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THE SUBJUNCTIVE

The subjunctive is a mood¹ which is used to express uncertainty, wishes, desires, etc. It usually refers to non-factual or hypothetical situations. The subjunctive is more commonly used in formal spoken language and formal writing.

The subjunctive can be present or past. In the present subjunctive, the verb is always in the *infinitive without "to"*, no matter in what tense the subjunctive-triggering verb or expression is. This verb usually occurs in "*that-clauses*," especially in American English. The present subjunctive is often triggered by verbs and expressions that express commands, demands, desires, formal motions, parliamentary resolutions, orders, recommendations, suggestions, wishes, etc. Notice the typical *structure* of sentences in the present subjunctive.²

*SUBJECT*₁ + *VERB*₁³ (in any tense) + (THAT+) *SUBJECT*₂ + (NOT+)⁴ *VERB*₂ (in the infinitive without "to") (+ OBJECTS + ADVERBS)

OR

*IT IS IMPORTANT*² + (THAT+) *SUBJECT*₂ + (NOT+) *VERB*₂ (in the infinitive without "to") (+ OBJECTS + ADVERBS)

For example: The teacher recommended that Mary (not) *take* the exam again.

It was advisable that they *cancel* the operation.

The present subjunctive can also occur in fixed expressions (or formulae) introduced by one of the expressions like *albeit*, *although*, *if*, *lest*, *provided that*, *so*, *so that*, *in order that*, *though*, *till*, *that*, *unless*, *whatever*, *whether*, *whoever*, etc.

For example: *So be it.*

If he be guilty, hang him.

Whether she *be* guilty or not, summon her.

Whatever *be* the reasons for their action, we cannot tolerate such disloyalty.

Though he *be* the President himself, he shall hear us.

They removed the prisoner in order he not *disturb* the proceedings any further.

On the other hand, the past subjunctive occurs in *if-clauses* and expressions with *I wish...* In this case, the plural past form of be (i.e., *were*) is used with all the persons.

For example: *If I were you.*

I wouldn't do it.

I wish Mary were here.

¹ **Mood** is a grammatical notion that refers to a set of syntactic and semantic contrasts which are often shown by the form of the verb and which express the speaker's attitude to what is said or written. Three moods have often been identified in English, namely, the indicative mood, the imperative mood, and the subjunctive mood (cf. Crystal, 1991; Richards, Platt, & Platt., 1992).

² The conjunction *that* can be left out.

³ Subjunctive-triggering verb.

⁴ Notice that in the negative, *no auxiliary* is needed.

Sometimes, *no if* is used, as in the following sentences:

Were I you, I wouldn't do it.

Suppose he *were* lost.

VERBS⁵ AND EXPRESSIONS USED IN THE PRESENT SUBJUNCTIVE:

ADVISE: The Congress *advised that* the minimum salary *be* raised.

ASK: I *asked that* the audience *not clap* until the end of the show.

BEG: The old woman *begged that* the jury *forgive* his son.

COMMAND: The General *commanded that* the plane *not take off* until further notice.

DECIDE: The committee *decided that* everyone *pay* their fees.

DECREE: The President *decreed that* all the prisoners *be* released.

DEMAND: I *demanded that* the Principal *show up* at once.

DETERMINE: The King *determined that* all his subjects *wear* hats.

INSIST: John *insisted that* his wife *see* a doctor.

MOVE: The chairman *moved* (= proposed) *that* a vote *be* taken on the employees' attitude.

ORDER: The teacher *ordered that* Mary *take* the exam again.

PREFER: The students *prefer that* their teacher *not give* a test tomorrow.

PROPOSE: We *proposed that* the income tax *be* lowered.

RECOMMEND: I will *recommend that* the decision *be* made today.

REQUEST: The Government *requested that* all citizens *pay* their taxes.

REQUIRE: This course *requires that* the students *participate* actively.

RESOLVE: The City Council *resolved that* all nightclubs *close* at midnight.

RULE: Congress *ruled that* the corrupt ministers *be* removed from office.

SUGGEST: I *suggested that* Margaret *take* the course again.

URGE: Mr. Smith *urged that* his wife *be* taken to hospital immediately.

VOTE: The Parliament *voted that* more severe punishment *be* enforced on corrupt politicians.

IT IS ADVISABLE: *It is advisable that* Mary talk to the principal about her problems.

IT IS CRUCIAL: *It is crucial that* we solve our political problems soon.

IT IS DESIRABLE: *It is desirable that* the teacher postpone the exam.

IT IS ESSENTIAL: *It is essential that* all English students *have* a good grammar book.

IT IS IMPERATIVE: *It is imperative that* a solution to the current crisis *be* found quickly.

IT IS IMPORTANT: *It is important that* the University *have* a better budget.

IT IS MANDATORY: *It is mandatory that* the janitor wear a uniform in the office.

IT IS NECESSARY: *It is necessary that* you *study* hard every day.

IT IS URGENT: *It is urgent that* the Constitution *be* reformed.

References:

Quirk, R., Greenbaum, S., Leech, G., & Svartvik, J. (1985). A comprehensive grammar of the English language. London: Longman.

Crystal, D. (1991). A dictionary of linguistics and phonetics (3rd ed). Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

⁵These verbs are sometimes referred to as *mandative verbs*.

Richards, J. C., Platt, J., & Platt, W. (1985). Longman dictionary of applied linguistics. Essex, England: Longman.

Exercises

Complete the sentences, using the idea of the words in parentheses.

Examples: (You should organize a camping trip.)

The girls proposed that their scout **leader organize** a camping trip.

(Ms. Hanson thinks that the director should divide our class into two sections.)

Ms. Hanson recommended that our class **be divided** into two sections.

1. *(You must call home every week.)*

Dan's parents insisted that he _____ home every week.

2. *(Someone must tell her the truth about her illness.)*

It is essential that she _____ the truth about her illness.

3. *(Open your suitcases for inspection.)*

The customs official demanded that all passengers _____ their suitcases.

4. *(Ann, you should take some art courses.)*

The counselor recommended that Ann _____ some art courses.

5. *(All parts of the motor must work correctly.)*

It is vital that all parts of the motor _____ in proper working order.

6. *(Please mail all packages at the central office.)*

The director requests that all packages _____ at the central office.

7. *(Soldiers must obey their officers.)*

It is imperative that soldiers _____ their officers.

8. *(We must remember to give the babysitter certain phone numbers to call in case of emergency.)*

It is important that the baby-sitter _____ phone numbers to call in case of emergency.

9. *(Everybody must stay at home during the curfew.)*

The government ordered that everybody _____ at home during the curfew hours.

10. *(Mom wants the children to make their beds before going to school.)*

Mom asks that the children _____ their beds before going to school.