

INFORMATION SHEET – A GUIDE TO THE SUBJUNCTIVE

Introduction

Grammar has been re-introduced into schools in the last few years and children might be seeking some help from parents to understand what they are being taught.

However, most parents went through school when emphasis in English lessons was on self-expression rather than what was seen as the constricting effects of grammar. Instruction in English grammar was thus minimal at best so your child might be asking you to explain concepts you've never learned yourself.

A particularly tricky grammatical concept is the subjunctive. This guide explains what it is and its significance in the English language.

One of the reasons the subjunctive is difficult to grasp is that it is rarely used in English (many people may never use it at all) so children may have little exposure to it. As a side note, it's worth bearing in mind that the subjunctive is alive and well in many other languages; it's dying out in English as the language's grammatical rules progressively simplify. That's happening because the use of English continues to expand internationally and, counter-intuitively, languages typically reduce grammar rules the more widely they are spoken.

Definition of subjunctive

Before we explain the relevance of the subjunctive, let's first look at a brief definition. The subjunctive (more correctly the 'subjunctive mood') is a form of a verb that deals with 'non-reality' which means that it expresses situations that are not real but are hypothetical, aspirational, conditional or necessary. Examples of some of those cases are as follows (with the verb in its subjunctive form shown in italics):

Hypothetical: If I *were* rich

Aspirational: I wish she *were* a doctor

Necessity: It's important that you *be* quiet

We noted that the subjunctive is dying out. As such, many people might make the statements above without using the subjunctive:

Hypothetical: If I *was* rich

Aspirational: I wish she *was* a doctor

Necessity: It's important that you *are* quiet

Usefulness of the subjunctive

The meaning of these statements is not altered by using the standard form of the verb (the form used for 'real' events called the 'indicative mood') which is one reason why use of the subjunctive is falling into disuse. The meaning isn't affected because languages have levels of redundancy (so that the sense of a statement is able to tolerate certain sorts of grammatical error). In the cases above, the sense of non-reality is conveyed by other parts of the sentence, typically 'if', 'that' or verbs indicating desire.

This highlights a short-cut way of identifying where a subjunctive is (or should be) used: it often comes in a subordinate clause that is introduced with an 'if' or 'that' conjunction.

Common expressions using the subjunctive

One final thing to note before we dive into the grammar: the subjunctive was more widely used in the past and remains in some of our common figures of speech. For example:

God *bless* you (not *blesses*)

Be that as it may (not *Is*)

Heaven *forbid* (not *forbids*)

Finally, the origin of one of the most commonly used English words is based in the subjunctive. The term 'please' is a contracted form of the formal 'if it *please* you', where the verb 'please' is in the subjunctive form (otherwise it would be *pleases*).

The grammar of time, aspect and modality ('TAM')

First some background. So far as verbs are concerned, there are three important grammatical dimensions to consider, concepts known by the acronym 'TAM':

Time: Does the action take place in the present past or future?

Aspect: Is the action completed (called 'perfective'), ongoing (called 'imperfective') or habitual?

Modality: Is the action a real event or a 'non-real' one (an instruction, a desire, a possibility, a necessity or simply just hypothetical)?

All languages have to manage these dimensions and they do so in many different ways. One method is to use other words ('auxiliaries') to express these dimensions (some languages almost only use this method). Another way to express a dimension is to alter the 'root' verb (using prefixes, suffixes or changes to the middle of the word – a process called 'inflection'). This process of inflection is used for a variety of grammatical purposes and its application to verbs is a special type of inflection called 'conjugation'. Some languages mostly use inflection to express the TAM dimensions without the need for auxiliaries.

English uses both inflection and auxiliaries.

Basic verb conjugation

Let's look at verb inflection first. For example, the verb 'to walk' (the root of which is 'walk') has the forms:

Present: I walk (perfective and habitual) and *I am walking* (imperfective);

Past: I walked (perfective), *I was walking* (imperfective) and *I used to walk* (habitual);

Future: I will walk (perfective), *I will be walking* (imperfective and habitual).

There are a few things to note. Firstly, there are other tenses besides the three listed above. Secondly, although 'will' is a separate word from 'walk' it can nonetheless be regarded as an inflection of 'walk' because it is used as a conjugation. Finally, where the sense in the above examples covers more than one aspect (e.g. perfective and habitual), other elements in a sentence structure are needed to clarify the aspectual context (e.g. *I walk every day*).

In addition to the inflection for TAM, please also bear in mind that verbs may also inflect to conjugate for the 'person' performing the action (I, you, he, she, we, they). Many languages will inflect both for person and for TAM dimensions creating in some cases bewilderingly complex tables of verb forms (which you may remember if you ever studied a foreign language at school).

By contrast, in line with its trend towards simplification (and with the exception of some irregular – albeit important - verbs), the only variation in conjugation for regular verbs in the English language is the addition of an 's' in the third person singular conjugation (he, she, it): i.e. *he walks*.

Verb moods

The subjunctive is just one of the ways that English deals with the dimension of modality. In terms of the conjugation of verbs, it is the least significant of the three 'moods' used in English. Each of the moods is simply a means of conjugating verbs to express their relationship to the modality (the reality) of the action.

By far the most commonly used mood deals with 'real' events and is called the 'indicative'. It's so common we regard it as the standard form and the examples above, for 'to walk' are all shown in the indicative mood. As we noted at the outset, the indicative forms of the verb are slowly supplanting the subjunctive in common use.

The second most common mood is the 'imperative'. This is the form used for giving commands and instructions. So far as its conjugation is concerned, aside from irregular verbs (more on those later) the imperative form is simply the root of a regular verb. It can be distinguished from the indicative because it doesn't require use of a personal pronoun:

walk faster!

sit down!

Conjugation of the subjunctive

Finally we come to the subjunctive. How does that conjugate differently from the indicative? Once again, leaving aside irregular verbs, the only difference in subjunctive form is that the root of regular verbs is the form of the verb in all subjunctive conjugations in the present tense (in other words, we no longer add an 's' to third person singular – 'he, she, it'), i.e.

I desire that he *walk* towards me (not 'walks'),

It's vital that she *sit* still (not 'sits').

There is also a past subjunctive tense which is even simpler: in regular verbs, the past subjunctive conjugation is exactly the same as the past indicative tense, i.e.

I desired that he *walked* towards me,

It was vital that she *sat* still.

There's such a tiny difference in the conjugation of verbs in the subjunctive form compared to the standard (indicative) form that it's another reason why the subjunctive is falling into disuse.

The irregular verb 'to be'

We've mentioned irregular verbs before. These are verbs that don't conjugate according to the standard pattern. Depending on definition there are about 200 irregular verbs in English. For the purposes of this discussion, we'll just look at the most common and also the most irregular of English verbs, the verb 'to be'.

The 'to be' verb is highly irregular (in common with many other Indo-European languages) mostly because it is used for so many purposes. The English verb 'to be' is, in fact, a conflation of several different archaic verbs. That is the reason it includes the conjugations 'am', 'is', 'are', 'was' and 'were' (amongst others). These forms bear no relationship to the root verb 'be' because they derive from different sources.

The verb 'to be' is also irregular in its subjunctive mood. We have shown the subjunctive form of 'to be' in some of the examples above, specifically the early examples that distinguish hypothetical, aspirational and necessity cases. To understand how 'to be' changes in the subjunctive form, it's best to look at a (simplified) conjugation table for this verb:

<i>Tense: Person</i>	<i>Indicative</i>	<i>Subjunctive</i>
Present: I	am	be
Present: You, we, they	are	be
Present: He, she, it	is	be
Past: I, he, she, it	was	were
Past: You, we, they	were	were

For the purposes of this discussion we will leave 'to be' at this point except to say that most cases where the subjunctive remains in common use involve this particular verb.

Other ways to express modality

Let's look back at regular verbs for a moment and, in particular, the first of the two examples of the use of the present tense subjunctive above: 'I desire that he walk towards me'. Although grammatically correct this form of words might be regarded as overly formal, possibly even pompous or archaic. It's unlikely to be how most people would express this idea. And this leads onto our next point.

The subjunctive is only one way that English deals with modality. And in fact, it is a method that is slowly being replaced by others. To complete this survey of the subjunctive, let's look at some of these alternatives.

We noted above that sentence structure (usually requiring additional words or phrases) is an important way that the English language uses to convey modality (as well as to express time and aspect, the two other dimensions of TAM). In many ways, this approach allows for more nuance than can be achieved simply using a verbal conjugation. As a side note, modality is not the only way in which English is simplifying its grammar. Shades of meaning lost in this process need to be conveyed in other ways and English has largely compensated by embracing a huge vocabulary of words with very subtle distinctions.

Modal verbs

However, English has a further, very useful, tool for dealing with modality: the 'modal' verbs.

The nine basic modal verbs are *can, could, may, might, will, would, shall, should* and *must*. But, depending on definition, there is a total 24 verbs that can be classed as 'modal' or 'quasi-modal'. Note that *will* and *would* can also be regarded as conjugations which form the future and conditional tenses respectively (e.g. I *will* go, He *would* go).

Everyone is familiar with these basic modal verbs because they are the most frequently used method for expressing a wide range of modality properties (hypothetical, possibility, intention, expectation, aspiration, necessity etc).

It's not our purpose to examine these verbs in detail. However, before concluding, it's worth just noting that modal verbs differ from standard verbs in a number of ways the most important of which are as follows:

Firstly, they function as auxiliary verbs in that they convey a sense of modality to a sentence's active verb (e.g. I *must go*).

Secondly they do not conjugate depending on grammatical person (e.g. I *must* go, he *must* go – not he *musts* go).

Thirdly, they are 'defective' verbs in that they do not exhibit the full range of uses of standard verbs: they cannot be used as infinitives, nor participles nor change tense (e.g. none of the following is permissible: *to must, it was musted, he musted*).

Conclusion

So, to summarise, the subjunctive is a grammatical 'mood' denoted by changes to verb roots through a process of 'inflection' called 'conjugation'. The subjunctive is a way to express a range of 'unreal' events such as the hypothetical or aspirational which is a grammatical concept known as 'modality'. However, in common speech, the subjunctive is increasingly being supplanted by other methods of expressing modality, particularly using a class of English verbs known as the 'modal' verbs.

Hopefully you have benefited from this long review of the subjunctive with its particular focus on how it fits into a wider perspective of English grammar. Our frequent digressions to compare other languages and examine the evolution of English have also been intended to provide context to this convoluted concept.

Although the subjunctive is less used than it once was, it's likely to survive in various forms in English for some time yet and an understanding of what it's for and how to use it will continue to be of benefit for those wishing to speak and write the language well.