

# El hecho de que... indicative or subjunctive?

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The general guidance given to learners of Spanish with regards to choosing between the indicative and subjunctive moods usually centres on the notion of the speaker's model of reality: when dealing with certainties (from the speaker's point of view), the indicative is used; whereas the subjunctive is normally used in situations involving factors such as uncertainty, denial, emotional reaction, desire, and influence.

This article looks at one particular example that appears to run counter to the above: namely the use of the subjunctive following *el hecho de que* where the phrase is used to state an objective fact and where no emotional reaction is involved.

Let's start by taking a closer look at some typical descriptions of the general rules involved in the use of the subjunctive mood. We will then go on to take a look at so-called *factive clauses* and follow this up by examining the choice of mood in such clauses. This mentions previous investigation in this area and presents some observations based on a statistical analysis undertaken for this article.

## **The indicative and subjunctive moods**

The following extracts have been taken from a variety of sources aimed at intermediate and advanced learners of Spanish.

"The basic function of the subjunctive is not to make statements of fact, but either (a) to show that the speaker is reacting emotionally in some way to the event referred to or (b) that the event mentioned in a subordinate clause is still not a reality."

—Oxford Spanish Grammar<sup>1</sup>

"The basic rule for knowing when to use the subjunctive is this: *if there exists the possibility that the action about which I am speaking has not or may not take place, it is necessary to use the subjunctive. However, if it is a realized fact that the action has taken or definitely will take place, the indicative is used.*"

—Schaum's Easy Outline Spanish<sup>2</sup>

"A person may use a verb *in such a way* that he indicates a wish, a fear, a regret, a joy, a request, a supposition, or something of this sort — this is the subjunctive mood."

—501 Spanish Verbs<sup>3</sup>

"Verbs in the *indicative mood* express events or states that are considered factual, definite, or part of the speaker's experienced reality [...]"

"The present subjunctive in Spanish is used in dependent noun clauses that mark events or states that the speaker considers not part of reality or of his/her experience. These dependent noun clauses follow main clauses that express

[...] (1) expectation, scepticism, doubt, uncertainty; (2) demands, wants, needs, insistence, advice, impositions of will; (3) negated facts.”  
—*The Ultimate Spanish Review and Practice*<sup>4</sup>

## **Factive clauses**

*El hecho de que*, *el que*, and *que* can all be used in Spanish to mean *the fact that*. When followed by the details of some fact, they form what is known as a *factive clause*. This is a nominal clause – it functions as a noun and can appear, for example, as the subject or the complement of the main verb of the sentence. This is illustrated in the following examples in English. In (1) the factive clause appears before the main verb (*shows*) and is its subject; whereas in (2) it appears after the main verb (*highlights*) and is its complement.

(1) The fact that Bertold von Regensburg used the spherical Earth as a sermonic illustration shows that he could assume this knowledge among his congregation.

(2) The analysis highlights the fact that today’s rising atmospheric carbon dioxide concentration is already 27 percent higher than its highest recorded level during the last 650,000 years.

A factive clause can of course also play roles other than that of an argument of the main verb in a sentence, and (3) provides an example of its occurrence as part of a prepositional phrase, for instance.

(3) What melancholy storms lie behind the fact that the Welsh for July (Gorffennaf) means "summer's end"?

Given the broad categories outlined above for the use of the subjunctive in Spanish, it might come as something of a surprise when sentences such as the following are first encountered.

(4) El hecho de que sea una potencia nuclear seguramente ha influido en la entrada de este país en el *Club de los países más poderosos del planeta*.

Butt and Benjamin<sup>5</sup> state that in such cases “*it is simply a rule of Spanish grammar that the phrases meaning ‘the fact that’ usually require the subjunctive, possibly because an idea of cause is involved.*”

They then go on to describe three different cases<sup>6</sup>. The first is for situations where some form of emotional perspective is involved.

“With all of these the subjunctive is used whenever any kind of value judgement or emotional reaction is involved.”

Another source also states that the subjunctive is *usually* used in such circumstances:

“el (hecho) de que (‘the fact that’) is normally followed by the subjunctive in statements of emotion or judgement.”  
—¡Ponte al día!<sup>7</sup>

Their second case describes situations where the indicative mood is necessary in the factive clause:

“The indicative is required when the main verb is a verb of knowing, perceiving, or a statement of fact. When *el hecho de que* is preceded by a preposition it almost always states a certain fact and takes the indicative.”

And their third case involves instances where it seems that either mood can be used with no difference in meaning.

“In some cases the subjunctive and indicative appear to be interchangeable.”

This is then supported with four example sentences. Although not explicitly stated there, the main clause of each of these actually involves some form of subjective reaction, which seems to contradict the guidance given for the first case.

To sum up then, with respect to the choice of mood in the factive clause, Butt and Benjamin associate the indicative with certainty (from the speaker’s point of view) and the subjunctive with subjective reactions, but allow for cases where either mood can be used.

### ***Deeper meaning of the choice of mood***

Returning now to the case mentioned at the outset — namely that of the statement of an objective fact with no associated emotional subtext — the choice of mood can actually be used to convey extra information to the listener (or reader) concerning the significance of that fact. Such a meta level of information, or commentary about the sentence, serves to reduce the processing cost on the part of the listener in comprehending the intent of the text and can be used to signal whether or not the fact is considered by the speaker to be relevant in itself (or, using an information-theoretic<sup>8</sup> analogy, to have a high information content). If the fact is being introduced as new information, then it is considered to be relevant. If, on the other hand, the speaker assumes that the listener is already aware of it — either from the previous context or from common knowledge — then the information content is usually much lower and it is not considered especially noteworthy in itself.

The issue of mood choice in this particular case has been the subject of some investigation (e.g. Woehr<sup>9</sup>, Lipski<sup>10</sup>, Krakusin and Cedeño<sup>11</sup>) and is part of the wider question of predicting the distribution of mood in Spanish, for which various generalisations have been put forward. For example, Terrell and Hooper<sup>12</sup> proposed a correlation between assertion<sup>a</sup> and mood, in which the indicative is linked to assertion and the subjunctive to non-assertion. Lunn<sup>13</sup> applied models from relevance theory<sup>14</sup> to Spanish and demonstrated a relationship between the choice of mood and the information value of the proposition. Mejías-Bikandi<sup>15</sup> revisited Terrell and Hooper’s correlation and proposed a modified definition of assertion, in which the intent of the speaker is taken into account, in order to cater for the exceptions to the generalisation. This decouples assertion from presupposition<sup>b</sup> (traditionally viewed as being mutually exclusive), and his

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<sup>a</sup> In general terms, if a proposition is asserted, it is put forward by the speaker as being true.

<sup>b</sup> Broadly speaking, if a proposition is presupposed, it is mentioned as a given. How presupposition is precisely defined, however, is a question that has received a lot of attention. See Simons, for example, for further discussion. The distinction mentioned here is as follows. *Semantic* presupposition is based on the actual context, and the truth

theoretical framework involves the concept of nested sets of propositions<sup>c</sup>, or Mental Spaces<sup>17</sup>. This pragmatic notion of assertion is one in which a proposition is asserted when the speaker intends to point out that it describes reality as perceived by an individual – either the speaker or someone else – i.e. when the proposition is contained within a mental space forming a subset of the speaker's own mental space. Mejías-Bikandi also informally posited a relation between the notions of (pragmatic) assertion and relevance. Jary<sup>18</sup>, citing Kempson<sup>19</sup> and Guitart<sup>20</sup>, highlighted the distinction between semantic and pragmatic presupposition and also noted the independence of pragmatic assertion from semantic presupposition. The main thrust of his relevance-theoretic account of mood distribution is that whereas the indicative can, but is not necessarily, used to present a proposition as being "relevant in its own right", the subjunctive cannot.

Woehr established a correlation between the position within the sentence of the factive clause and the use of mood, with the subjunctive being used in factive clauses in an initial position, and either the indicative or the subjunctive being used when it comes after the main verb. Lunn demonstrated a correlation between choice of mood and the information value of the propositions, with the subjunctive marking low information content and the indicative high content. She also noted that in a style peculiar to journalism information that is assumed already to be known by the reader is, in a similar vein, often marked by the use of the past subjunctive.

Krakusin and Cedeño developed these results further by undertaking a particular study of actual usage in which the entire context was taken into careful consideration. This was based on the analysis of the output of a single source, namely the articles published in *Visión*<sup>d</sup> written between 1981 and 1991 by the controversial Argentinian academic, writer, journalist and television presenter Mariano Grondona<sup>e</sup>. They provided evidence for a high correlation between the choice of mood in the factive clause, its position in the sentence, and whether it provides new (significant) or old (less significant) information. They found that the *el hecho de que* noun clause tends to appear before the main verb of the sentence, as its subject, and using the subjunctive mood when the fact is presupposed, that is considered by the speaker as already known by the listener and not being put forward as new information; and after the main verb, as its complement, and using the indicative mood when the fact is being brought to the foreground, that is considered as having a much higher information value. This ties in with the fact

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value of a semantically presupposed proposition is not affected when the main clause of the sentence is negated. For example, in "I knew it was raining", the truth or falsity of the statement that it was raining is not changed when the sentence is negated: "I did not know it was raining". *Pragmatic* presupposition, however, takes into account the speaker's beliefs about the wider context of the discourse. A proposition is pragmatically presupposed when the speaker believes (or makes believe), that it is already part of the participants' shared knowledge.

<sup>c</sup> If the speaker's view of reality is represented by a set of propositions, then this contains subsets of propositions corresponding to the speaker's perception of other individuals' views of reality.

<sup>d</sup> *Visión - Revista Latinoamericana*, ISSN 0185-1969, edited in Mexico and published in New York.

<sup>e</sup> Grondona's official website: <http://grondona.skyonline.net.ar/> Grondona was Director General of *Visión* between 1978 and 1995.

that background information is often placed early on in a sentence in order to establish the topic, or *theme*, and is followed by the *rheme*, or foreground comment on the theme. The use of the indicative therefore highlights the importance of the point, whereas the subjunctive deemphasises the point. Exceptions to these rules were encountered in cases where there was some stylistic reordering at play. Furthermore, other instances were also found where information already known by both speaker and listener was marked by the indicative – the overriding factor being the emphasis placed by the speaker upon the fact: the use of the indicative is employed as a device to focus the listener's attention on what is considered to be important. This is consistent with Mejías-Bikandi's pragmatic interpretation of assertion as being independent of presupposition. The speaker's intention is to highlight the shared knowledge rather than to comment on it as background information.

Lipski previously pointed out, however, that there is not an overwhelming consistency in actual usage by native speakers, and furthermore stated that some speakers only use this type of construction in more formal styles and in so doing tend to apply the 'rule' that the subjunctive is always required (as also implied by Butt and Benjamin's mention, described earlier, of a 'rule of Spanish grammar'). Lipski quoted Fente et al.<sup>21</sup> who observed that in most cases both moods could be used interchangeably, and that there was, however, a marked preference for the use of subjunctive in careful speech.

In light of Lipski's observation and the fact that Krakusin and Cedeño's study involved a single writer, a short investigation was carried out to analyse usage in factive clauses over a fairly diverse sample base. This is described in the next section.

## ***Statistical investigation***

A statistical study was undertaken looking at selected syntactical properties of factive clauses over a wide variety of written material available on the World Wide Web. A total of 500 occurrences<sup>f</sup> of the phrase 'el hecho de que' in web pages from Argentina, Colombia, Mexico and Spain were analysed and the following features were recorded for each one:

- Clause immediately preceded by a preposition?
- Mood used in the clause
- Position of the clause (before or after the main verb)
- Role of the clause (subject or object when an argument of the main verb)

The results obtained are shown in the following charts.

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<sup>f</sup> Search results were obtained using a custom application interfacing with the Yahoo! ® Search Web Services (<http://developer.yahoo.com/search/web/>)

Figure 1: Mood and factive clause role

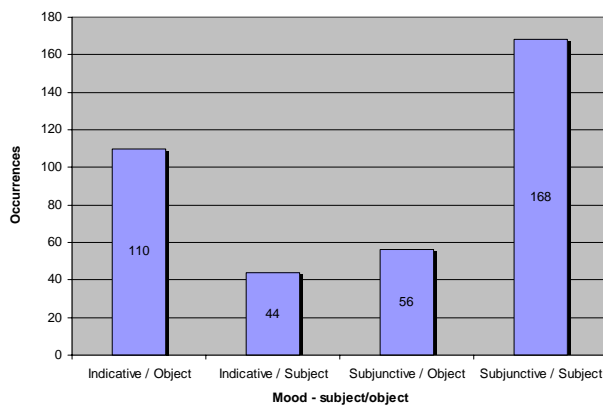


Figure 2: Mood and factive clause position

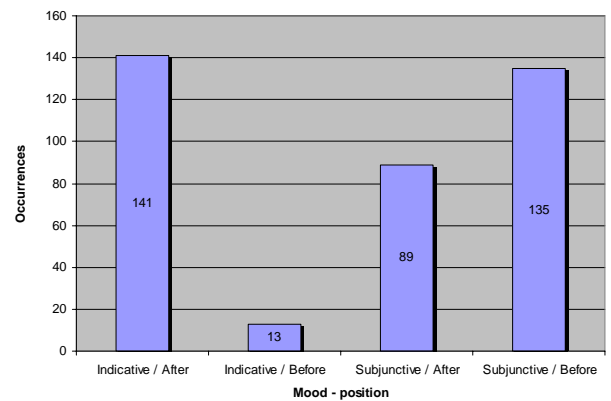


Figure 3: Factive clause position and role

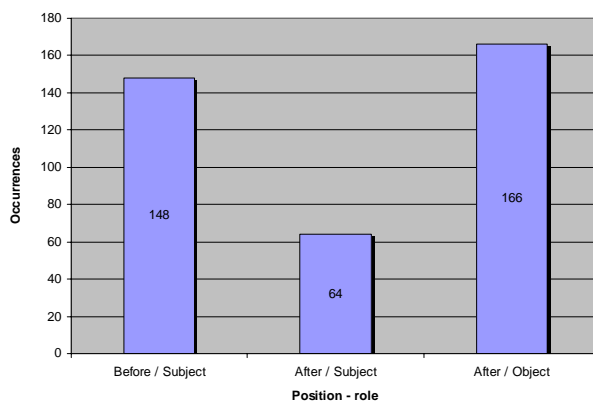
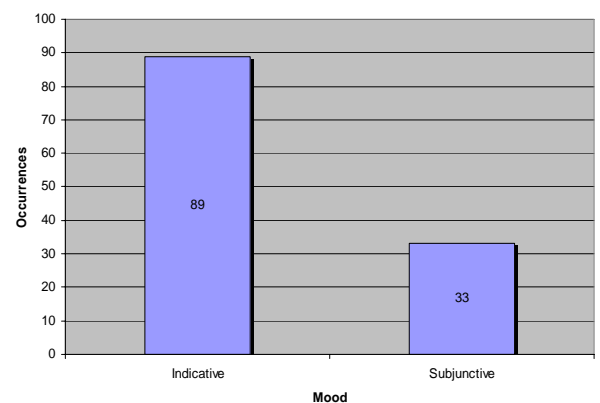


Figure 4: Mood in prepositional factive clauses



Figures 1, 2 and 3 are for cases where the factive clause is either the subject or object of the main verb. And Figure 4 is for cases where the factive clause is part of a prepositional phrase.

Figure 1 shows the relation between factive clause mood and its role as either the subject or complement of the main verb. In terms of usage, the most common situation is when it is the subject and uses the subjunctive (44%), followed by that where it is the complement and uses the indicative (29%). Less common are cases:

- (a) indicative used in subject clause (12%)
- (b) subjunctive used in object clause (15%)

Case (a) could be accounted for by instances where the speaker is deliberately using the indicative to emphasise common-ground information. And a possible explanation for case (b), which occurs slightly more frequently, is the undifferentiated use by some speakers of the subjunctive in all factive clauses.

Figure 2 shows the correlation between mood and the position in the sentence of the factive clause. Factive clauses using the indicative very rarely appear before the main verb (3% v. 37%), whereas subjunctive factive clauses appeared before the main verb in 36% of cases and after it in 24% of cases. This agrees with Woehr's results regarding position and mood and highlights a significant usage of the subjunctive irrespective of the position in the sentence of the factive clause.

Figure 3 depicts the relation between factive clause position and role. The two most common combinations in the cases examined correspond to SVO ordering:

- factive clause as object after the main verb (44%)
- factive clause as subject before the main verb (39%)

The alternative verb-subject order accounted for 17% of cases, and no occurrences were encountered where the factive clause appeared before the main verb as its complement.

Recall that according to Butt and Benjamin “when el *hecho de que* is preceded by a preposition it almost always states a certain fact and takes the indicative.” Figure 4 shows that in general the indicative is indeed much more common than the subjunctive in prepositional factive clauses. The actual ratio, of the order of 3:1 (73% v. 27%), however indicates that in practice the preference for the indicative is not as clear cut as might be suggested by the above.

Although no pragmatic considerations were taken into account in this study, the results obtained here from analysing occurrences of factive clauses from a wide range of sources do identify patterns of usage broadly consistent with the findings of Krakusin and Cedeño. The main point of difference is the significant proportion of occurrences of factive clauses in the subjunctive appearing after the main verb and as its complement. And with regards to prepositional factive clauses, the number of cases encountered employing the subjunctive mood was also found to represent a significant minority. These points would tend to suggest that, as observed by Lipski, many speakers simply use the subjunctive in factive clauses indiscriminately.

## References

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