

The subjunctive: theory and practice

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1 Introduction

In grammar books and textbooks one can find long lists of situations in which the subjunctive is used. For example, in [Graziano] we find the headings (1) “after impersonal expressions”, (2) “after verbs of volition”, (3) “after verbs of emotion”, (4) “after verbs of doubt and denial”, and (5) “after conjunctions”, although in this last case he really means “after certain conjunctions”. In the textbook *Parla e Scrivi* by E. Janfrancesco there are ten categories of main clause verbs followed by the subjunctive in the subordinate clause, with about thirty verbs in all given as examples, plus eight further categories defined in terms of the subordinate clause, with twenty-four different examples. But the list of sample verbs is far from complete, and by no means do all of these categories *necessarily* take the subjunctive. To learn the subjunctive in this way would be a daunting task indeed.

It would also be the wrong approach. The right question is: What do these examples have in common? After all, the subjunctive mood seems to have evolved independently in many completely different languages, and this strongly suggests that some basic principle underlies its use. In the case of Italian, at least, a beautifully simple explanation is given in [Maiden-Robustelli], p. 315:

Beginners sometimes ask “What does the subjunctive mean?” A better question, in fact might be “What does the indicative mean?”, for the subjunctive arguably means rather *less* than the indicative, and this is part of the key to its useage. It may be helpful to view the subjunctive as being similar to the infinitive, which expresses the “dictionary definition”, “what the verb basically means” ...It follows from the above that the subjunctive, rather than the indicative, will tend to occur *in contexts which assert or imply that the verb is not “realized”*.

So we have a very elegant conceptual basis for the subjunctive, which I will formulate as an abstract principle, the *Realization Principle*: The indicative expresses an actual realization of a verb; the subjunctive expresses the hypothetical or abstract possibility of realization. On the hypothetical side we have possibility, probability, desire, belief, hope, expectation, intention, fear, etc. that a verb may be realized; on the abstract side we have verbs that

may or not be realized but are presented in abstract form (e.g. *il fatto che* + subjunctive; see below for examples).

Of course, language is never that simple. To quote again from [M-R]: “There is, then, no point in trying to pretend that there is a magic formula that can predict every occurrence of the subjunctive.” Indeed, any language with a subjunctive also comes with an arbitrary set of conventional rules—violating the Realization Principle *ad hoc*—for using it. The subjunctives of Italian, French and Hungarian all follow the Principle up to a point, but each has its own set of arbitrary rules. This is what can make the subjunctive difficult. The beautiful thing about the Italian subjunctive, however, is that it follows the Realization Principle to a remarkably high degree of accuracy.

Note: Many of the examples used in this chapter are taken from the novels of Gianrico Carofiglio, particularly the first three of his four-volume series on Bari defense lawyer Guido Guerrieri: *Testimone Inconsapevole*, *Ad Occhi Chiusi*, and *Ragionevoli Dubbi*.

2 Basic examples

Let’s begin with a few examples from the textbook [Jafrancesco], p. 180-81:

- Suppongo che tuo fratello arrivi in treno. “I suppose your brother is arriving by train.”
- Temo che tu non mi abbia capito. “I’m afraid you didn’t understand me.”
- Esigo che tu mi dica la verità. “I demand that you tell me the truth.”
- Dubito che Fabrizio si faccia vivo con Paola. “I doubt that Fabrizio would show up with Paola.”
- È piuttosto improbabile che abbiano già venduto quella casa. “It’s rather unlikely that they’ve already sold that house.”
- Pare che Giulia stia meglio. “It seems that Giulia is better.”

Thus: Your brother may or may not be arriving by train, you may or may not have understood me, you may or may not be telling me (or have told me) the truth, Fabrizio may or may not show up with Paola, they may or may not have sold that house, Giulia may or may not be better. What unifies these cases is that the action or state described by the verb is not actually realized, or not known to be realized. In fact, if you look at the thirty or so examples listed in [Janfrancesco], you will see that there is only one category that doesn’t seem to fit with the Realization Principle, exemplified by:

Sono contento che i miei amici si siano divertiti. “I’m happy that my friends had fun.”

At first glance this appears not to fit the model, as the verb in question has definitely been realized. As we’ll see later, however, it fits the Realization Principle in a different way.

An important point sometimes obscured in the grammar texts is that verbs implying belief, doubt, etc. such as *credo che*, *mi chiedo che* do not *necessarily* trigger the subjunctive. Consider the following excerpt from *Ad Occhi Chiusi*:

Quando andai in cancelleria a depositare la costituzione di parte civile ebbi l'impressione che il funzionario addetto alla ricezione degli atti mi guardasse in modo strano.

Andando via mi chiesi se aveva fatto caso a qual era il processo in cui mi ero costituito parte civile e se era per quel motivo che mi aveva guardato in quel modo. Mi chiesi se quel cancelliere avesse rapporti con Scianatico padre, o magari con Dellisanti. Poi mi dissi che forse stavo diventando paranoico e lasciai perdere.

“When I went to the court clerk’s office to deposit the papers establishing the civil action, I had the impression that the employee in charge of receiving documents was looking at me in as strange way.

As I left I wondered if he had paid any attention to the particular trial in which I was to represent the civil action, and if it was for that reason that he had looked at me in that way. I wondered if the clerk had any connections with Scianatico’s father [Scianatico is the accused], or perhaps with Dellisanti. Then I told myself that maybe I was becoming paranoid, and let it go.”

The first paragraph is included just for background. The key point to note is that *mi chiesi* occurs twice, in one case followed by the indicative and in the other by the subjunctive. The choice is surely made by the author and not by any set rule, but I am told that native speakers would make this choice naturally without even thinking about it. (The subjunctive *mi guardassi* is of course triggered by *ebbi l'impressione che*.)

3 If-then statements and the *periodo ipotetico*

Even in its most abstract theoretical form, the Realization Principle does not assert that all unrealized verbs should be put into the subjunctive. For example, any verb referring to the future can be regarded as unrealized, but that’s what the future tense is for (or frequently, the present tense used with a future aspect). I can say *Domani andrò al mare* or *Domani vado al mare*, in which case the verb should be regarded as “realized in the future” and certainly wouldn’t take the subjunctive even in my idealized theoretical framework.

An interesting case is that of conditional if-then statements: If **P**, then **Q**. The main point at issue is whether the hypothetical **P** should be in the subjunctive. The standard textbook formula is known as the “periodo ipotetico”, a nice summary of which can be found in [Jafrancesco], Venticinquesima Lezione (see the “Schema generale”). The summary can in turn be summed up by the Realization Principle: the choice of indicative or subjunctive in **P** is determined by the likelihood of **P** being realized (there is also the concordance of tenses to consider, but that is a separate issue). Moreover this really is a choice more than a formula; it is up to the speaker to decide—which is as it should be if the subjunctive is to have real meaning.

Simple textbook examples are *Se io fossi ricco, ti comprerei una macchina* and *Se stasera mi sento meglio, domani partirò*. The first takes a subjunctive even in English, “If I were rich, I would buy you a new car.” The second “If I feel better this evening, I’ll leave tomorrow” is in the indicative, but of a type that can also be put in the subjunctive. For instance,

in [Janfrancesco] the very first example is *se domani fosse una bella giornata, potremmo andarci insieme*, which could be translated as “if it’s a nice day tomorrow, we could go there [downtown] together”. However, the subjunctive *fosse* puts a little more doubt on the “if”. Not many English speakers would say “if it were a nice day tomorrow”; a more likely colloquial equivalent would be “if it turns out to be nice tomorrow”.

Many variations on this theme are possible: the ordering of the clauses **P** and **Q** can be reversed, the “if” can be left implicit, the conditional can be left implicit, and so on. Here’s an example from one of my favorite Italian translations, *Il Meraviglioso Mago di Oz* (the tin man and the scarecrow are arguing over the relative merits of a heart and a brain):

—Malgrado tutto—disse lo Spaventapasseri—io chiederò il cervello invece del cuore, perché uno sciocco non saprebbe cosa farsene del cuore anche se lo avesse.

“Despite all that,” said the Scarecrow, “I would ask for a brain instead of a heart, because a fool wouldn’t know what to do with a heart even if he had one.” (With apologies to the Tin Man, I won’t record his interesting rebuttal, as it contains no subjunctives.)

An example from Cesare Pavese’s *La Luna e i Falò: Versai un’altra tazza al mio amico e gli chiesi quando tornava a Bubbio*. —*Anche domani,—disse lui,—se potessi*. “I poured another cup [of bootleg whiskey] for my friend and asked him when he was going back to Bubbio. ‘I’d do it tomorrow’, he said, ‘if I could.’” Here I put back the conditional in the translation, because it reads better that way (I think).

At least in conversation, if-then statements that very clearly call for a subjunctive + conditional are sometimes formulated with both clauses in the imperfect indicative. An example from *La Luna e i Falò*: “*Se sapevo suonare come te, non andavo in America*”. “If I could play [a musical instrument] like you, I wouldn’t have gone to America,” or *Se sapessi suonare come te, non sarei andato in America*. In Ammaniti’s *Io non ho Paura* the imperfect indicative version occurs frequently, but this is because it is narrated by a 9-year old boy (and in fact the subjunctive is hardly used at all).

4 Abstract use of the subjunctive

By “abstract” use of the subjunctive I mean that the realization or non-realization of the verb being subjunctified is not the deciding factor, and its use derives instead from the fact that the verb in question is referenced in the abstract, independently of realization. This fits with the infinitive or “dictionary definition” idea in the citation from [Maiden-Robustelli] above.

4.1 Infinitive use

Sometimes this use corresponds exactly to the infinitive in English, as in the following excerpt from Natalia Ginsberg’s *È Stato Così*:

Ho detto a Gemma che togliesse il cappotto alla bambina e la tenesse in cucina perché volevo scrivere una lettera.

“I told Gemma to take off the baby’s coat and keep her in the kitchen, because I wanted to write a letter.” That Gemma did in fact carry out these instructions is assumed although not explicitly stated. A more subjunctive-like English translation would be “I told Gemma that she should take off the baby’s coat...”, although in English as well as Italian this useage would fit better if the sentence began “I advised Gemma”, “I suggested to Gemma”, or (in a rare instance of a true subjunctive in English) “I insisted that Gemma take off the baby’s coat...”. But in the actual quote it is the neutral “I told Gemma”. In any case, although Ginzburg uses the subjunctive in this way throughout the novel, most of the authors I’ve read use it sparingly if at all. Perhaps it is just a matter of taste.

4.2 *Il fatto che*

A particularly clear abstract useage occurs with *il fatto che* + subjunctive, as in the following textbook example from [Maiden-Robustelli]:

Il fatto che lo abbia respinto non significa niente.

“The fact that he rejected it doesn’t mean anything.” Here the verb *respingere* has absolutely, positively been realized, but the subjunctive is used nonetheless because the speaker is not asserting “he rejected it” but rather referring to the abstract “fact that he rejected it”. (The auxiliary, in this case *avere*, receives the actual subjunctive conjugation.) According to [Maiden-Robustelli] the indicative can also be used here “che l’ha respinto” and in fact is more common in informal speech.

The preceeding example notwithstanding, one more commonly finds the abstract subjunctive employed when some non-neutral element such as emotion, uncertainty, etc. (although there are many other possibilities) is involved. Consider for instance this example from *Voci* by Dacia Maraini:

E il fatto che sia stata così brutalmente straziata mi sembra improvvisamente una offesa fatta a me personalmente.

“And the fact that she was so brutally mutilated suddenly seems like an offense against me personally.” The reference is to a murder which has most definitely been realized. One can contrast this with the indicative *La donna è stata brutalmente straziata*, which records the actual occurrence of the event—as opposed to the abstract fact of it here presented in the subjunctive. But at the same time, the clause “she was so brutally mutilated” is decidedly non-neutral.

The example cited in an earlier section—*Sono contento che i miei amici si siano divertiti*—admits a similar explanation. The speaker is not asserting that his or her friends had fun, but rather that “the fact that they had fun” makes him or her happy. The non-neutral element is the happiness of the speaker.

Just as English, “the fact that” is sometimes shortened to simply “that”. An example from *Testimone Inconsapevole*:

Che io facessi il pugilato rimase a lungo un segreto per mia madre.

“That I was boxing long remained a secret from my mother.” The abstract fact of Guido’s boxing is referenced; the non-neutral element is that it was kept a secret.

Use of the subjunctive after impersonal expressions (*bisogna che*, *è importante che*, etc.) also tends to fit this model. Here’s an example from *Tre Atti e Due Tempi*, by Giorgio Faletti:

È normale e scontato che lui sia il primo della lista.

“It is normal and taken for granted that he should be the first on the list.” In the context of the novel it is already an established fact that the “lui” referred to is first on the list. But the sentence quoted is not asserting the realization of the verb *essere*; it is saying “The fact that he is/should be first on the list is normal...” In this instance the subordinate clause is neutral, so we have a purely abstract subjunctive as in the [Maiden-Robustelli] example given above.

4.3 *Certo che, sicuro che, convinto che*

Textbook introductions to the subjunctive often lead the reader to believe that expressions such as *certo che* require the indicative in the following clause. This is not at all the case, as shown by the next three examples from *Testimone Inconsapevole*.

1. Per un attimo fui certo che dicesse: “Ho appena ucciso mia moglie e mia suocera. Sono giù in macchina, nel bagagliaio...Che dobbiamo fare adesso, avvocato?”

“For a moment I was certain that he would say: “I just killed my wife and mother-in-law. They’re down in the car, in the trunk. What should we do now, counselor?”

2. Io però fui subito convinto che fosse il nuovo fidanzato di Sara.

“I however was immediately convinced that he was Sara’s new boyfriend.”

3. Sono sicuro che in tutte le carceri si concentrino per scegliere apposta quella più fredda d’inverno e più calda d’estate.

“I’m sure that in all the jails they make a special point of choosing the one that’s coldest in the winter and hottest in the summer.”

In each case it is clear from the context (or would be if I had provided all the context) that any claims of certainty or conviction are only on the surface. For instance in example 1, a particularly disreputable, scary-looking client has just walked into Guido’s office; in reality, of course, Guido did not think any such thing even for a moment. In the second case Sara is Guido’s ex-wife, and his “conviction” is really an emotional reaction to seeing her with another man. The third example refers to the rooms provided for lawyers at the jail in Bari, and the “I am sure that...” is just sarcasm.

One might think that the use of the subjunctive following *certo che* and similar expressions depends on a following clause that turns out to not be true. This theory holds up in examples 1 and 3, or in Harry Potter’s reaction to a present just received from Hermione (*Il Prigioniero di Azkaban*):¹

¹I highly recommend the Italian translations of the Harry Potter books to anyone learning Italian (and to Italians, for that matter). They’re lots of fun and easy to read.

4. Conoscendo Hermione, era certo che fosse un grosso libro pieno di incantesimi molto difficile: e invece no.

“Knowing Hermione, he was certain that it would be a big book full of difficult incantations: but it wasn’t.”

But consider the following example from *Ragionevoli Dubbi*:

5. Poi, come per un richiamo, mi girai verso l’ingresso dell’aula e vidi Macri. Non so per quale motivo, ma fui certo immediatamente che fosse lui.

“Then, as though I had been called, I turned toward the entrance of the hall and saw Macri. I don’t know why, but I was immediately certain that it was him.” And indeed it was, so the above-mentioned theory breaks down. Nevertheless, the use of the subjunctive is quite natural here and fits with the Realization Principle: “...che fosse lui” is not the statement “it was him” but the (abstract) fact that it was him. In fact even in English one can use a kind of subjunctive in such situations: “I was certain it must be him”; perhaps this is a better translation.²

5 Obligatory subjunctives are redundant

There are certain cases in which the subjunctive appears to be obligatory. Sometimes this makes perfect sense. For example with *come se*, it makes sense to always put the verb(s) to which it applies in the subjunctive, since the very meaning of the phrase “as if”, or “as though”, implies a non-realized verb. Here’s a nice example from *Testimone Inconsapevole*; the context is that Guido has unexpectedly broken through the sullen reserve of his Senegalese client.

Era come se mi fossi lanciato su una porta chiusa per cercare di sfondarla e chi c’era dietro l’avesse aperta, con calma.

“It was as though I had thrown myself against a closed door in an attempt to break it down, and whoever was behind it calmly opened it.” Here the use of the subjunctive *fossi*, *avesse* is straightforward and obvious.

On the other hand, if the subjunctive is obligatory then it is redundant; *it carries no new information whatsoever*. In this instance *come se* by itself expresses the intended meaning. I happen to like the use of the subjunctive here, as a poetic way of reinforcing the hypothetical nature of things, but logically it contributes nothing.

Perhaps the most common examples of this phenomenon occur with verbs of belief, opinion and so on: *credere che*, *pensare che*, *sembrare che*, etc. According to [Maiden-Robustelli], the use of the subjunctive in the following clause is “a rule which must be observed in formal registers of Italian—but is less consistently observed in informal useage”. Typical examples (from [Jafrancesco]) are *Penso che Carlo abbia tre figli*, *Non credo che Paolo sappia il tedesco*, and so on. This useage fits perfectly with the Realization Principle, but if it is *obligatory* then it is redundant. If it were up to me, I would repeal the formal rule

²If I’m not mistaken, in older versions of English one could use a subjunctive directly: “I was certain it be him”.

and make the subjunctive optional here (and everywhere, for that matter). Then one could say *Penso che Carlo ho tre figli*, meaning that I'm pretty darn sure he has three kids, or *Penso che Carlo abbia tre figli* if I'm not so sure—maybe he only has two? In spoken English the latter shading is often achieved with an emphatic tone: I *think* he has three kids [but maybe I'm wrong]. In Italian the subjunctive could provide a more elegant way of achieving the same thing, but by making it obligatory the opportunity is lost.

In some cases the obligatory use of the subjunctive is worse than illogical; it is counterproductive. The most glaring example occurs with the conjunction *prima che*. As far as I know the subjunctive is absolutely obligatory after *prima che*, or at any rate I have yet to see a counterexample. In some cases it fits well with the Realization Principle, for instance in the following simple example from Cesaro Pavese's *La Bella Estate*: *Poi uscì, prima che tornasse Severino*. In this instance the protagonist Ginia is deliberately leaving the house before her brother Severino gets home. So *tornare* has not been realized and moreover there is a hint of uncertainty, in that he might get home at any moment and Ginia wants to avoid him. And yet in many cases requiring the subjunctive after *prima che* makes no sense at all. Consider for instance the following (from Carofiglio):

Aveva cominciato a frequentare lo scantinato poco prima che io lasciassi.

Here *scantinato* (basement) refers to a basement boxing gym that Guido, the narrator, once frequented. The sentence is a simple declaration of fact—"he had begun to frequent the gym shortly before I quit"—and as such there is no conceptual reason to use the subjunctive here; it is simply a convention that contrasts sharply with the preceding example.

But rules are rules, and it turns out that even flying monkeys use the subjunctive. In our final example the king of the winged monkeys in *Il Meraviglioso Mago di Oz* is telling Dorothy the story of how the monkeys became obligated to the Malvagia Strega dell'Ovest:

Questo era molti anni fa, molto prima che Oz calasse dalle nuvole a governare questo paese.

"This was many years ago, long before Oz dropped down from the clouds to govern this land." That Oz fell from the clouds (in a balloon) and governed the land is an established fact in the story. So once again the use of the subjunctive *calasse* is purely conventional.

6 The triple life of *perché*

One curious feature of Italian is its tendency to use the same word with different meanings but in related contexts, or even with opposite meanings. In all languages meaning is driven by context, but usually the context makes the distinction obvious: the bark of a dog or the bark of a tree, to take an English example. In Italian, however, one has words such as *ospite* which can mean either "guest" or "host" (!).³ Another example is *perché*. In English, *why?* is the question, "because" the answer. In French, *pourquoi?* is the question, *parce que* the answer. But in Italian *perché* is *both* why and because.

³Eventually there will be a chapter on vocabulary in which this and other issues will be discussed further.

In fact *perchè* leads not only a double but a triple life, when its incarnation as a conjunction is taken into account, and here again it is used with essentially opposite meanings. When *perché* means “because”, the logic of a sentence **A** perché **B** may be roughly represented as $\mathbf{B} \Rightarrow \mathbf{A}$, as in English. In other words, B implies A or B is the cause of A. But *perché* can also be used with the meaning “so that” or “in order to”, in which case the logic flows in precisely the opposite direction: $\mathbf{A} \Rightarrow \mathbf{B}$. This is appalling from a mathematical viewpoint,⁴ and would be hopelessly confusing even for Italians if there were no alternative mechanism for distinguishing the two cases. The Italian solution is to put the verb of clause **B** in the subjunctive, when the second of the above interpretations is intended. Consider the following example from *Il Cavaliere Inesistente* by Italo Calvino:

...ma tutto pareva calcolato perché ogni cavaliere passasse nell'intervallo tra due nemici, senza che si sfiorassero nemmeno.

“...but everything seemed calculated so that each knight would pass through the gap between two enemies, without so much as brushing against one another.” In the translation one could replace “so that” by “because” and still have a grammatical sentence, but the meaning changes significantly. You get used to this double useage of *perché*, but it’s a bit strange because the intended meaning can be uncertain until you get to the verb conjugation. Life would be simpler if other equivalent conjunctions were used, such as *così che* and *affinché*. In any case, the use of the subjunctive *passasse* fits with the non-realization principle, in the sense that the speaker is referring not to an actual “passing through the gap” but to a potential or abstract occurrence of the event. (The use of the subjunctive *sfiorassero* after *senza che* is straightforward.)

Here’s another example, from Carofiglio’s *Ad Occhi Chiusi*:

Arrivato a quarant’anni avevo conservato l’abitudine di indossare un abito grigio quando andavo in trasferta. Perchè fosse chiaro, dove non mi conoscevano, che ero effettivamente un avvocato.

“At forty I had kept the habit of wearing a gray suit when I went out on business. So that it would be clear, where people didn’t know me, that I was really a lawyer.” Without the subjunctive *fosse* this would read “because it was clear”, changing the meaning completely. For the Italian learner, or at least for this particular Italian learner, it takes a while to get used to this.

7 The same-subject rule

The Same-Subject Rule says that if the principal clause and subordinate clause have the same subject, then the subjunctive cannot be used in the subordinate clause (see for example the textbook *Parla e Scrivi*, p. 181 and p. 191). For example, one can say: *Temevo che diventasse matta* (“I was afraid she was going insane”) but not *Temevo che io diventassi*

⁴In lower level courses, it is ongoing struggle to convince students that if A implies B, it need not follow that B implies A.

matto (“I was afraid I was going insane”). Instead one has to use the infinitive: *Temevo di diventare matto*.

Clearly there is no logical reason for this rule, from the point of view of the ideal subjunctive. Indeed, one could hardly find a sentence more ideally suited to the subjunctive than “I was afraid I was going insane” (when in fact I was not). So the Same-Subject Rule is a purely conventional non-use of the subjunctive. Notice, however, the replacement of the subjunctive by the infinitive. This means that in a sense (compare the quote from [Maiden-Robustelli] at the beginning of the chapter), the *concept* of the subjunctive is still being applied in the same-subject case; the difference is only that it is being implemented with the infinitive directly, as is often done in English. The Same-Subject Rule applies also to various conjunctions, including *prima che*, in the sense that *prima che* gets replaced by *prima di* + infinitive.

8 Can the subjunctive have a tense?

A verb that is not realized at all can hardly be assigned a past, present, or future. It follows that the ideal subjunctive cannot have a tense, at least not in the same way that the indicative does. As pointed out in [Maiden-Robustelli], the so-called present subjunctive really ought to be called the “non-past” subjunctive. Consider for instance the following from *Tre Tempi e due Atti*, by Giorgio Faletti. The story is narrated in the first person, and the pronoun “io” is omitted because it is clear from the context: *È inutile che lo tiri fuori e lo apra. So quello che ci troverei*. Possible translations of the first sentence, using different English approximations to the subjunctive, include: “It would be pointless for me to pull it out and [to] open it” (using the infinitive) or “There is no point in my pulling it out and opening it” (gerund). The actions in question are not realized, hence the use of the subjunctive, and if they were to be realized they would be realized in the future—but in the immediate future, hence the “non-past” subjunctive.

On the other hand, in marked contrast with the imperfect indicative, the imperfect subjunctive can effectively express any tense—past, present or future—or no tense at all. Indeed the name “imperfect subjunctive” is ill-chosen because it suggests an analogy with the imperfect indicative where none exists. For example, it’s very common in the Periodo Ipotetico form—(“If” clause in imperfect subjunctive) + (“then” clause in present conditional)—that the subjunctive clause refers to a possible future event. The imperfect subjunctive is also very common with requests using the conditional of *volere*. Here’s an example from *Ragionevoli Dubbi*; Guido is cross-examining a witness:

Adesso vorrei che ci raccontasse brevemente come si svolse la ricognizione fotografica che lei ha fatto in questura, il giorno dopo la rapina.

“Now I would like you to tell us briefly how the identification of the photographs, which you did at police headquarters the day after the robbery, was carried out.” Note that in English, the infinitive is playing the role of the subjunctive.

The imperfect subjunctive is also very common in narration of past events, and indeed under suitable conditions the imperfect form is required by the rules of concordance. But

often there is nothing particularly “imperfect” about it, for instance in an earlier example *Poi uscì, prima che tornasse Severino*, “Then I left, before Severino returned”. (Here it must be said that even the imperfect indicative often fails to live up to its name, but that’s a subject for another chapter.) In any case, the moral of the story is that whatever name one gives to the imperfect subjunctive, it cannot be classified as a past, present or future tense of the subjunctive mood.

As we’ve seen, however, in many applications of the subjunctive the verb in question has in fact been realized but some non-neutral element is attached to it, or there is some doubt about its realization, and so on. In these cases it makes perfect sense to use the past subjunctive, i.e. present subjunctive auxiliary + past participle, or when appropriate the *trapassato* form, i.e. imperfect subjunctive auxiliary + past participle. The earlier example *Il fatto che lo abbia respinto non significa niente* is of this type. Other textbook examples (from [Jafrancesco]) are *Mi sembra che Paul abbia fatto la scelta migliore*, *È probabile che abbia avuto una buona offerta di lavoro*, *Vorrei che tu mi avessi trattato da amico* (“I wish that you had treated me as a friend”).

9 Further examples

There are many further uses of the subjunctive; I’ll list a few here.

From *Testimone Inconsapevole*: *Era meno affollato di quanto pensassi...* “It was less crowded than I thought it would be.”

This use with *di quanto* and similar expressions can be regarded as fitting with the Realization Principle, although in a somewhat indirect manner. The unrealized verb here is the implicit *essere* in the second clause, not *pensare*, but the subjunctive conjugation is shifted to *pensare* in much the same way as happens with auxiliary verbs.

Another nice use of the subjunctive is in connection with indeterminates such as *chiunque*, *qualunque*, *qualsiasi cosa* etc. Four examples:

1. From *Voci* by Dacia Maraini: *Ha sempre chiamato tutti i giorni, in qualsiasi posto si trovasse*. “He always called every day, wherever he might be.”

2. From *Testimone Inconsapevole*: *Chiunque ti abbia fatto la domanda, chiedi che venga ripetuta*. “Whoever may have asked you the question, ask that it be repeated.”

Note also that the subjunctive *venga* can be translated by a rare example of a true subjunctive conjugation in English: “be” in place of “is”.

3. From *Tre Atti e Due Tempi* (the story is narrated in the present tense): *Rosa capisce che, qualunque sia, è un problema che devo risolvere da solo*. “Rosa understands that whatever it may be, it is a problem I have to solve on my own.”

4. From *Ad Occhi Chiusi*: *Insomma, comunque sia, avevo frigo e dispensa piena*. “In short, for whatever reason, I had a full refrigerator and pantry.” A more literal translation of *comunque sia* would include an English subjunctive: “however it may be”.

10 The subjunctive in English

Italians who know English well are often surprised to learn that it has a subjunctive. For that matter, most native English speakers are blissfully unaware of the fact. This is not surprising, given that only a pitiful, vestigial remnant of the subjunctive survives in the modern language. Some examples:

1. “They demand that he leave the room.” Here “leave” is a subjunctive replacement for “leaves”. But this is a sad state of affairs indeed, because it only works in the third person singular: “they demand that you leave”, “they demand that we leave”, and so on; in every other case the supposed subjunctive conjugation is the same as the indicative, which in turn is the same as the short-form infinitive “(to) leave”. Furthermore even the third person singular case has a very limited scope, namely the “mandative” useage just given: “We insist that she take the exam”, etc.

2. “If I were rich, I would make everyone learn Italian.” This useage—the subjunctive “were” in place of “was” corresponds exactly to the *Periodo Ipotetico*. But again it is little more than a vestigial remnant of some earlier evolutionary stage, rather like toenails. It applies only to the verb “to be”, and even then, on closer examination, is a disappointment: “if we were rich”, “if they were rich”, “if you were rich”; in 4 out of 6 person/numbers the so-called “subjunctive” is the same as the indicative.

3. One can find a few other scattered cases involving the verb “to be”: “Let there be light”, for instance. And of course we mathematicians often state hypotheses in the form “let f be a differentiable function”.

Thus to the question “Does English have a subjunctive?” I tend to respond “not really”, because its scope is so limited that it’s hardly worth having it at all. It’s true that in many cases English achieves a subjunctive-like effect by resorting to a variety of other schemes: infinitives, would/should/must, and so on, as can be seen from the translations above. But this is not at all the same as having a true subjunctive *conjugation*.

11 Is the subjunctive necessary?

Let me be clear: I’m a big fan of the Italian subjunctive; I love it. But is it necessary?

A strong case can be made against it. One could cite the fact English has very few subjunctive conjugations (see above), and yet no one could seriously argue that as a result the language is somehow deficient. At least that is my view, but as it is almost impossible to be objective about one’s native language, it is more convincing to argue from the internal logic of Italian itself. For one thing, as I’ve already noted, in cases where the subjunctive is obligatory, for example after *prima che* or *come se*, it is redundant. More importantly, even Italian lacks a subjunctive conjugation in several important situations: (1) in the first person plural present; (2) in the second person singular present of -are verbs; and (3) when the same-subject rule prohibits it. Are Italians in any way handicapped by this state of affairs? I doubt it. But if you can live happily without the subjunctive in these cases, why not do away with it altogether?

I ask this only as *L'Avvocato del Diavolo*. I love the Italian subjunctive because it has such an elegant conceptual basis—the Realization Principle—and because it provides a systematic, largely consistent way of expressing things that in English require a hodge-podge of constructions: infinitives, “would”, “should”, “must” etc. Even the logically redundant cases serve an aesthetic purpose; indeed this is true also in English. The sentence “If I were king, I would make everyone learn Italian” just doesn’t have the same ring to it in the form “If I was king,...”. Likewise “Se fossi io il re...” adds a poetic emphasis that would be missing in “Se ero il re” (if the latter were grammatically permissible). But logically there is no difference whatsoever between the two forms, and I think that it is for precisely this reason that the subjunctive has atrophied in English and is, alas, on the decline in Italian as well.

There’s not much point in resisting the inexorable change of a language, although every generation tries. You might as well try to stop the tide from coming in, as all languages change all the time (see [Bauer-Trudgill]). And yet...if only it *were* possible to save the Italian subjunctive...true believers can help defend it against the infidels by sending a check or money order to:

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Direttore Generale
Ministero della Difesa del Congiuntivo
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