UNREAL ACTIONS RENDERED FROM ROMANIAN INTO ENGLISH USING THE SUBJUNCTIVE MODE

(A Contrastive Approach in Teaching English to Romanian Students)

Dan Mihai BARBULESCU[G]
Ioana Mariela BARBULESCU[G]

Abstract: *The paper presents a comparative approach of the subjunctive mode, both in English and in Romanian, with a double goal: theoretical and practical. At a theoretical level it illustrates the main similarities and differences between the Romanian "conjunctiv" and the English subjunctive as means of expressing unreal actions, taking into account that the conjunctiv mode is still very active in Romanian, both in colloquial speech and in literary language, while in English, according to several grammarians, the subjunctive mode tends to be assimilated to other verbal modes. At a practical level, the study represents a contrastive approach which highlights the aspects of subjunctive to be underlined when taught to Romanian native speaker students, suggesting the most suitable solutions for translating the specific constructions into the two languages: Romanian and English.*

Keywords*: subjunctive, conjunctiv, mode.*

This paper continues the series of the comparative studies the authors have begun in 2013 (*Comparative Aspects of the Voices in English and Romanian*) and follows the same conceptual framework according to which for a better understanding and memorization of the taught material, the comparative teaching (i.e. using the symmetry by underlying the similarities and the differences between the native tongue and the target language) has proved to be, in a particular stage, more efficient than other methods.

For a certain age category (over the age of 18), explaining the linguistic mechanism which functions in certain situations leads to a logical, easier and more rapid understanding of the linguistic phenomenon – which represents one of the stage goals that points to the final goal[1].

According to these principles, we consider that a contrastive approach of a mode heterogenous both in form and in content is advisable due to the fact that teaching the verb to Romanian speakers implies some difficulties deriving from the differences between the Romanian verb and the English verb[2].

This study represents an examination based on careful analysis of the subjunctive mode considering both its usage in English and its rendering into Romanian.

[*] The University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine, Bucharest, Romania. barbulescu.tnx@clicknet.ro.
[*] The University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine, Bucharest, Romania. barbulescu.tnx@clicknet.ro.

[1] See Dan Mihai Barbulescu and Ioana Mariela Barbulescu, *„A Long-term Strategy in Foreign Language Teaching"*, in Language and Literature – European Landmarks of Identity, 2012, Romania, Piteşti, Editura Universităţii din Piteşti: 432-438.
[2] *ibid*, 333

BDD-A14589 © 2014 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 21:59:44 UTC)

Our teaching experience corroborated with our research activity have showed us that the reciprocal relationship between the languages in question is not always balanced and consequently, at a practical level, the rules that should be followed are not always mutually applicable. The differences in content are essential for determining the modal characteristics in English and Romanian and therefore the correct mastery of these differences at a theoretical level will lead to a better standard at the practical level.

The English subjunctive (sometimes referred to as the *conjunctive*) is part of the set of grammatical modes known as *ireallis modes* (one that does not refer directly to what is necessarily real) often contrasted to the indicative, that is a *reallis mode*. The subjunctive expresses hypothetical or unlikely actions or events, (such as wish, emotion, possibility, judgment, opinion, necessity) or actions that have not yet occurred.

At first sight, according to the above definition, one could conclude that the English subjunctive corresponds to the Romanian „conjunctiv". However, both conceptually and functionally, the Romanian „conjunctiv" is not a perfect equivalent of the English subjunctive.

In examining this mode, there are different points of view that we have considered.

Firstly, we should take into account the contemporary grammars of the English language, especially those referring to British English.

Some grammarians grant no importance anymore to this issue, and several of them approach the subjunctive mode in a frugal way – see for instance John Eastwood, Ronald Mackin, *A Basic English Grammar with Exercises*, (self-study edition), Oxford University Press, 1991: 98, where the chapter is named „The unreal present and past" and the subjunctive mode is not mentioned at all:

*It's time we **went** (but we haven't gone yet).*
*I wish you **had said** something (but you didn't say anything).*
*I'd rather we **hadn't come** (but we have come).*
*If we **had booked** seats, we would have been more comfortable (but we didn't book seats).*
*Just suppose we **had** enough money (but we haven't enough money).*

So, the issue is presented in two groups (present/ present perfect and past), after such constructions as: *It's time...*, *I wish...*, *I'd rather...* and a Conditional 3.

The disappearance of the subjunctive mode and the significant diminishment of chapters dedicated to this verbal mode in some current English grammars authored by English native speakers[1] represent a point of view which might be of interest for specialists. For the Romanian native speakers this phenomenon is important to a specific extent as long as, while studying English and trying to communicate, they need to use a *certain* tense, in a *certain* verbal mode – say the Romanian *conjunctiv* for example. In other words, there are many cases in which, in order to render a text from Romanian into English, students must resort to what the subjunctive mode truly is.

[1] see also: Michael Swan, *Practical English Usage*, Oxford University Press, 1995: 566 – deals with the subjunctive on one single page in a large English grammar; see also B.D. Graver, *Advanced English Practice*, Oxford University Press, 1995: 95: *The subjunctive hardy survives as a distinctive form nowadays, except in the past tense of* to be *in conditional clauses, when* were *is used for all Persons (...).* and also: R. Quirk and S. Greenbaum, *A University Grammar of English*, Longman, 1989: 51, where the authors ascertain three subjunctive forms: Mandative Subjunctive, Formulaic Subjunctive, Subjunctive *were*.

BDD-A14589 © 2014 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 21:59:44 UTC)

Actually, this vanishing subjunctive tendency for the English native speakers is just apparent and it is in regard to the form and not to the content. This process is derived from the fact that many subjunctive forms are identical to other verbal forms – for example, one subjunctive form is identical with the simple past tense form; another subjunctive form is identical to short infinitive and another – to the indicative past perfect. Consequently, for the grammar simplification's sake, English native speakers have assimilated such subjunctive forms as above exemplified to their homonyms. In witness that things are wrong – there is the verb *to be*, which has the indicative past flexion as follows:

I was	*we were*
you were	*you were*
he/she/it was	*they were*

(partial syncretism)

while one of the subjonctive forms is:

I were	*we were*
you were	*you were*
he/she/it were	*they were*

(complete syncretism).

It is true that, in contemporary English, especially in American English, in colloquial speech, one can hear the form *was* – as in:

*If I **was** you* for *If I **were** you*

– and this is probably due to the above mentioned homogeneousness. Still, this form is not correct – at least for the time being – and it is considered as substandard.

But until this problem has been solutioned by Americans (language is a lively organism, isnt't it ?), we will consider *I was* as a correct form of past indicative and *I were* as a correct form of present subjunctive.

This makes us approach the issue from two angles: the former – of English grammars authored on English language ground and the latter – English grammars conceived by Romanian linguists.

From the viewpoint of English, face to face with itself, the subjunctive may be considered as a verbal mode attracted by certain verbs or constructions; in practice, this means that, whenever such expressions occur, the student (previously trained for such purposes) is supposed to use a subjunctive form.

Thus, English requires that the subjunctive mode should be used in the following cases:

1. After verbs expressing supposition (irrespective of the tense):

*Supposing he **be** here, what would you do ?*
Presupunând că el ar fi aici, tu ce ai face ?

2. After verbs expressing doubt (irrespective of the tense):

*I doubt he **be** here be here tomorrow.*
Mă-ndoiesc că ar fi aici mâine.

3. After verbs of request (such as: *to ask, to demand, to suggest, to say, to order, to move (= to propose), to command, to decide, to insist, to recommend, to request* etc.).

*He moved that the prisoner **be** released.*
A propus ca prizonierul să fie eliberat.

BDD-A14589 © 2014 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 21:59:44 UTC)

4. After corresponding nouns (such as: *advice, arrangement, command, decision, demand, desire, insistence, order, proposal, recommandation, request, require, suggestion* etc.)

The demand	*for production to slow* *that production slow* *that the prodution should slow*	*is welcome.*

Necesitatea ca producţia să fie încetinită este binevenită.

5. After the verb *to wish* expressing the speaker's desire or requirement:

I wish he were here. (colloquial)
Mi-aş dori ca el să fie aici [dar nu este]
or:
I wish he be here. (formal)
Doresc ca el să fie aici.
(it shows rather a command than a wish)
I wish he had been here.
Mi-aş fi dorit ca el să fie aici [dar nu a fost].

6. After such constructions as: *it's time / it's high time*

It's time you were in bed.
E timpul să te culci.
or:
It's high time you were in bed.
Demult trebuia să te culci.

7. After impersonal constructions introduced by *IT*: : *it is necessary, it is essential, it is probable, it is likely, it is possible, it is a pity, it is a shame, it is fortunate*, with all corresponding antonyms (most of them built with the prefix *un-*: *unnecessary* etc.)

It is necessary he be here.
E necesar ca el să fie aici.

The dispute between the indicative and the infinitive (on one side) and the subjunctive (on the other side) appears also after *it is good / bad / right / wrong / a pity*. Generally speaking, the tendency in contemporary English is to avoid as much as possible the subjunctive mode in the colloquial speech – hence the idea of several American or British linguists that this verbal mode has significantly diminished.

There are cases where indicative or infinitive indeed are suitable, but how can one deal with cases where rules of indicative or infinitive usage cannot be applied ? Besides, Romanian is a Romance language (its name itself being derived from "Rome") and the heritage of the *modul conjunctiv* has still a very significant role.

From the Romanian language point of view, face-to-face with the English language, the problem lies in rendering the Romanian „*să*...+ verb" into English. Here, we must mention that there are two types of cases: where two verbs are related to one and the same grammatical subject and where there are two different subjects.

An ingenious solution is given by a well-known specialist in English – Leon Levitchi[1] – who in his English Grammar (the 1961 version) provides a series of answers for the most frequent cases of rendering the Romanian "*să…*" into English. Yet some of the solutions are rather far from being satisfactory, since translating from Romanian into English and then, from English back into Romanian again, the solution differs:

Să-ţi spun ceva. → *I must tell you something.* → *Trebuie să îţi spun ceva.*

[1] Leon Levitchi, *Gramatica limbii engleze*, Editura de Stat Didactică şi Pedagogică, Bucureşti, 1961: 159-161.

BDD-A14589 © 2014 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 21:59:44 UTC)

or: *Asta să fie cartea lui ?→ Is this his book ? → Este aceasta cartea lui ?*

It is by all means understandable that the optimal solution shall be reached by the most gifted and skillful translator who will betray less the original text. Still, several remarks are due:

① Beyond the subjunctive's tendency to disappear (or, more correctly to be assimilated under different names) in grammars authored by English linguists (a tendency originated in substandard English, widely spoken), pursuant probably ignorance or pursuant homonymy mentioned above), there is also the tendency of replacing the subjunctive with other equivalents.

② The subjunctive form depends on the following circumstances:

(a) according to the time/tense level (present or past) the speaker takes into consideration: *present subjunctive* or *past subjunctive*.

PRESENT:

*If he **spoke**, she would leave. = Dacă el ar vorbi, ea ar pleca.*

PAST:

*If he **had spoken**, she would have left. = Dacă el ar fi vorbit, ea ar fi plecat.*

(b) according to the style: analytical or synthetic subjunctive

SYNTETHIC (bookish):

*It's necessary (that) he **come** here. = E necesar ca el să vină aici.*

ANALYTICAL (colloquial):

*It's necessary (that) he **should come** here. = E necesar ca el să vină aici.*

[In both cases, the Romanian translation is the same.]

(c) according to the English variant (British English or American English)

British English:

*She asked that George **should leave** at once. = Ea a cerut ca George să plece imediat.*

American English:

*She asked that George **leave** at once. = Ea a cerut ca George să plece imediat.*

[The same Romanian translation in both cases]

③ Another remark worth mentioning is that in various grammars (be they completed by native English speakers or Romanian scholars) students may come across the same subjunctive forms under a great deal of variety of names. Here are several examples encountered in:

- John Eastwood, Ronald Mackin, *A Basic English Grammar with Exercises*, (self-study edition), Oxford University Press, 1991: 98 – „*The unreal present and past*"
- B.D. Graver, *tentative, hypothetical and unreal conditions* (present or future time reference) p. 93., Unreal conditions, p 94, Past tense (sic !) after *I wish*
- Michael Swan; *The subjunctive is a special kind of present tense which has no -s in the third person singular*. (p. 566)
- Randolph Quirk and Sidney Greenbaum: *The Mandative subjunctive, The Formulaic Subjunctive, The Subjunctive **were*** (p. 51)

This is a good opportunity to salute luxuriant imagination.

④ The fourth remark – maybe the most important from the contrastive analysis between English and Romanian point of view – is the fact that, neither in form, nor in essence or function/performance (meaning the relations settled with other parts of speech), does the concept of the Romanian *conjunctiv* totally correspond with the concept of the English *subjunctive*.

BDD-A14589 © 2014 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 21:59:44 UTC)

Such differences should not be a surprise if we keep in mind the English *Present Perfect*, which has no sole correspondent in Romanian, but three: past tense, present tense, future tense. For a broader explanation – let us examine the following example: *I wish I were you.* ...and let us proceed to an analysis of this statement, first as viewed from the English language ground: *I wish* is a construction that (as already mentioned above), requires a subjunctive form. This structure has the form of a present simple tense and, if taken out of the context, it can be translated into Romanian with: *eu doresc.* Further on, *were* represents a subjunctive form of the verb *to be* and points to an action wanted, desired by the speaker – still an unreal action (which does not actually exist.) *I wish I were you – but I am not.*And yet, this statement cannot be translated into Romanian, according to the above mentioned analysis, like this:

**Doresc de-aş fi în locul tău.*

as this statement is not subject to the Romanian linguistic rules. The correct translation is:

Mi-aş dori să fiu în locul tău.

The paradoxical situation is obvious: consequently, we translate into Romanian a verb which in English is in indicative, present simple tense, with a verb which in Romanian is in the conditional mode. The warning is that when translating from Romanian into English, in the same context, we should not be deceived by the Romanian conditional mode, thus translating into English: *I would like to be you.* or *I would like to be in your place.*

Another example where translators must pay due attention is the following statement: *He wishes he had not been so careless...* rendered into Romanian: *Ar dori să nu fi fost atât de neglijent... (dar a fost)*. The Romanian translation is hardly the correct one, as the context does not follow the Romanian usage rules. The correct solution is: *Ar fi dorit să nu fi fost atât de neglijent... (dar a fost)*. or: *Ar fi dorit să nu fie atât de neglijent... (dar a fost)*. And this – due to the fact that, in the Romanian language, the non-performance of the action is expressed in the main clause and not in the subordinate clause – as it happens in English, at least at present tense.

Consequently, the Romanian perfect conditional shall be translated into English with simple present indicative, and the non-performance of the action shall be rendered by such forms of subjunctive like *had + Verb III-form.*

There are indeed cases, where tenses in both languages do correspond and therefore we will not insist on such topic, since difficulties are significantly reduced in such situations. Complexity occurs when – as mentioned above – there are no form similarities (the same content, the same idea of non-performance, expressed under various forms, such as present simple indicative in English and present or perfect conditional in Romanian).

Here are some other examples illustrating the issue under debate: *He was talking as if he had seen her. = El vorbea ca şi cum ar fi văzut-o (dar nu a văzut-o).* In such examples, both English and Romanian display the same tenses in the main clause; compare to: *He wishes he had seen her. = El şi-ar fi dorit să o vadă. (dar nu a văzut-o)* where there are different tenses and modes in the main clause.

Let us consider the following examples: *I wish you **were** here.= Mi-aş dori **să fii** aici.* and: *I wished you **had been** here, near me. = Îmi doream ca tu **să fi fost** aici, lângă mine.* Although the Romanian language knows no rigors related to a sequence of tenses, from the grammar rule point of view this statement translation is accurate. And yet, such a statement is unlikely, not only in colloquial speech, but also at a literary, more formal level. The expected form in Romanian is *Îmi doream ca tu **să fii** aici,*

BDD-A14589 © 2014 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 21:59:44 UTC)

lângă mine, according, of course, to the speaker's intention of setting the statement on a past perspective or a present one.

⑤ Another observation concerns the affirmative, interrogative, negative and interrogative-negative structures. As a rule, such structures follow the verbal forms similar to subjonctive to identicalness. Still, it is worth mentioning that, due to the semantic substance of the subjonctive's, the interrogative and/or interrogative-negative forms are rather scarce, but for such subjonctive forms as *shall, had better, would rather* – other interrogative and/or interrogative-negative forms are infrequent.

⑥ Regarding the subjunctive usage in terms of colloquial speech or formal expression, it is ascertained that, theoretically, this mode can be used both in formal and informal speeches. Such usage as: *I suggest he **be** here. = Propun ca el să vină aici.* may be met in formal speech, mainly in agreements, contracts, official deeds, regulations etc.

If some grammars [1] claim that in the colloquial speech the analythical subjunctive is preferred to the synthetic one: *It is necessary he should be here.* [analythical]; *It is necessary that he be here.* [synthetic], still we consider that we should mention that while in such constructions as *had better*, or *would rather*, or in conditional clauses, or after *I wish*, subjonctive forms in all variety may be met, the subjonctive forms after *it's necessary...* etc. (and the corresponding negations) are generally avoided in the colloquial speech and are widely replaced by *Accusative* + Infinitive structures.

⑦ The subjunctive mode is used both in American English and in British English – but either part has its preferences: American English (especially in formal speech) would use such forms as: *It is necessary he **be** here. = E necesar ca el să fie aici*¸ while British English would prefer *should* + Infinitive or even the replacement – where possible – with Accusative + Infinitive: *It is necessary that he should come in time. = It is necessary for him to come in time. = E necesar ca el să vină la timp.*

Since the subjunctive mode itself represents a heterogeneous chapter, our approach cannot be subject to a rigorous taxonomy but on the contrary, to a limited and imperfect classification with quite flexible rules. But beyond any classification, more or less arbitrary and more or less consistent and effective, the issue presented in this paper can be divided into two chapters: a point of view from the Romanian ground and a point of view from the English ground. The diversity of the viewpoints does not stand only for the diversity of linguists dealing with this issue, but also it is due to the fact that an approach of the subjunctive mode can be performed from different angles which are not always excludable, but some times may be also complementary.

References

Bădescu, A., *Gramatica limbii engleze*, Editura ştiinţifică şi enciclopedică, Bucureşti, 1984

Bărbulescu, D.M. and Bărbulescu I.M, „*A Long-term Strategy in Foreign Language Teaching*", in Language and Literature – European Landmarks of Identity, 2012, Romania, Piteşti, Editura Universităţii din Piteşti.

Eastwood, J., Mackin, R., *A Basic English Grammar with Exercises*, Oxford University Press, 1991

[1] G. Gălăţeanu and E. Comişel, *Gramatica limbii engleze*, Editura didactică şi pedagogică, Bucureşti, 1982: 38.

BDD-A14589 © 2014 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 21:59:44 UTC)

Gălăţeanu, G., Comişel, E., *Gramatica limbii engleze pentru uz şcolar*, Editura didactică şi pedagogică, Bucureşti, 1982
Graver, B.D., *Advanced English Practice*, Oxford University Press, 1996
Leviţchi L., *Gramatica limbii engleze*, Ed. de stat didactică şi pedagogică, Bucureşti, 1961
Paidos C., *English Grammar*, Institutul European, Iaşi, 1992
Quirk, R., Greenbaum, S., *A University Grammar of English*, Longman, 1989
Swan, M., *Practical English Usage*, Oxford University Press, 1995
Swan, M., Baker. D., *Grammar Scan; Diagnostic tests for Practical English Usage*, Oxford University Press, 2012.
Thomson, A., Martinet, A., *A Practical English Grammar*, Oxford University Press, 1994

BDD-A14589 © 2014 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 21:59:44 UTC)