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Understanding French Subjunctive

AUGUST 5, 2010 | By Camille Chevalier-Karfis

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(<http://www.frenchtoday.com/blog/understanding-french-subjunctive>)

French subjunctive is a bit tough to understand. But it is usually poorly explained... This blog post will definitely help you...

1. What is the Subjunctive Mood?

The subjunctive is a mood: a grammatical term which describes the subject's attitude.

The subjunctive is a mood which expressing wish, hope, fear, uncertainty, and other attitudes or feelings toward a fact or an idea.

Often, 2 different people are involved: the first one wanting/hoping/ fearing... that the other one does something.

Sometimes, it is an expression which is followed by the subjunctive, such as "il faut que". You will need to memorize by heart which expressions are followed by the subjunctive (versus the expressions followed by the indicative).

In English, the subjunctive is very rare (I wish I were with you). In French, it is quite common. However, if you are a beginner (<http://www.frenchtoday.com/learn-french/french-audio-books/a-moi-paris-beginner-bundle>), I would not worry about the

subjunctive right now but concentrate on the tenses of the indicative.

This is a long lesson. I suggest you take your time to go through it, let the concepts sink in, and bookmark it for future reference. You won't conquer Subjunctive in one reading!

2. How To Memorize the French Subjunctive?

In my opinion, to memorize your French irregular Subjunctive forms, drilling with audio is the only solution: you need to create reflexes, "hear" the form in your head.

Concentrate on the most common verbs : aller, être, avoir, prendre (<http://www.frenchtoday.com/learning-french/french-verb-drills>).

This is pure memorization, it has nothing to do with understanding, so I won't talk about it here.

3. Que is Often Followed by the Subjunctive in French

The conjunction that is followed by the subjunctive is mostly "que".

Other conjunctions like "quand" and "si" don't use the subjunctive. So you only have to worry about using the subjunctive when you are about to say a sentence using "que" (most cases) or "qui".

(Ok... there are a bit more with the superlative constructions... "le seul endroit où je ne sois jamais allé" for example... this is quite advanced so I won't talk about it here. Please just remember the large majority of subjunctive cases are going to be with "que").

4. French Subjunctive = Several People are Involved in the Action Process

To have a Subjunctive in French, you need:

1. At least two people = "person A" doing the action, "person B" wanting/ wishing / ordering / fearing that "person A" does this action.

2. Or an expression requesting that one particular person does something (versus everybody doing it)

Let's take some examples of sentences using the Subjunctive and the Indicative:

- Je veux que vous fassiez la vaisselle. (me wanting you to do it = several involved = subjunctive)
- Je veux faire la vaisselle. (me wanting me to do the dishes = only me involved = infinitive)
- Il faut que tu fasses la vaisselle (this condition applies only to you = subjunctive)
- Il faut faire la vaisselle (true for everybody = infinitive)
- Je suis contente que tu fasses la vaisselle. (me being happy that you do the dishes = 2 people – subjunctive)
- Je suis contente de faire la vaisselle. (me being happy that I do the dishes = one person = indicative)

So, if the same person is doing both actions, or if it's a general statement concerning everybody, you can avoid the Subjunctive and use an infinitive construction.

5. No interrogative Form With the French Subjunctive

You can use a subjunctive clause in a question, for example « Voulez-vous que je vienne avec vous? », but there is no way to turn a subjunctive clause itself into a question.



Now That The Ground Rules Are Established, Let Me Explain In Details The French Subjunctive.

What follows works most of the time, I'm sure you'll find exceptions, but I hope it helps making most cases clearer.

A – The French Subjunctive States 2 things:

– **One person influencing/having feeling for a DIFFERENT person's action.**

- Je veux que tu fasses la vaisselle. I = first person, want = verb of influence, you = different person, do the dishes = the action the first person is trying to influence.
- Je suis contente que tu fasses la vaisselle. I = first person, am happy = feeling, you = different person, do the dishes = the action the first person has a feeling about.

– **The percentage of chance *FOR THE SPEAKER* of this wish/fear/order/... becoming a reality.**

- Je constate qu'il est là. Actually, I can see him, FOR ME, this is a 100% sure thing = indicative. The actual reality is that he is an holographic projection... but the truth lies in the eyes of the beholder...
- J'aimerais qu'il soit là. But I know his plane is stuck in NY. Probability of my wish becoming a reality is almost 0 = subjunctive.

So, where do you draw the line ? I'd say:

1. **If you know for sure it's the reality = Indicative in French.**
2. **Over 70% chance of the action becoming a reality = Indicative in French.**
3. **If there is under 70% chance of the action becoming a reality = Subjunctive in French.**



B – Examples of French sentences using either the Indicative or Subjunctive

- Il est certain qu'il sera là demain = 100% chance of becoming a reality = indicative
- Il est probable qu'il sera là demain = 70% chance of becoming a reality = indicative
- Il est possible qu'il soit là demain = 50% chance of becoming a reality = subjunctive
- Je crois qu'il va partir. I'm positive about it. Say 90% he's going to leave = indicative.
- Je désire qu'il parte. But he really wants to stay... so there is only a 2% chance he is going to leave = subjunctive.
- J'exige que tu ailles à l'école. OK, but you have no intention of going. So even if I want it, it's not the reality, and I know it... = little chance of becoming a reality = subjunctive
- Regarde! Une maison avec un toit orange. I am actually looking at this house. 100% chance of the house existing = indicative.
- Je rêve d'une maison avec un toit orange et un grand jardin et une piscine. I am at a realtor's place and describing my dream house. He might or might not have one, I am not sure it exists – for my budget that is :-) = subjunctive



C – French Subjunctive In the Negative

All these verbs introduce the subjunctive in the negative, since now the percentage of chance of the action becoming a reality is very low:

- Je pense qu'il reviendra = his coming, to me, has a 90% chance of becoming a reality = indicative
- Je ne pense pas qu'il revienne = his coming, to me, has a 5% of becoming a reality = subjunctive

Watch out: "I don't think he will come" is not the same thing as "I think he will not come"....

You have to keep the action you are talking about very clear, and make sure you are applying the negative the the correct part of the sentence and not changing your sentence altogether.

D – The Ne Expletif – A Ne Without any Negative Value

- Je crains qu'elle ne mente. I am afraid she is lying to me (not that she is NOT lying to me...)

The "ne" here has no negative value. It's a rather formal concept, called "le ne explétif" and it comes with verbs of fear and some expressions.

The use of the “ne explétif” is not compulsory, it’s almost never used in speaking, and has no meaning whatsoever: it’s only there to be pretty – and confuse students of French!!)

Now, all this being said, another method is to learn by heart....

And it may work better :-) Here is a list of common verbs and conjunctions followed by indicative or subjunctive:

Common French Verbs Followed by the Indicative

- constater que,
- observer que,
- remarquer que,
- savoir que,
- trouver que,
- affirmer que,
- déclarer que,
- dire que...
- + indicatif.

But also:

- imaginer,
- espérer
- croire,
- penser,
- supposer...
- + indicatif.

Here it helps to understand that French people take their beliefs for a reality (LOL).

Verbs like croire que, penser que, supposer que, imaginer que, espérer que are followed by the indicative = that is logical because you do trust that it is the truth.

But souhaiter que is followed by the subjunctive.... Honestly, I think it’s stupid, and makes no sense. Maybe it’s an evolution of the language...



Common French Expressions Followed by the Indicative:

- il est clair que,
- il est certain que,
- il est sûr que,
- il est probable que...
+ indicatif

Common French Verbs Followed by the Subjunctive

- French verbs expressing wish = souhaiter, désirer, suggérer, proposer, conseiller + que + subjunctive
- French verbs expressing likes and dislikes = aimer, préférer, détester, adorer + que + subjunctive
- French verbs expressing fear = avoir peur, craindre, redouter + que + subjunctive
- French verbs expressing regrets = regretter, être désolé + que + subjunctive
- French verbs expressing doubt = douter + que + subjunctive
- French verbs expressing order = vouloir, ordonner, exiger, permettre, refuser, supplier + que + subjunctive

Common French Expressions

Followed by the Subjunctive

- il faut que,
- il vaut mieux que,
- il est important que,
- il est dommage que
+ subjunctive
- Pour que
- afin que,
- de sorte que,
- de crainte que,
- de peur que,
- avant que,
- en attendant que,
- jusqu'à ce que,
- bien que,
- à moins que,
- à condition que,
- pourvu que
+ subjunctive

Avant Que + Subjunctive BUT Après Que + Indicative !!!

"Avant que" is followed by the subjunctive = it's logical, there is a notion of uncertainty: you won't know for sure beforehand.

- Tu devras partir avant qu'il ne vienne. (This ne expletif again)...

However, "après que" is followed by the indicative – logical again, now you know for sure.

- En général, je pars après qu'il vient.

Although many French people use the subjunctive – myself included... It's a mistake but a very common one: the indicative sounds awful there... I wouldn't be surprised if this rule actually changed to allow the subjunctive in the near future.

I would actually never say that, and find an alternative:

- En général, je pars après son arrivée.

Ways To Avoid the Subjunctive in French

There are several ways of avoiding the Subjunctive in French.

1. Use A Noun

If you used a noun instead of a verb, there would be no problem at all... this applies mostly to "avant que".

Il finit avant le départ de sa femme (instead of Il finit avant que sa femme ne parte).

2. Make A General Statement

Instead of applying your sentence to one specific person, make a general statement.

Il faut faire du sport (instead of "il faut que tu fasses du sport")

3. Find A Way Around It – Use Two Sentences If Need Be

Tu dois partir immédiatement. Je l'exige. (instead of "j'exige que tu partes immédiatement")

What is the Best Way to Understand French Subjunctive?

The best way to develop a feeling for when to use the French Subjunctive is to learn it in context. Check out French Today's downloadable French audiobooks (<http://www.frenchtoday.com/audiobooks-to-learn-french>): French Today's bilingual novels are recorded at different speeds and enunciation, and focus on today's modern glided pronunciation.



I hope this long lesson make things clearer about the French Subjunctive. If you like it, share it on your social medias – it's a huge help for us!

You may also be interested in:

– my grammar lesson on the differences between French Passé-

Composé and Imperfect (<http://www.frenchtoday.com/blog/passe-compose-versus-imparfait>)

– my grammar lesson on how to use c'est versus il est

(<http://www.frenchtoday.com/blog/cest-versus-il-elle-est>)

– my vocabulary lesson on aller, rentrer, venir, retourner etc... to come/go back (home) (<http://www.frenchtoday.com/blog/aller-venir-retourner-revenir-rentre-to-go-back-to-come-back>)

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Learning French, like any other new language, implies a lot of memorization, and often, as adults, our memory is not what it used to be. These...



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In this lesson, I am not going to go over the constructions of Passé-Composé or Imparfait, but I will concentrate on their uses and differences.



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Camille Chevalier-Karfis

Born and raised in Paris, I have been teaching today's French to adults for 20 years in the US and France. Based on my students' goals and needs, I've created unique downloadable French audiobooks (/audiobooks-to-learn-french) focussing on French like it's spoken today, for all levels. Most of my audiobooks are recorded at several speeds to help you conquer the modern French language. Good luck with your studies and remember, repetition is the key!

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**Frederic** • 7 hours ago

Great post Camille, very well written. One of the most detailed and helpful articles about le subjontif.

^ | ▾ • Reply • Share ›

**Ronald Kharsohtun** • 12 days ago

merci beaucoup Camille
C'est très utile....

^ | ▾ • Reply • Share ›

**Palz** • 4 months ago

Salut camille,

Moi c'est palvi, je trouve vos explications très facile sur subjontif aussi je trouve un peu de problème avec les conditionnel..aidez -moi.

^ | ▾ • Reply • Share ›

**Akash** • 5 months ago

Bonsoir Madame Camille,

J'espère que vous pouvez m'expliquer ça: vous avez écrit que le subjontif n'est jamais utilisé lorsqu'on est certain que quelque événement va avoir lieu. Mai mon professeur français, elle nous a une fois donné cet exemple:
<<personne que="" je="" conaisse="" n'était="" pas="" là.="">> Pourquoi pas <<personne que="" je="" con nais="">>? Je suis certain, après tout.

Thanks!

P.S: You know, the subjunctive may be hard to understand for a Briton/American, since it's so similar to the indicative, but a lot of constructs like this exist in many languages, including my own (Bengali). Comparisons with Indian languages would actually be useful, but I don't suppose you know where I could find any? Because I'm a high school student, and French is one my best subjects, but I often find myself explaining grammar rules in terms of Hindi to my classmates.

P.P.S: Je suis vos leçons sur french.about. Elles sont très ineressantes! Merci.

^ | ▾ • Reply • Share ›

**Camille Chevalier-Karfis** Mod ➔ Akash

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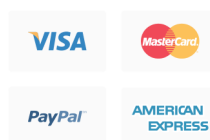
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