

## WARE'S LANGUAGE NOTES

### When it's all in the mind

This is the first of probably several articles involving the dreaded Subjunctive, so those of a nervous disposition should turn the page. Though it isn't really as frightening as all that. To begin with, it is not true that it doesn't exist in English. It hangs on in odd uses of should, may and might: "Although he may be a nice boy he's still not marrying my daughter." "How nice that you should have come!" "I insist that he come and see me" (instead of comes). But it is true that it is very rare in our own language, but quite popular in French, despite French people often denying it.

It is nearly always formed from the "ils" form of the present tense. Do you remember the Ware rule about verbs. If one person is doing it it sounds the same whoever it is, and if more than one is, then it sounds heavier, more ponderous, to reflect their weight. So you get "Je prends" (prong) but "Ils prennent" (prenn). When you say something in the subjunctive you are being ponderous – just look at the examples in English above!

So what you do is take the "ils" form of the present tense and make an ER verb out of it. Je prenne, tu prennes etc. Of course if you do this to an ER verb, you get exactly the same result as the ordinary present, which I think is why French speakers don't even know they are doing it much of the time. To make the Nous and Vous forms different, there is an -i- added before the -ons or -ez. In a lot of verbs this looks like the Imperfect endings (-ions, -iez) so over time these imperfect forms have been adopted for almost all verbs, however irregular. So rather like the shoulds and mays in English, French speakers often assume that they are using the present or imperfect, not the subjunctive at all! There are still a very few stubborn awkward verbs – être (sois/soyons), avoir (aie/ayons) savoir (sache/sachions) vouloir (veuille.veuillons) pouvoir (puisse/puissions), faire (fasse/fassions) and the like – that have their own shape for Nous and Vous.

So what do you use it for?

A lot of what we say is simply telling people what has happened or is going to happen in the real world. Things that you have done, or you want to do, or like doing. Real events in the past, present or future, and indicating what they were really like. There is a huge range of time indicators (the verb tenses) to show exactly how these relate to each other in time and to when the speaker is telling you about them. The verbs are said by grammarians to be in Indicative Mood. Mood is a good word for it, as the other one – the Subjunctive Mood – is used mainly when there is a thought process between the actual reality and what is being said. It is more to do with how the speaker feels about it than the actual truth of it. In modern terms, a spin is being put on it.

At the most obvious example of the influence of the speaker's views, I think he will come becomes Je crois qu'il viendra – straightforward future tense, as I think it is going to happen. But I don't think he will come becomes Je ne crois pas qu'il vienne – subjunctive, because I don't think his coming is in reality going to happen. You have surely spent hours looking for a tool or a builder to do a particular job and when you talk about this in French, you use the subjunctive, too – Je cherche quelquechose/quelqu'un qui fasse ce que je veux. I'm looking for something/somebody that will do what I want. French speakers don't really believe they will find it. Or maybe it doesn't really exist until they do. Sartre was a Frenchman.

Your emotional feelings about a happening are just such a spin. Je suis heureux que vous soyez venu. I am happy that you (should) have come. No doubt about the person having arrived, but obviously previous doubt about whether it would really happen.

## WARE'S LANGUAGE NOTES

Most frequently you come across it when someone is imposing his or her will on someone else. I want him to come = Je veux qu'il vienne. In English we simplify it, but if the person wanting the action done is not the one being required to do it, you have to use this ponderous approach. I don't want you doing that here = Je ne veux pas que vous fassiez cela ici.

Even when it is not mentioned whose will is being imposed – like with Il faut... – the moment someone is lumbered specifically, the subjunctive raises its very ugly head. Il faut faire son devoir = one must do one's duty (generalisation binding no-one in particular) but Il faut que Pierre fasse son devoir = Peter must do his duty (we've delegated the doing of it to a specific person). The basic principle is that there is someone's mind involved; telling someone to do something does not mean that they will necessarily do it. It's not reality, it is just what someone wants to be reality.

The moral of this story is that when you say "Il faut" you should stop there, for if you go on to say "que" you are moving into dangerous territory. On the other hand, if you are giving advice to a particular person and it is obvious you are really talking about them, you can get away with using an infinitive. You must tell your wife might become Il faut le dire à votre femme! The votre makes it obvious who is being told, but it is informal enough not to be more complicated. Il me faut du vin – I need wine. Again the pronoun simplifies the structure. But Il me faut tondre le gazon is not correct French. It should be Il faut que je tonde le gazon. But in most instances you can make life easier by saying so-and-and so must using devoir – Je dois tondre le gazon.

There are quite a lot of occasions when you can avoid the need for the subjunctive, and I am sure the subject will crop up again in future notes.