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On the Subjunctive Present
in Present-day American English

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1. Aim

The subjunctive present, which occurs in *that*-clauses after expressions of *demand*, *order*, *wish*, etc. and consists of the base form of the verb only, is characteristic of present-day American English. In my paper, I examine the degree of formality of the subjunctive on the basis of the distribution in text categories of the Brown Corpus and the relation between prescriptive grammar and the subjunctive construction according to the Brown Corpus.[1]

2. The frequencies in each text

Barber(1964:134) states "During and after the War, however, subjunctive forms increased in frequency, especially in the written language". Now consider in what type of category the subjunctive is most often used in writing.[2] Table 1 presents the number of subjunctives which occur in each category of the corpus.

Brown Corpus Categories	Number of texts	Number of subjunctives
1. Informative Prose	374	
A Press:reportage	44	27
B Press:editorial	27	9
C Press:reviews	17	1
D Religion	17	6
E Skills and hobbies	36	9
F Popular lore	48	19
G Belles-lettres, biography, memoirs	75	26
H Miscellaneous (Government Documents, Foundation Reports)[3]	30	14
J Learned and scientific writings	80	22

2. Imaginative Prose	126	
K General fiction	29	2
L Mystery and detective fiction	24	2
M Science fiction	6	-
N Adventure and western fiction	6	-
P Romantic and love story fiction	29	1
R Humour	9	1
total	500	126

Table 1: Number of subjunctives in each text category

in the Brown Corpus

Since the number of texts in each category is different, it is difficult to compare the number of the examples. It is, therefore, preferable that the average frequencies of subjunctives in a text are compared. Table 2 shows the average frequencies of subjunctives in a text.

Brown Corpus Categories	Average frequencies in a text
1. Informative Prose	
A Press:reportage	0.61
B Press:editorial	0.33
C Press:reviews	0.06
D Religion	0.35
E Skills and hobbies	0.25
F Popular lore	0.40
G Belles-lettres, biography, memoirs	0.35
H Miscellaneous(Government Documents, Foundation Reports)	0.47
J Learned and scientific writings	0.28
2. Imaginative Prose	
K General fiction	0.07
L Mystery and detective fiction	0.08
M Science fiction	-
N Adventure and western fiction	-
P Romantic and love story fiction	0.03
R Humour	0.11

Table 2: Average frequencies of subjunctives

in the Brown Corpus

Let us discuss the proportion of subjunctives in each text, refer-
ring to the previous observations. First, pay attention to category

A. Subjunctives occur most frequently of all in press reportage, which has not been observed before. Next, it can be noted that the subjunctive is clearly the dominant choice in informative prose, in comparison with imaginative prose. That is, few subjunctives are used in category K, L, M, N, P, and R. Barber(1964:134) states that the subjunctive has "spread" into 'literary language'.[4] Table 2, however, shows clearly that there is only sprinkling of subjunctives in the language of novels, short stories and so on. Thirdly, consider category H. According to Barber(1964:134), the subjunctive seems to have begun in 'the language of administration'. A large number of subjunctives should be in evidence in this category. Table 2 reveals that the subjunctive is frequently used, but not most often used. This means that the subjunctive has spread from the language of administration to less formal texts. In fact, it can be observed here that the subjunctive is spread through all the categories of informative prose, except that of category C.[5] It would be claimed, therefore, that although the subjunctive has not widespread in imaginative prose yet, the formal nature of the subjunctive has been waning. There is other evidence to consider; the deletion of *that*.

3. The deletion of *that*

The clauses introduced by the conjunction *that* illustrate the formal nature of the subjunctive. Chomsky & Lasnik(1977:485-6) state,"in subjunctive clauses, deletion of *that* is not permitted". However, as table 3 shows, the deletion of *that* can be seen, with respect to the use of the verbs, *insist* and *suggest*. The degree of usage of these verbs is 13.8%.[6]

	insist	*suggest*	total
frequencies of *that* deletion	2	2	4(13.8%)
frequencies of *that*	11	14	25(86.2%)
total	13	16	29

Table 3: Frequencies of *that* deletion

As is seen in examples [1]-[4] below, the tendency towards *that* being deleted even in the subjunctive clause can not be denied:

> [1] **h Bill Veeck's health is back to the dynamo stage, but his medics *insist* he *rest* for several more months before getting back into the baseball swim.(A16 1840)

> [2] Juras said he *insisted* Field *be* continued on a consultant basis only and be answerable directly to the administrator of the agency and not to other agencies of the government.(A23 0340)

> [3] His letter *had suggested* we *meet* at my hotel at noon on Sunday, and I came into the lobby as the clock struck twelve.(G12 0010)

> [4] The doctors *had suggested* Scotty *remain* most of every afternoon in bed until he was stronger.(K01 0520)

This would indicate that the formality of the subjunctive in present-day American English has decreased.[7]

4. The pre-position of *not*

There is another typical American construction to be considered, in addition to the *that* deletion. According to Quirk *et al.*(1985:156), "the verb phrase is made negative by placing *not* before the subjunctive form."

Visser(1966:847) comments as follows:

> It(=the pre-position of *not*) seems to have arisen --- quite recently, judging from the evidence come to light so far --- in the United States; it is probably not one of the numerous post-colonial survivals of mother-country usage. For at that time in England *not* was still often used without the *do*-paraphrasis, it was regularly placed in post-position in this case.

Kirchner(1954:123) also called this a "typical American construction", however, he (1983:507) mentions that "American literary historians are as yet fighting shy of this construction".[8] In addition, the observation that "*not* may be placed either before or after the subjunctive verb when *be* is used as a subjunctive verb"(Quirk *et al.*

Table 4 indicates disagreement with Kirchner(1983) and Quirk *et al.*(1985).

pre-pition		post-position	
be	others	*be*	others
4	2	-	-

Table 4: Position of subjunctive verbs

Only a few *that*-clauses with negative constructions are noted, because "it is more natural to command what is to be done than what is not take place".(Johansson *et al.* 1988:30). As far as my study is concerned, however, there is no evidence of "fighting shy" of the pre-position of *not*:

[5]   I *urge* once again that the Congress *not reenact* this rider.(H21 1120)

[6]   On the one hand do we argue the Supreme Court decision *required* only that a child *not be* denied admission to a school on account of his race? (J48 1330)

Moreover, even in the case of *be*, *not* is not placed in post-position (see [6]). That is, the typical American style of usage, where *not* is placed before verbs in the subordinate clause, has not been changed.

5. Conclusions

The following conclusions are drawn:

1. A study of the distribution in text categories reveals: a)The subjunctive is typically used in press reportage, which has not been noted before.   b)The subjunctive is used quite rarely in imaginative prose, which is incompatible to Barber's contention. c)In informative prose, the subjunctive is spread throughout almost all the categories and used frequently.   In the language of administration, fewer subjunctives were found than expected.   This

indicates the decrease of the formality of the subjunctive.

2. A further indication, which confirms the decreasing formality in the use of the subjunctive, is the tendency towards *that* being deleted even in the subjunctive clauses.

3. Despite the grammarians' assertion, the tendency for *not* to be placed in pre-position of the subjunctive verbs was clearly seen. In addition, it was irrelevant to the position of *not* whether *be* was used in the subjunctive clause or not.

Notes

1. The material for my study is: the Brown Corpus, a million-word collection of present-day American English, comprising 500 printed texts of approximately 2000 words under 15 text categories, aimed at a general representation of text types for use in research on a broad range of the language.

2. In counting examples, if there were more than one base form of the verb in one subordinate clause, only the first occurrence was included:

> Does this man live in a neighborhood where all are free loaders unwilling to help themselves, but ready to *demand* that "the community" *help* and *protect* them?(B17 0200)

If there were more than one clause after a subjunctive-taking word, each base form of the verb in each clause was counted:

> Two of the vital qualities *demanded* of a politician by other politicians are that he always *keep* a confidence and that he *keep* his word. (B03 0120)

The reason for this is that there is a case in which a subjunctive present clause and a *should* clause are conjoined, as in:

> She *suggested* that Ricki *come* to Kol Israel in Jerusalem and have lunch with her and that they *should visit* Eilat, Israel's version of Miami Beach.(S. Berman, *Driver, Give a Soldier a Lift*, cited in Konishi 1981:297)

Non-distinctive forms are not included in my study:

> I would like to *suggest* that landlord and Commission *get* together and *consider* liberalizing the practice of prohibiting dogs in apartments.(B17 1580)

The sample code (letter for text category + number of text) and the

line number are given at the end of each example.

3. In category H, 'industry reports', 'college catalogue' and 'industry house organs' are also included, but they are not taken into consideration in the present study because the subjunctive was not found in these texts.

4. If 'literary' were to be considered in a broad sense, category G could be included. In this category, the subjunctive is rather frequently used. In general, however, 'literary language' is not the language of belles-lettres or memoirs but the language of novels or short stories.

5. Surprisingly, usage is quite different between reportage and reviews. It is, however, difficult to draw any conclusion in this regard.

6. Similarly, in *The Reader's Digest*(1988 1-1988 12), *that* deletion occurred 3 times with *insist*, once with *request*, and 4 times with *suggest*.

7. In the LOB corpus, the British counterpart of the Brown Corpus, there is only one clause that is not introduced by the conjunction *that*.(Johansson 1988:30)

8. See the following example: Very little of his verse was published in his day, but he left enough in m. s. to fill a large volume, with the *request* that it *be not* pointed.(1948 Kenneth B. Murdock, in *Literary History of the U.S.* p.55, cited by Kirchner 1983:507)

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