

Chapter 29: The Imperfect Subjunctive

Chapter 29 covers the following: the formation of the imperfect subjunctive in all conjugations; the subjunctive of *sum*, *esse* in the present and imperfect tenses; the formation and use of result clauses; and at the end of the lesson we'll review the vocabulary which you should memorize in this chapter.

There are four important rules to remember in this chapter: (1) The imperfect subjunctive is formed by adding personal endings to the present active infinitive; [I know, I know. I'll explain it in a second.] (2) There is no future subjunctive; (3) The base of the present subjunctive of *sum* is *si-*; (4) Result clauses use the subjunctive; they are anticipated in the main sentence by *tam*, *talis*, *tantus*, *ita* or *sic* (all 'so' words) and in their own clauses are introduced by *ut* or *ut ... non*, *nullus*, *nemo*, *nihil*, and the like (but not *ne!*).

The existence of the imperfect subjunctive should be all the proof anyone needs that the subjunctive mood, just like the indicative, can change tense. And as you might expect from the term "imperfect," this tense of the subjunctive shows past action. At the same time it also signals that the verb represents action which is "uncertain" or is imbedded in a subordinate clause which calls for the subjunctive.

In terms of formation, the imperfect subjunctive is about the easiest type of verb we'll encounter in all of Latin. Take the present active infinitive, tack on personal endings and — tada! imperfect subjunctive! Use active endings, it's active. Passive, it's passive. First-, second- or third-person; singular or plural — it's as easy as *ducerem*, *duceres*, *duceret*, ... That's the active, or in the passive, *ducerer*, *ducereris*, *duceretur*, ... What's not to love here? Even I see no reason to chart this out ... but I can't help myself. I'm a teacher. I just feel naked without charts. So here's a chart with examples of one verb from each conjugation in the imperfect subjunctive active. Whew, I feel better. Hate that breeze.

Now let's turn me around and cover up my passives. *Amaremini!* I find it hard to imagine anyone actually ever saying *amaremini*. Which means ... it's Linguistics Time again! Also, Brutal Truth Hour. You know this is all a lie, right? You're not that easy to fool, are you? Come on, infinitives with endings? No way. That's a contradiction in terms. Infinitive means "no ending." That's because infinitives don't take endings. "No endings" means no endings. So, what's really going on here? What's really going on is that an archaic past-tense subjunctive marker *-se-* has changed to *-re-* because it had a single *-s-* in between two vowels. Rhotacism? Remember rhotacism? That's the same process that produced the present active infinitive *-re-* ending, but the similarity between the present infinitive and the base of the imperfect subjunctive is totally superficial. The original infinitive *-se* ending and the past subjunctive marker *-se* arise from completely different sources. That they ended up looking alike is a coincidence, a happy coincidence, very convenient for Latin students but utterly without linguistic basis.

The Romans were not thinking "y'all to love" when they heard *amaremini* — if they ever heard it. No, they were thinking "y'all were (in the past) being loved" — or "y'all were being loved (in a clause)." They were thinking subjunctive with a -1 time value. That means a form like *ducerem* is best translated as "I led, I did lead (S)," but take careful note here. It's not necessarily "I was

leading, used to lead.” It can be but it doesn’t have to be. Unlike the imperfect indicative, the imperfect subjunctive doesn’t represent incomplete or repeated action in the past. Instead, it’s used in a different way, which we’ll address in the next chapter. For now, just translate it as any English -1 time-value past-tense form, with (S) after it. [To be honest, “imperfect” subjunctive is not a very good name for this tense, not that I know of a better one, which is beside the point because we’re stuck with the name “imperfect” now. Just don’t let it mislead you into thinking this tense form is actually “imperfect.” It’s not. It’s just past-tense.]

In the present system there are only two subjunctive tenses: the present and the imperfect. No future! “Future subjunctive” is another contradiction in terms, since the future indicative shows the speaker feels certain about the future (“I will come”), while the subjunctive shows uncertainty (“I might come”). One out of the three tenses missing! How can any student feel bad about that?

The verb “to be” in Latin (*sum, esse*) is, as you might expect, irregular in the subjunctive — why not? it is everywhere else — but not as irregular as you might fear. The Romans used the subjunctive a lot but not as much as the indicative. The subjunctive thus could support some irregularity, but not too much. In the present subjunctive, *sum* uses the base *si-* to which it adds personal endings. In the imperfect, it does exactly what it should: it adds personal endings to the infinitive *esse*, producing: *sim, sis, sit, simus, sitis, sint* (present); and *essem, esses, esset, essemus, essetis, essent* (imperfect). *Possum, posse* (“to be able”) follows suit: *possim, possis, possit, ...* (present); and in the imperfect, *possem, posses, posset, ...* and so on. There’s really only one thing to learn here: the present subjunctive of *sum* uses the base *si-*. Everything else after that follows the rules.

It’s worth noting, however, one possible trap here. *Possim* (with an *-i-*) is the present subjunctive form. *Possem* (with an *-e-*) is the imperfect. A small but huge difference, especially when you think about their meaning. If *sim* means “I am (S)” and *essem* “I was (S),” then *possim* means “I am able (S)” and *possem* “I was able (S).” *Possim* (present, “am/is”), *possem* (imperfect, “was”). Tattoo that backwards on your forehead so you see it every time you look in the mirror.

Chapter 29 introduces a second type of subordinate clause which takes the subjunctive, the result clause in which the speaker remarks on the consequences of something being or being done in some extreme degree producing a notable “result.” For instance, “You’re *so* smart *that you always understand everything I’m saying.*” And that’s because “You have *such* a quick mind *that you get everything the first time I say it.*” Got it, Brainiac?

Look closely and you’ll see that result clauses like the two above require three components: first, a sign or degree word in the main sentence tripping off the possibility of expressing result. This sign word can take the form of anything that conveys a sense of “so, such.” In Latin those are *tam/ita/sic* (“so”), *talis* (“such”) and *tantus* (“so great, so much”). Next, there has to be a word for “that,” in Latin *ut* — just like purpose! — but the negator is different. Result can use any negative form (*non, nullus, numquam, ...*), anything except *ne*. No *ne* ever with result! [Tattoo that too on your forehead!]

And finally, the simplest element, a result clause needs a subjunctive verb. Here's an example: *Tam mali erant ut rem publicam tollerent*, meaning "They were so evil that (as a result) they destroyed the republic."

Note how this type of clause is negated: *Tam mali erant ut rem publicam servare non possem*, meaning "They were so evil that I could not save the republic." *Ut* plus *non*, not *ne*! Besides *tam*, those other sign words we mentioned above can also introduce a result clause, for instance, *tantus*: *Tantum scripsimus ut nemo librum totum legere posset*, "We wrote so much that no one could read the whole book." Note the use of the negator *nemo*. That's okay. Just not *ne*. Sometimes, however, the sense of a sentence alone can trip off a result clause if the thought involves some sort of extreme situation. In other words, result clauses usually have sign words but not always, for example, *Librum longissimum scripsimus ut nemo totum legeret*, "We wrote a very long book (with the result) that no one read the entire thing." So any words that have a natural sense of elevated degree can at times serve as sign words. That obviously includes superlatives like *longissimum* in the sentence above.

One last thing to note about this construction is that the Romans didn't distinguish between real and potential result. Real result shows what actually transpired, for example, "I was so tired that I fell asleep" — [That's right. I really did nod off and drool all over my keyboard as I was listening to this boring lecture on result clauses!] — versus "I am so tired that I could fall asleep any second now." [True, I haven't actually fallen asleep yet, but I am so tired and this presentation is so boring my potential result ... oh, no! I think it's happening. My potential result has become real result.] Clearly, the Romans didn't feel the need to clarify through grammar these very different types of thought. For instance, they could have used the indicative for real result and the subjunctive for potential result. That's the way the ancient Greeks did it. But by Roman times, the subjunctive had begun to be so closely associated with subordination (vs. uncertainty) *that as a result it was used in all result clauses, potential or not*, because that's what the subjunctive was coming to mean: "I may feel somehow uncertain about the truth of what I'm saying, but I know I'm in a clause." So the lack of a distinction between real and potential result in Latin can only mean the Romans relied on context to separate these two inherently different types of thought, the same way they trusted context to show whether *ut* introduces result or purpose. Note that, just as with reflexives, Latin tends not to overmark what doesn't need to be said. "Get to the point!" could have, should have been a Roman motto. So let's do that.

Vocabulary. The first word is *mens, mentis*, f., meaning "mind, thought, intention." It's third-declension feminine, and it's *i*-stem (monosyllabic with two consonants at the end of the base). So what's its genitive plural? *Mentium*. Good.

Next word, *miles, militis*, m., meaning "soldier." Third-declension masculine, and it's not *i*-stem. Nor is it an Indo-European word. There's nothing like it in any other Indo-European language. So the Romans must have picked it up somewhere. Did it come from one of their neighbors in Italy? The Etruscans perhaps, who lived on the Romans' northern border? They made an enormous impact on pre-classical Roman culture. And *miles* does indeed fit a pattern seen in other Latin words borrowed from Etruscan, like *velis, velitis* ("light-armed soldier") and *satelles, satellitis* ("bodyguard").

The next word is an adjective, *durus*, -a, -um, meaning “hard, harsh, rough, stern, unfeeling.” It’s first/second-declension. Nothing more to say about this word, so on to the next, *tantus*, -a, -um, meaning “so large, so great, of such a size.” It, too, is first/second-declension. This is one of the sign words we discussed above which can introduce a result clause. *Tantus* is the pair-word — the technical term is “correlative”— of the question word *quantus*, -a, -um (“how much?”). That is, *quantus* asks “how much” and *tantus* answers “that much.” *Tantus* is also paired with *talīs*, *tale* (“so, such, of such a quality”), a third-declension *i*-stem adjective. *Tantus* refers to the size of something, *talīs* to its quality or make-up. English inherited that same sensibility via our Latin derivatives “quantity” and “quality.” Please add *talīs*, *tale* to your vocabulary list. It’s an essential word to know in Latin.

The next word is another of those sign words, the adverb *ita*, meaning “so, thus.” Like *tantus*, it can introduce a result clause. This is the “so, thus” which is attached to adjectives (“He is so foolish ...”) or adverbs (“He acts so foolishly ...”), or even directly to verbs (“The fool acts thus/in such a way... that, as a result, nobody believes a word he says).” Like *tantus* and *quantus*, *ita* and *ut* are correlatives, literally “as/so/how ... thus,” for example, *Ut doctus, ita canis se geret*, “As (it was) taught, thus a dog will behave.”

A veritable synonym of *ita* is *sic*, also meaning “so, thus.” *Ita* and *sic* are virtually interchangeable in Latin, except that *sic* is used almost exclusively with verbs. And like *tantus*, *talīs*, and *ita*, it’s a sign word introducing a result clause, as is *tam*, meaning “so, to such a degree,” the last of the five words in this vocabulary list which often kick off result clauses. Unlike *sic*, however, *tam* is used exclusively with adjectives or adverbs, never with verbs.

Next up is *quidem*, another adverb, meaning “certainly, at least, even.” It’s often postpositive, that is, it comes second in the sentence, and it’s sometimes combined with *ne*, producing the idiom *ne ... quidem*, meaning “not even,” where *ne* and *quidem* usually surround the word they modify, e.g., *Ne veritas quidem nos servare nunc potest*, “Not even the truth can save us now.” Be careful not to confuse this word with *quidam*! What does *quidam* mean? That’s right: “a certain person, some person.” It’s a pronoun and changes form as it declines. *Quidem*, the adverb (“certainly”) never changes form.

The next word is a verb, *disco*, *discere*, *didici*, meaning “learn.” It’s third-conjugation. Be careful! *Disco* (“learn”) is the opposite of *doceo* (“teach”). They look alike and are easily confused. And I’ll answer your question before you ask it. No! This is not where we get our word “discus” or “disco” (as in “discotheque”). I’m sure there are many things a person can “learn” in a disco — probably a frightening number of things — but Latin isn’t one of them. Look at the perfect *didici*. It’s reduplicated, but not with the usual -e-. With -i-! Note also there’s no fourth principal part. That’s because there’s no passive at all for this verb. Just like English, in Latin “you can’t be learned nuthin’!” So how would Latin say “they will learn”? [What conjugation is *disco*? Third. And how does third conjugation form its future tense? With -e-. So what’s the answer?] *Discent*.

And the final word in this vocabulary list is *discipulus*, -i, m., meaning “learner, pupil, student.” It’s a second-declension masculine noun. *Discipulus* comes from the same base as *disco* and

produces our derivative “disciple,” a person who is “learning” something. How would Latin say “for the students”? Good, *discipulis*.

Do the rules that were cited at the beginning of this chapter now make sense to you? If not, please review this presentation. If so, please proceed to the next slide. For the next class meeting, please bring in a copy of the worksheet for Chapter 29. Here’s a link to that worksheet.

Amor tuus Latinae tantus sit ut plurima discatis, O discipuli cari!