

The Subjunctive

The subjunctive is an important difference between Spanish and English and particular care must be taken in order to use it correctly. It is generally described as a "mood" and not a tense. This does not necessarily help the learner. However, this helps us to understand that in certain instances the use of the subjunctive gives some idea as to the feelings of the speaker regarding a subject. Nevertheless, there are many instances where the subjunctive must be used and you have to learn all of these. As the subjunctive has practically disappeared from English we cannot rely on our own intuition as to when the subjunctive may be used. Basically, you have to sit down and learn it.

Formation of the Subjunctive

Take the first person singular of the present tense, remove the "o" and add the appropriate endings depending on whether it is an **-ar** verb or an **-er/-ir** verb. That's all there is to it.

-ar	-er	-ir
compre	beba	reciba
compres	bebas	recibas
compre	beba	reciba
compremos	bebamos	recibamos
compréis	bebáis	recibáis
compren	beban	reciban

The above verbs are in the present subjunctive. The first thing to notice about them is the endings. It is almost as if the verbs in the present subjunctive have a sudden identity crisis: **-ar** verbs use the endings of the **-er** verbs and **-er** and **-ir** verbs use the endings of **-ar** verbs.

Formation exercise

Work out the "I" form of the present subjunctive for these verbs. Firstly work out the first person of the present tense and then work out the subjunctive.

Infinitive	First person of the present tense	First person of the present subjunctive
abrir		
bailar		
caer		
salir		
leer		
poder		
traer		
aparecer		
volver		

NB Note that verbs such as llegar add a "u" to keep the sound, e.g. **llegue**.

Of course, as you would expect, some verbs are beyond all help and are completely irregular. Here are some of the most frequent ones:

ir	voy	vaya
saber	sé	sepa
estar	estoy	esté
dar	doy	dé
ser	soy	sea
haber	he	haya

Use of the subjunctive

After "cuando" (or similar expressions) when referring to the future or possibility

Look at these sentences and translate them into English:

Quando **tenga** 17 años voy a aprender a conducir.
Quando **vuelva** dile que quiero hablar con él en seguida.
Quando **sea** mayor quiero ser periodista.

You will have noticed that in the English sentences "*when*" is followed by a normal present tense. This is not the case in the Spanish sentences. Instead of the normal present tense forms, (**tengo, vuelve, soy**) there are three unfamiliar forms: **tenga, vuelva, sea**. This form of the verb is the subjunctive.

So, how do you use the subjunctive ? You cannot simply use it every time you come across **cuando**. Look at these sentences for example:

Cuando era pequeña me gustaba coleccionar sellos.
Cuando hace buen tiempo vamos a la piscina todos los días.
Cuando cumplí los 16 años me regalaron una moto.

The difference between these sentences and the subjunctive sentences is that the ones immediately above do not use the present subjunctive and they refer to events that do happen on a regular basis or that did happen or have happened.

When I was small I liked ...
When the weather is good we go ...
When I reached the age of 16 they gave me ...

So, the sentences that do use the present subjunctive refer to events that will happen or that have not yet happened.

NB. "**Hasta que**" meaning "**until**" works in exactly the same way as "cuando".

Exercise

Complete the following sentences with the correct part of the present subjunctive.

1. Podremos hacerlo cuando (hacer) sol.
2. Podremos hacerlo cuando (volver) mi padre.
3. Podremos hacerlo cuando (venir) mis amigos.
4. Cuando (estar) en Alemania , no dejes de escribirnos.
5. Cuando (detenerse) el autocar, voy a bajar.
6. No podré dormir hasta que mis padres (llegar)..... .
7. No puedo hacer nada hasta que tú (salir) de aquí.
8. Cuando (cumplir) los 18 años, puedes hacer lo que quieras.
9. Cuando (descubrir) lo que has hecho van a estar furiosos contigo.
10. Cuando (aparecer) tu hermano, dile que me gustaría hablar con él.

The subjunctive after verbs of wanting and requesting

Can you see what these sentences have in common ?

¿ Quieres que yo te lave esto ?
Quiero que usted me devuelva mi dinero.
Quiere que me ayudes

You probably saw that they are all about wanting other people to do things. This is a useful way of asking people whether they want things done and of getting people to do things without being too blunt.

Now look at these examples and say what happens to the second verb in each sentence:

Quiero que usted repare esto.
I want you to repara this.
Quiero que tú veas la ciudad.
I want you to see the town.
Quiero que limpies tus zapatos.
I want you to clean your shoes.
Queremos que hables español.
We want you to speak Spanish.

As you can see, each of the second verbs has **que** in front and is in the **present subjunctive**.

Exercise 1

Express your wishes by changing these statements of what a friend has not done into statements of what you wish your friend would do. Write down the new statements, for example:

No has visitado Sitges.	<i>Quiero que visites Sitges.</i>
No has visto la catedral.	<i>Quiero que veas la catedral.</i>

1. No has hablado español.
2. No has visitado mi país.
3. No has comido turrón.
4. No has subido a la cumbre.
5. No has visto los cuadros.
6. No has escrito a tus padres.
7. No has bebido horchata.

Exercise 2

Show that you can express wishes about other people by changing these statements of what people must do into statements of what you wish they would do. Write down the new statements, for example:

Creo que él tiene que lavar el coche.
Quiero que él lave el coche.

Nos parece que el tendero tiene que cambiar la camiseta.
Queremos que el tendero cambie la camiseta.

1. Me parece que él tiene que hacer sus excusas.
2. Creo que usted tiene que devolver mi dinero.
3. Nos parece que nuestro profesor tiene que hablar más despacio.
4. Creemos que los chicos tienen que encontrarnos a las seis.
5. El opina que nosotros tenemos que hablar español.
6. El cree que yo tengo que escribirle primero.
7. Ellos creen que nosotros tenemos que contestar cuanto antes.
8. A ti te parece que yo tengo que volver antes de medianoche.

The following expressions of good wishes are really the second halves of longer sentences. Can you guess what the longer sentences were ?

¡ Que lo pases bien !

Have a good time

¡ Que te diviertas !

Enjoy yourself !

The original sentences were:

Quiero que lo pases bien.

Quiero que te diviertas.

This manner of giving good wishes is extremely common in Spanish.

Exercise - Now you can write what these sentences mean, and what the original sentences were:

1. ¡ Que aproveches tu estancia en España !
2. ¡ Que tengas buena suerte !
3. ¡ Que todo te vaya bien !
4. ¡ Que tengas buen viaje !
5. ¡ Que nos veamos el año que viene !
6. ¡ Que Dios nos ayude !

