Uses of the Subjunctive Mood

In Independent Clauses

* Hortatory Subjunctive

1) This is a statement urging others to join in some action (commanding oneself and one’s associates). (It is roughly the same as first person imperative, which does not exist in Greek.)

2) It is easily identified because it will always be the first person plural form of the subjunctive mood. This verb form will often come near the beginning of the sentence.

3) It is usually translated "let us…." (Thus, as a mnemonic device, it can be referred to as the ‘Salad Subjunctive’.)

4) Examples:
   a) Hebrews 10:22 "Let us come forward to the Holy of Holies with a true heart in full assurance of faith."
      "προσερχόμεθα μετὰ ἀληθινῆς καρδίας ἐν πληροφορίᾳ πίστεως;"
   b) Hebrews 12:1 "Let us run the race that is set before us."
      "δι' ὑπομονῆς τρέχωμεν τὸν προκείμενον ἡμῶν ἁγώνα;"
   c) 1 John 4:7 "Beloved, let us love one another."
      "Αγαπητοί, ἀγαπῶμεν ἀλλήλους;"

* Deliberative Subjunctive

1) Whereas the indicative mood makes a statement, the subjunctive mood can be used to ask a question. The question usually involves deliberating about a certain course of action. The question may be either a real question (seeking an answer from the hearers) or a rhetorical one (just wanting consideration, with no answer expected). It is typically not asking "What?" or "Who?", but rather "How?", "Whether?", or "Where?" ("Could or Should I?"). The use of the subjunctive is indicating some uncertainty about the answer.

2) As was stated earlier about the overlap in use between the subjunctive mood and the future indicative, the future indicative can also be used to ask deliberative questions, but the subjunctive is more common.

3) It is usually translated into English using the future tense.

4) Real examples (rather than rhetorical):
   a) John 19:15 "Shall I crucify your king?"
      "Τὸν βασιλέα ὁμολόγησον σταυρώσω;"
   b) Matthew 6:31 "Therefore do not worry (be anxious), saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'"
      "μηδεὶς ὑμεῖς μεριμνήστε λέγοντες, Τί φάγωμεν; ή, Τί πίωμεν; ή, Τί περιβαλώμεθα;"
      i) The subjunctive mood in this example indicates that those who would be asking these questions have some doubt as to whether food, drink, or clothing will be available.

5) Rhetorical examples:
   a) Mark 8:37 "What can a person give in exchange for his (soul) life?"
      "τί γὰρ δοὺς ἄνθρωπος ἀντάλλαξιμα τῆς ψυχῆς σουτοῦ;"
      i) The subjunctive here implies that nothing would compensate for such a loss.
   b) Romans 10:14 "How can they hear without a preacher?"
      "πῶς δὲ ἄκουσωσιν χωρὶς κηρύσσοντος;"
      i) Here the subjunctive implies that there is no way for them to hear without a preacher, but causes the audience to ponder (and thus is used to motivate).
* Subjunctive of Emphatic Negation

1) This is a way to strongly deny that something will happen. It is the strongest way to negate something in Greek.
2) It is formed by using a double negative (οὐ μη) with an aorist subjunctive verb (or possibly future indicative). While οὐ plus the indicative denies a certainty, οὐ μη plus the subjunctive denies even the potentiality.
3) It is translated "certainly not" or "never", with the English future tense.
4) This use is found primarily in the reported sayings of Jesus and in quotes from the Septuagint. Outside of these two occurrences, it is used only rarely.
5) Examples:
   a) Matthew 24:35 "but my words will not at all (certainly not) pass away."
      "οἳ δὲ λόγοι μου οὐ μή παρέλθωσιν."
   b) Matthew 5:20 "unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of the heavens".
      "ἐὰν μὴ περισσεύσῃ ὑμῶν ἡ δικαιοσύνη πλέον τῶν γραμματέων καὶ Φαρίσαων, οὐ μὴ εἰσέλθητε εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν."  
   c) Hebrews 13:5 "I will not at all (certainly not) fail you, nor will I ever leave you."
      "Οὐ μή σε ἀνώ σοῦ οὐ μή σε ἐγκαταλίπω."  

Subjunctive of Prohibition (A negative command)

1) It is used to forbid in advance the initiation or occurrence of an action.
2) b) It is formed by using the negating adverb (μη) with the aorist subjunctive, typically in the second person. It is equivalent to imperative after μη.
   i) In second person verb forms, the subjunctive takes the place of a verb in the imperative mood. In third person verb forms, either the subjunctive or the imperative may be used.
   ii) The subjunctive of prohibition is usually seen with the aorist tense, rather than the present tense.
3) It is translated "don’t ever…” or just "do not….” It does not have the sense that "You should not….”
4) Examples:
   a) Matthew 6:34 "Therefore don’t ever worry about tomorrow;"
      "μὴ οὖν μεριμνήσητε εἰς τὴν αὔριον,"
   b) John 3:7 "Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born anew’.”
      "μὴ θαυμάσῃς ὅτι εἶπον σοι, Δεῦ ὑμᾶς γεννηθήκας ἄνωθεν."  
5) Comparative Note: A prohibition can be formed by using the negative adverb (not) with the present imperative or with the aorist subjunctive (or with the future indicative). As seen earlier, in general the present tense emphasizes the continuation of an action and the aorist sees the action as a whole (and thus sometimes has an ingressive idea). When used in prohibition, the present tense (imperative) can mean to cease the continuation of an action, i.e. "stop doing…” something. The prohibition formed with the aorist tense (subjunctive) can mean to not start the action, i.e. "don’t start doing…” something. This is a generality but cannot always be assumed to be the case. One needs to take caution and not blindly apply this generality. The context of the prohibition always needs to be taken into consideration.
   i) The present tense prohibition may also just be telling a ‘general or customary precept’, without commenting on whether the action is going on or not.
   ii) The aorist tense in prohibitions does not always have an inceptive sense, but can just be looking at the action as a whole, also as a general precept.
In Dependent (Subordinate) Clauses

* Third Class Conditional Sentences

(See other handout for explanation of Conditional Sentences)

* Clauses using the Greek Word ἵνα

This is the single most common category of the subjunctive in the New Testament, comprising one-third of all occurrences. This use of this clause can show purpose or result, or can be used substantivally, epexegetically, or complementary. If it makes sense to translate ἵνα as 'in order that', then assume that it is being used as a purpose clause (see below), otherwise translate ἵνα as 'that', with the subjunctive mood translated appropriately for the context.

* Purpose Clause (Formed by ἵνα and the Subjunctive)

1) The ‘purpose clause’ (a dependent clause) is used to show the purpose or intention of the action of the main verb in the sentence (in the independent clause). This construction is meant to show intention, not to state whether something actually happens or not.

2) The purpose clause answers the question "Why?" or "For what reason?", rather than "What?".

3) The conjunction that precedes the subjunctive verb (usually ἵνα or ὅπως) is translated "in order that" or possibly "that". For the sake of clarity, it is probably best translated "in order that".

4) If the subjunctive mood is used in a 'purpose' (or in a 'result') clause, then the action should not be thought of as a possible result, but should be viewed as the stated outcome that will happen (or has happened) as a result of another stated action. The use of the subjunctive is not to indicate that something ‘may’ or ‘might’ result from a given action, but it is stating the ‘purpose of’ or ‘reason for’ an action.

5) The subjunctive mood in a purpose clause actually functions more like a verb in the indicative mood rather than in the optative mood. It is not stating the possibility or probability of an action, but instead telling the intention of the primary action.

6) The ‘purpose clause’ is most frequently introduced by the conjunction ἵνα or ὅπως. (The single most common use of the subjunctive is after ἵνα, comprising about one third of all occurrences.) These words are used in clauses that show ‘purpose’, ‘result’, (or other related ideas). But the most frequent use is to show ‘purpose’.

7) For 'negative purpose' ἵνα μὴ or ὅπως μὴ is used, translated "in order that …not" or "lest". This indicates that the intention of the action of the main clause is in order that something else would not happen.

8) For example:
   a) John 10:38 "In order that you might know and keep on knowing that the Father is in Me, and I in the Father."
      "ἵνα γνωτε καὶ γινώσκητε ὅτι ἐν ἐμοὶ ὁ πατήρ κἀγὼ ἐν τῷ πατρί."
   b) Ephesians 3:10 "In order that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known through the church..."
      "ἵνα γνωρισθῇ νῦν ... διὰ τῆς ἐκκλησίας ἡ πολυποίκιλος σοφία τοῦ θεοῦ,"
   c) John 1:7 "He came for a testimony, in order that he might testify about the light, in order that all might believe through him."
      "ὁ δότος ἦλθεν εἰς μαρτυρίαν, ἵνα μαρτυρήσῃ περὶ τοῦ φωτός, ἵνα πάντες πιστεύσωσιν διὰ αὐτοῦ."
   i) Notice that this verse has two purpose clauses, emphasizing the ultimate reason for John’s coming as a testimony to Christ.

Indefinite Relative Clause

1) Referring to an indefinite/generic (or sometimes an uncertain) ‘person’ or ‘thing’.
2) The clause starts with the relative pronoun ὁς or ὧς, followed by the particle ἀν (which adds another element of indefiniteness to the clause), followed by a verb in the subjunctive mood.
3) This clause often operates as a substantive within the structure of a sentence.
4) It is the person that is ‘uncertain’, not the verbal element. (Thus the verb - in the subjunctive mood - is often translated as indicative, since the potential element belongs to the subject of the clause rather than to the verb.)
5) For example:
   a) Matthew 20:27 "And whoever wants to be first among you will be your slave."
      "καὶ ὃς ἄν θέλῃ ἐν ὑμῖν εἶναι πρῶτος ἔσται ὑμῶν δοῦλος;"
   b) John 4:14 "Whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never (emphatic negation) thirst again."
      "ὅς δὲ ἄν πίῃ ἐκ τοῦ ὑδατος οὗ ἐγὼ δῶσω αὐτῷ, οὐ μὴ διψήσει εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα;"
   c) Romans 9:15 "For he said to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion."
      "τῷ Μωυσεὶ γὰρ λέγει, Ἐλεήσω δὲ ἄν ἐλεῶ, καὶ οἰκτιρήσω δὲ ἄν οἰκτίρω."

Indefinite Temporal Clause

1) Often the subjunctive will be used after a temporal adverb (like ἕως, ἐχρή, or μέχρι) or after a temporal conjunction ὅταν (or less frequently ἐπειτά or ἧνίκα). These temporal adverbs mean ‘until’; the temporal conjunctions mean ‘whenever’.
2) This use of the subjunctive indicates a future contingency relative to the time of the main verb in the sentence.
3) Examples with temporal adverbs:
   a) Galatians 3:19 "It (the law) was added because of transgressions, until the seed should come to whom the promise was made;"
      "τῶν παραβάσεων χάριν προσετέθη, ἐχρής οὗ ἔλθη τὸ σπέρμα ὃ ἐπήγγελτο;"
   b) 2 Peter 1:19 "...word, which you do well to heed …, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts;"
      "...λόγον, ὃ καλῶς ποιεῖτε προσέχοντες ..., ἐως ὃ ήμέρα διασωγάσῃ καὶ φωσφόρος ἀνατείλῃ ἐν ταῖς καρδιάσις ὑμῶν;"
4) Examples with temporal conjunctions:
   a) 2 Corinthians 12:10 "For whenever I am weak, then I am strong."
      "ὅταν γὰρ ἀσθενῶ, τότε δυνατός εἰμι."
   b) 2 Corinthians 3:16 "But whenever it (the heart) turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away."
      "ἡνίκα δὲ ἄν ἐπιστρέψῃ πρὸς κύριον, περιασείται τὸ κάλυμμα."