

25. The subjunctive (3) - use in *que* clauses

1 Definition

The subjunctive is a verb form which is used not so much to report facts as to reveal the speaker's attitude towards the facts. It is used after constructions expressing notions such as possibility, doubt, need, wishing, feeling, opinion or hypothesis. Unlike in English where it is only used in a handful of set expressions such as *if I were you*, in French it is very common and used in all forms of language, informal as well as formal.

2 Use in *que* clauses

The subjunctive is used in three main contexts after subordinate clauses introduced by *que*:

2.1 When the main clause expresses an idea of **uncertainty** (ranging from possibility, via improbability, to impossibility). Constructions include: *il est possible que, il y a des chances que, il se peut que, il est peu probable que, il y a peu de chances que, il n'est pas question que, il est impossible que*:

Il est possible qu'il **ait** été au bureau mercredi
It's possible that he was in the office on Wednesday
Il n'est guère probable qu'elle **ait** dit ça
It's hardly likely that she said that

but Il est probable qu'elle **a** dit ça
It's likely that she said that

2.2 When the main clause expresses an idea of **personal will** (including wishing, preferring, needing and commanding). Constructions include: *il faut que, avoir besoin que, il est nécessaire / essentiel que, s'attendre à ce que, avoir envie que, vouloir que, souhaiter que*:

J'aimerais mieux qu'il **aille** au bureau mercredi
I would prefer it if he went to the office on Wednesday
Il faut que tu **viennes** immédiatement
You must come immediately

Note an important exception to this rule: *espérer que* takes the indicative:

J'espère que tu **viendras** immédiatement
I hope you will come immediately

2.3 When the main clause expresses a sense of **personal interpretation** (involving emotional feelings and opinions): *avoir peur que, être content / heureux que, il est dommage que, trouver normal que, il est utile / urgent que, il est temps / juste que, peu importe que, il vaut mieux que*:

Je regrette qu'il n'**ait** pas été au bureau mercredi
I'm sorry he wasn't in the office on Wednesday
Il a fait cela par crainte qu'elle ne **sache** qu'il n'était pas au bureau mercredi
He did this out of fear of her knowing that he wasn't in the office on Wednesday