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SUBJUNCTIVE MOOD IN HUNGARIAN: HOW TO DIFFERENTIATE
AND WHEN TO TEACH IT

This paper discusses eventuality of the subjunctive/conjunctive mood in subordinate clauses in the Hungarian language. First, the subjunctive mood and its use in various Indo-European languages are briefly introduced and then it is explained why it is important to distinguish the subjunctive mood in Hungarian. The paper argues that it is inevitable to include this category in the Hungarian descriptive grammar and in the practice of teaching Hungarian as a foreign language.

The subjunctive is a grammatical mood found in many languages and it is used to express unreality like emotions, wish, obligation, judgement, opinion, necessity, possibility or action that have not yet occurred, or an action which is being reported. The situation in which subjunctive is used varies from language to language, but non-reality or irreality is a common element.

The grammatical form of the subjunctive mood is also very different: some languages have a complex conjugation system, some languages use auxiliary verbs or other syntactic structures to convey the meanings of irrealis.

In this presentation I am going to pay attention only to the morphological formulas and show various examples of three languages and of my mother tongue – Hungarian.

There are two linguistic terms for this phenomenon from the Latin origin: *coniunctivus* which means ‘connecting’ and *subiunctivus* meaning ‘submitting’, both referring to the fact that this verb form is used in subordinate clauses [2].

In present-day English the most typical means for expressing unreality are combinations of modal verbs with an infinitive. For example, in restrictive clauses after the verbs *wish, insist, hope, desire, suggest, move, order, pray, prefer, ask, demand, recommend* and the expressions *to be important, essential, vital, desirable, necessary*:

(1) *I recommend that he should go there.*

(2) *It is important that he should go there.*

Five hundred years ago English had a highly developed system of the subjunctive mood from which we can detect some survived fossils [2]:

(3) *I recommend that he go there.*

(4) *It is important that he go there.*

Examples (3) and (4) are almost indistinguishable, because there is no difference between the subjunctive and the indicative forms of the verb except for the present tense third person singular and for the verb *to be*. The subjunctive for the present tense third person singular drops the *-s* or *-es* so that it looks and sounds like the present tense for everything else. The subjunctive mood of the verb *to be* is *be* in the present tense and *were* in the past tense, regardless of what the subject is:

(5) *He demands that I / you be / she-he / we / you / they **be** there on time.*

The most common use of the subjunctive is after *if* clauses that state or describe a hypothetical situation: *If I **were** you...* . Idiomatic phrases like *God bless you* or *God save the Queen; Heaven forbid* also demonstrate the remains of the subjunctive mood.

The subjunctive in French, unlike in English, is a separate mood with a complete conjugation paradigm in different tenses. The use of this mood is in many respects similar to English: we find it in subordinate clauses after verbs or adverbs expressing desire, doubt or eventuality and order. It is almost always preceded by the conjunction *que* (that).

Predicates licensing the subjunctive mood are, for example, the following: *commander que* (in order that), *defender que* (to forbid), *demander que* (to ask), *desirer que* (desire to), *éviter que* (to avoid), *recommander que* (to recommend), *souhaiter que* (to wish), *tenir à ce que* (to insist that), *vouloir que* (to want that), *detester que* (to hate that), *aimer que* (to love that), *refuser que* (to refuse that), *supposer que* (suppose, hypothesize), *il est possible que* (it is possible that), *il est bon que* (it is good that), *il semble que* (it seems that), *il se peut que* (it may be that).

The subjunctive appears to express some sort of feeling, or to show there is doubt about whether something will happen or whether something is true, but new theories are trying to explain the phenomenon of subjunctive with the possibility of making an account of other people’s different points of view to the described situation. That means we are obliged to use this mood when it is possible to think that someone is of an adverse opinion [3].

The subjunctive mood can be used after *que* as a third person imperative for commands, wishes, concessions, suppositions and exclamations:

(6) *Que la lumière soit!* Let there be light!

The subjunctive can be used without *que* for polite and/or literary commands but only for a few verbs (*être, pouvoir, savoir, venir, vivre, vouloir*):

(7) *Puissiez-vous dire vrai!* Let us hope you are right!

Obviousness, knowledge, certainty are considered real – at least to the speaker – therefore do not call for the subjunctive. Using these verbs and expressions in the negative and interrogative, however, indicates doubt: thus the subjunctive is required, or the speaker might consider other converse opinions:

(8) *Je pense qu'il est sympa.* I think he's nice.

(9) *Je ne pense pas qu'il soit sympa.* I don't think he's nice.

(10) *Penses-tu qu'il soit sympa?* Do you think he's nice?

The German subjunctive is called “Konjunktiv” and has two forms – Konjunktiv I and Konjunktiv II – for different purposes. (In English Konjunktiv I is called “present subjunctive” and Konjunktiv II – “past conjunctive” but this is misleading, because both can be used for present and past time.)

There is a “non-real” situation which hasn't been mentioned yet: the reported speech. By using Konjunktiv I, the speaker is asserting his/her own neutrality. However, Konjunktiv II and the indicative mood can also be used in indirect speech: the first can imply disbelief and the second is more common in the oral language.

The conjugation of Konjunktiv I is completely regular for all verbs, except for the verb *sein* (to be), it is formed by adding the *-e, -est, -e, -en, -et, -en* personal endings to the stem. According to the endings, the subjunctive and the indicative mood forms are in some persons identical, and it is ambiguous what kind of verb is in the sentence.

Like in English and in French, the present subjunctive also occurs in the third person imperative in wishes and commands:

(11) *Es lebe der König!* Long live the King!

It is a typical form for food recipes:

(12) *Man nehme zwei Kilo Kartoffeln.* Take two kg of potatoes.

The most typical non-real situation is when we give an account of something whose validity is dependent on some condition. For this occasion we may use the conditional mood (in many languages related to subjunctive) or Konjunktiv II in German.

The verb form in this mood is declined from simple past, for “weak verbs” it is a hundred percent identical. In case of “strong verbs”, an umlaut is appended to the stem vowel if possible. For example: *ich war* → *ich wäre, ich brachte* → *ich brächte*.

To avoid indistinguishable forms we can use the so-called “würde-form” for hypothetical situations: *würde* is the Konjunktiv II form of *werden* and is used together with an infinitive giving the analytical variant of conditional (very similar to the English *would* + infinitive). This is more common in spoken German and used more frequently in the main-clause of the *if...than* sentences [4].

Let us make a kind of brief research to prove whether we can find the subjunctive mood in Hungarian! Where is the subjunctive typically present? In subordinate clauses, after certain predicates like in English and French, and in third person commands like in all the three languages I briefly introduced:

(13) *Magyart tanul.* She learns Hungarian.

(14) *Ragazkodom hozzá, hogy magyart tanuljon.* I insist that she learn Hungarian.

(15) *A király sokáig él.* The king lives long.

(16) *Sokáig éljen a király!* Long live the king!

or:

(17) *A király tanuljon magyarul!* The king should learn Hungarian!

The changes are clear: the subordinate position and the commandment both transform the verb form.

By analysing the sentences correctly, we may find out that the subjunctive and the imperative mood forms are the same in Hungarian. Same form, same mood. Problem solved, no need to investigate the topic. That was the academic attitude for long and it still seems to be an unpleasant topic in the Hungarian linguistics.

But let us go a bit further! Let us change the aspect and see if something happens!

(18) *Megtanul magyarul.*

‘She will learn Hungarian.’ (present tense, indicative, resultative/perfective aspect)

(19) *Ragazkodom hozzá, (hogy) tanuljon meg magyarul!*

(20) *Ragazkodom hozzá, hogy megtanuljon magyarul!*

‘I insist that she will have learned Hungarian.’

(21) *Tanuljon meg magyarul!* She should learn Hungarian!

Sentence (21) is in the imperative mood, and we see that the prefix splits and moves behind the verb – that is an essential rule in Hungarian grammar. Sentences (19) and (20) show us that this is not necessary when the verb is in the subordinate clause, both variations are correct. However, we also might agree that the predicate in *I insist* has a strong directive meaning, and it is very close to the imperative.

At present the most popular descriptive grammars and school books do not recognize the subjunctive mood as a formally distinctive verb mood. It is said that all verbs appearing in subordinate clauses are in the imperative mood – that is because a considerable number of such predicates are directives or assertives with an imperative meaning, e.g.: *kötelez* (oblige), *parancsol* (order), *javasol* (suggest), *utasít* (instruct), *felszólít* (summon), *kér* (ask), *megkér* (request), *kíván* (demand), *elrendel* (direct).

(22) *Megkérlek, (hogy) menj el.* I am asking you to leave.

But in some cases of using such constructions, the “imperative” meaning is in no way possible! This mood form appears in the subordinate clause when we give an account of the purpose of our action:

(23) *Azért jöttem, hogy segítsek.* I was coming to help you.

The non-real, evaluating-emotive expressions – already listed in English and French – can be followed by this special verb form:

(24) *Fontos, hogy elmenj.* It is important that you leave.

Negative sentences – mentioned earlier in French – can also license the subjunctive mood:

(25) *Nincs olyan meleg, hogy elmenjünk kempingezni.* It is warm enough to go camping.

Indirect questions:

(26) *Nem tudja, (hogy) megcsinálja-e.* She does not know, whether she should do it.

(27) *Nem tudja, (hogy) hogyan csinálja meg.* She does not know how to do it.

Besides, there is a notable list of other emotionally defined predicates (like permissives, purposives) followed by this mood: *megenged* (allow), *hagy* (let), *beleegyezik* (consent), *alkalmat ad* (provide an opportunity), *elvár* (expect), *joga van rá* (have the right to), *nincs ellene kifogása* (have no objections against) and *rászánja magát* (make up one's mind), *törekszik* (strive), *igyekszik* (endeavour), *vállalkozik* (undertake), *hajlandó* (willing), *elszánja magát* (make up one's mind), *az a szándéka* (his intention is), *azon van* (be after) and a lot more [5]:

(28) *Megengedem, hogy elmenj.* I am allowing you to leave.

There is a problem in Hungarian how to distinguish the two moods. As we have seen, the main difficulty concerning the status of the subjunctive proper in Hungarian is that its form morphologically identical with the imperative. But if we compare sentence (22) to sentence (26), we see a clear difference: in (22) the preverb is moved behind the verb. The inversion is obligatory in directive sentences, without this act it becomes ungrammatical. We can see this in a simple imperative sentence, like (21).

In sentences (24), (25), (26), (28), which do not express a directive meaning, the preverb remains giving a definite illustration to the distinctions and an idea of us having solved the problem.

But we ought not to forget (19), (20) and (27). Sentences (19) and (20) demonstrate predicates which allow the preverb in both positions: remaining in the front (as in focus-less indicative) or moving behind the verb (as in the imperative mood). Sentence (27) demonstrates the changes caused by focus-position: if the focus position is filled, the preverb is also moving behind.

Studying the complementizer gives a new approach to differentiate the subjunctive mood and the imperative mood: by the semantic arguments we can securely diagnose that the deletion of *hogy* is only possible in imperative clauses (19) and (22), while deleting the complementizer in subjunctive clauses (24), (25), (28) would result in ungrammatical sentences. The conjunction is also optional in sentences (26) and (27), but this is caused by the rules of the reported speech in Hungarian.

Accordingly, we are able to distinguish the two moods, but this is not comforting enough. It is difficult to acknowledge the imperative in subordinate clauses and it does not harmonize with the Indo-European tendencies. Although the English, French subjunctive and the German Konjunktiv are used to give third person commands.

In most Hungarian grammars three grammatical moods are differentiated: the indicative, the conditional and the imperative. Sometimes a further syntactically motivated distinction is made stating that the imperative comprises two morphologically identical moods: the imperative and the subjunctive proper.

Several linguists realized that this is not tenable and suggested alternative distribution and denomination: “indirect imperative” for assertives followed by inverse preverb position, or calling the form generally “subjunctive” and distinguishing simple demands (*Menj el!* Leave! / Go away!) as “imperative”. The complex appellation “subjunctive-imperative” is also presented.

This is more than a question of terminology between linguists, since the grammatical phenomena must be understandable for students – both native speakers and foreigners.

There is syntactic evidence to make a distinction between the imperative and the subjunctive mood proper, even if the verb forms are identical.

As a teacher of Hungarian as a foreign language I am highly interested in this topic. Using the subjunctive mood properly is one key skill to B2 level in Hungarian studies. Even so, it does not appear in the practice of teaching Hungarian

as a foreign language, none of the course-books mention the possibility of the subjunctive mood. I find this inappropriate and make the students familiar with the use of the imperative-subjunctive form in subordinate clauses as soon as they learn the form.

The subjunctive-imperative mood is a delicate matter, and there are a lot of syntactic and semantic rules to lighten, but the existence of the subjunctive mood in Hungarian and its correlation with the mood forms in the mentioned languages are obvious. To solve this problem is an urgent necessity, which is meant to be hard but cannot be dilated any longer.

LITERATURE

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