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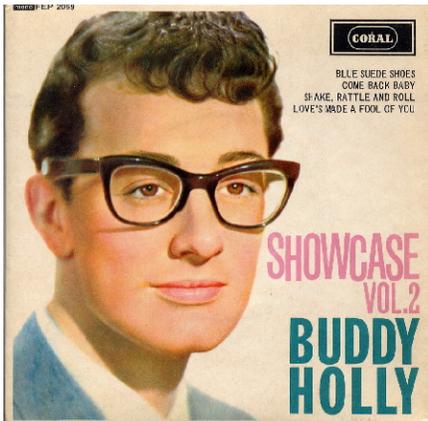
Lingua Franca

Language and writing in academe.

March 29, 2016 by Geoffrey Pullum

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Being a Subjunctive



Teaching them who Buddy Holly was would be more valuable than trying to make them shun covertly inflected mandative clauses.

For grammar bullies “the subjunctive” is sacred ground. Reforms proposed for the British national curriculum in 2012 required teaching use of the subjunctive not later than sixth grade. People seem to think the subjunctive is a fragile flower on which civilization depends; without our intervention it will fade and die, and something beautiful, fragile, and important will be lost.

As usual, virtually none of the things people believe about the subjunctive or its status in English are true. Most purists who witter on about it couldn’t actually pass a test on distinguishing subjunctive from nonsubjunctive clauses to save their sorry asterisks.

But then they don’t have to: Merely mentioning the subjunctive approvingly and urging that it be taught is enough to establish one’s credentials as a better class of person — one who knows about subjunctives.

This post is simply an attempt at surveying the facts (imperfectly; but see Rodney Huddleston’s beautiful treatment in *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*, henceforth *CGEL*, pages 993–1,000).

It’s not about verbs. English has an odd fondness for homophony or homography in verb forms: Grammatically distinct forms of verbs often share spellings or pronunciations, so you get fewer distinct shapes than you might have expected in the inflection table; but it’s crystal clear there is no point in having a “subjunctive” box anywhere in that table. Not a single verb in the language has a special subjunctive shape. *CGEL* distinguishes three tensed forms and three untensed for typical verbs. Here’s the array for **shake** and **bake**:

	plain present	<i>take</i>	<i>bake</i>
TENSED	3rd-singular present	<i>takes</i>	<i>bakes</i>
	preterite (simple past)	<i>took</i>	<i>baked</i>
	past participle	<i>taken</i>	<i>baked</i>
UNTENSED	gerund-participle	<i>taking</i>	<i>baking</i>
	plain form	<i>take</i>	<i>bake</i>

Shake has distinct shapes for the preterite and the past participle; **bake** doesn’t. Both share shapes for the **plain present** and the **plain form** (the latter is used in imperatives, in infinitivals, after modals, and elsewhere). Yet one verb in English—the weirdest yet commonest one, namely **be**—has a plain form different from all its other forms: *be* does not share its shape with *is*. Notice the contrast between present tense and imperative with **shake** and **be** (I underline the crucial forms):

Shake it vigorously. She is careful. Be careful.

[1] *He shakes it vigorously.*

With both verbs you can contrast present-tense clause with imperative; but with **be** you actually see a different verb form shape.

Now I'm ready to define English subjunctive clauses. They are **finite yet tenseless** clauses with their verb in the **plain form**. Virtually all are subordinate clauses, usually introduced by the standard finite-clause subordinator *that*. (A few optative main clauses with subjunctive form survive, relics of a bygone age: *Heaven help us, God damn you, God be thanked, Long live democracy, So be it*, etc.)

The subjunctives that are most robustly present in contemporary English are what *CGEL* calls **mandative** subjunctives. They go with verbs and adjectives of necessity, cruciality, or demand. A typical example (with the subjunctive clause underlined):

[2] *It's vital that he be more punctual.*

Finite clauses with pronoun subjects have to have **nominative** pronouns, hence we find *he*, not *him*. The finite declarative subordinator *that* is the same as in *Jill says that he is punctual*, but in [2] the subordinate clause verb (*be*) is in the plain form.

Today many speakers of Standard English substitute the plain present for the plain form in mandative subjunctives, and say *It's vital that he is more punctual* and so on. Yet even they have a subjunctive-clause construction, covertly, because they too see sentences like [3] as ambiguous:

[3] *Jill insists that I wear shoes.*

No contrast in meanings has been lost: It says either that Jill demands shoe-wearing or that she affirms I'm already a shoe-wearer.

By replacing first person in the subordinate clause by third person, we can make the difference pop into view for those speakers who use overt subjunctives, because two shapes emerge:

[4] *Jill insists that Jack wear shoes.* [unambiguously subjunctive]

[5] *Jill insists that Jack wears shoes.* [nonsubjunctive for all, covert subjunctive for some]

These patterns are simple, robustly entrenched—and not very important. If overt subjunctives disappeared completely, it wouldn't matter: Everyone would then be a covert-subjunctive speaker. The proportion of sentences that are ambiguous would be larger to some tiny degree. But English-speaking civilization does not hang on this, and there are many things more worth a sixth-grade teacher's time than whether the final *s* should be left off *wears* in [5]. Teach them what planets are; why dogs die; what the courts do; who Buddy Holly was; something more important than the footling matter of whether overt or covert mandative clauses are better.

[One footnote: Many discussions of English grammar refer to the *were* of *If only there were something we could do* as a subjunctive, often as the "past subjunctive"; but it's a totally different construction, the irrealis clause. The irrealis is overtly distinct only for the verb **be** (with every other verb the preterite is used), and only in the first and third persons, and only for some speakers. It occurs in certain clauses describing situations **not** claimed to hold in this world. It doesn't talk about the past at all: *I wish it were a different color* certainly isn't the past tense of **I wish it be a different color!*]

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Feckless Eric · 9 hours ago

Small point – the box displays forms for 'take' and 'bake' rather than the 'shake' and 'bake' referred to in the surrounding text.

And the CGEL has 'covert mandative' rather than 'covert subjunctive', doesn't it? Isn't calling it a 'covert subjunctive' almost going back to the days of Onions and classifying modals, modal preterites and all sorts of things as subjunctives on the basis of meaning rather than form?

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



Barrie England · 7 hours ago

Either 'shake' or 'take' needs changing. Otherwise, required reading for the UK's education administrators. Pity they won't read it, or will take no notice if they do.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



parma · 6 hours ago

The orange and blue box needs to match the text: replace "take" with "shake" there.

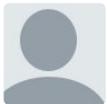
1 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



Russ Hunt · 6 hours ago

Please. Recognizing the subjunctive is one of the few language skills I have that let me be snobbish without guilt. Were it to disappear, I'd be lost.

3 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



Howard Roark · 6 hours ago

The table uses "take," rather than "shake." Mr. Pullum very adequately demonstrates that the subjunctive solves the ambiguity problem, then states that a bit of ambiguity is OK. Why not teach 6th graders the proper forms while they are young? There have been far too many compromises in the language already. Further dumbing down is not warranted. Civilization does not depend on this item--true--but why would we want to voluntarily promote an incremental escalation of English language entropy?

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share >

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jsryanjr · 4 hours ago

Mr. Pullum says that the mandative subjunctive is "robustly" present and entrenched, since the plain present, which is widely used (by The New York Times, for example) where a "grammar bully" would want the plain form, is in those cases actually a "concealed" or "covert" subjunctive. He says that "No contrast in meanings has been lost" in using the concealed subjunctive because two possible meanings still exist, and he rationalizes that the number of cases where it's ambiguous which one is intended is tiny relative to the number of all possible sentences. Channeling Eliza Doolittle's point to Henry Higgins that "England still will be here without you," he assures us that "English-speaking civilization" will survive such ambiguity.

I'm not sure I agree with any of this.

I see from a quick web search that the Oxford Dictionary of English Grammar identifies "covert subjunctive" as a usage of the Cambridge Grammar of the English Language, so Mr. Pullum did not invent it for this article. But what does "covert" communicate: that the subjunctive needs hiding? Why? Is it illegal or shameful? I don't see how the epithet "covert" makes a usage desirable.

As regards the appeal to relative frequency, surely we are discussing the subset of sentences in which case the use of the plain present is ambiguous (where the plain form would not be) 100% of the time.

And surely the partisans of English-speaking civilization would want to act so as to support it. How does stigmatizing a concern about ambiguity support civilization? Bullying is arguably a threat to civilization, but the article doesn't give instances of that.

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old nassau'67 · an hour ago

"Most purists who witter on about it,,," "witter"? maybe "twitter"?

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