

# The Subjunctive Mood

## Grammatical Properties of Verbs

In English, words have several properties which affect their inflexion. For instance, one dog is called a "dog", but we use the inflected form "dogs" when talking about more than one dog. The distinguishing property is called the *number* and may be either *singular* or *plural*.

Verbs have the properties of *number*, *person*, *tense*, *mood*, and *archaicness*. Usually the properties of the verb depend upon other parts of the sentence.

### Number

Number defines whether the subject (actor) of the verb is one person or thing or multiple.

### Person

Person defines who is doing the thing. The "First Person" indicates that the speaker or writer is the subject of the sentence. The "Second Person" indicates that the person spoken or written to is the subject of the sentence. The "Third Person" indicates that someone or something else is the subject of the sentence.

### Tense

Tense describes the temporal relationship between the sentence and the current time. The "Present Tense" is something that occurs now. The "Past Tense" is something that occurred beforehand. English has other tenses, but none of them are inflected forms of the verb: they are all complex verbs formed by combining the an auxiliary verb with the infinitive (base) form of the verb. (E.g., "shall be" is in the future tense).

### Mood

Mood describes what kind of action is going on. The "Indicative Mood" indicates something (e.g., "The dog **is** mean."). The "Subjunctive Mood" represents a questionable, supposed, or uncertain condition which may or may not be true (e.g., "I suggest the dog **be** spayed."). The "Imperative Mood" represents a command (e.g., "Spay the dog.") Traditional grammarians suggest that the "Imperative Mood" be only applicable to the second person, present tense. A phrase such as "God bless you" is considered to be in the subjunctive mood by traditional grammarians but some, as I do, consider it a third-person imperative. The indicative counterpart would, of course, be "God blesses you."

### Archaicness

Archaicness indicates whether or not the speaker be using the archaic *-est* and *-eth* endings for the second- and third-person indicative present found in the Authorized Version of the Holy Bible. Most people don't like to consider this property.



## Inflexions Based upon Mood

The rules to form the indicative mood are complex, yet fairly well known. Here we will discuss the formation of the forms for the imperative and subjunctive moods. The imperative mood is always the same as the infinitive (base verb form). The subjunctive mood forms may be determined by the following rules:

1. The imperative is always the same as the infinitive form.
2. The present subjunctive is always the same as the infinitive.
3. The second-person archaic past subjunctive form of *be* is *wert*.
4. All other past subjunctive forms are always the same as the past indicative plural form.

### Example Conjugations

Conjugation of the verb *be*

person	Indicative						Subjunctive					
	present			past			present			past		
1 <sup>st</sup>	I	am	we	I	was	we	I	we	I	we	I	we
modern 2 <sup>nd</sup>	you	are	y'all	you	were	y'all	you	y'all	you	were	y'all	y'all
modern 3 <sup>rd</sup>	he/she/it	is	they	he/she/it	was	they	he/she/it	be	they	be	he/she/it	they
archaic 2 <sup>nd</sup>	thou	art	ye	thou	wast	ye	thou	ye	thou	wert	ye	ye
archaic 3 <sup>rd</sup>	he/she/it	is	they	he/she/it	was	they	he/she/it	they	he/she/it	were	they	they

Conjugation of the verb *use*

person	Indicative						Subjunctive					
	present			past			present			past		
1 <sup>st</sup>	I	use	we	I	used	we	I	use	we	I	used	we
modern 2 <sup>nd</sup>	you	use	y'all	you	used	y'all	you	y'all	you	used	y'all	y'all
modern 3 <sup>rd</sup>	he/she/it	uses	they	he/she/it	used	they	he/she/it	use	they	use	he/she/it	used
archaic 2 <sup>nd</sup>	thou	usest	ye	thou	usedst	ye	thou	ye	thou	usedst	ye	ye
archaic 3 <sup>rd</sup>	he/she/it	useth	they	he/she/it	used	they	he/she/it	they	he/she/it	used	they	they

\* - An example of the third-person imperative is "Peace be with you." Some grammarians say that there is no third-person imperative and that this example is in the subjunctive mood. The first-person imperative (*e.g.*, from a recent film promotion, "We be bad.") is not used by speakers of good English.

## Modern Usage of the Subjunctive

The subjunctive mood is becoming more and more archaic every day. However, there are still a good number of instances in modern speech where it is preferred or essential by most all speakers. In many other cases, it is optional.

### Suggestions, Proposals, and Requests

An action that is suggested, proposed, or requested should be in the subjunctive mood: for instance, "I insist that Sharon *be* present." This sentence means, more or less, "Sharon had better come or else!" In contrast, "I insist that Sharon *is* present." means "I tell you that Sharon is currently here."

Here are other examples of the subjunctive mood in suggestions, proposals and requests:

- He moved that the meeting *be* adjourned.
- I suggested that he *remove* his hat in the church.
- I propose the company *locate* its new plant in Decatur.
- I wish she *were* here.

Note that in the last statement, the past tense is used because the speaker is resigned to the fact that she is not here; this is contrast to "I demand she be here." which uses the more forceful verb *demand* and surely does not hint of giving up on the not-yet-true possibility.

### Clauses beginning with *lest*

The word *lest* (which means *for fear that*) is a bit old-fashioned and just yearns for a corresponding old-fashioned subjunctive mood.

- I told him to mind his step lest he *fall*.
- Let's get away from the bees' nest lest we *be* stung.
- I suggest he move his car lest it *be* hit.

### Contrary Conditions

Conditions contrary to fact are in the subjunctive mood.

- If he were here, he could tell us the answer.
- If I were you, I'd tie my shoe.

### False Subjunctives

Sometimes folks see a word which they think might be in the subjunctive mood, but it isn't. For instance, in the sentence

The girl watched the archer shoot the arrow.

the word *shoot* is an infinitive form of the verb. We could determine this more easily by replacing the subject of *shoot* with a pronoun: namely, *him*:

The girl watched him shoot the arrow.

If *shoot* were a normal verb in the subjunctive mood, then its subject would have to be in the nominative (or subjective) case (namely, *he*). Only infinitives can take subjects in the objective case (*him*).

## The Enlightenment of the Co-Worker

### Story

It makes me sick when I hear people say "If I was you" rather than "If I were you". It makes me sicker to find out that they naïvely believe that the former (indicative mood) is grammatically preferred to the latter (subjunctive mood). Oh well.

Recently, an unenlightened co-worker, dared to question my perfect grammar. I had sent him an e-mail message describing some work items as follows (due to company secrecy and so forth, I have changed around some words not essential to this grammatical analysis):

If the noisemaker *be* in the clogged-up state and the air input to the noisemaker *be* lost by some means other than the instrumentalist running out of breath, then the noisemaker will still somehow start making noise.

The co-worker deemed my usage of the word *be* rather than *is* was unlearned and substandard.

I explained to him how I grew up using the Authorized Version of the Holy Bible as my moral and spiritual standard but also as my grammatical standard.

The co-worker laughed, challenging me to find some "we be"s in the Bible. Little did he know.... I quickly found several examples. I passed on some of these to him as well as some other "we be" references from literature.

After my presentation, the co-worker was converted and become an advocate of the subjunctive mood. (Although I think he went overboard).

### Citations of Subjunctive "we be"

#### From the Authorized Version of the Holy Bible:

If **we** this day **be** examined of the good deed done to the impotent man, by what means he is made whole; *Acts 4:9*

Now if **we be** dead with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him: *Romans 6:8*

But in this will we consent unto you: If ye will be as **we be**, that every male of you be circumcised;  
*Genesis 34:15*

### **From the Magna Carta**

(48) All evil customs of Forests and Warrens, and of Foresters and Warreners, Sheriffs and their officers, Water-banks and their keepers, shall immediately be inquired into by twelve Knights of the same county, upon oath, who shall be elected by good men of the same county; and within forty days after the inquisition is made, they shall be altogether destroyed by them never to be restored; provided that this be notified to us before it be done, or to our Justiciary, if **we be** not in England.

### **From Shakespeare's writings**

**King Richard II Act III, Scene 3, lines 71-75**

**KING RICHARD II:** We are amazed; and thus long have we stood  
To watch the fearful bending of thy knee, [*To NORTHUMBERLAND.*]  
Because we thought ourself thy lawful king:  
And if **we be**, how dare thy joints forget  
To pay their awful duty to our presence?

**A Midsummer's Night Dream (last two lines of the play)**

**PUCK:** ...

Give me your hands, if **we be** friends,  
And Robin shall restore amends.

### **At the Elevator**

I used to work on the sixth floor of an office building in Atlanta. When I was tired after a hard day's work, I would ride down the elevator rather than take my customary walk down the stairwell.

As I was waiting, a woman came up and asked me, "Be you waiting here long?" in a rather urbanized Gullah-like rhythm and pronunciation.

I knew precisely what she meant: "Hast thou been waiting here for a long period of time?" But I did not respond immediately because I was amazed at her concise question using the subjunctive mood.

I began to think to myself, "The subjunctive mood ought to be used in all questions because the asker does not know whether or not the question be true, and, therefore, the asker cannot be so presumptuous as to use the indicative mood, unless the question be rhetorical."

While I was speechlessly pondering the grammatical beauty of her question, she became embarrassed of her wording which she figured was unintelligible due to the blank stare on my face. She then said, with an archtypical charm-school pronunciation, "I am sorry; I mean: Have you been waiting here for a long time?"

I felt far more embarrassed than she could have ever been. I did not intend to be condescending. I was

merely amazed at the grammatical significance of my postulation based upon her question. But I quickly responded "not too long" just as the bell from the elevator dinged to announce its arrival.

Of course, I quickly abandoned my postulation, and to this day ask questions in the indicative mood (subordinate clauses of suitable types excepted).

---



Linguistic concerns



Curtis's home page