

Overcoming subjunctivitis: Understanding the French subjunctive through the lens of Renaissance personal correspondence

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Background: To prescribe or to describe? That is the question. Linguists and French grammar books alike have puzzled for centuries over the semantic meaningfulness of the French subjunctive. Problems inevitably are posed for second-language learners of French and for native speakers who attempt to concretize its essence. The gold standard of reference grammars such as Grevisse's *Le Bon Usage* (2011), along with powerful institutions such as the Académie Française, put their stamp of authority to *prescribe* that the subjunctive expresses unreality, wishes and the like. Against this, linguistic studies *describe* subjunctive behaviour beyond these constraints. Having investigated subjunctive behaviour, some scholars argue that the French subjunctive (form) is devoid of meaning (Poplack, 1992; Poplack et al., 2013; Poplack et al., forthcoming; Bybee and Thompson, 1997). This viewpoint is supported by the argument that the conserving effect of high-frequency forms can be found in subordinating clauses, which are typically conservative. By virtue of the frequency effect, these subordinating clauses retain archaic forms while becoming progressively desemantized.

Aim: It is argued that the key to resolving this controversy is to go upstream and explore subjunctive behaviour from the Académie's inception and the subsequent exigency of the Académie's rules. With this, the aim of this study was to explore why the subjunctive, despite its lack of modal productivity, might persist in Modern French.

Method: A qualitative content analysis was carried out of a corpus of personal correspondence of the behaviour of the subjunctive in Renaissance French. The material was collated from 16th and early 17th century personal correspondence of Jean Calvin, Marguerite de Valois, Catherine de Bourbon and Michel de Montaigne, comprising a corpus of 35,796 words. Through an analysis of structures that trigger the subjunctive in complement clause environments, the grammatical behaviour of the subjunctive was explored.

Results: Token frequency decreased lexical productivity. The subjunctive was routinized after regularly occurring verbal and non-verbal constructions, strengthening the subjunctive's position in certain complement clause environments. Beyond verbal and non-verbal constructions which routinize, routinization also affects gerund and present participle forms, and that these are on their way to becoming conjunctions (by virtue of subjunctive routinization which occurs after these).

Conclusions: The findings of this qualitative study support the proposition that no overarching mood can be attributed to the marked subjunctive form itself. It is argued that the subjunctive is a modally void fossil, persisting due to repeated usage following highly entrenched constructions. The findings offer insights into the behaviour of the subjunctive mood in French as it stands today. There are implications for defining the form/ function relationship of the French subjunctive.

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