

A Study on the Mental Space of Subjunctive Mood

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Abstract: Cognitive linguistics offers a novel approach to studying and elucidating language phenomena, with the theory of mental spaces being particularly adept at interpreting many “non-canonical” linguistic occurrences and providing a fresh cognitive framework. The subjunctive mood, one of the three primary moods in English, is integral to English grammar. Yet, it remains a contentious topic within the field, with a lack of consensus among different linguistic schools regarding this significant grammatical category. The substantial role of human cognition in the construction and interpretation of the subjunctive mood’s meaning has been infrequently explored. This paper, from a cognitive perspective, employs the theory of mental spaces to discuss the English subjunctive mood, addressing the questions of its theoretical foundation, the reasons for its use, and the methods of its application.

Keywords: Subjunctive mood; Mental space; Hypothetical space; Reality space; Spatial mapping

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1. Introduction

In the nearly 300 years since English grammar research began, the subjunctive mood has been widely discussed. American grammarian George O. Curme, Dutch grammarian H. Outsma, and others believed that the subjunctive mood in English is rich in content and diverse in form. Zhang argued that there are only two types of subjunctive forms in modern English verbs: the “be”-type subjunctive and the “were”-type subjunctive ^[1]. The subjunctive mood is a highly significant and controversial grammatical phenomenon in English. The debate among grammarians on the subjunctive mood has been ongoing, with no consensus reached. In fact, the subjunctive mood is neither unique to nor inherently a part of English. As Herndon argued, “Fitting English into the mold of Latin grammar is a doubly difficult task, for English did not evolve from Latin but from old Germanic dialects.” Undeterred by these differences, these eighteenth-century grammarians imposed an almost entirely foreign subjunctive mood onto English. Nevertheless, with the continuous evolution of the English language, the subjunctive mood has been seamlessly integrated and has become a defining feature. It is precisely because grammarians have studied this issue from various perspectives that we can fully and deeply understand this linguistic phenomenon ^[2].

Fauconnier is a renowned cognitive linguist, comparable to Lakoff, who followed Lakoff’s seminal

book *Metaphors We Live By* in 1985 with his equally influential work, *Mental Spaces*, an attempt to use mental space theory to reveal the cognitive underpinnings of language^[3]. During discourse comprehension, the brain activates various verbal and non-verbal frameworks of knowledge about people, things, and events, storing them in working memory. Fauconnier and Turner^[4] referred to this collection of temporary, online discourse information as mental space. The theory of mental space is concerned with the construction of various mental spaces and the connections between them during discourse development. It is one of the pivotal theories within cognitive semantics. Once proposed by Fauconnier, it garnered widespread attention globally, with scholars from China and abroad demonstrating its robust explanatory power from multiple angles. Fauconnier and Turner^[4] are the architects of this theory, which not only reviews its development and outcomes but also delves into its internal structure. Since the 21st century, the theory of mental space has seen significant advancements in two areas: first, a deepening of research on the internal structure of the theory, and second, a broader application across various fields such as literature, stylistics, grammar, and discourse analysis compared to five years prior^[5]. With the evolution of cognitive linguistics, many linguistic phenomena are now explained not only from a grammatical perspective but also from a cognitive one, offering a fresh outlook for language study. Most research and discussions on the subjunctive mood by scholars worldwide have remained at the level of traditional grammatical function, with little exploration of its intrinsic cognitive significance. This paper endeavors to elucidate the cognitive mechanism of the subjunctive mood from the vantage point of mental space theory. What, then, is the underlying mechanism of the unconventional verb usage in the English subjunctive?

2. Theoretical basis

Mental space theory is a subset of cognitive semantics, forming an integral part of cognitive linguistics alongside George Lakoff's cognitive semantics and Langacker's cognitive grammar. The theory originated with Gilles Fauconnier's publication *Mental Spaces* in 1985. As the progenitor of mental space theory, Fauconnier has since published a series of articles and books that delve into the cognitive aspects of language. This theory is one of the foundational methods for constructing knowledge and is broadly equivalent to Langacker's cognitive domain, Fillmore's "frame," Lakoff's image schema and ideal cognitive model (ICM), conceptual space, and other cognitive models proposed by Gardenfors^[6].

Cognitive semantics posits that the meaning expressed by language is a mental construct and an element of the cognitive structure resident in the brain of the language user. In this framework, semantics is defined as the mapping from linguistic expression to conceptual structure. This mapping encapsulates a set of associations between linguistic expression and conceptual structure that accumulate in the mind of the language user as they learn the language. At this juncture, language represents a conceptual structure rather than a direct depiction of the external world^[7]. Mental space theory is a cognitive linguistic theory that employs the concept of virtual mental spaces to elucidate the semantic relationships between words and sentences. These virtual mental spaces are not components of the formal or semantic structure of language itself but serve as "temporary containers" for relevant information within the language structure^[8]. "Mental space is a package of concepts constructed by individuals to facilitate local understanding and action during thought and communication"^[9]. Fauconnier^[9] referred to this collection of temporary, online discourse information stored in the mind as a mental space. In this model, Fauconnier^[9] asserted that "mental space is represented as a structured set of increasing quantities, meaning the set includes semantic elements and

their connectors.” Consequently, as new semantic items are introduced, new relationships are formed among these semantic items. Fauconnier^[9] elucidated the spatial theory and its concepts, such as the Identification Principle, connectors, triggers, and targets, as well as the interrelations among these concepts.

Fauconnier’s theory of mental space^[9,10] posits that language initiates a series of intricate cognitive processes. Mental space primarily investigates the “behind-the-scenes cognition” that underlies linguistic forms. The central theme of mental space theory is meaning construction, which entails the sophisticated and complex mental computations people perform while thinking, acting, and communicating^[11]. Mental space can establish a spectrum of concepts—such as time, space, reality, and the virtual—through language, enabling individuals to continually construct mental spaces for interpreting conceptual meaning during thought and conversation. This theory offers a novel perspective for examining how humans construct and interpret meaning^[12].

3. Mental space and subjunctive mood

The subjunctive is the verb form used by the speaker to express a hypothetical situation or a subjective desire, suggesting that the action or state denoted by the verb is not a fact or is merely a subjective assumption^[13]. The subjunctive indicates that the speaker’s statement is contrary to the facts, represents an impossible assumption, or conveys wishes, requests, suggestions, and so on. The meaning conveyed by the subjunctive is not an objective reality.

Cognitive studies of the subjunctive mood have been conducted from various perspectives, such as metaphor and conceptual integration, but ultimately, they are studies of mental space. Thus, the investigation of the subjunctive mental space is fundamental; if this investigation is clear and thorough, the cognitive study of the subjunctive will be as well. The theory of mental space primarily explores the cognition that underlies linguistic forms, which is a partial collection of information constructed during our thinking and speaking. Fauconnier has pointed out that grammar plays a crucial role in the construction of meaning because it exists between the underlying cognition and the superficial, overt behavior of human thought, serving as an observable linguistic form that connects these two realms^[14]. Understanding this phenomenon by grasping the essence of its grammatical form from a cognitive semantic perspective is an effective approach.

From the concept of the subjunctive discussed previously, it has become clear that the subjunctive conveys hypothetical or other non-factual meanings. Consequently, there are two spaces: the hypothetical space and the realistic space. The hypothetical space is not a simulation of the real space but a subjective construct of the cognizer. It is intentionally established by the cognizer due to semantic and cognitive needs, with the understanding that it is impossible in real space. The hypothetical space represents a unique mode of human cognition. To differentiate from real space, people must construct a cognitive mode relative to real space, namely, the hypothetical space. Since these are distinct spaces, the sentence’s expression can reflect verb tenses that differ from reality. To distinguish the expression in the hypothetical space from that in real space, the tense should be adjusted to create a sense of temporal and spatial distance. Therefore, the tense in the hypothetical space should be shifted to the past relative to the real tense. If we represent time on a number line based on the objective moment of the event in question, the hypothetical action should be positioned to the left on the coordinate (**Figure 1a**), with fictitious time always preceding objective time, and verb forms always being in the past or past perfect (as seen in the following three sentences): If we had found him earlier, we might have saved his life (**Figure 1b**). I remember it vividly as though it were tonight (**Figure**

1c). It's time we were leaving (Figure 1d).

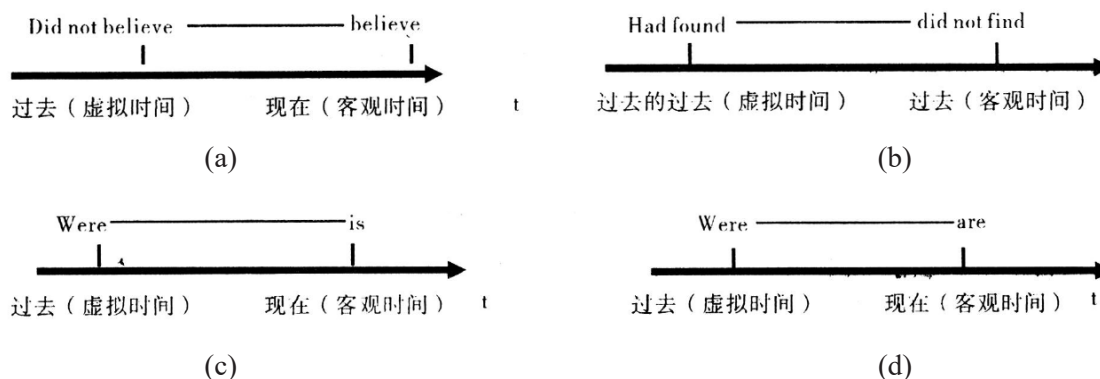


Figure 1. Tenses in the hypothetical space

Additionally, there exist certain fictitious or non-factual sentences where the verb forms are consistently presented in their base form, irrespective of the objective temporal context. The author contends that referring to these as their “original form” is misleading, as they function to denote the action within the mental space without reference to a specific context. Consequently, it is more precise to designate this phenomenon as the “zero tense,” thereby highlighting the distinction^[15]. For instance, the sentences “Though he be the President himself, he shall hear us,” “Long live world peace!” and “Let’s wait” illustrate this concept.

In **Figure 2**, the sentence “He speaks English so fluently as if he had studied English in England” constructs a hypothetical space. The conjunction “as if” serves as a spatial constructor. Within the real space, there is a spatial semantic term “he,” which is mapped into the hypothetical space. According to the recognition principle, the “he” in the real space may evoke the spatial semantic term “he” in the hypothetical space, fostering an association. In the real world, the property of “he” is his fluency in English; within the hypothetical space framed by “as if,” “he” is characterized by having studied English in England. In the real space, “he” speaks English in the present simple tense; in the hypothetical space, the phrase “he studied English in England” begins in the past tense. However, to differentiate the events occurring in the hypothetical space, the temporal setting is manipulated to create a sense of temporal and spatial distance. Consequently, the tense in the hypothetical space is altered to the past perfect tense based on the past tense. For instance, the sentence “If I were you, I would hire me tomorrow” illustrates this concept. In the real world, “you” are the employer and “I” am the employee. In the hypothetical space created by “if,” the roles are reversed: “I” become “you” (the employer), and thus “I” can hire “me” (the employee). In the hypothetical space, the phrase “I am you” is in the present tense, but to distinguish the events occurring in the hypothetical space and to generate a sense of temporal and spatial distance, the tense is shifted to the past tense based on the present tense. Similarly, “I will hire me tomorrow” is in the future tense, but to distinguish it from the real space and to establish a sense of temporal and spatial distance, the tense in the hypothetical space is adjusted to the future-in-the-past tense.

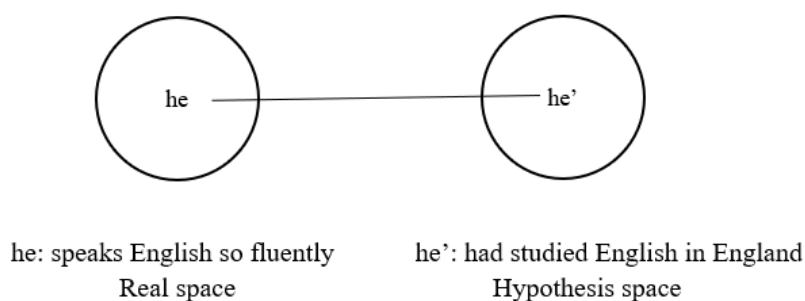


Figure 2. Real and hypothetical spaces

4. Conclusion

Grammatical forms are not rigid constructs but rather abstractions that reflect the user's cognitive processes. Exploring the cognitive motivations behind grammatical phenomena is essential for understanding their true nature. For language learners, grasping the essential characteristics of these phenomena is crucial, as it pertains not only to comprehending and applying the phenomena but also to shaping their overall learning and cognitive engagement with the grammatical system. Incorporating cognitive studies of grammatical phenomena into English teaching can serve as a valuable reference. Enhancing grammar teaching with more cognitive explanations and guidance can significantly ameliorate the common issue of learners' rote memorization of grammatical rules. The significance of teaching grammatical forms extends far beyond their mere usage^[15]. The investigation into the mental space^[15] of the subjunctive mood constitutes fundamental research on this mood. It addresses the theoretical underpinnings of the subjunctive mood, elucidates why and how it should be employed, and offers a novel perspective for academia to interpret traditional grammar. This research holds both theoretical and practical significance.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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