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Brick?"). And I'd use the imperative mood to tell someone to do something ("Brick, make yourself into an arch."). Easy, sober stuff that we all know. [1]

However, English's fourth mood, the subjunctive, is not so straightforward. [2] This mood is used when expressing wishes, suggestions, imaginary situations, or hypothetical positions. In other words, speakers using the subjunctive mood are talking about things they believe to be untrue, but, if certain conditions are met, could be made true. Subjunctive verb forms are different from the other three moods:

- Wishes: "Brick wishes an arch were less expensive than a concrete lintel." (Not "Brick wishes an arch was less expensive.")
- Suggestions: "I suggest Brick prefer something other than an arch" (Not "I suggest Brick prefers something.")
- Imaginary situations: "If Brick were lighter than air, it wouldn't need to be an arch." (Not "If Brick was lighter than air.")
- Hypothetical positions: "If I were to ask Concrete what it likes, it would probably answer 'lintel.'" (Not "If I was to ask Concrete.")

All these sample statements alert the listener that the speaker knows, or at least believes, the situation to be untrue:

- Brick knows an arch isn't less expensive than a concrete lintel (but it wishes it were) [3].
- Brick prefers being an arch (although I suggest it prefer something else).
- Brick isn't lighter than air (but if it were . . .).
- I am not asking Concrete what it likes (but if I were to ask it . . .).

Fortunately, many uses of the subjunctive come to us naturally. We say "If I were you, I wouldn't do that," not "If I was you," and "If I were king, things would be different," not "If I was king." But not all "if" statements use the subjunctive, and here's where you really need your inner sober grammarian. If the speaker knows the "if" statement is true, or might be true (even if the speaker turns out to be wrong), then the subjunctive is not the right mood. For example, "If we follow Brick's advice and build an arch, we will use the material honestly." In this case, the speaker knows that we might follow Brick's advice, so the indicative mood is correct. If the speaker is certain that we won't follow Brick's advice, the subjunctive is used: "If we were to follow Brick's advice and

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build an arch, we would probably be happy with the result." That doesn't mean we won't follow Brick's advice; the speaker could be wrong. But the subjunctive mood doesn't care if the speaker is wrong, only what the speaker believes to be true.

Still confused? Think about the Mamas & the Papas and this line from their 1965 song "California Dreamin'": "I'd be safe and warm if I was in L.A." Since the singer of the song isn't in Los Angeles, and knows it, this line should have used the subjunctive: "I'd be safe and warm if I were in L.A." I know it's been nearly 60 years since the song was released, but it's never too late to correct a mistake.

Some songwriters get it right. When Tim Hardin wrote "If I Were a Carpenter," he was in a subjunctive mood: "If I were a carpenter and you were a lady." He knew he wasn't a carpenter, but perhaps he went too far by telling the (presumably female) person to whom he was singing that he didn't consider her a lady.

And finally, sometimes the use of the subjunctive mood can give away more than a writer intends. For example, for the first nine seasons of the History Channel's show Ancient Aliens, the narrator started each episode by saying something like this: "Since the dawn of civilization, mankind has credited its origins to gods and other visitors from the stars," followed by, "What if it were true?" Not, mind you, "What if it is true?" (in other words, "It could be true."), but "What if it were true?" (that is, "We know it's not true, but what if it were?"). Then, suddenly, in Season 10, the opening was changed entirely, without either "What if it were true?" or "What if it is true?" Did the show's producers realize that their introduction was inadvertently signaling to their audience that they (the producers) didn't actually believe the often wacky (but nonetheless entertaining) theories presented on the show? Or simply that they, like many of us, stumble when dealing with the subjunctive mood. For me, it, like ancient aliens themselves, is just one more unsolved mystery.

Footnotes:

[1] My examples refer to architect Louis Kahn's famous statement about bricks and arches: "You say to a brick, 'What do you want, Brick?' And Brick says to you, 'I like an arch.' And you say to Brick, 'Look, I want one too, but arches are expensive, and I can use a concrete lintel.' And then you say, 'What do you think of that, Brick?' Brick says, 'I like an arch.'"

[2] We English speakers have gotten off easy, moodwise. In addition to the indicative, interrogative, imperative, and subjunctive moods, some languages have one or more other moods, including the optative, jussive, potential, hypothetical, inferential, and conditional moods, each most likely using a different verb form.

[3] Wishing isn't the same as hoping. When you wish, you know something isn't true, but you wish it were true.
When you're hoping, you know something might be true, and you're hoping it actually is, so the indicative is the right mood.

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