The Subjunctive in Present-day English: Revival or Demise?

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Abstract

The paper reviews and illustrates the uses of the subjunctive in BrE and AmE. Bevier (1931: 2017) argued that the subjunctive is a 'disappearing feature of the English language'; Foster (1968: 220) remarks that 'the subjunctive mood of the verb is a rather feeble and restricted device in modern English' and Harsh (1968:89) concludes that the 'inflected subjunctive forms decline to the point of non-existence in present-day English'. According to Givón (1993: 274), towards the end of the twentieth century 'the old grammatical category of subjunctive has almost disappeared'. More recently, Peters (2004: 520) concluded that the 'subjunctive is a pale shadow of what it used to be'. The aim of this paper is to investigate recent changes in the use of the subjunctive mood, an inflectional category of the verb. The empirical data reported in this paper show that AmE is leading world English in the revival of the mandative subjunctive. The paper also focuses on the variation between the were-subjunctive and the indicative in the subordinate clause of a conditional sentence. The use of would + be instead of the were-subjunctive in counterfactual if-clauses is largely confined to informal, spoken English. In AmE this use is met with strong prescriptive reaction, one side-effect being a tendency towards a hypercorrect use of were in non-counterfactuals.

Key Words*: formulaic subjunctive, if-clause, irrealis, mandative subjunctive, revival.*

1. Preliminary remarks

Semantically, the subjunctive mood is closely related to modal auxiliaries. Like some modals, the subjunctive in English can be used to express obligation or necessity. In *if*-clauses it can express 'irrealis', similar to the use of such modals as *could* and *might*.

(1) He said that the papers *be*/*must be*/*should be* handed in by the end of the week.

These semantically interrelated verbal categories, mood and modal auxiliaries, have been extensively studied in both synchronic and diachronic studies. Bevier (1931: 207) argues that the subjunctive is a "disappearing feature of the English language"; Foster (1968: 220) remarks that "the subjunctive mood of the verb is a rather feeble and restricted device in modern English". On the basis of his empirical data, Harsh (1968: 98) reaches a similar conclusion when saying that "the inflected subjunctive forms decline to the point of non-existence in present-day English". Towards the end of the twentieth century, Givon (1993: 274) points out that "the old grammatical category of subjunctive has almost disappeared". In a more recent study Peters (2004: 520) remarks that "the subjunctive is a pale shadow of what it used to be".

2. Forms of the subjunctive

Before making definitive statements about the death of the subjunctive in present-day English, a distinction should be made between "the paradigmatic poverty" of the English subjunctive and its use (Leech et al. 2009). By "paradigmatic poverty" should be understood the fact that English, which had a fully fledged subjunctive that was formally distinct from most person/number/tense combinations in Old English (Mitchell and Robinson, 1992: 43ff. and 51), has been reduced to

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remnants of the paradigm in the base form of the verb for all persons and numbers, the verb *be* in its bare form and the past subjunctive form *were* in the first- and third- person singular. Consider the sentences in (2):

(2) a. When he called again, demanding that she *sing* him his favourite song, … [F-LOBK 23]
b. Both cases demand that people as individuals … *be* judged fit … [Frown B02]
c. If the truth *be* told, … [Frown D10]
d. If this argument *be* right, … [F-LOBJ49]
e. The oriental girl wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, but delicately, as if this *were* the proper thing to do, … [F-LOBN11]
f. And if I *weren't* such a workaholic, …, I wonder what eventually might have happened. [FrownP20]

The sentences in (2) above show that **the present subjunctive** is expressed by the base form of the verb (example 2a). For the verb *be*, the subjunctive form *be* is distinct from the indicative forms *am, is, are* (examples 2b – d). For the other verbs, the subjunctive is distinctive only in the 3rd person singular.

(3) a. I insist that we *reconsider* the Council's decisions – indicative or subjunctive
b. I insist that the Council reconsider its decisions – subjunctive
c. I insist that the Council's decision be reconsidered – subjunctive

The past subjunctive (or **were**-subjunctive) survives only in *were* as a past form of *be* (examples 2e and 2f). The past subjunctive is distinguishable from the past indicative of be only in the 1st and 3rd persons singular.

(3) a. If she *was* there, you would have heard about it – indicative
b. If she *were* there, you would have heard about it – subjunctive

The indicative *was* is more common in less formal style. Only *were* is acceptable in *as it were* ('so to speak'). *Were* is usual in *if I were you*.

Negation of the present subjunctive does not require an operator.

(4) I insist that we *not reconsider* the Council's decision.

3. Uses of the subjunctive

As far as the use of the present subjunctive is concerned, a distinction should be made between **formulaic** or optative subjunctive and **mandative** subjunctive. Formulaic subjunctive survives in a few fossilized contexts such as the set expressions in (5):

(5) a. God *save* the Queen!
b. Long *live* the King!
c. *Come* what may
d. *Be* that as it may….
e. Heaven *forbid* that….

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f. *Suffice* it to say that…..
g. If need *be* …

or in subordinate clauses introduced by *lest*.

(6) a. He paused, afraid lest he say too much.
b. She pulled away from the window lest anyone see her.

The **mandative subjunctive** is used in a *that*-clause after an expression of such notions as demand, recommendation, proposal, intention (e.g. *we insist*/*prefer*/*request that*…; *it is necessary*/*desirable*/*imperative that*…..; *the decision*/*requirement*/*resolution that*….). This use is more characteristic of AmE that BrE. In BrE the alternatives are putative *should* and the indicative.

(7) a. The employees demanded that he *resign* – subjunctive
b. The employees demanded that he *should resign* – putative should
c. The employees demanded that he *resigns* – indicative

Research has shown, however, that present subjunctive is on the increase again in subordinate clauses following mandative or 'suasive' expressions such as *important* or *demand* (Övergaard 1995 and Hundt 1998). This is a development in which written and spoken AmE is leading world English.

As far as other uses of subjunctive are concerned, patterns seem to have stabilized at a low level. The past subjunctive, which is hypothetical in meaning, is used in conditional and concessive clauses and in subordinate clauses after *wish, suppose.*

(8) a. I wish the journey *were* over.
b. If I *were* a rich man, I would….
c. Just suppose everyone *were* to act like you.

Quirk et al. (1985: 158) regard the *were*- subjunctive as "something of a fossil". The *were*-subjunctive is often replaced by the indicative *was* in less formal style.

4. The revival of mandative subjunctive

Research on the diachronic development of constructions following such mandative expressions as *demand, require* or *insist* have identified two trends: (i) the use of periphrastic constructions with *should* is less frequent in AmE than in BrE; (ii) AmE has been found to be leading World English in a revival of the mandative subjunctive (Peters 1998, Hundt 1998).

The analysis of the empirical data has identified the most common suasive verbs and related nouns and adjectives that co-occur with the mandative subjunctive. The set of verbs include *advise, ask, beg, demand, desire, direct, insist, move, order, propose, recommend, request, require, stipulate, suggest, urge* and *wish*. The related nouns were *demand, desire, proposal, recommendation, request, requirement, suggestion* and *wish*. The set of adjectives includes *anxious, essential, important, necessary* and *sufficient.* In Crawford's (2009: 263) study, verbs are shown to be stronger triggers than nouns, which, in turn, are stronger triggers than adjectives. His study, based on the newspaper section of the Longman corpus (including approximately 5.5

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million words each of American and British data), provides interesting details on language-internal lexical variation. His analysis of the data has shown that 'weaker triggers have greater variation'. Moreover, his evidence suggests 'a direction of change where the subjunctive has made its way into BrE in the strongest triggers'. Schlüter (2009), in a longitudinal study of American and British English, has shown that the mandative subjunctive has also been spreading after the conjunction *(up)on (the) condition (that).* As a syntactic variant, the periphrastic construction with *should* was chosen. The indicative (e.g. I recommend that she uses fewer passives) was another variant that was revealed as an alternative only in BrE.

In many cases, English verb phrases show formal syncretism between the indicative and the subjunctive. The sentences in (9) are formally ambiguous between the indicative and the subjunctive.

(9) a. It is important that they *leave* on time
b. If they *were* here I would not have to go upstairs again

It can be argued that sentences like the ones in (9) are 'neutral' with respect to the category of mood. With a past tense verb in the matrix clause, however, the base form following a plural pronoun is interpreted as a subjunctive in empirical research studying the distribution and frequency of the English subjunctive.

(10) He insisted that they *go*.

Similarly, negative verb phrases lacking the operator do are interpreted as subjunctive, as illustrated in sentence (11) below:

(11) I ask that they *not leave*.

After a marked increase in the use of the subjunctive in AmE in the first half of the twentieth century, its spread has been slowing down. In the 1960s, a saturation point was reached in written AmE, with almost 90% subjunctives in mandative contexts (Övergaard 1995). The analysis of the British corpora shows a significant increase in subjunctives and a concomitant decrease of the periphrastic construction. The expanding use of mandative subjunctive in BrE is not quite as dramatic as that reported in Övergaard (1995: 16): she found 14 occurrences of the periphrastic variant with *should* in her British data for 1990, but 44 occurrences of the subjunctive. In the F-LOB data, on the other hand, the subjunctives are still less frequent than the periphrastic variant, which is not 'losing ground at an accelerating speed', as Övergaard (1995: 31) finds on the basis of her data.

A stratified corpus of written English registers is more likely to be conservative since it shows a higher proportion of the periphrastic construction *with should* as compared with elicitation data. The empirical data show BrE as more innovative with respect to the subjunctive option which is largely perceived as the more "correct" option presumably due to its higher level of formality. A comparison between AmE and BrE corpora[1] shows that BrE has not yet caught up with AmE in

[1] The quantitative analysis reported in this paper is based on the following corpora, unless otherwise indicated: **LOB** (the Lancaster–Oslo/Bergen corpus of British English, 1961); **F-LOB** (the Freiburg–Lancaster–Oslo/Bergen corpus of British English, 1991); **Brown** (the Brown corpus of American English, 1961); **Frown** (the Freiburg–Brown corpus

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the use of mandative subjunctive. Johansson and Norheim (1988:28) report only one occurrence of the indicative in the LOB data. The examples in (12 - 15) illustrate this pattern:

(12) In the testing of Rh negative women antenatally, for instance, it is *recommended that* the [. . .] techniques *are used* in parallel. [LOB J 13]
(13) May I venture to *suggest that* when the Minister of Works investigates the microphones, he *considers* not only new microphones but the possibility of reverting to the pre-war practice of not having microphones . . . ? [LOB H19]
(14) . . . and it is *essential that* the ripening *is stopped* at the correct degree of acidity, and the temperature subsequently reduced quickly and evenly. [LOB E33]
(15) . . . for plane frameworks it is merely *necessary that* they *are made* of material which obeys Hooke's Law of linear elasticity, to a chosen layout scale. [LOB J76]

F-LOB data show the indicative is a low-frequency option, below the 25% level that Turner (1980) observed in his elicitation data. Greenbaum and Whitcut (1988: 684) point out that the subjunctive or periphrastic *should* are preferred over the indicative in formal written discourse. Apparently, in BrE the indicative is more frequently used in informal spoken contexts than in written contexts. Hundt (1988) reports 167 subjunctives (28.5%), 228 periphrastic constructions with *should* (38.9%) and a substantial 191 occurrences (32.6%) of indicatives in the 10-million-word spoken subcorpus of the BNC. The examples in (16 – 18) are taken from naturally occurring conversation in BrE:

(16) it is very *important that* nobody *takes* anything off the shelf automatically. . . [BNC, KD8 7846]
(17) I *suggested that* Jack *goes* in [BNC, KB8 9899]
(18) then today I've had a letter from an architect friend in America *suggesting* he *gets* in touch with an architect in <unclear> for another job . . . [BNC, KCo 4207]

The pattern is confirmed by Quirk and Rusiecki's (1982) study. Empirical data show that Spoken BrE does not appear to undergo a substantial change towards a consistent use of the mandative subjunctive. The locus of change for the mandative subjunctive in BrE is primarily the written language.

According to Algeo (1992: 611), a consistent use of the indicative following suasive expressions is a idiosyncratic feature of BrE. Indicative forms are not attested in Brown and Frown, and even the approximately five million words of the LCSAE yield only the following example:

(19) They require that all their teachers *are* there at seven fifteen. [LCSAE 161602]

4.1 The mandative subjunctive and the level of formality

(American English, 1992). The web addresses of these two corpus resource agencies are as follows: http://icame.uib.no/ and http://ota.ahds.ac.uk/.

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Various grammarians have commented on the formal character of the mandative subjunctive. Jespersen (1924: 318), among others, claims that its revival is 'literary'; Quirk *et al.* (1985: 157) mention that it is 'formal and rather legalistic in style'. Johansson and Norheim (1988: 30) provide empirical data that confirm previous statements on the formal nature of the madative subjunctive, at least in BrE: 'All the examples except one occur in the categories of informative prose of the LOB corpus.' **Table 1** shows the distribution of mandative subjunctives across various categories of written texts in both AmE and BrE. The empirical data show that BrE is approaching the more even distribution found in the Brown and Frown corpora.

Subcorpora	Brown	Frown	LOB	F-LOB
Press	27 (151)	19 (107)	3 (17)	5 (28)
Gen.Prose (D - G)	50 (140)	29 (82)	5 (14)	15 (43)
Miscellaneous (H)	13 (208)	14 (232)	2 (33)	7 (117)
Academic prose (J)	14 (86)	15 (94)	3 (19)	14 (87)
Fiction (K - R)	13 (51)	28 (111)	1 (4)	8 (31)
TOTAL	117 (115)	105 (104)	14 (14)	49 (49)

Table 1. *Distribution of mandative subjunctives across text categories (figures in brackets give the frequency per million words)*

In both BrE and AmE, administrative texts (category H) are the most likely source of mandative subjunctives, as expected. Academic prose (category J) is the text category in which BrE has caught up with AmE. It has been suggested that the more even spread across genres in F-LOB indicates that the mandative subjunctive is beginning to lose its former stylistic connotations in BrE.

In BrE, the mandative subjunctive has become more frequent in all types of written texts sampled in the corpus. In AmE, this is not the case, and this has to be attributed to the fact that – despite an increase in the relative frequency of the mandative subjunctive against the periphrastic construction with *should* – the overall frequency of the subjunctive has decreased from Brown to Frown. This decrease has not affected all genres in the same way: the mandative subjunctive has become less frequent in Press and General Prose, but it has increased slightly in administrative writing, academic prose and most substantially in fiction.

The analysis of the data in LOB shows that the majority of mandative subjunctives co-occur with the passive. This is not the case for the Brown corpus, however, where a more even distribution of active and passive subjunctives can be found. Johansson and Norheim (1988) interpret this as further proof of the formal nature of the mandative subjunctive in BrE. The increase in the use of mandative subjunctives in BrE goes hand in hand with an increase in active subjunctives, resulting in a more even distribution of active and passive subjunctives in F-LOB than in LOB, as shown in **Table 2.** This can be taken as evidence that the subjunctive in BrE is indeed losing its formal connotations. In Frown corpus, active subjunctives outnumber passive subjunctives.

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	LOB	F-LOB	Brown	Frown
subjunctive	3 : 11	25 : 24	54 : 63	66 : 39
should-periphrasis	69 : 37	30 : 49	15 : 7	6 : 4

Table 2. Mandative subjunctive and periphrastic constructions: active vs. passive VPs

Passive subjunctives are particularly frequent in the Press section, i.e. in categories of text which are most affected by the colloquial style.

(20) Both cases *demand that* people as individuals, not as part of arbitrary classifications, *be judged* fit – or not – to contribute to the welfare of children. [Frown B02]
(21) 'Conditions have *dictated that* operations *be scaled* down [. . .]' [F-LOB A38]
(22) The political parties are now disintegrating into ethnic or other groups that rightly *demand* they no longer *be mulcted* by a graft from the centre, [. . .] [F-LOB B12]

In sentence (22) the subordinating conjunction *that* has been omitted, this is another marker of informality. In general, *that*-omission in mandative sentences occurs more often in spoken than in written discourse. In F-LOB corpus, only slightly over 8% of the mandative sentences show deletion of the subordinating conjunction (Hundt 1998: 168). Hoffmann (1997: 7), in his analysis of *be*-subjunctives, found *that*-deletion in 19% of the mandative sentences taken from the spoken BNC. Data from AmE spoken corpora provide further evidence that supports the hypothesis that the mandative subjunctive is losing its former formal connotations (see **Table 2**).

5. The *were*-subjunctive

While there is a wealth of research on the mandative subjunctive, the development of the *were*-subjunctive in the second half of the twentieth century has been scarcely documented so far. Biber *et al.*' s (1999) corpus-based grammar mentions the past subjunctive cursorily. This section focuses on the variation between the past subjunctive *were* and the indicative form *was* in the subordinate clause of conditional and concessive sentences. The sentences in (23) illustrate the use of the *were*-subjunctive in such contexts:

(23) a. If cancer *were* to start in one liver cell in each animal and proliferate at the same rate of speed, which animal would be the first to die? [Frown J31]
b. The best thing we can do is to behave as if nothing *were* further from our thoughts. [F-LOB P10]
c. I looked at him as though he *were* speaking Swahili to someone else and went about my business. [Frown R01]

Johansson and Norheim's (1988) corpus-based revealed that, in both BrE and AmE the *were*-subjunctive was preferred to the indicative in hypothetical conditionals. The *were*-subjunctive was shown to be more frequent in LOB, but relative frequencies of subjunctive *were* and indicative *was* suggest that AmE is the more conservative variety.

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Peters (1998) provides empirical data from the Australian Corpus of English compiled in the mid-1980s. Her analysis of the data indicates that there might be a "substantial shift away from the use of *were* subjunctives, in favour of indicative *was* and a wide range of modal paraphrases" (Peters 1998: 100) and that "in Australia the use of the *were* subjunctive is stiffening into a formulaic *if x were* [. . .]" (Peters 1998: 101).

Regarding the ongoing change and regional variation in the use of the *were*- subjunctive in AmE and BrE, additional evidence from Frown and F-LOB corpora can be added the existing body of evidence.

Empirical data indicate that the *were*-subjunctive has decreased in frequency in twentieth-century English. This tendency turns out to be more advanced in BrE than in AmE. AmE, on the other hand, might be the leading variety in a growing change to *would* in counterfactual *if*-clauses (Leech et al. 2009).

Table 3 gives the overall results of the comparison between BrE and AmE corpora. The empirical data show a decrease in the use of the *were*-subjunctive in BrE over the thirty-year period between LOB and F-LOB. In present-day BrE the past subjunctive is used with about the same frequency as the indicative. AmE, on the other hand, is lagging behind in this development. In the 1990s, the American corpus does not even have the same proportion of *were*-subjunctives and indicatives found in the 1960s British corpus. The overall figures in Table 3 show that the raw frequency of subjunctive *were* in *if*-clauses is now higher in AmE than in BrE.

	LOB *were* : *was*	F-LOB *were* : *was*	Brown *were* : *was*	Frown *were* : *was*
as if	33 : 15	19 : 19	35 : 8	32 : 8
as though	22 : 9	13 : 9	19 : 1	9 : 3
even if	7 : 10	2 : 6	3 : 4	4 : 4
if	64 : 38	46 : 40	56 : 28	53 : 20
TOTAL	126 : 72	80 : 74	113 : 41	98 : 35

Tabel 3 Subjunctive *were* vs indicative *was* in hypothetical/unreal conditional constructions (based on Johansson and Norheim 1988; Leech et al. 2009)

Even though the past tense form of the indicative tends to be replacing the *were*-subjunctive in hypothetical conditional clause, the elicited data shows that its remaining uses are not restricted to fixed phrases like *If I were you*.

In some examples from LCSAE the modal auxiliary *would* is used instead of the *were*-subjunctive in counterfactual *if*-clauses in AmE, as shown in (24).

(24) a. And if everybody would be nice we wouldn't need policemen [LCSAE 124301]
b. Yes if you would be willing to do it for us. You'd be volunteering for something you may not want to do. [LCSAE 161501]
c. If Oprah Winfrey would be my teacher, I'll listen to her you know. [LCSAE 141401]
d. If that would be a good alternative, I would have to bill at that point. [LCSAE 125202]
e. . . . if you would be willing to give her money from your organization account or whatever then she would appreciate it I'm sure . . . [LCSAE 11960]

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Out of the 64 occurrences of *would* in the LCSAE, however, only 10 would require subjunctive *were* or indicative *was*. The remainder are instances of indirect questions where *if* was used instead of *whether*, thus ruling out the subjunctive or the indicative *was*.

(25) a. . . . didn't know if Cassie would be able to get up there or not. [LCSAE 152101]
b. And so I didn't know if it would be that much difference. [LCSAE 125203]
c. I was wondering if Mr . . . would be available for me to come over and have some forms signed? [LCSAE 15610]

It can safely argued that these rather frequent instances of *would* in direct clauses might eventually pave the way for a more widespread use of *would* in counterfactual *if*-clauses. However, empirical data available so far indicate that *would* is not a frequently used alternative for subjunctive *were* in counterfactual *if*-clauses, even in spoken AmE.

One might suspect that the *were*-subjunctive, on its retreat, becomes a more specialized formal option in written Standard English and would frequently co-occur with other formal constructions (such as the passive). However, this is not the case. The hypothesis that the past subjunctive occurs predominantly in formal text categories is not supported by empirical data. As far as the passive is concerned, the data from F-LOB and Frown do not indicate a preference for co-occurrence: only 15 of the 80 *were*-subjunctives in F-LOB were passives and 9 of the 98 in Frown. This is in contrast with the mandative subjunctive which tends to favour the passive voice. Moreover, w*ere*-subjunctives are relatively frequent in genres open to colloquial usages, as proven by the Fiction subcorpus of both F-LOB and Frown (see **Table 4**).

	Press	General Prose	Official and Academic	Fiction	Total
F-LOB	6 (33)	25 (71)	17 (77)	32 (124)	80
Frown	14 (78)	23 (65)	11 (50)	50 (194)	98

Table 4 Distribution of were-subjunctives across text types (figures per million words are given in brackets)

To sum up, the data from the corpora under discussion (Brown, Frown, LOB and F-LOB) confirm that the *were*-subjunctive is losing ground in conditional and concessive clauses. AmE turns out to be the conservative variety in this ongoing change while BrE is more advanced.

6. Concluding remarks

As far as long-term developments are concerned, Traugott (1972: 148) and Blake (1996: 222) argue that modal auxiliaries (especially *should*) tend to replace the mandative subjunctive; Denison (1998:160), however, points out that the indicative is an alternative variant to the modal periphrastic constructions.

Leech et al. (2009) have shown that the mandative subjunctive is in the process of replacing periphrastic constructions with *should*. This tendency towards an increased use of the mandative subjunctive is more obvious in AmE than in BrE. With respect to absolute frequencies, the mandative subjunctive is still more common in written than in spoken discourse.

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The indicative form is a syntactic Briticism in mandative contexts. It has low frequency option in formal written English but it is a viable alternative to the mandative subjunctive in spoken and informal written BrE (Leech et al. 2009).

Unlike the mandative subjunctive, the *were*-subjunctive in counterfactual *if*-clauses is a recessive feature of standard written English.[2] It tends to be replaced by the past indicative form was in counterfactual *if*-clauses. *Would + be* instead of subjunctive *were* in counterfactual *if*-clauses is scarce and confined to informal, spoken English.

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[2] Grund and Walker's (2006) study of nineteenth-century English supports the direction of change towards the indicative rather than modal periphrastic forms.

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