

The Role of Grammatical Mood in Romance Political Speech

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines grammatical mood as a rhetorical resource in modern Romance political speech, focusing on French, Spanish, and Italian. It addresses a gap between mood theory, which mainly studies semantic, diachronic, and complement-clause patterns, and political discourse analysis, which more often prioritises lexis, ideology, style, and sentiment. Using 15 major political speeches, five per language, the study counts verbal units and classifies them as indicative, subjunctive, imperative, conditional, or non-finite. A supplementary coding of directive constructions examines how obligation is realised beyond imperative morphology. To reduce the confounding of language and genre, a sensitivity analysis recalculates mood distributions within a more closely matched institutional-setting subset. Quantitative results show that the indicative accounts for over half of all verbal units, dominating all three corpora. These findings support its central role in constructing shared political reality, institutional responsibility, and public authority. The subjunctive surfaces less frequently but is functionally significant: in French it often marks contingency, dependency, and procedural limits; in Spanish it carries deontic pressure, moral resolve, and non-asserted possibility; and in Italian it combines irrealis meaning with the register value of educated public speech. The imperative is used least across all three corpora, with most directive constructions realised through non-imperative forms. This paper argues that mood should be treated not merely as a grammatical category but as a mechanism through which politicians stage assertion, distance, obligation, and mobilisation. Its conclusions remain exploratory because of the corpus's small size and generic diversity; a larger, more balanced corpus is required to confirm and refine these findings across contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Why mood matters

Through political discourse, public actors claim authority, define reality, allocate responsibility, make promises, issue demands, and frame futures; in other words, it is where commitment and legitimacy are constantly negotiated in speech. In this study, I have chosen to examine the use of grammatical mood in political discourse because mood is the grammatical system that most directly links clause form to commitment, possibility, desirability, and directive force. In much formal semantic work, it is understood

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that verbal mood marks how a clause contributes to modal meaning, while sentence mood marks its basic conversational function. Therefore, mood serves as a formal feature of conjugation while bridging grammar, discourse, and political action.

Theoretical work on mood reinforces this point. Giannakidou & Mari (2026) characterise the indicative as “the mood of knowledge and unqualified certainty and belief” (p. 6), while Giannakidou (2011) ties the subjunctive not simply to subordination in a mechanical sense but also to a “lexical sensitivity to nonveridicality” (p. 64). Portner’s (2007) account of the imperative mood further shows that it is bound up with “orders, invitations, and suggestions” (p. 355). These studies suggest that mood is one of the most systematic linguistic resources for distinguishing between ‘this is the case’, ‘this should/might be the case’, and ‘make this the case’. For political speech, where leaders routinely shift between asserting realities, projecting futures, and mobilising audiences, that distinction is crucial.

Gap in Romance mood research

Although mood has been extensively studied in Romance linguistics, most of that work has concentrated on diachrony, complement-clause selection, grammaticalisation, and the abstract semantics of the indicative-subjunctive opposition. Recent comparative research has focused on the historical development of mood from Latin into Romance complement clauses (Becker, 2025) and how Romance subjunctive constructions diverge across languages (Radatz, 2024). However, the pragmatic strategies through which speakers deploy mood in specific contexts remain comparatively under-examined – Romance scholarship has focused on what mood is in grammar but less so on the different effects of mood in situated public discourse. Radatz’s comparative account of the Romance subjunctive argues that its intentional uses are best understood in terms of speaker commitment, while other subjunctive patterns reflect different stages of grammaticalisation and constructionalisation. He concludes by stressing the need for dedicated empirical work comparing the actual distribution of subjunctive constructions across languages.

This paper aims to respond to that call. Political speech offers a high-value empirical testing ground because it is both formally public and pragmatically charged: speakers must transmit authority while also managing uncertainty, normativity, persuasion, and collective action. However, this domain has rarely been used to systematically test comparative claims regarding Romance mood.

Gap in political speech research

Political discourse studies have generated literature on rhetoric, ideology, stance, style, metaphor, sentiment, and corpus construction. French presidential speech research has examined stylistic evolution and rhetorical profiles (Labbé & Savoy, 2020); Spanish speech-corpus work has produced reusable tools for lexical comparison and TF-IDF exploration (Álvarez-Mellado, 2020); and Italian parliamentary projects have concentrated on the release of large machine-readable datasets for computational analysis (Cova, 2025). These represent major advances, but they also reveal a pattern: even when political speech is studied comparatively and computationally, the variables selected are usually lexical, thematic,

affective, or infrastructural rather than morphosyntactic in the narrow sense of grammatical mood. The available literature therefore offers many approaches to study what politicians talk about and how their styles differ but far fewer tools for studying how they grammatically calibrate reality, uncertainty, or command.

When political discourse scholarship does approach mood or modality, it often does so in ways that leave the present research question untouched. Some studies analyse mood in the Hallidayan sense of interpersonal meaning, realised through declarative, interrogative, and imperative clause types (Zeng & Wang, 2019), while others concentrate on modality or evidentiality (Xu, 2015), especially in English-language corpora. That work is valuable for understanding interpersonal positioning and deontic or epistemic framing; however, it does not analyse inflectional mood systems in Romance languages, where the indicative, subjunctive, and imperative are built into the verbal grammar itself and interact differently across languages. The result is a persistent disconnect: political discourse studies acknowledge that stance and obligation matter, and mood theory recognises that grammatical mood encodes stance and obligation, yet the two approaches have only rarely been brought together in a tri-language Romance comparison.

Why this study is necessary

This paper addresses that disconnect by treating grammatical mood not as a background grammatical category but rather as a rhetorical resource in political speech. Its novelty lies first in scale and comparison: it brings together French, Spanish, and Italian, three major Romance languages with substantial speaker populations and strong political traditions, within a shared analytical frame, thus allowing mood frequencies and functions to be compared across closely related but non-identical systems. Because these languages share a linguistic inheritance yet differ in the productivity, audibility, and discourse distribution of the indicative, subjunctive and imperative, they provide a strong comparative opportunity. However, due to the uneven genre distribution, aggregate cross-language differences cannot be conclusively treated as pure language effects; this study therefore further tests whether the main patterns persist within a more closely matched institutional-setting subset.

Its second contribution is conceptual. This paper asks how morphologically marked mood helps politicians state facts as if they belong to a shared reality, hold propositions at a distance, package demands as necessity or desire, and mobilise audiences without always resorting to overt commands. Studying mood sharpens our understanding of assertion, commitment, obligation, and mobilisation at the intersection of grammar and persuasion, because political authority depends not only on what is said but also on its grammatical stance.

Its third contribution is methodological. Romance languages vary in how they map directive force onto verbal forms: Spanish and Italian frequently resort to the subjunctive for exhortation, while French and Italian restrict the use of the imperative more narrowly than the rhetorical function of ‘command’ might suggest. A study that counts only imperative morphology would therefore miss important cross-linguistic differences in how political speakers encode appeals to action; conversely, a study that ignores morphology would flatten distinctions that are central to the grammar. By combining quantitative mood

counts with a separate systematic coding of directive constructions, qualitative discourse analysis, and a genre-sensitivity check, this paper examines both the formal distribution of grammatical mood and the broader grammatical realisation of political direction and mobilisation.

METHODS

This study uses an annotated corpus of 15 modern Romance political speeches: five in French, five in Spanish, and five in Italian. The speeches, which include presidential addresses, parliamentary speeches, international speeches, and public rally or ceremonial interventions, were selected to provide a cross-linguistic comparison of grammatical mood in formal and semi-formal political discourse. Rather than creating a statistically representative corpus of all Romance political speech, the aim was to examine how mood functions across a sample of prominent political texts.

Because genre is unevenly distributed across the three corpora, a sensitivity analysis was conducted. Speeches were coded independently of their mood results as either institutional or extra-institutional according to setting, audience, and communicative role. The institutional subset comprised governmental, parliamentary, diplomatic, military-strategic, and formal presidential addresses. Sarkozy's university address, Sánchez's business-forum speech, Machado's ceremonial acceptance speech, and Meloni's rally were excluded from this subset. Mood distributions were recalculated within the institutional subset and compared with the results of the full corpus, while Hedges' g was calculated from individual speech-level mood percentages using the pooled standard deviation and the standard small-sample correction. This procedure does not fully isolate language from genre, but it does test whether the principal cross-language patterns survive after the most obvious genre imbalance is reduced.

The unit of analysis was the verbal unit, defined as a finite or non-finite verbal predicate expressing an action, process, state, relation, existence, obligation, possibility, intention, or presentation, rather than the individual verb word. This predicate-based approach was adopted because many Romance verbal meanings are expressed through multi-word constructions rather than isolated forms. Compound tenses, passive constructions, compound passives, pronominal verbs, progressive constructions, and tightly integrated verbal periphrases were therefore counted as single verbal units where they formed one predicate. Auxiliaries absorbed into these constructions were not counted separately. Each counted verbal unit was classified into one of five categories: indicative, subjunctive, imperative, conditional, or non-finite. Non-finite verbal units included infinitives, gerunds, present participles, and past participles where they retained verbal force. Dependent infinitives after modal, semi-modal, impersonal, or lexical finite verbs were counted separately unless the construction formed a recognised verbal periphrasis functioning as a single predicate. Conversely, verbal-looking forms, including fixed expressions, nominalised infinitives, purely adjectival participles, titles, salutations, headings, source notes, and proper-name elements, were excluded where they lacked independent verbal force.

To improve consistency, the annotation was conducted through a staged inventory procedure. Each speech was first divided into numbered paragraphs and sentences. A complete candidate inventory was then

created: for each candidate, every possible verbal-looking form, including counted units, absorbed auxiliaries, ambiguous forms, and excluded candidates, was listed with its exact source form, immediate context, full verbal unit, lemma, construction type, mood category, counted status, and reason for inclusion or exclusion in the inventory. This approach made the count auditable rather than dependent on a later aggregate estimate.

Each speech then underwent a first audit followed by a second adversarial audit. These audit stages checked for missed candidates, incorrect grouping of compounds or passives, wrongly classified moods, duplicate rows, inconsistent treatment of auxiliaries, and questionable exclusions. Corrections were made through patch tables rather than by replacing the inventory entirely so that all changes remained traceable. The final total for each speech equalled the sum of indicative, subjunctive, imperative, conditional, and non-finite counted rows.

A supplementary coding pass examined directive force independently of formal mood. The unit of analysis was the directive construction, defined as a grammatically integrated expression that placed prospective pressure on an agent to perform, continue, avoid, or cease an action. Constructions were classified as imperative, exhortative subjunctive, necessity, deontic, volitional, or explicit directive speech act. Assertions, predictions, promises, epistemic modality, wishes, and statements of possibility were excluded unless they independently carried directive force. Each construction received one primary category to prevent double-counting, and the same inventory and two-stage audit procedure was applied as in the mood analysis. Speech lengths differed, so directive frequency was normalised as constructions per 100 verbal units, while the proportions of directive constructions realised through imperative and non-imperative forms were also calculated.

Given the small number of speeches, the cross-language comparisons are treated descriptively rather than as significance tests. Reporting speech-level Hedges' *g* as an effect-size measure for the subjunctive and imperative in both the full corpus and the institutional subset allows the stability of the cross-language contrasts to be assessed without treating individual verbal units as independent observations.

Because a single researcher annotated the corpus, the results should be treated as exploratory rather than definitive. The method prioritises transparency and reproducibility but cannot eliminate all borderline judgements, especially for participles, periphrases, and mood forms with overlapping morphology.

RESULTS

Tables 1–3 present the distribution of counted verbal units across the French, Spanish, and Italian corpora, and report raw counts for each speech and aggregate percentages for each language. Table 4 summarises directive constructions, while Table 5 reports the formal mood distribution after restricting the analysis to the institutional-setting subset.

Speech	Indicative	Subjunctive	Imperative	Conditional/ Non-finite	Total Verbal Units
Chirac (2000)	344	26	11	255	636
Villepin (2003)	145	7	8	115	275
Sarkozy (2007)	564	21	17	286	888
Macron (2020)	590	27	16	421	1054
Macron (2025)	172	14	0	110	296
Total	1815 (57.64%)	95 (3.02%)	52 (1.65%)	1187 (37.69%)	3149

Table 1: Distribution of counted verbal units in French political speeches

Speech	Indicative	Subjunctive	Imperative	Conditional/ Non-finite	Total Verbal Units
Chávez (2006)	259	23	3	99	384
Sánchez (2018)	505	47	7	293	852
Obrador (2021)	105	23	2	94	224
Sánchez (2025)	375	40	1	183	599
Machado (2025)	297	17	2	128	444
Total	1541 (61.57%)	150 (5.99%)	15 (0.60%)	797 (31.84%)	2503

Table 2: Distribution of counted verbal units in Spanish political speeches

Speech	Indicative	Subjunctive	Imperative	Conditional/ Non-finite	Total Verbal Units
Letta (2013)	389	26	12	346	773
Renzi (2014)	798	91	17	422	1328
Mattarella (2015)	185	14	2	113	314
Meloni (2019)	349	12	10	130	501
Draghi (2021)	386	33	0	309	728
Total	2107 (57.82%)	176 (4.83%)	41 (1.13%)	1320 (36.22%)	3644

Table 3: Distribution of counted verbal units in Italian political speeches

Language	Total Directive Constructions	Per 100 Verbal Units	Imperative	Non-imperative
French	336	10.67	52 (15.48%)	284 (84.52%)
Spanish	238	9.51	15 (6.30%)	223 (93.70%)
Italian	324	8.89	41 (12.65%)	283 (87.35%)

Table 4: Distribution of counted directive constructions in French, Spanish, and Italian political speeches

Language	Institutional Speeches (n)	Indicative	Subjunctive	Imperative	Conditional/ Non-finite	Total Verbal Units
French	4	1251 (55.33%)	74 (3.27%)	35 (1.55%)	901 (39.85%)	2261
Spanish	3	869 (59.52%)	93 (6.37%)	12 (0.82%)	486 (33.29%)	1460
Italian	4	1758 (55.93%)	164 (5.22%)	31 (0.99%)	1190 (37.86%)	3143

Table 5: Distribution of counted verbal units in institutional-setting subset

CONTEXTS AND GRAMMATICAL FRAMEWORK

The corpus contains 15 speeches, five in each language, and the situations in which they were delivered are central to interpretation. The French sample is weighted towards institutional and strategic discourse: in 2000, President Jacques Chirac opened the 8th conference of ambassadors at the Élysée Palace in Paris

with his speech to French ambassadors and senior state officials in which he set out France's diplomatic priorities for the months ahead. In his speech before the United Nations Security Council in New York City in 2003, immediately after Hans Blix and Mohamed ElBaradei had reported on Iraqi disarmament, Minister of Foreign Affairs Dominique de Villepin presented a high-stakes diplomatic argument evaluating continued inspection and war. By contrast, in his 2007 address to elite African youth at Cheikh Anta Diop University in Dakar during his first presidential trip to sub-Saharan Africa, President Nicolas Sarkozy defined France's historical relation to Africa. President Emmanuel Macron delivered his speech at the École de Guerre in Paris in 2020 to officer-trainees and the wider strategic community as a formal statement of French defence and nuclear-deterrence doctrine; in 2025, he delivered a televised address from the Élysée Palace on the eve of a European Council in the context of the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War.

The Spanish sample spans more divergent political cultures and genres: Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez delivered his address in 2006 in the General Debate of the United Nations General Assembly in New York City, before heads of state, diplomats, and the international press, in which he openly criticised the presidency of George W. Bush. In 2018, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, then the proposed replacement prime minister in a parliamentary struggle triggered by the Gürtel case, delivered his speech in the Congress of Deputies in Madrid during the motion of censure against the incumbent Mariano Rajoy. Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador addressed the United Nations Security Council in 2021 during Mexico's month-long presidency of the Council, and cast corruption, exclusion, and inequality as matters of international peace and security. Sánchez opened and set the agenda for the 40th Annual Meeting of the *Círculo de Economía* in 2025 at the Palau de Congressos de Catalunya in Barcelona before a business and policy audience. Ana Corina Sosa Machado, the daughter of Venezuelan politician María Corina Machado, delivered her mother's 2025 acceptance speech for the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo, in which she narrated Venezuela's democratic struggle following the 2024 political crisis.

The Italian sample likewise combines distinct institutional and extra-parliamentary settings: Prime Minister Enrico Letta delivered his speech to the Chamber of Deputies at the Palazzo Montecitorio in Rome in 2013, as he presented the programme of the new grand-coalition government formed after the post-election deadlock, while in 2014, Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, also at Montecitorio, set out the programme of a newly installed government that had just replaced Letta and required immediate parliamentary legitimation. President Sergio Mattarella delivered his address in 2015 to the Italian Parliament on the day of his swearing-in as President of Italy before deputies, senators, and regional delegates in a joint session at Montecitorio. Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, by contrast, addressed a large opposition crowd mobilised against the Second Conte government in a mass-rally in 2019 in Piazza San Giovanni in Rome. Prime Minister Mario Draghi delivered his speech in the Senate in 2021 as he sought confidence for a broad unity government formed during the COVID-19 emergency and economic crisis. These contexts shape whether mood is used chiefly to narrate and legitimate, to distance and condition, or to exhort and mobilise.

Regarding the mood systems themselves, in French, the Académie française (2024) defines the indicative as the mood used to express an action or state “*de manière positive et certaine*” (“in a positive and certain

way”) and to present a fact “*envisagé dans sa réalité*” (“viewed in its reality”) (Definition II.1). The French subjunctive appears much less often in absolute terms, but when it does appear, it is frequently licensed by conjunctions and governors such as “*sans que*” and “*jusqu’à ce que*”, which make it especially visible in clauses of contingency, condition, or procedural limitation. The use of the imperative, meanwhile, is broader than bare command: Bona (2016) presents it as the mood of “*invitation...prière...supplique...exhortation*” (“invitation...prayer...plea...exhortation”) (para. 10) and the French imperative paradigm itself is restricted to three persons. In the French corpus, therefore, the imperative can be reserved for moments when injunction needs to be especially audible, while the subjunctive regulates more dependent or contingent political meanings.

Spanish distributes these functions somewhat differently. The Real Academia Española (n.d.) links the indicative to certainty, perception, and communication, while noting that negation can alter the choice of mood. The subjunctive is strongly associated with nonveridicality and with environments involving “*peticiones, órdenes, sugerencias*” (“requests, orders, suggestions”) rather than asserted states of affairs (RAE, 2009, §25.4d). The imperative also aims to influence the interlocutor, but formal comparison is complicated by Spanish morphology: first-person plural and formal-address directive forms overlap with the present subjunctive. Therefore, directive force is not neatly captured by ‘true’ imperative forms alone. Spanish also provides grammatical resources for exhortation through *que* + subjunctive, necessity constructions, and inclusive forms that blur the boundary between imperative and subjunctive morphology.

Italian combines a high indicative baseline with a particularly salient subjunctive. Treccani (2012) describes the indicative as the most common finite mood, used to present events as real, objective, and secure. At the same time, the *congiuntivo* remains both structurally important and sociolinguistically conspicuous. Prestige-sensitive and normatively monitored, it can “parade as a sign of polished Italian and of belonging to a higher social rank or a status symbol of a higher level of education” (Digesto, 2022, p. 3) in formal public speech. Italian also realises exhortative values through the *congiuntivo esortativo* and *indicativo iussivo*, so dedicated imperative morphology does not exhaust its directive possibilities. Whether these alternatives actually account for directive force in the corpus is tested separately through the supplementary directive-force coding.

Against that grammatical background, the overall corpus distribution becomes easier to read. French shows a lower share of the indicative at 57.64%, a low but meaningful share of the subjunctive at 3.02%, and the highest share of the formal imperative at 1.65% (Table 1). Spanish shows a higher proportion of the indicative, roughly 61.57%, but a markedly greater proportion of the subjunctive at 5.99%, while the use of the formal imperative is rare at 0.60% (Table 2). Italian is close to French in density of the indicative, at 57.82%, and has a comparatively strong presence of the subjunctive at 4.83%; its imperative remains lower than that of French at 1.13% (Table 3). Across the corpus as a whole, then, the indicative is the dominant mood of public political statement in all three languages, the subjunctive is comparatively rare but functionally loaded, and the imperative is the least frequent category in formal terms. Supplementary directive-force coding, however, shows that imperative frequency alone substantially understates directive activity, with non-imperative constructions accounting for 84.52% of directives in

the French sample, 93.70% in Spanish, and 87.35% in Italian (Table 4). The genre-sensitivity analysis further shows that the Spanish-Italian-French ordering of subjunctive frequency survives within the institutional subset, while the Italian-Spanish imperative difference weakens sharply (Table 5). The principal contrast is therefore not simply the amount of directive force but also the grammatical forms through which it is realised and the extent to which those forms are stable across settings.

GENRE SENSITIVITY ANALYSIS

Restricting the analysis to institutional speeches leaves the principal subjunctive ordering unchanged: Spanish remains highest at 6.37%, followed by Italian at 5.22% and French at 3.27%, compared with 5.99%, 4.83%, and 3.02%, respectively, in the full corpus. At the speech level, the absolute Hedges' *g* values for the institutional subset are 1.71 for Spanish-French, 1.03 for Spanish-Italian, and 0.88 for Italian-French, all comparable to or larger than the full-sample effects of 1.57, 0.94, and 0.68. The higher Spanish and Italian subjunctive rates therefore persist after the analysis is restricted to the most closely matched institutional-setting subset. The imperative pattern is more genre-sensitive. French remains highest in the institutional subset at 1.55%, compared with 0.99% in Italian and 0.82% in Spanish. However, the Italian-Spanish speech-level contrast falls from an absolute Hedges' *g* of 0.71 in the full corpus to 0.06 in the institutional subset, while French remains moderately higher than Spanish (*g* = 0.64) and Italian (*g* = 0.60). This suggests that the aggregate Italian-Spanish difference in imperative frequency is partly associated with genre composition, whereas the broader French-versus-Spanish/Italian contrast is more robust. Indicative rates remain tightly clustered in the institutional subset (55.33% French, 59.52% Spanish, 55.93% Italian), with only small speech-level differences.

DISCUSSION

French

The high concentration of institutional speech helps explain the rhetorical profile in the French material. The speakers consistently assume the role of narrating the situation of the state, interpreting events, defining strategic conditions, and presenting policy as orderly and continuous. Read together, these speeches create a French corpus in which authority is most often institutional, and in which mood serves to explain, justify, and guide mobilisation. The speakers use the indicative to present diagnosis, continuity, responsibility, and national authority as publicly available realities. In his 2000 speech, Chirac uses indicative clauses to describe diplomatic routines and orientations that make policy appear less like a proposal and more like an ongoing managed practice. Sarkozy's 2007 address relies heavily on past and present indicatives in the repeated "*Je suis venu...*" ("I have come"), using verbal repetition to narrate both purpose and historical position. Macron's 2020 speech makes even more explicit use of the indicative to transmit authority: "*La dissuasion nucléaire a joué un rôle fondamental...*" ("Nuclear deterrence has played a fundamental role...") presents strategic judgement as settled assessment, while "*Ma responsabilité est d'assurer la sécurité...*" ("My responsibility is to ensure safety") portrays

political obligation as a fact-like institutional duty. Computational stylistics research on French presidential speeches notes that the formal objectives of such speeches typically include “explaining a situation, presenting several solutions, [and] justifying governmental actions”, all tasks naturally accomplished via declarative, indicative clauses (Labbé & Savoy, 2020, p. 153). Even where the speech is prospective, the indicative helps transform programme into administered reality. In this corpus, then, the French indicative does not merely report but also legitimates the speakers as the authorised interpreters of circumstances.

The comparatively low French subjunctive rate should not, however, be mistaken for low functional importance. Precisely because it is so infrequent in the French sample, the subjunctive becomes conspicuous when it appears. Its most characteristic role is not free-standing emotional colouring but rather the management of dependency, limitation, and contingency in subordinate clauses. Macron’s 2025 speech provides the clearest examples. In “*jusqu’à ce qu’ils puissent négocier...*” (“until they can negotiate...”), the endpoint of action is grammatically held open: negotiation is projected as possible and desired but not yet realised. Likewise, “*sans que cela soit pris en compte*” (“without this being taken into account”) uses the subjunctive to frame an exceptive or concessive policy condition. In political rhetoric, such clauses help a speaker define what remains pending, conditional, or outside present control. The French subjunctive therefore works less as the dominant mood of desire than as a precise instrument for marking what has not yet entered the stable space of assertion.

This profile suggests that, within the French corpus, the subjunctive is predominantly procedural in function. It still carries the semantics of nonveridicality, but in practice it often appears through licensed environments rather than through flamboyant mood contrast. That makes it particularly suitable for policy speech, which must constantly distinguish between what is already the case and what depends on conditions being met. The French material therefore suggests a rhetoric in which the subjunctive is about grammatically organising the boundaries of commitment.

The imperative in the French sample is formally more visible than in Spanish or Italian, but the supplementary directive-force coding shows that it accounts for only 15.48% of French directives, while 84.52% are realised through non-imperative forms (Table 4). The formal prominence of the imperative should therefore be distinguished from the broader grammatical distribution of directive force. Chirac’s 2000 speech uses clear second-person plural imperatives: “*Soyez au contact...Ayez toujours à l’esprit...Prenez des initiatives*” (“Stay connected...Keep in mind...Take the initiative”), in a context where the speaker’s authority over the addressees is institutionally legible. These are not generic crowd commands but rather directives to actors embedded in a state hierarchy. Macron’s 2020 speech uses the imperative more inclusively: “*Assumons-le...Regardons les choses en face...Prenons nos responsabilités...Ayons le courage*” (“Let’s face it...Let’s be honest...Let’s take responsibility...Let’s have the courage”) transforms command into collective mobilisation by shifting from presidential instruction to a strategic “we”. However, the corpus also shows clear restraint. Macron’s 2025 speech contains no formal imperative and instead relies on “*il nous faut*” (“we need”) and “*nous devons*” (“we must”) to create obligation without bare command. Such constructions illustrate the broader quantitative

pattern identified by the directive-force coding: even in the French sample, most directive pressure is realised outside imperative morphology.

Taken together, the French material reveals a distinctive balance. The indicative constructs an authoritative common ground, the subjunctive opens conditional and procedural spaces within that ground, and the imperative surfaces when leadership requires either direct instruction or inclusive national mobilisation. That profile is not simply an outcome of Sarkozy's more public-facing university address. When that speech is excluded, the institutional French subset still has the lowest subjunctive rate of the three institutional samples (3.27%) and the highest imperative rate (1.55%) (Table 5), closely reproducing the direction of the full-corpus French pattern. The French corpus most often constructs authority by presenting reality as coherent and state action as continuous, while retaining grammatical resources for signalling contingency and for turning authority into collective exhortation as the situation demands.

Spanish

Both the results and the rhetoric reflect the wide internal variation of the Spanish corpus. Chávez's 2006 speech is openly confrontational and morally charged. Sánchez's 2018 speech is parliamentary and oriented towards accusation, defence, and public accountability. López Obrador's 2021 speech foregrounds corruption, reform, and institutional transformation. Sánchez's 2025 speech is a technocratic and agenda-setting intervention organised around the proposition, "*Europa tiene que despertar*" ("Europe needs to wake up"). Machado's 2025 speech narratively structures Venezuelan democratic struggle as an ongoing collective reality. As a result, the Spanish sample moves more quickly between assertion, evaluation, exhortation, and conditionality.

The indicative plays a crucial role. Chávez's famous "*huele a azufre*" ("it smells like sulphur") is a striking present-tense indicative because it presents moral judgement as immediate perception; the force of the utterance comes from the proposition that is staged as an experienced fact. Sánchez's 2018 parliamentary speech similarly favours indicative declaratives because parliamentary attack and defence depend on presenting claims as publicly testable. López Obrador's 2021 speech also uses indicative clauses to define corruption as a central problem and to build reform proposals on the basis of asserted diagnoses. Sánchez's 2025 speech uses the indicative to anchor plans and evaluations in a broader European context, while Machado's 2025 speech uses past and present indicative forms to narrate history and represent democratic struggle as still current. In the Spanish corpus, then, the indicative remains the principal mood for making reality visible and arguable.

Where Spanish most clearly differs from French is in the rhetorical visibility of the subjunctive. The aggregate proportion of subjunctive forms in Spanish is roughly double that of French and involves three main functions: deontic mobilisation, non-assertion, and argument management through concessive, conditional, or purpose-like structures. This difference is not removed by the genre-sensitivity check: within the institutional subset, Spanish rises to 6.37% subjunctive, compared with 5.22% in Italian and 3.27% in French (Table 5). López Obrador's 2021 speech is the most obvious example of deontic packaging. Repeated *que* + subjunctive sequences after evaluative triggers condense political demand into grammatically dependent structures. Chilton's (2004) account of modality in political discourse explains

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why such forms matter: deontic meanings can invoke obligation, moral rightness, and legitimacy through grammatical structure as well as through explicit argument. The speech creates a framework of necessity and reform: “*Es necesario que...*” (“It is necessary that...”), in which action appears institutionally and morally required. It allows forceful exhortation to appear as organised evaluative reasoning rather than as sheer command.

Machado’s 2025 speech shows a different but related use of the same resource. Expressions such as “*por dura que sea*” (“no matter how hard it may be”) and “*en la medida en que estemos dispuestos a luchar*” (“to the extent that we are willing to fight”) present hardship and commitment through concession and condition rather than simple factual predication. By keeping the proposition open enough to register effort, risk, and collective will, the subjunctive here helps construct a moral horizon that allows a speaker to create resolve without pretending that the outcome is guaranteed. In other words, in the Spanish corpus, the subjunctive is especially salient where political discourse holds together urgency and uncertainty.

The imperative in Spanish must be interpreted through this broader system. In formal terms, the imperative in Spanish is the least frequent of the three languages in the corpus, yet Spanish political speech here is not the least directive. The supplementary directive-force coding shows that low imperative frequency does not correspond to low directive activity: the Spanish sample contains 9.51 directive constructions per 100 verbal units, compared with 10.67 in French and 8.89 in Italian (Table 4). Moreover, 93.70% of directive constructions in the Spanish sample were realised through non-imperative forms (Table 4). The Spanish sample therefore provides particularly clear evidence that formal imperative frequency captures only a limited proportion of directive force. Chávez’s “*aceptémoslo con honestidad*” (“Let’s be honest about it”) and López Obrador’s “*Veamos*” (“Let’s see”) are inclusive imperatives. However, they do not carry the full burden of political pressure, which is more often distributed across necessity statements, such as “*Europa tiene que despertar*” and repeated “*debemos*”, and the directive force of subjunctive complements. Because first-person plural and formal-address imperatives overlap with the subjunctive, and because Spanish has productive ways of encoding exhortation through evaluation and desire, low imperative counts do not amount to low mobilisation. Rather, they indicate that command often appears deliberative, shared, or institutionally reasoned in the Spanish corpus. This pattern helps explain why Sánchez’s and Machado’s 2025 speeches contain so few formal imperatives while still maintaining strong programmatic and moral force. The institutional sensitivity analysis also leaves Spanish with the lowest imperative rate at 0.82%, although the gap with Italian narrows substantially, indicating that the Spanish-Italian contrast is partly genre-sensitive.

Viewed speech by speech, the Spanish material shows a repertoire in which mood is one of the principal means of regulating political intensity. The indicative defines the present and secures authority. The subjunctive projects reforms, obligations, and ethical horizons without collapsing them into already accomplished reality. The imperative appears at specific points of invitation or ratification, though much of the actual directive energy is channelled elsewhere. Political speech in this corpus is therefore not simply assertive or hortatory but rather grammatically adept at moving between assertion and mobilisation through a dense interaction of moods.

Italian

Like the French corpus, the Italian corpus shares a high proportion of institutional speech but differs in the cultural weight and discourse visibility of the *congiuntivo*. Letta's 2013 and Renzi's 2014 speeches are programmatic and parliamentary, built around diagnosis, reform, and future planning. Mattarella's 2015 address to Parliament frames democratic responsibility and constitutional reform as continuing tasks. Draghi's 2021 speech is organised around the pandemic response, governmental coordination, and public reassurance. Meloni's 2019 speech stands apart for its rally style and willingness to stage direct confrontation. This contrast within the Italian sample is analytically productive because it suggests how genre may contribute to mood distribution: parliamentary speech favours accountability and deontic planning, while rally speech favours spectacle, rebuke, and direct audience alignment.

In the parliamentary and presidential speeches, the high indicative share in Italian, much like in French and Spanish, reflects its role as the backbone of public accountability. Treccani (2012) explicitly characterises the indicative as the most common finite mood used to present states of affairs as certain or objective, which helps to explain the high indicative frequency in public address. Letta and Renzi resort to it to enumerate reforms, diagnose problems, and present political timetables. Mattarella needs it to articulate the ongoing duties of democratic institutions. Draghi relies on it to present governmental action as coordinated and real: commitments are stated, responsibilities are named, and the pandemic is framed as a problem to be confronted collectively but concretely. In this respect, Italian resembles French. The indicative supplies the grammar of seriousness: it allows speakers to present themselves as those who understand the situation and how institutions are responding.

The difference lies in the subjunctive. Beyond a semantic mood of dependency, the *congiuntivo* in public Italian is also a register marker associated with educated and polished speech. A speaker who uses it effectively can at once signal grammatical control, institutional seriousness, and a nuanced stance towards the proposition at hand. Renzi's 2014 example, "*l'idea...è che...che sia un Paese finito*" ("The idea...is that...it is a country that's come to an end"), illustrates the stance-marking function particularly well. The pessimistic proposition is represented as circulating discourse rather than as endorsed fact. The subjunctive thereby helps create distance: it allows the speaker to cite a view, register it as socially present, and resist adopting it as their own assertion. In political terms, this manoeuvre permits disagreement without sacrificing rhetorical composure.

Meloni's 2019 speech, by contrast, shows the mobilising function of the Italian subjunctive. "*Noi vogliamo che gli italiani tornino a contare*" ("We want Italians to matter again") is precisely the kind of 'irrealis' content often channelled into subordinate subjunctive clauses: a future programme is clearly identified but not described as already secured. The *congiuntivo* allows aspiration to be forceful without presenting it as fact. This same dual payoff, semantic irrealis plus public polish, helps explain the rhetorical salience of the subjunctive within the Italian corpus. It packages desire, programme, and stance in a way that sounds at once institutionally legitimate and rhetorically elevated.

The Italian imperative, as with Spanish, must be read against the structure of the language. The supplementary coding identifies 8.89 directive constructions per 100 verbal units. Of these directives,

87.35% are realised through non-imperative forms, a proportion slightly higher than in French (84.52%) but lower than in Spanish (93.70%) (Table 4). Draghi's 2021 speech illustrates this distinction through deontic formulations such as "*Dobbiamo...*" ("We have to...") and necessity constructions such as "*Occorre...*" ("We need to...") that present action as necessary and collective without employing imperative morphology, and are particularly well suited to a confidence-oriented parliamentary setting where coalition-building matters. Meloni's 2019 speech again provides the contrast: "*Guardate...*" ("Look...") creates spectacle and joint attention, while "*Abbate almeno la dignità...*" ("At least have some dignity...") publicly rebukes opponents. This pattern is consistent with a genre contribution, but it does not prove that genre is directly responsible for the difference in imperative frequency. When Meloni's speech is removed, the institutional Italian imperative rate falls to 0.99%, bringing it much closer to Spanish at 0.82% (Table 5). The Italian sample therefore shows both that directive force extends well beyond imperative morphology and that the frequency of overt imperatives appears more sensitive to speech setting than to the subjunctive contrast.

Overall, the Italian material shows a layered mood system. The indicative provides the grammar of programme, reassurance, and institutional responsibility. The subjunctive, adding both semantic subtlety and register value, is especially powerful for public stance-taking and desired futures. The imperative remains formally marginal, but exhortation hardly disappears; it is redistributed through structures of shared necessity, surfacing in bare imperative form, primarily when the genre becomes more performative. Italian therefore demonstrates with particular clarity that mood in political discourse is a means of calibrating authority, seriousness, and public style.

Comparative Interpretation

Once the analysis is reorganised by language and checked against a more closely matched institutional subset, the major patterns become more visible. All three corpora depend heavily on the indicative because political speech requires a grammatical means to treat claims as real, name responsibility, and make policy publicly intelligible. The indicative accounts for over half of the counted verbal units in every full corpus and remains dominant in the institutional subset: 55.33% in French, 59.52% in Spanish, and 55.93% in Italian (Table 5). The small speech-level differences in the institutional subset suggest that indicative dominance is primarily a cross-Romance commonality of these political contexts rather than a strong language-specific contrast.

The clearest contrast lies in the use of the subjunctive. French employs it relatively sparingly and often in more procedural subordinate environments, especially those that mark limitation, contingency, or non-completed endpoints. The full-corpus rates are 3.02% in French, 5.99% in Spanish, and 4.83% in Italian (Tables 1-3). After restricting the corpus to institutional speeches, the same ordering remains at 3.27%, 6.37%, and 5.22%, respectively (Table 5). The corresponding speech-level effect sizes remain substantial, with absolute Hedges' *g* of 1.71 for Spanish-French, 1.03 for Spanish-Italian, and 0.88 for Italian-French. Because the contrast persists when the analysis is restricted to the more closely matched institutional-setting subset, genre composition alone is unlikely to account for the higher subjunctive rates in the Spanish and Italian samples.

The imperative reveals a further contrast between formal mood frequency and directive function. French has the highest proportion of formal imperatives, at 1.65% of verbal units, compared with 0.60% in Spanish and 1.13% in Italian (Tables 1–3). However, the Italian-Spanish difference narrows from 0.53 percentage points in the full corpus to 0.17 points in the institutional subset, while the absolute speech-level Hedges' *g* falls from 0.71 to 0.06. This indicates that the Italian-Spanish imperative contrast is partly genre-sensitive, particularly because Meloni's speech contains more overt imperatives than the institutional Italian speeches. At the same time, the supplementary directive-force coding shows that formal imperative frequency is not equivalent to directive activity: the corpora contain 10.67 directive constructions per 100 verbal units in French, 9.51 in Spanish, and 8.89 in Italian, and non-imperative constructions account for 84.52%, 93.70%, and 87.35% of directives, respectively (Table 4). The cross-language comparison therefore separates two phenomena that the aggregate mood counts alone could conflate: the overall availability of directive force and the grammatical forms through which that force is realised.

LIMITATIONS AND RELIABILITY

This analysis remains exploratory and should be read with appropriate caution. The corpus is small, with five speeches per language, and the speech situations are heterogeneous: parliamentary interventions, programmatic addresses, foreign-policy speeches, rally-style performances, and other highly public interventions are all examined with the same frame. The institutional-subset sensitivity analysis reduces the most obvious genre imbalance but does not fully separate language from genre: its binary classification compresses important distinctions among parliamentary, diplomatic, military-strategic, presidential, and international speech, and speaker, country, topic, and historical moment remain entangled with language. Topic also matters. A corpus weighted towards deterrence, diplomacy, constitutional responsibility, or institutional reform is likely to favour explanatory and justificatory declaratives, regardless of language. Chilton (2004) further argues that there is “a great deal of internal variability across geographical and social space” with “greater or lesser degrees of variation in...pronunciation, word-forms, syntax, vocabulary” (p. 9), suggesting that the distributions here should not be treated as pure reflections of national language systems but rather are better understood as evidence of how mood behaves under specific social and political conditions within those systems.

Annotation reliability is a second major issue. In Spanish and Italian, directive force can be distributed across forms that blur the boundary between subjunctive and imperative-like uses, especially in exhortative or *que*-based constructions. Finally, the English glosses used throughout the analysis serve as interpretive aids rather than evidence in themselves. Translation can flatten precisely the mood contrasts that matter most.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that grammatical mood is not a peripheral inflectional category in Romance political speech but rather a central resource for calibrating assertion, contingency, obligation, and mobilisation. Across the French, Spanish, and Italian corpora, the indicative remains the dominant mood of public political statements, supplying the grammatical basis upon which speakers present diagnoses, institutional responsibilities, and programmes as part of an apparently shared reality. At the same time, the analysis indicates that formal frequency is an insufficient guide to rhetorical weight – the subjunctive, though less frequent, carries a significant functional load, and the imperative, though formally sparse, is not the only grammatical structure of directive force. The genre-sensitivity analysis sharpens these conclusions. The Spanish-Italian-French ordering of subjunctive frequency persists after the analysis is restricted to institutional speeches, with substantial speech-level effect sizes, suggesting that this contrast is not simply an artefact of the corpus's genre composition. By contrast, the Italian-Spanish difference in imperative frequency largely disappears in the institutional subset, suggesting that at least some aggregate mood differences are sensitive to genre.

This study's chief theoretical contribution is therefore to argue that mood should be analysed not only as a semantic or morphosyntactic contrast but also as a discursive resource through which political authority, epistemic distance, and calls to action are grammatically staged and negotiated. This framing places the study at the intersection of Romance mood theory and political discourse analysis; the findings suggest that mood deserves a more central place in the analysis of political speech. However, the results also remain provisional, as the corpus is small, the speech events and topics are heterogeneous, and mood annotation is not always straightforward. For that reason, future work should test whether the same distributions persist in larger, genre-balanced corpora; separate parliamentary, presidential, diplomatic, and rally speech to establish how far the observed patterns are genre-driven; identify the lexical governors and clause types that most strongly condition subjunctive selection; and extend the comparison diachronically and across additional Romance languages, such as Portuguese, Romanian, and Catalan.

Any broader generalisation beyond Romance languages must be made with caution, as mood and irrealis categories are not encoded uniformly across languages. Even within Indo-European languages, contemporary English, particularly in North America, has a highly restricted spoken subjunctive (Kastronic & Poplack, 2021). Outside Indo-European languages, Mandarin commonly uses sentence-final particles to mark clause type and speaker attitude – *ba*, for instance, mitigates directive force rather than instantiating a Romance style inflectional opposition (Fang, 2021). Turkish, by contrast, integrates commitment and evidence in verbal morphology, with evidential marking such as *-miş* affecting how strongly a speaker stands behind a proposition (Şener, 2011). This paper should therefore be read as a Romance-specific account of how grammar and persuasion interact rather than as a universal model of political speech.

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