

# **On the Development of the Subjunctive from Early Modern English to Present-Day English**

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## **1 Introduction**

The subjunctive in English is a rather controversial topic of grammar, and opinions on the subjunctive were and are varied even today. It was very common in Old English and in Middle English, and although it underwent a so-called revival in the 20th century again, especially in AmE, its use has been in decline since 1600. Today it is usually described as moribund, fossilized and almost extinct.

It is a common assumption that the most radical changes in the subjunctive took place in Old English and Middle English. In fact, it seems not to have changed significantly since the beginning of Early Modern English. The primary aim of this paper is to explore what impact the period from Early Modern English to Late Modern English had on the development of this rather marginal aspect of Present-Day English. Before outlining it, let us consider briefly the general treatment of the subjunctive by grammarians and what changes the subjunctive underwent in Old English and Middle English.

## **2 The treatment of the subjunctive by grammarians**

The controversial nature of the subjunctive is reflected in the way it is treated by grammarians. The first really influential grammars that could provide insight into the treatment of the subjunctive appeared in the 18th century. The grammarians of this period greatly differed in opinion respecting the form and use of the subjunctive mood. Even the category of mood seemed to be problematic. Most 18th c. grammarians refer to the indicative, imperative, infinitive and subjunctive and some even added the potential or optative as a fifth mood.

Compare the mood system of English found in some 18th c. grammars:

Ash	1775	Ind.	Imp.	Inf.			Pot.
Murray	1795	Ind.	Imp.	Inf.	Subj.		Pot.
Dilworth	1751	Ind.	Imp.	Inf.	Subj.	Opt.	Pot.
Bayly	1758	Ind.	Imp.	Inf.	Subj. (Opt.)		
Johnson	1755	Ind.	Imp.	Inf.	Conj.		Pot.
Lowth	1762	Ind.	Imp.	Inf.	Subj.	Part.	

(Ind. = Indicative, Imp. = Imperative, Inf. = Infinitive, Subj. = Subjunctive, Opt. = Optative, Conj. = Conjunctive, Part. = Participle, Pot. = Potential)

Some 18th c. grammarians deny the existence of a subjunctive form altogether. Ash (1760; 1775) is the best representative of this line of thought. According to Ash, subjunctive is a synonym for the potential mood. In contrast, Johnson (1755), Murray (1795) and Dilworth (1740) regard the potential and the subjunctive as two distinct moods, with Dilworth adding optative and Lowth (1762) participles as a fifth mood. Bayly (1756) uses the terms subjunctive and optative synonymously and Johnson uses the term conjunctive mood, which was interchangeable with subjunctive mood. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the subjunctive in the 18th century was still somewhat of a riddle and the grammarians were not sure of how to deal with it.

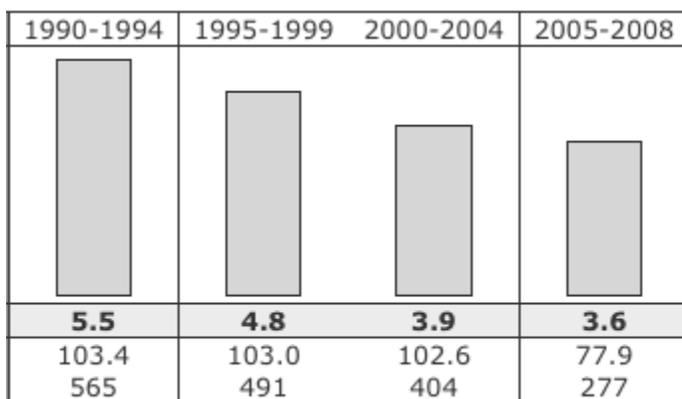
The subjunctive remained a source of dispute among grammarians in the 19th century as well. Gould Brown (1851:33) noted, “It would, perhaps, be better to abolish the use of the subjunctive entirely”. Henry Sweet (1898:109) also observed that the subjunctive is “rapidly falling into disuse – except, of course, in those constructions where it is obligatory in the spoken language”.

Similarly, in the 20th century, Somerset Maugham (1941:257) pointed out that American writers use the subjunctive more than British writers; yet “they are kicking against the pricks; the subjunctive mood is in its death throes, and the best thing to do is to put it out of its misery as soon as possible”.

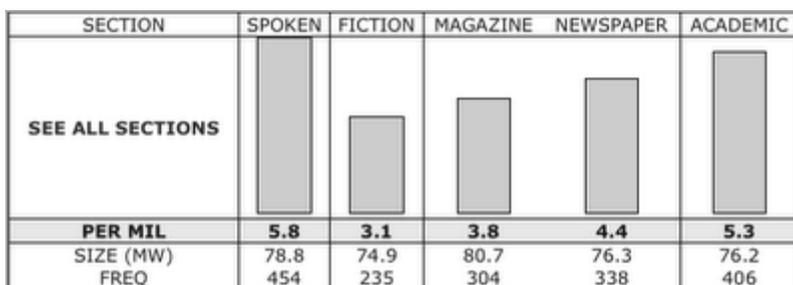
Quirk et al. (1985:155) noted that there are indications that the subjunctive is re-establishing itself in BrE, probably as a result of AmE influence. Nevertheless, especially the mandative subjunctive is more characteristic of AmE than of BrE, where it is formal and rather legalistic in style. In fact, the subjunctive in modern English is generally an optional and stylistically somewhat marked variant of other constructions, but it is not as unimportant as is sometimes suggested.

In fact, in recent years some other grammarians refer to the revival of the subjunctive, especially in AmE. Charles Finney (2000) argues that „the subjunctive mood is a beautiful and valuable component of the English language, and instead of dying out, it actually is enjoying a subtle revival” (Finney 1999–2000).

In contrast, quite recently, Jack English (2009) has pointed out that Finney is wrong as “you can’t show a revival by looking at a single point in time.” To prove this, he examined the occurrence of the subjunctive in COCA (*The Corpus of Contemporary American English*). It is the corpus of contemporary American English, which contains more than 385 million words of text, including 20 million words each year from 1990–2008, equally divided among spoken, fiction, popular magazines, newspapers, and academic texts. As this corpus (The most recent texts are from late 2008) is updated every six to nine months, it serves as a unique record of linguistic changes in American English, and is supposed to give reliable data for the usage of the subjunctive as well. Consider English’s diagram, which shows a drop in the usage of the subjunctive in the last two decades:



Another interesting finding of English is that spoken English appears to be the biggest user of the subjunctive, though academic English isn’t far behind, which challenges the common view that the subjunctive is characteristic of mainly formal style. The author uses the following chart to illustrate this:



On the basis of the evidence above it appears that the subjunctive is really in decline in American English as well.

Whether the subjunctive is dying or reviving, the subjunctive has lost a lot of its importance since Old English. Leaving aside various fixed phrases like *So*

*be it, Long live...*’, etc. the subjunctive of Present-Day English is mainly restricted to various kinds of subordinate clauses, i.e. mandative clauses, conditional clauses and clauses of negative purpose (Quirk et al. 1985:155–158 and Huddleston and Pullum 2002:993). Especially the mandative construction is very much alive, with attested examples like *I would stress that people just be aware of the danger* suggesting that its distribution is increasing (Huddleston and Pullum 2002:1000). In spite of its alleged revival the subjunctive is, however, rather neglected in grammar books and course books. It may be due to that fact that especially in BrE it is often replaced by other constructions. To understand what made the subjunctive a marginal and rather controversial aspect of Present-day English, let us have a brief look at the changes it underwent in the Old English and Middle English period.

### **3 A brief overview of the subjunctive in Old English and Middle English**

As far as its historic development is concerned, it is generally agreed that the inflectional subjunctive experienced a steady decline in the history of English, which began in late OE and went on in Middle English (cf. Traugott 1992:184–185, 239–240 and Fischer 1992:246–248, 349–356). Being extremely common in Old English, the subjunctive mood had special formal, syntactic, and semantic characteristics. Basically it was used to express various modal meanings (e.g. unreality, potentiality, hypothesis, exhortation, wishes, desires, requests, commands, prohibitions and obligation), and was the mood selected by certain conjunctions, mainly in conditional, concessive clauses and clauses of comparison. Besides, the subjunctive was also widely used in reported speech, when the reporter wished to avoid commitment to the truth of what was reported, or wished to cast doubt on it, as is typical in the early Germanic languages.

The subjunctive underwent some basic changes in the Middle English period as well. With the gradual loss of the verbal inflections, the periphrastic construction gained ground rapidly (*sholde, shal, wil, may, can*). Another significant change that had an impact on the development of the subjunctive was that the past tense indicative began to be used as a modal marker, the so-called modal preterite. Furthermore, in dependent clauses, such as concessive clauses or clauses of comparison the subjunctive began to be replaced by the indicative or sometimes the indicative and subjunctive were found side by side within the same sentence. However, the subjunctive still occurred regularly in object clauses where the subjunctive mood gave the activity expressed in the verb a certain modal colouring. In independent clauses, the present subjunctive still expressed wish or exhortation.

### **4 The subjunctive in Early Modern English (1476–1776)**

As noted by Rissanen (1999:210), the Early Modern English period, particularly the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, witnessed developments that resulted

in the establishment of the Present-Day English verbal system. The subjunctive and the modal auxiliaries are among the most noticeable.

Owing to the loss of inflectional endings, in Early Modern English distinctive subjunctive forms are restricted to the verb *be* and to the second and third person singular of non-auxiliary verbs (*thou lovest/love, he loves (loveth)/love; thou lovedst/loved*). It was probably the main reason for the replacement of the subjunctive forms by auxiliary periphrasis, which was supported by the general trend towards analytic constructions.

As far as modality is concerned, in main clauses the present subjunctive expressed a realisable wish (optative subjunctive), which is largely restricted to formulaic contexts, such as *God forgive him, Lord help our understandings, Heaven grant, God save, Long live*, etc., but also in less formulaic wishes (Rissanen 1999:228–229):

- (1) Come on, (poor Babe): Some powerful Spirit *instruct* the Kites and Rauens To be thy Nurses! (Shakespeare *Winter's Tale* II.iii)

Besides, the present subjunctive also expresses exhortation (hortative or mandative), for example:

- (2) Who hateth him and honors not his Father... *Shake* he his weapon at vs, and *pass* by. (Shakespeare *Henry VI* IV.vii)

However, the optative subjunctive is often replaced by periphrasis with *may* and the hortative subjunctive with *let*:

- (3) 'A god *rewarde* you', quoth this rouge, 'and in heauen *may* you *finde* it.' (Harman 39)

*Let* him *love* his wife even as himself: That's his Duty. (Jeremy Taylor 24)

Of these two periphrases, the one replacing hortative subjunctive seems to develop more rapidly, while the optative periphrasis is less common than the subjunctive.

As for the 'preterite subjunctive' (or modal preterite), the form *were* (and *had* in some phrases) seems to resist best the replacement by auxiliary periphrasis. In clauses indicating wish, preterite or pluperfect subjunctive can mainly be found in exclamations (Rissanen 1999:229–231):

- (4) O that I *knew* where I might find him. (Addison *Spectator* No. 565: IV 532)

*Were* and *had* with a personal subject occur with *as good or better/best*:

- (5) I *were* better to be married of him then of another. (Shakespeare *As You Like It* III.iii)

If you follow this advice, you *had* best wrap some broad leaves ... about the stock. (Langford 38)

The preterite or pluperfect subjunctive is fairly common in the apodosis, i.e. the main clause in a conditional sentence:

- (6) I *were* a verie vnworthy man to hold that place... if I were to be touched in that sorte. (Essex 16)

The periphrasis with *should/would* is, however, more common than the preterite or pluperfect. The use of the pluperfect subjunctive in the apodosis is particularly common when the protasis (the subordinate conditional clause) has inverted word order instead of the *if*-link:

- (7) *Had* not such a peece of Flesh *been ordayned*, what *had* vs Wiues *been* good for? (Middleton 1)

Due to the modally marked character of the subjunctive forms, it is natural that they occur in nominal clauses indicating wish, request, exhortation, doubt, etc. In reported speech, the subjunctive forms are also common, particularly in contexts in which uncertainty (question, assumption, etc.) is indicated.

As in main clauses, subjunctive forms vary with auxiliary periphrasis in subordinate object clauses (Rissanen 1999:285–286):

- (8) I do intreat you, not a man *depart*, Saue I alone. (Shakespeare *Julius Caesar* III.ii)

I doubt he *be* not well that hee comes not home. (Shakespeare *Merry Wives of Windsor* I.iv)

While in Middle English the typical auxiliary is *shall/should*, in Early Modern English *will/would* gains ground; *may/might* is used in expressions of uncertain wish or expectation:

- (9) I began to think, How if one of the Bells *should* fall? (Bunyan *Grace* 33)

Than the provost was in doubt of hym, that he *wolde* in the nyght tyme come and overron the cytie of Parys. (Berners *Froissart* 1 405)  
and thereupon I made sute that Edward Wyat *might* either be brought face to face to me, or otherwise be examined. (Throckmorton 68 Ci)

Similarly, the mood of the final clauses is mostly expressed by subjunctive forms or by modal periphrasis with *may/might*, *shall/should* and *will/would* (Rissanen 1999:304–305):

- (10) that we orderyne at the portes and havens of Englande suche provysyon and defence that our countrey *receive* no blame (Berners *Froissart* 4 314)

Final clauses were introduced by the conjunction *that*, which was often preceded by elements making the indication of purpose more obvious, such as *so*, *to the intent/end* and *in order*. There was an alteration between the subjunctive and the auxiliary verbs *may/might*:

- (11) To do this *to the end that they may* oft-times reade over these...  
(Brinsley 46)

*In order... that* the Resemblance in the Ideas *be* Wit, it is necessary...  
(Addison *Spectator* No. 62 1 264)

In negative clauses of purpose *lest* is used if the intention or purpose to prevent or guard against something is expressed:

- (12) which I denied, *lest* they should so recouer the swords... (Covert 17)

The subjunctive forms predominate in conditional clauses indicating hypothetical or rejected condition, where auxiliary periphrasis also occurs. In non-introduced conditional or concessive clauses (with inversion) the subjunctive or auxiliary periphrasis is the rule (Rissanen 1999:308–309):

- (13) and if euer it *came* soo to/ that he shulde resygne his Kyngelye mageste /he sayde his mynde was to resygne to the Duke of Herforde (Fabian 168V Ci)

If he *should* nowe *take* any thinge of them, he knewe, he said, he should do them greate wronge... (Roper 41)

*Would* I haue my flesh Torne by the publike hooke, these qualified hangmen Should be my company. (Ben Johnson *Sejanus* II.iii)

Furthermore, the subjunctive or a modal auxiliary is used in conditional clauses of comparison introduced by the conjunction *as if* and *as though* as well. A special case of the use of *as* in clauses of comparison is the combination of *as* with *who/which* in the phrase *as who say/says* 'as if somebody should say', after which the subjunctive or the modal auxiliary *should* varies with the simple indicative form both in Middle English and Early Modern English (Rissanen 1999:317):

- (14) *As who say*, one condition... of the couenant is our vpright and good profession (a1586 *Answer Cartwright* 9)

*As who should sai* it were a very daungerous matter. (1551–6 Robinson, transl. More's *Utopia* 35)

## 5 The subjunctive in late Modern English (1776–Present day)

As pointed out by Denison (1998:92), by 1776 the English language had already undergone most of the syntactic changes which differentiate Present-Day English from Old English and relatively few categorical losses or innovations have occurred in the last two centuries. As evident from the above discussion, the subjunctive was losing importance already from OE onwards. Nevertheless, there have been no substantive changes in it since the end of the 18th century.

In Late Modern English the present subjunctive is morphologically distinct only with *BE* or with 3rd Person Singular of other verbs. Denison (1998:162)

refers to some subtypes of the subjunctive, which are, however, not truly productive. It occurs in expressions of type *God grant that...*, *Long live NP*, *Far be it from me to VP*, *Suffice it to say*; in stage directions of the form *Enter NP*; and in the types *Try as he may*, *Say what he will*.

One productive syntactic pattern with a present subjunctive has an indefinite pronoun as subject:

- (15) *Take* the pipe out of his mouth, somebody. (1841 Browning, *Pippa Passes Poems*)

Subjunctives with definite third person subjects have been supplanted by forms involving *may* or *let*:

- (16) *May* the devil take him. ~ The devil *take* him.

The subjunctive in the latter survives now in formulaic utterances.

The present subjunctive is also common in clauses which complement an adjective, noun or verb whose meaning is desire, obligation (Denison 1998:262):

- (17) and Jo wrathfully *proposed* that Mr. Davis *be arrested* without delay (1868 Alcott, *Little Women* vii89)  
Jerry knew that it was *imperative* she *be got* some place where it was dry and warm. (1947 Gallico, *The Lonely* i.39)

The present subjunctive above, which tends to be replaced by the modal verb *should* in BrE, has retreated to high-flown literary or legal language. In America, however, it seems to be the norm.

As for final clauses, the main changes during Late Modern English are in the inventory of subordinate conjunctions and in the increasing disuse of the (present) subjunctive:

- (18) She... kept putting up the hand, that held the stone, first closing it carefully *that* the precious stone *be not lost*. (1923 Sherwood Anderson, *Many Marriages*)  
Loath though he was to encourage his employer in any way *lest* he *get* above himself, Joss was forced to drop a word of approval. (1940 Wodehouse, *Quick Service*)

The conjunction *that* and *lest* occur now only in very formal registers while the comparatively recent conjunction *in order that* occurs only with modals (*may*, *might*, *should*).

The present subjunctive is also used in conditional and concessive clauses:

- (19) *If* it *be* I will have nothing to do with it, much as I love and reverence the man. (1981 Green, *Letters* 80)  
Reason never comes too late, *though* it *be* midnight when she knocks at the door. (1799 Dunlop, *False Shame* II 20)

Denison (1998:297) also refers to the usage of the subjunctive present in exceptive clauses, where *may/might* rivals with *should* as the possible modal alternative:

- (20) And I judge that this must ever be a condition of human progress, *except* some religion *appear* which can move forward with the progress of man. (1863 Green, *Letters* 118)

As for the past subjunctive, it is used in apodoses (main clauses) of unreal conditionals, which is highly literary and was already a rather pompous archaism by the early nineteenth century and *would be* would be normal (Denison 1998:163):

- (21) But it *were* better not to anticipate the comments to be made. (1948 TLS 23 (10 Jan))

The past perfect subjunctive is used similarly, which is illustrated by the following example, in which *had been* stands for *would have been* in Present-Day English:

- (22) It *had been* easy for me to gain a temporary effect by a mirage of baseless opinion; (1871–2 George Eliot, *Middlemarch* 201)

In the protasis of an unreal conditional the past subjunctive is optional after *if*, with the indicative increasingly often used in standard (Denison 1998:298):

- (23) Obviously, it is not easy to be a great poet. If it *were*, many more people would have done so. (1913 Ezra Pound *Egoist*, 48)  
If Everest *was* only 300 metres higher, it would be physically impossible to reach the summit without bottled oxygen. (1993 Ed Douglas, *New Scientist* 23)

The past subjunctive is virtually obligatory in the generally more formal, inverted protasis:

- (24) Ah! *were* she a little less giddy than she is. (1843–4 Dickens, *Chuzzlewit*, 305)

Where unreality is involved, certain nominal subordinate clauses permit a past subjunctive or a past perfect which may be regarded as subjunctive (Denison 1998:264):

- (25) I wish I *were* more worthy of you. (1891 Sidney Webb, *Letters* 153)  
I dined a Pologne as usual yesterday, & wished you *had been* there.  
(1890 Dowson, *Letters* 91 p. 139)

The subjunctive is also the normal form after conjunctions expressing a rejected comparison:

- (26) I feel as if I *had jumped* into old age during the last two years. (1918 Bell, *Letters* II 450)

As evident from the above examples, the decline of the subjunctive went on in the 18th century with its forms being reduced and its functions being taken over by the indicative and some modal auxiliaries.

## 6 Conclusion

The subjunctive is a continual source of dispute among grammarians and of perplexity to scholars as its historical role in English seems to have been rather weak and inconsistent. Some grammarians and linguists even proclaimed the subjunctive's death, and others regarded its usage as pretentious in Modern English. As far as its historic development is concerned, it is generally agreed that the inflectional subjunctive experienced a steady decline in the history of English.

In fact, historical change has more or less eliminated mood from the inflectional system of English, with past subjunctive confined to 1st/3rd person singular *were*, which is moreover usually replaceable by the indicative past form *was*. Besides the loss of inflections, the appearance of the periphrastic forms accounted for the decline of the subjunctive. Thus, in Present-day English, the main mood system is analytic rather than inflectional and the functions of the subjunctive seem to have been taken over by the indicative and modal auxiliaries.

As might be evident from the above discussion, by the end of the early Modern English period, i.e. 1776 the subjunctive had more or less undergone all the significant changes that would differentiate it from its present-day usage.

Unlike Present-day English, the subjunctive forms were still also common in reported speech, particularly in contexts in which uncertainty (question, assumption, etc.) was indicated.

An additional change occurred in the usage of the subjunctive in clauses of purpose and in the inventory of the conjunctions, which nevertheless reflected a new tendency in Present-Day English. The conjunction *that* began to be preceded by elements making the indication of purpose more obvious, such as *so*, *to the intent/end* and *in order* and the subjunctive altered with the auxiliary verbs *may/might*.

In Early Modern English, a special case of the use of *as* in clauses of comparison was the combination of *as* with *who/which* in the phrase *as who say/says* meaning 'as if somebody should say' in Present-Day English, after which the subjunctive or the modal auxiliary *should* varied with the simple indicative form.

As another peculiarity of the subjunctive, in the early nineteenth century the past subjunctive was used in apodoses (main clauses) of unreal conditionals, which was nevertheless highly literary, regarded to be as a rather pompous archaism.

The past subjunctive *were* also occurred in clauses indicating wish, mainly found in exclamations (O that I *knew* where I might find him), just like after a

personal subject with better/best (I *were* better to be married of him than of another).

All in all, in spite of the fact that there have been considerable changes in the forms of the subjunctive during the centuries, with a few exceptions there have not been many in its usage. The subjunctive has always been marked for modality, expressing doubt, unreality, wishes, commands, and so on, and it is the mood selected by certain conjunctions, such as *if, though, whether, as if* and *lest* even today with the exception of earlier *except, unless* and *that* (*expressing purpose*). In fact, there were some losses and changes in the 18th and 19th centuries in its usage, which are, however, not considered to be significant.

It may also be true that the subjunctive is used in a limited area in Present-Day English, but it is very much alive in that area, especially in Am E, in which it is assumed to have become remarkably prevalent again in the 20th century.

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