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## What's the Subjunctive, Again? Preparing English Speakers for Learning Spanish

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**What's the Subjunctive, Again?**  
**Preparing English Speakers for Learning Spanish**

By

Emmy Lou Pearl Olsen

An Honors Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for Graduation from the  
Western Oregon University Honors Program

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# Acknowledgements

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## Personal Connection:

My personal journey to learn Spanish has been a long one; I figure it at just about eighteen years. From my kindergarten teacher, I learned my colors, numbers, alphabet, some animals—all the things that little kids learn—but I think more than basic vocabulary, Mrs. Kirby gave me a spark. I was hooked from age five, and I had the sounds of Spanish all rolling around in my mouth and ringing in my ears, just waiting for more knowledge and more use.

From there I was in a couple of after-school Spanish classes during elementary and middle school, gaining vocabulary and phrases, but never for any considerable length of time. I traveled a few times during that period with my family, and being in Mexico and Costa Rica kept my interest in Spanish strong. It was also on those early travels that I began to appreciate the differences between varieties of Spanish spoken from country to country.

I suppose that I didn't start actually studying the language until my freshman year of high school. I committed to four years of Spanish rather than the suggested two, and eventually ended up giving up calculus in favor of advanced Spanish. One secondary education later, I went out into the Spanish-speaking world only to realize—to my dismay—that I was not even remotely conversational in the language. I was frustrated to realize that all I had gained so far was rudimentary “tourist Spanish” as I called it. Of course,

reading road signs and asking for directions are important foreign language skills, but I knew then that I wanted more.

It was after that maddening experience in Spain that I got serious and dove into an immersion program in South America. Three months of travel and immersion and home stays in Peru, Argentina, and Chile gave me the fluency and confidence to be able to say, “I speak Spanish.” There is, of course, no substitute for immersion, when it comes to second language learning, and my own experience with immersion inspired me to pursue Spanish as my degree at Western Oregon University. Four more years of study and one more three-month immersion stint in Mendoza, Argentina have brought me to the proficiency level I have now, which I am finally proud of. I am pleased with how far I have come towards being bilingual, but I can’t help but think that there must be a faster way to get here for second language learners.

My interest in linguistics only took recognizable shape during my early time at Western, but in retrospect I truly have been interested in languages my whole life. I was that girl in elementary school who, after studying Norse mythology, learned to read and write in runes (which came in handy when I read Tolkien for the first time). It didn’t end there, either.

Through the Honors Program, I got to see a play at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival called *The Language Archive*. This beautiful play introduced me to the invented international language Esperanto. My

fascination with language and linguistics became clear to me when, in my free time, I began to teach myself Esperanto. Eventually, I realized that I am hopelessly in love with languages, and that learning them and teaching them is what I want to do with my life.

My linguistics studies at WOU only deepened my interest in human communication and made me ask more questions about how and why we learn to speak in multiple tongues. Pursuing the Teaching English as a Foreign Language certificate has clarified many of these questions, and even many of the answers to them. It is my study of second language acquisition coupled with my passion for Spanish and my own struggles in learning it (and some wise advising) that ultimately drove me to create this honors thesis project.

## Second Languages:

The most basic piece of widely accepted knowledge in the field of second language acquisition study is that there is a clear difference between learning a language and acquiring a language. The term “learning” specifically refers to the intentional and methodical study and instruction in which learners engage in order to gain language skills. Alternately, the term “acquisition” refers to the unconscious process by which learners who are exposed to a language system will internalize that system.

This difference is not trivial. It means, for example, that even though

students might learn how to conjugate numerous verbs and they might learn and be able to recite the rules governing the formation of many irregular verbs, it is only after prolonged or intense exposure to authentic native speaker or standard verb usage that they will acquire the ability to use those conjugations in spontaneous and authentic communication. Alternately, students who are exposed to colloquial language and pick it up that way, without purposeful study, will likely be highly fluent and communicative, but the variety of the acquired language they will speak will be highly non-standard. Non-standard speech in itself is not a bad thing, we all engage in such speech, but there come certain times when a mastery of the standard form of a language becomes necessary.

I make this distinction because it must be stated that what I have created for this project most certainly falls into the learning category. Much of the current literature on second language instruction stresses using instruction methods that promote acquisition, but for the most part we all still go to classes to learn languages. Language learning is a necessary part of our foreign language instruction system, even though we want to get students to really acquire the language. So, it follows that we must make efforts to streamline and improve the way that we help students learn. If we make language learning more efficient, we can hopefully make acquisition easier and faster.

The next important aspect of second language acquisition that must be mentioned in relation to this project is the idea of the “communicative” approach to language instruction. There have been and continue to be many different schools of thought about the best way to teach a foreign language. Luckily for learners, the field has progressed well beyond the years of approaches like the audio-lingual method, which consisted primarily of drilling and memorizing sentences. The most current trend in foreign language teaching is to work to make students communicatively competent, not just linguistically competent, meaning that not only will the students know words and how to make sentences, they will be able to verbally navigate real-world situations and conversations.

Fostering communicative competence goes far beyond throwing students into conversation groups. A communicative approach to language teaching involves using authentic language from the very beginning of instruction, presenting real or at least plausible language tasks, and focusing on use of language not on specific grammatical function. What this tends to mean for a classroom is much less time spent on explicit grammar instruction and more time spent on students “getting their hands dirty” and exploring the language for themselves.

For all the shifting away from constant grammar lessons in second language teaching, there is still a time when some of the fine inner workings



of grammar must be explained. This type of grammar instruction requires that teachers and students engage in “metalinguage,” the vernacular or language used to talk about language. This is where my project fits into the scheme of second language Spanish instruction.

## The Grammar Handbook:

I struggled to learn Spanish just like countless other high school students. I always read well above my grade level, but I still didn’t know what an indirect object was. Now, this was no problem in English class, because teachers assumed that if you could read Steinbeck, you didn’t need to be taught grammar. However, when it came to Spanish grammar instruction, it was like learning two languages at once: the first was Spanish, and the second was Grammar.

There really is a whole vernacular of grammar. Not only the terms for parts of speech, but also the basic codes that are shared between languages—the commonalities that make it possible to take one language, relate it to your own, and then manage to understand it. I simply didn’t “speak Grammar” when I began learning Spanish, and I can safely assume that most other students to come up through an average US public school would not be familiar with it either. This is the problem that I have attempted to tackle with this project.

Though this project is not communicatively based but rather focuses on specific grammar issues, it does seek to enhance both a communicative approach to language teaching and a faster rate of acquisition. In order to adhere to and support these principles, my goals in creating this grammar booklet were threefold.

First, I wanted to empower students. I wanted to create something to provide them with the metalanguage that they tend to be lacking when entering into a course of Spanish study. Grammar instruction is useless if students don't know what a teacher is talking about, and even more useless if they lack the ability to ask their own questions about what they are being taught. So, I wanted to give students easy access to the vernacular of grammar instruction.

Second, I wanted to support teachers. Curriculum and lesson planning are difficult enough even before time begins to get away from you in the classroom, as it inevitably does. In my experience, one thing that Spanish teachers struggle with is taking time out of their planned lessons to teach *English* grammar. If, for example, students don't know or don't remember what an adverb is and does, the teacher has to spend time explaining adverbs in the English system before they can begin to tackle Spanish *adverbios*. If properly used, this booklet can cut down on this kind of time misuse by putting the responsibility of knowing English grammar in the hands of

individual students.

Third, I wanted to encourage students. The language in the booklet is directed specifically at the student who is reading it. I wanted to reassure students that they do know grammar, even if they don't necessarily know *about* grammar. I wanted to remind them that learning Spanish isn't like deciphering a top-secret code. They are fully capable of learning it, and learning it well. I felt the need to let students know that one language is really just like the next, because we are all humans with the same reasons for communication. I chose to speak directly and honestly to the students, rather than vaguely about the grammar, in order to put them at ease with the subject matter and bolster their confidence.

It is my sincere hope that students be given this booklet before beginning a 100 level Spanish course, and I hope that it can be put to use helping students and teachers come together more easily in the collaboration that is language learning.

# Handbook Contents

Introduction... 11

Agreement... 13

Direct Objects and Pronouns... 16

Indirect Objects and Pronouns... 21

Coordination and Coordinating Conjunctions... 23

Subordination and Subordinating Conjunctions... 26

Relative Clauses and Pronouns... 28

Subjunctive Mood ... 32

Uses of “Se” ... 35

Lexicon... 40

## Introduction: Who is this for?

This handbook is designed for you, an English-speaking university student who is setting out to learn Spanish. You might feel like the prospect of learning a new language is pretty intimidating, and understandably so. You might be thinking to yourself something like, “How can I possibly cram a new and completely different language into my head?” Well, you really can do it, and there will be plenty of room—no cramming necessary—once you realize just how similar English and Spanish really are.

As a student, you probably don’t even realize just how much you already know about how English and other languages work. It is likely that your middle and high school English classes had more to do with Fitzgerald or Bradbury than with the structure and grammar of English. Maybe you had to diagram some sentences at one point or another, but it was probably a long time ago, and who remembers that stuff, anyway? The thing is, you *are* a native speaker of English, and you actually have quite sophisticated instincts about grammar, even if you can’t explicitly identify your knowledge.

Now, you are starting to study Spanish as a second language. If you are like me, perhaps you took a Spanish or other foreign language class in high school, but not much really sank in. Perhaps you have never studied another language at all. Either way, you are likely to benefit from reading and referring to this handbook because you have never studied English grammar

in depth or you don't recall doing so. Though you have full native-speaker mastery of English, you could not describe with certainty what an indirect object pronoun is or confidently say whether or not English has reflexive verbs. If this is the sort of student you are, then this short handbook will give you a lens through which to recognize familiar patterns Spanish.

The way that this booklet is organized will allow you first of all to become familiar with, or at least brush-up on your English grammar. You have it all, you know it all, you just need to be reminded of what things are called, and how they function in this language. After that, you will get a brief description of that same grammar issue in Spanish. You will notice that many of the grammatical terms that you hear in your first-year Spanish class are actually very similar to the terms we use in English. This is because Spanish is a grammatical system that simply uses different symbols to represent the same basic ideas. It is important not to fall into thinking that Spanish is too "weird," "hard," or "different." It really isn't, and armed with the knowledge in this handbook, you will not want to hide in a corner when your professor throws words like "imperfecto del subjuntivo" at you.

Read it through; get familiar with some concepts in English before you get in over your head in Spanish. Then, once you are in your Spanish class, use this handbook as a reference when you have questions about the grammar instruction you encounter. ¡Disfrute!

# Agreement

Agreement, sometimes called concord, is something that every beginning Spanish student struggles with, so don't worry if you can't remember right away if you should say, "*Yo tengo 19 años*" or "*Yo tengas 19 años*" to tell your age. What agreement means is two different parts of a sentence match one another. The reason this is so difficult for English speakers to pick up on is that in our system, fewer things have to agree. In English, agreement happens between subjects and their verbs, and the things that need to match are the *number* and *person*.

Number, of course, refers to whether a subject is singular or plural. For example, the pronoun *I* is singular, because there is only one of me, but the pronoun *we* or the noun phrase *you and I* are both plural because there are more than one of us.

Person refers to who and where the hearer or reader is in relation to the speaker or writer. If the speaker is talking about herself or about a group in which she is a member, she uses the *first person*. If she is referring to another person or group that is present in the interaction, she uses the *second person*. If the speaker is talking about a person or a group that is not present in the interaction, she uses the *third person*. Agreement for most verbs is only an issue in the present tense, where you must choose a different form to go with *he, she* or *it*. When we talk about the irregular verb "to be" things get trickier

because there are more forms, and you have to choose different forms for the past tense as well as the present.

Pronouns	<b>Singular</b>	<b>Plural</b>
<b>1<sup>st</sup> person</b>	I am I was	We are We were
<b>2<sup>nd</sup> person</b>	You are You were	You (all) are You (all) were
<b>3<sup>rd</sup> person</b>	He/She/It is He/She/It was	They are They were

Agreement in Spanish is a bit more complicated.

First, not only do subjects have to agree with verbs, but nouns also have to agree with the adjectives that describe them and the articles (a, an, the, my) that go with them.

Second, aside from agreeing in number, nouns and adjectives have to agree in *gender*, but not person.

Third, verbs have to agree with their subjects in person and number just like in English, but there are different conjugations for each person and each number, and verbs have to be conjugated differently in every single one of the tenses. It is a task to memorize all of the conjugations, but it is certainly not impossible.

Where most of us English-speakers get tripped up is getting articles and adjectives to agree with nouns in number and especially gender. We simply aren't used to the fact that *all* nouns, not just things that are biologically male



or female, have a *grammatical* gender, so give yourself a break if it doesn't click right away. Unfortunately for us, we must memorize which nouns are masculine and which are feminine.

one red cat = *un gato rojo* (singular, masculine)

two red cats = *dos gatos rojos* (plural, masculine)

a red car = *un auto rojo* (singular, masculine)

a red house = *una casa roja* (singular, feminine)

two red roses = *dos rosas rojas* (plural, feminine)

# Direct and Indirect Objects

Grammatical “objects” tend to throw a lot of Spanish learners for a loop, simply because we haven’t memorized how to pick them out of a sentence in English. So, don’t be overwhelmed when you start to hear terms like “objeto directo” and “objeto indirecto” and struggle to even tell them apart. These will be confusing at first, but it is important to remember that we have both direct and indirect objects in English, and you use them all the time. You just need to remember which one serves what purpose in a sentence.

## Direct Objects

Direct objects are nouns or pronouns that represent the thing that is *directly* affected by or that receives the “action” of the main verb of the sentence. The direct object might sometimes also be referred to as the “patient” of the verb’s action, while the subject would be the “agent.” Objects can be as simple as a singular noun, or as complex as a whole clause (sort of a sentence within a sentence) with its own subject and verb.

We make *dinner* every night.

The boy throws *the ball*.

I wear *those red shoes* all the time.

She knows *that you are here*.

I named *my son*.

However, this relationship is sometimes not obvious, as with verbs like “receive,” “buy,” or “catch.” Verbs like these ones are called “transitive” verbs, which means that they require something to follow them. You wouldn’t say, “We bought,” and leave it at that. Though sometimes, as with “receive” it may seem that the subject is the thing being affected, it is important to be able to answer the question of “what was verb-ed (the past participle of the verb: received, bought, or caught)?” The answer to this question will be your direct object.

Ana received *an invitation*.

What was received? *An invitation*.

We bought *a house*.

What was bought? *A house*.

I always caught *colds*.

What was caught? *Colds*.

Also, there are other relationships between the verb and the direct object that can exist. For example, sometimes the direct object is what came into being as a result of the action of the verb. This is also a direct object, and can be verified using the same question.

Prehistoric man invented *the wheel*.

What was invented? *The wheel*.

They wrote *a letter*.

What was written? *A letter*.

All direct objects can be replaced with appropriate pronouns in the sentence.

There are many kinds of pronouns, but they are all words that replace a previously mentioned noun or noun phrase. Direct object pronouns are singular or plural, and are determined based on whether the object is a person or not, as well as by gender if it is a person.

The boy throws *the ball*. = The boy throws *it*.

I always wear *those red shoes*. = I always wear *them*.

I named *my son*. = I named *him*.

In Spanish, direct objects work just the same way. They are the direct recipients of the effects of the verb.

Preparamos *la cena* cada noche. = We make *dinner* every night.

What was made? *Dinner*.

El chico tira *la pelota*. = the boy throws *the ball*.

What was thrown? *The ball*.

Siempre llevo *esos zapatos rojos*. = I always wear *those red shoes*.

What was worn? *Those red shoes*.

Ella sabe *que estás aquí*. = She knows *that you are here*.

What was known? *That you are here*.

Yo nombré *a mi hijo*. = I named *my son*.

What was named? *My son*.

The main difference is that, in Spanish, there is a specific set of direct object pronouns. These pronouns are determined by the number of things or people in the direct object, whether the direct object is a person or not, as well as by the grammatical gender of the direct object.

We make *breakfast* every morning:

Preparamos *el desayuno* cada mañana. = *Lo* preparamos cada mañana.

(singular, nonhuman, masculine)

Ana received *an invitation*:

Ana recibió *una invitación*. = Ana *la* recibió.

(singular, nonhuman, feminine)

I always wear *those red shoes*:

Siempre llevo *esos zapatos rojos*. = Siempre *los* llevo.

(plural, nonhuman, masculine)

She knows *that you are here*:

Ella sabe *que estás aquí*. = Ella *lo* sabe.

(singular, nonhuman, neutral)

I named *my son*:

Yo nombré *a mi hijo*. = Yo *lo* nombré

(singular, human, masculine)

I named *my daughter*:

Yo nombré a *mi hija*. = Yo *la* nombré.

(singular, human, feminine)

Also, the placement of the direct object pronoun depends on whether and how the verb is conjugated. If the verb is conjugated in the present, past, future, or conditional tense, the pronoun will come before the verb. If the verb is in the infinitive (base or non-conjugated) form, the affirmative command form, or the progressive (-ing) form, the direct object pronoun may be attached to the end of the verb. This rule takes some memorizing, because in English, direct object pronouns always follow the verb.

I like to make dinner every night:

Me gusta preparar *la cena* cada noche. = Me gusta preparar*la* cada noche.

I am writing *the letter*:

Estoy escribiendo *la carta*. = Estoy escribiéndola.

Try the soup:

Prueba *la sopa*. = Pruébala.

## Indirect Objects

Indirect objects are those nouns or pronouns that represent the person or thing that is *indirectly* affected by the action of the verb. The indirect object may physically receive the direct object itself, or it may be the beneficiary of the action of the verb. Often this relationship to the verb is marked by a preposition like “to” or “for” but this is not always the case. Often, it is the placement of the noun phrase directly after the verb and before the direct object that shows it is an indirect object.

I always make dinner for *my family*. = I always make *my family* dinner.

Dad gave the bone to *Fido*. = Dad gave *Fido* a bone.

Mom gave the car to *my sister*. = Mom gave *my sister* the car.

Indirect object pronouns in English are the same ones we use for direct objects, determined by number, personhood, and gender of people.

I always make dinner for *them*. = I always make *them* dinner.

Dad gave the bone to *him*. = Dad gave *him* the bone.

Mom gave the car to *her*. = Mom gave *her* the car.

In Spanish, indirect objects represent the same kinds of relationships to the verb and the direct object. However, in Spanish, there is a separate set of pronouns for indirect objects, different from the direct object pronouns. It might be helpful to think of the indirect object pronouns as containing the

preposition that sometimes accompanies the indirect object. For example, *nos* would mean “to us” or “for us” instead of simply “us.”

I make dinner for *my friends*. = I make *them* dinner.

preparo la cena para *mis amigos*. = *Les* preparo la cena.

Dad gave the bone to *Fido*. = Dad gave *him* the bone.

Papá dio el hueso a *Fido*. = Papá *le* dio el hueso.

Mom gave the car to *my sister and me*. = Mom gave *us* the car.

Mamá dio el auto a *mi hermana y a mí*. = Mamá *nos* dio el auto.

Indirect object pronouns, just like direct object pronouns can also be placed after the infinitive or progressive form of the verb, though they come before the conjugated forms. This gets a bit tricky, though, because the indirect object pronoun comes before the direct object pronoun, but if both pronouns start with an *l*, the indirect object pronoun will become “*se*.” This is just a matter of making the words sound nicer. But, before you go thinking that this is silly and maybe even annoying, remember that we do this in English, too. It’s why we say “an apple” and not “a apple.”

I sent the book to Paul. = I sent it to him.

Yo mandé el libro a Paulo. = Yo *se lo* mandé. (NOT “Yo *le lo* mandé”)

I’m going to send the letter to Ana. = I’m going to send it to her.

Voy a mandar la carta a Ana. = Voy a *mandársela*. (NOT “*mandárlela*”)



# Coordination and Coordinating Conjunctions

Coordination means that you are taking two or more independent ideas or items and joining them into one larger unit. You can do this with multiple nouns, adjectives, verbs, whole phrases, or even entire clauses (which are like sentences, with their own subject and verb), as long as the two things that are being joined have the same grammatical function.

In English, there are words called coordinating conjunctions that serve as the adhesive that stick these pieces together and make them into one. You might be familiar with the “f.a.n.b.o.y.s.” *For, and, nor, but, or, yet, and so* are the “simple” coordinating conjunctions. They are, in fact, very simple. You just stick them between two parts and you end up with a new, more complex part. Really, the only trick is to remember that when using *or* and *nor* to join two subjects, the verb remains singular, but when using *and* to join them, the verb becomes plural, because both subjects are doing the action.

The dog is playing. + The cat is playing. = The dog *and* the cat *are* playing. The dog *or* the cat *is* playing.

The dog is playing. + The cat is sleeping = The dog is playing *and* the cat is sleeping. The dog is playing *or* the cat is sleeping.

I don't read. + I don't like to learn. = I don't read, *nor* do I like to learn.

I don't read + I like to learn. = I don't read, *but* I like to learn.

I like to learn. + I don't read. = I like to learn, *yet* I don't read.

I like to learn. + I read. = I like to learn, *so* I read.

Aside from the simple coordinating conjunctions, there are also “correlative” coordinating conjunctions. These also join two similar items into one, but they show different connections between the items. This kind of conjunction includes *both...and*, *either...or*, *neither...nor*, and *not only...but (also)*.

*Both* the dog *and* the cat are playing.

*Either* the dog *or* the cat is playing.

Coordination in Spanish is almost exactly the same... almost. All of the same functions exist, and there is a group of coordinating conjunctions, both simple and correlative. The trick is to know that there is not necessarily a direct translation for each English conjunction. You must choose which conjunction to use depending on the relationship between the two parts of the sentence, and a sentence that requires the word *but* in English could require one of many Spanish conjunctions that have subtle differences in meaning. For example, *sino que* functions more like *but rather*, and is used when the first part of the sentence is negative.

Leo y me gusta aprender. = I read *and* I like to learn.

Ni leo, *ni* me gusta aprender. = I don't read, *nor* do I like to learn.

No leo, *pero* me gusta aprender. I don't read, *but* I like to learn

Leo, *más* no me gusta aprender. = I read, *yet* I don't like to learn.

No leo, *sino que* escucho los audiolibros. = I don't read, *but rather* listen

to audiobooks.

The correlative conjunctions are just like the English ones. They express the same relationships and they are even formed in a very similar way. They include *tanto...como* (*both...and*), *o...o* (*either...or*), *ni...ni* (*neither...nor*), *no sólo...sino/ sino también* (*not only...but also*).

*Tanto* el perro *como* el gato comen. = *Both* the dog *and* the cat are eating.

*O* el perro *o* el gato está jugando. = *Either* the dog *or* the cat is playing.

*Ni* el perro *ni* el gato está aquí. = *Neither* the dog *nor* the cat is here.

*No solo* el perro *sino también* el gato está jugando. Not only the dog, but also the cat is playing.

# Subordination and Subordinating Conjunctions

Subordination, like coordination, is a way to join two elements into one.

Subordination is, in particular, a way to join two clauses together when the meaning or importance of one clause depends on the other clause. This is why you will hear one clause referred to as the “dependent clause” or the “subordinate clause” and the other as the “independent clause.” The way to tell which clause is which is to know that the independent clause can move to the beginning of a sentence. It can sort of orbit the independent clause.

Unlike coordinating conjunctions, the list of subordinating conjunctions in English is extensive, as there are many ways that one part of a sentence can depend on another. However, the most common subordinating conjunctions include *after, although, as, as far as, as if, as long as, as soon as, as though, because, before, if, since, so that, though, unless, until, when, whenever, where, and while*. As you can see, each of these conjunctions implies a relationship of dominance and subordination between one clause and the other. Some subordinating conjunctions, like *if* and *unless*, imply a conditional or hypothetical situation.

I go to the movies *as long as* I have money.

I go to the movies *because* I like stories.

I go to the movies *when* it is raining.

I go to the movies *so that* I can judge films.

I go to the movies *if* there is something good to see.

In Spanish, there is also an abundance of subordinating conjunctions, and the concept of linking an independent and a dependent clause together is the same as in English. Again, as with coordinating conjunctions, there is no one-to-one, English-Spanish conversion for the subordinating conjunctions, but they can and do express all of the same relationships.

Voy al cine *en el caso de que* tenga dinero.

I go to the movies *as long as* I have money.

Voy al cine *porque* me gustan las historias.

I go to the movies *because* I like stories.

Voy al cine *cuando* llueve.

I go to the movies *when* it is raining.

Voy al cine *si* hay algo bueno que ver.

I go to the movies *if* there is something good to see.

You might notice that in Spanish, many of the subordinating conjunctions are followed by a verb conjugated in the “subjunctive mood.” This is because the relationship between the clauses implies a hypothetical situation, and though the same is true in English, the Spanish language requires the use of the subjunctive in the dependent clause. We will explore the subjunctive later.

## Relative Clauses and Relative Pronouns

When we talk about something, we generally try to describe it as much as possible. We use details to identify or specify nouns and verbs, and in grammar, these details are called modifiers. The simplest examples of modifiers are adjectives (blue, happy, tall) and adverbs (quietly, quickly, suddenly). However, there are other kinds of modifiers that can be words, phrases, or whole clauses. In English, relative clauses perform like modifiers, in that they identify, describe, or otherwise modify a noun or a noun phrase. A relative clause is introduced into—or “related” to—the sentence using one of five relative pronouns: *who*, *whom*, *whose*, *which*, or *that*. In case you are wondering whether to use *who* or *whom*, remember that *who* is a subject pronoun, while *whom* is used for objects. When using relative clauses to modify a noun or noun phrase, the relative pronoun you use is determined by the kind of information you want to add as a modifier, as well as the function of the noun as an agent (doer) or a patient (receiver) of an action. It should be noted that the relative pronoun *which* is used only for non-human things, while *that* may be used for either human or non-human things.

She is the woman who called us yesterday. (The woman = agent)

He is the man whom we called last night. (The man = patient)

That is the person whose car we bought.

The letter which the boy wrote was returned.

*That* often replaces the other pronouns, except the possessive pronoun *whose*. This happens most often in informal speech, but is becoming more common in writing.

She is the woman *that* *called us yesterday.*

He is the man *that* *we called last night.*

The letter *that* *the boy wrote was returned.*

Also, it is common for the relative pronoun in English to be omitted, and this is usually acceptable, as long as the meaning is still understood.

He is the man *we called last night.*

The letter *the boy wrote* was returned.

However, sometimes the relative pronoun needs to be there in order to maintain the meaning of your sentence.

\*She is the woman *called us yesterday.*

\*That is the person *car we bought.*

Relative clauses that are necessary for the identification of the noun phrase are called “restrictive” relative clauses, while relative clauses that simply add extra information are called “non-restrictive.” Non-restrictive clauses will rarely use the pronoun *that*.

Bananas which come from Panama are delicious. = Restrictive (Only Panamanian bananas are delicious.)

Bananas that come from Panama are delicious. = Restrictive

Bananas, which come from Panama, are delicious. = Non-restrictive

(Bananas are delicious, and they happen to come from Panama)

In Spanish, relative clauses serve the same modifying purpose as they do in English. The relative pronouns, *que*, *quien*, *cuyo*, and *el que/el cual*, operate similarly, but not always identically, to those in English. Non-restrictive relative clauses are usually set apart by commas as they are in English.

However, unlike in English, Spanish pronouns are never deleted from the sentence.

*Que* is the most commonly used relative pronoun in Spanish. It can refer to people or objects and occurs often in informal speech, and therefore can be equated roughly to *who*, *which*, or most often, *that* in English.

Ella es la mujer *que* nos llamó ayer.

She is the woman *that* called us yesterday.

*El que* and *el cual* are used interchangeably with *que*, usually in non-restrictive clauses and after prepositions. They are mostly used in more formal language, but you will hear them in speech, too.

Mi hermano, *el que* vive en México, es maestro.

My brother, *who* lives in Mexico, is a teacher.

Mi libro favorito, sin *el cual* nunca viajo, es Rayuela.

My favorite book, without *which* I never travel, is Hopscotch.

Also, these pronouns can be used to clarify gender ambiguity.



La casa de mi amigo, la cual es muy alta, está en la esquina.

My friend's house, which is very tall, is on the corner.

(La cual = la casa. The house is tall)

La casa de mi amigo, el cual es muy alto, está en la esquina.

My very tall friend's house is on the corner.

(El cual = mi amigo. My friend is tall)

*Quien* and its plural *quienes* refer specifically to people, and are used almost exclusively after prepositions. *Quien* and *quienes* can be equated to either *who* or *whom*, because in Spanish, the subject and object relative pronouns are the same.

Él es el hombre a quien (OR – al que) llamamos anoche.

He is the man who we called last night.

Ellas son las mujeres con quienes (OR – con las que) trabajo.

They are the women with whom I work.

*Cuyo* functions identically to the English relative pronoun *whose* to indicate possession.

Esa es la persona cuyo auto compramos.

That is the person whose car we bought.

# Subjunctive Mood

Although learning the subjunctive might seem foreign and confusing at first, it is important to remember that the subjunctive exists in English, too. In Spanish, the subjunctive can be used in noun clauses, relative clauses, and adverbial clauses, so you will come across it constantly as you learn the language. Here, however, we will only discuss the subjunctive in noun clauses just so that you can get familiar with the idea of what “subjunctive” means and recognize some of the situations where it is used.

There are two distinct problems for us English speakers when we begin learning to use the subjunctive mood. First, learning the subjunctive means memorizing a whole different set of conjugations for each and every verb, and many verbs that follow regular rules in the regular (indicative) mood are irregular in the subjunctive mood. Second, as if that were not enough, there is the matter of remembering all of the many situations where you need to switch to the subjunctive. These will become clear to you little by little, but this should help you get a head start on remembering them.

The subjunctive is used in English noun phrases after expressions that indicate will or desire. It's sort of as if wishing something changes how we speak about it, because it could *hypothetically* happen or not happen. Such expressions are often followed by a subjunctive phrase that includes a verb in its unchanged base (non-conjugated) form. Unfortunately, you might not be

very familiar with these uses, because they most often appear in formal language that most of us don't use every day.

I demand that he *be* quiet.

We suggest that she *call* her lawyer.

Also in English, "conditional" expressions and expressions that use the word "wish" create a different form of the subjunctive, the *were*-subjunctive, that requires the use of "*were*" in place of what would otherwise be "*was*" or "*is*." The verb "to be" is the only irregular subjunctive verb in English. Lucky us.

I would read it if it *were* shorter.

I wish I *were* taller.

In Spanish, the subjunctive is used in the same ways, as well as a whole bunch of others. The subjunctive mood in Spanish makes use of a different set of verb endings than are used in regular statements of facts, or "indicative" statements. This usually means changing an -ar ending for an -er or -ir ending and vice versa. However, there are also a number of irregular subjunctive verbs. These will have to be memorized, of course, but the most important thing to remember is that you already know how to use the subjunctive mood, you do it all the time in English, and you can easily do the same in Spanish, just more often. Essentially any time that something you are saying isn't or wasn't or won't be true in reality has to be in the subjunctive. Things that haven't happened yet usually need to be in the subjunctive, even

though you might think that they are going to happen. Things that you desire or wish for, things that you demand, things that you suggest or implore, and even things that you doubt or don't believe, all need to be subjunctive. Over time and with exposure and practice, you will recognize all of the situations, times, key words, and stock phrases that tell you when you need a subjunctive verb. Just don't be afraid to use it like most beginners are. The subjunctive doesn't bite.

## Uses of “Se”

Now that you have looked at some commonly misunderstood bits of grammar in English, you should be a little bit more prepared to jump into beginning Spanish. However, here is just one more issue in Spanish that a student like yourself will run into and probably struggle with: the word *se*. For such a tiny word, *se* has many uses in Spanish, and though it can be difficult to tease them apart, they really are predictable, and eventually you will see patterns emerge in the reasons it is used. This will give you a head start on seeing those patterns.

### Reflexives:

In English as well as in Spanish, there are some kinds of verbs that always or almost always need an object to go with them. Such verbs, like “to catch” are called “transitive” verbs. On the other hand, “intransitive” verbs, like “to snore,” do not take an object. Reflexivity in grammar means that the subject of the sentence is the same thing as the object—that is, they have the same *referent* in the real world—and it is simultaneously doing and undergoing the action. Verbs that go with identical subjects and objects are called reflexive verbs. Reflexive verbs in English require reflexive pronouns to replace object noun phrases. Reflexive pronouns can be identified easily, because they end

in *-self* or *-selves*. For example, you wouldn't say, "Joe looked at Joe in the mirror." You would say, "Joe looked at *himself* in the mirror."

Mary bathes him. (Non-reflexive)

Mary bathes *herself*. (Reflexive)

In Spanish, reflexive verbs can serve the same function that they do in English, but one of the reflexive pronouns in Spanish is *se*. (The others are *me*, *te*, *nos*, and *os*.)

María le baña. = Mary bathes him.

María *se* baña. = Mary bathes *herself*.

Where things get tricky for English speakers is with verbs that we think of as being intransitive, and therefore not reflexive. "To sleep" in English is intransitive, so we would not say, "He's going to sleep himself." However, in Spanish, the same verb "dormir" is transitive and reflexive, so you would say, "Él va a dormirse." It is much more common in Spanish to have reflexive verbs, and it will take some time to remember which verbs are reflexive.

## To Get and To Become:

In English, we use the verb "to get" in ways other than meaning, "to obtain."

We often use it to mean something more like "to become." In most casual speech and writing, we would say that we get sick or we get tired, rather than saying that we become ill or become fatigued. In Spanish, both "to become"

and this use of “to get” are represented using a reflexive verb. So, for example, “to get sick” is “enfermarse,” (literally: to infirm *oneself*) and “to become” is “hacerse” (to make *oneself*) or “convertirse” (to convert *oneself*).

## Reciprocal pronouns:

Reciprocity in grammar means that two or more nouns are doing the same thing to each other while at the same time receiving the same treatment from each other. In English, the reciprocal pronouns *each other* and *one another* serve a somewhat similar function as the reflexive pronouns. In Spanish, this reciprocal relationship between nouns in the subject is represented by a reflexive verb and pronoun.

The two governments recognize *one another*.

Los dos gobiernos *se* reconocen.

The students looked at *each other*.

Los estudiantes *se* miraron.

## Impersonal Expressions:

Impersonal expressions are used to make claims about things that everyone or no one *in particular* does. These claims are usually about habitual or

constant things. In English, these claims often use the impersonal subject “they” to mean “everyone” or “some people.”

People in New York talk very quickly.

They say that running is healthy.

They used to think that the world was flat.

Instead of using a particular subject like “people” (gente) or “they” (ellos), the same impersonal expressions in Spanish are formed using the reflexive pronoun *se*.

*Se habla muy rápido en Nueva York.*

*Se dice que correr es saludable.*

*Se pensaba que el mundo era plano.*

## Passive Voice and the “Se Pasivo-reflejo”

The passive voice construction in English doesn’t translate well into Spanish. Our passive structure of [“to be” verb + past participle] is hardly ever heard in Spanish speech, and only rarely appears in writing, and even that is generally due to the influence of English.

For example, while we would say in English, “the song *was written* two hundred years ago,” you would not want to translate that directly into Spanish with the same structure. The way to express such passives in Spanish is to use the “*se pasivo reflejo*,” which is a construction using *se* that is very



similar to impersonal expressions. So, instead of directly translating, “la canción *fue escrita* hace doscientos años,” you would say “la canción *se escribió* hace doscientos años.”

The song *was written* two hundred years ago. =

La canción *se escribió* hace doscientos años.

The rule *was passed* with a majority vote. =

La regla *se aprobó* con un voto de mayoría.

The ship *was carried* out to sea. =

La nave *se llevó* al mar.

## Lexicon = Léxico

Adjective = Adjetivo

Adverb = Adverbio

Agent = Agente

Agreement = Acuerdo

Article = Artículo

Antecedent = Antecedente

Auxiliary = Auxiliar

Clause = Cláusula

Concord = Concordancia

Conditional = Condicional

Conjunction = Conjunción

Coordination = Coordinación

Determiner = Determinante

Direct = Directo

Entity = Entidad, Ser

Feminine = Femenino

First = Primero

Future = Futuro

Gender = Género

Helping = Ayudante

Imperfect = Imperfecto

Indicative = Indicativo

Indirect = Indirecto

Interrogative = Interrogativo

Intransitive = Intransitivo

Masculine = Masculino

Modify = Modificar

Mood = Modo

Neutral = Neutro

Noun = Sustantivo

Number = Número

Object = Objeto

Patient = Paciente

Person = Persona

Phrase = Frase

Predicate = Predicado

Present = Presente

Preterit = Pretérito

Pronoun = Pronombre

Referent = Referente

Relative = Relativo

Second = Segundo

Sentence = Oración

Subject = Sujeto

Subjunctive = Subjuntivo

Subordination = Subordinación

Tense = Tiempo

Third = Tercero

Transitive = Transitivo

Verb = Verbo

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