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**The French Subjunctive in Context:** *a comparative study of the uses of the subjunctive in French compared to its uses in other Romance languages*

**Introduction**

This paper is an attempt to provide a broader perspective on the usage of the subjunctive in French through a comparative study of the subjunctive in four other contemporary Romance languages: Romanian, Spanish<sup>1</sup>, Portuguese and Italian. The objective is to determine what characteristics, if any, are unique to the French subjunctive, what characteristics it shares with the other Romance languages, and whether or not these differences and similarities can be found to characterise any underlying pattern or philosophy unique to the French language.

We will begin by examining the subjunctive in each of the aforementioned languages in turn, relating certain aspects of them to French where appropriate. Then we will turn to the French subjunctive and examine its usage in relation to the other languages. Finally we will draw conclusions based upon this comparison.

**Romanian**

Romanian, sometimes spelled “Rumanian”, is by far the most unique of the Romance languages, both in terms of its use of the subjunctive as well as many other

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<sup>1</sup> Purists would argue that the term *Spanish* is meaningless, so in the interests of clarity I will state that by this term I refer to the Castilian language.

grammatical features.<sup>2</sup> This is due to the isolation of Romanian from the influence of the other Romance languages during its evolution, coupled with a high degree of contact with, and therefore influence from, the nearby Balkan languages.<sup>3</sup> As a result, the Romanian subjunctive bears little resemblance to that of any other Romance language, either in appearance or usage,<sup>4</sup> and it can best be described in terms of these differences.

In Romanian, verb endings are generally less complex than in other Romance languages, and this can be seen in the subjunctive, where the first and second person forms (both singular and plural) are identical to those in the present indicative. Only the third person forms are unique to the subjunctive, with the singular and plural forms being identical to one another. The only exception is the verb *a<sup>5</sup> fi* (to be), which has unique forms for the first, second, and third person forms, although even here, the two third person forms are identical to one another (*sa fie* and *sa fie*). (Forms unique to the subjunctive are in italics.):

	<u>A FI</u>	
	<u>Indicative</u>	<u>Subjunctive</u>
<b>I</b>	<b>sint</b>	<i>sa fiu</i>
<b>You</b>	<b>esti</b>	<i>sa fii</i>
<b>He/she/it</b>	<b>este</b>	<i>sa fie</i>

<sup>2</sup> It has, for example, retained features from Latin, such as three genders and a simplified case system, neither of which is found in any other Romance language.

<sup>3</sup> In fact, the languages of this region have influenced one another to such a degree that they are said to form a linguistic union, referred to as the Balkan Union. In other words, even though they are not closely related linguistically, they still share several grammatical features acquired from one another through prolonged contact, one of which is the use of the subjunctive to replace the infinitive.

<sup>4</sup> A Romanian student of English, whom I contacted via e-mail, argued that there is no subjunctive at all in Romanian and that I had actually mistaken the Romanian conjunctive for the subjunctive, which is very different. However, since all of the resources I consulted on Romanian written in English refer to the conjunctive as the subjunctive, and because Italian also refers to its subjunctive as the conjunctive, I feel secure in concluding that conjunctive is merely the Romanian term for subjunctive. The fact that she made that mistake though, underscores just how great the differences are.

<sup>5</sup> The word *a* is a marker (like *sa*) and indicates that the verb which follows is an infinitive. It corresponds the use of the word *to* before an infinitive in English.

<b>We</b>	<b>sintem</b>	<b><i>sa fim</i></b>
<b>You</b>	<b>sinteti</b>	<b><i>sa fiti</i></b>
<b>They</b>	<b>sint</b>	<b><i>sa fie</i></b>

Notice the word *sa* which precedes all of the subjunctive forms. Since in the majority of cases, indicative and subjunctive verb forms are identical, Romanian uses the morpheme *sa*<sup>67</sup> to make the distinction. *Sa* is not a subordinating conjunction (like *que* in French) and has no lexical meaning per se; it merely indicates that the verb which follows is in the subjunctive mode. (*sa* is always used before a subjunctive, even when the verb form of a subjunctive is distinct from the indicative.)

In order to illustrate these points more clearly, below is the less irregular verb *a avea* (to have), conjugated in both the present indicative and subjunctive. (The third person subjunctive forms are italicized.):

	<b><u>A AVEA</u></b>	
	<b><u>Indicative</u></b>	<b><u>Subjunctive</u></b>
<b>I</b>	<b>am</b>	<b><i>sa am</i></b>
<b>You</b>	<b>ai</b>	<b><i>sa ai</i></b>
<b>He/she/it</b>	<b>are</b>	<b><i>sa aiba</i></b>
<b>We</b>	<b>avem</b>	<b><i>sa avem</i></b>
<b>You</b>	<b>aveti</b>	<b><i>sa aveti</i></b>
<b>They</b>	<b>au</b>	<b><i>sa aiba</i></b>

Besides relying mainly on a marker (*sa*) rather than distinct verb forms to indicate the subjunctive mood, Romanian has adopted the Balkan tendency of suppressing the use of the infinitive in favor of the subjunctive. In most Romance languages, it is not permissible to use the subjunctive in a subordinating clause if the verb in the main clause

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<sup>6</sup> It is interesting to note that this accented a (a), as well as most other accented Romanian letters, is not included as one of the 256 ASCII characters, even though such obscure characters as the Danish Ø, the Icelandic þ, and the unidentifiable Ɔ, are included.

has the same subject, for example the English sentence “*He wants me to work.*” Would be translated into most Romance languages in the form “*He wants that I work.*” with the verb *work* in the subjunctive:

**French:** Il veut que je travaille.

**Portuguese:** Ele quer que eu trabalhe.

**Spanish:** El quiere que yo trabaje.

However, the sentence “*He wants to work.*”, where the subject of both verbs is the same, does *not* become “*He wants that he works.*” Instead, the infinitive is used as it is in English:

**French:** Il veut travailler.

**Portuguese:** Ele quer trabalhar.

**Spanish:** El quiere trabajar.

The Romanian wording of the sentence is “*He wants he works.*”, where *wants* is in the indicative, *works* is in the subjunctive, and no subordinating conjunction is used:

**Romanian:** El vrea sa lucreze.

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<sup>7</sup> In English this accent is referred to as a smile, so *a* is called “a-smile”.

This practice greatly increases the frequency with which the subjunctive is used in Romanian<sup>8</sup>.

As is the case in all Romance languages, certain Romanian verbs always require the use of the subjunctive when followed by a relative clause. What makes Romanian unique in this regard is that there does not appear to be much pattern of wishing, doubt, or situations contrary to fact related to these verbs as is the case in all other Romance languages. We have already seen from the above examples that *a vrea* (to want) is one such verb just as it is in all other Romance languages, but what about these?:

<b>-a trebui</b>	<b>must</b>
<b>-a putea</b>	<b>can</b>
<b>-a incerca</b>	<b>to try</b>
<b>-a continua</b>	<b>to continue</b>
<b>-a incepe</b>	<b>to begin</b>
<b>-a indrazni</b>	<b>dare</b>

Clearly the Romanian subjunctive bears little resemblance to its French counterpart. As we shall later see, it is by far the most unique of the Romance languages, both in terms of usage and form.

## **Portuguese**

The Portuguese subjunctive distinguishes itself by having more tenses than any other Romance language<sup>9</sup>. The three main tenses are the present, imperfect and future, all

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<sup>8</sup> It also makes it necessary for non-native speakers studying Romanian to be exposed to the subjunctive far sooner than is typical for students of other Romance languages. The beginners' textbook I used for part of my research introduces it in chapter ten; there are 25 chapters in total. By contrast, Ball State only introduces its Spanish students to the subjunctive late in their second year of study.

<sup>9</sup> One probable exception is Galician, which has an almost identical grammar to Portuguese. (It differs mainly in spelling, pronunciation, and vocabulary.) I haven't done the research, but probably everything I

of which are simple (not needing to be formed with auxiliary verbs). There are also two composed tenses, perfect and past perfect, formed with the auxiliary *ter* (to have).

Remarkably, native speakers of Portuguese use all of these tenses effortlessly in everyday speech<sup>1011</sup>. None are restricted to literary use. All of these tenses work almost exactly as their French counterparts, with the exception of the future, which has no counterpart in French.

By far, the future is the most unique subjunctive tense in Portuguese. It which did not even exist in Latin and occurred only once in the history of Romance languages<sup>12</sup> in the proto-Iberian language that spawned Spanish, Portuguese and Galician. Besides its unique history, what makes the future subjunctive remarkable is how it is used. Whereas most other subjunctive tenses in Portuguese (as well as in other Romance languages, including French) occur in subordinate *que* clauses, the future subjunctive appears almost exclusively in *se* (if) and *quando* (when) clauses, referring to the future. Although this is consistent with the subjunctive idea of uncertainty, I don't know of any other case where a Romance language would use a subjunctive in an if or when clause, although this is very common in Germanic languages, such as English and German<sup>13</sup>. Here are some examples:

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state about the Portuguese subjunctive is the same in Galician. I know for a fact that Galician has a future subjunctive.

<sup>10</sup> What makes this even more remarkable is that despite their total mastery of the subjunctive, only highly educated Brazilians know how to properly use the imperative, a much simpler form.

<sup>11</sup> One minor exception to this is the fact that the majority of Brazilians are under the mistaken impression that the correct future subjunctive stem of the verb *ver* (to see) is *ver-* rather than *vir-*.

<sup>12</sup> I remember reading somewhere that in one or two obscure dialects of Italian there is some form of future subjunctive.

<sup>13</sup> Examples: *If I were rich, I would buy a car.*  
*Wenn ich Geld hätte, würde ich ein Auto kaufen.*

*Se eu **comer** demais, vou engordar.* (future subjunctive simple)

*Se eu **tiver comido** demais, vou engordar.* (future subjunctive composed)

If I eat too much, I will become fat.

*Quando eu **for** na França, vou ter que falar francês.* (simple)

*Quando eu **tiver ido** na França, vou ter que falar francês.* (composed)

When I go to France, I will have to speak French.

Where one does not encounter the future subjunctive is where one would most expect it, namely in *que* clauses referring to the future. In other words, it is not possible to take the following sentence and put it into the future by changing the tense of the subjunctive:

*Eu duvido que você **tenha estudado** francês ontem.* (perfect subjunctive)

I doubt that you studied French yesterday.

The proper future form would merely use the present subjunctive<sup>14</sup>:

*Eu duvido que você **estude** amanhã.* (present subjunctive)

I doubt that you will study tomorrow.

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<sup>14</sup> This may be due to the fact that Latin, having never adopted a future subjunctive tense, also used the present subjunctive in the future sense. In other words, Portuguese appears to have retained the original Latin pattern in this case. (Unfortunately, my Latin is too poor to allow me to provide the Latin translation of this sentence.)

The future, however, is not the only subjunctive tense to be used in if (se) clauses. The imperfect, in addition to being used as it is in French que clauses, is employed in if clauses relating to statements contrary to fact. (Although it should be noted that the Portuguese imperfect subjunctive, unlike the future, is not used in when (quando) clauses.) French uses the imperfect to convey the same idea. Let's look at some examples.

First, as stated previously, the imperfect subjunctive fulfills the same rôle in Portuguese as it does in French; namely it takes the place of the present subjunctive in a que clause when the verb in the main clause is in a past tense.

*J'étais heureux que sa femme **fût** riche.*

*Eu estava feliz que sua mulher **fosse** rica.*

In addition, it appears in contrary-to-fact if clauses, corresponding to the French use of the imperfect:

*Si j'**étais** riche, j'achèterais une voiture. (imperfect indicative)*

*Se eu **fosse** rico, compraria um carro. (imperfect subjunctive)<sup>15</sup>*

However, Portuguese does *not* use the subjunctive mode if the expression is not contrary-to-fact. This enables Portuguese to make a distinction not possible in French:

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<sup>15</sup> Note that both languages use the conditional in the main clause.



*Se João não **tivesse** culpa, por que será que ele foi preso?* (imperfect subjunctive)

*Se João não **tinha** culpa, por que será que ele foi preso?* (imperfect indicative)

If John wasn't/weren't guilty, then why was he arrested?

Here the only difference is in the mode of the verb, but the meanings of the two sentences are different. The first is hypothetical; it is understood that John was in fact guilty, and the speaker is asking for speculation. In the second sentence, the speaker knows that John was not guilty and wants to know why he was arrested. This is the only case I know of in a Romance language where the use or omission of the subjunctive, without additional alterations to the sentence, conveys meaning. Normally the subjunctive merely reflects an idea already conveyed by the rest of the sentence, and switching modes would only result in a grammatical error, rather than a change in meaning.

As is common in all Romance languages, Portuguese requires the use of the subjunctive after certain words and in specific situations. For the most part, Portuguese follows the same patterns as French. The subjunctive is used to express wishing, wanting and desire:

*Quero que você me **dê** dinheiro.*

*Je veux que vous me **donniez** de l'argent.*

It also expresses emotion:

*Tenho medo que isso **seja** perigoso.*

*Je crains que cela **soit** dangereux.*

It is used in clauses of uncertainty:

*Preciso encontrar um republicano que **seja** inteligente.*

*J'ai besoin de trouver un républicain qui **soit** intelligent.*

I would estimate that in 90 percent of the instances in which the subjunctive is used in Portuguese, it would also be utilized in French. Clearly the overall philosophy underlying the use of the subjunctive is nearly identical in both languages, and there is little to be gained by making a thorough inventory of all the similarities.

An examination of the differences also serves to underscore the similarity, as most differences are due to differing interpretations of the same rules. One example of this can be seen in the use of the subjunctive after the Portuguese verb *esperar* corresponding to the French verb *espérer*, both meaning “to hope”<sup>16</sup>. In Portuguese, this verb is always followed by the subjunctive, the rationale being that hoping conveys wishing and wanting, as well as uncertainty about the occurrence of a future event. (After all, if one is certain of the outcome, there would be no need to engage in hoping.) To the French grammarian (Are there any French who aren't?), the logic is perfectly comprehensible and totally in keeping with French rules. The French however, interpret the rules differently with respect to this verb. For them, *espérer* is a verb of thinking or opinion, like *penser* or *croire*, since hoping for or against something reflects an opinion as to whether or not an outcome is desirable, therefore *espérer* only triggers the

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<sup>16</sup> Also, they both have the secondary meaning “to wait”.

subjunctive when it is negated. Admittedly the French interpretation is a bit of a stretch (a convoluted and bizarre use of logic of which only the French are capable), but the point is that both languages used the same rules on the same verb and reached different positions solely on the basis of interpretation, not because of grammatical differences. The French and Portuguese positions could just as easily have been reversed.

Another interesting difference between the usage of the French and Portuguese subjunctives is that unlike in French, the Portuguese subjunctive *can* occur outside of a *que* or *qui* clause, after the word *talvez* (maybe):

*Talvez eu não **tenha estudado** o suficiente.*

Maybe I didn't study enough.

Perhaps this is due to attempts on the part of French grammarians to maintain consistency in the language. *Peut-être* definitely conveys uncertainty, but it does not introduce a clause and would be the only exception to the *que/qui* rule. But what about *Peut-être que*? French logic eludes me here.

On a more minor point, it is interesting to note that the Portuguese present subjunctive is derived from the stem of the first person singular of the present indicative rather than the third person plural, as is the case in French. (Portuguese does however, derive the future subjunctive from the third person plural stem of the perfect tense.)

## Spanish

Anyone who has studied both Spanish and Portuguese will tell you that once you have mastered an aspect of Portuguese grammar, it is a simple matter to learn it again in Spanish, since the Spanish version will doubtless be far simpler than it is in Portuguese; whatever complexities it does have will be nearly identical in Portuguese; and what few significant differences there are will be very easy to learn. The Spanish subjunctive epitomizes this phenomenon.

The subjunctive tenses in Spanish are the same as those in Portuguese, but the future long ago fell into disuse and became an almost exclusively literary tense, and today it is almost never even used in writing. Most Spanish speakers have only seen this tense in *Don Quixote*, where it was used for satirical purposes, having already fallen into disuse by 1612 when the work was published. The tense is still used in a few isolated places. According to Dr. Gauggel, some Colombians use it, and Spaniards are able to recognize it, although they never use it themselves. I also read that some Argentinian newspapers like to use it. Nevertheless, it is so rare nowadays that Dr. Gauggel believes himself to be the only person in the entire state of Indiana to actively use it.<sup>17</sup> The future was used in Spanish exactly as it is in Portuguese in if and when clauses<sup>18</sup>.

The imperfect subjunctive works the same as in Portuguese, except that it does not appear in if clauses. In other words it works exactly like its French Counterpart. It does however differ from Portuguese in that it has two forms, both of which are composed. Each comes from a separate Latin root tense. Both forms are used in identical

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<sup>17</sup> He did however, admit to the possibility that there may be highly educated Colombians living in the state who are also wont to use it.

situations, but only one of the two is commonly used. (It is unfortunate that this is not the one which most closely resembles the Portuguese form.)

Other than that, the Spanish rules governing the use of the subjunctive are the same as those for Portuguese. It does not appear that our study of the Spanish subjunctive contributes much to our examination of French.

## **Italian**

The Italian subjunctive is fairly straightforward, and, of all the languages covered, bears the most resemblance to French. It has four tenses, and these are identical to those in French: present, perfect, past perfect, and imperfect. Furthermore, the present and imperfect tenses are simple, while the perfect and past perfect tenses are composed, once again exactly as in French.

As in all the Romance languages we have covered, with the exception of Romanian, Italian only uses the subjunctive when the subject of the subordinate clause is different from that of the main clause. Otherwise the infinitive is used.

The rules for the use of the subjunctive are very similar to those of French, Spanish and Portuguese<sup>19</sup>. It is used in subordinate clauses to express uncertainty, doubt, judgement, emotion, and everything else expressed by the French subjunctive.

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<sup>18</sup> I have also come across information that it was used in *que* clauses referring to the future, but I could not find a totally reliable source for this, and I suspect that the tense has been out of use for so long, that many people are mistaken as to its correct usage.

<sup>19</sup> Although the rules are essentially the same, they are not expressed identically. Wording and choice of examples tend to differ a little from one language to another. One Italian text I read states that one use of the subjunctive is to express a curse:

*Vadano alla malora!* – Bad luck to them!

In Italian the subjunctive is used with more frequency than in French, due to a looser interpretation of the rules. One example is the verb for *sperare* “to hope” which takes the subjunctive, even when it is not negated, just like in Spanish and Portuguese:

*Spero che<sup>20</sup> egli scriva.* -- I hope that he writes.

But unlike the other Romance languages covered here, Italian also uses the subjunctive with with the verb *pensare* “to think”, even when not negated:

*Penso che dorma.* – I think he is sleeping.

This is still consistent with the rules, since thinking something is not the same as knowing something and can imply a certain level of doubt. To the Italians, this distinction is significant.

Agreement of tense is the same as in the other Romance languages (except of course Romanian). If the verb in the main clause is in the present or future, then the subjunctive must be in the present. If the main verb is in the perfect or imperfect, the subjunctive must also be in one of those tenses, except where it indicates a completed action which preceded that of the main verb, in which case the past perfect must be used.

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<sup>20</sup> Notice that Italian uses *che* as its subordinating conjunction, rather than *que*.

## French

French as a Romance language is clearly not radically different in its use of the subjunctive. In fact, as we have already seen, it uses nearly (in some cases, perhaps entirely) the same rules as Portuguese, Spanish and Italian. Although there are a few cases where the rules are applied differently (i.e. *espérer* or *penser* in the affirmative), such differences are exceptions rather than the rule. As a student having studied several years of French, Spanish and Portuguese, I have observed that in the vast majority of cases, it is possible for a speaker of one of these languages to nearly always correctly employ the subjunctive in any of the others without being familiar with the rules.

With regard to tenses, the French subjunctive has four: present, imperfect, perfect and past perfect. It has no tenses not found in the other Romance languages (except of course Romanian). Furthermore, *all* of these tenses occur in the other languages, and Italian, like French, has only these four tenses. Also, in all of these languages, the present and imperfect are simple, and the two perfect tenses are composed, just like in French.

Agreement is also identical in all of these languages<sup>21</sup>. See the above paragraph on Italian agreement for a detailed description.

French, like Italian, does not share the Spanish and Portuguese practice of allowing the subjunctive to appear in a main clause beginning with a certain trigger word<sup>22</sup>, like “maybe”, as in *talvez* (Portuguese) or *tal vez* (Spanish). The only occurrence of the subjunctive in the absence of a *que* or *qui* is in a few idiomatic expressions:

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<sup>21</sup> See footnote 18 for a possible exception in Spanish.

<sup>22</sup> Another Spanish word that triggers the subjunctive in a main clause is *ojalá* “let’s hope”. The addition of *que* after this word is optional.

**Vive la France!**

**Meurent les traîtres!**

But even here, a preceding main clause is implied:

*(Je désire que) Vive la France!*

*(Je souhaite que) Meurent les traîtres!*

And this practice is not unique to French:

**Viva o rei!** – Long live the king! (portuguese)

As to the radical differences in usage and form between Romanian and French (as well as Portuguese, Spanish and Italian), it appears that Romanian is a unique case. (Had I been aware of this from the beginning, I probably would not have researched it in such detail.) One might even make the argument that the Romanian subjunctive is entirely borrowed from neighboring unrelated languages<sup>23</sup> and therefore is not relevant to this study. Whether or not that is the case, I would argue that since Romanian *is* classified as a Romance language, its subjunctive must also be classified as such, regardless of origin.

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<sup>23</sup> Linguists point to the Balkan Union (footnote 3) as evidence that there are no linguistic restrictions on what grammatical forms, words or sounds one language may borrow from another as a result of sustained or repeated contact.



## Conclusion

The original objective of this study was to determine what makes the French subjunctive unique as a Romance language and perhaps even identify an underlying pattern or linguistic philosophy underlying those differences. Surprisingly, it turns out that what makes the French subjunctive unique is that it is the most generic of all the languages studied. With the obvious exception of Romanian, it was not possible to identify a single characteristic of its usage<sup>24</sup> or a special tense which does not exist in the other languages. Italian comes in at a very close second and would tie with French as most generic were it not for its looser interpretation of what constitutes doubt. Clearly anyone wishing to acquire knowledge of how the subjunctive is used in modern Romance languages should begin their study with French.

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<sup>24</sup> I do not consider the non-use of the subjunctive outside of dependent clauses, as is the case in Portuguese and Spanish, to be relevant as a unique trait. If Italian shared this feature with the Iberian languages, then perhaps one could make the argument.