If I'd wanted foreplay, I'd have said so.

## The Subjunctive Mood in English:

English, like German, has the general subjunctive, a system for talking about hypothetical situations:

- "If I were you, I wouldn't do that."
- "Had she known that, she wouldn't have gone out with him."
- "Let's pretend that we were pirates."
- "If you lived here, you would be home now."
- "I would go, but I'm too tired."
- "If only I hadn't said that!"

These forms are very common, but speakers are not always conscientious about using them correctly: we hear toughs say, "If I was you, I'd keep my mouth shut," and sports commentators claim, "If I'm the coach, I'm happy with the way the game is going." Colloquial speech is most comfortable with constructions employing "would" (the subjunctive form of "will"): "I would do it if I could."

The general subjunctive is sometimes called the "past subjunctive" because it builds off past tense forms, but it does not necessarily refer to the past. In fact, "If I were rich..." refers to an undetermined time <u>not</u> in the past - it could be in the present or the future. To talk about an unreal situation in the past, we would have to say, "If I had been rich...."



~~Should. Would have. Could. Would.~~ **Do**.
Berlin needs **more** gardens!

## The General Subjunctive Mood in German (Konjunktiv II).

Just like English, German uses the simple past forms as a basis for the general subjunctive. In fact, the subjunctive form of weak verbs is indistinguishable from the [simple past:](simple past:)

Wenn ich diesen Wagen haben wollte, kaufte ich ihn sofort.
*If I wanted to have this car, I would buy it immediately.*

The strong verbs also use the simple past, adding an umlaut where possible, together with the same endings that follow the "-t-" of the weak [simple past:](simple past:)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| ich wär**e** | wir wär**en** |
| du wär**est** | ihr wär**et** |
|  | Sie wär**en** |
| er/sie/es wär**e** | sie wär**en** |



If you could kiss only one person in your life, who would it be?.

The irregular weak verbs add an umlaut to the imperfect form: *brächte, dächte, hätte, wüsste,* although some of them substitute an "-e-" for the "-ä-": *brennte, kennte, nennte, rennte, sendete, wendete.*

Modals also add an umlaut to the imperfect form — if there was one in the infinitive: *dürfte, könnte, möchte, müsste.* "Sollen" and "wollen," however, do not add an umlaut: *sollte, wollte.*

(Some verbs have retained subjunctive forms that reflect archaic constructions. Thus "helfen" traditionally becomes "hülfe." However, these forms now seem pedantic, and we increasingly find "hälfe." You can click here for a listing of the subjunctive forms of the more common strong verbs).

Uniquely among weak (= regular) verbs, *brauchen* ("to need") sometimes adds an umlaut to its subjunctive form. While most grammar guides conjugate it as *brauchte*, *bräuchte* is just as correct and more likely to be used:

Um das zu reparieren, bräuchte ich einen größeren Hammer. *To repair that, I would need a bigger hammer.*

**Some sample sentences**:

| | |
| --- | --- |
| Wenn ich dieses Lied wüsste, sänge ich es. | *If I knew this song, I would sing it.* |
| Wenn es nicht regnete, gingen wir schwimmen. | *If it weren't raining, we'd go swimming.* |
| Ich kaufte das Buch, wenn ich Italienisch lesen könnte. | *I'd buy the book if I could read Italian.* |
| Ich brächte Blumen mit, wenn die Geschäfte nicht zu hätten. | *I'd take flowers along if the stores weren't closed.* |
| Wenn das Wörtchen "wenn" nicht wär', wär' mein Vater Millionär. | *If it weren't for the little word "if," my father would be a millionaire (~ "If wishes were horses, then beggars could ride.").* |
| Wenn ich ein Vöglein wär',/ Und auch zwei Flüglein hätt'/ flöge ich zu dir'. | *If I were a little bird,/ And had two little wings,/ I'd fly to you. [from a folksong].* |
| Wenn deine Großmutter Räder hätte, wäre sie eine Straßenbahn. | *If your grandmother had wheels, she'd be a trolleycar [= Yiddish proverb].* |

Similar to English's use of "would," colloquial German most comfortably employs **"würde"**, the subjunctive form of "werden". In conditional sentences ("if...then"), "würde" is normally part of the "then-clause":

| | |
| --- | --- |
| Wenn ich dieses Lied wüsste, würde ich es singen. | *If I knew this song, I would sing it.* |
| Wenn es nicht regnete, würden wir schwimmen gehen. | *If it weren't raining, we would go swimming.* |

„Wenn mein Freund so viele Versprechen brechen würde wie der Kanzler, würde ich ihn rauswerfen."

CDU — Zeit für Taten.

*If my boyfriend broke as many promises as the chancellor, I'd throw him out.*

## Tenses in the General Subjunctive:

Note that constructions with "würden" resemble the future tense (i.e. "werden" + infinitive), but a future meaning is not necessarily implied. In contrast to the special subjunctive, the general subjunctive has in fact only two tenses — the non-past and the past — but we can construct each of these tenses in several ways.

**The non-past**, an indeterminate time in the present or future, can be constructed with or without **""würde"**:

> Wenn ich schneller führe, hätte ich bestimmt einen Unfall.
> Wenn ich schneller führe, würde ich bestimmt einen Unfall haben.
> *If I drove faster, I would surely have an accident.*

To create **a past tense**, an indeterminate time before the present, we employ a perfect construction, using the subjunctive forms of "haben" or "sein" as the auxiliary verbs:

> Wenn ich schneller gefahren wäre, hätte ich bestimmt einen Unfall gehabt.
> Wenn ich schneller gefahren wäre, dann würde ich bestimmt einen Unfall gehabt haben.
> *If I had driven faster, I would surely have had an accident.*

When the sense calls for it, both tenses might be used:

> Wenn ich das damals gewusst hätte, wäre ich jetzt ein reicher Mann.
> Wenn ich das damals gewusst hätte, würde ich jetzt ein reicher Mann sein.
> *If I had known that then, I would now be a rich man.*

Note that only the "unreal" portion of the sentence is in the subjunctive:

> Wenn ich damals gewusst hätte, was ich jetzt weiß, wäre ich ein reicher Mann.
> *If I had known then what I know now, I would be a rich man.*

## Other forms of "if-then" clauses:

Inverted word order can replace **"wenn"** (compare the English, "Had I known..."):

| | |
|---|---|
| Hätte ich gewusst, wer ihr Vater ist, hätte ich etwas anderes gesagt. | *Had I known who her father is, I would have said something else.* |
| Regnete es, gingen wir nach Hause. | *Were it to rain, we'd go home.* |



Sie haben Angst vorm Älterwerden...

Ein TB-Kranker in der Dritten Welt würde sich darüber freuen.

Schon 50 € retten sein Leben.
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*You're afraid of growing old... A TB-patient in the Third World would be delighted by it.*

## Other Uses of the Subjunctive:

1) Much as in English, requests or other claims can be softened by the general subjunctive:

| | |
|---|---|
| Ich hätte gern das große Frühstück. | *I'd like the large breakfast.* |
| Ich möchte einen Döner ohne Soße. | *I'd like a Döner without sauce.* |
| Könnten Sie mir bitte auch etwas Brot geben? | *Could you please give me some bread, as well?* |
| Hätten Sie vielleicht etwas Salz? | *Would you happen to have some salt?* |
| Würden Sie mir bitte Ihren Bleistift leihen? | *Would you please lend me your pencil?* |
| Wie wäre es mit einer Tasse Kaffee? | *How would a cup of coffee be?* |
| Dürfte ich sie bitten, das Fenster aufzumachen? | *Might I ask you to open the window?* |
| Es wäre jetzt Zeit, dass du gingest. | *It would be time for you to go now.* |
| Ich müsste eigentlich jetzt gehen. | *I really ought to go now.* |
| Ich wüsste nicht, was ich dir sagen könnte. | *I wouldn't know what to tell you.* |
| Das dürfte richtig sein. | *That is probably right.* |
| Ich hätte noch einen Wunsch. | *I have one more request.* |
| Das wäre alles. | *That would be all [I have no more requests].* |
| Sie möchten bitte nach Hause anrufen. | *Please call home.* |
| Jetzt wären wir am Ende. | *Now we're finished. (That would be all.)* |

2) **"als ob"**, **"als wenn"**: When "as if" implies an unreal condition, it requires the subjunctive. **"als ob"** is the most usual form, but **"als wenn"** is also possible. You can also use **"als"** with inverted word order.

| | |
|---|---|
| Er tut, als ob er die Antwort wüsste. | *He acts as if he knew the answer.* |
| Sie tun, als ob sie kein Wort verstanden hätten. | *They act as if they hadn't understood a word.* |
| Die Amerikaner sprechen, als ob sie heiße Kartoffeln im Munde hätten. | *Americans talk as if they had a mouthful of hot potatoes.* |
| Er sieht aus, als ob er zu lange in der Sonne gelegen hätte. | *He looks as if he had been lying in the sun too long.* |
| Sie redet, als wenn sie meine beste Freundin wäre. | *She talks as if she were my best friend.* |
| Sie tut, als hätte sie das Pulver erfunden. | *She acts as if she had invented gunpowder [~ "were a rocket scientist"].* |

3) Wishes can be expressed in the subjunctive. Note that the verbs expressing the desire are, in contrast to English, also in the subjunctive:

| | |
|---|---|
| Ich wünschte, ich könnte fliegen. | *I wish I could fly.* |
| Ich wollte, er würde den Mund halten. | *I wish he'd keep his mouth shut.* |

4) The subjunctive alone can also imply the wish:

| | |
|---|---|
| Das wäre der Wagen für mich! | *That's the kind of car I'd want!* |
| Man müsste jung sein! | *Oh, to be young!* |

5) "If only" (or inverted word order) + subjunctive:

| | |
|---|---|
| Wenn du nur hier wärest! | *If only you were here!* |
| Wenn ich nur ihren Namen wüsste! | *If I only knew her name!* |
| Wenn sie nur anrufen würde! | *If only she would call!* |
| Regnete es nur! | *If only it would rain!* |
| Hätten sie nur die richtige Größe! | *If only they had the right size!* |

6) Using the subjunctive to contradict a previous claim:

| | |
|---|---|
| Wann hätte ich so was gesagt? | *When am I supposed to have said such a thing?* |
| Wie sollte er es gefunden haben? | *How is he supposed to have found it?* |
| Schön wäre es! | *That would be nice [if it were true].* |
| Nicht dass ich wüsste. | *Not that I'm aware of.* |

7) To assert something fanciful:

| Ich dachte, ich wäre im Kino. | *I thought I must be dreaming ["at the movies"; i.e. the situation was ridiculous]* |
|---|---|
| Wir hatten Angst, dass er vor Wut platzen würde. | *We were afraid he would explode with anger.* |

8) Using the general subjunctive in [indirect discourse,](#) especially when doubtful about the speaker's veracity:

| Er sagt, dass sein Wecker nicht geklingelt hätte. | *He says that his alarm didn't go off.* |
|---|---|
| Sie behauptet, dass sie die ganze Zeit zu Hause gewesen wäre. | *She claims that she was home the whole time.* |
| Der Hund hätte Ihre Arbeit gefressen? | *[Are you saying that] The dog ate your paper?* |

9) Some other examples:

| Er wäre der letzte, den ich um Hilfe bitte würde. | *He would be the last person I would ask for help.* |
|---|---|
| Das Buch is so teuer, wie es sein könnte. | *The book is as expensive as it could be.* |
| Ich habe Angst, dass ich das Spiel verlieren könnte. | *I'm afraid that I could lose the game.* |
| Wo ist einer, der das tun wollte? | *Where is someone who would want to do that?* |