

Review of Moessner, Lilo. 2020. *The History of the Present English Subjunctive: A Corpus-based Study of Mood and Modality*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. ISBN: 978-1474-43801-8. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781474438018>

Erik Smitterberg
Uppsala University / Sweden

The development of the subjunctive mood in English is of great interest to language historians not only in English linguistics but also from a cross-linguistic perspective, since this mood has evolved along different paths in the Germanic languages. Moessner's corpus-based book-length study, which treats the present subjunctive in Old, Middle, and Early Modern English (henceforth OE, ME, and EModE, respectively), is thus a very welcome contribution to research. The book contains six main chapters and an epilogue; I will first provide brief and selective summaries of these main sections of the monograph before proceeding to the evaluation of Moessner's findings.

The first, introductory chapter creates a research space for the book, discusses the subjunctive as a concept and its treatment in previous work, addresses Moessner's choice of corpus and method, and outlines the structure of the book. Moessner considers the subjunctive to be "identified by its form as a realisation of the category mood" and to express "one of several kinds of root modality" (p. 241). Root modality occurs "when an illocutionary act is intended to get the world to match the words" (p. 12). Moessner uses a subset of the *Helsinki Corpus* as her material is based on, among other things, the high degree of representativity of that corpus.¹ However, as she did not have access to a comparable corpus that bridges the gap between EModE and Present-Day English, she does not include the period after 1710 in her study. As regards retrieval, Moessner opts

¹ <https://varieng.helsinki.fi/CoRD/corpora/HelsinkiCorpus/>



for manual scrutiny and uses close readings to identify subjunctives and their competing variants in the texts examined to ensure high recall and precision (p. 17). These competing variants are the imperative, the indicative, and modal constructions,² though not all of them are relevant to each clause type. Moessner excludes from the scope of her study (i) forms of the verb *be* where the subjunctive and indicative are distinct but where other verbs do not have an equivalent distinction, and (ii) past-tense verb forms, with the rationale that the distribution of the verb *be* and of strong and weak verbs with subjects of different persons and numbers might otherwise skew quantitative comparisons. Each relevant token is coded for a large number of relevant parameters; the exact parameters used depend to some extent on the clause type the verb phrase occurs in.

Chapters 2–5 address main, relative, nominal, and adverbial clauses, in that order; each chapter provides a period-by-period discussion of OE, ME, and EModE. The scope of investigation frequently differs with the period under study, as the subjunctive is formally distinct from other forms in more contexts in OE than in EModE; the normalised frequency of relevant verb phrases thus typically decreases over time.

Moessner begins Chapter 2, on main clauses, by identifying modal constructions and (in the second person) the imperative as the other variants considered, before proceeding to the analysis. The proportion of subjunctives decreases between OE and ME but not between ME and EModE, where the percentage of imperatives drops (a result that is partly related to the relative frequency of second-person and third-person contexts). Modal constructions account for an increasing share of relevant tokens; *shall* predominates in ME, while *can* and *will* become frequent in EModE. Statutory texts — and, in OE, prose texts and texts on religious instruction — favour the subjunctive throughout; in EModE, this is partly a result of the use of formulaic structures.

Chapter 3 is devoted to adnominal relative clauses, where the variants are subjunctives, indicatives, and modal constructions. The subjunctive begins to lose ground in this context even during the OE period, with 25 per cent of relevant tokens being subjunctives overall. In ME, the subjunctive accounts for a mere 4 per cent of the variant field, and it appears to virtually die out in relative clauses during the EModE period. Statutory texts favour the subjunctive in all periods, as do prose texts in OE and

² Some semi-modal constructions, as well as structures like OE *uton* + infinitive, are also included in the modal category in many of Moessner's tables.

ME. In OE and ME, restrictive relative clauses appear to favour the expression of root modality (modals or subjunctives), as do southern texts. In all periods, use of the subjunctive and/or modal constructions is promoted by an expression of root modality in the matrix clause, while epistemic modality in the matrix clause correlates with indicative verb phrases in the relative clause. Moessner interprets this pattern as a tendency towards ‘modal harmony’, a term borrowed from Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 179–180), with root or epistemic modality expressed in both clauses.

Nominal clauses are the topic of Chapter 4. Here the relevant variants are subjunctives, indicatives, modal constructions, and, in ME and EModE, imperatives.³ Moessner excludes infinitive clauses from her analysis as she considers them to be in competition with finite *that*-clauses in general rather than with, for instance, the subjunctive in such finite clauses. Nevertheless, she acknowledges that the increased frequency of non-finite clauses may have contributed to the decline of the subjunctive (pp. 102–103). The proportion of subjunctives decreases between OE and ME and between ME and EModE; in OE and EModE, there are also decreasing proportions of subjunctives within the periods themselves. Statutory texts favour subjunctives in all three periods, as do *that*-clauses when compared with other clause types and—in OE and ME— texts on secular instruction and prose compared with verse. There are clear tendencies towards modal harmony at least in OE and ME. Moessner also supplies a detailed analysis of which functions of nominal clauses (subject, adjectival complement, etc.) favour the subjunctive in different periods.

Chapter 5 addresses adverbial clauses, which are categorised according to their semantic role. The results reveal a continuous decline of the proportion of subjunctives from OE via ME to EModE, although ME again stands out in evincing no steady development within the period itself. In OE and ME, Southern and Kentish texts, statutory texts, and texts providing secular instruction favour subjunctives. In the former period, prose is also more hospitable to the subjunctive than verse. Secular instruction continues to promote subjunctives in EModE, whereas modal constructions appear to replace it in statutory texts. As regards semantic roles, concessive and conditional clauses—and, in OE, clauses of purpose/result— have the highest percentages of

³ Moessner (pp. 8, 126, 132–133) seems to analyse direct speech following a reporting clause as a nominal clause: if the direct speech takes the form of an imperative clause, it is thus included as an imperative nominal clause. In contrast, Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 1027) argue that, in such cases, the complement of the reporting verb “is not a subordinate clause of any kind” and that the structure “involves the embedding of a **text**, not of clauses as such” [emphasis original].

subjunctives overall. Individual conjunctions (e.g., *ær* in OE) or subclasses of semantic roles (e.g., posterior time in ME) may also prefer the subjunctive. In several contexts, an expression of volition in the matrix clause increases the likelihood of a subjunctive in the dependent clause.

Chapter 6 provides an overall picture of the subjunctive in each period, followed by a concise account of the subjunctive in OE, ME, and EModE taken together. The comparison of periods enables Moessner to show, for instance, that the subjunctive is the most prevalent in nominal clauses in OE and ME but in adverbial clauses in EModE relative clauses are the least hospitable to the subjunctive in all periods. The final section demonstrates, among other things, that the simplification of the verbal paradigm may not have affected the distribution of the subjunctive as much as might be supposed, as most subjunctives occurred in the third person singular, where the subjunctive and indicative have remained distinct, even in OE. Moessner also suggests that the decrease in modal harmony between matrix clauses that express root modality and nominal clauses in EModE might be seen as a reduction of redundancy: if the matrix clause already expresses root modality, subjunctive marking in the nominal clause is typically redundant. The diachronic tendency for infinitive clauses, which do not express mood, to replace finite *that*-clauses contributes to the same reduction in redundancy. In the brief epilogue that concludes the book, Moessner mentions the same tendency in adverbial clauses, where there is less change overall, but where the indicative may replace the subjunctive and reduce redundancy where the latter “did not add a meaning component” (p. 243). Moessner concludes by mentioning the need for a study of the subjunctive’s development from Late Modern English onwards and some desiderata for such a study.

Moessner’s book is clearly the result of careful and painstaking work. Detailed surveys of previous research, problems of classification, etc. accompany the presentation of results throughout. As regards her own data, based on Tables 6.1, 6.9, and 6.17 (pp. 203, 214, and 223, respectively), I conclude that the analysis covers a total of 14,254 verb phrases, 4,398 (31%) of which are subjunctives. Selecting that number of tokens through manual scrutiny and analysing them on a large number of contextual parameters must be considered a remarkable achievement. This method also allows Moessner to include contexts that are notoriously difficult to identify through

computerised searches without loss of recall even in tagged and parsed corpora, such as relative clauses with zero relative markers.

The comprehensive scope of Moessner's analysis also enables her to reach conclusions that would not necessarily have been apparent from an analysis of only one clause type. For instance, her enlightening account of modal harmony between matrix and dependent clauses clearly benefits from her being able to show that this phenomenon occurs in different types of dependent clause. Similarly, the special status of statutory texts as promoting the subjunctive stands out because this phenomenon recurs in several different linguistic contexts.

Another clear strength of Moessner's study is the mixture of quantitative analyses and detailed observations on individual tokens, genres, and so on. In several places, this sheds light on distributions of data that may otherwise have resisted explanation. For instance, her identification of a shift from inheritance-centred to testator-centred wills in OE enables her to account for the drop in directive speech acts in this text category during the period (pp. 36–38). Her close reading of the corpus texts doubtless facilitates reaching such insights.

There are also a few areas where the study could be improved. The first of these concerns the use of statistics. As made clear above, Moessner opts for a quantitative analysis using raw frequencies, percentages, and —where relevant— normalised frequencies, and includes an impressive number of independent variables that may affect the distribution of variants. However, it is very difficult to establish which of the potential factors have an independent effect on the distribution of variants when only one variable is considered at a time. Moessner does attempt to consider the simultaneous influence of several factors, for instance by considering tokens that feature several characteristics which favour the subjunctive (p. 115), but a multifactorial analysis of each variant field could have made this far clearer. It is possible that Moessner does not believe in null-hypothesis significance testing —see Kopleinig (2019) for a recent critique of this practice— but the advantages and drawbacks of refraining from more detailed statistical analysis should have been discussed explicitly in the book.

Moessner's variant fields are another area where more explicit discussion would have been desirable. Although Moessner does not discuss her methodological choice in those terms, the main perspective of the book is implicitly variationist rather than text-

linguistic—in Biber *et al.*'s (2016) sense—in that the distribution of “the subjunctive and its competitors is measured in terms of the relevant verbal syntagms, not in terms of the size of the texts in which they are attested” (p. 20). Raw frequencies are thus primarily turned into percentages of occurrence rather than normalised frequencies.

One basic tenet of the variationist paradigm is that the variants of the linguistic variable should be different “ways of saying the same thing” (Tagliamonte 2012: 2). Yet it seems clear that not all the tokens included by Moessner are equivalent in this respect. As Moessner does not separate epistemic and root meanings of modal auxiliaries in main clauses, not all modal constructions included in tabulations can be replaced with subjunctives without change of meaning. As Moessner acknowledges, this makes ME and EModE figures for main clauses somewhat difficult to compare, as in ME *shall* dominates the distribution, while in EModE *will* and *can*—which are more likely than *shall* to be epistemic—are frequent (p. 56). Based on Figure 6.1 (p. 229), Moessner also draws conclusions as regards which variants have replaced the subjunctive by conflating results for her four clause types; but as the imperative is not an option in all clauses, cumulative percentages of these four variants do not necessarily provide a true picture of the actual choices language users made. Against this background, I would have appreciated a more explicit discussion of Moessner's perspective on variation.

Differences in meaning also play a role in Moessner's interpretations of some other results. The smaller share of subjunctives in relation to imperatives and modal constructions in ME than in OE main clauses is interpreted in terms of the hypothesis that the ME variants “which were preferably used, namely imperatives and modal constructions, especially those with the modal *shall*, expressed a stronger type of deontic modality than their OE predecessors with their greater share of subjunctives” (p. 46). Moessner also suggests that a preference for “more face-threatening” directive speech acts in ME main clauses “in turn offers a new explanation of the decreasing frequency of subjunctives between OE and ME” (p. 46). In addition to the discussion of whether variants are ways of saying the same thing if some of them express stronger modality than others (see above), this interpretation raises interesting questions of more general relevance. If ME does express stronger root modality than OE does, it would be of great interest to attempt to uncover potential reasons for such a difference. Alternatively, one might assume that other factors affect the distribution. For instance,

strength of the root modality expressed by the main variants considered by Moessner may have shifted between OE and ME; expressions that are not included by Moessner but also express root modality may have affected the variant field (for instance, as Moessner acknowledges (p. 235n), adverbs that express modality—very understandably—fall outside the scope of her study); or there may be problems regarding the comparability of the OE and ME samples. More extensive discussion of this issue would have been welcome.

The book is well written and well edited as a whole. Moessner's account is easy to follow despite a few typos and a number of run-on sentences, and the summaries of results are very reader friendly. In addition, as Moessner notes (p. 19), it is fully possible for readers to focus on only one clause type by accessing the relevant chapter directly.

In sum, Moessner's account is a valuable and very welcome contribution to research on the subjunctive in English (and, by extension, in other Germanic languages). The results presented in her book are also likely to be an important source of inspiration for further work on the topic, not least as regards (i) Late Modern English developments, and (ii) forms of the subjunctive not covered by Moessner, such as the past tense and additional forms of the verb *be* where subjunctive and indicative forms are distinct.

REFERENCES

- Biber, Douglas, Jesse Egbert, Bethany Gray, Rahel Oppliger and Benedikt Szmrecsanyi. 2016. Variationist versus text-linguistic approaches to grammatical change in English: Nominal modifiers of head nouns. In Merja Kytö and Päivi Pahta eds. *The Cambridge Handbook of English Historical Linguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 351–375.
- Huddleston, Rodney and Geoffrey K. Pullum. 2002. *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Koplenig, Alexander. 2019. Against statistical significance testing in corpus linguistics. *Corpus Linguistics and Linguistic Theory* 15/2: 321–346.
- Tagliamonte, Sali A. 2012. *Variationist Sociolinguistics: Change, Observation, Interpretation*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons.

Reviewed by
Erik Smitterberg
Uppsala University
Department of English
P.O. Box 527
SE-751 20
Uppsala
Sweden
E-mail: erik.smitterberg@engelska.uu.se