The imperfect subjunctive

MOOD  Imperfect subjunctive
TIME  Refers to the past
KEY PHRASES  Hypothetical “if,” “as if”
STRUCTURE  Simple tense: verb base + verb ending

The imperfect subjunctive is used in the same situations as the present subjunctive—when there is an aspect of uncertainty, after certain expressions, and after certain words (such as “perhaps,” “maybe,” and “even if”). However, the time frame is in the past rather than in the present.

In the study of the indicative tenses, we distinguish between the preterite and the imperfect tenses in the past. This distinction is not an issue in the subjunctive mood, where the imperfect subjunctive refers to actions in the imagined or hypothetical past.

Consider the following two sentences.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spanish</th>
<th>English</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Espero que Ricardo tenga el libro.</td>
<td>I hope that Richard has the book.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esperaba que Ricardo tuviera el libro.</td>
<td>I hoped that Richard had the book.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

In the first sentence, both verbs are in the present—Espero (“I hope”) in the main clause and the present subjunctive tenga (“has”) in the subordinate clause.

In the second sentence, the main clause Esperaba (“I hoped”) is in the past (the imperfect indicative), which sets the stage for the imperfect subjunctive.

We’ll look at the formation of the imperfect subjunctive tense and then at the situations in which it is used.

Formation of the imperfect subjunctive

The base of the imperfect subjunctive is what remains after the -ron ending is dropped from the third-person plural of the preterite tense. This is the base for all forms of the imperfect subjunctive.
Spanish Verb Tenses

THIRD-PERSON PRETERITE | IMPERFECT SUBJUNCTIVE BASE
--- | ---
hablaron | habla-
comieron | comie-
abrieron | abrie-
tuvieron | tuvie-
dijeron | dije-
fuieron | fue-
estuvieron | estuvie-
hicieron | hicie-
pusieron | pusie-

To this base, add either of the following sets of endings.

- -ra -ramos
- ras -rais OR -se -sems
- ra -ran
- ras -rais -ses -sems

Of these two sets of endings, which may be used interchangeably, the -ra endings are more commonly used, and these are the endings that are shown in the examples in this book. Below is the full conjugation of hablar in the imperfect subjunctive.

**hablar** to speak, talk

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>hablar</td>
<td>hablamos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hablaras</td>
<td>hablarais</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hablara</td>
<td>hablaron</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note that in the first-person plural (nosotros) form, the stress falls on the vowel that precedes the imperfect subjunctive ending (for example, hablamos, dijéramos, tuviéramos, fuéramos), and a written accent mark is required.

**Uses of the imperfect subjunctive**

**Main clause in the past**

When the main clause is in the past and the subjunctive is required, use the imperfect subjunctive in the subordinate clause.

Ella quería que yo **hablara** en español. She wanted **me to speak** in Spanish.
Fue terrible que **estuvieramos enfermos**. It was terrible that **we were sick**.
Querían que **supieras** la respuesta. They wanted **you to know** the answer.
Él dudaba que **pudierais** bailar. He doubted that **you all could** dance.
Yo esperaba que **no hubiera** un accidente. I hoped that **there wasn’t** an accident.
Comimos antes de que **ellos llegaran**. We ate before **they arrived**.
Traducción

1. I wanted John to buy the towels (la toalla).

2. It was a pity that you had to work last Sunday.

3. There wasn’t anyone in the class who spoke French.

4. We doubted that Humpty Dumpty fell from the wall (el muro).

5. No one believed that Mary had a little lamb (el corderito).

6. Mr. Clean requested that we take off our shoes before entering his palace (el palacio).

7. Was it necessary that you all call me in the middle (en medio) of the night?

8. They weren’t sure that I could take care of myself (cuidarse).

9. She prepared dinner so that we wouldn’t die (morirse) of hunger.

10. We cleaned the house before they arrived.

11. She studied in case there was a test the next day.

12. He begged me not to order the lobster (la langosta).

13. We didn’t think that anyone heard us.

14. Was anybody there who knew all the state capitals?

15. We asked that they continue without us.