicative is conceived in the mind of the speaker as certain, its realization is not questioned or doubted. The facts are viewed objectively, uncolored by personal feeling. The indicative has various tenses that you have studied: the *passé composé, imparfait, futur proche, futur, futur antérieur, plus-que-parfait, conditionnel, conditionnel passé, passé simple*.

THE IMPERATIVE is used to give an order to someone else, others, or to suggest that you all do something together. There are no *tenses* in the imperative; only the three forms you have studied: *Jean, va au supermarché. Marc et Mireille, prenez vos parapluies. Allons au cinéma.*

THE SUBJUNCTIVE, while also used in independent clauses, occurs mostly in ***subordinate clauses*** introduced by the conjunction QUE, sometimes by a relative pronoun. ***It is the mode which denotes uncertainty, or doubt, purpose, or unattained ends***. The action expressed by the subjunctive is uncertain or doubted, the desired purpose or ends may never be obtained. In addition: the subjunctive reflects the mental tension resulting from a manifestation of the will. It also reflects the emotion which arises from uncertainty, doubt or denial, as well as the emotions arising from fear or surprise, joy or sorrow, or from the expression of a judgment, an opinion, a restriction, a reservation, or a concession. The facts are viewed subjectively, and are strongly colored by the personal feeling or attitude of the speaker. For these reasons, the subjunctive is often called the ***AFFECTIVE MODE***.

Compare the use of the indicative and the subjunctive in the following examples:

Je sais (je crois, j'ai appris) qu'il viendra demain.

Je veux (j'exige, j'ordonne, je souhaite, je défends) qu'il vienne demain.

In the sentence with the indicative, his *coming* is conceived as a certainty. In the sentence with the subjunctive, his coming is conceived as potential.

Je sais qu'il a été puni.

Je regrette qu'il ait été puni.

Il est injuste qu'il ait été puni.

He has been punished is a fact. In the sentence with the indicative, the fact is merely stated, without any feeling on the part of the speaker, while in the sentences with the subjunctive, the same fact is viewed by the speaker with a personal feeling of sorrow in the first sentence, of disapproval in the second.

The choice of mode is not a question of rigid grammatical rules, but of meaning or feeling. Certain expressions, by their very nature (emotion, uncertainty, manifestation of the will, etc...) call for the subjunctive, whereas other expressions, which do not contain in themselves a factor calling for the subjunctive, the choice of mode is determined by the meaning or feeling the speaker wants to convey or imply. Compare:

Est-ce la seule chose que vous **avez** à dire?

Est-ce la seule chose que vous **ayez** à dire?

The first sentence merely asks a question. But in the second one, the use of the subjunctive **ALTERS** the meaning: it shows surprise, or doubt, or may show regret or indignation. It is the **SUBJUNCTIVE ALONE**, not what precedes, that determines this particular meaning. In English, the distinction would be made via **INTONATION**.

In the following sentences, you will recognize expressions which you have learned govern the subjunctive. Study the list carefully in order to understand the implications of the subjunctive in these sentences. If you understand the reasons behind the choices, then the list of expressions, learned almost subversively, and hidden in the back of notebooks, will become easier to learn:

Je veux (insiste, exige, préfère, ordonne,) qu'il parte.

A POTENTIAL ACTION.

Je regrette (crains, doute, suis surpris, suis content) qu'il soit parti.

AN EMOTION (resulting from fear, doubt, surprise, pleasure)

Il est possible qu'il parte.

AN EMOTION; UNCERTAINTY; POTENTIAL ACTION.

Est-il possible qu'il parte?

AN EMOTION: REGRET, SURPRISE.

Cela m'inquiète qu'il parte seul.

AN EMOTION (resulting from worry)

Il vaut mieux qu'il parte.

A POTENTIAL ACTION; PERSONAL OPINION.

Je resterai ici jusqu'à ce qu'il parte.

AN EMOTION (resulting from the expression of a reservation or condition)

Il est temps qu'il parte.

A POTENTIAL ACTION; AN EMOTION: impatience or wish; fear that he may be late; or a personal opinion.

Je lui enverrai de l'argent pour qu'il parte.

A POTENTIAL ACTION

Bien qu'il soit pauvre, il ne se plaint pas.

AN EMOTION: sympathy, admiration

TENSES IN THE SUBJUNCTIVE

The **PRESENT SUBJUNCTIVE** expresses a time period which is a present or a future in relation to the main clause:

Nous doutons qu'il fasse cela.
We doubt (that) he **will** do that.

J'aime qu'on soit ponctuel.
I like people who **are** punctual.

NOTE: The verb **ESPÉRER** (to hope) is **NOT** a verb of emotion in French, but rather a verb of thinking (like **CROIRE**, **PENSER**) and takes the **INDICATIVE**..

THE PERFECT SUBJUNCTIVE: Translates (in clauses requiring the subjunctive) the English past and future perfect:

Je suis heureux que vous soyez venu.
I am happy that you came.

Il craint que vous n'ayez pas compris.
He's afraid you did not understand.

Je doute qu'ils aient fini quand vous arriverez.
I doubt they will be finished when you arrive.

VS.

Ils auront fini quand vous arriverez.
They will have finished when you arrive.

CONCERNING IMPERSONAL EXPRESSIONS

In most cases, impersonal expressions in French require the subjunctive in the subordinate clause. But not **ALL impersonal** expressions require the subjunctive. They must fall into certain categories:

NECESSITY OR COMPULSION:

Il est nécessaire que
Il faut que

SPEAKER'S OPINION AS TO FITNESS, SUITABILITY:

Il est juste que
Il est heureux que (it is fortunate that)
Il est temps que
Il convient que
Il vaut mieux que
Il est raisonnable que
Il est bon que (it is well that)

POSSIBILITY:

Il est possible que (impossible que, rare que)
Il se peut que (it may be that)

DOUBT:

Il est douteux que

Il est peu probable que (n'est pas probable que)
IL EST PROBABLE takes the *indicative*.
Il n'est pas certain que

SOME CLARIFICATION ON DECLARATIVE VERBS

CROIRE
ESPÉRER
PENSER
ESTIMER

SE SOUVENIR
AFFIRMER
ASSURER
REMARQUER

These verbs do not contain any information in and of themselves which might call for the subjunctive. The use of the subjunctive in the subordinate clauses depends on the meaning the speaker wants to convey.

Used affirmatively, they indicate the belief, knowledge, and conviction of the speaker.

Used interrogatively or negatively, the speaker has the choice between the subjunctive and the indicative.

When the speaker chooses to use the subjunctive he is not only expressing uncertainty or doubt, but he is also hesitant to be too categorical in negating or questioning a fact. He is *hedging*. Therefore, use the indicative when the action is considered an accomplished fact or when you wish to stress the reality of a fact.

SOME OTHER VERBS:

Désespérer: a verb of emotion used either affirmatively or negatively requiring the subjunctive.

Prétendre que: when the verb means **TO INSIST THAT, TO REQUIRE THAT**, it is a manifestation of the will and requires the subjunctive, since the action is only potential:

Je prétends que (j'insiste que) vous fassiez vos devoirs.

NOTE: When **PRÉTENDRE QUE** means to **CLAIM THAT** (as in the idea of a "pretender [claimant] to the throne") it is treated like a declarative verb and there is a choice between the subjunctive and the indicative:

Je prétends qu'il a bien fait (I claim he did right)

Je ne prétends pas qu'il ait bien fait. (I'm not claiming he did right. Depending on the intonation of the sentence, you may use either the indicative or the subjunctive)

NOTE: Be careful *not to* translate the English word "pretend" using the verb *prétendre*. It is a *faux ami*. To translate *pretend* into French, the expression is: *faire semblant de* (Pierre fait semblant d'être fâché. Pierre pretends to be angry.)

Comprendre: followed by the subjunctive when the speaker wants to convey appreciation of a reason or disapproval. Use the indicative when you want to convey the sense of *grasp the meaning of*:

Nous comprenons que vous soyez fâché
We can understand your being angry

Il ne comprend pas que je ne peux pas le voir maintenant.
He doesn't understand that I can't see him right now.

Supposer: usually treated as a declarative verb. When used in the imperative, it can suggest an unreal assumption or one yet to be proved and therefore requires the subjunctive:

Je suppose qu'il sait ce qu'il fait.
Je ne suppose pas qu'il soit riche.
Supposons que vous ayez raison. Et ensuite, que feriez-vous?

Consentir à ce que; s'opposer à ce que: Followed by the subjunctive when the action in the subordinate clause is conceived as potential. Use the indicative when the action is an accomplished fact:

Le colonel s'oppose à ce que vous alliez en permission maintenant.
The colonel is opposed to your going on leave now (Aha!
that's a real subjunctive in English!!)

Je ne consens pas à ce que vous m'aidiez.
I do not consent to your helping me (English subjunctive!)

Nous consentons (nous nous opposons) à ce que vous avez proposé.
We consent (are opposed) to what you have proposed.

NOTE: This list of verbs where the choice subjunctive/indicative exists is not exhaustive. Remember, in general, the **SUBJUNCTIVE MUST BE USED** in a subordinate clause when the verb of the main clause expresses **UNCERTAINTY, DOUBT, EMOTION, or POTENTIAL ACTION.**