17

Advanced Conditionals and the Subjunctive

17.1 Mixed conditionals

Real reasoning often crosses time zones: a past cause with a present result, or a present cause with a past result. Mix the halves of the second and third conditionals accordingly.

17.1.1 Past condition → present result

If + past perfect, *would* + base verb:

- *If I* ***had taken*** *that job, I* ***would be*** *in Singapore now.*
- *If we* ***hadn't missed*** *the flight, we* ***would be*** *on the beach by now.*

17.1.2 Present condition → past result

If + past simple, *would have* + participle:

- *If he* ***weren't*** *so stubborn, he* ***would have apologized*** *years ago.*
- *If she* ***didn't speak*** *fluent Mandarin, they* ***would never have hired*** *her.*

Key Point

Choose each half of a conditional *independently*: past perfect for unreal past, past simple for unreal present, in the *if*-clause; *would have* + *participle* for past results, *would* + *base* for present results. The four combinations all occur.

17.2 Inverted conditionals

Formal English can drop *if* and invert subject and auxiliary:

- ***Had I known****, I would have called earlier.* (= If I had known)
- ***Were*** *the offer* ***to be*** *withdrawn, we would seek other partners.* (= If the offer were. . .)
- ***Should*** *you* ***require*** *assistance, please contact reception.* (= If you should require — polite business style)

Negatives are not contracted in inversion: ***Had it not been*** *for your help, we would have failed.* (✗ *Hadn't it been*)

17.3 Other refinements

- *if it were not for / if it hadn't been for* + noun: *If it weren't for the noise, this flat would be perfect. If it hadn't been for the goalkeeper, we would have lost.* (Formal inversion: *Were it not for…; Had it not been for…*)
- *but for* + noun (formal): ***But for*** *the storm, we would have arrived on time.*
- *supposing / suppose / imagine*: ***Suppose*** *you lost your passport — what would you do?*
- *on condition that, provided that*: strong contractual *if*.
- *if* + *should* for remote chance: *If you* ***should*** *happen to see her, give her my regards.*
- *if* + *was/were to* for hypothetical futures: *If the glaciers* ***were to melt****, sea levels would rise dramatically.*
- *would rather* + *past*: *I'****d rather*** *you* ***didn't smoke*** *in here.*
- *it's (high/about) time* + *past*: *It's high time we* ***left****.*

17.4 The subjunctive

English keeps two fossilized subjunctives, both alive and well in formal usage.

17.4.1 The mandative subjunctive

After verbs, adjectives, and nouns of demanding, suggesting, and requiring (*demand, insist, propose, recommend, request, suggest; essential, vital, important, imperative; recommendation, requirement*), the *that*-clause verb appears in the *base form* for all persons:

- *The board insisted that he* ***resign*** *immediately.*
- *We recommend that she* ***be*** *appointed.*
- *It is vital that every visitor* ***sign*** *the register.*
- Negative: *They asked that the news* ***not be released****.*

Usage Note

The mandative subjunctive is vigorous in American English. British English often prefers *should*: *The board insisted that he* ***should resign*** — or even the plain indicative: *…insisted that he resigned* (which risks ambiguity with a factual reading). In international formal writing, the subjunctive (*that he resign*) is the safest choice.

17.4.2 The *were*-subjunctive

Unreal *were* for all persons survives in conditionals and after *wish, as if/though, suppose*:

- *If I* ***were*** *in charge, things would change.*
- *He acts as if he* ***were*** *the owner.*
- *I wish it* ***were*** *summer.*

17.4.3 Formulaic subjunctives

Fixed expressions preserve older syntax: *God* ***save*** *the King!* ***Long live*** *the Republic!* ***Be*** *that as it may…* ***Suffice*** *it to say…* *Come what may…* *far* ***be*** *it from me…* *if need* ***be****.*

Exercises

Exercise 17.1 Mixed conditionals

Complete with appropriate forms.

1. If they _____ (not/move) abroad in 2010, their children _____ (speak) Spanish now.
2. If he _____ (be) more careful by nature, he _____ (not/lose) his passport last week.
3. If I _____ (accept) their offer, I _____ (work) in Berlin today.

Exercise 17.2 Inversion

Rewrite without *if*, using inversion.

1. If you should change your mind, let us know.
2. If the government had acted sooner, lives would have been saved.
3. If the company were to relocate, half the staff would leave.
4. If it hadn't been for the referee's error, we would have won.

Exercise 17.3 Subjunctive

Complete using a subjunctive construction.

1. The doctor recommended that he _____ (take) a month's rest.
2. It is essential that the data _____ (be) verified before publication.
3. The union demanded that the decision _____ (reverse — passive).
4. She treats me as if I _____ (be) a child.
5. It's high time the council _____ (do) something about the potholes.