

The Subjunctive in Old English and Middle English

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1 Introduction

The subjunctive in English is a fairly marginal and rather controversial topic of grammar. In fact, it is usually described as moribund, fossilized and almost extinct in Present-Day English. Although it was very common in Old English and in Middle English, it started to lose ground already in the Middle English period. In recent years, some grammarians, however, refer to the revival of the subjunctive, especially in AmE. Analysing the subjunctive, Quirk et al. (1985:155-158) and Huddleston and Pullum (2002:993-1003) also refer to the more frequent use of the subjunctive in American English.

This seems to have been justified by Johansson and Norheim (1988), who in their study on the subjunctive compared its usage in the American Brown Corpus (cf. Francis and Kučera 1979) and the British LOB Corpus (cf. Johansson et al. 1978). The commonest type of the subjunctive, the mandative subjunctive, which is used in *that* clauses after expressions of demand, order, suggestion, etc., was found to be the normal choice in the Brown Corpus whereas it had a very low occurrence in the LOB Corpus. When it occurred in the latter, the verb was *be*, mainly used in the passive, which illustrates the formal nature of the subjunctive in British English. The formulaic subjunctive, which is used in some fossilized phrases expressing hope, or wish, turned out to be rare in both corpora. Similarly, the base-form subjunctive in adverbial clauses, mainly conditional clauses seemed to be infrequent with only a few examples in fairly formal texts with the verb *be* in both corpora. The only exception was the subjunctive in clauses of negative purpose introduced by the formal and archaic sounding *lest*, which tends to be more typical of American English. As for the *were* subjunctive, which is the dominant choice in hypothetical conditional clauses and in clauses introduced by *as if* and *as though*, both corpora showed the same tendencies with the *were* subjunctive being more frequent than indicative *was*.

It is also noteworthy that the American Charles Finney (1999-2000) clearly argues in defence of the subjunctive saying 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.” It is supported by his corpus of about 160 examples taken from different types of registers, movies, radio and television programmes, newspapers and even conversations that he overheard or

participated in between 1996 and 2004. As an illustration let us consider some of his examples:

Conversations:

- (1) It's not really vital he *be involved* in this call. Conversation (2001-04-03)
 I was going to request that they [television sets] *be turned down*. Conversation with Allison Miller (1999-12-01)
 It is important that he *tell* the truth now, lest he *be doubted* later. Conversation (1999-10-19)

Television, radio:

- (2) The ultimate goal of the Arabs is that the distinction *be made* ... News, National Public Radio (USA) (2001-01-19)
 Harris was determined that the film *be authentic*. CBS Sunday Morning (US television) (2001-02-11)
 Growing up, my mother was so concerned that we *not be brought up* as “cheap” Irish. It was so important to my mother that we *be thought* of as classic, “lace-curtain” Irish. Conan O'Brien, *Tonight Show with Jay Leno* (2001-01-23)
 It is imperative that everyone *play pianissimo* during the spoken monologue. From the series “Frasier” (US television) (2000-04-13)

Movies:

- (3) If it *were not* for the pleadings of my granddaughter, you would be dead already. If you *weren't* a Doone, I could almost like you. From the movie, *Lorna Doone* (2000) (A&E, US television) (2001-03-11)
 There was a man in there who knew exactly what he wanted, and I found myself wishing I *were* as lucky as he. From the movie, *You've Got Mail* (1998)
 It is critical that I *see* them. From the movie, *Sphere* (1998)
 Both bones were porous, as if the virus or causative organism *were consuming* them. From the movie, *X-Files* (1998)

Newspapers:

- (4) She said company lawyers also have demanded the Web site *be transferred* to their authority. Associated Press, printed in *The News-Sentinel* (Knoxville, Tennessee), p. D4 (1999-11-21)
 I took all of the necessary information, but because of her attitude I did not insist that we *call* for a police officer. Letter to the syndicated column *Smart Money*, printed in *The News-Sentinel* (Knoxville, Tennessee), p. D2 (1999-11-21)

A group of Albanians demanded that the U.N. Mission in Kosovo put its mascot stray dog, Unmik, to sleep because he is “Serbian”. Chuck Shepherd, “News of the weird” (weekly syndicated column), *Metro Pulse* (Knoxville, Tennessee), p. 35 (2000-01-06)

In contrast, Jack English (2009) pointed out that Finney was 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, and it is 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. The author gives evidence for the clear drop in the usage of the subjunctive from 5.5/million words (1990-1994) to 3.6/million words (2005-2008).

Another interesting finding of English is that spoken English appears to be the biggest user of the subjunctive (5.8/million words), though academic English (5.3/million words) isn’t far behind, which challenges the common view that the subjunctive is characteristic of mainly formal style. According to his results, the subjunctive occurs less frequently in newspapers (4.4/million words), magazines (3.8/million words) and fiction (3.1/million words). On the basis of the evidence above it appears that the use of the subjunctive is declining in American English not just in British English.

In spite of the alleged revival of the subjunctive, especially in American English, it is generally agreed that the inflectional subjunctive experienced a steady decline in the history of English. In fact, the most radical changes in the subjunctive took place in the Old English and the Middle English period, and it has not changed significantly since the beginning of the Early Modern English period (cf. Kovács 2009). The primary aim of this paper is to explore how this rather controversial aspect of the English language was used in Old English and Middle English, and to reveal what factors played a role in its process of dying.

2 The subjunctive in Old English (from the beginnings to 1066)

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 and was the mood selected by certain conjunctions.

In Old English, which had a rich inflectional system, verbs were inflected for person, number, tense and mood. As in all Germanic languages, there were only two tenses, present and past, and there were also three moods: indicative, subjunctive and imperative.

A regular strong verb such as *stelan* ‘steal’ had the following paradigm in classical Old English (Hogg 1992:150):

Present			
	Indicative	Subjunctive	Imperative
1Sg	ic stele	ic stele	
2Sg	þu stelst	þu stele	stel!
3Sg	he stelð	he stele	
Plural	hī stelað	hī stelen	stelað!

Past			
	Indicative	Subjunctive	Imperative
1Sg	ic stæl	ic stæle	
2Sg	þu stæle	þu stæle	
3Sg	he stæl	he stæle	
Plural	hī stælon	hī stælon	

Infinitive	stelan
Present Participle	stelend
Past Participle	gestolen

As is clear from this example, the verb inflections of the subjunctive were less differentiated than those of the indicative, never distinguishing first, second and third person.

As for its functions, in OE the subjunctive was used to cast some doubt on the truth of the proposition or to express unreality, potentiality, exhortation, wishes, desires, requests, commands, prohibitions, obligation, hypotheses and conjectures (Traugott 1992:184, 239-240). Consider the following cases where the subjunctive was used in Old English:

- with mental verbs, such as *þencan* and *þyncan*
- with verbs of ordering and requesting, such as *bebeodan*, *batan* ‘order, bid’
- verbs and adjective of being appropriate, such as *gedafenian* ‘be fitting’, *gebyrian* ‘behoove’, *selost beon* ‘be best’ and other predicate adjectives with BE, such as ‘*dyslic beon*’ ‘be foolish’:

- (5) Hit gedafenað þæt alleluia sy gesungen.
It is-fitting that Alleluiah be sung.
It is fitting that Alleluiah should be sung.
- (6) dyslic bið þæt hwa woruldlice speda forhogie for
foolish is that someone worldly goods despise for
manna herunge of-men praise
It is foolish to despise worldly goods in order to win the praise of men.
- with expressions of desire, such as *willan* ‘will’
- (7) Forðy ic wolde ðætte hie ealne æt ðære stowe wæren (SUBJ).
Therefore I wanted that they always at that place were.
Therefore I wanted them always to be there.

The subjunctive is also widely used in reported speech, as is typical in the early Germanic languages. Originally this use may have been of the ‘hear-say’ type in which the reporter wishes to avoid commitment to the truth of what was reported, or wished to cast doubt on it:

- (8) Wulfstan sæde þæt he gefore (SUBJ) of Hæðum, þæt
Wulfstan said that he went from Hedeby that
he wære (SUBJ) on Truso on syfan dagum & nihtum, ðæt þæt
he was in Druzno in seven days and nights, that that
scip wæs (INDIC) ealne weg yrnende under segle
ship was all way running under sail.
Wulstan said that he left from Hedeby, that reached Druzno in seven
days and nights, and that the ship was running under full sail all the
way.

As also noted by Fischer (1992:314), the subjunctive occurred regularly in reported speech without any implication of uncertainty on the part of the speaker. In Old English the subjunctive could still be used in its original function of syntactic marker of subordination.

The hortative subjunctive was used in all persons except the first person singular (Traugott 1992:185):

- (9) Ne yldan we na from dæge to dæge.
Not let-us-delay we not from day to day.
Let us not delay from day to day.
God us gerihtlæce.
God us correct.
May God correct us.

Command or wish was expressed not only by the imperative, but by *uton* (we) + infinitive ‘let us’, which is, however, restricted to first-person plural (Fischer 1992:248):

- (10) Ac utoⁿ we beon carfulle.
 But let us be careful.
 But let us be careful.

As far as dependent clauses are concerned, in Old English the subjunctive was used in concessive clauses and in clauses of comparison. Clauses of comparisons had the subjunctive mood when they were followed by an affirmative main clause, otherwise they were indicative. In conditional clauses the indicative mood was usual unless the main clause was non-indicative whereas in concessive clauses the subjunctive was the regular mood even when the main clause expressed something factual (Fischer 1992:349-356).

In terms of register the subjunctive in OE was especially preferred in monastic and legal regulations; charms, medical prescriptions, and similar generalized instructions were also normally in the subjunctive (Traugott 1992:185).

3 The subjunctive in Middle English (1066-1476)

The Middle English period was marked by numerous changes in English grammar, which may be described as a general reduction of inflections. As noted by Baugh and Cable (1978:159), this levelling of inflectional endings was partly due to phonetic changes, partly to the operation of analogy. In terms of their morphology, the verb suffered serious losses as well.

Although the three types of mood, i.e. the indicative, the subjunctive and the imperative remained, the decay of inflections brought about a simplification of forms in the verb paradigm (Olga Fischer 1992:246-248). Formally the imperative singular and the subjunctive present of weak verbs could no longer be differentiated. The inflectional differences between indicative and subjunctive were also considerably reduced. In the present tense indicative only the second and the third-person singular were distinctive, while in the past tense of strong verbs only the first and third person were distinctive, and of the weak verbs only the second-person singular. In the present subjunctive both weak and strong verbs had only two inflections, *-e* in the singular and *-en* in the plural, just like in the subjunctive past where strong verbs had the *-en* inflections in all the persons singular and plural and weak verbs had the *e*-inflection in the singular and *-en* in the plural in both the present and the past tense. As an illustration consider the following table (Lass 1992:134):

Present									
		Strong			Weak				
		Ind.	Subj.	Imp.			Ind.	Subj.	Imp.
Sg.	1	-e	-e	-∅	1	-e	-e	-e	
	2	-(e)st			2	-(e)st			
	3	-eþ			3	-eþ			
Pl.		-aþ	-en	-aþ		-aþ	-en	-aþ	
Past									
		Strong			Weak				
		Ind.	Subj.				Ind.	Subj.	
Sg.	1	-∅	-en		1	-e	-e		
	2	-e			2	-(e)st			
	3	-∅			3	-e			
Pl.		-on	-en		-on	-en			

Be, which was not really a verb in Old English, but a collection of semantically related paradigms of various historical origins with three major stems, had the following paradigm by the late fourteenth century (Lass 1992:141):

Present				
		Ind.	Subj.	Imp.
Sg.	1	am	be	be
	2	art		
	3	is		
Pl.		be(n)/are(n)	be(n)	be(th)
Past				
		Ind.	Subj.	
Sg.	1	was	were	
	2	were		
	3	was		
Pl.		were(n)	were(n)	

As is evident from the table above, *be* was the only form in the present and *were* the only form in the past subjunctive. It is not surprising that the periphrastic constructions gained ground rapidly (*sholde, shal, wil, may, can*) and by the end of the Middle English period they far outweighed the subjunctive forms. In Olga Fischer's view (1992:362), the development started in Late Old English when "the gradual erosion of verbal inflections made it necessary to replace the subjunctive by something more transparent". Besides, the use of periphrastic

constructions at a fairly early stage accounted for the disappearance of the subjunctive. This change may have been triggered by “the desire to be more emphatic and possibly to be more specific than was possible with the subjunctive form”. Together with the loss of the subjunctive came a grammaticalization of the modal verbs, which in Old English in many ways still had the status of full verbs.

As Fischer (1992:247) notes, another significant change that happened in Middle English is that the past tense indicative began to be used as a modal marker, the so-called modal preterite. This is in fact a continuation of the Old English past subjunctive, which had become virtually indistinguishable from the past indicative in Middle English. The use of the modal preterite is most common when other elements in the clause are the indicator of modality, such as conjunctions (*if, as if*), adverbs (*perhaps*), or when the clause is preceded by a class of verbs that semantically expresses non-fact (*desire, hope*, etc.).

Like in Old English, the subjunctive is used in both independent and dependent clauses in Middle English as well. In independent clauses, the present subjunctive expresses wish or exhortation, (Fischer 1992:248):

- (11) God *shilde* that he deydde sodeynly!
 þatt mann þatt wile follʒhenn me/ & winnenn eche blisse./ He *take* hiss
 rode, & *here* itt riht.
 ‘That man who wants to follow me and attain eternal bliss, let him take
 up his cross and bear it well’.

The hortatory subjunctive is expressed by a periphrastic construction with *let*, which is used to express an exhortation, command. Unlike the Old English construction with *uton*, which still occurs in Middle English (*ute(n)*) until the late thirteenth century, *let* is not restricted to the first-person plural. Moreover, *let* and the subjunctive can occur side by side.

- (12) Now *lat us stynte* of Custance but a throwe,/ And *speke* we of the
 Romayn Emperour,...

The past subjunctive expresses an unrealisable wish or a hypothetical situation, such as in:

- (13) Allas, for wo! Why *nere* I deed?
 For though I *write* or *tolde* yow everemo/ Of his knyghthod, it myghte
 nat suffice.

Besides independent clauses, the subjunctive is also used in different types of dependent clauses, such as in clauses of purpose (Fischer 1992:343-344). The most common subordinator is *that*, but we can find a variety of conjunctive phrases which strengthen the idea of purpose, such as *to that/the endet hat/the ente that* and in negative purpose clauses *lest (that)* is used.

- (14) And whan ony man dyeth in the contree þei brennen his body in name of penance to þat entent þat he suffre no peyne in erthe to ben eten of wormes.

Instead of the subjunctive mood modal auxiliaries can also be used. The auxiliary found most frequently in these clauses is *shal/sholde*, especially in the preterite. Furthermore, *may/mighte* also occurs mainly in the present tense, just like *wil/wolde*, which is occasionally found in Late Middle English.

Besides clauses of purpose, the subjunctive mood frequently occurs in conditional and concessive clauses in Middle English (Fischer 1992:347-352). The most common subordinator in Middle English conditional is *if (that)*. To convey the sense of 'if only', 'provided that', Middle English uses *so (that)*. Sometimes, however, indicative and subjunctive are found side by side within the same sentence:

- (15) eke if he *apparailleth* (ind.) his mete moore deliciously than nede is, or *ete* (subj.) it to hastily by likerousnesse.

In fact, the subjunctive is required by an inverted word order in the conditional:

- (16) But & sche *haue* (subj.) children with him þei leten hire lyue with hem to brynge hem vp ...

Interestingly enough, the past subjunctive is the rule in both main and subclauses when the activity expressed is unreal or purely hypothetical. However, the subjunctive of the main clause is usually replaced by a modal auxiliary:

- (17) ... and I *were* a pope/ Not oonly thou, but every myghty man,
... *Sholde have* a wyf;

In Middle English the use of the subjunctive continues in concessive clauses but begins to be replaced later on by the indicative when the subclause is factual, especially in the preterite:

- (18) And thogh youre grene you the floure (subj.) as yit, /In crepeth age alwey, as stille as stoon, ...
And thogh that Salomon seith (indic.) that he ne foond nevere worn man good, it folweth nat therefore that ...

The reason why the preterite subjunctive is replaced more frequently by the indicative is presumably that the preterite subjunctive came to be used more and more to express hypothetical/non-factual situations.

In clauses of comparison in Early Middle English the indicative becomes the rule unless non-factuality or potentiality is involved. In clauses introduced by *as if/as though/lyk as/as (that)* the past subjunctive is used even when the context is present and expresses non-factuality (Fischer 1992:356-361):

- (19) ... it is ȝit all broyly (= charred) as þough it were half brent.

It is noteworthy that instead of the subjunctive, the modal auxiliaries *sholde* and *wolde* are also used.

When the comparative expresses the highest possible degree, a subjunctive is used at least in Early Middle English:

- (20) Apulf sede on hire ire/ So stille so hit were.
‘Adolf said in her ear as quietly as possible.’

In Late Middle English an auxiliary (*can*, *may* or *mighte*) is the rule and *that* may also accompany *as* or be used instead of *as*:

- (21) And fleeth the citee faste as he may go.
And spedde hym fro the table that he myghte.

In unequal comparative clauses, which are always introduced by the conjunction *than* regularly followed by the general subordinator *that*, the indicative becomes the rule in contrast to Old English, which used the subjunctive. However, Chaucer still prefers the subjunctive when the *than*-clause refers to a prospective event and after phrases like *had lever*, which indicate uncertainty. Instead of the subjunctive the auxiliary *should* is also found.

- (22) It is ful lasse harm to lete hym pace,/ Than he *shende* alle the servantz
in the place.
Arveragus... hadde levere dye in sorwe and in distresse/ Than that his
wyf were of his trouthe fals.
For, by my trouthe, me were levere dye/ Than I yow *shoulde* to
hasardours allye.

The subjunctive occurs regularly in object clauses as well (Fischer 1992:314). The subjunctive mood gives the activity expressed in the verb a certain modal colouring so that it conveys no longer a fact, but something that is possible, probable or desirable. Not surprisingly, therefore, the subjunctive occurs especially after verbs expressing a wish, a command or exhortation, where the subclause denotes a prospective event as in (a); after verbs expressing some mental activity as in (b):

- (23) (a) ichulle þæt ze speken selde.
I want that you speak seldom.
‘I want you to speak seldom.’
(b) Hi weneþ þæt þu segge soþ.
‘They think that you speak the truth.’

The subjunctive also occurs after a negated verb, denoting the uncertainty of the action conveyed in the complement clause. For the same reason the subjunctive is fairly frequent in indirect questions.

Nevertheless, instead of the subjunctive, after verbs expressing a wish, a command or exhortation, we often find auxiliaries. *Should* is the most common

auxiliary, in Early Middle English we also come across *mote* ‘may’, while in Later Middle English *would* also occurs (Fischer 1992:315):

- (24) And manie gon nakede; and bidde þæt sum man heom scholde
biweue, ...
‘and many go naked and ask that some one would clothe them, ...’

4 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 development is concerned, it is generally agreed that the inflectional subjunctive experienced a steady decline in the history of English.

As is evident from the above discussion, 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. In fact, in Present-day English, the main mood system is analytic rather than inflectional, marked by the modal auxiliaries. Although there have been considerable changes in the forms of the subjunctive, there have not been many in its usage. As we have seen above, the subjunctive has always been marked for modality, expressing doubt, unreality, wishes, commands, and so on, and it was the mood selected by certain conjunctions, such as *if*, *though*, *unless*, *whether*, *that* and *lest*.

However, its functions have been somewhat reduced in Present-day English. Like in Old English and in Middle English, the present subjunctive is commonly used in the mandative construction in an object clause introduced by *that*, especially in American English. It is, however, not used after mental verbs and expressions of desire.

By now the subjunctive seems to have completely disappeared from reported speech, in which it was commonly used both in Old English and Middle English. Reported speech is governed by other rules in Present Day English, with shifts in tense and not the mood of the verbs and some changes in the use of deictic features of the language that relate to the time and place of the utterance and to the person referred to in the utterance (Quirk et al. 1985:1026-27). As mentioned above, when using the subjunctive in Old English the reporter wished to avoid commitment to the truth of what was reported.

The present subjunctive, which was commonly used in both Old English and Middle English to express wish or exhortation, can be found in certain formal and rather old-fashioned set expressions in Present-Day English, like *Come what may*, *God save the Queen*, *Suffice it to say*, *Heaven forbid*, *Be that*

as it may, etc. (Quirk et al. 1985:157-158). It is noteworthy that the subjunctive and *let* occurred side by side in both Old English and Middle English. In Present-Day English, the directive *let* with 3rd person subjects, such as ***Let no one think that a teacher's life is easy. Let each man decide for himself***, etc. is generally rather archaic and elevated in tone. (Quirk et al. 1985:830)

In dependent clauses, such as in clauses of condition, concession and negative purpose introduced by *lest* or *for fear that* the present subjunctive is rather formal in Present-Day English (Quirk et al. 1985:158). Interestingly enough, while the subjunctive, a variant of which was *should*, still occurred in clauses of comparison introduced by *than* in Middle English, it seemed to have disappeared in Present-Day English.

The auxiliary *should* as an alternative of the past subjunctive also appears to be used in other cases in Middle English, namely it replaces the subjunctive in a main clause expressing unreality or hypothesis. In Present-day English it alters with *would* for 1st persons in the same hypothetical meaning in main clauses. Unlike in Old English and Middle English, the past subjunctive is, however, not used in main clauses to express hypothesis.

Especially in British English specialised *should* is commonly used in mandative clauses as an equivalent to the subjunctive, just like in adversatives introduced by *lest*, in which this specialised *should* is also readily used, such as in *Both were tense with worry lest things **should** somehow **go** wrong*. Specialized *should* also occurs in unreal conditional in a subclause introduced by *if*, which involves that some doubt is involved in the condition, such as in *If some thief **should open** the case, he wouldn't easily find the jewellery*. In fact, it alters with the indicative past, which, however, suggests that the condition is accepted as satisfied. (Huddleston and Pullum 2002:998-1000).

All things considered, the subjunctive may be 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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