

The Special Subjunctive Mood in English:

English, like German, has a special subjunctive, employed mostly in formulating third-person commands:

- "So be it."
- "Long live the king!"
- "May he rot in hell."

It may also be used in clauses that concede a point:

- "Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home."
- "Be he alive, or be he dead, I'll grind his bones to make my bread."

As the examples suggest, the special subjunctive is largely obsolete and can usually be found only in set expressions from an earlier time.

The Special Subjunctive Mood in German (Konjunktiv I):

Just like English, German bases the special subjunctive on the stem of the present tense forms. It then adds the same endings as does the [general subjunctive \(Konjunktiv II\)](#):

ich mache/ habe/ fahre/ sehe	wir machen/ haben/ fahren/ sehen
du machest/ habest/ fahrest/ sehest	ihr machet/ habet/ fahret/ sehet
	Sie machen/ haben/ fahren/ sehen
er/sie/es mache/ habe/ fahre/ sehe	sie machen/ haben/ fahren/ sehen

Note that all of these forms are completely regular, regardless of whether or not the verb is strong. The only exception is "**sein**:"

ich sei	wir seien
du seiest	ihr seiet
	Sie seien
er/sie/es sei	sie seien

With the exception of "sein," many special subjunctive forms are indistinguishable from the ordinary present tense: e.g. *ich mache, wir haben, Sie fahren, sie sehen*.

Indirect Discourse:

The special subjunctive appears most frequently in restatements of what someone else has claimed. Let us assume, for example, that a politician asserts:

"Ich bin ein ehrlicher Mensch. Ich habe kein Geld gestohlen." *I am an honest person. I haven't stolen any money.*

A newspaper would report this statement as follows:

Er sagte, er sei ein ehrlicher Mensch. Er habe kein Geld gestohlen.

He said that he was an honest person. He hadn't stolen any money.

By using the special subjunctive, the newspaper is asserting its own neutrality concerning the claim's veracity. English does not provide so elegant a means. "He said that he was an honest person" - as opposed to "He said that he is an honest person" - is a kind of modified subjunctive that provides some distance, but it cannot be sustained over longer passages as easily as German's special subjunctive. Instead, English must rely on words like "allegedly" and frequent repetitions of "he said...."

Here is part of an interview that the *Bildzeitung* conducted with Katherina Reiche, a politician who was expecting a baby:

BILD: Haben Sie keine Angst, dass der Wahlkampfstress Ihnen oder Ihrem ungeborenen Kind schadet?

BILD: Aren't you afraid that the stress of a campaign will hurt you or your unborn child?

Katherina Reiche: Nein! Ich habe eine robuste Konstitution, stehe unter ständiger ärztlicher Betreuung. Die Nottasche fürs Krankenhaus steht bereit.

Katherina Reiche: No! I have a robust constitution, am constantly under a doctor's care. The emergency bag for the hospital is already packed.

BILD: Was wird es denn?

BILD: What is the baby going to be?



Katherina Reiche: Es wird ein Mädchen. *Katherina Reiche: "It's a girl. We
Wir haben auch schon einen Namen, aber already have a name, but it won't be
der wird nicht verraten. revealed."*

A report of this interview might read:

*Die Bildzeitung fragte, ob sie keine Angst habe, dass der
Wahlkampfstress ihr oder ihrem ungeborenen Kind schade. Katherina
Reiche antwortete, nein, sie habe eine robuste Konstitution, stehe unter
ständiger ärztlicher Betreuung. Die Nottasche fürs Krankenhaus stehe
bereit. Gefragt, was es denn werde, antwortete Frau Reiche, dass es
ein Mädchen werde. Sie haben auch schon einen Namen, aber der
werde nicht verraten.*

German can also use [the general subjunctive](#) in indirect discourse: "sie hätte keine Angst"; "Die Nottasche fürs Krankenhaus stünde bereit." This form is more colloquial, however. Depending on the context, it can also imply disbelief. But even a formal, neutral report might employ the general

subjunctive when the special subjunctive form is ambiguous, i.e. when there is no distinction between the special subjunctive and indicative forms. Instead of "sie haben schon einen Namen," which might or might not be subjunctive, one might write the unambiguous "sie hätten schon einen Namen." It is thus possible to use both the special and general subjunctives within the same sentence: "Sie hätten auch schon einen Namen, aber der werde nicht verraten."

If the original quotation contained a general subjunctive form, it is retained:

"Ich würde es tun, wenn ich könnte, aber ich bin jetzt zu krank." *I would do it if I could, but now I am too sick.*

This becomes:

Er würde es tun, wenn er könnte, aber er sei jetzt zu krank.

Tenses in the Special Subjunctive:

While [the general subjunctive](#) offers only two tenses, the special subjunctive has four:

present:

Er wolle uns helfen, aber er könne es heute nicht tun.

[he says that] He wants to help us, but he can't do it today.

Sie sei kein Kind mehr.

[she says that] She is no longer a child.

Sie schlafe gern auf dem Balkon.

[she says that] She likes to sleep on the balcony.

past:

Er habe nicht gewusst, dass er seinen Hut vergessen habe.

[he says that] He didn't know that he had forgotten his hat.

Sie habe einen Unfall gehabt, weil sie zu schnell gefahren sei.

[she says that] She had an accident because she was driving too fast.

future:

Er werde in Zukunft mehr arbeiten.

[he says that] He will work more in the future.

Sie werde uns bald besuchen.

[she says that] She will visit us soon.

future perfect:

Er werde es vor Freitag fertig gemacht haben.

[he says that] He will have finished it before Friday.

Sie werde bis dann alles gelesen haben.

[she says that] She will have read everything by then.

Note that the three indicative past tenses (imperfect, present perfect, and past perfect) are reduced in both subjunctives to one perfect tense: *habe/hätte gesehen, sei/wäre gelaufen*.

Some Other Uses of Special Subjunctive:

1) As in English, the special subjunctive can be used for third-person commands:

Es lebe der König!	<i>Long live the king!</i>
Gott gebe, dass wir sicher ankommen.	<i>May God grant that we arrive safely.</i>
Hole ihn der Teufel!	<i>The devil take him!</i>
Möge sie glücklich sein.	<i>May she be happy.</i>
Er komme!	<i>Let him come!</i>
Gott sei Dank.	<i>Thanks be to God.</i>

2) Somewhat more common in third-person commands is "**mögen**" in the special subjunctive:

Möge sie glücklich sein.	<i>May she be happy.</i>
Möge dir Gott helfen.	<i>May God help you.</i>



3) Consistent with such commands, recipes in old-fashioned cookbooks are often written in the special subjunctive:

Man erhitze die Artischockenherzen in etwas Olivenöl.	<i>Heat the artichoke hearts in some olive oil.</i>
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4) German has no word for "unless." It can - albeit rarely - use "**außer dass**" or "**außer wenn**", but most common is the special subjunctive phrase, "**es sei denn,...**":

Wir fahren morgen früh, es sei denn, du willst länger schlafen.	<i>We're leaving tomorrow morning, unless you want to sleep late.</i>
Wir fahren mit deinem Wagen, es sei denn, dass du etwas dagegen hast.	<i>We'll go in your car, unless you have something against that.</i>
Sie kommt bald, es sei denn, dass sie den Bus verpasst hat.	<i>She's coming soon, unless she missed the bus.</i>

5) As in English, the special subjunctive can be used to concede a point, although such constructions are largely obsolete:

Sei der Berg auch noch so hoch, wir werden ihn ersteigen.	<i>However high the mountain may be, we'll climb it.</i>
Er möge schreien, soviel er will, wir kaufen es ihm nicht.	<i>He can yell as much as he wants, but we won't buy it for him.</i>