

# LINGUISTIC NOTES: THE PSEUDESSIVE MOOD

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Research in Mideastern paleolinguistics<sup>1</sup> has recently brought to light the existence of a special form of the subjunctive mood. This set of verb forms, the "pseudessive", was frequently used in Ugaritic and other ancient languages of the Levant\*. But while the subjunctive mood expresses hypothetical or wishful ideas in general, the pseudessive is used more specifically to express *things that might have been true, were it not for facts or beliefs which have subsequently been found to be false.*

The pseudessive should not be confused with the *jussive*, employed for orders or commands, nor the *Jurassic*, which refers to dinosaurs. (The dinosaurs are examples of entire species that would still be true were it not for the ice age.)

As a convention in this discussion, the pseudessive form will be indicated by use of the notation §. For example, "Heshmeh § went to the marketplace § to buy some marshmallows, but § found that they § had been recalled by the health department." Note that all four verbs in the sentence are inflected in the pseudessive mood, since (1) the Akkadian Health Department had no authority concerning marshmallows,<sup>2</sup> and (2) there were neither health departments nor marshmallows in ancient Akkad. Or again, quoting the Phoenician *bon mot*, "Samyah § wants to go jogging, but Samyah's wife § has not washed the family jockstrap." This sentence is written in the pseudessive mood, of course, because Samyah is a feminine name.

In contradistinction to the subjunctive, which applies only to verbs, the pseudessive may also be applied to interjections. For example, if you go into the bathroom late one night to brush your teeth, but find that the lightbulb has burned out, your oath will take the form of the *expletive pseudessive* if you are both blind and edentulous.

The pseudessive may also be applied to queries. An associate recently asked us, "§ Is it necessary for me to §

understand your question in order to § give an inappropriate response?" (The answer was, of course, no.) This is termed the *interrogative pseudessive*.

We remember a television episode in which William Bendix was on vacation in Hawaii. It rained suddenly every time he went outdoors—but *there were no clouds in the sky!* He spent his entire holiday in the pseudessive mood. Many international travelers have had similar experiences. Consider the angry expressions used by tourists who find it impossible to purchase Ex-Lax in Mexico. That these comments are necessarily in the pseudessive mood is ironic testimony to the power and influence of foreign grammar.

One frequently encounters clumsy attempts to reintroduce the pseudessive into modern speech<sup>3</sup>—efforts stymied by the fact that it has never been used before in those languages. This produces such semantic treacheries as the modern German practice of forming very large words, e.g., *Missverständetunangemessenantwort* (the "inappropriate answer" cited above). Regrettably, the pseudessive mood has also found use in political rhetoric: Eldridge Cleaver once used it in a California Senate campaign when he said, "If elected, I'll § lower your taxes."

The pseudessive pervades the world of modern advertising too—for instance, the commercial wherein a housewife goes to her refrigerator to make a gourmet meal, only to find that her jar of Miracle Whip is empty; or the one in which a fancy bridge party would have been perfect but for the improperly managed odor of household cat dung.

Finally, the etymology of the term "pseudessive" is itself an example of pseudessive semantics: it would have been derived from the Greek root *pseudo* ("false") and the Latin *esse* ("to be"), were it not for the fact that it is actually a corruption of the Canaanitic phrase, "*Sod 'os sif*," which means, "My orange cat has a gray hairball in its throat." As always, it loses in translation. 🍷

<The End (so to speak)>

\*Not Oscar.

<sup>1</sup>Eco, Umberto, *Lost Wax Paleolinguistics: Theory and Practice*. Rome: Semiotics Press, 1987.

<sup>2</sup>Allegro, John, *The Sacred Mushroom and Glossolalia*. Henley-on-Thames: Food of the World Press, 1979.

<sup>3</sup>Copper, Felix, "Semitics and semantics—the influence of trilateral roots in post-hegelian philosophy." *J Amer Solipsist Assoc.* 34:358-367. 1961.