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# Diachrony and idiosyncrasy: The subjunctive in the first half of the nineteenth century

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ABSTRACT

The decline of the English subjunctive seems to have been temporarily reversed in Late Modern English. Several sources either state this as an observation or present studies whose results can be similarly interpreted. This article presents a part of an investigation that covered the period from the first half of the 16th c. to the beginning of the 21st c. and also produced a similar result. The investigation was based on examples manually extracted from a corpus specifically compiled for that purpose. The corpus consists of two genres, plays as a primary corpus and a reference corpus of non-fiction texts. Each genre is represented by two authors in a century and the texts that are included were published in the first half of the century. This contribution discusses the trend displayed by morphologically distinct instances of the subjunctive. Apart from the reversal in the first half of the 19th c., the analysis showed considerable individual variation, which is particularly pronounced in that part of the corpus. For most uses only texts by George Soane and Thomas Carlyle contribute to the instances of morphologically distinct subjunctive forms that create the reversal, in contrast with the overall numbers for the other two authors, M.G. Lewis and Charles Lamb, which are as would be predicted from the numbers in the previous and subsequent centuries. The higher numbers of subjunctive instances in the texts by Soane and Carlyle may be related to the two authors' general tendency to use archaic forms and constructions.

## 1. Introduction

The use of the subjunctive has declined over time and today its forms survive only in a small number of contexts. The decline does not seem to have been just a continuous downward trend: several authors mention a reversal in Late Modern English.

Jespersen (1924: 318) states that "from the middle of the nineteenth century there has been a literary revival of some of its uses", and this seems to have been confirmed in a study by Harsh (1968), i.e. in its part that deals with the use of the subjunctive in British and American plays from the 15th to the 20th c. The statistics for the two plays representing the late 19th c. show "a slight upswing in frequency of subjunctive structures and more pronounced increase in the percentage of inflected subjunctives" (1968: 84). Strang (1970 [1994: 209]) also mentions a reversal. She describes it as sporadic and places its beginning a century earlier, as a consequence of "the tendency to hypercorrection in 18c and later teachers and writers". Turner (1980: 272), however, claims that the decline continued in the two centuries mentioned by these authors "in spite of the predictable efforts by some of the early English grammarians to arrest the decline".

These opposing claims motivated Auer (2009) to investigate the use of the subjunctive in a corpus study. The study was for the most part based on ARCHER (A Representative Corpus of Historical English Registers) and an analysis of forms (subjunctive, indicative and modal periphrasis) that appear in the third person singular present in a selection of adverbial clauses from 1650 to 1990. Auer (2009: 70) indeed found a reversal when the data was examined in 50-year spans, but it covers the second half of the 18th c. and only the first half of the 19th c. The reversal appears as "a slight rise" in the percentage of the subjunctive. In the 1700–1749 part of the corpus, the subjunctive share is 24.1%, which increases to 24.9% in 1750–1799 and 25.8% in 1800–1849, and then falls to 15.9% in 1850–1899. *If* stands out in the selection of adverbial clauses that is examined as "the most frequently attested" one with the subjunctive, which in that type of clause "parallels the overall development" with 31.7% in 1700–1749, 35.9% in 1750–1799, 36.4% in 1800–1849, and 31.1% in 1850–1899. This leads to the interpretation that "[t]he fate of the inflectional subjunctive in adverbial clauses may therefore be dependent on the conjunction *if*". The other conjunctions are not found with the subjunctive in numbers that are representative enough, and in many cases the difference across the periods is in one instance only, if there is a difference or any instances of the subjunctive at all (2009: 72–4). Auer (2009: 86) considers that the reversal "could be ascribed to the influence of prescriptive grammars, and grammarians appear to have been temporarily successful in halting the decline in the use of the subjunctive".

This contribution presents an investigation into the use of the subjunctive in the period of Modern English that obtained results which can be related to the issues presented above. The investigation was based on the comparison of samples of texts of approximately equal size, i.e.

approximately equal amounts of text representing the 16th to the 21st centuries. This approach stemmed partly from an interest in the likelihood of finding different uses of the subjunctive in comparable samples throughout the period and establishing possible factors contributing to the retention or loss of this category.

There was no available corpus spanning the entire period of Modern English that could be used, so a corpus of a sort was assembled specifically for this purpose and examples were manually excerpted. Although the samples included were relatively small, they produced findings that can be interpreted as a reversal in the segment dealing with the first half of the 19th c., which is the only part of the investigation that is comparable to the statements and analyses presented above.

## 2. The corpus

The six centuries covered by the investigation are represented by texts published approximately in the first half of a century, i.e. the corpus consists of six subcorpora: 1500–1550, 1600–1650, 1700–1750, 1800–1850, 1900–1950 and the beginning of the 21st c. with texts published in the period 2000–2006.

The investigation was concerned with the subjunctive in standard British English, and particularly with usage in the literary tradition that formed the basis of the variety in Modern times.

There were several considerations in selecting texts for the subcorpora and they were all intertwined with the availability of certain types of text or specific texts. The main constraint in choosing text types was finding genres present throughout the Modern English period. Ultimately, it was decided that plays would form the primary corpus alongside a reference corpus of non-fiction texts.

Two authors were selected to represent each genre in the subcorpus. One reason for settling for only two authors was the assumption that it would be difficult to obtain texts of several different authors for the earliest period (1500–1550) and such editions of those texts that would be accompanied by notes and glossaries, which were considered rather necessary for understanding usages specific to that time. The composition of later subcorpora matched the choice of two genres and two authors[1].

[1] Many of the texts were found on the pages of the Internet Archive <http://archive.org>, Google Books <http://books.google.com>, and SCETI (Schoenberg Center for Electronic Text & Image) <http://sceti.library.upenn.edu>.

Since the subjunctive has become increasingly rare over time, the size of the subcorpus was determined by a desire to build a sufficiently large and yet manageable corpus which would increase the probability of sufficient findings. The size finally decided upon was approximately 42,000 words per author, which in total amounts to approximately one million words for the entire corpus.

There was an additional consideration intended to ensure that texts represented a subperiod more faithfully: the authors chosen were born within the last three decades of the previous century[2].

At the outset of the investigation it was decided to excerpt all morphologically distinct instances of the subjunctive[3] and all finite forms (subjunctive, indicative, non-distinct, modal verbs) in a selection of dependent clauses, which included those typically examined in studies of the English subjunctive. This contribution presents the part of the investigation dealing with the subjunctive forms only, findings for the 1800–1850 subperiod and how it compares to the previous and subsequent subperiods.

The 1800–1850 authors are Matthew Gregory Lewis (1775–1818) with the plays *Adelmorn, The Outlaw: A Romantic Drama* (1801), *Alfonso, King of Castile: A Tragedy* (1801) and *The Castle Spectre: A Drama* (1798)[4], and George Soane (1790–1860) with the plays *The Bohemian: A Tragedy* (1817) and *Faustus: A Romantic Drama* (1825). The non-fiction authors are Charles Lamb (1775–1834) with a selection of essays from *The Essays of Elia* (1823) and Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881) with a selection of essays from *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays* (1839).

A few remarks are needed with regard to instances that were included in the analysis. The constructions of the type *all be it* and *how be it* were not counted because in the 1500–1550 subcorpus they seem to be fixed expressions, and the subsequent use of *albeit* posed the problem of diachronic comparison. Also not included in the count are the instances of *enter* in stage directions, which James (1986: 17) does include in his analysis of the subjunctive. The presence or absence of forms of this type was partly dependent on stage dynamics of particular plays, which would possibly have

[2] There were some exceptions from the criteria described above due to a lack of available texts: the 1500–1550 playwright Henry Medwall was born *c.* 1462, and his plays were supplemented by approx. 4,510 words from a play by John Rastell.

[3] The vast majority of the morphologically distinct forms that were excerpted are third person forms.

[4] This title representing the first half of the 19th c. was actually published in the preceding century, but it was the choice most similar to the titles by the same author that had already been selected. Only a part of it was used to supplement the needed number of words (approx. 3,920).

distorted the numbers. The use of *enter* and similar expressions generally seems to follow the fate of the subjunctive since they are not found in the plays in the last subperiod in the corpus.

The present tense form *be* with plural subjects was classified as subjunctive from the 1700–1750 subperiod onwards since its use as an indicative plural is evident in the first two subperiods.

## 3. An overview

When the total number of subjunctive instances in an author's text is charted, the corpus displays the trend shown in Fig. 1. Numerical information is given in tables in the Appendix. The numbers are compared directly, i.e. normalization is not required, as all the authors are represented with approximately 42,000 words each.

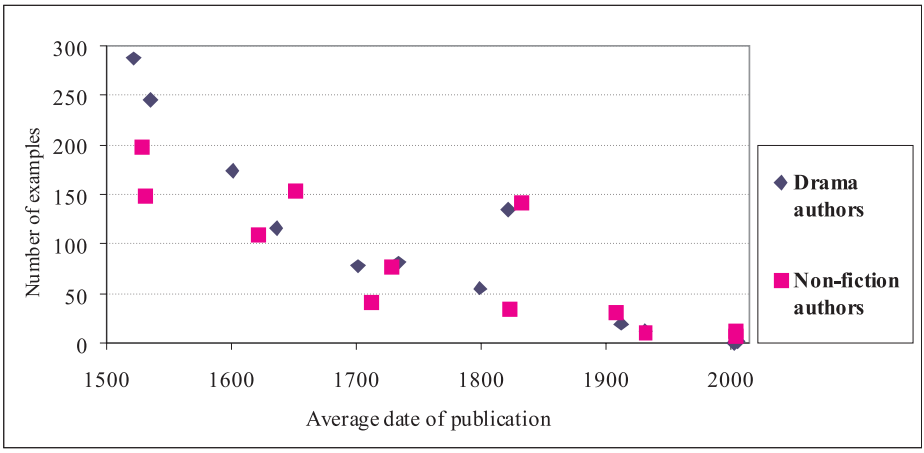


Figure 1. Total number of subjunctive instances in an author's text (approx. 42,000 words each)

With the exception of 1500–1550, the two genres mostly do not show as much difference as the authors within a genre. The difference between two playwrights in a subperiod is rather closely matched by the difference between the authors of the non-fiction texts, except in 1700–1750 when the two playwrights produce similar total numbers.

Different sources indeed describe the use of the subjunctive in Early Modern English as idiosyncratic. Görlach (1991: 113) states that "[b]efore 1650 the frequency of the subjunctive varied from one author to the next; no

regular distribution according to the type of text or style can be determined". Another author, Cannon (2010) examines the use of the subjunctive, modal preterite and modal auxiliaries as a "linguistic fingerprint" in establishing the authorship of an anonymous translation of Erasmus of Rotterdam's *Enchiridion Militis Christiani* that appeared in 1533. Moessner (2002) obtains results that show varying numbers for different authors in different genres in the 17th c. in an investigation of forms (subjunctive, indicative, and modal auxiliaries) after third person singular subjects in a selection of present tense adverbial clauses, which is based on electronic corpora consisting of different types of texts[5].

The findings of the present investigation seem to show the same phenomenon, both in the total numbers and numbers of some specific uses (cf. below), and suggest that it continued in the subsequent centuries.

The difference between the authors within a genre probably indicates the range of individual variation in the period, or at least part of that range, since there are only two authors involved. The plays generally have more subjunctive forms throughout the corpus, but in 1900–1950 the two genres change place, i.e. the non-fiction texts in the last two periods have more instances than the plays.

The difference between the plays and non-fiction texts in the 1500–1550 subcorpus is due to higher numbers of the optative and hortative use, the present subjunctive in dependent clauses, especially *that*-clauses, and subjunctive *were* in main clauses. The optative and hortative use and subjunctive *were* in main clauses continue to be present in higher numbers in the plays of the subsequent three subperiods, but combined with the instances of other uses they do not differentiate the plays from the non-fiction texts.

The 1800–1850 subperiod shows the largest difference between the authors in the same category. George Soane in drama and Thomas Carlyle in non-fiction contribute results that are comparable not to those of the preceding subperiod, but to that of 1600–1650. Their contribution creates an average for the period higher than the one found in 1700–1750 and thus creates a reversal. The other two authors, M.G. Lewis and Charles Lamb,

[5] Two possible explanations are offered: "subjunctive frequency is either a function of the linguistic structure of the texts, i.e. of text types, or it is an idiosyncratic feature, a matter of personal style" (2002: 230). Moessner (2002: 234) concludes that "Görlach's statement […] can even be extended to the second half of the 17th century". She repeats the explanation that the use of the subjunctive is "largely a matter of personal style" as "(so far) the only plausible explanation" commenting on one author's particularly low number of instances in handbooks, the genre that contained the highest number of instances.

seem to conform to the trail of scattered numbers that represent the authors in the other periods, which show a clear trend of decline.

The narrowing range of numbers shows the reduction in both the number of instances and contexts in which these instances appear.

The following sections present the numbers when distinguished between the present and past tenses of the subjunctive, and its use in main and dependent clauses.

## 4. The optative and hortative subjunctive

This article discusses morphologically distinct instances of the subjunctive, which are usually perceived as such compared to the morphologically distinct forms of the indicative. However, the optative and hortative subjunctive is compared to the imperative because of some similarities in use (e.g. Traugott 1992: 184–5), and although the formal distinctions between these two moods are lost by the Modern English period, many descriptions retain the classification. Furthermore some third person instances that are historically subjunctives (see Mitchell 1985: 378) are discussed as "third person imperatives", with the mention of ambiguities that can be present (e.g. Blake 2002: 110–3).

Davies (1979: 84) states that "[a]ll imperatives have participant occupancy of the decider role" (the decider may be the speaker or the addressee), while the subjunctives are described as having "third-party occupancy of the role". The classification of third person instances was largely based on this interpretation, and the instances that could be interpreted as "third person imperatives" were not included in the subjunctive count, possibly based on a very subjective understanding of what is said.

Some examples that are very similar in structure were, thus, classified differently because of the semantic and pragmatic differences involved. To illustrate this point, here are some instances that were found in the 1800–1850 subcorpus. Example (1) was classified as "subjunctive", and so were the instances in (2), the first one of which could be treated as analogous with (1) due to the similarity in structure, with the difference that it is not good wishes that are conveyed:

(1) *Heave'n's peace be on thy head*. (Soane 1817: 54)

(2) *Th' eternal curse be on them! The archfiend*
*Enfold them to his breast of flames!* (Soane 1817: 46)

In (3) below that analogy is not observed because the situation is much more dependent on the speaker's volition or decision, since it is his curse that is cast:

(3) *My curse be on him!* (Lewis 1801b: 60)

Fig. 2 presents the numbers for this use in the corpus. The instances that were counted as "subjunctive" are presented as data series with solid shapes. For comparison, their numbers combined with "third person imperatives" are also given as series with empty shapes. Average values for subcorpora are indicated with a line for both: more specifically, the broken line indicates the combined numbers for "subjunctives" and "third person imperatives".

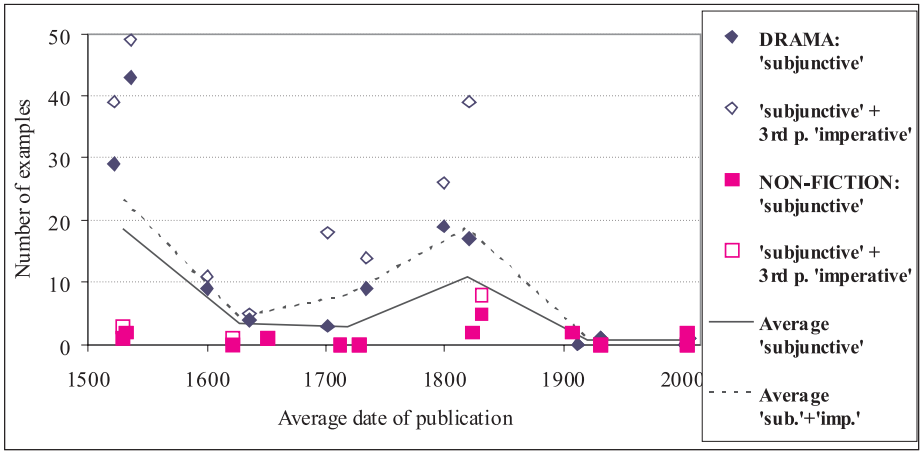


Figure 2. The optative and hortative subjunctive

The general trend is similar in both counts: the values for 1500–1550 and 1800–1850 are the highest. The 1800–1850 subperiod has noticeably higher numbers than the preceding two periods, especially in the case of the playwrights, and even higher numbers with the "third person imperatives" added, especially in the case of George Soane (cf. Table 2 in the Appendix). The addition of "third person imperatives" does not significantly affect the trend shown in Fig. 1.

It should be noted that 1500–1550 instances are typically of the type presented in (4)–(7):

(4) *Thanked be God* they had no stavys
Nor egetoles, for than it had ben wronge. (Heywood 1991: 107)

(5) *Gayus* Be they slayne? Nay, *God forbyde!*
*A* Yes, *so helpe me God*, I warande them dede. (Medwall 1980: 63)

(6) *Our Lorde spede you both where so ever ye goo.* (Medwall 1980: 85)

(7) *The devyll take the for thy longe taryeng!* (Heywood 1991: 86)

The examples found in 1800–1850 have a flair of their own and a more varied content, which is seen especially in some examples that contain successive instances, as in (8) and (9).

(8) Thy choice is made, and may
That choice prove all thy fondest dreams e'er pictured!
*Blest be thy days as the first man's in Eden,*
*Before sin was! Be thy brave lord's affection*
*Firm as his valour, lovely as thy form!* (Lewis 1801b: 53)

(9) *The grace of Heav'n be with you*; may its love
So teach your life that death may have no fear;
*Thy years be many, and no moment pause*
*To wish their number ended; be thy joy*
*As plenteous as autumn, rich, like that,*
*In fruit to those who cultivate its grace*. (Soane 1817: 59)

Thomas Carlyle's essays also contain a relatively high number of instances for the non-fiction part of the corpus, but 4 out of 5 examples found there are of the type *far be it from us*.

## 5. Subjunctive *were* in main clauses

The first and third person singular subjunctive form *were* appears in main clauses in the first four subperiods. Examples classified as main clauses include forms coordinated with *and*, *or* and *but*. All the other instances were classified as dependent clauses to avoid the determination of where to place mostly specific instances of clauses with *for*, which are found "[o]n the gradient between "pure" coordinators and "pure" subordinators" as discussed in Quirk et al. (1985: 920).

The use of subjunctive *were* in main clauses also shows a reversal in 1800–1850, as shown in Fig. 3:

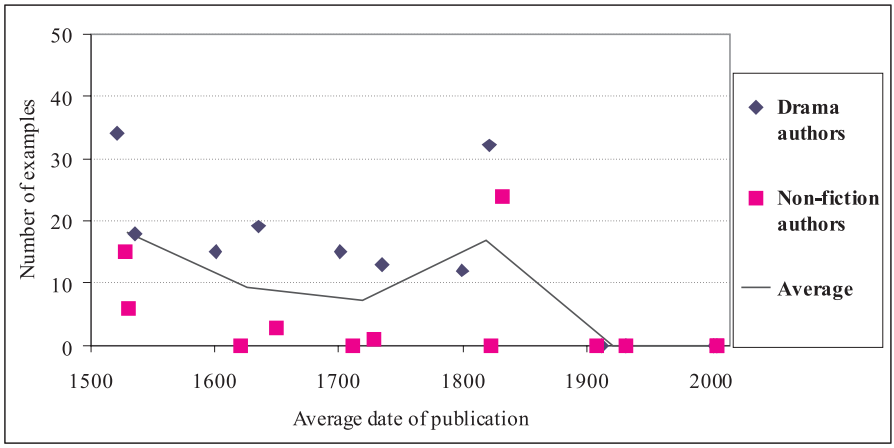


Figure 3. Subjunctive *were* in main clauses

The reversal is mostly the result of the numbers contributed by George Soane and Thomas Carlyle (32 and 24 instances out of 68, the total number for the period), who produce examples like the following two:

(10) I'll not betray you – *It were fruitless toil*
*To lop the gangren'd limb from one that's dead*. (Soane 1817: 91)

(11) Rudiments of an Epic, we say; and of the true Epic of our Time, – were the genius but arrived that could sing it! Not 'Arms and the Man'; 'Tools and the Man', *that were now our Epic*. (Carlyle 1904, 18: 162)

There are no instances of this use in the last two subperiods, in which *were* is replaced with *would be*.

## 6. The subjunctive in dependent clauses

The present subjunctive initially appears in dependent clauses in much higher numbers than the past subjunctive. In 1500–1550, the range in which present subjunctives appear is between 88 and 172 instances in an author's text, while in the case of *were* it is between 38 and 69. One reason for this initial difference may be that the present subjunctive has more morphologically distinct forms to be counted while the past subjunctive is represented only with *were*.

Another reason may be that the use of the present subjunctive is probably linked to the dominant use of the present tenses in the two genres investigated, if they can be compared with present-day genres for which there have been corpus investigations into tense distribution. Biber et al.

(1999: 456) present corpus findings on the distribution of tense in four types of register: conversation, fiction, newspaper and academic prose. The results show that "[c]onversation and academic prose are alike in showing a strong preference for present tense forms". Plays are characterized mostly by the present time orientation in the interaction of the characters as the plot develops on stage, and most non-fiction texts in the corpus may be compared to academic writing.

The numbers for the present subjunctive in dependent clauses are shown in Fig. 4. The high initial numbers make the decline steeper when compared to the numbers of the past subjunctive in dependent clauses in Fig. 5. To facilitate the comparison, both figures have the same scale on the axis with the number of instances.

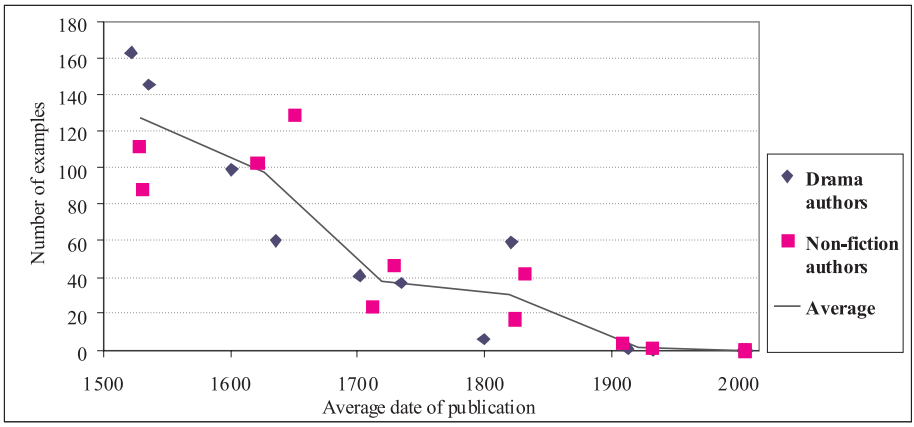


Figure 4. The present subjunctive in dependent clauses

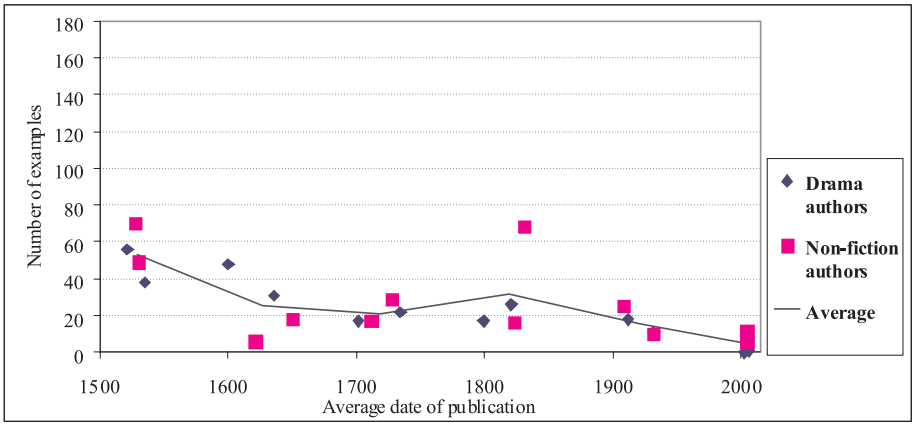


Figure 5. Subjunctive *were* in dependent clauses

The decline of the present subjunctive appears only to have slowed down in 1800–1850, while the past subjunctive in dependent clauses shows a reversal, albeit produced by Thomas Carlyle, who is the author of 69 out of 128 morphologically distinct instances in past dependent clauses in 1800–1850. He outnumbers the other authors of the period with similar or higher ratios in the past subjunctive conditional clauses with inversion, and clauses with *as* and *as if*. Conditional-concessive inversion is found only in his essays in the period. Some instances of those clauses are presented in (12)–(15):

(12) *Were there no epitomising of History*, one could not remember beyond a week. (Carlyle 1904, 18: 172)

(13) Thus in all Poetry, Worship, Art, Society, as one form passes into another, nothing is lost: it is but the superficial, *as it were the body only*, that grows obsolete and dies. (Carlyle 1904, 18: 39)

(14) In the same sense, too, have Poets sung 'Hymns to the Night'; *as if Night were nobler than Day; as if Day were but a small motley-coloured veil spread transiently over the infinite bosom of Night, and did but deform and hide from us its purely transparent eternal* deeps. So likewise have they spoken and sung *as if Silence were the grand epitome and complete sum-total of all Harmony*; and Death, what mortals call Death, properly the beginning of Life. (Carlyle 1904, 18: 16–7)

(15) [H]e who has battled, *were it only with Poverty and hard toil*, will be found stronger, more expert, than he who could stay at home from the battle. (Carlyle 1904, 18: 141)

Among dependent clauses, adverbial *if*-clauses deserve particular attention because of the numbers in which they appear: 42.4% of all the present subjunctive instances in the entire corpus are in adverbial *if*-clauses (500 out of 1178), and so are 22.1% of the past subjunctive instances (135 out of 611).

Adverbial *if*-clauses have already been reported as very frequent in some corpus-based studies that used selections of adverbial clauses to examine the subjunctive in different periods in the history of English. Auer (2009: 72–4) reports such a finding for a corpus-based investigation dealing with a selection of adverbial clauses in the period from 1650 to 1990 (cf. above). Grund – Walker (2009) investigated both the present and past subjunctive in a selection of adverbial clauses in the 19th c. They found *if* to

be "by far the most common conjunction introducing the subjunctive, and this is especially true of Drama, History, Science and Debates where *if* makes up over 75 per cent of the subjunctive examples" (2009: 99).

The numbers in which these clauses appear in the present investigation are shown in Figs. 6 and 7. The average for the present subjunctive in adverbial *if*-clauses shows a rather steady decline even for 1800–1850.

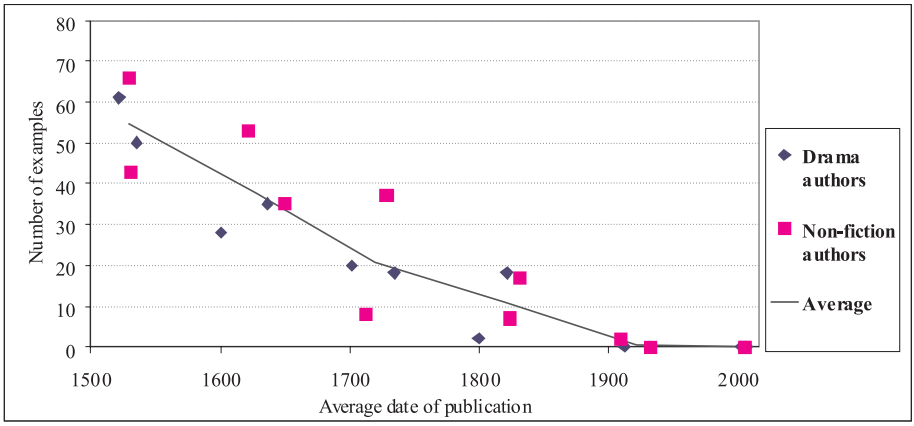


Figure 6. The present subjunctive in adverbial *if*-clauses

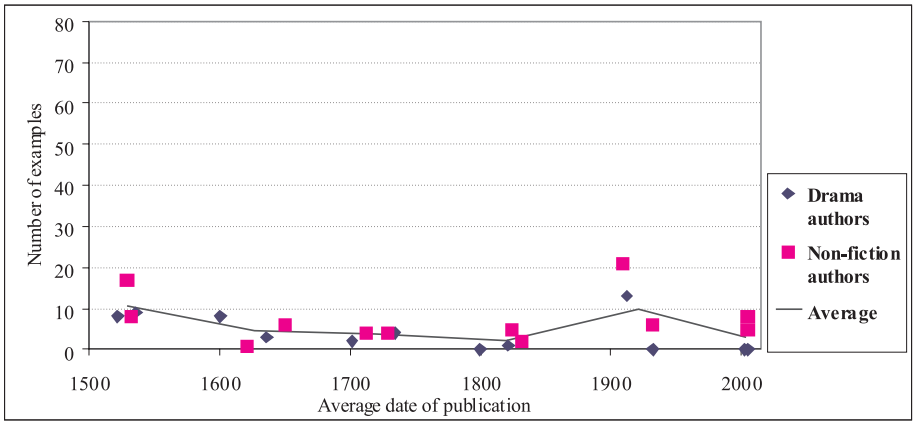


Figure 7. Subjunctive *were* in adverbial *if*-clauses

The past subjunctive appears in lower numbers with a less pronounced decline and a reversal in 1900–1950, which is followed by a decline. The same trend is actually present with non-distinct and indicative forms in adverbial *if*-clauses in this investigation, except that with the indicative forms there is no decline, but rather an increase, after 1900–1950. It is probable that specific

properties of the texts included play at least some part in these numbers; however, another finding suggests that the past subjunctive in adverbial *if*-clauses should be examined in comparison to the past subjunctive in other conditional structures. Instances of conditional inversion appear in significant numbers in the first four subperiods, and their share for the entire corpus is 14.4% (88 out of 611). Instances of conditional clauses introduced with *and* also appear in the first two periods with 4.4% (27 instances).

These two types of conditional clauses appear in almost complementary numbers in 1600–1650, 1700–1750 and 1800–1850, i.e. together with *if* they produce similar totals (47, 46 and 42 respectively, all the authors together in a period), but only in the case of morphologically marked past subjunctive forms. The past subjunctive in adverbial *if*-clauses thus shows no reversal for 1800–1850, only a continuation of a trend observed for the earlier subperiods in the corpus.

## 7. Additional observations

The higher numbers for the subjunctive in 1800–1850 seem to be part of a general tendency to use older and archaic forms, as well as structures that are relatively rare, judging by the authors in other subperiods in the corpus.

All the four authors in 1800–1850 have archaic features in their texts, especially the playwrights[6]. Two of these features are the use of second

[6] The setting of the plays seems to be the then-past. The time is actually specified only for *Alfonso, King of Castile*, as the year 1345. Archaic features can be linked to the setting of the plays; however, the subjunctive is not equally present in the use of the two authors.

The setting is discussed as relevant by Harsh (1968), since the results for the late 19th c. appear to be determined by one play in particular, Tennyson's *Harold*, which he sees as a confirmation of Jespersen's characterisation that it is "a literary revival" (cf. above). Harsh says that "there is the possibility, indeed the probability, that Tennyson used subjunctive (and other archaic) structures to suggest the linguistic patterns of the historical period (the eleventh century) in which the tragedy is set" (1968: 87). He also notes though that two other late 19th c. plays do have "fewer" and "very few" instances of the subjunctive, but the percentages of "total subjunctive modal structures per total finite verbs" are "high" and "rather high". The choice of past time settings may have some significance on its own.

The past features in the non-fiction texts in the corpus as well. Thomas Carlyle is a historian and among his essays included in the corpus are "On History" and "On History Again", but, in this case, the content cannot be used to explain the language in the same way.

person pronouns and negation without an auxiliary, as in (16) by Charles Lamb. Additional features that appear are a question with inversion without an auxiliary and the use of a modal alone where a verb of motion would also be used today, as in (17) and (18) by M.G. Lewis.

(16) *Dost thou love silence* deep as that "before the winds were made?" *go not* out into the wilderness, *descend not* into the profundities of the earth; *shut not* up thy casements; nor pour wax into the little cells of *thy* ears, with little-faith'd self-mistrusting Ulysses. – Retire with me into a Quakers' Meeting. (Lamb 1848: 28)

(17) HERMAN. *Owned he the murder?*
ORRILA. He did, but said 'twas committed in self-defence. (Lewis 1801a: 10)

(18) *I must to my husband's dungeon*. (Lewis 1801a: 64)

But George Soane and Thomas Carlyle seem to have more instances in some cases and exploit a wider range of structures. For example, George Soane's plays contain more instances of the zero relative pronoun in the subject position, as in (19). M.G. Lewis' plays also contain some instances, but in George Soane's plays they are more frequent[7].

(19) What suffocating fearful heat is this
*Comes creeping o'er my brain*. (Soane 1825: 11)

Only George Soane's plays seem to contain instances of combining two central determiners, as they are considered today, which is a feature typically mentioned in descriptions of Early Modern English:

(20) 'Mongst *these my vassals*, many, as I know,
Are servants to the bond. (Soane 1817: 46)

[7] There are four instances observed in M.G. Lewis' plays, while there are at least four times as many in the plays of George Soane (these examples were not regularly excerpted, so only an approximation can be given). However, personal style may be linked to different features, and a reverse situation is found with *nor* after an affirmative clause, of which there are some instances in Soane's plays, but many more in Lewis'.

This impression of the texts by George Soane and Thomas Carlyle is probably best supported by some instances for which it can be precisely stated how many of them were found in the corpus, because all of them were excerpted in the investigation (with a due reservation since examples were extracted manually and possibly something slipped through unnoticed). One of George Soane's plays contains the only instance of a present tense modal in a conditional clause with inversion. The modal is *can*:

(21) Ah! Thou art terrible, and I am nothing –
Yet no; *can I do this*, I can do more. (Soane 1825: 3)

Thomas Carlyle is the author of one of only three examples of inversion used in a conditional clause in the present tense, example (22). That instance is in the indicative; the other two are a subjunctive in 1500–1550 and a form with the second person inflection in 1700–1750.

(22) *Has any man, or any society of men, a truth to speak, a piece of spiritual work to do*; they can nowise proceed at once and with the mere natural organs, but must first call a public meeting, appoint committees, issue prospectuses, eat a public dinner; in a word, construct or borrow machinery, wherewith to speak it and do it. (Carlyle 1904, 17: 61)

In 1800–1850 we find the only two instances of what can be interpreted as the *be* past perfect subjunctive in the entire corpus. One is in an essay by Thomas Carlyle, example (11) repeated here as (23):

(23) Rudiments of an Epic, we say; and of the true Epic of our Time, – *were the genius but arrived* that could sing it! (Carlyle 1904, 18: 162)

The other is found in a play by M.G. Lewis:

(24) I've placed my light in the window. Would *Ludowick were come*! (Lewis 1801a: 43)

As has been presented in the introduction, some commentators interpret the reversal in the decline of the subjunctive as a result of prescriptive influence. Prescriptive grammar may be responsible, but there are other rare or archaic uses in the 1800–1850 texts as well, which leads to the conclusion that there may be something else that motivates the use of the subjunctive and those

other forms that seem to emphasize the connection to the past and the past tradition in those texts. Particularly, the plays of the 1800–1850 subperiod are much more comparable in content, style and language to the plays in the preceding subperiods than to those of the following 1900–1950 subperiod.

The 1800s are very important for historical linguistics, and the context of the time has been noted for its ideological import in matters of language. Milroy (1999: 28) discusses the influence of standardisation on descriptive linguistics and mentions the 19th c. and "an insistence on the lineage of English as a Germanic language with a continuous history as a single entity" relative to "the development of strong nationalism in certain northern European states and the identification of the national language as a symbol of national unity and national pride".

The use of the subjunctive and those rare and archaic forms may be an expression of the same or similar views about the continuity and history of English, which may have been present already in the previous century. The reversal of the decline could be interpreted as a result of an increased interest in bringing back the features that had disappeared or started to disappear and were symbolic of the language tradition. Such attitudes may be more strongly reflected in the language use of some authors and linked to personal style[8].

This interpretation may also account for some differences in the use of the subjunctive presented above for 1800–1850. The increase in the instances of the optative and hortative subjunctive and *were* in main clauses might show their symbolic value in emulating the usage of the past and they may be among the salient features of a text that mark it for certain style. After 1800–1850 *were* in main clauses does not appear, and the optative and hortative use is greatly reduced, which agrees with the explanation that the increased use is an effect of an influence external to the grammatical system.

The use of the subjunctive in dependent clauses may show a combined influence of several factors. The decline in use of the present subjunctive is only slowed down in the results of this investigation, and Auer (2009: 70) reports a slight increase, so that use may largely show a structural change.

The past subjunctive in dependent clauses may show a tendency to use structures that are marked by the subjunctive as a feature that is being revived. There is also a possibility that some writers rely more on strategies of writing that use hypothetical forms to present or demonstrate a point:

[8] However, it should be noted that in most plays the setting is non-Germanic and continental.

something with which the subjunctive conveniently tallies (cf. examples 12–15 by Thomas Carlyle).

## 8. Conclusion

The increased use of the subjunctive in 1800–1850 is found in the texts that seem to be more marked by the use of other older or rare features as well, and therefore it may be related to the author's style and general tendency to use such forms and constructions.

The use of the subjunctive in the earlier periods may have shown individual variation that continued into the later periods, and became even more linked to personal style as the category had been disappearing from use and grown less obligatory. In the earlier periods, the subjunctive may have been indirectly linked to personal style through grammatical contexts in which it was still dominantly found; the link probably becomes more direct later.

Late Modern English shows a reversal in the present investigation mostly because of the instances found in the text of one author in both genres in 1800–1850, which suggests that reversal is possibly not dependent on genre. Auer's (2009: 83) study is based on a corpus that comprises texts of nine genres and "eight out of nine genres showed a blip or an upward trend either in the second half of the eighteenth century or the first half of the nineteenth century". If individual variation continued to characterize the use of the subjunctive into Late Modern English, some authors may have been more responsible than others for the increase in use.

The variation present in the corpus may be due to the specific authors included in the corpus, but it also presents the question of whether the possible reversal in the decline of the subjunctive can be found in a general increase in the number of instances of different uses of the subjunctive throughout the community, or in individual choices, of which some may have been more prominent and noticeable. In such a case, different observers may draw different conclusions about the development of the category. If it is observed as a property related more to personal style, and not a generally shared trend, it may be dismissed as not a genuine language change, or not the same type of change as the previous decline.

The increase possibly should not be viewed only as a reversal but also as a way in which what Görlach (1991: 1) calls "diachrony in synchrony" may be present and possibly used to reflect attitudes about language and literary tradition.

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APPENDIX

The authors in the corpus:

| | | 1500–1550 | 1600–1650 | 1700–1750 | 1800–1850 | 1900–1950 | 2000–2005 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Drama | a | H. Medwall & J. Rastell | Ben Jonson | Nicholas Rowe | M.G. Lewis | W.S. Maugham | Shelagh Stephenson |
| | b | John Heywood | James Shirley | George Lillo | George Soane | Noël Coward | Laura Wade |
| Non-fiction | c | Thomas More | Robert Burton | Joseph Addison | Charles Lamb | G.K. Chesterton | Nick Hornby |
| | d | Thomas Elyot | Thomas Hobbes | Francis Hutcheson | Thomas Carlyle | Aldous Huxley | Charlie Brooker |

Table 1. Total number of subjunctive instances in an author's text (approx. 42,000 words)

| | | 1500–1550 | 1600–1650 | 1700–1750 | 1800–1850 | 1900–1950 | 2000–2005 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Drama | a | 287 | 174 | 78 | 55 | 19 | 0 |
| | b | 245 | 116 | 81 | 135 | 12 | 2 |
| Non-fiction | c | 199 | 109 | 41 | 35 | 31 | 12 |
| | d | 148 | 153 | 77 | 140 | 11 | 8 |
| Average | | 219.75 | 138.00 | 69.25 | 91.25 | 18.25 | 5.50 |

Table 2. The optative and hortative subjunctive[9]

| | | 1500–1550 | 1600–1650 | 1700–1750 | 1800–1850 | 1900–1950 | 2000–2005 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Drama | a | 29 | 9 | 3 | 19 | 0 | 0 |
| | b | 43 | 4 | 9 | 17 | 1 | 1 |
| Non-fiction | c | 1 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 0 |
| | d | 2 | 1 | 0 | 5 | 0 | 2 |
| Average | | 18.75 | 3.50 | 3.00 | 10.75 | 0.75 | 0.75 |

[9] The numbers of "3rd person imperatives" that are added to the instances that were classified as "subjunctive" are the following: in 1500–1550 H. Medwall 10, J. Heywood 6 and T. More 2; in 1600–1650 B. Jonson 2, J. Shirley 1 and R. Burton 1; in 1700–1750 N. Rowe 15 and G. Lillo 5; in 1800–1850 M.G. Lewis 7, G. Soane 22 and T. Carlyle 3.

Table 3. Subjunctive *were* in main clauses

| | | 1500–1550 | 1600–1650 | 1700–1750 | 1800–1850 | 1900–1950 | 2000–2005 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Drama | a | 34 | 15 | 15 | 12 | 0 | 0 |
| | b | 18 | 19 | 13 | 32 | 0 | 0 |
| Non-fiction | c | 15 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | d | 6 | 3 | 1 | 24 | 0 | 0 |
| Average | | 18.25 | 9.25 | 7.25 | 17.00 | 0 | 0 |

Table 4. The present subjunctive in dependent clauses[10]

| | | 1500–1550 | 1600–1650 | 1700–1750 | 1800–1850 | 1900–1950 | 2000–2005 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Drama | a | 163 | 99 | 41 | 6 | 1 | 0 |
| | b | 145 | 60 | 36 | 59 | 0 | 0 |
| Non-fiction | c | 112 | 103 | 24 | 17 | 4 | 0 |
| | d | 88 | 129 | 47 | 42 | 1 | 0 |
| Average | | 127.00 | 97.75 | 37.00 | 31.00 | 1.50 | 0 |

Table 5. Subjunctive *were* in dependent clauses

| | | 1500–1550 | 1600–1650 | 1700–1750 | 1800–1850 | 1900–1950 | 2000–2005 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Drama | a | 56 | 48 | 17 | 17 | 18 | 0 |
| | b | 38 | 31 | 22 | 26 | 11 | 1 |
| Non-fiction | c | 70 | 6 | 17 | 16 | 25 | 12 |
| | d | 49 | 18 | 29 | 68 | 10 | 6 |
| Average | | 53.25 | 25.75 | 21.25 | 31.75 | 16.00 | 4.75 |

Table 6. The present subjunctive in adverbial *if*-clauses[11]

| | | 1500–1550 | 1600–1650 | 1700–1750 | 1800–1850 | 1900–1950 | 2000–2005 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Drama | a | 61 | 28 | 20 | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| | b | 50 | 35 | 18 | 18 | 0 | 0 |

[10] There are only 21 morphologically distinct instances of the present perfect subjunctive in the entire corpus, and they appear in the first four subcorpora. They are not included in the numbers of dependent clauses presented. Morphologically distinct subjunctive instances of the past perfect are found only as two *be* perfects in 1800–1850, and they are also not included in the numbers of the past subjunctive in dependent clauses.

[11] The numbers of *if*-clauses in Tables 6 and 7 are contained in the numbers in Tables 4 and 5.

| | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Non-fiction | c | 66 | 53 | 8 | 7 | 2 | 0 |
| | d | 43 | 35 | 37 | 17 | 0 | 0 |
| Average | | 55.00 | 37.75 | 20.75 | 11.00 | 0.50 | 0 |

Table 7. Subjunctive *were* in adverbial *if*-clauses

| | | 1500–1550 | 1600–1650 | 1700–1750 | 1800–1850 | 1900–1950 | 2000–2005 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Drama | a | 8 | 8 | 2 | 0 | 13 | 0 |
| | b | 9 | 3 | 4 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Non-fiction | c | 17 | 1 | 4 | 5 | 21 | 8 |
| | d | 8 | 6 | 4 | 2 | 6 | 5 |
| Average | | 10.50 | 4.50 | 3.50 | 2.00 | 10 | 3.25 |