

Hablando de gramática

por Señor Conner

Señor Conner is the author of the popular language series *BREAKING THE SPANISH BARRIER*. Each month he will feature a grammatical topic of interest to our readers. Do you have ideas of topics you would like to see covered? E-mail Señor Conner at: john@tobreak.com. You can also visit his website: www.tobreak.com.

MAKING POLITE REQUESTS

Last month, we studied words and expressions that are used in negative sentences. The title of last month's article was simply: *"I said no!"* This month, we are going to be a little nicer, considering two common ways to make polite requests. What is interesting about this topic is that a Spanish speaker can use grammar wisely to form sentences that ask people to do things. The choice of tense or mood that a speaker makes will help him or her to "soften" the request. The listener of this request becomes so impressed with the beautiful grammar uttered, that he or she seems to have no choice but to say: "Yes!"

A) Use of the conditional tense to make a request

Just as in English, the conditional tense is often used to make polite requests – be it on the telephone, in a social situation, or at a restaurant. This choice of tense helps to make the speaker sound polite, well-mannered, and earnest.

Examples: *Me gustaría ir contigo al próximo concierto de John Mayer y Sheryl Crow.*
I would like to go with you to the next concert of John Mayer and Sheryl Crow.

Querría hablar con Ud. ahora.
I would like to speak with you now.

¿Sería posible devolver esta camisa rota?
Would it be possible to return this ripped shirt?

Querriamos pedir el gazpacho y el pollo al ajillo.
We'd like to order the gazpacho and the garlic chicken.

The use of the conditional tense in all of the above sentences helps to make the speaker sound polite. The request was offered in a way that the listener would find appealing and properly humble.

Consider if we changed the conditional in a few of the sentence above to the present tense:

Examples: *Quiero hablar con Ud. ahora.*
I want to speak with you now.

Queremos pedir el gazpacho y el pollo al ajillo.
We want to order the gazpacho and the garlic chicken.

While both sentences above are perfectly correct grammatically, they are just a bit too strong and direct. In the first sentence, it is almost as if a police officer were at the door, demanding to speak with you, or your teacher had caught you doing something and expected to talk with you immediately. In the second sentence, the waiter is listening to a client who knows exactly what he wants and does not want to make any small talk. It is very direct. I recommend that when you are with others, be polite! Use the conditional.

Do you remember how to form the conditional? The basic rule is to add the following endings to the infinitive form. What is wonderful about the conditional is that the endings are the same whether the verbs be –AR, –ER or –IR verbs.

CONDITIONAL ENDINGS

-ía	-íamos
-ías	-íais
-ía	-ían

Hablar →	hablaría, hablarías, hablaría, hablaríamos, hablaríais, hablarían (I would speak, etc.)
Comer →	comería, comerías, comería, comeríamos, comeríais, comerían (I would eat, etc.)
Vivir →	viviría, vivirías, viviría, viviríamos, viviríais, vivirían (I would live, etc.)

B) Use of the imperfect subjunctive mood to make a request

The imperfect subjunctive mood can also be used to make polite requests. It is an alternative to the conditional and is most often used with just the following three verbs: *deber*, *poder* and *querer*.

Examples: *Debiéramos prender la computadora. ¿Recuerdas la contraseña?*
We ought to turn on the computer. Do you remember the password?

¿Pudiéramos compartir la comida? Tengo muchísima hambre.
Could we share the food? I am very hungry.

Quisiera hablar contigo esta noche acerca de un asunto muy confidencial.
I would like to talk to you tonight about a very private matter.

The use of the imperfect subjunctive mood raises the level of politeness. The speaker is clear that he or she is just offering a suggestion, and is waiting for the listener to weigh in with an opinion, too. Yet, it probably will be nearly impossible to turn down a request that was so nicely made!

Do you remember how to form the imperfect subjunctive? The following formula works for all verbs!

- 1) Take the 3rd person plural of the preterite (e.g., *hablar* → *hablaron*)
- 2) Take off the “on” at the end of the word (*hablar* → *hablar*__)
- 3) Add the following endings:

IMPERFECT SUBJUNCTIVE ENDINGS

-a	-amos
-as	-áis
-a	-an

hablar →	hablara, hablaras, hablara, hablaríamos, hablarais, hablaran
comer →	comiera, comieras, comiera, comiéramos, comierais, comieran
vivir →	viviera, vivieras, viviera, viviéramos, vivierais, vivieran

Note: Did you notice the little accent mark you have to add to the *nosotros* form on the antepenultimate syllable (i.e., the third syllable from the end)?

PRUEBA DE REPASO

Make the following sentences very polite by choosing either the conditional tense or the imperfect subjunctive mood. For this exercise, why not use the conditional for all verbs except for *deber*, *poder*, *querer*? For these three verbs, it is your big chance to use the imperfect subjunctive mood!

- 1) Nos _____ ver Jersey Boys en Broadway porque nos encanta la música de The Four Seasons. (gustar)
- 2) Tú _____ estudiar más si quieres aprobar el próximo examen. (deber)
- 3) A mi hermana le _____ pasar el fin de semana con su novio, pero mis padres no lo van a permitir. (encantar)
- 4) Nosotras _____ salir ahorita, señor. ¿ _____ Ud. abrir esa puerta? (Querer, Poder)
- 5) Como se me olvidó la billetera, ¿me _____ tú un poco de dinero? (prestar)
- 6) Oye, Riqui, voy a estar solo esta noche en casa. ¿Me _____ después de cenar, si no te importa? (llamar)