INDICATIVE PAST TENSES VS SUBJUNCTIVE

Claudia Leah
Assoc. Prof., PhD, University of Oradea

Abstract:The English Past Tenses and Subjunctive are complex verbal forms which require a special attention. The present paper aims at pointing out the obvious similarities and differences between Past and Subjunctive tenses, terms which are not constantly found and explained in English Grammars and handbooks. This fact might create bewilderment in learners' understanding and correct usage of the mentioned tenses.

Keywords: past tenses, subjunctive, understanding, usage, meaning

Seeing that very many Romanian students are confused when they have to use the subjunctive corectly, the idea of attempting to make a comparison between Indicative and Subjunctive past tenses occurred to me. I commenced from two basic hypotheses:

- Most grammar books and handbooks offer insufficient or, sometimes, even no information an explanation for the Indicative and Subjunctive past tenses;
- Some students misunderstand and misuse these verbal structures, both as a consequence of the first hypothesis and as a result of the English language spoken around (lyrics, movies a.s.o.)

Grammatical ***mood*** refers to the type of expression a verb is making. (Bantaş, 1997: 132). This paper focuses on only two moods: Indicative and Subjunctive (Past and Past Perfect Tenses)

Indicative is the most common grammatical mood which expresses matters of fact (*You **ate** two ice-creams* an hour ago. *We **went** to the theatre)*. This is the verb form we use to state a fact or ask a question.

Indicative sentences are the most frequently used sentences in conversation. (*I went to the theatre.I didn't know where he was. Did you find the book you had been looking for?)*

Subjunctive is a relatively rarely used mood that can express an indirect command, a wish, or a contrary-to-fact situation (*I'd rather you **went** now, If only I **listened** to her*). There are different definitions given by grammarians: the Subjunctive Mood expresses "a possible action, or unreality, improbability" (Paidos,2001:98), or that the Subjunctive is used to " express wish or hope, or to show such feelings as doubt and to indicate conditions".(Budai, 1981: 45). The subjunctive in English has been classified into two main categories: *the Synthetical Subjunctive* and *the Analytical Subjunctive*. (Galateanu Farnoaga, 1995:36)

e.g. *It is essential that he **arrive** in time.*

*It is essential that he **should arrive** in time.*

The Analytical Subjunctive, formed by combinations of a modal verb (in fact a semi-auxiliary with a slight modal value) and short infinitives or even indicatives, shows hypothetical actions or states, such as: doubt, condition or concession. (Leviţchi, 2006: 147)

BDD-V5200 © 2018 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:10:18 UTC)

An interesting opinion about this classification is that of Randolph Quirk, who claims that "they are traditionally called the present and the past subjunctive, although the distinction relates more to mood than to tense" (Quirk,1993: 43). Nowadays, the analytical subjunctive is preferred instead of the synthetical one, especially in the spoken, informal language.

According to Hardin, G. (2000:72) the subjunctive is frequently used in formal style, in official, juridical or administrative documents and it occurs in American rather than in British English. It is used generally when talking about something that may or may not happen; it may show something that the speaker wants, hopes for, expects, or imagines; *If I **were** there, I would call you.* (Swan, 1980:580).

In the twentieth century, some grammarians and linguists anticipated the subjunctive's death arguing that this wasn't such an irrecoverable loss, since its historical role in English had been weak and inconsistent; moreover, some exaggerated considering that in Modern English its usage is *pretentious*. Levițchi draws attention upon the fact that, due to a constant process of disappearance from the language, the Subjunctive has been losing more and more its independence, overlapping with some other moods and tenses forms (e.g.: infinitive past indicative). (Levițchi, 1998: 89). Other linguists assume that the subjunctive mood is a beautiful , challenging and valuable component of the English language, which instead of dying out, experiences a subtle revival and that the subjunctive is alive and strong in Modern English and deserves its distinct place among the other verbal moods.

A long, unfinished debate among linguists refers to Subjunctive: is it a distinct mood or not? Those who consider that Subjunctive is not a mood support their opinion with the folowing argument: Subjunctive does not have its own, identifiable verb forms or tenses. Up to a point, this is true, since the Present Subjunctive, also called Formulaic Subjunctive when used in certain set expressions, shares its form with the Bare Infinitive, the Past Subjunctive with the Past Tense Indicative and Past Perfect Subjunctive with the Past Perfect Indicative.

e.g. *All he did was **live** an honest life.*(Bare Infinitive)
*Long **live** the University!* (Present Subjunctive)
*I **went** to his party yesterday.* (Past Tense Indicative)
*I wish I **went** to his party now.* (Past Subjunctive)
*I went out after I **had learned** the poem.* (Past PerfectTense Indicative)
*I behaved as if I **had learned** the poem.* (Past Perfect Subjunctive)

On the other hand, there are some obvious signs supporting that we deal with two distinct moods: Indicative and Subjunctive, and that the cases in which they are used or required do not overlap:

- In the case of Bare Infinitive, it can be replaced by long infinitive:
  *e.g All he did was **tolive** an honest life.*
- Being an old form, Present subjunctive is used either in fixed expressions or is required by certain verbs such as: *propose, suggest, order, demand, insist, advise, it's impossible, it's necessary, it's unbelievable, it's strange, it's natural, it's improbable etc:*
  *e.g. Long live the University! (not *Long **to live**the University!)*
  *The doctor suggests that he **live** a healthy life*. (not *The doctor suggests that he **tolive** a healthy life.*)

According to Leon Levițchi (1998:89), the present subjunctive had been "frequently used in the earlier stages of development of English". Also called *The subjunctive I*, it is the old form of subjunctive, which is more common to the formal style than to spoken or informal English nowadays. However, it is still often used in the American English. As Andrei Bantaş (1997: 229)

BDD-V5200 © 2018 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:10:18 UTC)

mentions, this form of subjunctive can have a past, present and future reference too, as the action it shows is not very precise in time.

According to Quirk.(1933: 44), this is what grammarians call *Formulaic Subjunctives* or *optative subjunctive.* Eugenia Pănescu (1999: 294) classifies these expressions into:

- ❖ Wishes: *Long live the President!*
- ❖ Hopes and desires: *Heaven help us! / God blessyou!*
- ❖ Fixed constructions: *So be it!*

- The Past Tense Indicative is the basic tense that shows a past, finished action:
  *e.g. I **went** to his party* **yesterday**.

Coe, N. (2009: 6) points out that the Past Tense has the same form in all persons, but as a Past Tense, the verb *to be* makes use of two forms: *was* and *were.*

e.g. *I **was** at school an hour ago, but you **were** not there.*

The Past Tense is used to express:

- ✓ finished actions that happened at a specific time in the past.
  e.g.*John called him last week. I went to college 3 years ago. I slept well last night.*
- ✓ situations in the past; According to Harmer, J. (2004:12) we can use the past tense simple to talk about a situation that continued for some time in the past but is now finished e.g. *He **lived** in London at that time/ in the last 5 years* (he doesn't live there anymore).
- ✓ a series of actions in the past
  e.g. *He **entered** the room, **looked** at them and **smiled**.*

Thomson (2010:162) refers to Past Tense simple describing past habits (like *used to*)

*e.g. Sarah **drank** six cups of coffee a day till she gave up.* (used to drink)

L.G. Alexander (2001:174) mentions that the Past Tense does not always refer to past time. It can also be used for polite inquiries, asking for favours, mainly with verbs like: *hope, think, wonder. e.g. I wondered if he could give me a lift.*

The Past Tense may associate with common time expressions(time adverbials) used as tense markers: *yesterday morning/evening,the other day,the day before yesterday , last year/month/Friday,an hour/ a day/ a year ago, on Tuesday, at 4 o'clock, in July ,always, often, ever, never etc.*

e.g. *We **had** our aniversary in August.*
*I **met** him yesterday.*
*I **met** him as recently as last week.*
*I always **helped** her.*

- The Past Subjunctive is called Past only because of its resemblance/identity in form with the Past Tense Indicative, but, in fact, it is a present tense, it refers to a present action, which is why it is sometimes also named *Present Subjunctive 2* or *The Subjunctive II*:
  *e.g. I wish I **went** to his party* **now.**
  As a Past Tense Subjunctive, the verb *to be* makes use of only one form: *were.*
  This tense is also found in Conditional clauses 2:
  e.g. *If the weather **were** better, we would go out.*

This form of subjunctive is accepted by all grammarians as being more often used than the Present Subjunctive, both in written and spoken English. It is hypothetical in meaning and is used in conditional and concessive clauses and in subordinate clauses after optative verbs like *wish* (it can also be used after words like *suppose*, when they have a similar meaning to *if*).This subjunctive is restricted to one form *were*. It occurs in the 1st and 3rd person singular past of the

BDD-V5200 © 2018 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:10:18 UTC)

verb *be*, matching the indicative *was*, which is the more common in less formal style: *(Quirk,Greenbaum,Leech,Svartvik 1972: 76)*

e.g. ***If I were/was*** *you I wouldn't worry so much.*

I wouldn't mind ***if he weren't/wasn't*** *so rude.*

There is a special form of conditional sentence in which the subjunctive *were* is used with an infinitive, and this is sometimes inverted in a literary style .*Was* is not possible here.

e.g. *If she* ***were to say*** *everything she knows, we could discover the truth.* Or:

Were she to say *everything she knows, we could discover the truth.*

Were is always used in the expression *as it were* (meaning the same as *so to speak)*

*She is a sort of Madona****, as it were.***

In very formal language, such as legal documents).*be* is sometimes used after *if* and *whatever.*

e.g. ***If*** *any person* ***be found*** *guilty….*

*…****whatever be*** *the reason…* (Swan,1980:581)

- The Past Perfect Indicative expresses a past action taking place prior to another past action: *I left Bucharest after I* ***had finihed*** *my studies./ I* ***had finished*** *my studies before I left Bucharest.*

Past Perfect can be used with ***for, since*** as tense markers for actions which began before the time of speaking in the past and

- were still continuing at that time: *Mary* ***had been*** *a teacher for twenty years.*
- stopped at that time or just before it: *Mary* ***had waited*** *fora week.*
- stopped some time before the time of speaking: *My father had served in the army for thirty years.***(Thomson, 2010:175)**

- The Past Perfect Subjunctive, also called *The Subjunctive III* refers to a past action, but it is required by certainh words and structures:*ask, demand, determine, insist, move, order, pray, prefer, recommend, regret,request, require, suggest,wish, it's (high) time, as if as though* etc.

e.g. I wish I ***had finished*** *my studies.*

Eugenia Pănescu (1999: 301)states that the Past Perfect Subjunctive `*shows an unreal action, contrary to a past reality*`. Bantaș Andrei (1997: 308) goes beyond, and points out that the action expressed by this subjunctive form is either previous or simultaneous to the action in the main sentence.

The Past Perfect Subjunctive ia also found in Conditional clauses 3:

e.g. *If he* ***had come*** *to the theatre, he would have seen a nice comedy*.

Had *he* ***come*** *to the theatre, he would have seen a nice comedy*.

In some grammar books and handbooks, terms such as Indicative Past Tense and Past Subjunctive are not constantly found and explained. For instance, students are taught that:

"We use *wish* + ***past simple*** to express that we want a situation in the present (or future) to be different: *I* ***wish*** *I* ***understood*** *Russian*. (I don'tunderstand Russian.)

I ***wish*** *I* ***had*** *a dog*. (I don't have a dog.)

I ***wish*** *I* ***was*** *on a trip*. (I'm at school.)

I ***wish*** *it* ***was*** *summernext month*. (It's onlyFebruary next month.)

We use *wish* + ***past perfect*** to express a regret, or that we want a situation in the past to be different: *I* ***wish*** *I* ***hadn't wasted*** *so much time*. (I wasted a lot of time.)

I ***wish*** *I* ***had been invited*** *to the party*. (I wasn't invited.)

We use the Past Perfect with third conditional sentences.

If we had traveled bycar, we wouldn't have been so tired.

BDD-V5200 © 2018 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:10:18 UTC)

If John ***had learned*** *more, he would have passed the exam.*

This is the so-called hypothetical past: we are talking about things thatneverhappened.

I wish I ***had read*** *that book. (but I didn't)*

If only I ***had listened*** *to her advice. (but I didn't)*

We often use the Past Perfect to show dissatisfaction with the past. Such sentences typically start with *I wish ...* or *If only ....*

I wish I ***had bought*** *something to drink. I'm thirsty now.*

If only I ***had bought*** *something to drink. I'm thirsty now.*

The Past Perfect is also used with expressions such as *as if* and *as though*:

John behaved as if he ***had been*** *an adult.*

John behaved as though he ***hadn't met*** *her. "*

In all these cases it is about Subjunctive, Past or Past Perfect and not about Past Tense or Past Perfect. The fact that they find two different categories of terms and explanation, creates bewilderment in learners' understanding and correct usage of the mentioned tenses. In order to make learners aware of Past Indicative and Past Subjunctive forms it is worth mentioning some of their basic specific characteristics.There are similarities, but mainly differences when it comes to these structures.

Among similarities we could mention:

- Past Tense Indicative and Past Tense Subjunctive are identical in form with the second form of the main verbs.
- The Past Perfect Subjunctive has the same *form* as The Past Perfect Indicative Tense, both employing one single form in all the persons.

Among differences we can mention:

- The Past Subjunctive Tense`s forms overlap The Past Indicative Tense`s forms, except for the verb *to be***,** due to the fact that the verb has the form *were* in all persons, regardless of the number of the subject, while the Past Indicative has the form *was* for the first and third person singular. (Pănescu, 1999: 301)
- Although Past Perfect Tense and Past Subjunctive have the same form, when *Had* is placed in initial position and *if* is omitted, in conditional clauses, the difference between the two similar forms is obvious:.

  e.g. ***If*** *you* ***had arrived*** *on time you would not have missed the train.* (Dacă ai fi ajuns la timp n-ai fi pierdut trebul)

  Had *you* ***arrived*** *on time you would not have missed the train.* (Să fi ajuns la timp n-ai fi pierdut trebul)
- The form of a verb in the subjunctive mood may differ from the form with the same subject which is not in the subjunctive mood.

  e.g. *I* ***was*** *in your position two years ago.* (not in the subjunctive mood)

  If I ***were*** *in your position, I would do the same.* (subjunctive mood)
- At first sight, an example such as: *If I were a doctor I would work in a hospital*., seems to be incorrect, since *doctor* is a singular noun, and the verb preceding it should be *was*, not *were*. However, this construction does not use *was* because *were* is the past subjunctive of *be*, and formally it is always used with *if*, and certain other words/phrases, such as *I wish* and *as if* etc.
- While the tenses of the Indicative Mood preserve their form and usage, Modern English prefers to replace the subjunctive mood with other grammatical forms.

BDD-V5200 © 2018 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:10:18 UTC)

As with all grammar and usage matters, the rules for subjunctive mood are based on centuries of convention. However, there is a tendency, quite common in everyday English, to substitute the subjunctives with simpler verbal constructions, such as infinitives and indicatives, while the usage of the Subjunctive Mood is distinctive for the formal style. For most verbs, formal differences between subjunctive and indicative have obliterated, only two verbs preserving their proper forms: *to be* and to *have. To be* has a so called *old subjunctive form*and a *modern subjunctive form. The old subjunctive* is *be* for all persons, the *modern one*being *were* for all persons. *To have has the form had* for all persons. For all the other verbs, no matter whether modal or main verbs, the present subjunctive form coincides with past tense: *could, might, should, would finished.*The old subjunctiveform coincides with the bare infinitive of main verbsor with the present of all except the third person singular: *bring, read, listen.*(Hulban,2003:359)

Moreover, there are also some old forms of subjunctive, which are no longer used, but there are also some forms that cannot be omitted and are used nowadays. According to *Penguin Grammar A-Z*, there are three main areas in which Subjunctive is still quite often used "the ***were*** patterns for hypothetical situations", "the Mandative Subjunctive" and the so called "Formulaic Subjunctives"(Broughton, 1990: 286).

Subjunctive can be tricky to use, which could explain, partially, why many users of the English language forgot or avoided it. However, Subjunctive is not only a useful, but also an erudite structure and careful, educated users of English should do their best to preserve it.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alexander L.G. (1998, 2001). *Longman English Grammar*, Longman Group UK Limited.
- Bantaş, A. (1997).*Engleza pentru admitere*, Bucureşti, Ed. Teora.
- Biber, D., Conrad, S., Leech, G. (2005). *Student Grammar of Spoken and Written English*, Longman.
- Broughton G. (1990). *Penguin English Grammar from A-Z for Advanced Students*, Penguin Books Limited England .
- Budai, L. (1981).*Theory and Practice*, Ed. Tankonyvkiano.
- Coe, N., (2009). *Oxford living Grammar*, Oxford University Press.
- Eastwood J.(1994). *Oxford Guide to English Grammar,*Oxford University Press.
- Galateanu-Farnoaga, G., Comisel, E. (1995). *Gramatica limbii engleze*, Omegapres.
- Hardin, G., Marcheteau, M., Savio, M., Berman, J. (2000). *Gramatica Limbii Engleze*, Bucuresti, ed.Niculescu.
- Harmer, J. (2004). *Just Grammar*, Marshall Cavendish.
- Hulban, H. (2003). *Syntheses in English Morphology*, Spanda.
- Leech, G.(1989). *An A-Z of English Grammar and Usage*, Thames Nelson & Sons LTD.
- Levițchi, L. (1998). *Gramatica limbii engleze*, Bucureşti, Ed. Teora.
- Levițchi, L., Preda, I. (2006).*Gramatica limbii engleze*, Bucureşti, Ed. Grammar.
- Murphy, R. (2010). *English Grammar in Use*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Paidos, C. (2001).*English Grammar. Theory and practice*, vol. 1, București, Ed. Polirom.
- Pănescu, Eugenia. (1999).*Gramatica limbii engleze. Morfologia*, Ed. Univers.

BDD-V5200 © 2018 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:10:18 UTC)

- Proca, R. (2004). *Gramatica practica a limbii engleze*, Bucureşti, Ed. Polirom.
- Quirk, R, Greenbaum, S.(1973). *A Concise Grammar of Contemporary English*, Harcourt Brace, London
- Quirk, R.(1993).*A Students Grammar of The English*, London,
- Swan, M.(1980). *Pratical English Usage*, Oxford University Press.
- Thomson A.J. and Marinet A.V. (2010). *A Practical English Grammar*, Oxford University Press .
- Zdrenghea, M.,Towinson, N .(1995).*English Grammar*, Ed. Clasium.
- www.cambridge-efl.org.uk
- www.scribd.com
- (http://www.bartleby.com/64/C001/001.html
- (http://wwwceafinney.com.sujunctive/index.html)

BDD-V5200 © 2018 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:10:18 UTC)