

How to Teach Pragmatic Functions of English Subjunctive Mood

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Abstract

English subjunctive mood, with a variety of pragmatic functions to show English users' regret, determination and the like, originates from the Old English. In early literature work, English subjunctive mood was widely used. However, nowadays the frequency of English subjunctive mood has declined, far from that in the past. There are several reasons accountable for its decline: (1) English users tend to use easier declarative mood to replace English subjunctive mood. (2) English users ignore some commonly used structures. (3) English users understand its pragmatic functions incomprehensively. Firstly, it briefly introduces English subjunctive mood, covering the definition, classification, and development. Next, it puts much emphasis on the analysis of pragmatic functions of English subjunctive mood, euphemism function and emphasis function. At last, it offers some suggestions on the teaching of English subjunctive mood. This article is a complement to the research on English subjunctive mood, which aims to help English users understand the mood and appropriately use it to show their purposes in different contexts.

Keywords

English Subjunctive Mood; Pragmatic Functions; English Grammar Teaching; Suggestions.

1. Introduction

The origin of English subjunctive mood can be traced back to the Old English, when English users use English subjunctive mood widely in their lives and works. With the evolvement, English subjunctive mood is in decline. The following factors will account for that. Firstly, English users tend to use declarative mood to replace English subjunctive mood. Next, English users ignore some structures of English subjunctive mood. More importantly, English users understand its pragmatic functions incomprehensively.

Nowadays, many scholars are working on the analysis of pragmatic functions of English subjunctive mood and they have got some fruits on the analysis of pragmatic functions of English subjunctive mood. After analyzing the usage of English subjunctive mood in those popular dramas, they found that the main function of English subjunctive mood was moderation function. That is to say, English subjunctive mood can relieve threats to maintain social relationship in some occasions, such as criticism, warning and request. By the way, they also agreed that it had a minor function, non-moderation function, which intensified English users' emotions, such as determination and wish.

Based on the existing achievements, this article will analyze pragmatic functions of English subjunctive mood from a new perspective. Firstly, it will introduce English subjunctive mood briefly, including development, definitions, and classifications. Then, it will analyze pragmatic functions of English subjunctive mood from two aspects, euphemism function and emphasis function. At last, there will be some suggestions on the teaching and learning of English subjunctive mood, such as contextualization, diversity and individualization.

2. Introduction to English Subjunctive Mood

English subjunctive mood is very complicated. To begin with, its definitions and classifications are with a great variety. The famous grammatical scholars, such as Zhang Zhenbang, Zhang Daozhen and Yao Shanyou, have different views on the definitions and forms of English subjunctive mood. By the way, it has colorful structures. What's more, it holds different trends in different periods.

2.1. Development of English Subjunctive Mood

The term "subjunctive" comes from the Latin word "subjunctives" which means "proper to be subjoined". English subjunctive mood takes different positions in different periods (Lu Chonglai 1992:17).

In Old English and Middle English period, the subjunctive mood is widely used. It's available to find many markings of English subjunctive mood in the literary works at those periods. For example, Bacon once wrote that "it is one of the best bonds, both of chastity and obedience in the wife, if she think her husband wise which she will never do if she find him jealous" to show his assumption (Lu Chonglai 1992:21).

However, in modern English, it is declining. It's partly due to the fact that people use less English subjunctive mood now, and are accustomed to using the declarative mood.

What's worse, people tend to apply modal verb, adverb and a combination of verbs, which are the markings of declarative mood, to take place the structure of English subjunctive mood. For example, people usually use "may", "should", "must" "possibly", "perhaps"; and "it's high time that", "it's important that". Meanwhile, people prefer to directly transform a sentence in subjunctive mood into another sentence in declarative mood (Lu Chonglai 1992:22). In fact, the declarative mood can't replace the subjunctive mood. For example,

"You may be the winner."
"I wish you were the winner."

It's evident that the second sentence shows one's blessing more intensely, while the first sentence is a declarative sentence which is too pale. Therefore, it's easy to arrive at this conclusion that the English subjunctive mood couldn't be replaced by the declarative mood.

In addition, more and more necessary structures to express English subjunctive mood are neglected by the modern people. If-clause is the most commonly used one. For example,

"If I were a bird, I should fly."

People tend to use the simple past tense in the subordinate clause, and use modal verb "should" in the main clause with the infinite verb to indicate that something is going against the present or the future. Gradually it leads to the misunderstanding that the English subjunctive mood is merely with one structure to show something going against the past, present and the future, even though the fact that the subjunctive mood could be also used to express wishes, possibility, regrets and requirements etc. is informed. Later, the common structures of English subjunctive mood will be discussed.

Next, the usage of English subjunctive mood is narrowed by people. People tend to use it to express declarative sentences, for example, "The police declared that the criminal die." However, besides in the declarative sentences, it can also be in the instructive sentences, expressive sentences and promised sentences. For example, a father said to his son, "If you picked up that paper, the ground would be clean." This is an instructive sentence in which the

father ordered his son to pick up the paper on the ground. What's more, for example, "Without your help, I would have lost my wallet". And this expressive sentence is to show one's appreciation. The insufficient analyses of the pragmatic functions of English subjunctive mood will be one factor of its narrow usage now.

Generally, the subjunctive mood had once been widely used, but now it is in decline due to several reasons that we have talked about. English subjunctive mood is an important grammar which adds variety into this foreign language, and it can't be replaced by other moods, so all the English users should try their best to reserve the tough situation.

2.2. Definitions and Classifications of English Subjunctive Mood

With the development of English subjunctive mood, there always exists debates about its definition and classification. The great grammatical scholars, Yao Shanyou, Zhang Daozhen and Zhang Zhenbang, have proposed different views which share some common things and also have some differences.

Yao Shanyou (1964:13) stated that the English subjunctive mood is neither used to state facts nor to express commands and requests, and more specifically it expresses one's desire, wish, fear, purpose, doubt, assumption, conjecture and imagination. When it comes to the forms of English subjunctive mood, he believes that there are seven kinds of forms. Take the verb "be" as an example. The seven forms are "be", "were", "had been", "should be", "should have been", "should/would be", and "should/would have been". Yao's proposal is partly true. English subjunctive mood is not used to state facts, but it can express commands and requests. For an instance, "He ordered that all the books be sent at once." This sentence is used to command someone to send the books or request someone to send the books.

Zhang Daozhen (1979:237) holds the view that a sentence is to express a purely imaginary situation or subjective desire, where the verb should be in a special form. It is called the subjunctive mood. There are three subjunctive forms of the verb. They are the present subjunctive, past subjunctive and past perfect subjunctive. Traditional grammatical scholars randomly mix up the declarative mood and subjunctive mood. In fact, subjunctive verbs cannot express time and have no tense, and sometimes both present time or past time use the verb in the same form. There are three kinds of moods, the declarative mood, imperative mood and subjunctive mood. They can't be randomly mixed up to cause misunderstanding. For example, "If I were free, I would help you". Based on Zhang Daozhen's classification, it embodies two meanings. The first one is that now I am busy, so I can't help you. On the contrary, the second one is that I don't know whether I'll be busy or not later, and I may help you if I will be free at that time. Therefore, Zhang Zhaozhen's classification on the forms of English subjunctive mood is partly unreasonable.

Zhang Zhenbang (1983:179) wrote, "Subjunctive mood is a kind of verb form to express hypothetical meaning and non-factual meaning." He classifies the forms of English subjunctive mood from different points of view. In modern English, Zhang uses the past forms of verb, the past form of modal verb. The common structures are "it's high time that", "I would rather that..." and "I wish" etc. In Old English, the subjunctive mood only has two forms which are be- and were-. Sentences with Be- subjunctive mood should use the verbs of original forms. This is true to the Were-subjunctive mood, sentences in which the verb should be "were" or "was". Be-subjunctive mood and were-subjunctive mood are emphasized by Zhang Zhenbang, and the classification simplifying the English subjunctive mood neither covers all the forms of English subjunctive mood, nor correctly reflect the relationship between verbs and subjunctive moods. Normally, besides the "were" or "be", people could use the past form of the modal verbs and the verbs to show the subjunctive mood. For example, "It's high time that we went to bed." This sentence is to express suggestion with the past form of "go". "Without your help, I would have

been lost today.” This sentence is to show appreciation with the past form of the modal verb “will”.

Generally, their views on identifications and classifications on the English subjunctive mood have their own deficiencies, but they also share something. That is they all agree that the English subjunctive mood will express one’s wish, desire and imagination etc. However, the English subjunctive mood also has other functions, such as showing suggestion, request and surprise. Concerning the classification of English subjunctive mood, seven kinds of forms by Yao Shanyou cover the forms of English subjunctive mood relatively comprehensively than the other two scholars. Zhang Zhenbang’s classification is too simple to cover all the components, and Zhang Daozhen’s classification mixes up the declarative tense and subjunctive tense. At present, the classification of subjunctive mood forms in foreign language community of China is mainly based on the form of verbs or tense, by which it is difficult to accurately reflect its nature, and its relation to declarative and imperative forms. According to grammatical function, Yuan Xiaoning (2000) tries to classify the forms of English subjunctive mood into three categories. They are the subjunctive mood to show something that must to do, the subjunctive mood to show hypothetical meaning and wishes can’t come true or the subjunctive mood to express wishes, curse and prohibition etc. It builds up a new way to help English learners understand the English subjunctive mood.

3. Pragmatic Functions of English Subjunctive Mood

The complexity of the definition and classification, uneasiness of its development and variety of the commonly used structures lay a sound foundation for the fact that English subjunctive mood is with colorful pragmatic functions.

Deng Jing (2015) once analyzed the English subjunctive mood involved in three popular American dramas, obtained the moderating function and non-moderating function of the subjunctive mood, and proposed that the main function of the English subjunctive mood is language moderation. That is a new perspective to analyze the pragmatic function of English subjunctive mood. People will be able to use the English subjunctive mood to ease their conflicts, raise suggestions etc., which is the moderating function. What’s more, they can use English subjunctive mood to show their intense emotions, such as anger and desire. It’s the non-moderating function.

In most cases, sentences in English subjunctive mood have some implications, which could reduce the threats of the words to show politeness to establish and maintain the social relationship and sometimes it stresses the emotions, too.

3.1. Euphemism Function

English subjunctive mood will be able to subtly reverse many embarrassed occasions to maintain personal relationship by its euphemism function. Euphemism is a strategy, which helps people express something in a euphemistic way. For example,

A: “How about my new hat?”

B: “It was pink.”

B didn’t answer this question directly, but his answer may imply that the hat is not good. This manner shows politeness and lessen the threats. In English subjunctive mood, it’s easy to find some examples.

a) Suggestion

Sometimes, to raise suggestions is a headache for most people. If the suggestion is favorable to the listener, whatever way is OK. However, if the suggestion will hurt one's dignity or confidence, English users should take many factors into consideration. Now, English subjunctive mood may be a good helper. For example,

“If I were you, I should wait till next week.”

This sentence is better than the directive declarative mood, “You should wait till next week.” The former sentence is much politer and it seems that the advisor considers the problem from the point of view of the suggestion receiver, and the opposite will be glad to accept it.

b) Criticism

Criticism is done when one feels extremely dissatisfied with something, which may threaten personal relationship. However, English subjunctive mood can reverse the tough situation. For example,

“If you had called him, you would know what to do now.”

This is what a boss said to an employee. It is much tender than directly criticizing the employee with this sentence, “You had made such a big mistake that you didn't call him yesterday!” Sometimes those sharp criticisms would arouse listeners' rebellion, however gentle criticism would help the listeners take deep reflection.

c) Humility

The English subjunctive mood will show humility euphemistically. For example, in the popular drama, *Modern Family*, Claire was once a manager and then she resigned to take care of her family. When she knew her colleague had been promoted to a higher place, she was shocked. And her colleague replied,

“If you had not left, it would have been you.”

This sentence not only appreciated Claire's competence, but also relieved the embarrassed atmosphere. If her colleague responded, “What I have achieved is nothing.” It seems to show off her success deliberately in an indirect manner. It protects the listener's dignity and relieves the listener's psychological discomfort (Sun Juezhao 2021:126).

d) Request

Request refers to ask for something formally. To make a request should be in a reasonable manner which encourages people to provide helps. Take the following sentences as an example.

“Would you mind opening the door?”

“Please open the door.”

Apparently, the first sentence leaves much room for the listener. It seems that the decision relies on the listener. As to the imperative mood, the listener has no choice. The first one is with a less aggressive request than the imperative sentence which sounds sharp as an order from a person who is superior to others. Hence, it is more likely to fulfill the request by English subjunctive mood.

e) Warning

Warning is to tell somebody that something bad or unpleasant may happen in the future, so they can avoid that. In daily life, English users tend to warn someone by imperative mood, but unfortunately it will cause anxiety and depression. When in a shop a customer is holding a new glass, the shopkeeper is worried about the safety of the deliberate glass. It's wise for him to say,

“If you hurt your hand, it would be very painful.”

Superficially, the shopkeeper is showing concerns for the customers, but actually he politely warns the customer not to break the glass.

f) Refusal

It is not an easy thing to say or show that you will not do, give or accept something. When someone invites you to a party passionately, it's hard and rude to directly say No. Now, the English subjunctive mood will provide a new tool to refuse someone or something. For an instance,

“I wish that I could come to your party, too.”

It tactfully shows that you can't go to this party, but that's not because you are not willing to go to it. In this way, the relationship is effectively preserved.

Language is an effective tool, which carries much information to establish and maintain the social relationship. The famous functional linguist Halliday (1985) once remarked that though the roles of speech communication are so complex, but they only have two jobs: the first one is to offer and the other is to demand. When people are to offer or to demand, they should take the personal relationship into consideration, for no one can live in isolation from social community now. As we have discussed, the euphemism function of English subjunctive mood expresses things tactfully and indirectly, such as suggestion, criticism, humility, warning, declination etc. It deliberately and politely establishes and maintains the social relationship.

3.2. Emphasis Function

The previous examples have shown that the subjunctive mood is a mediator in interpersonal communication, and the subjunctive mood also has the effect of promoting emotional expression (Deng Jin 2015:90). In some communicative contexts, the English subjunctive mood will intensify speakers' emotions. That is to say, English subjunctive mood will express the emotions vividly and truly. And, the emphasis function is not contradicted with the euphemism function. For example, a man asked his lover to live with him in his country, a woman responded sadly, “I wish I should go with you.” The woman refused the man's request euphemistically and expressed that she was forced to stay here.

a) Astonishment

In English, there are many ways to show one's astonishment, such as the application of the punctuation and some familiar tones of voice. English subjunctive mood will express the astonishment tactfully, too. For example,

“She forgot me!”

“Oh my god! She forgot me.”

“That she should forget me so quickly was rather a shock.”

The speaker was shocked that the woman had forgot her so quickly. “Should” is the great touch of the last sentence, which describes strategically how astonished and disappointed the woman

is. However, the first two sentences are less intense than the first one. In English subjunctive mood, the application of the modal verb in past form (should, would, might) to show one's astonishment is an ideal way. Take another example, "To think that he would marry such a nasty woman!"

b) Desire

English subjunctive mood also emphasizes the individual desire effectively. Normally, English users tend to use the structure, "I wish that...". But, they can also express intense individual desires in unconventional structure with English subjunctive mood. For example,

"I wish that we could see him again!"
"Would that the flood might never come again!"

The first sentence expresses expectation for the next meeting vividly, more intense than this one, "I hope that we will see him again". And the second sentence expresses the speaker's desires strongly, better than this one, "I hope that the flood will not come again." It's safe to say that the English subjunctive is irreplaceable, partly due to its emphasis function.

c) Determination

Sentences which express one's determination are required to show the firmness and the perseverance of the speaker who will not give up until the goal is achieved. Some simple sentences can't fully show one's determination, such as "I want to..." or "I will..." Actually, there are more ideal ways. For example,

"If the sun were to rise in the west, I would marry him."
"She insisted that she go to the south for her holiday."

The first sentence looks very simple in the form, but it conveys strong determination. It's universally acknowledged that the sun rises from the east and goes down from the west. It's impossible that sun rises from the west. The impossibility conveys the girl's extreme determination and strong unwillingness. And in the second one, the verb "insist" leads a clause to show the girl's stubbornness that she must go to the south for her holiday. The reader will get this feeling easily that no one can change the girl's decision, even though the sky is falling. That's due to the emphasis function of the English subjunctive mood.

d) Appreciation

When it comes to show appreciation to someone, what really matters is to make sure that the receiver will be able to get your sincere gratitude. A simple sentence, "Thank you" or "Thanks" is not enough to show the gratitude to others. In English subjunctive mood, people usually use "But for", "without" and if-clause to appreciate someone. For example,

"But for your help, I couldn't have achieved anything."
"Without your help, I couldn't arrive on time."
"If you hadn't save me yesterday, I wouldn't be there now."

In these sentences, English users stress the cause-and-effect relationship, and both the users and receivers will be aware of the importance of the help. And the receivers will also know how the speaker value the help. The personal relationship is reinforced, too. Therefore, the emphasis function of the subjunctive is extremely important in expressing gratitude.

e) Regret

It's inevitable that everyone will make some mistakes. When they realize what they had done, a sense of regret will surge up. English subjunctive mood will express English users' regret much more intensively than other moods. For example,

“If only I had gone to the airport by taxi, I wouldn't have missed the plane.”

“I wish I hadn't said that.”

“She wishes she'd never got involved in the whole affair.”

These sentences are to show regrets for the wrong choice not to take the taxi to the airport, for wrong speech, and for involvement in the whole affair respectively. The English subjunctive successfully strengthens the sense of regret. And the declarative mood can't meet this goal. Take an example, “I regret for what I had said.” Though it contains the verb “regret”, it just states a fact without intense regret. Even, the second sentence doesn't include the verb “regret”, it expresses intense regret in a delicate way.

The English subjunctive mood is a polite resource to alleviate the threats of the speech acts, and its basic pragmatic function is moderation function. At the same time, the English subjunctive mood will undergo functional deviation and variation under the stimulation of special contexts, and there will be non-moderating usages that are opposite to the power of mitigating usages (Deng Jin 2015:92). Based on Deng's analysis and the above analysis, it's safe to arrive the following conclusions. The emphasis function of the English subjunctive usually occurs in some expressions which are full of intense emotions. And it is mainly to intensify these emotions, such as astonishment, desire, determination, appreciation, regret etc. It contributes to vary the language and strengthen the communication in emotion. What's more, it should be noted that the euphemism function and emphasis function don't contradict each other. That is to say, the English subjunctive mood will be able to implement two functions in one sentence.

4. Suggestions in Teaching English Subjunctive Mood

As we've talked above, the importance of the pragmatic function of English subjunctive mood is obvious. However, in reality, its pragmatic functions are often neglected, since most teachers put more emphasis on the form. Due to that, their teaching methods are somewhat mechanical. Much time was spent on lengthy explanations, repetition, and drillings, which has destroyed the laws of English teaching as not to achieve the ultimate goal of English teaching--the key competence. In reality, teachers should obey the following principles to maximize the teaching when teaching the pragmatic function of English subjunctive mood.

4.1. Contextualization

In modern English teaching, the knowledge is usually in isolation of the context. Students learn the knowledge mechanically and don't know how to use it, which is not only an inefficient learning, but also will widen the gap between English used in daily life and English learned in the classroom. CLT and TBLT, two modern English teaching methods, advocate that English learning should be in communicative activities in different contexts. The two methods are ideal for the teaching and learning of English subjunctive mood. Take the application of CLT as an example, the teacher will set a context that is “you got the last one in the latest English examination”, and then students should create a conversation with the English subjunctive mood. Students will use subjunctive mood to show their regret, criticism, determination, suggestion, wishes etc. For example,

A: “I got the last one. I shouldn't have watched TV that night.”

B: “You shouldn't blame your mistakes on watching TV.”

A: "Why?"

B: "If I were you, I wouldn't sleep in the English class."

...

Students will learn the pragmatic function of English subjunctive mood through meaningful communication in different contexts. This is more effective than mechanical practice, such as transformation and completion. Zhang Suhua (2019:63) remarked that the establishment of contexts will build up the relation between English and different contexts, and help students understand. Putting grammar into the dialogue teaching of the overall structure makes the classroom lively and helps to cultivate students' ability to learn and use grammar effectively.

4.2. Diversity

English grammar teaching needs diversity within the several reasons. Firstly, teachers should diversify the teaching contents and prepare different tasks to meet different needs of students, subjects and environments. Take an example of students' differences. Students vary in the attitude, motivation, learning styles, aptitude etc. For example, when doing exercise, the work for high-achieving students should be different from the work for struggling students. Only in this way, will all students make progress and see their achievement. Secondly, diversity make students well-prepared in different contexts. The pragmatic function of English subjunctive mood is best shown in communicative activities. In daily life, people will communicate in different contexts, such as in a supermarket and hospital. In the classroom, the teacher should set different contexts for students to communicate so that they will be able to cope with different situations naturally and correctly. What's more, diversity creates the motivation and maintains the interest. Whatever effective grammar learning activity overused, it will become useless in the end. Actually besides transformation, there are thousands of activities for English grammar learning, from mechanical practice to meaningful practice, such as transformation, role play and information gap activities.

4.3. Individualization

Sometimes, the exercises in the textbooks are far from students' real life, which will cause students' low motivation. Therefore, the teaching of pragmatic function of English subjunctive mood should be individualized. At first, the grammar teaching should fully take students' life and interest into consideration and then integrate the teaching into them comprehensively. That is to say, the teaching should be close to their real life. For example, the teacher will hold an exam reflection meeting. There students will show their emotions freely in line with their performance in the exam. For example,

A: "If I were you, I wouldn't sleep in the English class."

B: "If only I hadn't slept in English exam."

C: "Without Li Ming's help this semester, I wouldn't achieve that."

This activity is individualized, since every student might have something to say in accordance with his performance in the exam. Meanwhile, it emphasizes the meaning as well as the form. What's more, individualization will also arouse students' interests, too. That's because an individualized question or activity will clear away the boredom after the long-term repetition, which is indispensable for the grammar learning. In a nutshell, grammar teaching should be closely related to life, close to the individual student.

5. Conclusion

English takes different positions in different periods, and nowadays English subjunctive mood is in decline. It's mainly because of people's incomprehensive understandings on its colorful pragmatic functions which are determined by complexity of its definition and classification,

uneasiness of its development and variety of the commonly used structures. There are two main pragmatic functions.

The euphemism function is the basic one. The euphemism function of English subjunctive mood, which will help English users express moods euphemistically, such as criticism and humility, within the purpose to establish and maintain social relationship.

Besides it, there is the emphasis function. In some occasions, English subjunctive mood will strategically intensify speakers' emotions, such as astonishment, regrets, wishes etc. It should be noted that the two functions are not contradicted each other.

The analysis of its pragmatic functions is meaningful. It will not only help English users understand subjunctive mood in English, but also offer English teachers some suggestions on the teaching of English subjunctive mood, such as contextualization, diversity and individualization.

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