

# The Trend in the Use of *Was* or *Were* in Conditional Sentences in Grammar and Usage Books Published over the Last Sixty Years

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In a previous paper, I covered the situation for a period of more than 2000 years up to the 1950s. This paper continues from the 1950s and considers how the attitudes towards the subjunctive, particularly towards *was* and *were* in conditional sentences, have changed over the last sixty years. Around 1950, there was still strong support for the subjunctive *were* in conditional sentences, but this support has become muted with the increase in the use of *was*, not only in informal speech, but also in informal writing. From the statements many years ago that *was* often replaces *were* in informal speech, recent grammar and usage books have started to present this in the opposite way, saying that some people use *were* instead of the expected *was*. As teachers, we must always make pedagogical decisions on these points. The general agreement in grammar and usage books is that the subjunctive will continue to decrease in importance, and that decisions about preferences in English should be based on the English that people actually use now, rather than what grammar books promoted in the past. In fact, it is becoming impossible to use the words “correct” or “incorrect” because even famous writers use forms that were previously described as “incorrect”.

## **Summary of previous paper**

In my previous paper (Jones, 2007), I considered the differences in ideas about what kind of language should be used or taught: should it be the language of the ordinary people or should it be the traditional language? These differences in ideas are not something new; they have existed for well over 2000 years.

In ancient days, leading grammarians, such as Panini (Sanskrit) (Coulson, 1976) and Dionysius of Thrax (Greek) (Stalker, 1985; Odlin, 1994; Wikipedia, 2006) insisted on retention of the traditional language. On the other hand, support for the use of the

language of the ordinary people came from various quarters, such as the Buddha and some leading Roman poets. This last reference to Roman writers is expanded as follows by Bryson (1990):

Many scholars believe that classical Latin was spoken by almost no one – that it was used exclusively as a literary and scholarly language. Certainly such evidence as we have of everyday writing – graffiti on the walls of Pompeii, for example – suggests that classical Latin was effectively a dead language as far as common discourse was concerned long before Rome fell. (p. 25)

The same idea is expressed by Dalby (1988):

Later writings, including Vergil's Aeneid, the memoirs of Julius Caesar, and the histories of Tacitus, were in a language – *classical Latin* – that had begun to differ strongly from everyday speech. A few texts have colloquial features but in general literary Latin and spoken Latin diverged from this point onwards, the literary language demanding difficult study, the spoken language of the empire – *vulgar Latin* – gradually differentiating into regional dialects which would become the Romance languages. (p. 351)

This evolution of Latin is explained by Bryson (1990), who goes on to describe not only what happened but also specifies the date when it happened:

Latin didn't so much decline as evolve. It became the Romance languages. ... If we must fix a date for when Latin stopped being Latin and instead became these other languages, the year 813 is a convenient milestone. It was then that Charlemagne ordered that sermons throughout his realm be delivered in the 'lingua romana rustica' and not the customary 'lingua latina'. (p. 24)

This difference of ideas about what kind of language should be used has continued ever since. On the one hand, with the spread of general education in more modern times, the authority of grammarians promoting traditional speech became stronger. On the other hand, language is a living thing, and traditional grammar often fails to keep up with the changes; or rather, it tries to suppress the changes. Widespread education and, more recently, the spread of television has led to an increase in the number of educated people confident and willing to use more up-to-date forms of grammar.

As part of the evolution of English over the centuries, various forms of the language have disappeared, leaving us with various anomalies: the multiple forms of verbs in the past tense have been reduced to one form, with the exception of *was/were*, while for most verbs, the present tense consists of only two forms (with or

without third person singular “s”). In particular, the status of the subjunctive mood has been the subject of increased attention during the last hundred years.

### **Changes in the acceptance of the subjunctive**

The previous paper (Jones, 2007) described the changes in the situation regarding the subjunctive up to around 1950, starting with Jespersen in his *Growth and Structure of the English Language* (1905) and the Fowler brothers (together or alone) in *The King’s English* (1906) and *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (1926), and continuing to Partridge in *USAGE & ABUSAGE* (1947) and Gowers in *Plain Words* (1948) and *The ABC of Plain Words* (1951) (which were combined and re-issued as the *Complete Plain Words* (1954)). Jespersen and the Fowler brothers agreed that the subjunctive was dying out, but 50 years later it was still being used, although much less frequently: Partridge accepted that the subjunctive was in a state of decay but nevertheless supported its continuation; Gowers, while also accepting the existence of the subjunctive, recommended only restricted use of it. All of these writers were approaching the topic from different angles: Jespersen was reporting the changes in English; the Fowler brothers were analyzing the way English was actually being used and making recommendations on acceptable usage; Partridge was a university professor trying to raise the level of English of his students; while Gowers was a bureaucrat trying to reduce pompous English and make government reports easily understandable to the general population.

### **Effects of the worldwide boom in learning English**

Most of the books that I referred to up to the time of Partridge and Gowers were books about English usage written for native speakers. But following the Second World War there has been a worldwide boom in teaching English as a second language. As a result, most of the books that I will refer to from now on are grammars written either for learners of English or for teachers of English. This means that the level of the description of the grammar point differs greatly depending on the target reader or target use, in many ways mirroring the difference in approach between Partridge (getting students to write English at a higher intellectual level) and Gowers (getting people to write English that is easier to understand). The most common description of the use of the subjunctive in

grammar books from around this time comes in the formation of conditional clauses.

For example, in a series entitled THE KEY TO ENGLISH aimed at learners of English, the volume on verbs (Withers & Brockman, 1970) does not make any reference to subjunctives, but describes the form of the verb in a Type 2 conditional clause as “past tense; WERE only in the case of BE” (p. 69), with the following comment “If the verb in the conditional clause is BE, the only formed (sic) used is WERE, regardless of the subject.” (p. 71) In other words, this learner’s guide does not even acknowledge the existence of the subjunctive mood or the use of *was*, but simply tells the student to use the past tense, without explaining why *were* is used instead of *was* as the past tense of BE.

On the other hand, Quirk and Greenbaum (1973) in their A University Grammar of English, a book written for native-speaker university students of English, give the following explanation:

The SUBJUNCTIVE *were* is hypothetical in meaning and is used in conditional and concessive clauses after optative verbs like *wish*. It occurs as the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular past of the verb *be*, matching the indicative *was*, which is the more common in less formal style:

If she *were/was* to do something like that, ...

He spoke to me as if I *were/was* deaf

I wish I *were/was* dead

Note

Only *were* is acceptable in ‘As it were’ (=so to speak); *were* is usual in ‘If I were you’. (p. 52)

As can be seen from the language used in the above explanation, it is clearly intended for high-level native speakers. But at the same time, unlike THE KEY TO ENGLISH VERBS, it clearly accepts the large-scale use of *was* instead of *were* by native speakers in less formal style, as already described by the Fowler brothers (1906, 1926).

A similar description to the Note above is given in Zandvoort (1975), with support to the declining status of the subjunctive:

If I were you, I should go.

Cf. also the stereotyped phrase *as it were*.

From the point of view of the structure of present-day English, the opposition subjunctive - indicative is of limited importance. (pp. 88-89)

Both Quirk and Greenbaum, and Zandvoort make similar comments on the

mandatory use of *were* in “as it were” and refer to the occurrence of *were* in “if I were” as “usual” (Quirk & Greenbaum) or “stereotyped” (Zandvoort).

Leech and Svartvik, in their *A Communicative Grammar of English* (1975), have the following to say about subjunctives:

In addition to the past tense, there are three less common ways of expressing hypothetical meaning in subclauses:

(A) THE *were*-SUBJUNCTIVE:

I'd play football with you if I *were* younger.

(The ordinary past tense *was* can replace *were* in <informal> style.)

(B) *Were to* (or *was to* <informal>) + infinitive

If it *were to* rain tomorrow, the match would be postponed.

(This construction expresses hypothetical future.) (pp. 125-6)

The third use does not involve the use of *was/were*, so it does not apply to the present paper. Later on, Leech and Svartvik expand their explanation of the *was/were* difference, as follows:

The *were*-subjunctive, when *were* is used instead of the expected *was* (my underlining), occurs in clauses expression condition or contrast and in subclauses after verbs like *wish*. *Was* can also be used and is more common in <informal> style:

If she *were/was to* do something like that, ...

He spoke to me as if I *were/was* deaf.

I wish I *were/was* dead. (p. 294)

But: *were/\*was* I to yield to your demand ...

(Leech and Svartvik, 1975, p. 294)

As we can see from the sentence that I have underlined, Leech and Svartvik state that *was* is the expected form. As the title of their book indicates, they are dealing with communicative English, so they emphasise the move away from considering the subjunctive to be the expected form. However, they say on page 125 and page 294 that “*was* can also be used”; “*was*” is given only as a possible replacement for “*were*”, not as the usual form. Furthermore, like Quirk and Greenbaum, Leech and Svartvik list *were* before *was* in their examples. That is, all cases where either can be used are listed as *were/was*.

Swan (1980) gives the following example: ‘I'd hurry up if I *were* you.’ (p. 51) while making no mention of the *was/were* problem or the subjunctive, treating *were* as the only possible form.

In the 1980s, the explanations of conditionals became even more complex. This may not be a problem for native speakers of English, but it increases the problems for learners of English. The following quote from Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1983), admittedly in a book aimed at teachers, indicates some of the complexities.

The imaginative conditional sentences are perhaps the most problematic of the three main types in our description. There are two subtypes of imaginative conditionals – hypotheticals and counterfactual. Hypothetical conditions express unlikely yet possible events or states in the *if* clause. Counterfactual conditionals, on the other hand, express impossible events or states in the *if* clause.

This explanation might be fine for grammar researchers who want to distinguish the various types of unreal conditions, but I doubt that it is of any practical use for learners, particularly low-level learners, to make such a distinction. Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman then go on to describe the tenses involved.

The problem with imaginative conditionals arises in the tenses used. The past tense refers to the present time and the past perfect tense refers to past time. Furthermore, we have a vestige of the Old English subjunctive mood in the use of *were* with singular first and third person subject where *was* is the expected form (my underlining). (p. 344)

Like Leech and Svartvik quoted above, Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman state that *was* is the expected form. This statement about *was* being the expected form is expanded in a footnote at the bottom of page 344.

In colloquial English *was* in fact occurs in imaginative conditionals in lieu of *were* in such sentences.

As can be seen from these various comments and footnotes, there is an increasing acceptance of *was* in spoken English. The comment that *were* is a vestige of the old subjunctive goes completely against the passage quoted from Partridge in the previous part of this paper that, in the case of all verbs except *be*, the “subjunctive has been disguised” (1947, p. 311); in other words, it looks like an indicative but it can be shown to be a subjunctive. Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman clearly consider the “disguised” subjunctives to be undisguised indicatives; *were* is treated simply as a vestige.

Certainly there is much to be said for considering the verbs to be past indicatives as they all have the same form in both the past indicative and past subjunctive (except *was/were*). It is no longer very useful to distinguish between the indicative “had” and the subjunctive “had”, especially when teaching learners of

English.

Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman have a “Teaching Suggestions” section at the end of each chapter. The suggestion for conditionals is to practice “if I were a carpenter, if I were a rich man”, which is reminiscent of a certain English Conversation school in Japan that used the expression “if I were a bird” in recent years to advertise its approach to teaching colloquial English. Maybe I am one of the few who think it is rather a strange choice to use a written form to advertise a conversation school that would be expected to teach colloquial forms.

Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman’s “Teaching Suggestions” remain unchanged in the 1999 second edition. They themselves agree that in colloquial English *was* is more common but they make no attempt to teach it. In the later “exercises” section they have the following exercise:

One of your advanced students has heard native speakers say conditionals like [the following], and he or she wants to know whether they are correct or not. What will you say?

*If I was the Dalai Lama, I'd do the same thing* (1999, p. 566)

No answer is given to this question. It is left to the teacher to decide, but it seems that Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman prefer *were*.

### **Further decline in use of subjunctive since 1980**

As many other grammar and usage books published from the 1980s express the same kind of ideas about the status of the subjunctive and the frequency of *was* or *were*, with only minor differences, let me give a selection of what these books have to say, including quotes in these books dating back to previous eras, starting with general statements about the subjunctive. It should be noted that those writers insisting on use of the subjunctive are generally writing for native speakers of English, rather than for non-native speakers of English and their teachers.

The subjunctive ... is sharply on the decline in English, a fact easily observable. (Copperud, 1980, p. 366)

... the use of subjunctive forms where the indicative will serve is considered unnecessarily formal and even pretentious. (Copperud, 1980, p. 366)

In present-day English the subjunctive is formally no more than a vestigial survival, whose uses are limited. (van Ek & Robot, 1984, p. 216)

The subjunctive mood is dying: even native speakers and writers are uneasy

with it. (Howard, 1984, p. 18)

The subjunctive is dying, let it die. I very much doubt if there will be any more than relics of the subjunctive in the twenty-first century. (Howard, 1984, p. 125)

Randolph Quirk remarked in 1972: 'The subjunctive is not an important category in contemporary English and is normally replaced by other constructions.' (Birchfield, 1985, p. 53)

In present-day English the subjunctive is most commonly used in formulaic expressions (*come what may, suffice it to say, be that as it may*, etc.). (Birchfield, 1985, p. 53)

Use of the subjunctive in English appears to be generally fading, however, though usage varies throughout the world. (Roberts, 1987, p. 125)

The subjunctive is used very little in modern English, being mainly restricted to formal or formulaic expression. (Crystal, 1988, p. 70)

Fading into the sunset, probably forever, is that splendid old mood we have known as the subjunctive - (Richard L. Tobin, *Righting Words*, May/June 1988, quoted in Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of English Usage, 1989).

Ayres 1881 paraphrased three unnamed grammarians who thought the subjunctive more or less defunct. One of them [remarked] in an 1887 grammar that "the subjunctive, as a separate mode, is almost lost and out of mind in our language." (Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of English Usage, 1989, p. 876)

Even earlier, at the end of the 18th century, Noah Webster was either regretting or welcoming the loss of the subjunctive (he took different views in different works). And even before that Priestley ... observed that the subjunctive ... was "much neglected by many of our best writers." (Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of English Usage, 1989, p. 876)

From Fowler 1907 to Bryson 1984, there are a few commentators who expressed concern over the use or non-use of the subjunctive after *if* ... (Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of English Usage, 1989, p. 521)

Some usage authorities argue that there is no longer a need to worry ... but careful writers and speakers continue to use subjunctive forms in a few situations - and particularly in *if* clauses that express a statement contrary to fact. (Tarshis, 1992, p. 89).

Understanding of the workings of the subjunctive is not as important in English grammar as it is in other languages. (Tarshis, 1992, p. 91).

Use the subjunctive to describe only conditions that are contrary to fact or

improbable; do not use the subjunctive to describe simple conditions or contingencies. (Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, 2001, p. 43).

The subjunctive, one of the four moods of verbs, has been slipping from use in English for decades. (Bryson, 2002, p. 192)

Although once very common, (the subjunctive) scarcely features in English now. (Bryson, 2002. p. 217)

Still used in French, but uncommon in English is the subjunctive mood. (O'Connor, 2003, p. 77).

It is much more plausible to say that irrealis *were* is an unstable remnant of an earlier system – a system which has otherwise been replaced by one in which the preterite has expanded its use. (Huddleston & Pullum, 2005, p. 88)

The opinions quoted above make it clear that, with the exception of Tarshis (“careful writers and speakers continue to use subjunctive forms in a few situations”) and the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, which is written with more or less the sole purpose of upholding the past traditions of formal English, most of the authors regard the subjunctive as somewhat dated and mostly restricted to very formal English.

Even a leading contemporary grammarian such as Quirk considers the subjunctive to be unimportant in present-day English, although his comment is rather conservative compared with various other writers quoted above, who describe the use of the subjunctive as a “vestige”, “relic”, “unstable remnant”, “defunct”, “neglected”, “on the decline”, “restricted to formal or formulaic expressions”, “unnecessarily formal and even pretentious”, “fading” (or even more dramatically “fading into the sunset”), “slipping from use”, “scarcely features”, “more or less defunct”, or “almost lost or out of mind”.

### **The rise of *was* and the fall of *were***

The above quotes refer to the choice between the subjunctive and indicative. Some of them also mention the use of *was* or *were* in connection with the subjunctive. The following are samples of comments referring directly to the frequency of *was* and *were* which appear in grammar and usage books published from the 1980s.

First, as a summary of the comments on the usage of *was* and *were*, Copperud (1980) gives the following report of the result of a survey carried out among leading

commentators.

In sentences expressing a condition contrary to fact and calling for a choice between *was* and *were* (“if I were King”; “if she were you,” two critics and American Heritage insist on *were*; one considers *was* preferable, except in *if I were*. Another does not admit any usage but *were* in such circumstances, and a fourth regards it as the mark of education. One restricts the use of *were* to what is not merely contrary to fact but impossible or out of the question, a distinction that seems difficult to apply in any practical way. The consensus, then, overwhelmingly favors *if I were* over *if I was* for conditions contrary to fact. But, as four critics warn, the writer must distinguish between a statement of a timeless condition contrary to fact and the statement of a simple condition relating to the past: “If he *was* (not *were*) present at the meeting he did not vote.” Clauses beginning with *If*, then, do not necessarily take a subjunctive verb (*were*, *be*). (p. 366)

As can be seen from this report, not even the experts in 1980 could reach complete agreement on the use of *was* or *were*. This becomes even clearer from the following comments taken from various grammar and usage books written over the years since 1980. To find some pattern among all these comments, I have divided them into the following five categories: only *were* is allowed, order given is *were/was*, order given is *was/were*, both orders are given, no order is given.

1. Only *were* is allowed; it is not interchangeable with *was*. (*Was* and *were* have different meanings.)

Incorrect:

If the experiment was not designed this way, the participants’ performances would suffer.

Correct:

If the experiment were not designed this way, the participants’ performances would suffer.

(Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, 2001, p. 43).

Although some of the experts in 1980 allowed only *were*, this is the only book published in the 21st century that I have seen that states “*was*” is “incorrect”, although Bryson in the following quote implies the same.

Problems often arise in deciding whether *if* is introducing a subjunctive clause (‘If I were ...’) or an indicative one (‘If I was ...’). The distinction is straightforward. (Bryson, 2002, p. 99)

For Bryson there is no possibility of interchanging *were* and *was*. *Were* must be used in cases like “If I were king, I would ... (where there is no possibility that I can be king, whereas *was* must be used in cases like “If I was wrong, I apologise” where it is possible that I was wrong.

The subjunctive form can be used to express conditions, uncertainty and wishes:  
I wouldn't go in there, if I were you. (O'Connor, 2003, p. 77)

O'Connor seems to make no reference to *was/were*, which is rather unusual for a book published in this millennium.

Use *were* (instead of *was*) in statements that are contrary to fact.

If this were [not was] a well-run camel caravan, we wouldn't be lost. (Tarshis, 1992, pp. 89-90)

2. The alternatives are given in the order *were/was*.

In present-day English the subjunctive is used in an optional use of *were* instead of *was* in the expressions like *I wish I were/was dead*. (Birchfield, 1985, p. 53)

*Were* must be used (i.e. *was* would be incorrect) in *as it were* (= so to speak).

There is much variation in *If I were/was you*, but *If I were you* is the more usual. (Birchfield, 1985, footnote on p. 53)

3. The alternatives are given in the order *was/were*.

If it *was/were* to rain, the ropes would snap. They're far too tight.

Both the past subjunctive and the past indicative forms are possible for hypothetical conditions, the subjunctive being preferred by many, especially in formal written English:

If John *was/were* here, we would soon learn the truth.

The idiom *if I ... you* by convention usually contains the subjunctive *were*, though *was* also occurs frequently (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, & Svartvik, 1985, pp. 1093-1094).

If + NP + *was/were* etc. + NP + *would/might* etc.

If I *was* in such pain, I would see a doctor.

If it *wasn't* for you, I *don't* know what I'd do.

What would you do, if you *were* me?

(Thornbury, 2004, p. 178)

The above appears in a section giving examples of *was* and *were*; no explanation is given of the difference between *was* and *were* after *if*.

If my grandfather *was/were* still alive, he would be a hundred today.

Notice that we can sometimes use *if ... were* instead of *if ... was*.

(Hewings, 2005, p. 218)

There is a past subjunctive form *were*, which we can use instead of *was* in the first and third person singular.

If I *was/were* a bit taller, I could reach.

The subjunctive *were* is a little formal, but it is often used in the idiom *if I were you* meaning 'in your place'.

It's a good offer. If I were you, I'd accept it

(Eastwood, 2005, p. 329)

We sometimes use *were* instead of *was* in an if-clause.

If I *was/were* a billionaire, I would travel around the world

(Eastwood, 2005, p. 346)

4. Both *were/was* and *was/were* are given in different places.

*Were* can be used in place of *was* after *if I/he/she/it*. There is no difference in meaning, but *were* is more formal, particularly when we are making doubtful statements:

If I *was/were* the better qualified, I'd apply for the job.

However, *were* is preferable in purely imaginary statements:

If I *were* you/if I *were* in your position (Not *was*)

*If I were to* (or *was to*) ask, would you help me?

(Alexander, 1988, pp. 278-279)

5. Neither order (*were/was* or *was/were*) is given anywhere.

The subjunctive form *were* is used with 1st and 3rd person singular subjects, thus formally contrasting with the indicative *was* (more common in informal English):

Note that the *were*-subjunctive is obligatory in the set phrase *as it were* (= so to speak), in non-introduced conditional clauses with inverted word order, e.g. *Were he to arrive now, he would still be too late, and in if I were you*. (Howard, 1984, p. 217)

The indicative form *was* replaces *were* in informal styles: *if I was you*. .... This use of *was* tends to attract criticism when it appears in written expression. (Crystal, 1988, p. 70)

The main change you need to make in most of these situations is to substitute *were* for *was*. (Tarshis, 1992, p. 89).

Jespersen hazards no guess as to why *was* began to compete with the older *were*, other than to note that in some contexts *was* is more emphatic. ... But most of

the examples, in Jespersen and elsewhere, are not notably emphatic. (Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of English Usage, 1989, p. 877)

Jespersen observes that subjunctive *were* is least likely to be displaced in the constructions without a conjunction in which it begins a clause or sentence, but even here he found a few examples with *was*, like this one:

Was I Diogenes, I would not move out of a kilderkin into a hogshead.

(Charles Lamb, letter, 29 March 1809 quoted in Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of English Usage, 1989, p. 878)

In the *if* clause we often use *were* in place of *was* (some people consider that it is incorrect to use *was* after *if*). (Parrott, 2000, p. 234)

We sometimes use *were* + infinitive instead of a past tense form in the *if* clause of Type 2 conditional sentences. (Parrott, 2000, p. 234)

It is notable that although Parrott states that *were* is often used instead of *was* (implying that *was* is also frequent), he does not give any example of the use of *was*.

Course materials often introduce Type 2 conditional sentences beginning with *If I were you ...* idiomatically to express advice, separately from Type 2 conditional sentences as a grammatical class. (Parrott, 2000, p. 234)

The past indicative *was* is more usual than the subjunctive *were* in contexts that are not formal. The exception is the fixed expression *as it were*. (Greenbaum, 1996, p. 269)

*Were* is sometimes used instead of indicative *was* in the conditional clause, particularly in more formal contexts:

I would *if I were you*. (Greenbaum, 1996, p. 341)

If it wasn't for this awful flu, I'd be out there too. (Yule, 1998, p. 129).

No comment is made about *was* in this sentence, but the following statement is made later.

Although sentences [with *were*] continue to be used, there is increasing use of *was* instead of *were* in these types of sentences in contemporary spoken English. (Yule, 1998, p. 131).

I would *if I was you*. (CONV)

In fact, I've got relatives in Romania and *if I were still* there, I'd be a vampire. (CONV) <note the use of subjunctive 'were' here> (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, & Finegan, 1999, p. 819)

Although the reader is told to note the use of *were* in the second example, both are marked as CONV (conversational). However, no explanation whatsoever is given

of the difference between the first example and the second example, so I wonder what the reader is supposed to understand when noting the use of *were*?

If I *were* you, I *would accept* the invitation

Note: *Were* is used for both singular and plural subjects. *Was* (with *I, he, she, it*) is sometimes used in informal speech: If I *was* you, I'd accept the invitation. (Azar, 2002, p. 415).

You may hear English speakers using *was*. It is becoming accepted today, but you should not use it in formal situations. (Foley & Hall, 2003, p. 122)

The past-tense subjunctive (or *were*-subjunctive) is used to express an unreal or hypothetical meaning:

I wish he *were* here.

If Jane *were* leader...

An equivalent use of *was* is heard in informal speech:

I wish he *was* here.

If Jane *was* leader ...

These forms routinely attract criticism when used in writing, unless the text is consciously informal. (Crystal, 2004, p. 139)

After *if*, some speakers use *were* (sometimes called a 'subjunctive' form) in place of the expected *was*. For example, *If Mary were to come, we'd ask her to propose the vote of thanks.* (Speakers who use *was* in preference to *were* can say *If Mary was to come, . . .*) (Dixon, 2005, p. 68)

In the conditional clause, 'were' is sometimes used instead of 'was', especially after 'I'.

If I were a guy, I would fancy Sophie.

If I were asked to define my condition, I'd say "bored".

(*Collins COBUILD English Grammar*, 2005, p. 351)

We often use *were* instead of *was* after *if*. This is common in both formal and informal styles. In a formal style *were* is more common than *was*, and many people consider it more correct, especially in American English. (Swan, 2005, p. 235)

We often use the structure *If were you...* to give advice.

*I shouldn't worry if I were you.*

*If I were you, I get that car serviced.*

*If I was you* is also possible. Some people consider it incorrect. (Swan, 2005, p. 241)

After *if* and after *wish*, we sometimes use I/he/she/it with *were*:

If he were (or was) alive today, ...

Notice also the expression if I **were you**, when you give someone advice:

If I were you, I'd go to the police.

(NOT *If I was you, ...*) (Coe, Harrison, & Paterson, 2006, p. 214)

After *if* and *wish*, you can use *were* instead of *was* (*if I were .../I wish it were* etc.). *I was/it was* are also possible. So you can say:

If I were you, I wouldn't buy that coat.    *or*    If I was you, ...

I'd go out if it weren't so cold.                    *or*    ... if it wasn't so cold.

(Murphy, 2006, p. 78)

Murphy (2006) gives no explanation of the difference between *was* and *were*. Instead, he gives a very confusing explanation of the possibilities. What exactly is the reader to understand by "you can use *were* instead of *was*" and "I *was/it was* are also possible"? Surely "you can use *were* instead of *was*" means that both are possible. There is no need to say that "I *was/it was* are also possible".

As can be seen in the examples in the five categories above, not only is there no consistency in the way the differences between *was* and *were* are presented, but there is also no consistency in the explanations. In fact, there is a complete continuum: "If I were you" is considered "obligatory" by Howard, the only permissible form by Coe et al. (with the caveat "NOT if I was you"), "conventional" by Quirk et al. (although *was* occurs frequently), "preferable" by Alexander (who follows an example of "if I were you" by saying "Not was"), "more usual" by Birchfield (despite much variation), "often used" by Eastwood, "sometimes used" by Greenbaum, "If I was you" is possible but "some people consider it incorrect" by Swan, with Crystal saying "if I was you" is common in informal styles but tends to attract criticism when written, and finally perfectly acceptable by Murphy.

Another point of difference is the order in which *was* and *were* are presented, even in books by same authors, or even in the same book: Quirk and Greenbaum (1973) put *were* before *was* in their examples, as in "I wish I *were/was* dead"; whereas Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, and Svartvik (1985) put *was* before *were* in their examples, as in "if John *was/were* here". In a more extreme turnabout, the quotes from Swan's 2005 Third Edition of *Practical English Usage* are in complete contrast with the statements in Swan's 1980 First Edition. The only allowable construction in 1980 was the use of *were*; there is no mention at all of the possibility of using *was* instead of *were*. In the 2005 edition, *was* has become common in both formal and informal

English. This shows very clearly how the attitudes towards *was* and *were* changed in the intervening 25 years.

On the other hand, Alexander (1988) gives both orders, as follows: “If I *was/were* the better qualified”, as opposed to “If I *were to* (or *was to*) ask”, but this seems to indicate the preference for the particular structure. This is mirrored by the way that the change is expressed: Do we substitute *were* for *was* (i.e. take *was* as the normal) (Birchfield, 1985; Alexander, 1988; Tarshis, 1992; Parrott, 2000) or do we substitute *was* for *were* (i.e. take *were* as the normal) (Crystal, 1988; Greenbaum, 1996)? If the experts are so confused, how can the teachers expect their students to understand, especially if they are at a low level? This brings us back to the theme of Jones (2007).

### **What English should we teach?**

It must be remembered that when it comes to teaching English, the most important point for the teacher to consider is where the students will use their English. Will they spend their English-speaking lives talking to the grammar experts described by Copperud or will they spend most time speaking English to their peers? Will be they speaking formal or informal English? Should we teach all grammar or should we teach only the bare minimum, particularly if teaching the grammar only confuses the students? If we believe that it is the latter in each case, then probably the most applicable evaluation is the following comment made by Howard (1984).

As Britons themselves, and foreigners from all round the world, are learning English as a second language, the tendency to make it easier to learn is irresistible. Those of us who know the old grammar in its full glory will continue to use it, but we shall sound and look increasingly stuffy, as those of us who persist in using “whom” or the subjunctive correctly already do. (p. 123)

### **Future research**

One of the features of recent grammar and usage books it is that they are corpus based. That is, they base their judgement on huge amounts of data showing statistically what English speakers actually say and not what they think they say.

In my next paper, I will analyse representative examples of English over the last 20 years and report on what the data in the corpora can tell us about the actual use

The Trend in the Use of *Was* or *Were* in Conditional Sentences in Grammar and Usage Books Published over the Last Sixty Years of *was* and *were*.

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