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ANTHROPOLOGY
1010-003

USO DEL SUBJUNTIVO...

*A juxtaposition of Spanish and English grammar and their uses
of the subjunctive mood.*

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Linguistic anthropologists have studied the similarities and differences between and among languages and have collectively established the theory of linguistic relativity. This is the concept that the language that one speaks affects the way one perceives the world around him (Lucy 1997). 20th century Linguistic anthropologists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf conceptualized this notion in a hypothesis called the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. It states that the language people speak influences the way they think (Lucy 1997). By comparing and contrasting English and Spanish grammar, one can see that: Because speakers of English and Spanish use different grammatical moods to express themselves, they must think differently and perceive reality in distinct ways.

DEFINITION:

The subjunctive mood is used to express hopes, desires, doubts and uncertainty. It is used more frequently in Spanish than in English. Much of surrealism¹ is written in the subjunctive mood because the subjunctive mood expresses something that *could be*, but isn't necessarily *real*; the same concept is inherent in surrealism itself. Surrealism was developed by the 20th century literary and artistic movement (Stowers 2011). Its goal is to express in the conscious realm what only the subconscious can experience. Surrealism is an expression of something that isn't necessarily in line with the western concept of "Reality," but that doesn't define it automatically as non-reality, but more so an alternate reality (Arenas 1972). Syntactically speaking, it would only make sense that much of Spanish surrealism were written in the subjunctive mood as it expresses a desire for that which isn't necessarily a "Reality."

¹ Surrealism was expressed by Spanish-born painter, Salvador Dalí in his famous painting "The Persistence of Memory" which depicts clocks melting in a desolate, arid desert.

FOUND IN LITERATURE:

In 1964, poet and author Reinaldo Arenas wrote a short story called, “Con los ojos cerrados²” (Arenas 1972). In it, he paints a picture of a young boy walking down the street where he trips over a dead cat on the side of the road. The boy also finds two elderly ladies in front of a candy shop begging for spare change, and a band of young boys harassing a muskrat beneath an overpass. The first part may be seen from the perspective of a passive reader as the boy’s “reality.” The boy then closes his eyes while walking across the bridge. With his eyes closed, he trips on the same cat, which scurries off because it was startled by the boy—it is not really dead. The boy visits the same candy shop, but instead of finding the two old ladies begging, they are the shopkeepers and both give him a huge chocolate cake with almonds. Finally, the boy finds himself at the overpass again and witnesses a group of boys trying to save a sick muskrat. The boy decides to share the cake with the youngsters, but is hit by a car and ends up in the hospital with casts on his legs. The entire story is written in the indicative, but shifts between “realities” as marked by use of the subjunctive mood. The boy bids the reader not to tell his mother that he was walking across the bridge with his eyes closed—which thing had led him to break his legs. He also challenges the reader to visit the overpass that the cake might be found and that his story might be validated. If this story were written in English, it would be considered a fairy tale or a story of a young man with “some imagination.” In Spanish, though, it is thought of as an alternate reality for the boy and is completely accepted as valid without taking a trip to the overpass to find the cake.

² “With my eyes closed”

In “Si dios fuera una mujer³,” (Benedetti 1995) poet Mario Benedetti suggests how we humans would be treated differently by God were she to be female. He proposes that God would be more loving, more present and interactive with humans, and that *she* would “infect us with her immortality instead of making us sick with AIDS” were *she* to be a woman (Benedetti 1995). He finishes this poem by stating that with God as a woman, our human experience would be splendid, yet impossible, and that it would be blasphemous to propose that God were a woman in the first place. Because Spanish uses the subjunctive mood more often than English, poets, writers, and authors who speak it can better express hypothetical concepts than those who speak English. Spanish supports conceptualization of alternate realities as is evident in their use of the subjunctive mood while writing surrealistic literature.

TRANSLATION DOESN'T WORK:

“Translation doesn’t work” (Stowers 2011). Professor Stowers is known to repeat this phrase in his Spanish classes. He drills that one cannot transpose a piece of text directly from one language to the next while expressing the *exact* same meaning as was implicit in the first language. The reason for this is that not all languages express meaning in *exactly* the same way, neither does each have *exactly* the same words to express these meanings. When translating a piece of literature or direct oratory from one language to another, one is actually translating the inherent meaning of the written or spoken words, rather than the actual words themselves. For example, if a Honduran mother wants her child to clean his or her room, she might say, “Quiero que limpies tu habitación.⁴” The implication in Spanish is, “I really really want you to clean your room, if you have time, so that I don’t have to do it for you. I realize

³ “If God were a woman”

⁴ I want (indicative) you to clean (subj.) your room.

that you may or may not, but I'd really really like you to. I understand that it is ultimately your choice to clean or not clean your room, but I, as your mother, would really like to see that you were to clean your room because it's really dirty." It is translated to English simply as, "I want you to clean your room." This translation is a direct translation, but is frankly too simple. The subjunctive mood is used to express ideas and hopes, although they may or may not happen—EVER, and the English translation mentions none of that. This short example hints to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis which suggests that, "The language we speak influences the way we think about reality" (Lucy 1997). The Honduran mother is highly suggesting to her child that he clean his room, but she is *not* demanding it. This use of the subjunctive as a petition alludes to the culture that Spanish-speaking people share—one that is more suggestive than demanding.

GRAMMATICAL DIFFERENCES:

Because English has been influenced by so many other languages, it has no linguistic "purity." That is to say that there are no concrete grammar rules and regulations which dictate proper use of sentence structure and the subjunctive mood; neither is there a distinct and unique vocabulary proprietary to the English language. There is no English Language Academy to maintain the purity and proper grammatical structure of the language (Baranowski 2007). As such, many accepted "rules" in the English language often have multiple exceptions which diverge from common grammar usage. The line between the indicative (able to be perceived with the five senses) and the subjunctive (hopes, dreams, and desires) is often blurred in English; the two are often obfuscated and used interchangeably. Because of this confusion concerning the use of the subjunctive mood, English grammar has been molded to solely express indicative concepts and objects, and has caused that English be a more "black and

white” language. Accepting the aphorism that language influences thought, one can conclude that the English language both maintains and substantiates dichotomic thoughts and beliefs. An idea, concept, or belief in English either *is* (white), or it *is not* (black), there really is no *maybe* (gray) (Holmquist 1985).

There exists a Spanish academy to determine which words are accepted into the Spanish vocabulary and to maintain the purity of the Spanish tongue; *La Real Academia Española* was founded in Madrid, Spain in 1771 (Baranowski 2007). France had also founded *L’académie Française* in 1635 to purify the French language. Because there are more rules and fewer exceptions in Romantic languages, the line between the indicative and the subjunctive is seldom, if ever, crossed. As a result, Spanish and French have maintained a wide usage of the subjunctive mood to express hopes, dreams, and desires. By doing so, they have created and supported the “gray” in their respective languages which allows that they be able to more fully and felicitously express abstract thoughts and emotions.

Modern English *does* contain some sense of the subjunctive mood as in, “I wish I *were* rich.” This sentence, however, can be confusing to some EFL (English as a First Language) and ESL (English as a Second Language) students because “*were*” is actually both the subjunctive mood and the third-person plural simple past form of the verb “to be” (Lee 2006). While English speakers can describe events that are contrary to fact using the subjunctive mood, “If I *were* famous,” they are limited to a few tenses and cannot use this mood to express meaning which spans across the time continuum. English has neither a past nor a future subjunctive. In modern American English, few verbs are ever conjugated in the subjunctive mood in colloquial

speech. One would never say, for example, “What *doth*⁵ appear around the corner?” One would instead say, “What appears⁶ around the corner?” The latter is indicative and holds that there must be (white) something around the corner, whereas the subjunctive expresses that there may be (gray) something around the corner. In Elizabethan English, as used by Shakespeare, the first use would be perfectly acceptable, but modern American English does not support the use of the subjunctive mood as did Elizabethan English (Baranowski 2007).

In Spanish, one may express all three time references; past: “Quise que yo fuera rico;⁷” present: “Quiero que yo sea rico;⁸” and future: “Quiero que yo haya sido rico antes de que muero.⁹” This means that Spanish-speakers are better able to express desires as well as alternative realities and understand them better than their English-speaking counterparts because Spanish widely uses the subjunctive mood to substantiate each, where English really doesn’t.

In conclusion, it is evident that Spanish, more often than English, uses the subjunctive mood to express hopes, dreams, and desires. As the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (the language one speaks influences the way that one thinks [and perceives reality]) proposes, it is clear that Spanish-speakers think differently than English speakers. Spanish allows for more abstract thought and expression of non-reality (gray), where English constantly expresses absolute fact (white), whether present or not. The language one speaks certainly affects, if not defines, the way one thinks about and perceives reality.

⁵ *doth* (subjunctive form of the infinitive verb “to do”)

⁶ appears (indicative conjugation of the verb to appear) This tense alludes to the absolute *fact* that something exists, whether it is known or not.

⁷ I wanted (Indicative) that I had been rich.

⁸ I want (indicative) to be (subj.) rich.

⁹ I would like to be (subj.) before I die (indicative).

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