

THE SUBJUNCTIVE IN ENGLISH

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1. The general opinion is that the subjunctive is "one of the most confused and confusing chapters of English grammar" (Zandvoort 1963: 73) and that "there has always been more uncertainty among scholars regarding the nature and definition of mood than about any other of the so-called [verb] properties" (Kennedy 1935: 464). This confusion and uncertainty, in my opinion, was due to the inconsistency and inadequacy of the methods of analysis of the formal-semantic correspondences.

The present analysis is based on texts from the Early New English period, more specifically on some of Beaumont and Fletcher's plays (*Bonduca* — B, *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* — KBP, *A King and No King* — KNK, *The Wild-Goose Chase* — WGC). I have chosen texts from the XVIIth century to discuss the subjunctive for two reasons:

- a. The subjunctive was still in a fairly current use.
 - b. The language of that period is very close to the contemporary English.
2. Formally the so-called "subjunctive" is characterized by lack of the subject-agreement markers, i.e. personal endings.

In the Early New English texts the "subjunctive" cannot be distinguished in all persons. This becomes clear when we compare the verb *to know* in the "subjunctive" with its forms in the Unmarked category, and the forms of the same verb marked with D with its forms marked with D+NON -S.

The Unmarked category

I know
thou knowest
you know
he knows, knoweth
we know
you know
they know

The "subjunctive"

I know
thou know
you know
he know
we know
you know
they know

The Unactual Tense

I knew
thou knewest
you knew

The "subjunctive" + the Unactual Tense

I knew
thou knew
you knew

he knew
we knew
you knew
they knew

he knew
we knew
you knew
they knew

This comparison shows that the "subjunctive" can be distinguished from the "indicative" in the unmarked as to the tense category in:

- a. the 2nd sg., but only when the pronoun *thou* (with the obligatory ending *-est* in the verb) is used,
- b. the 3rd sg.

and in the Unactual Tense only in the 2nd sg. with *thou*.

A few words must be said about the verb *to be*. Beside the suppletive forms (*am, art, are, is*) *be* is used in the Unmarked category, i.e. *be* with personal endings. This is a regular continuation of the Middle English paradigm (cf. Brunner 1948: 86, Wright 1924: 193).

Here are examples:

Look, Lucé, look; the dog's tooth nor the dove's
Are not so white as these; and sweet they *be*,
And whipt about with silk, as you may see. (KBP, I, 2, p. 14)

Now, Fortune, if thou *be'st* not only ill, show me thy better face, ...

(KBP, II, 2, p. 26)

As with other verbs the only persons in the Unmarked category in which we can distinguish the "subjunctive" from the "indicative" of *to be* are the 2nd sg. with *thou*, and the 3rd sg.

In the Unactual Tense the distinction between the "subjunctive" and the "indicative" is made in the 1st and 3rd sg. (*were* vs. *was*) and in the 2nd sg. with *thou* (*were* vs. *wert*).

Thus, formally the "subjunctive" has a limited application. In the persons in which the forms of the "subjunctive" are identical with the unmarked forms we cannot distinguish between the "subjunctive" and the "indicative" mood.

3. So far the meaning of NON -S has been described by various authors in a more or less similar way. Here are some examples of how it has been defined by various authors (O. Jespersen, B. M. Charleston, C. Hockett):

In the old language the subjunctive served in clauses to express various subjective moods, uncertainty, hesitation, diffidence, etc. (Jespersen 1962: 294)

The subjunctive is used with two important functions: with an optative function, i.e. expressing a wish, the fulfilment of which is regarded by the speaker as possible, as uncertain or as doubtful, and with a potential function, i.e. expressing possibility or conceivability. (Charleston 1941: 137)

Modes show differing degrees or kinds of reality, desirability, or contingency of an event: *He is here* (fact), *(If) he were here* or *Were he here* (contrary to fact). (Hockett 1958: 237)

Also F. Mossé, describing the "subjunctive" in the Middle English period, distinguishes eight cases in which it could be used (four in main and four in subordinate clauses). Among others it could be used to express a realizable wish (in the "present tense"), an unrealizable wish (in the "preterit tense"), it could be used when followed by a hypothetical subordinate clause, after verbs of commanding, asking or wishing, with an idea of possibility (Mossé 1952: 98 - 99, 114 - 115).

All these uses have been summarized by R. W. Zandvoort: "If it be asked what the subjunctive in the above instances expresses the answer is threefold:

- [1.] [...] [it] expresses a WISH; in this sense it may be called an OPTATIVE.
- [2.] [...] [it] expresses POSSIBILITY; in this sense it may be called a POTENTIAL.
- [3.] [...] [it] expresses UNREALITY; in this sense it may be called an IRREALIS [...]" (Zandvoort 1965: 88)

ad [1.] Examples given for the OPTATIVE are:

Miss Dorothy L. Sayers has passed to us your letter of June 22nd and has asked us to thank you for your suggestion that she come over to Holland to lecture next Autumn or Winter.

The men had said that he must have been delayed, and had suggested that she wait. Joanna had insisted that he come. (Zandvoort 1965: 86 - 87).

I do not agree that it is the "subjunctive" here that expresses wish. It is the verbs expressing wish (*wish, suggest, insist*) that convey that meaning in these and all other sentences of a similar kind.

ad [2.] Zandvoort's examples are:

- a. So long as a volume hold together, I am not much troubled as to its outer appearance.

The inventor may, if he live in London, or visit that city, search the files of the Patent Office.

- b. Though everyone desert you, I will not. (Zandvoort 1965: 87)

Zandvoort explains that in the first two sentences the subjunctive expresses 'open' condition ("says nothing as to whether the condition is, or is not likely to be fulfilled". (Zandvoort 1965: 87 note 2)) and the third sentence expresses concession. But concession and condition in these sentences are expressed by such phrases as "so long as", "if", and "though", and not by the verb form itself, and that is why we cannot speak of concession and condition as expressed by the verb in subjunctive form.

ad [3.] This is a case of formal and semantic combination of two categories D and NON -S.

Now I shall examine some examples from Beaumont and Fletcher's texts and try to find a single basic meaning signalled by NON -S.

... but if any thing *fall* out of order, the gentlemen must pardon us. (KBP, II, 4, p. 30)

Mar. [*Kneels.*] Sir, that I have ever loved you, my sword hath spoken for me; that I do, if it be doubted, I dare call an oath, a great one, to my witness; (KNK, I, 1, p. 162)

If he *continue* thus but two days more, a tailor may beat him... (KNK, IV, 2, p. 209)

Pray have a care of her, for fear she *fall* into a relapse. (WGC, IV, 3, p. 374)

If she *mean* what she writes, as it may be probable, ... (B, III, 2, p. 425)

I suggest — and here I agree to some extent with R. W. Zandvoort, who defines the subjunctive as a verbal category denoting non-fact (=not 'contrary to fact' but 'what is not a fact' (Zandvoort 1965: 342)) — that the meaning signalled by NON -S is that the speaker does not say anything about the possibility of the occurrence of the event named in the subordinate clause, but mentions it only provisionally. I do not want the words "the speaker does not say anything..." to be understood that the speaker does not want to, or cannot, or need not say anything about the possibility of occurrence. He just *does not say* anything about it. It is, then, an attitude of noncommitment to the event on the part of the speaker. If we compare the sentences:

... but if any thing *fall* out of order, the gentlemen must pardon us [=1]

Mar. [*Kneels.*] Sir, that I have ever loved you, my sword hath spoken for me; that I do, if it be doubted I dare call an oath, a great one, to my witness; [=2]

we see that the probability of the occurrence of the event in the first sentence is greater than in the second sentence. But what makes us think that the occurrence of the event is more probable or probable at all is our experience. The boy saying the first sentence knows that because the play has not been going very smoothly so far and that Ralph is an amateur actor, the probability of "any thing falling out of order" is quite considerable. In the second sentence the possibility that Mardonius' love of the king could be doubted is very little as appears from the context. The king says: "Who can outvalue thee? [...]. Thy love is not rewarded;" (KNK, I, 1, p. 162). What I am driving at is that realizability is irrelevant to the subjunctive. If it was not I do not think we would find a sentence like "If she mean what she writes, as it may be probable, ..." [=5], where the probability is explicitly stated ("as it may be probable").

As to the time reference of such sentences M. Joos says: "...each such sentence is *provisional*, looking ahead into an indeterminate future and making provision for a possible 'case' by *positing* the case..." (Joos 1964: 37). If this may be true for, for example, "Pray have a care of her, for fear she fall into

a relapse." [=4] nothing of that kind can be said about "If he continue thus but two days more, a tailor may beat him..." [=3] (very determinate future) or "If she mean what she writes, as it may be probable, ..." [=5] (present or even past time reference).

This point has been stressed by R. L. Allen:

The fact that the verb *go* in each of the following three sentences lacks time-orientation (and is therefore the base form of the verb rather than some special form called the "subjunctive") is shown by the fact that a change of time-reference in the main verb does not produce any change in the verb in the included clause:

[28] (a) I *insisted yesterday* that you *go*.

(b) I *still insist* that you *go*.

(c) *Tomorrow* I *will insist* again that you *go*.

(Allen 1966: 162)

Allen is right as regards the lack of time-orientation of such forms but his examples are wrong, since we cannot distinguish the indicative *you go* from the subjunctive *you go*.

Again I stress the point that all meanings such as realizability, possibility, future, present, etc., as regards the "subjunctive", depend on the context which refers to reality, and on our experience. The verb form itself does not convey any of these meanings.

I suggest to call this category the NON-ASSERTIVE MOOD, since, in fact, the speaker does not assert anything. Non-assertion here is to be understood as the negation of OED definition of *assertion*: "A positive statement, a declaration, an averment".

4. The next point I should like to discuss is a more general one: the relation of the Non-assertive Mood to the modal verbs.

The modal verbs have usually been described separately from other verb categories but they have been treated as a part of the system of verb. F. R. Palmer says:

There is broad agreement among the writers mentioned [Joos, Diver, Twaddell, Crystall], except Diver concerning the outline of the formal pattern of the verb. There are, that is to say, two independent systems, a primary system involving tense forms and the primary auxiliaries BE, HAVE (plus DO under certain storable conditions), and a secondary or modal system involving the modals WILL, SHALL, CAN, MAY, MUST, OUGHT, DARE and NEED. (Palmer 1967: 179)

I do not see why W. Diver should be treated as an exception in this respect, since he describes the 'chronological' and 'modal' systems separately but as two parts of one complete system of verb. M. Joos treats the two systems in a similar way. He includes the 'Relative-Factual' opposition into the general pattern of oppositions of the verb but discusses the verbs of the Relative Assertion category separately, arranging them into a separate system.

There seems to be no other way of including the modal verbs into the verb system more closely than it has been done by Joos and Diver. But should they be included into the verb system at all? Is it possible to do so without straining the interpretation? F. R. Palmer seems to suggest that this cannot be done when he says: "The two systems are, however, not alike. The modal system simply involves the eight modals, which form a system in that they do not co-occur but are mutually substitutable" (Palmer 1967: 179).

M. Joos and W. Diver try to find a common meaning the modal verbs signal and on the basis of which these verbs could be included into the verb system. M. Joos finds this common meaning to be the *relativity of assertion* which he describes in the following way:

Relative Assertion (WILL, etc.): There is no such truth-value with respect to occurrence of the event; what is asserted is instead a specific *relation* between that event and the factual world, a set of *terms of admission* for allowing it real-world status (Joos 1964: 149).

W. Diver says that "the Modal System contains a number of internal oppositions that share the distinctive meaning 'hypothetical'" (Diver 1964: 322). Both Joos and Diver oppose the modal system to the indicative system (Joos' *Factual Assertion*, Diver's *Indicative system*). But what is the nature of this opposition? If the modal verbs belong to the modal system then all the other verbs belong to the indicative system. That means that all verbs are divided into modal and indicative verbs. In that case the modal verbs should be treated as a group of lexical items with formal characteristics different from the characteristics of the 'indicative' verbs (!?), and described separately.

That the modal verbs should be treated as purely lexical items is supported by the fact that no single meaning, 'hypothetical' or other, can be established for them, as has been pointed out by F. R. Palmer:

Lexical items even less appear to have consistent meaning, yet I can see no more reason for assuming that WILL has a single meaning than that FAIR has a single meaning and this seems to be refuted by a *fair trial* (just), *fair weather* (fine), *fair hair* (light coloured), *in fair condition* (not very good), and *fair of face* (handsome). (Palmer 1967: 183, cf. also Palmer 1965: 105 - 139).

I totally agree with Palmer, if I understand him rightly, that the modal verbs should be treated as lexical items whose meanings and grammar should be described separately (cf. Jespersen 1931: 4 - 5).

From what has been said so far it is obvious that the modal verbs cannot be included into the grammatical category of mood together with the Non-assertive Mood. This is also Ilyish's opinion:

It should be noted at once that there are other ways of indicating the reality or possibility of an action, besides the verbal category of mood, viz. modal verbs (*may*, *can*, *must*, etc.), and modal words (*perhaps*, *probably*, etc.), which do not concern

us here. All these phenomena fall under the very wide notion of modality, which is not confined to grammar but includes some parts of lexicology and of phonetics (intonation) as well. (Ilyish 1965: 105).

5. There is one more evidence that the nature of the modal verbs is different from the nature of the grammatical categories of verb. When we compare all the marked categories (Tense, Aspect, Phase, Mood) with the Unmarked category we see that the latter may have the meanings of all the marked categories (cf. Szwedek 1970). If we wanted to find the same with regard to the modal verbs as a grammatical category we would fail. The Unmarked category cannot express modality which the modal verbs are supposed to express. For example:

'if he goes' = 'if he go'

'he goes' ≠ 'he may go' (in any context)

6. To sum up:

a. The Non-assertive Mood, signalled by the lack of syntagmatic subject-agreement marker (NON-S), is a formally limited category. It appears only in subordinate clauses and only in the persons in which it can be distinguished from the Unmarked category.

b. The meaning of the Non-assertive Mood is that the speaker does not say anything about the possibility of the occurrence of the event specified by the verb, but mentions it only provisionally.

c. The modal verbs cannot be treated together with the Non-assertive Mood. Together with other words (*perhaps*, etc.) and features (intonation) they fall under the wide notion of modality.

d. As with the other grammatical categories of verb (Unactual Tense, Temporary Aspect, Perfect Phase) the meaning of the Non-assertive Mood can be expressed by the Unmarked category.

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