

THE FRENCH SUBJUNCTIVE IN SEMANTICS

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The subjunctive is defined in traditional grammar as a structure that is required by a certain semantically restricted class of predicates and conjunctions. Thus, for years French youth and learners of French as a second language have heard that tautology: the verbs of emotions, will etc. . . trigger the subjunctive mood, because the subjunctive is the mood of emotion, will etc....

In a closer study of the subjunctive throughout the centuries I found out that this position was fairly new. It began mostly with the prescriptive grammarians of the 19th century. Even our patriarchal master Vaugelas mentions the subject briefly only from a stylistic point of view. The topic has been tackled ever since from the point of view of meaning until the transformationalists analyzed the phenomenon. One of them, Maurice Gross (1978) concludes his own analysis stating that:

the situation is as follows -- from the point of view of the relationships between completive clauses, ce que P, and infinitive clauses, (de) VO, there is no need to differentiate between indicative and subjunctive. The verbal marks of the subjunctive and the infinitive are just purely morphological variants, which are indifferent to a syntactic process as general as the reduction of the completive clauses -- there is no need to look for a semantic explanation. Studies, conducted on the relationship between form and sense, do not reveal any possibility of characterization of the former according to sense. If some syntactico-semantic regularities exist, their existence is due to some phenomena of lexical productivity. These phenomena affect some parts of the lexicon, as determined by some extra-linguistic factors (literary, technological...) which vary in time.

My aim was to find these "syntactico-semantic regularities" in the use of the subjunctive mood, and study the lexical phenomena that produced it. My intuition was that if verbs x, y or z required the subjunctive they might have a common semantic feature. Thus the subjunctive, without being attached to semantics, would help to determine a lexical field and from there a semantic field. Or, in other words, I wanted to break the tautology I had learned as a child.

As Kathleen Connors (1978) demonstrated, there are two uses of the subjunctive in French: an "automatic" subjunctive and a "non-automatic" subjunctive. I reserve the study of the non-automatic subjunctive for a later

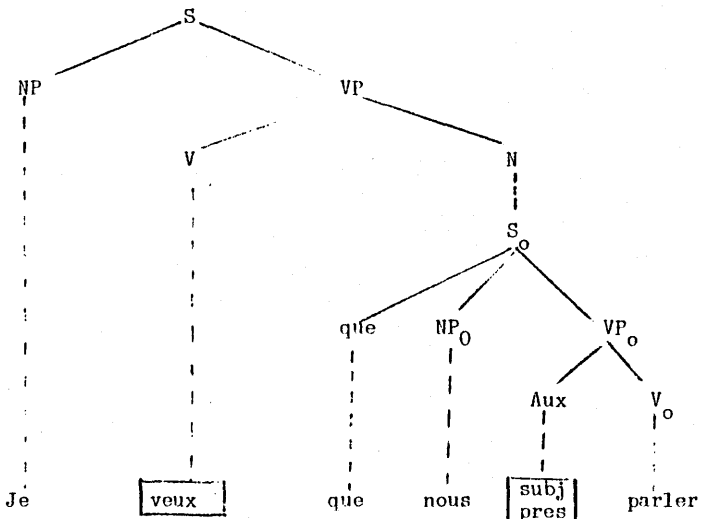
presentation. I have done some preliminary work on it, that has shown, so far, that there was no link between semantics and the non-automatic subjunctive.

The case of the automatic subjunctive seems more promising. Let us look at:

- (1) Je veux qu'elle vienne
I want her to come.
- (2) Je veux qu'elle parle.
I want her to talk.
- (3) Je veux que nous parlions.
I want us to talk.

We should note first that the subjunctive is not noticeable for the verbs ending in -er, a group which is very large in the lexicon, except of the nous- and vous-forms. By noticeable, I mean distinguished from the indicative forms, which have always been considered the neutral forms by grammarians of all times. Thus if we analyze Aux in (2), we might not be able to define parle as a subjunctive. For the same reason, parlions in (3) might be described as the indicative 'imparfait', which can be considered as an aspectual characteristic of the verb rather than a tense-related mark.

Let us now analyze (1) with a tree-diagram.



This diagram shows something of interest. In the kernel-string we can notice that V comes before V_0 and veux before (subj). We could interpret that (subj) is triggered by the lexeme V positioned before it in the kernel string.

Saying that (subj) is triggered by the lexeme does not mean that its 'sense' is linked to (subj) but that it possesses some potential to create or rather to be integrated in a certain syntactic meaning which itself would be supported by the addition of (subj). For that reason we should study the lexemes which demand that (subj) be used as a morpho-syntactic device, in other environments and study the different syntactic meanings that they are compatible with.

For example (subj) can be used in opposition to (inf), infinitive, on a syntactic level. Let us study some of these oppositions:

(4) Nous défendons qu'elle apparaisse.
We forbid that she should appear.

(5) Nous lui défendons d'apparaître
We forbid her to appear.

(6) Nous défendons d'apparaître.
We forbid to appear.

(7) Nous désirons qu'elle entre.
We wish her to come in.

(8) Nous désirons entrer.
We wish to come in.

(note that in these utterances the indicative is not possible.)

If we pair these examples, and assume that one is obtained by transformation of the other, we can observe the changes in syntactic meaning due to the transformation.

(5) could be obtained from (4) by a transformation 'de'.

Thus we could get:

$X-N-V-Qu-No-V_0$ (subj) -Y ----> $X-N-V-N_0-de-V_0$ (inf)-Y

The difference in meaning is slight; it depends on the change of position of N_0 which is headed directly by V in (5). That is (5) could be paraphrased as '(we told her) we forbid her to appear' whereas (4) does not have that clear an implication that the 3rd person 'elle' was actually warned in person. (4) could apply to a situation where the enunciators 'nous' could have control over the appearance of 'elle'.

(4) and (6) are linked in the same way, but N_0 has been deleted and therefore the utterance becomes a very general (almost meaningless) statement where 'nous' forbids any kind of appearance from anybody.

(8) can be analyzed in the same way but the deletion of N_0 makes nous the topic of entrer, and in this case (7) and (8) cannot be made equivalent as there is no way to insert N_0 in the structure with the infinitive. Thus (8) cannot be a transformation of (7).

Then if we want to apply our hypothesis that (subj) is triggered by the lexeme, there should be some common feature in 'défendre' and in 'désirer' that makes them compatible with a (subj) syntactic structure; and that same feature might be responsible for the (inf) structure too as the syntactic meaning or interpretation of the sentence does not change. What is difficult is to pinpoint what the lexeme really triggers. As I wrote above, they do not seem to trigger (subj) or (inf) directly, but they are compatible with such syntactic structures and the meaning these generate themselves. In the case of (13) to (17) a common interpretation is difficult to find. If we go back to Givón (1979: chap 3), we might try to fit these into categories of existence¹. Givón tells us (1978:322) that an entity that is temporally stable is linked to a certain nouniness. It is the case with entrer and d'apparaître. Here, though, they are a-temporal and are linked thus, with the 'abstract' that Givón defines as the level of 'exist'. We could extrapolate and say that 'désirer' and 'défendre' by their presence in an utterance demand a certain level of abstraction which is realized by (inf).

(4) and (7) we have said are less general than (5), (6), and (8). They give more information, on their topic for example, and seem to be placed in time. Not yet representing a concrete process, but not an abstract one, apparaître and entre represent a virtual process, which would be translated as 'exist in time' by Givón.

To see if these criteria would sustain further examination, let us look at another set of utterances:

- (9) Il faut que je parte
It is necessary that I leave
- (10) Il me faut partir
It is necessary for me to go
- (11) Il faut partir
It is necessary to go.
- (12) Il vaut mieux que nous sachions
It is better than we know.
- (13) Il vaut mieux savoir
It is better to know.

The analysis of these utterances is similar to the one above except that the lexemes 'faut' and 'vaut mieux' are used in an impersonal structure, which makes the segments que je parte or savoir part of the topic and not of the predicate in the kernel string. Which would mean that (subj) would actually come before 'faut' in the kernel-string. And that would mean that (subj) is presuppositional according to our results . . . or that would mean that our preceding results do not stand close examination!

So we need to look at other examples to see what would work, if anything, and why:

- (14) Afin qu'il grandisse, il doit manger sa soupe.
In order to grow up, he must eat his soup.
- (15) Afin de grandir, il doit manger sa soupe.
In order to grow up, he must eat his soup.
- (16) Bien qu'elle soit petite, elle parle déjà bien.
Even though she is little (young), she already speaks well.
- (17) Avant qu'elles ne parlent, appréciez le silence.
Before they speak, appreciate the silence.
- (18) Avant de parler, elles vous feront apprécier le silence.
Before speaking, they will make you appreciate the silence.
- (19) Avant de parler, appréciez le silence.
Before speaking, appreciate the silence.
- (20) Avant la conférence, appréciez le silence
Before the conference, appreciate the silence.

(15) as a transformation of (14) is very close to it in interpretation.
(15) as (13) or (8) is a little bit more abstract than its counterpart.
(16) is an example of a conjunction which is activated only by the subjunctive (or vice-versa?). There is no transformation of (16) possible in any other mood.

(17) to (19) are important to show that the 'mood' that is chosen is chosen rather as a function of the topic rather than anything else. (19) is the same case as (8): the second NP has to be identical to the first, and is then deleted. Thus the transformation 'de' cannot be completed from (17).

(20) is an example of these adverbial phrases that replace subordinate clauses in French. Avant is the preposition which gives the conjunction avant que or avant de (or vice versa). If we intimate that something in 'avant' is favorable to the existence of (subj) or (inf) in an utterance, and therefore that it contains some feature that would react to an abstract or virtual environment, (20) gives us a counter-example, for 'avant' governs a noun

entity which belongs to the concrete domain, the 'exist in space' (according to Givón). (20) is not an isolated case. In fact it is often preferred (by native speakers) to the completive case. Other conjunctions in fact have almost fallen out of use as

- (21) Malgré qu'il soit borgne, il voit bien ce qui se passe.
Even though he only has one eye, he can see what is going on.

which is considered awkward and not stylish; it is replaced by

- (22) Malgré son manque d'acuite visuelle, il voit bien ce qui se passe.
In spite of his bad eyesight, he can see what's going on.

Thus the speaker's choice of one mood over the other is not determined by any kind of semantic prerequisite but by the speaker's stylistic choice.

There are other problems with the use of the automatic subjunctive, especially when it exists in opposition to the indicative.

- (23) Je crois qu'il est fou.
I believe he's crazy.
- (24) Je ne crois pas qu'il soit fou.
I don't believe that he's crazy.
- (25) Croyez-vous qu'il est fou?
Do you believe he's crazy?
- (26) Croyez-vous qu'il soit fou?
Do you believe he's crazy?
- (27) Vous ne pensez pas que nous existions?
You don't think that we exist?
- (28) Vous pensez, donc vous êtes.
- (29) Pensez-vous que vous êtes de ce monde?
Do you think you're from this world?
- (30) Pensez-vous que vous soyez drôle?
Do you think you're funny?

(24) is derived from (23) by a Tneg. That is, the syntactic structure of the utterance changes and the change produces another interpretation (or syntactic meaning). Grammars usually explain the change of 'mood' by saying that the 'meaning' (they probably mean 'sense') of the lexeme is modified by ne...pas and therefore the 'meaning' of the sentence slides into virtuality (among other things). If we keep ne...pas on a syntactic level, it only proves, again, that (subj) is triggered by a syntactic structure, not by some semantic features of the lexeme.

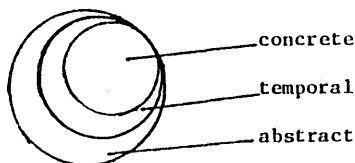
The case of (Interrogation) is another proof of this, and moreover, of the fact that (subj) is also triggered by presupposition: (26) as compared to (25) brings in a shade of doubt as to whether the delocutee is crazy.

Certainly all of these examples prove one thing: that a general explanation of the subjunctive cannot work. Each case contradicts the other. (subj) is purely a syntactical structure, and if it affects the 'meaning' of an utterance, it is not linked directly to the 'sense' of the lexemes involved in that utterance.

As you have noticed I differentiated 'meaning' and 'sense' in my paper. 'Meaning', as defined by Penelope (1979) pertains to the domain of stylistics (in opposition to what I call 'sense' which belongs to semantics) and I think that saying the subjunctive is a matter individual utterances, a matter of 'meaning' will lead me to study it as a stylistic matter. In fact as I have started to show in (20) and (21), the subjunctive is linked with the speakers' self-image, that is their intention to show their belonging to a certain class of society. The subjunctive would then be a class marker.

NOTE

¹Givon explains that semantic features such as 'concrete', 'temporal', and 'abstract' structure the lexicon and are arranged in a fashion that 'yields an implicational scale' (1979:314). He pictures the arrangement as such:



parallel to:

exist in space > exist in time > exist

He adds (1979:321) 'the noun universe of language, at its embryonic core, codes more "concrete entities", that is those which exist in space and time... On the other side of the lexical continuum, we find verbs... They map entities that have most typically only existence in time.

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