On the variable use of subjunctive mood in Portuguese: a trend study

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This paper focuses on variable use of subjunctive/indicative mood in Brazilian Portuguese. The usual explanation is that there is a difference in meaning between the constructions: the indicative mood expresses factual reality and the subjunctive mood expresses eventuality and potentiality (the *irrealis* hypothesis) and is considered by traditional grammar the prototypical mood of subordination. Our analyses are based on four oral samples (1570 tokens) of standard dialect from two urban centers, Salvador and Rio de Janeiro, recorded in two different periods of time, the 70's and the 90's, for a short term real time study (Labov, 1994).

In Brazilian Portuguese, subjunctive/indicative mood alternation occurs not only in adverbial clauses (mainly concessive structures) but also in embedded clauses, where prescriptive grammar allows only the subjunctive. Our hypothesis is that the use of subjunctive in embedded clauses (11% in our sample) is related to the semantic/lexical component of the main clause (the matrix verb), while in concessive structures (85%) syntactic constraints must be considered. The results confirm that only some verbs permit both indicative and subjunctive forms, such as *acreditar*, *crer* (‘to believe’; ‘to think’), *parecer* (‘to seem’) and *achar* (‘think’; ‘suppose’) when preceded by the negative particle *não* (‘no’) in the matrix clause. Mood choice may be conditioned by other, sometimes competing, semantic and syntactic factors, such as the type of embedded clause (verbal or noun argument) and the kind of complementizer (*que* or *se* - ‘that’ or ‘if/whether’). In concessive structures, the use of indicative is restricted to the cases in which the adverbial clause comes after the main clause and is introduced by *embora* ‘although/even though’.

The embedded clause analysis reveals age-group differentiation: older -- rather than younger -- speakers use the subjunctive more often. Regional and time variables also play a role in mood choice.

Reference