The Subjunctive in Spoken British English

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Questions to be addressed

• Is the subjunctive undergoing a revival in spoken English as is said to be the case in written English?

• Is the indicative a real alternative to the mandative subjunctive in spoken British English?

• Does the were subjunctive only survive in “fixed formulas” such as *if I were you*, as is said to be the case by Jespersen (1931)?
The Diachronic Corpus of Present-Day Spoken English

- Contains only spoken English.
- 400,000 words London-Lund (late 1950s-late 1970s).
- 400,000 words ICE-GB (early 1990s).
- Tagged and parsed.
Figure 1. The grammatical analysis of the sentence *I started it* in DCPSE. PU= Parsing Unit, SU = Subject, VB = Verbal, MVB = Main verb, OD = Direct Object, NPHD = Noun Phrase Head, PRON = Pronoun.
Figure 2. FTF which retrieves subjunctive clauses from the corpus.
Formulaic subjunctives

• Johansson and Norheim (1988: 31): Brown and LOB “contain a sprinkling of examples”.
• In DCPSE formulaic subjunctives are fairly uncommon.
• As it were:
  – most common formulaic subjunctive;
  – stable across the thirty year period;
  – most frequent in informal face-to-face conversation.
The *were* subjunctive

- The past subjunctive “survives as a distinguishable form only in the past tense of the verb BE” and is “invariably *were*” (Quirk *et al.* 1985: 155-6).

- Only with 1\(^{st}\) and 3\(^{rd}\) persons are the indicative and subjunctive morphologically distinct.

**e.g.** If I/he/she *were* leaving, you would have heard about it. (subjunctive)
The *were* subjunctive

- Jespersen (1931: 130): “[i]n colloquial English, *were* in the singular hardly survives except in the fixed formula “If I were you” […] but even here “if I was you” is sometimes found”.
- Johansson and Norheim (1988): *were* subjunctive is infrequent and when it does occur it is in formal texts and with the verb *be*.
- Leech *et al.* (forthcoming): results indicate a decrease in the *were*-subjunctive in BrE; subjunctive and indicative are used with almost equal frequency.
Figure 3: FTF to retrieve clauses introduced by a subordinator *if* (including *as if, even if*), followed by an NP subject or existential *there* and a verb phrase headed by *were*. 
### Results: *Were* vs. *was*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>LLC frequency</th>
<th>ICE-GB frequency</th>
<th>Change in frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>raw per 100,000</td>
<td>Raw per 100,000</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>were</em></td>
<td>41</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>-54.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>was</em></td>
<td>56</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>+0.30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: A comparison of *was* and *were* in conditional clauses in DCPSE (not statistically significant).
Results: text types

Figure 4: Distribution of the *were* subjunctive across text type in DCPSE.
### Results: informal conversation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Change in frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>raw per 100,000 words</td>
<td>raw per 100,000 words</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>were</td>
<td>19 4.09</td>
<td>3 0.71</td>
<td>-82.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>was</td>
<td>34 7.33</td>
<td>32 7.59</td>
<td>+3.66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Comparison of *was* and *were* in conditional clauses in informal conversations (figures in bold significant at p<0.01).
The mandative subjunctive

• Most common use of the subjunctive in English (Quirk et al. 1985).

• Productive; possible with any verb in a *that*-clause introduced by a superordinate clause expressing demand, recommendation, proposal, etc.

  e.g. Peter came and begged that he be allowed to accept a job at the bottom of the scale.
  (DCPSE:DL-A02 #0259:2:A)
Current change in the mandative subjunctive


• No increase in spoken English, although this is based on a restricted number of triggers (Waller 2005).
The mandative subjunctive in DCPSE

• This study: data from full list of triggers (over 100 compiled from Huddleston and Pullum 2002 and Quirk et al. 1985) using DCPSE.

• Consider variants to the subjunctive:
  – Indicative forms
  – Modal forms
  – Non-distinct forms
Variants

*Subjunctive*: Peter came and begged that he be allowed to accept a job at the bottom of the scale. (DCPSE:DL-A02 #0259:2:A)

*Indicative*: will he ensure that Concorde is not allowed to fly in and out of Heathrow ... (DCPSE:DL-G01 #0127:1:Q)

*Non-distinct*: ... what they will probably come up with is the proposal that we put all of the text in this onto a cassette tape ... (DCPSE:DL-A02 #0359:3:A)

*Modal*: It was obviously important from the very beginning that Eurotra should have a very precise specification ... (DCPSE:DI-I04 #0097:1:A)
## Distribution of variants in DCPSE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variants</th>
<th>LLC frequency</th>
<th>ICE-GB frequency</th>
<th>Change in frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>raw per 100,000 words</td>
<td>raw per 100,000 words</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>subjunctive</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-56.48</td>
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<tr>
<td>indicative</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>+46.91</td>
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<td>should</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>-3.49</td>
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<tr>
<td>other modals</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>-31.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>non-distinct</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>-8.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>total</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>-11.90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Distribution of variants in mandative clauses in DCPSE (not statistically significant).
Figure 5: Variants in mandative clauses as percentages of the total.
References


Hundt, Marianne. 1998. ‘It is important that this study (should) be based on the analysis of parallel corpora: On the use of the mandative subjunctive in four major varieties of English.’ In Lindquist, Hans, Staffan Klintborg, Magnus Levin and Maria Estling (eds.). *The Major Varieties of English* (Papers from MAVEN 97). Växjö: Acta Wexionensia, 159-175.


