

Subjunctive: Part I

All too frequently, the topic of the subjunctive is made far more difficult than is necessary. Let's try a slightly different approach, with the goal of making this topic less troublesome.

The subjunctive is not a tense; rather, it is a mood. Tense refers to when an action takes place (past, present, future), while mood merely reflects how the speaker feels about the action. The subjunctive mood is rarely used in English, but it is widely used in Spanish.

Here are some examples of the subjunctive being used in English:

The doctor recommends that he take the pills with food.

Subjunctive conjugation: he take

The law requires that you be 18 years old to vote.

Subjunctive conjugation: you be

If I were a rich man, I wouldn't have to work hard.

Subjunctive conjugation: I were

So far, you have studied verb tenses in the indicative mood. The indicative mood is used to express factual information, certainty, and objectivity.

Usted va al Perú en diciembre.

You are going to Peru in December.

The above sentence merely reports the fact that you are going to Peru in December, so the indicative mood is used.

Let's change the above example slightly:

No dudo que usted va al Perú en diciembre.

I don't doubt that you are going to Peru in December.

In the above sentence, the clause "no dudo" introduces a quality of **certainty**,—the speaker has no doubt, so the indicative mood is used in the second clause (**va**) as well as the first (**no dudo**).

Let's make another slight change to our example:

Dudo que usted vaya al Perú en diciembre.

I doubt that you are going to Peru in December.

In the above sentence, the clause "dudo" introduces a quality of **uncertainty**,—the speaker does have doubt, so here the subjunctive mood is used in the second clause (**vaya**).

The **subjunctive** mood is used to express everything except certainty and objectivity: things like doubt, uncertainty, subjectivity, etc.

Yo dudo que usted vaya al Perú en diciembre.

I doubt that you are going to Peru in December.

Since the above statement does not express certainty, the subjunctive (**vaya**) is required in the second clause.

The difference between indicative and subjunctive is the difference between certainty/objectivity (indicative) and possibility/subjectivity (subjunctive).

Indicative

John goes to the store.

(This sentence merely states the certain, objective fact that John goes to the store.)

I know that John goes to the store.

(The clause "I know" tells us that the speaker feels that it is a certain, objective fact that John goes to the store.)

There is no doubt that John goes to the store.

(The clause "there is no doubt" tells us that the speaker feels that it is a certain, objective fact that John goes to the store.)

Subjunctive

I want John to go to the store.

(The clause "I want" tells us that the speaker feels that there is uncertainty as to whether John goes to the store.)

I hope that John goes to the store.

(The clause "I hope" tells us that the speaker feels that there is uncertainty as to whether John goes to the store.)

It is possible that John will go to the store.

(The clause "it is possible" tells us that the speaker feels that there is uncertainty as to whether John goes to the store.)

It's good that John goes to the store.

(The clause "it's good" alerts us that the speaker is about to express a subjective opinion.)

It's important that John goes to the store.

(The clause "it's important" alerts us that the speaker is about to express a subjective opinion.)

Because there must be some uncertainty or subjectivity to warrant the use of the subjunctive, you will usually see it in sentences that contain a main clause which introduces a quality of uncertainty or subjectivity.

- I hope she will come** I hope = main clause
- I know she will come** I know = main clause
- I feel she will come** I feel = main clause.

The above examples all have main clauses, but only the first and the third introduce an element of uncertainty or subjectivity.

In learning to use the subjunctive, it is quite helpful if one can first recognize such clauses. The following is a list of clauses commonly associated with the use of the subjunctive:

- | | | | |
|-------------------------|----------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|
| a menos que | unless | es terrible que | it's terrible that |
| antes (de) que | before | hasta que | until |
| con tal (de) que | provided that | insistir en que | to insist that |
| cuando | when | mandar que | to order that |
| conviene que | it is advisable that | más vale que | it's better that |
| después (de) que | after | mientras que | while |
| dudar que | to doubt that | negar que | to deny that |
| en caso de que | in case | no creer que | not to believe that |
| en cuanto | as soon as | no es cierto que | it's not certain that |
| es aconsejable que ... | it's advisable that | no estar convencido | |
| es bueno que | it's good that | de que | to not be convinced that |
| es difícil que | it's unlikely that | no estar seguro | |
| es dudoso que | it is doubtful that | de que | to not be sure that |
| es fácil que | it's likely that | no es verdad que | it's not true that |
| es fantástico que | it's fantastic that | no imaginarse que ... | to not imagine that |
| es importante que ... | it's important that | no parecer que | to not seem that |
| es imposible que | it's impossible that | no pensar que | to not think that |
| es improbable que ... | it's unlikely that | no suponer que | to not suppose that |
| es incierto que | it's uncertain that | ojalá que | if only he would |
| es increíble que | it's incredible that | para que | in order that |
| es (una) lástima que . | it's a pity that | pedir que | to ask that |
| es malo que | it's bad that | preferir que | to prefer that |
| es mejor que | it's better that | prohibir que | to prohibit that |
| es menester que | it's necessary that | puede ser que | it may be that |
| es necesario que | it's necessary that | querer que | to want that |
| esperar que | to wish that | recomendar que | to recommend that |
| es posible que | it's possible that | rogar que | to plead that |
| es preciso que | it's necessary that | sentir que | to regret that |
| es preferible que | it's preferable that | sin que | without |
| es probable que | it's probable that | sugerir que | to suggest that |
| es raro que | it's rare that | tan pronto como | as soon as |
| es ridículo que | it's ridiculous that | temer que | to fear that |
| estar contento que ... | to be happy that | tener miedo de que .. | to be afraid that |