Chapter 16

Pigs Might Fly: *conquering code and manipulation*

Pigs Might Fly
An absurd phrase, steeped in sarcasm, conjuring the image of utter improbability.

Most likely to have originated from an old Scottish proverb, though it also appears in *Alice in Wonderland*, by Lewis Carroll (1865).
'I've a right to think,' said Alice sharply.
'Just about as much right,' said the Duchess, 'as pigs have to fly.'

Subjunctive Mood

Language moods have nothing to do with emotional frame of mind. This 'mood' is a variation on the word 'mode'. The three most common moods of English are:

- ☐ Indicative mood e.g. God saves the Queen.
- ☐ Imperative mood e.g. God, save the Queen!
- ☐ Subjunctive mood e.g. God save the Queen.

The subjunctive mood usually occurs in dependent clauses (i.e. clauses that cannot operate alone as a sentence), often after the conjunction 'that' or the preposition 'if'. The subjunctive mood is used to express a wish, a feeling, an order, an opinion or a fantasy. What distinguishes the subjunctive from the other moods is its combination of tense forms, e.g. past tense but taking but the form of present or future tense:

- It was expected [*past form*] that we march [*present form*] into class each morning.
- She requested [*past form*] that it be done [*present form*] immediately.
- If the prophecy were [*past form*] genuine, we would [*future conditional form*] soon know.
- It is [*present form*] about time you arrived [*past form*].

- If I had seen [*past perfect form*] you there I would have [*past form*] waved.
- If we fail [*present form*] it won't be [*future form*] for want of trying.
- Were I [*past form*] the president, this wouldn't [*future conditional form*] happen.
- I requested [*past form*] that the prisoner be shown [*present form*] mercy.
- It was [*past form*] necessary that he remain [*present form* – almost].

Burchfield (1996) describes the subjunctive as 'one of the great shifting sands of English grammar'. This mode of language expresses the following:

- ☐ hypothesis
- ☐ likelihood
- ☐ wonder
- ☐ alternative reality
- ☐ cogitation on events outside the control of the speaker
- ☐ wishful thinking

Here are some examples:

Be that as it may	Far be it from me to
God forbid that	Come what may
So help me I'll	Long live the King
Wish you were here	If you want to see me scream
If Germany had won the war	If it were up to me
Please let me be	Will it never be morning
If I could turn back time	It was as though I never existed
Perish the thought	The powers that be
It's important that you be there	Whether it be now or later
I would rather you hadn't said that	As it were
May the best man win	Peace be with you
Truth be told	God bless you
God bless America	Woe betide anyone who
Suffice it to say	I need only let it be known
Would that it were	Rest in peace
Heaven forbid	If need be
If I were you	Come next week we will...
Until death do us part	Albeit
Let it be known	So be it
If I had a million dollars	Were I to say
Lest we forget	It's as though he were

The subjunctive mood is full of possibility and potential, but it's also a place for shadows, deceit and subterfuge. It is the Delphic oracle of grammar, a source for asking what might happen; anxiety about our chances. What might be the future developments, the surprises, triumphs or disaster? In this mystery corner called the subjunctive, many secrets hide. It's a shadowy language tool shed where soothsayers of the press, and of governments seeking re-election, sharpen their

blades. The subjunctive is where New Age enlightenment gurus rake for hope, and where hate merchants seek word weaponry among its shadows—not a safe place, but exciting.

Conditional Sentences

It is easy to confuse the Conditional with the Subjunctive mood. Many people lose their footing, bemired in complexities. When should I use 'was' and when should I use 'were'? Should I use 'may' or 'might'? And what about 'should', 'could' and 'would'?

- ☐ *If I was in Philadelphia right now* (real possibility: Conditional)
- ☐ *If I were in Philadelphia in 1776 at the Continental Congress* (wishful thinking: Subjunctive)
- ☐ *I may go to the market tomorrow* (real possibility: Conditional)
- ☐ *I might fly to the moon one day* (wishful thinking: Subjunctive)
- ☐ *I wish people respected me more* (wishful thinking: Subjunctive)
- ☐ *I would like people to respect me more* (real possibility: Conditional)

A conditional sentence includes two clauses: (a) condition (b) consequence, e.g.

- *If it snows this week* [condition], *the ski season will open early* [consequence].

Here, the *condition* is the subordinate clause, while the *consequence* is the main clause. There are two types of conditional sentence: (i) factual and (ii) hypothetical

(i) Factual

Verbs known as *modal auxiliary* (e.g. 'may',' might', 'could', 'will') are not usually used in the condition clause, unless the action takes place after that in the main clause, e.g.

- *If you will all be patient, we will resume service as soon as possible.*

(ii) Hypothetical

When a verb in the condition clause is intended for a situation that is unlikely, untrue or impossible, we use the subjunctive mood, e.g.

- *If I could turn back time, I would take back what I said.*

For readers interested in a thorough analysis of both the conditional and the subjunctive, I recommend *Usage and Abusage* by Eric Partridge (3rd Edition, 1987).

May and Might

These modals, a form of auxiliary verb, could well suffer the fate of 'will' and 'shall'. They might even go the way of 'you' and 'thou'. Often used interchangeably, either one of this pair could be absorbed, assimilated or altogether subsumed into the other. They might. Or they may.

Most native speakers of English will be familiar with the following type of exchange, either experienced in a classroom, or overheard, or reported as fact. The example highlights the difference between capacity and permission.

- Pupil: Can I go to the bathroom?
- Pedantic teacher: You can but you may not.

'Can' versus 'may' doesn't present writers with a dilemma; one refers to possibility, the other to permission. But the distinction between 'may' and 'might' is subtler and more problematic. Both these modal verbs suggest possibility, though 'may' is a shade more likely than 'might'. For example, I may go to a royal wedding if invited. On the other hand, pigs might fly.

To add to the complication of this near-dichotomy, 'might' is the past tense form of 'may'. But this form is the less troublesome usage. To illustrate: in Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), Mr Wickham would not say 'I may have attended the ball at Netherfield last night'; rather he would say 'I might have attended the ball at Netherfield.' As the character was known to have received an invitation, permission wasn't in doubt; and yet he chose to stay away, which meant that he could speak only of possibility. In the past tense this is clear enough; however, when speculating about possibility in the present or future tenses, writers can experience potential problems. 'They might have arrived already' is scarcely any different from 'They may have arrived already'. Likewise, 'I may be late for the meeting' is virtually indistinguishable from 'I might be late for the meeting'.

Other modal verbs (such as 'would,' 'could' and 'should') tend not to cause such difficulties. Modals, which have been called 'helping verbs,' often indicate the attitude of the speaker. 'I would go if I could' is several nuances removed from 'I may go if I can'. This confusion may (or might) be regarded as a linguistic uncertainty principle. Confusion often arises because modals express two kinds of meaning: probability and permission. 'Prince Charles may become king' is ambiguous because the heir to the English throne has on his side both permission and likelihood. Contrast this example with 'Prince Charles may visit Rome next year,' which needs little clarification. Permission is assumed, so it's only possibility that remains in question.

These examples may help. Or they might cause further confusion. Perhaps it would be easier if we all went back to speaking Latin.