

Use of Singular *Was* or *Were* After *If*: What do the Data Tell Us?

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Abstract

In this paper, I collected and analysed data from various sources to check for details about how *was* and *were* are used after *if*. All my sources were from the last 20 years, with sources from video series from Britain and America, and with groups of books with a common theme, such as the hypothetical idea of Jesus being married, which appears in *The Da Vinci Code* and other books that were used as source material by Dan Brown, the writer of *The Da Vinci Code*. Another group of books that I used were books about the Roman army during the days of the Roman Empire, written by four different authors with differing backgrounds. The other group of books that I used was the Harry Potter series, which are unique in that they have both British and American versions. Researching these books revealed data about the differences in the attitudes towards *was* and *were* when used after *if*. The results of my research showed that most writers simply use their own ideas of the rules: some writers more or less consistently used *was*, while other writers more or less consistently used *were*. This makes it very difficult for teachers to decide whether to teach their students to use *was* or *were* after *if*, particularly as whichever from they teach their students, the students will invariably come into contact with the opposite use. The data collected ten years ago from 10-year-old children in England, who are now of university age, give a key hint as to what forms of English teachers teaching English as a foreign language should consider when teaching university students in the present day (in 2013).

Summary of previous papers

In my previous papers (Jones, 2007, 2008, and 2012), I reviewed the changes that had taken place in the way that the second conditional, in particular, *if* with *was* or

were, has been presented in grammar books over the last 100 years. In Jones (2008), I divided the approaches in the grammar books I reviewed into the following five categories:

1. Only *were* is allowed; it is not interchangeable with *was*
2. The alternatives are given in the order *were/was* (or *was* instead of *were*)
3. The alternatives are given in the order *was/were* (or *were* instead of *was*)
4. Both *were/was* and *was/were* are given in different places
5. Neither order (*were/was* or *was/were*) is given anywhere

The following examples of Category 2 were given: Quirk and Greenbaum (1973), Leech and Svartvik (1975), and Burchfield (1985). The examples I gave of Category 3 were as follows: Thornbury (2004), Hewings (2005), and Eastwood (2005).

Basically, Category 1 is now rare; it simply refuses to accept that English is changing. Categories 4 and 5 are hedging their bets or avoiding making decisions, so only Categories 2 and 3 are viable. In Jones (2012), I reported my investigations into grammar books that I had located in the time since Jones (2008), and found that there were no examples of new grammar books in Category 2. Examples of Category 3 included Swan (1985), Winter (1986), Nettle and Hopkins (2003), Sinclair (2004), Duckworth (2007), Powell et al. (2008), and Carter et al. (2011). In other words, the findings were that basically up to the 1980s, grammar books presented *were* as the standard and *was* as the alternative, but from the mid-1980s, the order was reversed and *was* was given as the standard with *were* as the alternative. In addition, in the 21st century, the verb form to use for the formation of the second conditional is given as the past indicative (not the subjunctive), with the word *were* treated as some kind of fossilised form, or in the words of Swan (1995), a special tense.

Present paper

In the present paper, I investigate data on the use of *was* and *were* to gain some insight into the way that they are actually being used in the 21st century. My hypothesis is based on the assumption that grammar books in general follow the trend several years later rather than act as an advance guard to lead changes. So for this reason, I selected sources of data that would be representative of the last twenty years.

Method of researching data

When I originally started this research more than 10 years ago, I had planned to use corpora to investigate in more detail the comparative frequency of *was* or *were* after *if* in second conditionals. At that time, the only alternative to using corpora was to read books and newspapers or watch videos and movies and note down by hand each occurrence. The main problems with this method are that it is not only time-consuming but it is also easy to overlook numerous occurrences. For that reason, it seemed a much more viable prospect to carry out this kind of search using corpora.

However, it soon became clear that using the results of corpora was not as informative as had been expected. The reason for this was that I had considered that there were basically only two possible combinations of *if* and *was* or *were*: the above-stated second conditional and the past tense in reported speech for questions – as in “Are you going” changed to “He asked me if I was going” in reported speech. It had become obvious early on in my research that these two possible combinations were in fact frequently confused even by well-educated writers or speakers. In the case of reported speech, it is almost as if the appearance of “if” raises a warning flag, saying “Remember to use *were*”. Moreover, there were also cases of *if* and *was* or *were* other than the two I have just mentioned, such as two clauses in the past, as in “If I was wrong, he was wrong, too.”

Unfortunately, the results of corpora often do not show clearly the context in which *if* is used with *was* or *were*, so it was impossible to draw firm conclusions from investigation of the data from the corpora. For example, Fowler (1926) had distinguished between the written and spoken forms, with *were* used for the written form and *was* frequently used for the spoken form. In the case of some corpora, there is no way to distinguish if the occurrence is a case of a written or spoken form (unless searches are run separately), or who the writer or speaker is, let alone if he or she is well educated or not, or speaking formally or not, or even if the occurrences were examples of singular or plural. This made it very difficult to use only the results of corpora for the purposes of this research.

At the same time, big changes had occurred in ways of collecting the data. At first, I made use of Kindle books on iPad. These Kindle books come with a search function which makes it possible to use the iPad to search for all occurrences of *if*. But this turned out to be not as simple as it seemed. If I started a search for the word *if*, the search function on the iPad would also show every occurrence of any word

including the combination *if*, such as *life*, *lift*, *different*, *difficult*, or *naif*. Luckily, this problem was overcome by using the Kindle reader itself. With the Kindle reader, any search for the word *if* would bring up only cases of *if*, not of any other word including the combination *if*.

It then became a matter of noting down all the cases of *if* that Kindle displayed in combination with *was* or *were*. As with the results of any corpora, the context of the word *if* was shown with several words before and after. However, by clicking on the displayed text, it was possible to go directly to the page in the book and to confirm exactly the context in which the combination of *if* and *was* or *were* was being used. The results of such searches showed very clearly that the combinations of *if* and *was* or *were* were not limited to the expected occurrences of the second conditional and reported speech; various other unexpected combinations, such as two clauses in the past mentioned above, also appeared.

Forms of conditionals

When teaching conditionals, the traditional way has for a long time been to teach the main three types, commonly called the first conditional, second conditional, and third conditional. This is certainly true of the situation during my teaching career. There are various other types of conditionals taught, such as the zero conditional, but for the purposes of this paper, I will consider only the first, second, and third conditionals. Their traditional forms are as follows:

First conditional (this is used for the present or future when the condition is possible)

If I am rich, I will buy a house.

If he/she is rich, he/she will buy a house.

If we/you/they are rich, we/you/they will buy a house.

Second conditional (this is used for the present or future when the condition is hypothetical, impossible, or unreal). In traditional explanations of the second conditional, the subjunctive is used for the verb in the *if* clause, but only the verb *be* has different forms in the indicative and the subjunctive (*was* compared with *were*). No other verb in modern English has any difference between the indicative and the subjunctive. In grammar books of fifty years ago, the subjunctive *were* was given as the standard form, with the comment that some people use the indicative *was*.

If I were rich, I would buy a house.

If he/she were rich, he/she would buy a house.

If we/you/they were rich, we/you/they would buy a house.

Third conditional (this is used for the past when the condition was hypothetical, impossible, or unreal)

If I had been rich, I would have bought a house.

If he/she had been rich, he/she would have bought a house.

If we/you/they had been rich, we/you/they would have bought a house.

In grammar books for most of the 20th century, these three forms were presented as if written in stone. However, have these always been the standard forms?

For the purpose of checking on the situation in the past, I searched for conditional clauses in the works of Shakespeare and in the King James Bible. These works show the situation with conditionals four hundred years ago. In the 20th century, the situation with the second conditional was that *were* was preferable for written English, whereas *was* could be permitted as an example of colloquial English. If we consider the works of Shakespeare and the King James Bible, Shakespeare's works are a prime example of colloquial English, so it might be expected to find examples of colloquial use, while the King James Bible, which was translated by leading scholars, could be expected to show the traditional grammar expected in written English.

Nevertheless, searching the works of Shakespeare and the King James Bible online revealed very clearly that, in terms of the forms used for conditionals, there was absolutely no difference between the two. At the same time, both of these sources showed that there was a major difference between the forms of the conditionals four hundred years ago and the forms of the conditionals given in traditional grammar books in the 20th century. This difference came not in the second conditional, which appeared in the same form as the traditional form in the 20th century, but in the first conditional. In the examples given above of the first conditional, the verb in the *if* clause in 20th century explanations always appears in the present indicative form, but in the time of Shakespeare and the King James Bible, the first conditional always used the present subjunctive, not the present indicative.

The following is a selection of quotations from Shakespeare (Henry IV Part 1) and the King James Bible (the early chapters of the Old Testament) showing use of the first conditional. So many examples appeared in Shakespeare's plays and in the

books of the Bible that I have given only the first examples that were found during my search.

Occurrences in Shakespeare, Henry VI Pt 1

Act 1 Scene 1: Bedford, if thou *be* slack, I'll fight it out.

Act 2 Scene 3: If thou *be* he, then art thou prisoner.

Act 3 Scene 1: Who should be pitiful, if you *be* not?

Act 4 Scene 4: If he be dead, brave Talbot, then adieu!

The above are merely a few examples from a long list of occurrences appearing in various plays. A search for the number of occurrences of “if he was/were” and “if he be/is” gave the following results:

“if he was”: 0 occurrences

“if he were”: 23 occurrences

“if he is”: 0 occurrences

“if he be”: 44 occurrences

In other words, every occurrence was of the subjunctive form; there were no occurrences of either the present or past indicative after *if*.

Occurrences in the King James Bible

Exod 1 6: If it *be* a son, then ye shall kill him: but if it *be* a daughter, then she shall live.

Exod 22 8: If the thief *be* not found, then the master of the house shall be brought unto the judges.

Lev 3 12: And if his offering *be* a goat, then he shall offer it before the LORD.

Again, the above are merely a few examples from a long list of all the occurrences with the present subjunctive after *if*.

On the other hand, one interesting example of the past subjunctive appeared in the King James Version of the translation of Luke 3:15, as follows: “And as the people were in expectation, and all men mused in their hearts of John, whether he *were* the Christ, or not.” This is retranslated as follows in a later different version: “And while the people were waiting, and all men were questioning in their hearts about John, if he *was* the Christ or not.” In other words, we seem to have here an early example of the confusion between second conditionals and reported speech. Both cases are grammatically the same construction, but one puts the verb *be* in the past subjunctive, while the other puts it in the past indicative. Some modern grammar books mention that one way of distinguishing between conditionals and reported speech is the possibility of using *whether* instead of *if*. If *whether* is possible, it

indicates that the construction is reported speech, not conditional. Yet here we have an example of *whether* being used (indicating reported speech) followed by *were* (apparently indicating that the structure is a conditional).

The above cases show that the use of subjunctive *be* for present conditionals in English was standard four hundred years ago. Grammar books of 150 years later, in the 18th century, also support the same use. In that period, there were three famous grammar books (Johnson, 1755; Lowth, 1762; and Murray, 1795). All three of these are available online. They all give similar paradigms, as shown in the examples below.

Subjunctive mood, Present tense (the subjunctive is called the conjunctive by Johnson)

I *be*, thou *beest*, he *be*

if I *be* loved, if thou *be* loved, if he *be* loved (Johnson, 1755, p. 45)

We can also find examples of the present subjunctive in the explanations that accompany the grammar points. For example, “If the latter *be* true, as it indisputably is, then auxiliary and principal united, constitute a tense, in one instance.” (Murray, 1795, p. 94.)

And the present subjunctive also appears in the following long explanation from Samuel Johnson:

Thus have I collected rules and examples, by which the English language may be learned, if the reader *be* already acquainted with grammatical terms, or taught by a master to those that are more ignorant. To have written a grammar for such as are not yet initiated in the schools, would have been tedious, and perhaps at last ineffectual. (Johnson, 1755, p. 51)

Going on another 150 years, in the middle of the 19th century, we can find the following quote from Abraham Lincoln showing his use of the present subjunctive *be* after *if*:

If there *be* those who would not save the Union unless they could at the same time save slavery, I do not agree with them. If there *be* those who would not save the Union unless they could at the same time destroy slavery, I do not agree with them. My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union. (In a letter to Horace Greeley printed in the New York Tribune, August 22, 1862)

And there is a further expression from the children’s story Jack and the Beanstalk, where in some editions of the story even in the late 20th century, the ogre comes in and says:

“*Be* he alive or *be* he dead

I'll grind his bones to make my bread"

The above quotation is particularly interesting as it shows an example of reversal of the verb and subject. With the present traditional forms of the second and third conditionals, it is possible to reverse the verb and subject to say "were I rich" or "had I been rich" instead of "if I were rich" or "if I had been rich". However, with the first conditional with traditional use of the indicative form of the verb, this reversal is impossible. Yet as can be seen above, if the present subjunctive is used, as it was several hundred years ago, there is no problem with this reversal of verb and subject.

In previous papers, I looked at only the presentation of conditionals in grammar books of English written in English. When I referred to two English grammar books written in Japanese, I found to my astonishment that even though my copies were of editions that were published fairly recently, they were still presenting the present subjunctive *be* as an alternative form for the first subjunctive.

If it is (or be) fine tomorrow, I will go. (Inoue 1982, p. 429)

If he be a fool... (Miyabe 1985, p. 79)

In an era where grammar books are moving towards making the teaching of conditionals easier, it is puzzling to think why these two books felt the need to introduce a form that is obsolescent, if not obsolete.

Sources of the data

As I explained in my previous papers, when reading newspapers, I began to notice an increase in the number of occurrences where *was* was used after *if*. I had initially used the corpora to research the number of occurrences, but as I have already said, the corpora do not show clearly where the data come from, in terms of whether the occurrence is spoken English or written English, or the context in which the occurrence is used, or the type of person using it, or in particular, if it is a case of the use of the singular or plural. As a result of this, I decided to collect data from the following sources.

At the time that I started to collect data, the American sitcom *Friends* was popular on television. In this programme there is a distinct difference in the use of *was* or *were* according to the speaker. For example, one of the friends, Ross, is a stickler about the use of English grammar. Ross is a university professor whose field of expertise is dinosaurs – maybe this choice was deliberate, hinting that Ross' type

of English belongs to the time of the dinosaurs. Even though Ross realises that his friends make fun of him for his rigid following of the traditional rules of English grammar, he still cannot stop himself from commenting on his friends' failure to use "proper" grammar, as shown in the following scene.

Phoebe: And there's the added mystery of who gets who.

Ross: Who gets whom. (Speaking to Phoebe)

I don't know why I do that. (Speaking to himself)

But it is correct. (Season 4 Episode 8)

Interestingly, when I input the above quote, Word displayed a green line to flag the word "whom" in "Who gets whom" in the second line, indicating a possible grammatical problem, but did not flag the second "who" in "who gets who" in the line spoken by Phoebe.

Even Ross' own sister, Monica, who actually usually follows Ross' rules of grammar, suggested the following reason as to why people don't like Ross.

Monica: Because he's always correcting people's grammar?

"Whom, whom". Sometimes it's "who"! (Season 5 Episode 22)

To balance this American programme, I also researched a British video series, *Inspector Morse*. Like Ross in *Friends*, the main character, Inspector Morse, a graduate of Oxford University, is proud of using proper English grammar; like Ross with his friends, he does not hesitate to correct his subordinate if he does not follow Morse's ideas of proper grammar, as shown in the following scene.

Lewis: No such luck. I might have been a Chief Inspector by now if I was.

Morse: "*Were*", Lewis. If you *were*. You'll never get on if you can't master your subjunctives.

In addition to these two video series, I also researched several types of books.

The first group, which I refer to as the Hypothetical Group, consisted of *The Da Vinci Code*, and two other books: *The Templar Revelation* and *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*, which provided hints for the plot of *The Da Vinci Code*. I selected these books because they are based on or propose the hypothesis that Jesus was married, so it could be expected that there would be many cases of hypothetical *if* followed by *was* or *were*.

The second group consisted of historical novels about the Roman army in the days of the Roman Empire. I selected these mainly because I was interested in such books, and also because they were mainly about Roman soldiers, whose use of Latin grammar was apparently far from the type of Latin found in classical literature of

that era. A further point was that the writers would probably have a classical background and might therefore tend to use traditional grammar in English; I was also interested to see if the writers would distinguish between the grammar used by common soldiers and the grammar used by their patrician officers.

The four writers that I chose were the following: Simon Scarrow (British, a former schoolteacher), Ben Kane (British, a veterinarian), James Mace (American, an ex-soldier), and Harry Sidebottom (British, an Oxford don, i.e. university professor). Of these, I had expected the greatest difference in grammatical usage would be between James Mace and Harry Sidebottom, with James Mace as an ex-soldier using the typical language that would be used by soldiers, and Harry Sidebottom as a university professor of Classics tending more towards the language used by patricians. However, the expectations in the case of James Mace, although being correct, produced an unexpected situation. Apparently, so many people complained about Mace's appalling lack of grammar that a grammar expert was called in to clean up his prose. As a result, the ratio of *was* and *were* in his books was close to that of the Harry Sidebottom books and far from the usage in the books by Scarrow and Kane. Incidentally, although James Mace's grammar was corrected by an expert, his spelling was clearly checked by somebody who had no idea how to spell or how to use a spelling checker. In the case of homophones, it seemed that the person checking the spelling almost invariably chose the wrong spelling from those provided by the spelling checker, the most egregious case being "he waived his hand" instead of "he waved his hand" (a most unusual mistake).

The final group consisted of the Harry Potter books. Apart from my interest in any difference between the students and teachers in their uses of *was* or *were* after *if*, there was also the added factor that all the books are available in both a British version and an American version, so it would be interesting to see how and where the American editors found it necessary to make changes in the original British version.

Results shown by the data

Tables 1 and 2 below give the results of a search using the following corpora: British National Corpus (BNC), Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), and Corpus of Historical American English (COHA). These corpora cover the following periods:

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BNC 1980s - 1993

COCA 1990 - 2012

COHA 1810 - 2009

Using these three corpora, I searched separately for “if * was” and “if * were” (meaning any combination of “if + was or were” separated by other words). The corpora reported the results for the top one hundred combinations. Of these results, the top seven combinations appear in Tables 1 and 2. In each of these three corpora, the top seven combinations for “if * was” were exactly the same items and in the same order.

In the table below, “n” indicates the number of occurrences and “%” indicates the percentage of occurrences for each combination as a proportion of the total for the top seven combinations. As can be seen, the percentages for each combination are almost the same in each corpus.

Table 1 Frequency of “if * was”

		BNC		COCA		COHA	
		was		was		was	
		n	%	n	%	n	%
1	it	2261	31.75	7590	28.68	7223	27.65
2	he	1394	19.57	5076	19.18	5799	22.20
3	there	1156	16.23	4388	16.58	4708	18.02
4	I	889	12.48	4111	15.53	3809	14.58
5	she	778	10.92	2890	10.92	2877	11.01
6	that	333	4.68	1307	4.94	947	3.63
7	this	311	4.37	1106	4.18	760	2.91
		7122		26468		26123	

Table 2 Frequency of “if * were”

		BNC		COCA		COHA	
		were		were		were	
		n	%	n	%	n	%
1	it	1373	31.88	7847	29.54	12354	30.74
2	he	732	17.00	5399	20.32	9588	23.85
3	I	680	15.79	5025	18.91	6773	16.85
4	there	674	15.65	3092	11.64	4321	10.75
5	she	487	11.31	3322	12.50	5127	12.76
6	this	214	4.97	998	3.76	1192	2.97
7	that	147	3.41	884	3.33	839	2.09
		4307		26567		40194	

The above Table 2 gives the frequency of “if * were” for cases where “*” refers to a singular subject; the results for plural forms, such as “if they were”, “if you were”, and “if we were” appeared in the top ten but have been removed from the table. The results for “if there were” have been left in the table even though the occurrences were probably a combination of the occurrences of both singular and plural, such as in “*if there were* a book I would read it” compared with “*if there were* books I would read them”. One other point to be noted is that all the combinations in the table are in the order given by BNC. As a result, the order for “if she were” appears as fifth on the list, but is actually fourth in frequency for COCA and COHA.

Another point of interest which does not appear in the above tables is the frequency of “if we was” (BNC 23rd, COCA 23rd, COHA 8th), “if you was” (BNC 10th, COCA 11th, COHA 8th), and “if they was” (BNC 28th, COCA 21st, COHA 9th). In these cases, a singular verb is used with a plural subject.

Taking the example of the top word, “it”, in both Table 1 and Table 2, the demands of traditional grammar would be as follows: the second conditional would require *were* after *if it*, giving “if it were”; on the other hand, reported speech would require *was* after *if it*, giving “if it was”. In that case, it would be reasonable to assume that the frequency is proportional to the comparative frequency of second conditionals and reported speech. However, the data from the other sources indicates that there is complete confusion between these two forms: *was* has become more common in second conditionals, while many writers, presumably influenced by the word *if*, use *were* in reported speech. At the same time, various other constructions appeared, which added further complications to judging the situation.

From these two tables we can see that in BNC, the overall use of *was* for the top seven items greatly exceeds the use of *were* for the same seven items. In the case of COCA, the total numbers for each item are similar. With COHA, the overall use of *were* for the top seven items greatly exceeds the use of *was* for the same seven items (exactly the reverse of the situation in the BNC). But if we look at the percentages, the percentages for each of the seven items are more or less the same in the two tables for all three items.

Table 3 below shows the total numbers and percentages of singular *was* and *were* after *if* for each of the authors and each of the video series that I investigated. Figures are given separately for the UK and US version of the Harry Potter books.

A word of caution is needed regarding the following table. The figures in the table indicate the frequency of use of singular *was* or *were* after *if*, but problems arise

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with deciding what a “singular” is. For example, one well-known difference between British English and American English is whether teams or groups are handled as singular or plural.

The following is an example of a passage referring to the house Quidditch teams that appears in the UK and US versions of *The Prisoner of Azkaban*.

Bloomsbury original (UK version, p. 135)

“If Hufflepuff lose to Ravenclaw...”

“Hufflepuff’ ll have to lose by at least two hundred points,” said George.

“But if they beat Ravenclaw ...”

“No way, Ravenclaw are too good. But if Slytherin lose against Hufflepuff ...”

The same passage appears in the Scholastic (US version, p. 187) as follows.

“If Hufflepuff loses to Ravenclaw...”

“Hufflepuff’ ll have to lose by at least two hundred points,” said George.

“But if they beat Ravenclaw ...”

“No way, Ravenclaw is too good. But if Slytherin loses against Hufflepuff ...”

As can be seen, the UK version has plural verbs after the names of the teams, whereas the US version uses singular verbs in every case. However, it is notable that both versions refer to the team as “they” in the third line of the quote. The above passage shows use of the first conditional, but this means that there would also be a

Table 3 Occurrences of *was* and *were* after *if*

Series	Was		Were	
	Total	%	Total	%
Friends	63	56.76	48	43.24
Morse	82	76.64	25	23.36
Video Total	145	66.51	73	33.49
Da Vinci Code	8	17.78	37	82.22
Templar Revelation	32	57.14	24	42.86
Holy Blood, Holy Grail	86	66.67	43	33.33
Hypothetical Group Total	126	54.78	104	45.22
Scarrow	319	87.40	46	12.60
Kane	109	85.83	18	14.17
Mace	78	59.09	54	40.91
Sidebottom	81	49.69	82	50.31
Roman Army Total	587	74.59	200	25.41
Harry Potter UK	185	79.40	48	20.60
Harry Potter US	184	78.97	49	21.03
Harry Potter Total	369	79.18	97	20.82
Grand Total	1227	72.13	474	27.87

difference if the passage had appeared as a second conditional. Although both the British and American versions would have *were* after *if*, the British version would be an example of a plural use of *were*, not a singular use; whereas the American version with exactly the same words would be an example of a singular use of *were*. This indicates the difficulty of differentiating when such examples appear in a corpus.

This situation is further complicated by the fact that many American teams include in their name their location and the special name of the team. For example, if we take the New York Yankees, we will find newspaper articles saying “New York wins” at the same time as “The Yankees win”. In other words, the use of the singular or plural changes according to which part of the name is used. Unfortunately, this becomes even further complicated by the fact that this basic difference is not always followed. The following quotes from The Japan Times July 6, 2012 from AP show this inconsistency.

Arsenal has lost a string of top players in the last few years.

Glasgow Rangers was barred.

Rangers has won a record 54 national titles.

Yu Darvish will not make his final scheduled start of the first half as the Texas Rangers attempt to get him some extra rest in his first season in the majors.

The first three quotes refer to British football teams, whereas the fourth quote is referring to an American baseball team. In the first quote, “Arsenal” is followed by a singular verb. But, disconcertingly, the other references to two teams with the name “Rangers” state “Glasgow Rangers was/has” (singular), but “Texas Rangers attempt” (plural). According to my understanding, Glasgow Rangers would normally always be plural, not only in Britain but also in America.

A similar apparent inconsistency appeared on CNN News July 25, 2012, with the following two statements:

“South Africa beat England by innings” (headline, verb in present tense)

“UK deploys extra 1200 Olympic troops”

This seems to mean that the use of singular or plural differs according to whether the group is a team (South Africa) or a political entity (UK).

Luckily, this particular problem did not appear so many times in the sources I researched. One case which did appear on several occasions in the Roman army books the use of “enemy” in expression such as “if the enemy were coming”. Is this a case of a singular “enemy” followed by a past subjunctive or of a plural “enemy” followed by a past indicative or subjunctive?

A further problem that appeared on one occasion was the question of whether a certain expression is a dialect use. For example, in some dialects of English the expression “we wuz robbed” (plural + *was*) is used – and very frequently according to the corpora (“if we was” appears in the top 25 of each of the three corpora that I accessed); on the other hand, in northern England dialects of English, the following kind of expression may appear: “I were reading book” (singular + *were*, and no article). The expression that appeared in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* was “if he weren’t when he went to Azkaban, he will be now.” This appears to me to be a dialectal use of a plural indicative rather than use of the subjunctive.

In other words, the decision as to whether *if* followed by *were* is an example of the use of a singular verb sometimes must be determined by subjective judgement when viewing the context, which is not always possible with the raw data from the corpora.

One point that must be emphasised here is that this paper is dealing with the frequency of occurrences of *if* with *was* or *were*. It is simply a descriptive analysis, and does not make any attempt to pass judgement on whether the usage is “correct” or “incorrect”.

Table 3 above gives the raw data for use of *was* or *were* after *if*. In the case of the video material, the occurrences were all examples of spoken English, and it was easy to distinguish who the speaker was. But with the books, a larger number of characters appeared, so it was difficult to list who the speaker was; at the same time, much of the text was narrative (written English, not spoken English), that is, the words of the writer.

For this reason, I carried out further analysis in different ways. In the case of the video material, I noted how many times each character used *was* or *were* after *if*. In the case of the books, I attempted to distinguish between the occurrences of specific types of construction using *was* or *were* after *if*.

Tables 4 and 5 give the figures for the comparison of the use of *was* and *were* by each character in *Friends* and *Inspector Morse* respectively.

Table 4 shows the relative frequencies of *was* and *were* in the American sitcom, *Friends*. “Others” refers to characters other than the six friends. There was a mixture of various characters who appeared only in a small number of episodes each. As can be seen, they show no particular preference for *was* or *were*. Ross and Monica, as mentioned previously, are brother and sister and display almost identical preferences, with double figures for the use of *were*, which is nearly double the

Table 4 Singular *was/were* after *if* in *Friends*

Character	Was	Were
Joey	10	2
Chandler	16	8
Ross	7	12
Monica	7	10
Rachel	13	5
Phoebe	5	6
(Others)	(5)	(5)
6 Friends	58	43

Table 5 Singular *was /were* after *if* in *Inspector Morse*

Character	Was	Were
Morse	30	9
Lewis	18	0
Dons/wives	6	4
Doctors/upper class	8	1
Police	6	5
Others	14	3
American doctor	0	1
19th century doctor	0	1
Total	82	24

frequency of their use of *was*. Three of the remaining four friends show the reverse tendency, with double figures for the use of *was*, which is three times the frequency of their use of *were*. The remaining friend, Phoebe, shows no particular preference.

Table 5 above shows the relative frequencies of *was* and *were* in the British detective series, *Inspector Morse*. The main characters in every episode are Inspector Morse and his subordinate Lewis. As already mentioned, Morse is a stickler for the correct use of subjunctives, but the figures in the table show that in fact the frequency of his use of *were* is not as high as would be expected. Actually, several of the cases where Morse used *was* should have been *were* if Morse had been following his own grammatical rules. On the other hand, his subordinate, Lewis, plays his part grammatically exactly as expected. He never uses *were*.

The other characters listed have the following meanings. “Dons/wives” refers to Oxford university professors and their wives, who would be expected to show a preference for *were*, but in fact do not. “Doctors/upper class” refers to medical doctors and members of the aristocracy, who also do not show a preference for *were*.

“Police” is self-explanatory and “Others” refers to various characters who appear in one or two episodes. The American doctor is a 20th century doctor, and the 19th century doctor refers to an episode where Morse is re-examining a murder case that took place more than a century previously, when the use of *were* was predominant

With the seven Harry Potter books, I compared the comparative frequency of *was* and *were* in the original UK versions (Bloomsbury) with the frequency in the US versions (Scholastic). The figures for the comparative frequencies are given in Table 6.

Comparison of the figures for *was* and *were* after *if* in the Bloomsbury and Scholastic versions does not reveal any big difference. The figures in the table above in italics indicate that in some cases, an occurrence with *was* in the Bloomsbury version has been changed to *were* in the Scholastic version and vice versa, with the sentence rewritten on one occasion.

Table 6 Singular *was/were* after *if* in Harry Potter books

Book		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Total	%
Bloom	was	27	10	23	<i>24</i>	<i>44</i>	<i>23</i>	34	185	79.7
	were	1	3	10	3	7	<i>10</i>	14	48	20.7
Schol	was	27	10	23	<i>23</i>	<i>42</i>	<i>25</i>	34	184	79.3
	were	1	3	10	4	9	8	14	49	21.1
Total		28/28	13/13	33/33	<i>27/27</i>	<i>51/51</i>	<i>33/33</i>	48/48	233/233	

Key to Books :

1. HP & the Philosopher’s Stone
2. HP & the Chamber of Secrets
3. HP & the Prisoner of Azkaban
4. HP & the Goblet of Fire
5. HP & the Order of the Phoenix
6. HP & the Half-Blood Prince
7. HP & the Deathly Hallows

Key to Publishers:

Bloom: Bloomsbury (UK original version)
Schol: Scholastic (US version)

Total 28/28 Occurrences in Bloom/Schol

Changes from *was* (Bloomsbury) → *were* (Scholastic)

- ... it might be easier to get past a dragon if he *was* (Scholastic: *were*) a ferret ...
- ... if he *was* (Scholastic: *were*) caught trespassing in Professor Umbridge’s office.
- ... if he *was* (Scholastic: *were*) caught ...

Changes from *were* (Bloomsbury) → *was* (Scholastic)

- ... if there *were* (Scholastic: *was*) any way to procure some ...
- ... if he *were* to tell anyone, Mr Weasley *would be* the right person. (Bloomsbury)
- ... if he *was* to tell anyone, Mr Weasley *was* the right person. (Scholastic)

Personally, I fail to find any logic or consistency in either the original Bloomsbury text or in the changes made by the Scholastic editors. As the main purpose of this series of papers is to suggest a consistent way for teaching the second conditional in English, I find these data to be of no practical use.

In the case of the books that I researched, many of the occurrences of *was* and *were* after *if* were in narrative text and were not examples of the usage preferences of any particular person except the writer. For the purposes of analysis, I divided into various types of usage of *was* and *were* after *if*. However, this was often problematical as in some cases exactly the same combination of words had to be allocated to different categories. On the other hand, there were many cases where *was* and *were* were both used, but the category was considered to be the same. The following are examples of choices that had to be made.

What if it was/were right, what would you do?

If it was/were right, what would you do?

If it was/were right, I gave one point. (Past)

If it was/were right, I would give one point. (Habitual)

If it was/were right, I would give one point. (Hypothetical future)

I wondered if his answer was/were right.

Sometimes, students would write a different, but correct, answer. If this was/were the case, I would give them full marks.

Even if he was/were here, I didn't see him.

Even if he was/were here, he would not be allowed to take the test.

If he was/were right, I was wrong

If only he was/were here.

Damned if I was/were going to do it.

She, if it was/were a she ...

The above are examples of the types of problematic sentences that occurred; not all of them appeared with both *was* and *were*. As a result of reviewing the types that occurred, I combined them into the following fifteen types.

1. If... was/were... would (normal second conditional)
2. If ... was/were indeed/actually/truly/really
3. If this was/were the case/true
4. If... was/were to succeed/fail
5. If I was/were you
6. What if ... was/were

7. Even if... was/were
8. As if ... was/were (Like if ...)
9. Non-conditional if ... was/were (verbs in both clauses in past)
10. Indirect speech if ... was/were (“if” can be replaced by “whether”)
11. If only . . was/were
12. Other
13. Reverse order (Were it ...)
14. Singular or plural? (Enemy was/were)
15. Damned if I was/were

Note that in Type 4, there are two different meanings of the construction “if ... was/were to”. One case is as in the past form of “If you are to pass the test, you will need to study”; the other indicates something that happens by chance as in “What would you do if the president were to enter the room now”.

The order of the categories indicates only the order in which that type appeared. “Other” is a catch-all category for occurrences that do not seem to fit any of the other categories.

I have cut Types 12 to 15 from the table. There were many occurrences of Type 12, but as the name “Other” indicates, they were not a distinctive type, but rather were a variety of cases that could not be categorized easily. Types 13, 14, and 15 appeared only one or two times each, so they did not add anything of interest.

Table 7 below shows the frequency of *was* and *were* by Group and Type. As expected, the occurrences of the second conditional and reported speech are the most common. In traditional grammar, the second conditional uses *were*, but as reported in recent grammar books, *was* is used more frequently than *were*. With reported speech, which traditionally uses *was*, there are cases of *were*, but they represent only ten percent of the total.

Type 9 (both verbs in the past) also occurred frequently. One example of this type from the first Harry Potter book is “If the motorcycle was huge, it was nothing to the man sitting astride it.” In such constructions, *was* would be expected but there were a few occurrences of *were*. Another commonly occurring type is Type 8 (as if ... was/were). As can be seen from the results in the table, the ratio of *was* to *were* is nearly 50-50. However, when the results are viewed by writer, a very different picture appears. The usage of this structure seems to depend very much on the preference of the individual. For example, in the Hypothetical Group, Dan Brown in *The Da Vinci Code* uses this structure 23 times, but only one of these occurrences

uses *was*; the other 22 use *were*. On the other hand, this structure occurs 41 times in *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*, but only four of the occurrences use *were*; the other 37 use *was*.

Table 7 Singular *was/were* after *if* by Group and Type

Group	Type	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	Total
Video	Was	76	4	0	0	1	6	5	2	21	4	1	120
	Were	44	1	0	4	8	3	2	3	0	0	2	67
Hypothetical	Was	24	12	3	3	0	4	4	40	23	8	0	121
	Were	23	14	7	3	0	4	17	28	3	6	0	105
Roman Army	Was	139	5	4	29	2	12	20	82	104	136	3	536
	Were	45	0	1	15	23	4	8	72	1	14	8	191
Harry Potter	Was	64	7	0	3	0	4	1	14	47	33	4	177
	Were	15	0	0	5	10	0	2	15	0	0	0	47
Total	Was	303	28	7	35	3	26	30	138	195	181	8	954
	Were	127	15	8	27	41	11	29	118	4	20	10	410

The same pattern appears in the Roman Army group, where Harry Sidebottom, the Oxford don, uses this structure 36 times, but only four of the occurrences use *was*; the other 32 use *were*. The reverse pattern appears in the Simon Scarrow books, where the structure appears 58 times, but only six of the occurrences use *were*; the other 52 use *was*.

All the other writers seem to use *was* or *were* after *as if* almost equally, but in the case of JK Rowling, her preference seems to have changed over time. In the first Harry Potter book, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, the ratio is 7-0 in favour of *was*, but in the last book, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, the ratio is 10-3 in favour of *were*.

The only other type with a clear difference is Type 5, “If I *was/were* you”, where *were* is preferred by a ratio of 41-3 (with the ratio in favour of *were* being 23-2 in the Roman Army group and 10-1 in the Harry Potter books).

From this, it has become clear that writers follow the rules that suit them, which creates a serious problem for teachers. So the problem still remains that I asked in my first paper in this series: What English should we teach?

The Internet is also a source of examples of the occurrence of *was* and *were* after *if*. The following is data retrieved from the Internet that emphasise the way that *were* has changed to *was*. In 2002, to mark the Golden Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II, the BBC asked elementary school children in Northamptonshire, England, what they

would do if they were a queen, telling them to complete the following sentence: If I *were* a queen, I would ...

One pair of girls wrote a very flowery reply, starting their answer with the requested “If I *were* a queen, I would ...” To me, however, their answer was not something I would expect from 10-year-old elementary school children. It seemed more likely to me that their parents had written it.

But they were one of the few to answer “If I *were* a queen, I would ...”. Most of the other children answered “If I *was* a queen, I would ...” or “If I *was* a king, ...”. In other words, most of the children answered naturally “If I *was*” even though they had been specifically asked to answer “If I *were*”. At the time of writing these answers, these children were about ten years old. Now these same children are twenty years old, the same age as our university students.

Conclusion

When deciding what to teach, we teachers must decide how we view our status. Is it our job to be the last bastion of defence, protecting English grammar from the ravages brought upon it by poor usage? Or should we be the pioneers of progress, moving ahead of the crowd and keeping up to date with the inevitable changes in grammar?

Considering the data from the children, and considering that even well-known writers follow their own ideas of the rules of grammar when using *was* or *were*, it has become clear to me that the time has come to give up the idea of second conditionals using the subjunctive and to teach our students the same form of English that their peers in native-speaker countries are using.

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