

Review of Additional Grammar Books on the Use of *Was/Were* in Conditionals

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Abstract

In Jones (2008) I reviewed a large number of English grammar and usage books to see how they presented the use of *was* and *were* in conditional sentences. Since then there has been a steady flow of new grammar books, as well as occasional reprints of old grammar books. This paper studies how these additional books are placed in the five categories introduced in Jones (2008), and questions how teachers can be expected to teach English language learners how to form conditionals in the 21st century when the explanations given by grammar book writers are often mutually conflicting and confusing.

Summary of Previous Paper

I started research into the topic of the use of *was* and *were* in conditionals more than ten years ago. The reason for starting was that I had become increasingly aware of the rise in the frequency of “if I/he/she/it was” in newspapers and magazines where traditional usage would require “if I/he/she/it were”. A hundred years ago, leading experts on English usage and grammar, such as Jespersen (1906, latest edition: 1985) and the Fowler brothers (1906, 1925), commented on the gradual disappearance of the subjunctive in conditionals, particularly in informal speech, but even the Fowler brothers recommended the continued use of the subjunctive in written English. However, here they were referring to cases where the expected traditional usage was actually giving way to informal usage.

At first, I just noted mentally the places where these instances occurred, but as they became more evident, I started to jot down the references. As the number of references became larger, I asked several of my native-speaker colleagues in the English teaching profession if they would ever use “if I/he/she/it was” instead of “if

I/he/she/it were”. In almost every case, the answer was that they would never use “if I/he/she/it was”; they would always use “if I/he/she/it were”. However, somewhat disconcertingly, I noticed that some of these native-speaker colleagues actually used “if I/he/she/it was” when speaking to me on some occasions. When I asked Japanese colleagues who were teaching English, the reply was even more conservative. In some cases, the reply was on the lines of “teachers of English should be the last bastion of correct English; we should not be pandering to those who speak inferior forms.”

However, the situation has been showing a steady change, particularly over the last decade. As I have already said above, a hundred years ago people recognised the existence of the use of *was* in conditionals. Although they recognised it, they did not encourage it: whereas it might be permissible in spoken English, it was not recommended for use in formal written English. After the Second World War, Partridge (1947) and Gowers (Plain Words, 1948; ABC of Plain Words, 1951; combined into The Complete Plain Words, 1954; revised version 1986) approached the subject from opposite points of view. Partridge was promoting high standards of educated English among university students, while Gowers was promoting simplified and intelligible use of English among bureaucrats. For further details of the above and following, see Jones (2007, 2008).

From the 1970s, the increase in the acceptance of English as the international language brought about a surge in the publication of English grammar books targeted at English teachers and, at the same time, learners of English as a foreign language. The grammar and usage books coming out in this period basically describe the use of *if it were* as the correct form of English, and made little more than passing reference to the increasing use of *if it was*, which had been reported 50 years previously by the Fowler brothers (1906, 1925). Examples of grammar books in this period are Withers and Brockman (1970), Quirk and Greenbaum (1973), Zandvoort (1975), Leech and Svartvik (1975), and Swan (1980). Of these, Withers & Brockman and Swan make no reference at all to the existence of *if it was*.

In the 1980s, various writers of English grammar and usage books (Copperud, 1980; Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1983, 1998; van Ek and Robot, 1984; Bryson, 1984; Howard, 1984; Burchfield, 1985; Roberts, 1987; Crystal, 1988; Tobin, 1988; Alexander, 1988) commented on or lamented the decline in the use of the subjunctive. However, from this period, it becomes possible to distinguish the change in the ideas about the use of *was* and *were* in conditionals by looking at the way and

order that these two words are introduced.

From the 1990s, opinions about the use of *was/were* in conditionals differed greatly. In Jones (2008), I divided the explanations about the use of *was/were* in conditionals 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*.

Examples of this are Withers and Brockman (1970), Swan (1980), Tarshis (1992), Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (2001), Bryson (2002), and O'Connor (2003). (According to Bryson (2002), *was* and *were* have different meanings.)

2. The alternatives are given in the order *were/was* (or *was* instead of *were*).

In other words, *were* is normal; *was* is informal but can be used sometimes.

Examples of this are Quirk and Greenbaum (1973), Leech and Svartvik (1975), and Burchfield (1985). This is often given in the form of “Notice that we can sometimes use *if ... was* instead of *if ... were*”. After the 1980s, this order rarely appears: the examples of the *were/was* order are greatly outnumbered by the examples of the *was/were* order.

3. The alternatives are given in the order *was/were* (or *were* instead of *was*).

In other words, *was* is normal; *were* is formal but can be used sometimes.

Examples of this are Thornbury (2004), Hewings (2005), and Eastwood (2005). This is often given in the form of “Notice that we can sometimes use *if ... were* instead of *if ... was*.”

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

An example of this is Alexander (1988). In grammar books, it is not common for examples of both words to be given without explanation, but in ordinary books (novels, etc.) it often happens. In extreme cases, both words even appear in the same sentence.

5. Neither order (*were/was* or *was/were*) is given anywhere (or in some places *was* is given but in others *were* is given without mention of an alternative).

Examples of this are Howard (1984), Crystal (1988), Tarshis (1992), Greenbaum (1996), Yule (1998), Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, and Finegan (1999), Parrott (2000), Azar (2002), Foley and Hall (2003), Crystal (2004), Dixon (2005), Sinclair (2005), Swan (2005), Coe, Harrison, and Paterson (2006), and Murphy (2006).

Data from Newly Obtained Books

Since reporting these five categories (Jones, 2008), I have come across various other grammar books dating back to different eras. Because grammar books are often a revised version of an older and now out-of-print book, it is difficult to determine exactly if the revisions incorporate any changes in the original presentation of *was/were*, but basically the explanations in the newly reviewed grammar books fit the above five categories in chronological order, although Category 5 is not exactly dependent on the era.

Examples of Category 1

Regarding the formation of the second conditional, Dixson (1971) states “*To be* uses *were* in all persons in these clauses.” (p. 143). This book was first printed in 1943, so, as expected, it is in Category 1. Freeborn (1990) states that “The only exception is *were*, a past tense subjunctive form expressing something hypothetical.” (p. 93). Although this book was published in 1990, it is analyzing a quote from Katherine Mansfield from 1922, so, as expected, it is also in Category 1. Chalker (1987) is a reprint of the book that first appeared in (1984) and Vermes (1991) is the second edition of a book first published in 1981. These are both examples of Category 1: Chalker (p. 136) gives examples of conditionals using *were*, but makes no mention at all of the use of *was*, except in the following statement:

Subjunctive *were* can be used for all persons [instead of *was* and *were*] in hypothetical conditions: <If he were rich ...>. (p. 137)

In other words, Chalker considers that there are two forms of *were* (past indicative and past subjunctive) in the same way as Partridge (1947, etc.).

Vermes, like so many books of that era, evaluates the following examples.

Incorrect: If I was rich I'd travel around the world.

Correct: If I were rich I'd travel around the world. (p. 60)

There is no mention of the use of *was* in informal spoken language. It is simply that *were* is correct and *was* is incorrect.

Gucker (1966) states that:

The changing language has resulted in the gradual abandonment of the subjunctive mood except for one very limited purpose: when expressing a condition contrary to fact, in an if clause, or after a verb which expresses a wish. Specifically, we use the word *were* instead of *was*. (p. 36)

This is followed by several examples which belong to Category 1; and there is no

attempt to distinguish between conditions, wishes, or advice.

Wilkin and Charlton (2010), in a section on second and third conditionals, give the following statement in the explanation of second conditionals: If the verb **be** is used in the *if* clause, **were** is used for both singular and plural subjects.

This is followed by a footnote which states: An unreal present situation can also be expressed by as *if + subj. + were* -- as in:

He talks **as if** (=as though) he **were** married (but he's not married). (p. 170)

This is the only book other than O'Connor (2003) that I have found in the 21st-century that does not mention the possibility of using *was*. In addition, the writers state that *if* is followed by *subj. + were*, which indicates either that the writers have not proofread the book properly or that they are unaware that *were* is the subjunctive, and not something that is used with the subjunctive.

The above are all examples of Category 1.

Examples of Category 2

There were no examples of Category 2 among the new books that I researched. All the books were either "*were* is correct" or "*were* can be used instead of *was*" or is "used in certain cases."

Examples of Category 3

A typical description of the formation of second conditionals that appears in Category 3 explanations is along the following lines:

if + past tense ... would + infinitive.

For example, see Alexander (1973), Swan (1995), Winter (1986), Nettle and Hopkins (2003), Sinclair (2004), Duckworth (2007), Powell et al. (2008), and Carter et al. (2011).

The only interpretation I can see it for this is that *was* (the past tense of *be*) is expected to be used. In other words, *were* is not expected. Furthermore, there are only occasional references to use of the subjunctive.

However, the above explanation is usually followed at some point by a reference to formal English as opposed to informal English, as in Swan and Walter (1997, reprinted in 2009): "After *if*, we often use *were* instead of *was*. In a formal style, *were* is considered more correct." (p. 255) and Nettle and Hopkins (2003): "In a more formal style we use *were*, not *was*, after *if*." (p. 140) In other words, *was* is normal and *were* is formal.

The problem with both the above books is that although they say the past tense is used and that *were* is used instead of *was* in formal style, neither of the books

actually give any example or exercise where *was* is used.

In contrast to this, Christophersen and Sandved (1990) give as an example: “If he was (or were) here now, things wouldn’t ...” (§ 505, p. 207). They do not specify which is normal or which is formal, but they give the Category 3 order *was/were*.

Another point raised regarding the difference between *was* and *were* is the degree of unreality, as in Alexander (1973): “Note that in Type 2 conditions, *were* may be used instead of *was*. *Were* is more usual than *was* when the condition is contrary to the known facts.” (p. 85)

Again, as with the two books above, there is no example where *was* is used.

Swan (1995) is the second edition of *Practical English Usage*, and is positioned between the first edition of 1980 and the third edition of 2005. As mentioned in Jones (2008), there is a big change between the first edition and the third edition, with *were* being the only permissible form in 1980, but being reported as being basically restricted to formal usage in 2005. Coming midway between the first and third editions, we can see how Swan’s ideas regarding the use of *was* and *were* changed over the years.

According to Swan (1995):

The same tenses can be used after *if* as after other conjunctions. However, special tenses can also be used to give the idea that something is unlikely, imaginary or untrue. (p. 245)

The following explanation of the structure of the second conditional is the usual *if* + past ... would + infinitive. Yet there is no mention here of what a special tense is. Another mention of special tense comes in the notes to the above explanation in which it is stated:

As far as tenses are concerned, it is more accurate to distinguish two kinds of structure: (1) *if* with ordinary tenses (including the so-called ‘first’ conditional) and (2) *if* with ‘special’ tenses (including the so-called ‘second’ and ‘third’ conditionals). (p. 246) This explanation is hardly clear, and it does not say what a ‘special’ tense is.

However, it is then followed by one section describing ordinary tense-use and another section describing special tense-use. In the latter section, there is an explanation of *if I were* etc., in which it states the following:

The grammatical name for this use of *were* is ‘subjunctive’. (p. 248)

No mention is made of the fact that all the verbs used after *if* in second conditionals are also subjunctive, presumably because there is no difference in form

between the indicative past and subjunctive past in any verb other than ‘be’, and mentioning it would only confuse students.

In a repeat of Swan (1995), Swan and Walter (1997, reprinted in 2009) refers to ordinary tenses and special tenses. In one of the examples at the bottom of page 259, the first practice sentence is as follows: If it wasn’t raining, we (*play*) tennis (expecting the answer If it wasn’t raining, we could play tennis). If this is combined with what is said in Swan 1995, the only possible conclusion is that *was* is the normal form. There is no mention of *were*.

It then goes on to say:

We often use the structure ***I should(n’t) ... if I were you*** to **give advice**. (p. 261)

Similar comments are also made by Alexander (1973), Winter (1986), Sinclair (2004, reissued 2011), Duckworth (2007), Dignen, Viney, Walker, and Elsworth (2007), and Powell, Walker, and Elsworth (2008).

Sinclair (2004) says the following:

When you are talking about something that you think is unlikely to happen, you use the past simple or past continuous in the conditional clause and ‘would’ in the main clause.

If he was coming, he would ring.

‘Were’ is sometimes used instead of ‘was’ in the conditional clause, especially after ‘I’.

This is followed by a further comment: you often say “If I were you” when you are giving someone advice.

If I were you, I would take the money. (p. 132)

Eastwood (2008) makes the following comments on the use of second conditionals:

As well as the past simple, we can use the past continuous or *could*.

If the sun was shining, it’d be perfect. (p. 315)

We can mix Types 2 and 3.

If Tom really was ambitious, he would have found a decent job years ago. (p. 317)

Sometimes we use *were* instead of *was*.

If the picture was/were genuine, it would be worth millions of pounds.

Carter et al. (2011) and Swan and Walter (2011) give the usual explanation of *if* + past simple ... would + infinitive, but in Carter et al. there is no mention of the use of *was* or *were*. On the other hand, Swan and Walter state that after *if*, we often use *were* instead of *was*. In a formal style, *were* is considered more correct. (p. 255)

Vince (2003, first published in 1998) includes the following statement:

The regular past simple of *to be* is *I was* and *He/She was*. We can use these forms in second conditionals, or alternatively we can use *if I were and if he/she were*. The *were* form is more formal.

*If I **was/were** an astronaut, I'd enjoy being weightless.*

Side and Wellman (2002) give two examples of the second conditional in Sections 1 and 2:

*If only he **weren't** so stubborn, he'd agree with us.*

If I weren't so busy, I take a long holiday. (p. 86)

However, on page 88, they say that “We use tenses like this: *If I **wasn't/weren't** such an idiot, I wouldn't have done that.*

Followed by “We can use the phrase *if it weren't/wasn't for ...* to refer to the present, though if the time reference is clear, it can occasionally refer to the past:

If it wasn't for the parking problem, I'd drive to work.

If it wasn't for/hadn't been for those delays on the motorway we'd never have missed the wedding.

Although the order given is *if it weren't/wasn't for*, the examples show only *wasn't*.

And in the practice examples, Question 4 is: If it wasn't for the endless bureaucracy, ...

As can be seen from this, the explanations in Side and Wellman (2002) are extremely confusing. The first examples indicate that only *were* can be used, then *was* is introduced, then the order is given as *were/was* but the accompanying examples show *was* as the normal.

Parrott (2010) in his new edition shows no change from his statements about the use of *was* and *were* in Parrott (2000), and the comment made in Jones (2008) “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*.” still applies.

Greenbaum and Whitcut (1988) state that “*Was* is common in the less formal styles. Do not use *were* after *if* in the sense in which *if* can be replaced by *whether*.” (p. 767). Leech, Cruickshank, and Ivanić (2005) state “But if the Past Tense has UNREAL MEANING, we can use *were*, instead of *was*, with all subjects. For unreal meaning, *were* is more <formal> and ‘correct’ than *was*.” (p. 569). They are supporting Category 3 – *was* is normal but *were* is formal.

Duckworth (2007), in a section entitled Form explains as follows: The second

conditional is formed by using *if* + past tense and *would* + bare infinitive. There is no mention of the word “subjunctive”. In the next section entitled Imaginary situation, the first example is “*If Anna was* here, she’d *know* what to do.” In the following section entitled Variations, there is the following note: “In the *if* clause, we can use *were* instead of *was* for the verb to be. This is very common when we give advice using the expression *If I were you ...*” (p. 87).

Powell, Walker, and Elsworth (2008) similarly state “To form second conditional sentences, we use *if* + past simple + *would*. If it *was* warm, we could eat outside.” with the following notes: “We can use *were* instead of *was* in the *if* clause.” and “We can use *if I were you* to give advice.” (p. 134). Likewise, Dignen, Viney, Walker, and Elsworth (2007) state that “We can use *was* or *were* in the *if* clause after I/he/she/it: If I *was/were* rich, I’d leave my job.” And Lock (2005) states “Note that [with] *if it were* not, *were* is used rather than *was*. This usage tends to be restricted to formal, usually written, contexts as well as a number of common expressions such as *if I were you*.” All of these seem to be Category 4: *was* is normal in some cases, but *were* is normal in others.

Winter (1986) gives the following explanation of the form for the second conditional:

if + past simple + *would* + infinitive.

This is given as the only form for the conditional, but is followed by the following note: There is a special form used to give advice.

If I were you, I wouldn’t buy that house.

In other words, conditionals and advice are treated as different structures.

Thompson and Martinet (1986), in the Fourth Edition of a book first published in 1960, explain the use of conditionals as follows:

When the supposition is contrary to known facts:

If I were you I’d plant some trees round the house. (p. 198)

This example seems to me to be a case of advice, the same as Winter’s example above.

On the following pages, further information is given, but it seems to me that it would totally confuse most students rather than clarify the issue.

In section 225 on page 202, the explanations below are given.

A *If* + *were* instead of *if* + *was*

1. Usually either can be used, *were* being more likely in formal English:

If she was/were offered the job she’d take it.

If Tom was/were here he'd know what to do.

2. But *were* is a little more usual than *was* in the advice form *If I were/was you I would/should ...*: (Note that this structure was described as “supposition contrary to known facts” on page 198.)

3. *Were*, not *was*, is used when the auxiliary is placed first:

Were I Tom I would refuse.

However, my own personal question about this would be whether the *were* in “*Were I Tom I would refuse*” is an auxiliary in the sentence. The explanation in sections 1, 2, and 3 says that *was* is more usual than *were* in conditionals but *were* is more usual than *was* when giving advice (or supposition contrary to known facts), whereas only *were* is used when it comes as the first word in a sentence without *if*.

Alexander (1973) states that Type 2 conditional sentences use *if* + past tense + *would/should (could/might)*. (p. 85)

This is followed by examples including;

If I were in London now, I would go to the exhibition.

With the following comment:

Note also that ‘*if I were you, I'd ...*’ is a useful way of offering advice.

Note that *weren't* (instead of *weren't/wasn't*) may be used throughout the drill.

The following is an answer to a question in the textbook:

I wouldn't drive now if I were you. Offering advice. Note were (NOT was). (p. 85)

A totally contrary explanation is given by Murphy (2011), who gives “*If I was/If I were*” with the statement that “*Was* or *were* can be used but *was* is more informal”, but then gives two examples, one of advice and the other an ordinary conditional.

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

I'd go out if it wasn't so cold = if it weren't so cold

In the first case above, all the other writers have said that the construction when giving advice is “*If I were you*” (with Alexander (1973) saying “*NOT was*”), yet here *was* is given before *were*.

As with Winter (1986) and Thompson and Martinet (1986), second conditionals and advice giving are different structures according to Alexander. But despite his statement that “*were* may be used instead of *was*”, which hints that *was* is more common than *were*, he does not give any example of *was*. I assume that the statement that “*weren't* (instead of *weren't/wasn't*) may be used throughout the drill.” is meant to aid the students in that they do not have to switch between *was* and *were* during

the drill.

Another difference in explanations of the use of *was* or *were* in second conditionals is the description of the verb form used for *was* or *were*. In Category 1 explanations as typified by Freeborn (1990), the general statement is that the verb form being used is the past subjunctive. However, there is a clear change from this in many of the more recent grammar books. One such change can be seen in Spankie (1989), which summarises the situation in the following short note:

“*Were* is the unreal conditional present of *be*, all persons, singular and plural; *was* is often heard and accepted with singulars in spoken English, but not in formal writing and careful speaking.” (p. 210).

As can be seen from the above description, *were* is not subjunctive, or even past; it is conditional and present. However, it should be noted that this description does not appear frequently, if it appears at all, in the other grammar books that I investigated.

More confusion is added by Thompson and Martinet (1986), who state that “the verb in the if-clause is in the past tense; the verb in the main clause is in the conditional tense.” They then follow this by the following explanation: the past tense in the if-clause is not a true past but a subjunctive. (p. 198)

In the explanations in the five categories above, there is a complete continuum of beliefs about the use of *were*, from “obligatory”, “the only permissible form”, “conventional”, “preferable”, “more usual”, “often used”, to “sometimes used”, with a corresponding increase in the acceptance of *was*. See Jones (2008) for details.

The statements in Swan’s *Practical English Usage* (1980, 2005) show an extreme turnabout in the attitude towards *was* and *were*. The only allowable construction in the First Edition (1980) was the use of *were*; there is no mention at all of the possibility of using *was* instead of *were*. In the Third Edition (2005), *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.

Situation in the 21st Century

The situation in the 21st century is put clearly in the following quote from *The History of the English Language*, an Oxford FactFiles reader written by Brigit Viney (2008).

The two most widely used grammar books were Robert Lowth’s *Short*

Introduction to English Grammar which appeared in 1762, and Lindley Murray's *English Grammar* of 1795. These books have a great effect on people's views of grammar in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and still have some effect today. Some people believe that there is only one 'correct' way of saying things, and argue, for example, about whether it is correct to say *different to or different from*. As a result, many first-language speakers of English think that the way they speak and write is incorrect and are ashamed of it. The opposite view -- that all ways of expressing an idea are grammatically correct if they can be understood clearly, and that grammar is always changing -- is becoming more popular. As a result, some grammar books today simply describe how English is used, instead of telling us how we should speak or write. (p. 41)

A much longer explanation appears in Huddleston and Pullum (2005), who start their tome with a long discussion of what the meaning of "correct" is.

This book is a description of the grammar of modern Standard English. To be more specific, we give a synchronic, descriptive grammar of general-purpose, present-day, international Standard English... . Wherever grammatical change has clearly occurred, our aim will be not to describe the evolutionary process but to describe the current state of the language.

Our aim is to **describe** and not **prescribe** ... [this book] is not designed as a style guide or usage manual. We report that sentences of some types are now widely found and used, but we will not advise you to use them. We state that sentences of some types are seldom encountered, or that usage manuals or language columnists or language teachers recommend against them, or that some form of words is normally found only in informal style or, conversely, is limited to rather formal style, but we will not tell you that you should avoid them or otherwise make recommendations about how you should speak or write. (p. 2)

The distinction between the prescriptive and descriptive approaches to grammar is often explained by saying that prescriptivists want to tell you how you ought to speak and write, while descriptivists want to tell you how people actually do speak and write. This does bring out the major difference between the two approaches: it is a difference in goals. (p. 5)

It has been a common assumption of prescriptivists is that only formal style is grammatically correct. (p. 8)

This brings us back to the theme of Jones (2007): What English should we teach? And in particular, how should we explain it? When explaining about this form

of the conditional, do we tell the students to use the conditional present (Spankie 1989), the past subjunctive (Freeborn 1990), the past simple (e.g. Powell et al. 2008), or a ‘special’ tense Swan (1985) and Swan and Walter (1997); or do we tell them to substitute *were* for *was* (i.e. take *was* as the normal) (Burchfield, 1985; Alexander, 1988; Tarshis, 1992; Parrott, 2000) or to substitute *was* for *were* (i.e. take *were* as the normal) (Crystal, 1988; Greenbaum, 1996)? If the experts cannot agree on these basic points, how can the teachers expect their students to understand, especially if they are at a low level?

In my next paper, I will look into the actual use of *was* and *were* in conditional in recent literature and TV programmes. I was intending to introduce the results of research into representative literature written in recent years, which is now available as ebooks, particularly the Harry Potter series, This new style of book has made it much easier for the researcher to examine uses of grammatical structures, simply by using the search function, which is much quicker and more accurate than reading the book and checking visually. Unfortunately, the issue of the Harry Potter ebooks, which was originally due out in November was postponed and will now come out sometime in 2012.

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