Uses of the Optative Mood

The optative is the mood of strong contingency. Like the subjunctive it is the mood of possibility, but the optative expresses a wish or a desire. The word optative comes to the English from the Latin optātīvus meaning “chosen [a wish].”

Optative of wish or prayer. The optative is the common usage of the verb for expressing a wish. An example is Rom. 3:3-4: τι γὰρ ἐὰν ἤπεισης τινες τινί, μὴ ἣ ἄπιστα αὐτῶν τὴν πίστιν τοῦ θεοῦ καταργήσεις μη γενοῖτο. γινεῖσθαι δὲ ὁ θεὸς ἁλλῆθης, πας δὲ ἄθρωπος γενοῖται, ὁπως αὖ δικαιωθῆς ἐν τοῖς λόγοις σου καὶ νικησι γενοῖται ἐν τῷ κρίνουσθαι σε. (For what if some did not believe? Will their unbelief make the faithfulness of God without effect? May it never be! Indeed, let God be true but every man a liar. As it is written: “That you may be justified in your words, and may overcome when you are judged.” ). An example of a prayer is found in 1 Thes. 3:11: Αὐτὸς δὲ ὁ θεὸς καὶ πατὴρ ἡμῶν καὶ ὁ κυρίος ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦς κατευθύναι τὴν ὀδὸν ἡμῶν πρὸς ὑμᾶς (Now may our God and Father Himself, and our Lord Jesus Christ, direct our way to you.).

Optative of deliberation. The optative is often used in questions where the speaker is pondering the meaning of a thing. An example is Luke 1:29: ἡ δὲ ἐπὶ τῷ λόγῳ διεταραχθη καὶ διελογίζετο ποταπος εὑρ ὁ ἀσπασίμος οὐτος. (But when she saw [him], she was troubled at his saying, and considered what manner of greeting this might be).

Optative of possibility. At times, the optative is used in conditional sentences to express a consequence in the future of an unlikely condition, as Dr. Wallace says, “If he could do something, he would do this.” An example is Acts 17:18: τινες δὲ καὶ τῶν Ἐπικουρείων καὶ Στοικῶν φιλοσόφων συνεβάλλον αὐτῷ, καὶ τινες ἔλεγον, Τι ἁν θελοι ὁ σπερμιολογος οὗτος λεγειν οὐ δὲ, ἔννοιν διαμινον δοκει καταγγέλειν εναι, ὅτι τὸν Ἰησοῦν καὶ τὴν ἀνάστασιν εὐχαριστεῖτο. (Then certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers encountered him. And some said, “What would he wish to say?” Others said, “He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign gods,” because he preached to them Jesus and the resurrection.) Drs. Dana & Mantey write, “Expressed fully the example would read, What would he wish to say, if he could say anything? These optatives occur as the fulfillment of a condition which is implied, and in the great majority of instances we can supply from the context the implied condition.”

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1 Wallace, p. 484
2 Dana & Mantey, p. 174