

Chapter Twenty-Three

Optative Mode

The optative mode, like the indicative, presents verbal notions as claims about the “outside world” rather than as notions specifically located in someone’s mind. The optative differs from the indicative in that the indicative makes claims about how the “outside world” *really* is, while the optative envisions how events *might* turn out in the outside world. The optative differs from the subjunctive in that it does not present its vision as a hypothesis located in someone’s mind, but as *a potential outcome located in the real world*.

Meaning of optatives

To my mind, the best way to get a fix on the core semantic sense of the **optative** is to contrast its meaning in “if-clauses” with the meanings of **indicative** and **subjunctive** verbs in “if” clauses. Let’s imagine how English can frame “if-clauses” to present different kinds of possibilities.

If clauses

“If” as an abstract possibility located in thought rather than reality [εἰ ἄν + **subjunctive**].

We might choose to envision a possibility and to make clear that it is merely a possibility that we are considering in our imaginations. The tone of this kind of “if” clause is rather intellectual or hypothetical: “*If we assume that he x’s, ...*” or “*If he were to x, ...*” If-clauses of this sort tend to generalize and imply “*If he (or anyone else)were ever to x...*”

- If **he were** to drive, he would arrive in 15 hours.
- If **he were** to fly, he would arrive in 2 hours.

“If” as a possibility envisioned in the real world [εἰ + **indicative**]. We might choose to express the possibility in a way that skips the hypotheses and presents a particular possibility as though it really is happening (or happened or will happen) in the real world. In this construction the tone is, “*If (someplace out there) he is x-ing ...*”

- If **he is driving**, he’ll arrive late tonight.
- If **he is** on the 10:00 flight, he’ll arrive at noon.

“If” as a contingent possibility in the real world [εἰ + optative].

Sometimes we want to frame an if-clause neither as a generalized possibility located in our mind (“If x were to happen,” εἰν + subjunctive) nor as something to be envisioned as actually “out there” using the full realism of εἰ + indicative. Instead we want to picture it as a contingency in the external world. Greek expresses this kind of “if” using εἰ + optative. If-clauses in the optative present possibilities not as ideas generated in the mind but as *potential events in the real world*. The tone of this sort of if-clause is “*If it should turn out that x happens, ...*”

- *If he should arrive this evening*, we would need to prepare an additional bed.

The distinctions between optative, indicative, and subjunctive modes are subtle and difficult to conceptualize. Even Greek speakers must have found this subtlety a bit difficult to handle because the optative disappeared entirely from the language over the course of the centuries. Those of you who read the New Testament will discover that by the first century A.D. the optative had almost disappeared in many authors.

Most introductory grammars don’t try to explain the core sense of the optative, and I’m not entirely satisfied with the explanation I offer. Nonetheless, it’s better than none, and it might prove helpful. In short, *optatives usually present an action as something that might occur in the real world*.

Morphology of optatives

The basic configuration of the optative is

stem / **theme vowel** + ι or ιη (optative marker) / **secondary personal endings**

The most readily identifiable feature of the optative is an iota diphthong, a composite sound resulting from the addition of the ι of the optative marker to the normal theme vowel (ο for present, strong aorist, and future active stems; α for weak aorist active stems, and ε for aorist passive stems). You would probably do well to imagine that Greeks had the option of using either ι or ιη as the optative marker. That isn’t really quite accurate, but it makes learning the general optative scheme much easier. The optative uses virtually the same personal endings that you learned for the athematic strong aorist indicative.

The charts below show how optative marker and personal endings combine with the various theme vowels. To avoid excessive complication, in analyses I will mark the composite optative personal ending (**theme vowel** + **optative marker** + **personal ending**) as the **optative ending**. Verbs are configured in the optative mode simply by adding the appropriate composite **optative ending** from the charts below to the appropriate stem: optative = **stem** + **optative ending**.

I have emphasized with boldface three odd endings that are used in the weak aorist.

-οι(η) optative endings (ο theme vowel)

Added to **present, strong aorist, perfect active, future active stems**

	Active		Middle	
	Singular	Plural	Singular	Plural
1 st -person	<u>οιμι</u>	<u>οιμεν, οιημεν</u>	<u>οιμην</u>	<u>οιμεθα</u>
2 nd -person	<u>οις, οιης</u>	<u>οιτε, οιητε</u>	<u>οιο</u> [οισο]	<u>οισθε</u>
3 rd -person	<u>οι, οιη</u>	<u>οιεν, οιησαν</u>	<u>οιτο</u>	<u>οιντο</u>

-αι optative endings (α theme vowel)

Added to the **weak aorist active stem**

	Active		Middle	
	Singular	Plural	Singular	Plural
1 st -person	<u>αιμι</u>	<u>αιμεν</u>	<u>αιμην</u>	<u>αιμεθα</u>
2 nd -person	<u>αις, ειας</u>	<u>αιτε</u>	<u>αιο</u> [αισο]	<u>αισθε</u>
3 rd -person	<u>αι, ειε</u>	<u>αιεν, ειαν</u>	<u>αιτο</u>	<u>αιντο</u>

-ει optative endings (ε theme vowel)

Added to the **aorist passive stem**

	Singular	Plural
1 st -person	<u>ειην</u>	<u>ειμεν, ειημεν</u>
2 nd -person	<u>ειης</u>	<u>ειτε, ειητε</u>
3 rd -person	<u>ειη</u>	<u>ειεν, ειησαν</u>

Optative of ειμί (έσ/)

	Singular	Plural
1 st -person	εἶην	εἶμεν, εἶημεν
2 nd -person	εἶης	εἴτε, εἴητε
3 rd -person	εἶη	εἶεν, εἶησαν

Notice that the optative endings for the aorist passive and the optative of εἰμί are identical. The reason is obvious: In each case the optative marker (ι, η) + personal ending is added to ε. In the weak aorist passive the ε is the shortened theme vowel; in the optative of εἰμί the ε is what is left of the base έσ/.

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Anomalies

You can produce most forms of the optative from the charts above, but there are a few odd forms that require brief explanations.

Present Active Optatives of contract verbs. Verbs whose present stems end in **α/**, **ε/**, and **ο/** and experience contraction in the present indicative also contract in the present optative. For reference purposes the charts below show how the contractions of forms using **ι** and **η** optative markers work. You should generally expect to find singular forms that use **η** and plural forms that use **ι**, though that is not a hard and fast rule.

Pattern 1: Present stem + οι endings with predictable contractions.

	-α/ τιμάω (τιμα/)	-ε/ καλέω (καλε/)	-ο/ δηλώω (δηλο/)
1 st singular	τιμῶμι (ά/οιμι)	καλοῖμι (έ/οιμι)	δηλοῖμεν (ό/οιμι)
2 nd singular	τιμῶς (ά/οις)	καλοῖς (έ/οις)	δηλοῖς (ό/οις)
3 rd singular	τιμῶ (ά/οι-)	καλοῖ (έ/οι-)	δηλοῖ (ό/οι-)
1 st plural	τιμῶμεν (ά/οιμεν)	καλοῖμεν (έ/οιμεν)	δηλοῖμεν (ό/οιμεν)
2 nd plural	τιμῶτε (ά/οιτε)	καλοῖτε (έ/οιτε)	δηλοῖτε (ό/οιτε)
3 rd plural	τιμῶεν (ά/οιεν)	καλοῖεν (έ/οιεν)	δηλοῖεν (ό/οιεν)

Pattern 2: Present stem + οιη endings with predictable contractions.

	-α/ τιμάω (τιμα/)	-ε/ καλέω (καλε/)	-ο/ δηλώω (δηλο/)
1 st singular	τιμῶην (α/οίην)	καλοίην (ε/οίην)	δηλοίην (ο/οίην)
2 nd singular	τιμῶης (α/οίης)	καλοίης (ε/οίης)	δηλοίης (ο/οίης)
3 rd singular	τιμῶη (α/οίη-)	καλοίη (ε/οίη-)	δηλοίη (ο/οίη-)
1 st plural	τιμῶημεν (α/οίημεν)	καλοίημεν (ε/οίημεν)	δηλοίημεν (ο/οίημεν)
2 nd plural	τιμῶητε (α/οίητε)	καλοίητε (ε/οίητε)	δηλοίητε (ο/οίητε)
3 rd plural	τιμῶησαν (α/οίησαν)	καλοίησαν (ε/οίησαν)	δηλοίησαν (ο/οίησαν)

Resultant-State Optatives

Resultant-state active optatives can be formed either as one-word forms (**perfect active stem** + **optative endings**) or as periphrastics (**Perfect active participle** + **present optative of εἰμί**):

τεθνηκοῖεν

or

τεθνηκότες εἶησαν

Resultant-state middle-passive optatives are formed as periphrastics, two-word work-arounds such as you encountered as constructions of the perfect passive subjunctive:

Perfect middle-passive participle (nominative case) + **present optative of εἰμί**:

γεγραμμένον εἶη

Syntax of optatives

1) εἰ + optative. “If” clauses that mean, “If it should turn out that x happens ...” Discussed above in *What Verbs in the Optative Mode Mean*.

2) optative + ἄν. **Potential Optative.** ἄν often means something like, “in that case...” Consequently, it is used in those very common expressions where someone states how things *would* turn out if the necessary prerequisites occurred. *The contingencies on which the possible outcome depends may be specified or merely understood.*

*If I were to win the lottery, I **would** [in that case] **move** to Greece.*

*If the Persians were to attack, the Greeks **would** [in that case] **retreat**.*

*I **would love** to visit. I.e., Assuming certain unspecified factors, I **would** [in that case] **love** to visit.*

As in English, this kind of *would* construction is sometimes used **in the interests of politeness**. The polite tone results, I think, because the **optative** + ἄν allows for all possible contingencies.

Would you (please) **explain** your proposal to us? I.e., *If you are willing and nothing at all prevents you, **would** you [in that case] **explain** ...?*

Yes, I **would be glad** to. I.e., *If you really want me to, I **would** [in that case] **be glad** to.*

So, **polite questions and answers** are variations of the potential optative. Both polite optatives and all other potential optatives are expressed by

optative + ἄν.

3) Optative of wish. The optative is used to express wishes or hopes for the future. Either by itself or introduced by the particles εἴθε or εἰ γάρ, the optative can indicate a wish or hope for the future.

To clarify **the semantics of the optative of wish**, let's consider the notion “we eat.”

- An **indicative** verb (in whatever tense) expresses an assertion: We **are eating** / **ate** / **shall eat**.
- The **subjunctive** presents the notion as a proposal generated in the mind—an intent or a

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hypothesis. In the absence of a particle such as ἴνα to indicate otherwise, we would translate such a mental proposal as a hortatory expression—“Let’s eat.” Its tone is something like “My mind has suggested the possibility “We may eat. What do you say to that?”

- The **optative** presents the notion (“we eat”) as how things might turn out in the real world rather than as something the mind has chosen to imagine. In the optative of wish, ἄν is not included and so there is no suggestion of contingency. If the ἄν were included, the phrase would mean “[*In that case*] we would eat.”

Introduced either by εἴθε or εἰ γάρ (sometimes just εἰ in poetry), however, the optative establishes a semantic flow along the lines of “If it should turn out that we eat, ...” The unspoken conclusion must be something like, “*I sure would be happy*.” Any conclusion that may have been assumed, though, remains unexpressed; the idea fades out in midstream. And so, the expression produces the sort of airy contemplation of future possibility that comprises a hope or a wish. *Sometimes the optative stands alone* (without εἰ, εἴθε, or εἰ γάρ) to express a wish, which to my ear makes the wish even a bit airier: Not even “If we should get to eat, [*I would be happy*],” but merely “Oh, the possibility that we might eat!”

4) Optatives in Secondary Sequence. The **optative** often replaces an original **indicative** or **subjunctive** in a dependent clause in a sentence which is set in **past time**.

a) Indirect Discourse dependent on past time verbs. You will often find **optatives** in indirect discourse introduced by a **past time verb** of saying or thinking + ὅτι or ὥς (“that”). English has something rather similar. In English, if the introductory verb (“say”/“think”) is **not in past time**, the verbs inside the indirect statement will occur in their normal **indicative** or **subjunctive** mode.

Xerxes *believes* that he **will attack** Greece so that he **may conquer** it.

If, though, the introductory verb (“say”/“think”) is **in past time**, any forward looking verbs inside the indirect statement may shift modes to something that sounds very like the Greek optative.

Xerxes *believed* that he **would attack** Greece so that he **might conquer** it.

In Greek, the situation is much the same, but the shift is not restricted to future-looking verbs. If the introductory notion (“say,” “think,” etc.) is set **in past time** (by an aorist, imperfect, pluperfect, or even a historical present verb), **indicative** and **subjunctive** verbs in the indirect statement may (at the speaker’s discretion) change to the **optative** mode. If the **subjunctive** was accompanied by ἄν (to indicate indefiniteness), the ἄν is dropped when the subjunctive is changed to optative because ἄν + **optative** would sound like a potential optative clause rather than an indefinite clause.

Future optatives in indirect discourse. Because indirect speech often reports statements that were originally in future time, Greek needed and produced a future optative (**future stem** + **o-theme-vowel optative endings**). In the example above, “Xerxes *believed* that he **would attack** Greece,” a **future optative** would be used because Xerxes’ belief was (in direct statement), “I **shall** attack.”

b) Other clauses dependent on past tense verbs. English often changes both indicatives and subjunctives in other kinds of dependent clauses set in past time.

He *drinks* his milk while he is growing so that he may become strong.

He *drank* his milk while he was growing so that he might become strong.

Greek also tends to change both indicatives and subjunctives—to optatives—in all sorts of clauses dependent on past tense verbs.

Impossible possibilities use past-time indicative verbs

“Impossible possibilities” are notions expressed as if they were possibilities, but which have in fact already turned out otherwise. A beginning student might expect that Greek would use the optative to express such notions, but it doesn’t. Greek uses indicative verbs to express impossible possibilities. In expressions of “possibilities that might have been (but weren’t)” the optative would be inappropriate because the optative expresses how things might *actually* turn out in the real world. The indicative is used, I think, because these notions implicitly recognize contravening events that *actually have occurred* in the real world. *All impossible possibilities are expressed by an (augmented) indicative verb set in past time.*

Possibilities that might have occurred in the past, but didn’t. The aorist indicative is used of events that might have been. The pluperfect indicative is used of states or conditions that might have been. In rare circumstances you might encounter the expression of a process that might have been, in which case the imperfect indicative is used. (Usually, though, you will find imperfects used to indicate possibilities that might be the case in the present, but aren’t.)

Possibilities that might be going on in the present, but aren’t. To express a possibility that might be going on in the present, but isn’t, the imperfect indicative is used.

Specific uses of impossible possibilities

1) Futile Wishes. Some wishes or hopes are not for things that might come true. In these cases the person wishing makes clear by his choice of words that he knows his wish is futile because things have already turned out otherwise.

Futile wishes that the past had occurred differently take the form $\epsilon\iota\theta\epsilon$ or $\epsilon\iota\ \gamma\acute{\alpha}\rho$ + past time indicative (aorist, imperfect, or pluperfect). The aspect of each tense is significant.

- Aorist: Would that *I had not fallen* and broken my leg yesterday.—(Event)
- Imperfect: Would that *I had run* two miles every day for the past 20 years.—(Process)
- Pluperfect: Would that *I had not gotten* sick (and therefore been in a cranky condition) during your visit last week.—(Resultant-state)

Futile wishes that the present were turning out different take the form $\epsilon\iota\theta\epsilon$ or $\epsilon\iota\ \gamma\acute{\alpha}\rho$ + imperfect indicative. Would that we were sharing a feast right now instead of quarreling.

2) *Impossible if's and then's*. Sometimes people need to express *if...then* situations concerning the past or the present that they know are impossible because events have turned out differently. Greek frames these constructions very sensibly.

Impossible if-clauses are expressed as **ἐἰ** + **past time** indicative.

- Aorist indicatives for impossible **past events**.
- Imperfect indicatives for impossible **past** and **present processes**.
- Pluperfect indicatives for impossible **past states**.

Impossible then-clauses are expressed as **ἄν** (“**in that case**”) + **past time** indicative.

- Aorist indicatives for impossible **past events**.
- Imperfect indicatives for impossible **past** or **present processes**.
- Pluperfect indicatives for impossible **past states**.

These constructions will be used to communicate ideas like the following:

- If (**ἐἰ**) 2500 years ago Xerxes had better understood (pluperfect indicative, state) the Athenians, (**in that case, ἄν**) he would have exercised (aorist indicative, event) greater caution at Salamis—but he didn’t understand, and he didn’t exercise caution.”
- If (**ἐἰ**) Tevya were [imperfect indicative, process] a rich man *right now*, he would (**in that case, ἄν**) be living right now [imperfect indicative, process] in a mansion. But he isn’t rich, and he lives in a simple house.

Past repeated actions also use **past-time indicative verbs**

Another situation where a beginning student might expect to find an optative, but won’t is in expressions of repeated past actions. You might expect an optative because English often uses “would” to express them.

When I was a boy, my teacher *would* frequently *beat* me.”

In fact, though, you won’t find optatives in such constructions, because the speaker is not referring to something that might occur in the **future**, but to something that actually did occur in the **past**. The construction Greeks used was

ἄν + aorist or imperfect indicative,

which means, “**In that situation** (**ἄν**), he did the **event** of beating me” (aorist) or “**In that situation**, he would (=used to) carry out the **process** of beating me (imperfect).”

Uses and translations of optative mode: recap

At this point, you may imagine that translating optatives will be impossibly complicated. Not so. When you encounter an optative, all you need to do is systematically consider the possibilities.

Is the optative accompanied by ἄν? It must be a *potential optative*. You will probably end up translating it “may ...” or “might ...”

Is the optative clause introduced by εἰ? It is almost certainly an *if-clause* that means “If it should turn out that ...” Translate it like that to start with; then smooth it out. If that use doesn’t make sense, it may be a rare poetic way of expressing a wish or hope (*see below*).

Is the optative introduced by εἴθε or εἰ γάρ (or εἰ in poetry)? If so, it expresses a wish or hope for how things may turn out. Even if it is not preceded by one of those particles, it may express a wish or hope *if* it is the main verb in its sentence.

Is the optative accompanied by neither ἄν nor a variant of εἰ; and is the optative located in a dependent clause rather than the main clause; and is that dependent clause set in a past time context? If the answer to all three of these questions is *yes*, you are dealing with an optative in secondary sequence. Simply read the verb as though it were an indicative (or as a subjunctive if it’s introduced by a word like ἵνα that requires the subjunctive). If English requires you to adjust the mode or tense, do so.

What now?

Identify the elements in the following optatives and imagine what each form would mean in the constructions you have learned.

<u>Optative</u> form	Aspect	Voice	Tense	<u>Person/#</u>
1) λαμβάνοιτε				
2) λάβοιεν				
3) ληψοίμεθα				
4) ληφθείη				
5) εἴποι				

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6) λέγοιτο				
7) ἔρχοιντο				
8) γράψαιεν				
9) γράψειαν				
10) γράψοιμεν				
11) γραφθήσοιντο				
12) ληφθησοίμην				
13) λελοίποιμι				
14) τεθνηκυῖα εἶης				
15) γεγραμμένα εἶης				
16) δίδοιμι				
17) δοίην				
18) δοθείη				
19) σταίησαν				
20) ισταίη				

#16-20. Our old athematic friends δο/, στα/, and θεε/ are somewhat anomalous. Instead of using the normal optative endings (the -μι set of endings), in both present and aorist optatives they use the endings found on aorist passive optatives (the -ειην endings)—*without* the theme vowel ε: ιην, ιης, etc.

Am I ready to proceed?

Well, have you learned it all?