The Past Subjunctive in English: The 'Unreal Past'

Nathaniel Tyler Edwards

1. *Introduction*

The past subjunctive is still in relatively common use in contemporary English and appears with far greater frequency than the present subjunctive. Thomson and Martinet (1986) maintain, "Past subjunctives are often known as unreal pasts" (p. 253). The form of the past subjunctive is identical to the simple past form, although the past subjunctive form of the verb *be* can be *was* or *were* in everyday conversation. *Were* is generally considered to be more correct and is more common in cases involving the expression of doubt or situations that are contrary to fact. Swan (1995) states, "We use 'special' tenses with *if* when we are talking about unreal situations- things that will probably not happen, situations that are untrue or imaginary, past events that did not happen, and similar ideas. In these cases, we use *would* and past tenses to 'distance' our language from reality" (p. 247). The concept of the past subjunctive may also be viewed to some extent as a special use of the simple past.

The indicative mood is far more common and widespread in English usage than the subjunctive mood, and the indicative mood can sometimes be used to convey the same basic meaning inherent in a subjunctive construction. Jesperson (1905) states, "While the number of tenses [in English over the centuries] has been increased, the number of moods has tended to diminish, the subjunctive having now very little vital power left. Most of its forms have become indistinguishable from those of the indicative, but the loss is not a serious one, for the thought is just as clearly expressed in "if he died", where *died* may be either indicative or subjunctive, as in "if he were dead", where the verb has a distinctly subjunctive form" (p. 205). The English past subjunctive still continues to play an especially important role

in expressing hypothetical situations.

2. *Contemporary Use of the Past Subjunctive: Was and Were*

The widespread use of *was* in the place of *were* in subjunctive constructions has generally been frowned upon by scholars, but *was* appears to be replacing the use of *were* in everyday speech in the case of the third person, as in, for example, "If he *was* here, we could finish the work." Most native-speakers would not object to the use of *was* in such a case. However, the use of *was* for the first or second person in the same construction might not be deemed acceptable by most native-speakers. Roberts (1954) asserts, "*Was* [as in *if I were you*] would be a strong indication of the speaker's lack of education . . . *was* might be heard in general spoken English in such constructions and might occasionally creep into general written language, but in choice English it would be conspicuous" (as cited in Lee, 2006, p. 82). Some English writers use both *was* and *were* as a past subjunctive form, sometimes employing both in the same sentence (Lee, 2006). Lee (2006, p. 89) provides the following examples to illustrate the parallel occurrence of *was* and *were* in a past subjunctive role:

"If he **was** city-bred, as were many shearers, the chances were that he started in a black coat and bowler hat, exactly as if he **were** going to tea at his aunt's." C.E.W. Bean (1910). *On the wool track.*

"But if he **were** not and Grant **was** in there looking for him, he might come back and drive off." Kenneth Cook (1961). *Wake in fright.*

The linguistic phenomenon of hypercorrection involving the past subjunctive also occurs occasionally in indirect questions that are introduced with *if* (Lee, 2006). The following examples of the incorrect application of the past subjunctive *were* are provided by Lee (2006, p. 90):

"She wondered if he **were [incorrect]** deaf and too vain to wear a hearing aid." Sumner Locke Elliott (1981). *Signs of life.*

"Hamilton, beginning to wonder if he **were [incorrect]** the victim of some private mockery, took out a small cigar and lit it." C. J. Koch. (1978). *The year of living dangerously.*

3.   In American English, the present subjunctive is normally used after verbs such as *demand, insist,* and *suggest* but British speakers sometimes use the past subjunctive after such verbs (Murphy and Smalzer, 1989). For example:

He suggested that I **buy** a new car. (American English: Present Subjunctive).
He suggested that I **bought** a new car. (British English: Past Subjunctive).
We demanded that she **apologize**. (American English: Present Subjunctive).
We demanded that she **apologized**. (British English: Past Subjunctive).

4.   Thomson and Martinet (1986, p. 254) provide the following examples:

as if/as though + past subjunctive

He behaves as if he owned the place.
He talks as though he knew where she was.
He talks/talked as though he knew where she was.
He orders me about as if I were his wife.
He talks about Rome as if he had been there himself.
He looks/looked as though he hadn't had a decent meal for a month.

it is time + past subjunctive (unreal past)

It's time we were leaving. (The past subjunctive implies that it is a little late.)
It's time I was going.

Regret can be expressed using the past subjunctive in *if only* clauses. For

example:

If only they were here = I/We wish they were here.

I'd rather you didn't do that.

I'd rather you washed the dishes later.

5. Sentences that express a wish are followed by a dependent clause containing a verb in the subjunctive. In a dependent clause, present time is expressed with the past tense, past time is expressed with the past perfect tense, and the future is expressed with the modal auxiliary verb *would* (Sabin, 2005, p. 278). Sabin provides the following examples:

I wish I knew the answer.

I wish they could go.

I wish he had invited us.

I wish you had told me.

I wish they could have seen that.

I wish they would do their best.

I wish she would stop talking about that.

6. An *if* or *as if/as though* clause can be used to state conditions that are "improbable, doubtful, or contrary to fact" (Sabin, 2005, p. 278). For example:

If I had enough money, I would give it to you. (Situation in the present time).

If I had had enough money, I would have given it to you. (Situation in the past).

If I were you, I would wait a little longer. (Situation in the present time).

If I had been in your position, I would have waited a little longer. (Situation in the past).

They treat me as if I were a stranger. (But I am not.)

She talks as though she were the company president. (But she is not.)

If we had the instructions, we should be able to fix the machine. (Situation in the present time. Note the possible use of *should* instead of *would* in British English).

7. *More Examples of Past Subjunctive Structures:*

If it wasn't/weren't for his advice, they would never have bought the house. (=Without his advice...).

If it wasn't/weren't for hope, we could not continue. (=Without hope...).

But for his kindness, we would never have found our way home. (=Without his kindness).

Had you read the message carefully, we would not have been late. (=If you had read...).

8. Finney (n.d.) contributes the following quotes from English literature, songs, and the media containing examples of both past and modern usage of the past subjunctive:

(1) If only the weather **were** this reliable.
Walgreens advertisement (US television) (2001-02-17)

(2) – I wish it **were** enough.
– If it **were**, then you wouldn't be the man I feel in love with.
From the series "Andromeda", episode #108 "The Banks of the Lethe" (US television) (2000-11-20)

(3) This would be wise advice, if only the situation **were** like that – if the job **were** done and it **were** time to relax. If only that **were** true! But challenges abound, and this is no time to take the future for granted.
— —
If "the job" really **were** done, if there **were** nothing at stake except credit,

perhaps it would be wiser to let the matter drop. But we are not in that position.

Richard Stallman, "By any other name...", <u>commentary</u> on <u>AnchorDesk</u> (2000-10-13)

(4) But <u>if</u> you ***were*** a scientist, I think you should ask yourself the same question.

Marilyn vos Savant, "Ask Marilyn" (weekly column), *Parade Magazine* (2000-01-09)

[Emphasis on "were" added by vos Savant.]

(5) But <u>if</u> it **were**n't so big, it wouldn't be nearly so fun.

Commentator, ESPN (US television) (1999-11-20)

(6) That would have been a huge win, <u>if</u> they **were** able to pull it off.

Commentator, ESPN (US television) (1999-10-23)

[Compare the common usage, "if they had been able".]

(7) **Were** I he, ...

Overheard (1999-01-28)

[Bless you, sir ! This is much better than, "If I was him, ..."]

(8) An important <u>requirement</u> for equilibrium is that the temperature **be** uniform throughout the system or each part of the system in contact. <u>If</u> this condition **were** not met, spontaneous heat transfer from one location to another could occur while the system is isolated.

Moran MJ, Shapiro HN (1992). *Fundamentals of Engineering Thermodynamics* (2nd edition), ISBN 0-471-57117-2, p. 656.

(9) <u>What if</u> I **granted** you a kingdom?

From the movie, *Flash Gordon* (1980)

(10) It is <u>as though</u> you **had** become Messala.

<u>If</u> you **were** not a bride, I would kiss you goodbye. <u>If</u> I **were** not a bride,

there would be no goodbyes to be said.
From the movie, *Ben-Hur* (1959)

9. Regarding the use of the past subjunctive, Kenny (n.d.) states, "This form of the subjunctive mood is more common in modern speech. It is used to express regret or longing" (para. 1). The past subjunctive is also employed in hypothetical situations and may sound formal to many native-speakers. Kenny (para. 2) provides the following examples of the past subjunctive in daily conversation:

- "If only he **were** still alive."
- "I wish I **were** taller."
- "If that **were** the case, I wouldn't be alive today."
- "She eats as if she **were** an animal."
- "If only he **was** still alive."
- "I wish I **was** taller."
- "If that **was** the case, I wouldn't be alive today."
- "She eats as if she **was** an animal."

Conclusion

The past subjunctive is more common in contemporary English than the present subjunctive and plays an especially important role in expressing hypothetical situations. As English has evolved, the indicative mood has steadily been replacing the subjunctive mood. The widespread contemporary use of *was* instead of *were* for the third person in subjunctive constructions appears to indicate the continuation of this historical linguistic transformation. The use of the simple past form to express the past subjunctive seems natural and appropriate, since the simple past form helps to provide a useful psychological distance for speakers from hypothetical events expressed in subjunctive constructions. The 'unreal past' of the past subjunctive still remains an important feature of modern English and will likely remain so for several more centuries.

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