

THE PRESENT SUBJUNCTIVE IN CONTEMPORARY
BRITISH ENGLISH

LILLIANE HAEGEMAN

University of Geneva

It is generally assumed in current literature on British English that the subjunctive is only a minor category.

Structures such as

(I suggested that) he *come* to my house.

(It is vital that) they *be* invited

are usually given scarcely any attention (cf. O.). This paper is a report of a research project which tries to reassess the position of the present subjunctive as a grammatical category in British English. The paper deals with

- (i) the frequencies of occurrence of the form
- (ii) syntactic characteristics of the form.

O. PRELIMINARY NOTES: THE DISCUSSION OF THE SUBJUNCTIVE IN SOME
REPRESENTATIVE GRAMMARS

Quirk et al's *Grammar of Contemporary English* (1972) provides some scanty observations on the use of the subjunctive. These will be repeated here.

On p. 76 they say:

The subjunctive is not an important category in contemporary English and is normally replaced by other constructions. It can be described in three separate statements:

* I wish to use this opportunity to thank Professor R. Quirk for allowing me to use the data of the *Survey of English Usage* for my research. Thanks are also due to Professor F. Aarts (Nijmegen) and Professor S. Greenbaum (London) for their comments on an earlier version of this paper. Needless to say, the defects of this version remain my own.

(a) The MANDATIVE SUBJUNCTIVE in *that*-clauses has only one form, the base (V); this means that there is lack of the regular indicative concord between subject and finite verb in the 3rd person singular present, and the present and past tenses are indistinguishable. This subjunctive is productive, to the extent that it can be used with any verb in subordinate *that*-clauses when the main clause contains an expression of recommendation, demand, surprise, and so on... The use of this subjunctive occurs chiefly in formal style (and especially in Am. E.) where in less formal contexts one would make use of other stylistic devices, such as *to*-infinitive or *should*+infinitive.

We ask that the individual citizen watch closely any development in this matter (...)

(b) the FORMULAIC SUBJUNCTIVE... is only used in clauses in certain set expressions... (cf. also their discussion in par. 7.86)

(c) the WERE-SUBJUNCTIVE (cf. p. 77)

My discussion here will be restricted to the present subjunctive in complement-clauses (i.e. (a)).

Note that the short statement above contains observations of distinct types:

(i) formal syntactic analysis: the subjunctive is realized as the base of the verb, i.e. it lacks tense and agreement features: cf. Indicative: he comes — he came Pres. Subjunctive: (that) he come

(ii) the distribution of the form is primarily seen as being determined by the nature of the higher clause; more specifically, the constraints are semantic: the higher clause should contain an expression (i.e. Noun, Adjective or Verb) of recommendation, demand, surprise, etc. e.g. a Noun such as *suggestion*, an Adjective such as *essential*, a Verb such as *ask*. In such contexts the authors say that the subjunctive is 'productive'. Their statement seems to imply that, given the appropriate context, there are no constraints on the occurrence of the subjunctive.

(iii) the distribution of the subjunctive in English is also linked to regional variation, the form being commoner in American English. Furthermore, stylistic factors determine its use: the subjunctive is preferred in 'formal' English. From the formulation in Quirk et al. it is unclear whether the stylistic constraint is also posited for American English. Note that on p. 783 the authors seem to imply that the stylistic constraint is mainly for British English: "The present subjunctive is more common in Am. E. than in Br. E., where it is little more than an archaism of legalistic style".

(iv) as 'substitutes' for the present subjunctive Quirk et al. mention the *to*-infinitive and *should*+infinitive.

Each of the claims listed here seems to merit some further research.

In a later section of the grammar Quirk et al. (1972: 783) also point to the use of the subjunctive in adverbial clauses (conditions; concessions; purpose etc.) where it expresses a 'putative' (as opposed to 'factual') meaning: "Though he be the president himself, he shall hear us".

Close's *Reference Grammar for Students of English* (1972) basically adopts a similar line. Some points are noteworthy, though. Close points out that there are three constructions regularly available for clauses embedded as complements of verbs such as *propose* and *recommend*.

(i) *should*: which is the 'normal' form

(ii) the 'informal' indicative

(iii) the subjunctive: which is 'formal' and typical of official style (especially in American English) (note the same unclarity of wording) e.g. We propose that Mr X should go/goes/go

Close says '*should*' also occurs in *that*-clauses after verbs and adjectives expressing personal feelings, judgement, etc. as, in

(32) We regret that you should feel obliged to resign = We are sorry

(33) It is right that he should be punished"

and adds: "'*Should*' could be omitted in (32), but not in (33). Adjectives which could replace *right* in (33) include *better*, *essential*, *important*, *necessary*, *wrong*".

Close's comments are rather obscure: it seems that both in (32) and in (33) *should* is omissible: in (32) the embedded clause of the factive predicate *regret* may have an indicative:

(32) We regret that you feel obliged to resign

while the embedded clause in (33) may take either an indicative or a subjunctive:

(33') It is right that he is punished (cf. 1.2 and 1.3)

(33'') It is right that he be punished (cf. 1.2 and 1.3)

In the discussion of the subjunctive in *Meaning and the English Verb* (Leech 1971) Leech repeats similar observations and claims that in British English "it belongs to archaisms of legalistic style" (1971: 156).

It is the purpose of the following sections to verify the claims of the various descriptions cited above.

1. THE DATA

In order to assess the validity of the claims made in current grammars an analysis of data is essential. In the following section I present my findings, based on (i) an analysis of the material collected in the *Survey of English Usage* (University College London) (cf. Ilson 1982 and Haegeman 1982 for a description of the material, and also the references cited there) and (ii) on further data collected by random observation of present-day usage of speakers of Standard British English (spoken and written usage). My findings can be considered

complementary to those presented by Šćur (1975). Šćur, however, is based on written material only.

My analysis will reveal that the descriptions dealt with in O. do not present an adequate picture of usage. Moreover, it will be shown that there are many problematic areas with respect to the usage of the subjunctive and that further research is necessary.

1.1. Identifying the form

If we look at actual data of usage it turns out, as one might expect, that the present subjunctive and the present indicative are not always readily identifiable¹. Consider the following examples:

- (1a) I think one of the reasons Miss Baker suggested I *show* you around...
(*Survey of English Usage*, S. 1.5.; Quirk and Svartvik (1981: 141))
- (1b) Watford University Press insisted that Bottomley's original numbers *be* retained (id. S. 2.1. p. 380)
- (2) I suggested Ian *tried* to stay with him (id. S. 2.6. p. 132)
- (3) What they will probably come up with is the proposal that we *put* all of the texts in this onto a cassette (id. S. 3.2. p. 798)

While the italicised verb forms in (1) and (2) are to be identified as 'present subjunctive' vs. 'indicative' (past tense) respectively, *put* in (3) might be either a present subjunctive or a present indicative.

Among identifiable present subjunctives we find forms such as:

— third person singular not ending in *-s*:

(*that*) *he come*

— *be*-forms: *he be invited*

— base forms in clauses embedded after past higher tenses:

I suggested that they come

A problem may arise here, though, since such base forms might be the result of the speaker/writer not observing sequence of tenses:

cf. *I told him I will be there (tomorrow)*

— negated clauses with *not* which lack *do*-insertion;

(*that*) *he not come (later than five)*

Identifiable indicatives are:

— past tense forms: *he came*

— present tense forms with third person-*s*: *he comes*

— inflected forms of *be*: *he is, was* etc.

¹ Šćur (1975) does not indicate his policy with respect to such unidentifiable cases.

But in clauses embedded after present-tense higher verbs (cf. (3) with present tense *is*) the base form of the verb is only identifiable with third person singular subjects. In my analysis I have not included such unidentifiable forms, since there is no objective way of assigning them to either category.

1.2. The Survey of English Usage

In the total corpus considered (89 spoken texts, 5,000 words each; 72 written texts, 5,000 words each) it was possible to identify 38 instances of clear subjunctives. Since we are here only dealing with the 'mandative' subjunctive in complement clauses, 14 instances were not considered: (i) 7 instances of subjunctives in main clauses ('formulaic'); (ii) 7 instances of conditional clauses. This leaves us with 24 identifiable instances of a mandative subjunctive.

In the structure considered, i.e. complement clauses, we have identified 23 instances of indicatives, and there were 25 instances which are 'unidentifiable' (cf. 1.1.).

Should+infinitive occurs in 126 instances of complement clauses which could also have taken a subjunctive (cf. Table 1 below).

The data fully confirm Close's discussion of the relative frequency of the modal *should*; they do not, however, immediately confirm his intuitions with respect to the distribution indicative vs. subjunctive.

Table 1. below gives a breakdown of the totals with respect to the contrast: spoken vs. written English. Note, though, that the spoken corpus is slightly larger than the written one.

Table 1. Survey of English Usage: complement clauses

	Subjunctive	Indicative	Subj/Ind	<i>Should</i>
<i>Total</i>	24	23	25	126
Spoken	13	7	12	84
Written	11	16	13	42

There are 13 subjunctives in the spoken part of the Survey, and 11 in writing. Conversely, and perhaps surprisingly, there are only 7 instances of the indicative in spoken English and 16 in writing. *Should* forms are very common in spoken English (84), and less predominant in writing (42).

Of course, such totals are really too small to rely on, but the first impression is that the indicative is not the regular 'informal' substitute for the subjunctive. A further breakdown per type of text is of course even less reliable. Note though that the subjunctive forms occur unexpectedly often in informal conversation (texts S. 1, S. 2, and S. 3): 8 such forms were noted. The more formal

spoken texts have rather fewer: S. 11 and S. 12, which contain spontaneous and prepared orations, having one each.

In writing, most subjunctives occur in legalistic writing: W 13, which contains 'printed administrative and official language', has 8 instances.

In a sense, then, the subjunctive in British English takes up two opposite poles in the 'spectrum of usage': on the one hand the informal spoken variety, on the other hand the formal legal writing. Perhaps, though, those two areas of usage should not be seen as entirely parallel: it might well be, for example, that the spoken variety of English has tended to introduce the subjunctive more recently, perhaps because of the influence of American English, while the occurrence of the subjunctive in legalistic writing is the remainder of its original use. These remarks are, at this point, entirely speculative and further research is necessary.

Informants' tests² might reveal in how far distinctions of age have a bearing on the use of the subjunctive.

The indicative as a substitute for the subjunctive shows no clear peak occurrence. S. 1-3 have only 1 instance (and further three forms are unidentifiable) S. 11 and S. 12 have 3 (2 and 1 respectively); W. 13 has one example, and W. 7 (letters) has 4 instances. The data for letters, however, are notably unclear: there are 4 indicatives; 1 subjunctive but 8 unclear instances.

In S. 1-3, 12 instances of *should* were identified; W. 13 has 24 instances. Of course, one has to take into account that the latter texts are written basically to issue regulations, instructions etc.; hence we would expect regular occurrences of 'mandative' sentence types. Note thus that even in legalistic writing *should* is the predominant form (24 *should*; 8 subjunctives; 1 indicative).

1.3. Some further data

1.3.1. Some notes on distributions in spoken English

When we look at the data for spoken conversation in the *Survey of English Usage* (especially texts S. 1-3) we see that in fact 4 out of 8 subjunctives occur in S. 2.1., a spoken text containing a conversation between academics aged 25-43. In fact all four instances are used by speaker B, a 'male academic aged c. 34'.

- (1) The idea was... that I write to the Ford Foundation... then I present myself and give them... (Quirk and Svartvik, 1980: 386)

It might be noteworthy to point out that the subjunctives alternate with *might write*.

² cf. Quirk and Rusiecki (1981).

- (2) Watford University Press insisted that Bottomley's original numbers be retained after the Library of Congress insisted that their call marks be put in (ib 380).

This suggests that the phenomenon is idiolect-bound. I noted 11 additional instances of subjunctive usage, all of which occurred with 'younger speakers' (under 35). Three instances were used during a phone-in on London Broadcasting Corporation; eight were used in conversation by native speakers, usually academics, e.g.

- (3) One of the conditions of the adequacy of a semantic theory is that it be able to predict entailments, synonymy... (SOAS lecturer, 1981)
 (4) The committee decided that Mr Thorpe be given the job. (LBC, 28/2/82, 9/00 news announcer)

Obviously, the formal situation (lecture) in (3) may favour the subjunctive.

The additional instances of the indicative as a substitute for the subjunctive amounted to 8. Speakers here were of more diverse ages and backgrounds:

- (5) I insist that you are able to tell me exactly the way in which I have deviated from these instructions. Otherwise I shall conclude that you have been giving them in bad faith.
 (5) was used by a young academic during an informal conversation (15/4/82; 5.10) in which he actually was assuming a mock-formal tone. It is hence interesting that, in spite of the pretended formality, he still uses the indicative.
 (6) you could suggest to her that she looks through these (academic, C. 30, to secretary, 26. 11. 79)
 (7) an exhibition which Mary Burns suggested we went to (old age pensioner, 1.4.82)

Obviously, the observations above are fairly unsystematic and need further testing. However, it seems that *should* is indeed the preferred form for complement clauses with 'mandative' verbs. Both the indicative and the subjunctive are also used, though. It may be significant, too, that the use of the 'unidentifiable' form is rather frequent. Its very ambivalence may be a reason why it is easily used. Further research, supplemented with elicitation texts, may reveal in how far factors such as 'age', 'province' (e.g. academic English) and degree of 'formality' have a direct influence on the use of the forms.

1.3.2. Journalese

Although the journalistic prose in the Survey has yielded only one instance of the subjunctive it would seem that the form is used relatively frequently in certain papers. Further research is needed here. It might be profitable to

compare various types of papers with each other with respect to the verb form used in mandative complement clauses, and also to compare the different types of articles. The results of such an analysis could also be contrasted with an analysis of 'broadcasting' English.³

In order to assess whether there may be an increasing tendency to use the subjunctive in certain types of texts, it might be interesting to extend the study to cover a wider time-span (e.g. 1950—80).

1.4. Distribution of the subjunctive: syntactic characteristics

1.4.1. The higher clause

It is clear that there is a constraint on the type of higher structure which allows embedding of a subjunctive clause. In Table 2 below I give a complete list of the expressions of 'recommendation, wish' etc. in higher clauses with embedded subjunctives. Expressions between parentheses have been found in random sampling, but not in the *Survey of English Usage*. Table 3 gives comparable data for the indicative forms substituting for subjunctives; Table 4 gives the relevant information for *should*.

Table 2. Lexical items embedding subjunctives

(advice)	insist
(ask)	(move)
(appropriate)	(option)
assumption	(order)
beg	(propose)
(compromise)	(proposal)
(condition)	proposition
(decide)	recommend
(eager)	request
(ensure)	(require)
(essential)	resolve
(important)	suggest
(importance)	(suggestion)
	(urge)
	(wait)
	(wish)

Table 3. Lexical items embedding 'mandative' indicative

anxious	
ask	
(demand)	
essential	
(important)	(importance)
(insist)	insistence
intention	
in order that	
propose	
(recommend)	
requirement	
rule	
suggest	
(vital)	

Table 4. Lexical items embedding 'mandative' *should*
(Survey of English Usage only)

advocate	inevitable	
ask	intend	
concern	instruction	
conclusion	judge	
decide	keen	
demand	legitimate	
desirable	matter	
desire	necessary	
dictate	prefer	
direct	propose	
essential	recommend	
expect	request	
fair	right	
fitting	stipulate	
idea	suggest	suggestion
important	view	

Note that all items taking the subjunctive also take a *to*-infinitive-clause:

- (1) my *advice* to her to go now rather than tomorrow...
- (2) I *asked* him to go

and the subject of the infinitive (*to go*) is 'controlled' by a subject NP or another argument NP in the sentence. Lexical items taking subjunctives are typically non-factive.

³ Šćur (1975) presents some data.

1.4.2. The tense of the embedding clause

Table 5 gives a survey of the distribution of present and past tenses in higher clauses embedding subjunctive or indicative complements. Clauses containing modal auxiliaries have been grouped with the present tense if the modal auxiliary occurs in the present tense form (*will*), with past tense if it has the past tense form (*would*), in spite of the fact that, semantically, past tense modals often have present time reference.

Note that the information here is very much influenced by the fact that the problematic instances which may either be indicative or subjunctive all occur after a higher present tense verb:

I demand that they *go* immediately.

Table 5. Distribution of the tense in the higher clause

	<i>Subj</i>	<i>Ind</i>	?
Present	6	14	25
Past	18	9	

1.4.3. Voice

Table 6 gives the distribution of the voice of the subjunctive or indicative VP in mandative complement clauses, in the *Survey of English Usage*. As can be seen, there are 12 active and 12 passive examples for subjunctives; among the indicatives there are 18 active instances and 5 passive.

An important consideration here is the 'willingness to use the *be* subjunctive' which encourages also the passive subjunctive (cf. Quirk and Rusiecki, 1981).

Table 6. Voice patterns for subjunctive VPs and indicative substitutes

	<i>Subj</i>	<i>Ind</i>	?
Active	12	18	25
Passive	12	5	

Again, of course, all passive subjunctives are identifiable; hence, the problematic cases will be active only.

1.4.4. Negation

No instances of negated subjunctives are to be found in the *Survey of English Usage*; neither were there any negative mandative indicatives. Note that the negative subjunctive differs from the indicative in lacking

do-support:

I insist that he not come
I insist that he doesn't come.

It would be interesting to see what form native speakers would choose for negated mandative clauses if forced to select either indicative or subjunctive.

2. SOME FURTHER CHARACTERISTICS OF SUBJUNCTIVES

In this section I shall briefly discuss a number of features of subjunctive-clauses which are often ignored in descriptions. It is my view that a fully formalized account of the place of the subjunctive as a category in the Verb System of English should somehow be able to account for these. Recent work in Transformational Grammar has, it seems to me, much to offer here.

The Verb of a subjunctive clause apparently lacks both Tense and agreement marking, which suggest that the auxiliary node of the sentence, if present, is defective. Negation markers such as *not* precede the lexical verb:

I insist that he not come

and lack *do*-support.

The impossibility of having *do*-support is typically triggered by structures with a 'stranded' tense: informally:

- (i) John Tense (+Past) not come
John did not come
- (ii) Tense (+Past) John come? (after inversion)
Did John come?
- (cf. Lasnik 1981)

Though subjunctive clauses lack overt tense marking, they are no hindrance for the sequence of tense rule: the subjunctive, being 'tenseless', is 'transparent' for the higher tense:

I suggested to him

(+PA) that he come and see me
(-T) when he had finished his work
(+PA)

I shall suggest to him

(-PA) that he come and see me
(-T) when he has finished his work
(-PA)

Though lacking in overt agreement features, the subjunctive clause is not a non-finite infinitival clause. It is well-known that English infinitivals take object-form subjects:

It is important for *me* to be here.
I wanted *them* to be here.
I expected *her* to be here.

while subjunctives take subject-form subject:

It is important that *they* be here.

In current versions of EST theory (Chomsky 1981) the assumption is that it is the auxiliary node, now labelled INFL, more specifically Agreement (AGR) and/or Tense (T), which assigns nominative case to the subject. This, then, would suggest that subjunctive clauses contain some auxiliary node, though not overtly realized. Treating the subjunctive on a par with a bare infinitive loses the possibility of linking nominative (subject-form) with INFL.

The 'finiteness' of the subjunctive clause is also in line with the occurrence of the complementiser *that*. In this respect it is interesting that *that* tends to be overtly realized.

Unlike infinitive clauses subjunctive complement clauses do not take reflexive or reciprocal subjects:

They wanted *each other* to be happy.
He wanted *himself* to be invited first of all.
I heard *myself* talk.
*I suggested that *myself* be invited
vs. *I*
*They demanded that *each other* be released
vs.
They each demanded that *the other* be released.

A personal pronoun subject (*he, she*) of a subjunctive clause may be coreferential with the higher subject of the matrix clause:

*He*₁ demanded that *he*₁ be given the money

while this is not allowed with infinitivals:

**He*₁ wanted *him*₁ to be released

As far as I know the data described in (2) have not been treated in any great detail. However, they are all somehow related to the subject-auxiliary link inside S. Though I cannot yet offer a fully-fledged account I would like to offer some proposals.

One assumption will be that the structure of S is as suggested in the Govern-

ment Binding framework (Chomsky 1981):

$$S \rightarrow NP - INFL - VP^4$$

INFL stands for the AUX node of earlier work, and is said to contain

- (i) Tense
- (ii) Agreement: a set of features (person, number, ...)
- (iii) Modal auxiliaries (in English)

$$INFL \rightarrow T - AGR - (M)$$

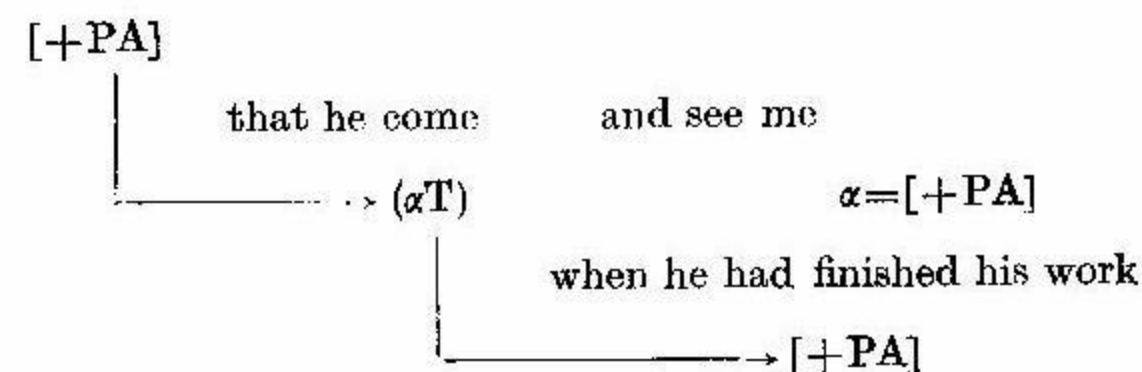
It has been suggested (Picallo 1982) that subjunctives are defective in that they lack Tense. If we pursue this proposal, then we might say that subjunctive clauses have an INFL node, but that INFL lacks a Tense specification, and contains only AGR. We might then say that, in English, AGR is only overtly realized if T is present.

However, I would like to propose that the INFL node of Subjunctives is not only a set of AGR features, rather I would like to say it has unspecified T and unspecified M.

$$(INFL \rightarrow \alpha T - AGR - \beta M)$$

When the subjunctive is actually used, it occurs in a dependent clause.⁵ The Tense of the higher clause, then, determines the tense specification of the subjunctive clause: it 'controls' the tense reading. This would then tie in with my suggestion that subjunctive clauses are 'transparent' for Tense and for sequence of Tenses (cf. 2.2.)

I suggested to him



[+PA] determines the tense of the embedded *when* clause 'through' the transparent subjunctive clause.

⁴ Possibly to be recast in a binary branching format as

$$\begin{array}{l} S \rightarrow NP - \overline{INFL} \\ \overline{INFL} \rightarrow INFL VP \end{array}$$

⁵ Imperatives might be considered as subjunctives or non-embedded (ungoverned) clauses and with no overt subject. The imperative reading would be a default reading.

The unspecified subjunctive needs 'filling' in for Tense from the higher clause. This controlling mechanism creates a tighter link between the higher verb and the Subjunctive Verb.

3. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper was twofold:

- (i) to offer a description of the use of the subjunctive in British English, and to suggest which factors might be responsible for the use or non-use of the form. Further corpus study and elicitation tests may give us a clear picture.
- (ii) to raise some issues with respect to the description of the subjunctive which have often been ignored. A formalization is suggested to incorporate some of these observations.

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