

French 203, Fiche 1

The Context in which the Subjunctive is Used

To understand the French subjunctive, it is important to learn 1) how to conjugate verbs in the subjunctive and 2) when to use it. As with any verb form, learning the conjugations requires memorization. It is, however, a simple pattern, and there are only a few irregular forms to learn. (Conjugation of the subjunctive is covered in a separate worksheet.) The use of the subjunctive is a more complex matter, and the following basic concepts are important.

The subjunctive is a verbal “mood.” It is not a tense. (The tense of a verb indicates the temporal aspect of an action: e.g., past, future, present.) Verbal “moods” tell the speaker’s **attitude** toward the action. Other examples of verbal “moods” are the imperative (for commands), the conditional and the indicative. The most frequently used mood is the indicative. When a speaker uses the indicative, she affirms the truth of the action being described. All the verbs in the following French sentences are in the indicative mood:

“J’aime le riz.” (I like rice.)

“Deux plus deux font dix-sept et demi.” (Two plus two is seventeen-and-a-half.)

“Tout le monde en français a des A.” (Everyone in French gets an “A”.)

Note that at least two of these statements are manifestly false. However, the verbs are in the indicative. Why is this so? One reason is that the sentence presents the statement as if it were a fact, whether it is or not: the speaker is not casting doubt upon what is said. More to the point, however, the **sentence structure** doesn't allow the subjunctive: each is a simple sentence, with only one clause. In French, the subjunctive usually occurs in complex sentences, with two clauses (a clause consists of a subject and a verb): there is a main clause linked to a dependent clause by the conjunction **que**.

The subjunctive is used in four main contexts in French, three of which are presented in chapter 6:

- in impersonal expressions of **judgement or necessity**
- in phrases of **will** which express **a desire, a recommendation, a preference**
- in phrases which express **emotions**
- in phrases which express **doubt or opinion**

(The subjunctive is also required after certain conjunctions, presented in chapter 7.)

When studying these different contexts for the subjunctive, remember that just because a sentence seems to express opinion, emotion, or a recommendation, it does not necessarily mean that the subjunctive is used. These notions only operate within the specific grammatical context presented above: the subjunctive is used when the sentence’s main clause reflects desire, emotion, judgment, or doubt about the statement in the dependent clause. Consider the following statements:

“La guerre est stupide.”

“Ce vin est mauvais.”

“Je me sens très heureux.”

“Tu dois partir.”

These sentences can be said to express opinions (1 & 2), emotion (3), and necessity (4), but the verbs are in the indicative, not the subjunctive, because these are all simple sentences: that is, there is only one clause, there is no dependent clause. By contrast, the following sentences all demonstrate the grammatical context for the subjunctive (the underlined verb is in the subjunctive):

“Il est temps **que** cette guerre finisse.”

“Je suis heureux **que** tu ailles en France.”

“Il faut **que** tu étudies.”

“Je doute **qu**’elle vienne.”

SUMMARY. The subjunctive will normally occur only in a complex sentence of the following type:

SUBJECT₁ + VERB_{INDICATIVE} + **que** + [SUBJECT₂ + VERB_{SUBJUNCTIVE}.]

The nature of the statement in the main clause determines whether or not the subjunctive will be used in the dependent clause: it gives the red light or the green light for the subjunctive. Chapters 6-7 present the kinds of statements in a main clause which require the use of the subjunctive.