

# Come What May: The History and Future of the English Subjunctive

## Introduction

Many native English speakers (myself included), when first studying a Romance language, are quite surprised and confused by the sheer diversity of inflectional endings that Romance verbs display. While the richer morphological distinctions between different gender and number combinations is not entirely unfathomable due to the somewhat similar distinctions in forms of “be”, particularly fascinating or frustrating – the choice of adjective highly variable depending on who you ask – is the additional inflection multiplying factor of grammatical mood. The subjunctive mood, which is of interest for this paper, tends to be particularly difficult for learners to grasp due to its seeming absence from English (as opposed to the imperative mood, which is used, albeit in morphologically less rich forms, similarly in English as to the Romance languages). In fact, in secondary school-type introductory courses, it is often claimed that English simply has no analog to e.g. the Spanish *subjuntivo* or Italian *congiuntivo*.

While these claims are not true, they reflect the intuition many English speakers have that the subjunctive mood exists in only an impoverished form in present-day English. In this paper, I investigate the historical developments leading to this conception of the English subjunctive mood, examine the modern usage of explicitly marked subjunctive constructions, and make some cautious predictions regarding the future development of the English subjunctive, or lack thereof. I conclude that English has, since its earliest days, been losing the tendency towards and the observable artifacts of subjunctive expression and will likely continue to do so.

## Current and Historical Use

Firstly, to demonstrate the modern existence of the English subjunctive beyond the fixed phrases often quoted as comprising English's subjunctive mood (e.g. “If I were you,” “Be that as it may,” “God bless you,” etc.), I show here the productive use of one of the most common distinguishable subjunctive forms in English – what many authors call the mandative subjunctive, since it tends to be found in *that* clauses expressing a desired, requested, recommended, etc. circumstance. It is important to note that these forms are more common in American than British English, although Turner's elicitation test suggests that the American preference is spreading to British English speakers (Turner 273).

- (1a) I recommend that he **eat** his vegetables.
- (2a) It is required that he **pass** a difficult test.
- (3a) They insist that you **be** ready at eight.

- Cf. (1b) He **eats** his vegetables.
- Cf. (2b) He **passes** a difficult test.
- Cf. (3b) You **are** ready at eight.

Note that the given examples employ only 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular present verbs, except for (3ab). This is because the subjunctive is only observable as a distinct inflection in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular present, since it is equivalent to the base form of the verb, which is the form employed for all other present tense persons in English, except for the special case verb “to be.” For “to be,” the subjunctive form (“be”) is distinct from all inflections of the indicative. We will return to examine the syntactic and semantic peculiarities of this and other English subjunctive forms later.

We now turn to the historical “former glory” of the English subjunctive, as attested in Old and Middle English. Of the mandative subjunctive uses shown above, Turner asserts, “They are to be found

in Old English and there are abundant recorded occurrences throughout Middle English and the period of the Renaissance” (Turner 271). Besides these, Old English (OE) exhibited a wider range of uses of the subjunctive, including in clauses expressing reported speech – which is analogous to a modern German use (Aarts 2). The productivity of the subjunctive mood in OE is further supported by a (mostly) distinct inflectional morphology, as demonstrated by the class I weak verb *trymman* (“strengthen”) in Table 1.

Table 1: Inflectional paradigm for OE verb *trymman* (Hogg cited in Aarts 2)

	Indicative			Subjunctive	
	Present	Past		Present	Past
1 Sg	<i>trymme</i>	<i>trymede</i>	Sg	<i>trymme</i>	<i>trymede</i>
2 Sg	<i>trymest</i>	<i>trymedest</i>	Plural	<i>trymmen</i>	<i>trymeden</i>
3 Sg	<i>trymeð</i>	<i>trymede</i>			
Plural	<i>trymmað</i>	<i>trymedon</i>			

Evidently, though, the visibility and productivity of the subjunctive has greatly declined from OE to Modern English. Turner attributes this primarily to phonological processes, the “general process of weakening and loss of vowels in final unstressed syllables” which lead to the conflation of indicative and subjunctive forms. He also cites the “fundamental redundancy and superfluousness” of the inflectionally-marked subjunctive, arguing that alternative means of construing subjunctive meanings through modal auxiliaries, adverbs, and periphrastic constructions were already attested in OE and became increasingly preferred through Middle and Early Modern English, an instance of English's historical tendency to shift from synthetic to analytic forms of expression (Turner 272).

These explanations are well-supported by the 1963 corpus study of Biblical translations done by Wayne Calvin Harsh. Harsh's data show that, of 133 verbs in parallel translations ranging from Old to Modern English, 59 were expressed with the inflectionally-marked subjunctive in the OE Rushworth Gloss of 950, 18 in the Middle English Wycliffe translation of 1389, and zero in the 1923 Goodspeed translation. The data also show increasing usage of modal auxiliaries to express subjunctives up to Early Modern English, but a sharp decrease in all subjunctive expressions (Harsh distinguishes inflectionally-marked, modal auxiliary, preterite, and non-distinctive) from the 1611 King James translation to the Goodspeed translation (Harsh 47). This crucially suggests not just a shift in mode of expression, but a strong decline in the tendency to express the subjunctive mood altogether.

## Syntactic and Semantic Properties

Even though, according to Aarts, “Most modern grammarians agree that there is no justification for recognising an inflectional subjunctive in English,” the few inflectionally-marked subjunctive constructions in English exhibit a few interesting syntactic properties (2). First, as partially illustrated before, is an implicit one: subjunctive inflection almost never appears outside of dependent clauses. The few exceptions to this are fixed phrases that are usually considered archaic, such as “God shed His grace on thee” (from “America the Beautiful”) or “far be it from me.” Even these could, in the Modern English context, perhaps be arguably construed as third-person imperatives rather than subjunctives. The more interesting and explicit property of subjective inflection is its interaction with negation.

- (4a) I recommend that he **not eat** his vegetables.
- (5a) It is required that he **not pass** a difficult test.
- (6a) They insist that you **not be** ready at eight.

- Cf. (4b) He **doesn't eat** his vegetables.
- Cf. (5b) He **doesn't pass** a difficult test.
- Cf. (6b) You **aren't** ready at eight.

All three of the (a) examples are negated by inserting *not* before the subjunctive verb. In particular, (4) and (5), which require *do*-insertion in the indicative, resist it in the subjunctive mood. At first pass this seems to perhaps suggest that the subjunctive inflection bestows on the verb similar syntactic properties to modal auxiliaries, except that the negative particle comes before the verb. The development of a syntactic theory that explains these phenomena would be an interesting topic for future study.

A few uses of the mandative subjunctive lead to interesting semantic consequences. Consider the example of the verb “insist,” which can take an indicative or subjunctive clause as complement.

(7) I insist that he **believe** me. [Subjunctive complement]

(8) I insist that he **believes** me. [Indicative complement]

Sentence (7) is a mandative subjunctive: the speaker expresses her strong wish that some 3<sup>rd</sup> person would believe her. (Note the insertion of the modal auxiliary as an alternative expression of the subjunctive in the previous sentence.) Sentence (8), though, is simply indicative: the speaker asserts that some 3<sup>rd</sup> person does, in fact, believe her.

Another interesting duality between subjunctive and indicative semantics arises from the use of the “past” subjunctive, i.e. first or third person singular “were” in conditional dependent clauses.

(9) If he **was** the winner, I better congratulate him.

(10) \*If he **were** the winner, I better congratulate him.

(11) If he **were** the winner, I would congratulate him.

The ungrammaticality of (10) arises from the implied counterfactual semantics of this subjunctive form. “If he were the winner” implies that he was *not*, in fact, the winner. “If he was the winner” has no such implication, however; he could have been the winner and the speaker hasn't yet learned of it. Here we see an interesting dependence between the main clause and the dependent: namely, an indicative main clause can only occur with an indicative dependent, but a subjunctive main clause can occur with a subjunctive (and possibly also an indicative – “?If he was the winner, I would congratulate him.”) dependent.

The counterfactual semantics of this form also explains the exceptionally strong survival of the form “If I were you...” over the generally considered ungrammatical “\*If I was you...”. Since one person can never *actually* be another, the use of the indicative is in this instance ungrammatical, or at least infelicitous and intuitively semantically wrong.

## Conclusions

The history of the English subjunctive, particularly the form expressed through inflectional morphology, has been characterized by declining visibility since Old English times. Many expressions that would previously have been inflected in the subjunctive mood have been replaced with modal auxiliaries and other devices with analytic tendencies. Many of the forms that remain, however, show productive use, unique syntactic constraints, and special semantic properties.

Still, one can hardly resist the evidence-supported temptation to doom the vestiges of the English subjunctive to eventual extinction. Within the domain of the mandative subjunctive, the strongest and most cohesive stronghold of inflectional subjunctive expression, indicative forms are becoming somewhat acceptable, especially in informal conversation.

(12) ?I recommend that he orders the steak.

(13) ?It is a requirement that the fence is painted overnight.

While one could argue that the subjunctive mood itself hasn't disappeared but has only become inflectionally silent, one must then wonder whether a grammatical distinction that becomes completely invisible can really be thought to exist – especially given the American population's general unawareness of its use (or non-use). But the most telling harbinger of the English subjunctive's fate, perhaps, is the astounding number of American pop song titles starting with “If I was...” published in the last few decades.

## Works Cited

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