

SEMANTICS OF THE PRESENT SUBJUNCTIVE

Both the present subjunctive and the present indicative occur in independent clauses, as in *So be it* and *It is so*, in object clauses, as in *They insist that it be so* and *They insist that it is so*, and in conditional clauses, as in *They will not go on if it be so* and *They will not go on if it is so*. The problem is that the choice of mood produces a clear contrast in meaning in the independent and object clauses, but no clear contrast in the conditional clauses. How then do we describe the semantics of the present subjunctive? In this chapter I argue that the subjunctive signifies one of two basic modalities. I explain the apparent differences in its meaning with an analysis that distinguishes it semantically from the indicative and the imperative and also reconciles its disparate current uses and its earlier uses.

2.1 POSSIBLE AMBIGUITY OF THE PRESENT SUBJUNCTIVE

An alternative approach would avoid the problem of reconciling its uses altogether. If we take the subjunctive in conditional clauses to be a stylistic variant of the indicative in present-day English, then we might say that it is ambiguous, for the subjunctive's meaning in object clauses contrasts with the indicative's in a way that is more than stylistic. For earlier English, before obsolescence creates stylistic differences, the ambiguity would be even clearer: the subjunctive would be synonymous with the indicative (or nearly so) in one of its meanings but would contrast with it sharply in the other. Considering the subjunctive to be ambiguous, we might try to avoid the problem of reconciling its uses simply by saying that they need not be reconciled. Ambiguity ac-

counts for the different uses. But this solution creates other problems which are equally difficult. How would we describe the semantics of the indicative? Is it too ambiguous, with one meaning in conditional clauses and another in object clauses? And what about independent clauses? Do either or both the subjunctive and the indicative have a third meaning in independent clauses?

Another difficulty in calling the subjunctive ambiguous is to describe the ambiguity. Surely the ambiguity is not homonymy. To say that what is traditionally referred to as the subjunctive is actually two moods, let us call them the optative and the conditional, which are semantically unrelated and only by chance have the same phonological form, is highly implausible. If we maintain that the subjunctive's ambiguity is not homonymy but polysemy, we are left with the problem of demonstrating the connection between its meanings, and this is scarcely different from the original problem of reconciling its uses. I will not argue that the subjunctive is not ambiguous, for I think that whether it is or not depends only on what we choose to regard as ambiguity. I will try to show, however, that the subjunctive conveys one consistent element of meaning in all its uses (or it did, at least, before its obsolescence). I regard this element of meaning as its semantic content, and I would argue that if we wish to regard the subjunctive as polysemous, its different senses are best explained by reference to pragmatic, and not semantic meaning.

2.2 MODALITY AND MODAL FORMS

Traditional grammars usually define mood by saying such things as that it expresses the mental attitude of the speaker or that it signifies manner of predication or manner of representation.⁶ Such differences in definition do not reflect significant differences in the way that mood is conceived, but are merely different ways of saying essentially the same thing. The manner in which the verb is predicated of its subject determines the manner in which the state of affairs indicated by that predication is represented, so the second two definitions are equivalent. The first is not quite equivalent to the other two. Although the speaker will often choose a manner of representation which reflects his attitude toward the situation, the choice may also reflect someone else's attitude, so to define mood as speaker's attitude is too restrictive. To define mood as manner of representation is not restrictive in this way and is quite satisfactory in my view. But traditional grammars do not clarify the notion 'manner of representation'. Instead they give ex-

amples of how moods function semantically, showing how one mood expresses command and another statement or how one expresses thoughts and another facts. In order to distinguish the subjunctive from the indicative, I will offer an interpretation of the key term, 'manner of representation'.

The interpretation begins with a hypothesis that there are two fundamental manners of representation. It is a philosophical hypothesis about all kinds of representation, linguistic or otherwise. It is reminiscent of a distinction that philosophers, past and present, have drawn between practical and theoretical reasoning. Particularly, it is reminiscent of the distinction that the philosophical grammarian James Harris draws between two fundamental "powers of the soul". He calls these powers "perception" and "volition", explaining that he intends the terms in an extended sense. By "powers of perception" he means "the senses and the intellect". By "powers of volition" he means "not only the will, but the several passions and appetites", and these include "all that moves to action". Harris goes on to claim that "all speech is a publication of these powers", and, therefore, that "every sentence will be either a sentence of assertion or a sentence of volition". (See Harris 1751: 13-17.)

Very similar distinctions are made more recently by G. E. M. Anscombe and by John Searle. Anscombe distinguishes between two separate kinds of lists, exemplified by a shopper's list, according to which a man selects items in a grocery store, and a detective's list, which another person makes by recording everything the shopper puts into his basket. Anscombe observes that two kinds of mistakes can occur: in the first case, "if the list and the things that the man actually buys do not agree . . . , then the mistake is not in the list but in the man's performance"; but in the other case, "if the detective's record and what the man actually buys do not agree, then the mistake is in the record". (See Anscombe 1957: 56.) The lists reflect a fundamental difference in their manner of representation. Searle describes this as a difference between the way in which the words are intended to match the world: when mistakes are made, the shopper fails to get the world to match the words, and the detective fails to get the words to match the world. A correspondence between words and world can be intended in either of two ways. (See Searle 1972: 346-347.)

Words on lists are of course representations, and what Searle says about the kinds of match between words and world holds equally well for non-linguistic representations. Consider, for example, an architect's sketch of a house he plans to build. He intends for the world to match the sketch, which is his 'blueprint'. Now consider an artist's sketch of

that house after it is built. He intends for the sketch, which is his 'record', to match the world. The sketches may look exactly alike, but they differ in their manner of representation. If the same person had occasion to draw both kinds of sketches, he might choose to do 'blueprints' on blue paper and 'records' on yellow paper, to help keep orderly files. The colors would then serve to signify manner of representation. Modal forms are the linguistic analogue of this color-coding, and modality is just a linguistic term for manner of representation. Manner of representation is the relation (of which there are two kinds) between a representation and what is represented. The semantic function of modal forms is to signify, and usually also to qualify, one of the two basic modalities. Moods, as systems of inflection on verbs, are a subclass of the larger class of modal forms. Before turning to the moods, I will briefly examine some non-inflectional modal forms, auxiliaries, adjectives, and adverbs, for these help to confirm the hypothesis that there are two separate kinds of modality.

2.3 MODAL AUXILIARIES AND OTHER MODALS

The ambiguity between the root and epistemic senses of the modal auxiliaries is an ambiguity between these two kinds of modality. In the root sense, *can* means ability, *may* permission, *must* obligation, *shall* determination, and *will* intention. In the root sense, they refer to what are powers of volition in Harris's terminology: they are antecedents of action. (Ability should be included as a 'power of volition' because, although it may not 'move to action', it is a requisite of action.) In the epistemic sense, *can* and *may* mean theoretical possibility, *must* means theoretical necessity, and *shall* and *will* mean futurity. As the term 'epistemic' suggests, in this sense they refer to powers of perception in Harris's terminology: they involve the exercise of the senses or the intellect. In Searle's terminology, to represent a situation as within someone's ability, as permitted to someone, as an obligation of someone, as determined to be brought about by someone, or as intended by someone is in each case to make a representation for the world to match. The root modals have the modality in common. They differ semantically in the qualifications they add beyond specifying a particular modality. Likewise, to represent a situation as theoretically possible, theoretically necessary, or belonging to the future is to make a representation which matches the world. The epistemic modals have the modality in common and differ in the qualifications they add beyond it.

The semantics of modal auxiliaries is complicated by the fact that

they can serve not only to attribute properties to the subject of a sentence but also, like moods, to determine the illocutionary potential of a sentence. (Illocutionary potential is the range of illocutionary forces that a sentence can have when uttered, illocutionary force is the communicative purpose with which a sentence is used to perform a speech act, and a speech act is an act of using language for doing such things as giving orders, making promises, and reporting information.) Julian Boyd and J. P. Thorne show that in certain uses in independent clauses, the auxiliaries can be analyzed as modifying one or another of two primary speech acts, statements and imperatives. *May*, for instance, in the sentence *He may go*, determines illocutionary potential if the sentence means 'I permit him to go' (but not if it means 'He has permission to go'). 'I permit' can be analyzed as 'I do not forbid', and 'I forbid', as 'I command . . . not'. In this way *may* can be taken as a modification of an imperative. By contrast, *may* can be taken as a modification of a statement if *He may go* means 'I do not deny that he goes', for 'I deny' can be analyzed as 'I state . . . not'. Since the communicative purpose of statements is to get words to match the world, and the communicative purpose of imperatives is to get the world to match words, the auxiliaries are still ambiguous between two kinds of modality, whether or not they determine illocutionary potential. (See Boyd and Thorne 1969.)

The modal adjective *possible*, as Ian Hacking points out, exhibits an ambiguity comparable to the ambiguity in the modal auxiliaries. Hacking notes that there are two kinds of possibility and that these are not identical: one does not entail the other. Giving an example, he says, "It may be possible for the judge to give the woman a suspended sentence, but it is not possible that he will; he is notoriously mean and will certainly send her to jail" (Hacking 1975: 323). If we say, "It is possible for the judge to do it," meaning he has the legal authority to do it, *possible* specifies the same modality as *can* and *may* in the root sense. This kind of possibility is potential, and 'potential' is semantically similar to 'ability' and 'permission', being somewhat more general and often implying both. If we say, "It is possible that the judge will do it," meaning there is some chance of his doing it, *possible* specifies the same modality as *can* and *may* in the epistemic sense, for this kind of possibility is theoretical possibility. The words *necessary* and *necessarily* show that there are two kinds of necessity, just as there are two kinds of possibility. If we say, "It is necessary for him to do that," *necessary* specifies the same modality as *must* in the root sense, and if we say, "That is necessarily the case," *necessarily* specifies the same modality as *must* in the epistemic sense.

2.4 MOODS

The ambiguity of the modal auxiliaries, which is reflected in words denoting possibility and necessity, supports the hypothesis that there are two separate manners of representation. Moods, like the auxiliaries and some other words, signify manners of representation. They are not ambiguous, however; they signify one modality or the other. They are also comparatively simple semantically, for they signify very little beyond a basic modality. The imperative and subjunctive signify Harris's volitions, that is, the blueprint, or world-to-match-words modality, and the indicative signifies Harris's perceptions, the record, or words-to-match-world modality. The imperative is semantically distinct from the subjunctive only in two respects: first, its distribution is more limited than the subjunctive's (recall that I ignore the subjunctive's obsolescence), as it is restricted to the second person, present tense, and to independent clauses, and second, it refers the bringing about of the state of affairs represented in the clause in which it occurs to the subject of that clause. The subjunctive is not restricted syntactically in the way that the imperative is, nor does it refer the bringing about of the state of affairs to anyone in particular. The indicative is like the subjunctive in lacking the kinds of added information that the imperative conveys. Together the three moods divide the semantic domain of modality in conformity with the hypothesis that there are two basic manners of representation.

For convenience I will refer to the two manners of representation as 'practical' and 'theoretical', from the Greek words meaning 'doing' and 'viewing'.⁷ The new terms will prove less awkward than the terms I have been using and more inclusive than terms that have been used previously to describe modal ambiguity. In this terminology, representations like blueprints or shoppers' lists are practical and those like records or detectives' lists are theoretical. The practical modality corresponds to Harris's volitions. It is the modality of the modal auxiliaries in the root sense and of *possible* and *necessary* with *for . . . to* complements. The theoretical modality corresponds to Harris's perceptions. It is the modality of the modal auxiliaries in the epistemic sense, of *possible* with *that*-clause complements, and of *necessarily*. Since I regard modality as the relation between words and world, the best way to paraphrase my terms would be to call the practical modality the world-to-match-words modality, and the theoretical modality the words-to-match-world modality. I will now try to establish that the subjunctive mood signifies no more nor less than the practical modality. Signifying practical modality, the subjunctive is semantically distinct from the in-

dicative, which signifies theoretical modality. The subjunctive is distinct from the imperative, which also signifies practical modality, in not conveying any additional information. If we take the semantic content of the subjunctive to be limited to the practical modality, we will be able to account for its apparently different meanings in different uses.

2.5 USES OF THE PRESENT SUBJUNCTIVE

Analyzing the meanings of moods in particular uses involves sorting out and finding sources for different kinds of information. The word 'meaning' is a vague, pretheoretical term. Traditional studies describing the meanings of the moods have assigned nearly all information about the manner in which a clause represents a state of affairs to the mood of the main verb. But much of the information about manner of representation is qualifying information coming not from the mood but from the particular use, coming, that is, from other forms in the sentence or from the context in which the sentence typically or actually occurs. Assigning too much information to the mood makes reconciling its uses impossible. By assuming that the subjunctive conveys the very limited information that manner of representation is practical, we avoid this problem. What remains to show is how the information conveyed by the subjunctive combines with information from other sources to produce the effects observable in particular uses. To do this, we must distinguish the signification of a form, information which the form itself conveys, from the implications of a form, information deducible from the form as it occurs in context. Analysis will show that meanings which grammarians have traditionally assigned to the moods, meanings such as 'statement', 'fact', 'certain', 'actual', or 'real' for the indicative and 'wish', 'thought', 'uncertain', 'potential', or 'unreal' for the subjunctive, are implications which derive automatically from the signification of a mood and the qualifying information in typical contexts.⁸ Being implications, no single one of these meanings always occurs with a given mood, and grammarians assuming any one of them as the mood's basic meaning (signification) have therefore been unable to provide a unified account of the mood's uses.

Below I analyze the present subjunctive in three syntactic environments, independent clauses, noun clauses, and adverb clauses. Important sources of qualifying information I consider in analyzing particular uses are the syntactic environment itself, the communicative purpose of the clause, and the point of view from which a state of affairs is