Episode 086 – Grammar

Subordinate clauses with "ob"

Subordinate clauses are dependent upon an independent clause or another superordinate depedent clause. They cannot stand on their own. Often they begin with words (subordinating conjunctions, relative pronouns or question words) that connect them to the independent or superordinate clause.

"ob" is one such conjunction that introduces a subordinate clause. Subordinate clauses with "ob" have the same meaning as an indirect yes-no question.

Examples:
Ja/Nein-Frage: *Gibt es hier ein Orakel?*
Subordinate clause with "ob": *Können Sie uns sagen, **ob** es hier ein Orakel gibt?*

There are certain expressions that permit constructions like these, especially verbs that express questioning, pondering, doubt or uncertainty.

Examples:

*Ich **weiß nicht,***	
*Ich **überlege,***	*ob es hier ein Orakel gibt.*
*Ich **bin nicht sicher,***	
*Ich **frage** den Pfarrer,*	

Subordinate clauses with "ob" can serve as the subject or object in a main clause. In other words, they belong to the sub-group of subject and object clauses. They answer the same questions that apply to subjects and objects. You can tell whether a clause is a subject clause or an object clause by the fact that the superordinate clause would be incomplete without it.

Examples:

object
↓

*Können Sie uns **etwas** sagen?*

object clause

*Können Sie uns sagen, **ob** es hier ein Orakel gibt?*

subject
↓

***Das Finden** des Orakels ist nicht sicher.*

subject clause

*Es ist nicht sicher, **ob** wir das Orakel finden.*

More:

Comparison of "ob" clauses

"ob" clauses are grammatically similar to "dass" clauses and object clauses with question words. But there are some key differences.

1. "ob" clauses represent yes-no questions while object clauses with question words represent questions with "W" question words.

Examples:
Yes-no question: *Gibt es hier ein Orakel?*
Subordinate clause with "ob": *Können Sie uns sagen,* **ob** *es hier ein Orakel gibt?*
Interrogative "W" word: *Wo ist das Orakel?*
Subordinate clause with a question word: *Können Sie uns sagen,* **wo** *das Orakel ist?*

2. Use the conjunction "dass" when you know or (don't) want something or when you are certain that your assertion is correct. Use "ob" to ask about things that are unknown or when you are uncertain of your assertion.

Examples:
Dass-Satz: *Ich weiß/bin sicher,* **dass** *es hier ein Orakel gibt.*
Ob-Satz: *Ich bin nicht sicher,* **ob** *es hier ein Orakel gibt.*

Some verbs can accommodate both "dass" and "ob" clauses. Then the difference in meaning is essential.

Examples:
"dass" clause: *Der Pfarrer sagt uns,* **dass** *es ein Orakel gibt.* (= The pastor is sure that an oracle exists. So this sentence tells us that there is an oracle and that the pastor believes it is real.)
"ob" clause: *Der Pfarrer sagt uns,* **ob** *es hier ein Orakel gibt.* (= We still don't know for sure whether an oracle exists. The pastor will tell us whether it exists or not.)