

A pan-Romance perspective on subjunctive variability

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The uses of the Latin subjunctive are often characterized as remarkably well preserved in Romance, and perusal of prescriptive rules for its use suggests that it behaves in much the same way across the board. Essentially, the subjunctive is prescribed to convey irrealis readings of doubt, wish, desire, uncertainty, etc., in keeping with its construal as a grammatical mood. As such, when it is absent from “subjunctive-selecting” contexts, the inference is that other meanings were intended. In this paper we test this hypothesis by means of a cross-linguistic comparison of subjunctive use in verbs embedded under subjunctive governors in French (FR), Portuguese (PTG) and Italian (ITA). Quantitative analysis of 5,222 tokens of subjunctive selecting-contexts (here limited to matrix verbs that governed at least one subjunctive in the data) extracted from corpora of naturally-occurring speech (Cresti 2005; Gonçalves 2003; Poplack 1989) reveal robust variability in each (1-3):

- (1) a. Je crois pas que ce *soit*_{SUBJ} la fin du monde. (FR.060.195)
'I don't think that it would be the end of the world.'
- b. Je crois pas que l'âge *a*_{IND} tant à faire que ça. (FR.003.189)
'I don't think that age has that much to do with it.'
- (2) a. Eu acredito que *vá*_{SUBJ} *sair*. (PTG.143.356)
'I believe that it will come out.'
- b. Eu acredito que ele *devia*_{IND} *ter* em torno de setenta anos de idade. (PTG.99.148)
'I believe that he should be around seventy years old.'
- (3) a. Credevo *fosse*_{SUBJ} un errore (ITA.023.152)
'I believed it was a mistake.'
- b. E tutti che dicevano- credevano che *ammazzava*_{IND} uomini (ITA.304.10)
'And everybody that said- believed that he killed men.'

ITA and FR were found to lead in subjunctive usage, at rates of 74% and 76% respectively, with PTG lagging far behind, at 14%. Nonetheless, comparison of the *conditioning* of subjunctive selection reveals the latter two to be at the same stage of development. In none of the languages could we detect the prescribed semantic motivation for subjunctive selection. Instead, all three share a strong lexical effect, such that some matrix verbs are heavily associated with subjunctive morphology (e.g. FR *vouloir* at 91% subjunctive; ITA *bisognare* at 100%; PTG *fazer* at 96%), while others disfavour strongly (PTG *achar* at 0.6%; ITA *dire* at 17%). Interestingly, these verbs need not coincide (e.g. compare ITA *pensare*_{neg} at 86% subjunctive with FR *penser*_{neg} at 13% and PTG *pensar*_{neg} at 0%), a finding that is at odds with a semantic explanation for subjunctive selection. In addition, in each language, a relatively large proportion of all subjunctive morphology is embedded under a small number of lexical governors (which again differ amongst languages). This is most striking in FR, where a single governor (*falloir*) is disproportionately frequent (accounting for 65% of the entire governor pool) and heavily associated with the subjunctive (at 89%). It is also evident in the other languages: about one third of all subjunctive morphology is accounted for by one (PTG *querer*) or two (ITA *pensare*, *credere*) verbs, albeit to a much lesser extent. These results show how the facts of variability and the interplay between governors' frequency distributions and relative associations with subjunctive morphology enable us to assess differential productivity cross-linguistically. In both FR and PTG, it is highly restricted, due in the former to strong associations with only a few highly frequent governors and embedded verbs, and in the latter, to weak associations with a few infrequent governors. In ITA, where it remains most productive, associations are high and spread over many more verbs, regardless of frequency.

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