

# The Spanish Imperfect Subjunctive: Your Guide to When and How to Use It

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If you're talking about the past in Spanish, you'll eventually need to use the imperfect subjunctive tense.

This post covers when this will happen and how to use the imperfect subjunctive properly so you can talk about the past in a way that makes sense.

## Contents

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- [When to Use the Imperfect Subjunctive in Spanish](#)
- [How to Use the Imperfect Subjunctive in Spanish](#)
- [The Alternate Conjugation of Spanish Imperfect Subjunctive](#)
- [How to Practice the Spanish Imperfect Subjunctive](#)

## When to Use the Imperfect Subjunctive in Spanish

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So, what exactly is the imperfect subjunctive? It's the past version of a subjunctive!

Just as with the present subjunctive, the past subjunctive is triggered when we talk about **opinions, hopes, denials, doubts** and **hypothetical situations**, and we have two clauses with different subject nouns.

The only difference is that now we're talking about the past.

## Talking about the past

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You can use the past perfect in the subjunctive in the same way as in the indicative past perfect by conjugating the verb *haber* and adding the past participle (-ado, -ido form).

This is for talking about a **hypothetical, doubted or emotionally commented on “past before the past.”**

*Le impresionó mucho que hubieras tomado clases de baile.* — She was very impressed that you had taken dance classes.

## Talking about the present

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It may seem a bit odd, but we can also use the imperfect subjunctive after **como si** to talk about the **present**. If it makes you feel any better, we also often use our (disappearing) English subjunctive in this context.

*Baila contigo como si ya fuera tu amante.* — She is dancing with you as if she were already your lover.

## Talking about hypotheticals

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Finally, **a clause in the imperfect subjunctive can be coupled with a clause in the conditional to talk about fantastic, unlikely situations** (not necessarily past). This also seems a bit weird until you realize that we follow exactly the same pattern in English.

*Si yo fuera muy rico, ella estaría todavía conmigo.* — If I were very rich, she would still be with me.

*Si yo supiera bailar tango, podría reemplazarla con cualquiera.* — If I knew how to dance tango, I would be able to replace her with anyone/whomever.

The construction you see above is **si + imperfect subjunctive clause** (the if-only-it-were-so clause), **conditional clause** (the how-things-would-then-be clause).

## When certain verbs are present

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There are certain verbs that if present in the main clause, will commonly trigger the imperfect subjunctive in the second clause. Here are some of those verbs:

<b>Verb</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
<i>Agradecer</i>	To thank
<i>Alegrarse</i>	To be happy
<i>Desear</i>	To wish
<i>Encantar</i>	To be delighted
<i>Enojar</i>	To be angry
<i>Esperar</i>	To hope
<i>Estar triste/contento/etc.</i>	To be sad/happy/etc.
<i>Insistir</i>	To insist
<i>Molestar</i>	To bother
<i>Necesitar</i>	To need
<i>No creer</i>	To not believe
<i>Pedir</i>	To ask that
<i>Preferir</i>	To prefer
<i>Quejarse de</i>	To complain
<i>Querer</i>	To want
<i>Sorprender</i>	To be surprised

## How to Use the Imperfect Subjunctive in Spanish

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**1. Take the *ellos* form (third-person plural) of the preterit.**

*bailar* ⇒ (***ellos***) ***bailaron***

*poder* ⇒ (***ellos***) ***pudieron***

**2. Remove the *-on* from the end.**

*bailaron* ⇒ ***bailar***\_\_

*pudieron* ⇒ ***pudier***\_\_

**3. Add the ending from the following table:**

Subject	Ending
Yo	<b>-a</b>
Tú	<b>-as</b>
Él/Ella/Usted	<b>-a</b>
Nosotros	<b>-amos</b>
Vosotros	<b>-ais</b>
Ellos/Ellas/Ustedes	<b>-an</b>

For example:

*bailar* ⇒ (ella) **bailara**

*pudier* ⇒ (ella) **pudiera**

## The Alternate Conjugation of Spanish Imperfect Subjunctive

While the above *-ra* endings are the most common form of the imperfect subjunctive, and the ones I'd recommend learning first, you'll sometimes see **-se** endings instead, especially in Spain.

The meaning is exactly the same. If you want to do the alternate conjugations, start with the *ellos* form again, but this time remove the last three letters, *-ron*, and add:

Subject	Ending
Yo	<b>-se</b>
Tú	<b>-ses</b>
Él/Ella/Usted	<b>-se</b>
Nosotros	<b>-semos</b>
Vosotros	<b>-seis</b>
Ellos/Ellas/Ustedes	<b>-sen</b>

So these would look like:

*bailar* ⇒ (ella) **bailase**

*pudier* ⇒ (ella) **pudiese**

## How to Practice the Spanish Imperfect Subjunctive

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It can be difficult to understand when to use the imperfect subjunctive. If you're struggling with this, using other resources can help you grasp this more quickly.

The best way to practice using the imperfect subjunctive is by speaking. Especially speaking with a native Spanish speaker will help you incredibly as you can hear how they use it and they can give you feedback when you use it yourself.

Even if you can't find a conversation partner, listen to as much authentic content as possible. [FluentU](#) is a great option for this as there is a wide offering of native Spanish clips that can show you how the imperfect subjunctive is applied.

There are even great learning resources such as flashcards and quizzes that will only enhance your understanding of this tense.

There are also some great podcasts such as [Lightspeed Spanish](#) podcast and [Coffee Break Spanish](#) that will give you even more listening practice.

Learning the imperfect subjunctive will not always be easy, but you can always improve with lots of practice!