THE SUBJUNCTIVE MOOD

Pattern: The subjunctive mood is used when what is said is contrary to reality. If a phrase expresses uncertainty, desire, opinion, or emotional reaction, it needs to be in the subjunctive mood.

**Indicative vs. subjunctive**
Most of what people say is done in the indicative mood. The indicative mood is used to make statements about reality. The subjunctive mood is used to make statements contrary to the indicative mood. Take the following two sentences as an example:

- *Juan tiene una bicicleta roja.*
  - Juan has a red bike.
- *Yo no creo que Miguel tenga una bicicleta.*
  - I don't believe that Miguel has a bike.

The first sentence uses the verb form *tiene* (present tense indicative form of *tener*), while the second uses *tenga* (present tense subjunctive form of *tener*). This is because the second sentence contradicts reality and expresses doubt by saying *yo no creo...* (I don't believe...).

**When to use the subjunctive mood**
Knowing when to use the subjunctive mood can seem complicated to many English speakers. This is mostly because the subjunctive mood is not used the same in English as it is in Spanish. The subjunctive mood is also used much less frequently in English than Spanish.

Adding to the confusion is the fact that a sentence can be correct in either the indicative mood or subjunctive mood. Just remember that the subjunctive mood must be used if the sentence is meant to express uncertainty, desire, opinion, or emotional reaction.

Here is an example of how a subjunctive mood can change the meaning of a sentence:

- *Yo quiero comprar la bicicleta aunque no funciona.*
  - I want to buy the bike even though it does not work.
- *Yo quiero comprar la bicicleta aunque no funcione.*
  - I want to buy the bike even if it does not work.

The difference in meaning in these two sentences is slight, but important. In the first sentence, we know that the bike does not work, so the indicative mood is used (*funciona*). In the second sentence, we do not know if the bike works or not, so we use the subjunctive mood (*funcione*). The change of one letter on the verb changes the whole sentence.

**Main clauses and subordinate clauses**
Consider the following two sentences:

- *Es cierto que ella viene a mi casa.*
  - It is certain that she is coming to my house.
- *Es dudoso que ella venga a mi casa.*
  - It is doubtful that she is coming to my house.
Both of these sentences have a main clause and a subordinate clause.

In the first sentence, the main clause is *es cierto que*. The subordinate clause that follows it does not use the subjunctive mood because the main clause clearly says that the action is not in doubt.

In the second example, the main clause is *es dudoso que*. The subordinate clause that follows it **must use the subjunctive mood** because the main clause clearly says that the action is in doubt.

There are many main clauses that will not trigger use of the subjunctive mood. On the other hand, there are many main clauses that will trigger the use of the subjunctive mood. Just remember that all of them express uncertainty, desire, opinion, or emotional reaction.

Here are some common examples:

**Example clauses that require subjunctive mood**

- *dudar que* to doubt that (uncertain)
- *es bueno que* it is good that (opinion)
- *es difícil que* it is difficult that (uncertain)
- *es importante que* it is important that (opinion)
- *estar contento que* to be happy that (emotional reaction)
- *querer que* to want that (desire)
- *no creer que* to not believe that (uncertain)
- *ojalá que* let us hope that (desire) [ojalá comes from an Arabic phrase meaning “God willing”]

**Clauses that do not require subjunctive mood**

- *creer que* to believe that (certain)
- *no dudar que* to not doubt that (certain)
- *es obvio que* it is obvious that (certain)
- *es evidente que* it is evident that (certain)

Many main clauses in Spanish use the word *que*. It is important to remember that not all phrases with the word *que* require the subjunctive mood. In fact, some subjunctive phrases do not have the word *que* in them. In many of these cases, the meaning of the phrase will change if the subjunctive is used. For example:

- *Comeremos cuando llegue Papá.* We will eat when Dad arrives.
- *Comemos cuando llega Papá.* We (always) eat when Dad arrives.

In the first case, we don't know when (or even if) Dad will arrive. That is why the subjunctive verb *llegue* is used. In the second case, the family habitually eats when Dad arrives. The difference is that the second sentence is a statement of fact because it expresses something that always happens (Dad comes home and we always wait for him). The first sentence expresses an uncertain time frame for Dad's arrival.
A word about infinitives and subordinate clauses

One of the most common mistakes people make when evaluating a sentence for subjunctive mood is that they attempt to translate word-for-word from English to Spanish. This is problematic because English uses infinitives in many places where Spanish requires the use of the subjunctive. Consider the following example:

I want you to go to the store. Quiero que vayas a la tienda.

The Spanish sentence literally means “I want that you go to the store.” It is incorrect to say quiero tú ir a la tienda. This is a common mistake of English speakers learning Spanish. To avoid this mistake, remember that subordinate clauses in Spanish do not use infinitive verbs unless the same person is the subject of both verbs, like this:

I want to go to the store. Quiero ir a la tienda.