

On the semantics of subjunctive ‘tenses’ in Romance languages

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1. Introduction

The literature on the semantics of mood in Romance languages has been focused on the opposition between the indicative and the subjunctive moods. In my communication, I will consider a less explored topic: the semantics of the different subjunctive tenses.

Past Imperfect Subjunctive	Present Subjunctive	Simple Future Subjunctive
‘falasse’	‘fale’ (‘speak’)	‘falar’
Pluperfect Subjunctive	Past Perfect Subjunctive	Compound Future subjunctive
‘tivesse falado’	‘tenha falado’	‘tiver falado’
French, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, ...		Portuguese

Table I – Subjunctive ‘tenses’ in Romance Languages

If, following Kamp & Reyle 1993, the semantics of the compound forms is assumed to be basically identical to the simple forms, the subjunctive system in most Romance languages is reduced to two forms: *present* and *past subjunctive*, while in Portuguese the subjunctive system has three forms: *past*, *present* and *future subjunctive*.

2. Traditional assumption (cf., e.g., traditional grammars, Picallo 1984, Ambar 1992, Vogel 1997, Laca 2007)

- The semantic difference between the various subjunctive forms is of temporal nature: the *present subjunctive* and the *past imperfect subjunctive* have, respectively, present and past temporal reference.

- (1) a. Agora duvido que eles **cheguem**_{PRES-SUBJ} a tempo.
‘Now I doubt that they will arrive on time’
- b. Naquela altura eu duvidava que eles **chegassem**_{PAST-SUBJ} a tempo.
‘That time, I had doubts that they would arrive on time’

Problem 1: In several kinds of constructions the opposition between the *present* and *past subjunctive* is not of temporal nature:

- (2) a. com este frio, ainda que **fosses**_{PAST-SUBJ} passear, não ficarias_{COND} melhor
‘with this cold, you would not feel better, even if you went for a walk’
- b. com este frio, ainda que **saias**_{PRES-SUBJ} para passear, não ficarás_{FUT-IND} melhor
‘with this cold, you will not feel better, even if go for a walk’
- (3) a. com este frio, caso **saísse**_{PAST-SUBJ}, apanharias_{COND} uma gripe
‘with this cold weather, if you were to go out, you would get a flu’
- b. com este frio, caso **saias**_{PRES-SUBJ}, apanhas uma gripe.
‘with this cold weather, if you are to go out, you will get a flu’
- (4) a. com este lindo dia, logo que **saísse**_{PAST-SUBJ}, sentir-te-ias_{COND} melhor
‘with this beautiful day, you would feel much better, as soon as you went out’
- b. com este lindo dia, logo que **saias**_{PRES-SUBJ}, vais_{PRES-IND} sentir-te muito melhor
‘with this lovely day, you will feel much better, as soon as you go out’
- (5) a. com esta tempestade, uma pessoa que **estivesse**_{PAST-SUBJ} na rua estaria_{COND} aflita
‘with such a storm, anyone who were outside would be in trouble’
- b. com esta tempestade, uma pessoa que **esteja**_{PRES-SUBJ} na rua está_{PRES-IND} aflita
‘with such a storm, anyone who is outside is in trouble’

- Laca 2007 suggests that these cases with the past subjunctive “can be assimilated to the numerous instances of past tenses used for signaling counterfactuality or non-realistic modal bases (see Iatridou 2000)” (Laca 2007, 5).

Problem 2: Future subjunctive

The *future subjunctive* occurs in conditional clauses introduced by *se* ('if'); temporal clauses introduced by *quando* ('when'), *enquanto* ('while') or *assim que* ('as soon as') and relative clauses if the relativized NP has a universal quantifier. The *present subjunctive* is ruled out from these cases, although it might occur in other conditional, temporal and relative clauses (cf. (3)-(5) and (9)):

- (6) se **estiveres**_{FUT-SUBJ} / ***estejas**_{PRES-SUBJ} em casa, telefona-me
if [you] are at home, phone me
 - (7) quando **estiveres**_{FUT-SUBJ} / ***estejas**_{PRES-SUBJ} em casa, telefona-me
when [you] are at home, phone me
 - (8) (todos) os estudantes que **participarem**_{FUT-SUBJ} / ??**participem**_{PRES-SUBJ} receberão um certificado
'(all) the students that participate will receive a certificate'
 - (9) é melhor entrares antes que ***chover**_{FUT-SUBJ} / **chova**_{PRES-SUBJ}
'you should come in before it rains'
- No difference of temporal nature seems to exist between the constructions with the *present subjunctive* and those with the *future subjunctive*. Thus, the assumption that the difference among the subjunctive forms is basically of temporal nature is questionable.

3. Alternative proposal: the difference among the subjunctive forms is of modal nature

Sketch of the proposal:

Assumption: Mood affixes are marks signaling the set of possible worlds to be considered. The indicative mood indicates that the proposition is verified in all the considered possible worlds; the subjunctive mood indicates that the proposition is not verified in some of them.

(amendment): Following Portner 1997, the notion of "possible world" is replaced by the notion of "possible situation" (possible situations being parts of possible worlds). I.e., mood affixes point to ordered pairs formed by worlds and time intervals.

- Proposal:
- (i) The *present subjunctive* and the *future subjunctive* impose the following restrictions on the members of the ordered pairs:
 - (a) the possible worlds to be taken into account belong to the context set (the set of alive possibilities at each point of the conversation);
 - (b) the considered time intervals include t_0 .
 - (ii) The *past imperfect subjunctive* does not have these restrictions; i.e., it does not signal that the set of possible worlds to be considered belongs to the context or that the parts of worlds to be considered include t_0 .

3.1 Past imperfect subjunctive vs. present and future subjunctive

- (10) Naquela altura eu duvidava que eles **chegassem**_{PAST-SUBJ} / ***cheguem**_{PRES-SUBJ} / ***chegarem**_{FUT-SUBJ} a tempo
'That time, I had doubts that they would arrive on schedule'
- In complement clauses as (10), where the main verb has past reference, only the *past imperfect subjunctive* is allowed because the parts of the possible worlds to be considered do not include the time of speech. I.e., one is talking about the past, and what might be the case at the present has no relevance for the information intended to convey. *Present* and *future subjunctive* are ruled out because they point to parts of worlds that include t_0 , thus leading to a mismatch between the information conveyed by the main and the complement clauses.
- (11) a. Agora duvido que eles **cheguem**_{PRES-SUBJ} a tempo.
'Now I doubt that they will arrive on time'
- b. Agora duvido que eles **chegassem**_{PAST-SUBJ} a tempo.
'Now I doubt that they would arrive on time'
- In sentences as (11a), the *present subjunctive* gives the instruction to consider possible worlds which include the time of speech and which are part of the context set. This information is compatible with the one conveyed by the main clause, which has present reference.

- ▶ With the *past imperfect subjunctive*, the complement sentence might be interpreted as having past temporal reference, in which case the parts of worlds to be considered do not include t_0 , as it might be interpreted as if a hidden counterfactual concessive conditional was processed, in which case the set to be considered includes possible worlds which lie beyond the context set. I.e., out of context, (11b) might be interpreted as equivalent to (12a) or, e.g., (12b):

- (12) a. Agora duvido que eles chegassem_{PAST-SUBJ} a tempo naquele dia.
 ‘Now I doubt that they would arrive on time that day’
 b. Agora duvido que eles chegassem_{PAST-SUBJ} a tempo mesmo que viessem de helicóptero.
 ‘Now I doubt that they would arrive on time even if they came by helicopter’

3.2 Present subjunctive vs. future subjunctive

- ▶ The *future subjunctive* occurs only in restrictors of universal quantifiers, a context where the *present subjunctive* is ruled out. Thus, the opposition between the *present* and the *future subjunctive* does not seem to be related to time reference, but to the existence or non existence of universal quantification.
- ▶ Proposal: the *future subjunctive* occurs in propositions which are presented as being part of larger situations.

3.3 Posteriority reading in temporal clauses

If the *future subjunctive* does not convey temporal information, why are the temporal clauses with this morpheme temporally interpreted as following reference time?

- (13) a. Se **estiver**_{FUT-SUBJ} a chover, o trânsito está caótico [overlapping]
 if it is raining, the traffic is chaotic
 b. Se **chover**_{FUT-SUBJ}, o trânsito fica caótico [posteriority]
 if it is raining, the traffic turns chaotic
- (14) a. Todos os estudantes que **estiverem**_{FUT-SUBJ} na sala serão avisados [overlapping]
 ‘all the students that are in the classroom will be advised’
 b. Todos os estudantes que **acabarem**_{FUT-SUBJ} o curso receberão um certificado [posteriority]
 ‘all the students that finish their graduation will receive a certificate’
- (15) Quando **chover**_{FUT-SUBJ} / **estiver**_{FUT-SUBJ} a chover, as ruas ficam desertas [posteriority]
 ‘when it rains / will be raining, the streets will be empty’

- ▶ In conditional and relative clauses, the overlapping reading occurs with stative predicates, non stative predicates display the posteriority reading (see Condoravdi 2002). However, in temporal clauses with the *future subjunctive* only the posteriority reading is available even with stative predicates.

- ▶ Temporal connectors trigger a presupposition:

- (16) a. Before Strawson was even born, Frege noticed / didn’t notice presuppositions. (Levinson 1983)
 PRESS: Strawson was born.
 b. John left / will leave, (but not) when Mary came / comes.
 PRESS: Mary came / will come.
- (17) Se apanhaves_{FUT-SUBJ} uma gripe, deves ficar em casa.
 If you catch a flu, you must stay home.
 \Rightarrow You will catch a flu.
- (18) As pessoas que apanharem_{FUT-SUBJ} uma gripe devem ficar em casa.
 the persons that catch a flu must stay at home
 ‘Anyone who catches a flu must stay home.’
 \Rightarrow Someone will catch a flu.
- (19) Quando apanhaves_{FUT-SUBJ} uma gripe, deves ficar em casa.
 when [you] catch a flu, [you] must stay home
 PRESS: You will catch a flu.

- ▶ Hypothesis: Temporal connectors select an historical modal base, as defined in Werner 2006. The posteriority reading of the *future subjunctive* in temporal clauses follows from this together with the semantics of the *subjunctive* (see (i), p. 2).

- (20) For any world w and time t , $\cap f(w, t)$ = the set of worlds which are identical to w up through time t .

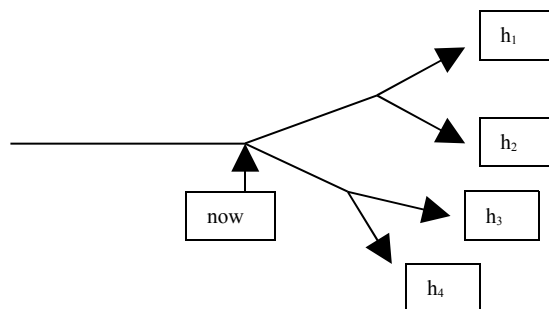


Figure 1 – Historical Modal Base

- (21) Quando **estiveres**_{FUT-SUBJ} doente, deves ficar em casa.
when [you] are ill, [you] must stay home

- (22) Se **estiveres**_{FUT-SUBJ} doente, deves ficar em casa.
if [you] are ill, [you] must stay home

► In (21), the posteriority reading arises because:

(a) on one side, the temporal connector indicates that its complement clause is true in the real world (i.e., there is a part of the real world where the state of affairs described by the temporal clause is verified);

(b) on the other side, the subjunctive leads to the consideration of alternative possible worlds/situations where the proposition is not verified;

Thus, if one considers a part of the real world where the state of affairs is verified and that does not follow t_0 , the condition imposed by the subjunctive – that there are alternative worlds/situations where the state of affairs is not verified – is not satisfied. On the contrary, if one considers a part of the real world where the state of affairs described by the temporal clause is verified and that follows t_0 (e.g., h_1), the modal base contains alternative possible situations where the state of affairs may not be satisfied (e.g., h_2). Hence the posteriority interpretation in temporal clauses follows from the condition imposed by the subjunctive, once it is assumed that temporal connectors as *when* select an historical modal base.

► In (22), since the conditional conjunction does not select an historical modal base, alternative possible worlds/situations where the state of affairs are not verified might be reached without resorting to the future. One may consider a part of the real world that includes t_0 (a possible situation) and alternative possible situations, the state of affairs being verified in some of these possible situations, but not in others.

4. Conclusion

The semantics of the subjunctive tenses is best analyzed if these forms are seen as modal operators rather than as morphemes conveying temporal information. This perspective allows the description of cases like ()-(), where no temporal difference exists between the *past subjunctive* and the *present subjunctive* and accounts for the fact that the opposition between the *present* and *future subjunctive* is not of temporal nature. The temporal information expressed by temporal clauses with the *future subjunctive* follows from the semantics of the subjunctive, once it is assumed that temporal connectors select historical modal bases.

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