

On the nature of the subjunctive<sup>☆</sup>

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**Abstract**

The objective of this work is to find out more about the nature of the subjunctive by isolating a criterion on which the subjunctive/indicative opposition is based. In the present work, this distinction is viewed as a bipolar opposition between forms that are temporally anchored and forms that are not temporally anchored (in terms of Giorgi and Pianesi's elaboration of the notion of 'temporal anchoring'). I propose that subjunctive forms can be viewed as temporally non-anchored forms in which the element responsible for the temporal anchoring has been substituted with an ExclF in the sense of [latridou \(2000\)](#). The paper discusses the morphological occurrences of the subjunctive in several different language families. It accounts for the basic cross-linguistically attested semantic and syntactic properties of the subjunctive. It is argued that the overt morphological realizations do not always correspond to the core semantic properties of the subjunctive.

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**Keywords:** Subjunctive; Indicative; Temporal anchoring; Mood; Exclusion feature**1. Introduction**

Within generative grammar the Subjunctive issue has been discussed for more than three decades now. Still the question of what distinguishes the subjunctive from the indicative, has not yet received a satisfactory and cross-linguistically valid answer. This is not at all surprising in view of the large variety of morpho-syntactic manifestations of the subjunctive, which place a real challenge in front of the attempts to find out the exact criterion on which the Subjunctive/Indicative distinction is based.

Traditionally, the notion of subjunctive is related to the occurrences of verbal forms with a particular morphological make-up, different from that of the indicative forms, generally used in complements to volitional predicates, wishes, counterfactual conditionals, etc. Among the Indo-European languages, productive subjunctive is attested in the Romance languages, in the languages from the Balkan group, among the East and West Slavic languages, in German and Icelandic (among the Germanic group) as well as in Persian (a language belonging to the Indo-Iranian branch of the Indo-European languages). Until now morphology remains the basic distinguishing criterion the major analyses on the subjunctive rely on. Since, however, the one-to-many mappings between morphology and semantics are not rare, I think that any doubts about the validity of morphologically-based approaches are completely justified.

A large number of facts could be provided to show that morphological occurrences that have received the traditional label 'subjunctive' in different languages display sometimes puzzling semantic or/and syntactic differences. For example, in German and Icelandic the subjunctive can be found in complements of *verba dicendi*, something that does not happen

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in Romance. As noted in [Sigurðsson \(2010\)](#), Old Norse, which is another Germanic language does not exhibit subjunctive in such contexts. German Konjunktiv I, in fact, has been argued in [Schlenker \(2005\)](#) to be more like a reportive indicative (see also [Fabricius-Hansen and Sæbø, 2004](#)). A similar proposal about the semantic import of the Icelandic subjunctive has been suggested in [Sigurðsson \(2010\)](#). Nevertheless in a number of contexts (for examples in complements of volitional predicates) the distribution of the Romance subjunctive is the same as that of the Germanic subjunctive. These facts strongly suggest that what has been traditionally called ‘subjunctive morphology’ might well be an ambiguous form that can realize more than one category.

An interesting fact illustrating cross-linguistic variation in the semantic interpretation of the subjunctive is that, while in the languages of Europe counterfactuality is often expressed by means of the subjunctive, in Persian, the subjunctive is only used to express lack of certainty concerning the probability that an event might really occur/has really occurred ([Silakhori and Abbasi, 2012](#)). Counterfactuality, on the other hand is expressed by means of indicative tenses.

On the syntactic level, the phenomena that have been claimed to be related to the subjunctive are numerous. More puzzling however is the fact that, as noted in [Quer \(2009\)](#), “subjunctive does not constitute a syntactically uniform object either cross-linguistically or even within the same language” ([Quer, 2006](#)). This variation, the author suggests, leads to the conclusion that subjunctive is a sort of a by-product of semantic or syntactic selection and cannot be defined as a homogenous phenomenon.

The lack of a precise definition of the subjunctive causes difficulties also when analysing languages that do not belong to the Indo-European family. It has been noted in [Kiparsky \(1968\)](#), for example, that the so-called N-tense verbal form existing in Maasai and in the Bantu language Tswana has sometimes been referred to as ‘subjunctive form’, probably because of its similar distribution. There is evidence, however that the N-tense is not a real subjunctive form.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the striking variation, in this paper I will argue that it is not impossible to isolate core properties of the subjunctive and formulate a definition with cross-linguistic validity, in which morphology does not play a crucial role. I offer a comparative study between the subjunctive occurrences in several language families (the mainly analysed instances here are from Balkan, Romance and Slavic languages) suggesting that such an analysis can offer interesting insights concerning the underlining properties of the subjunctive verbs. In this work I do not discuss the issue of subjunctive licensing. I will be interested in analysing subjunctive occurrences with the aim to understand which of their characteristics might be universal and which ones – language specific. At the end I offer a formal proposal which accounts for the common properties of the subjunctive.

I argue that the core property of the subjunctive is the lack of temporal anchoring on the one hand and, on the other hand, the substitution of the temporal anchor with an *exclusion feature* in the sense of [Iatridou \(2000\)](#). I will base my formal account on [Giorgi's \(2010\)](#) theoretical proposal, which formalizes the semantics of the temporal relations between the embedded complement clause and the matrix clause.

One of the advantages of the present approach is that it can account for cross-linguistically attested properties of the subjunctive like the temporal underspecification of the subjunctive clauses and the impossibility of the subjunctive to form declarative main clauses. I discuss the subjunctive occurrences not only in complement clauses but also in less analysed embedded constructions – relative and adverbial clauses.

The paper is organized as follows: In section 2 I introduce the main properties of the subjunctive discussed in the literature. In section 3 I argue that the phenomenon of Sequence of Tenses is not related to the nature of the subjunctive and is independently present on the Romance subjunctive morphology. In section 4 I present my analysis of the subjunctive forms and in section 5 I present the conclusions.

## 2. Properties of the subjunctive

In this section I present a brief overview of the main proposals and of the properties of the subjunctive discussed in the literature that could possibly become the basis for a common approach to this phenomenon.

As already mentioned various morphological, syntactic and semantic properties of the subjunctive have been discussed in the literature in an attempt to find more about its underlying nature. Its particular temporal status has been reported in [Bresnan \(1972\)](#), [Bouchard \(1984\)](#) and [Picallo \(1985\)](#), who notice that the subjunctive cannot have independent time reference.

Picallo interprets the temporal deficiency of the subjunctive as a temporal dependency holding between the matrix predicate and the embedded subjunctive verb whereby the temporal interpretation of the subjunctive depends on the time of the matrix eventuality. Since the temporal properties of the matrix verb seem to affect those of the embedded

<sup>1</sup> The N-tense is a verbal form which shows no tense and mood markers (cf. [Kiparsky, 1968](#)). It appears in conjoined structures as a second verb form (the first one is a tensed form). Its Indo-European counterpart is the so-called Injunctive mood form. That the Injunctive mood form is different from the Subjunctive is shown by the fact that it co-exists with the subjunctive in early Vedic (cf. [Kiparsky, 2005](#)).

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