

# If It Was the Subjunctive, Would It Be Wrong?

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*The use of the English subjunctive form has decreased significantly over time, with phrases such as “if I were” being replaced with “if I was.” Though the use of the indicative is increasing, traditional rules still encourage the use of the subjunctive, leading the author to examine English corpora to determine current usage patterns. The results indicate that only very recently has the use of first-person indicative surpassed the subjunctive. Furthermore, the usage of the indicative form is only higher when used with a predicate adjective; with predicate nominatives, the subjunctive is still more common.*

**W**hy does it sound equally natural to say, “If I was younger . . .” and “If I were younger . . .”? Why does Meghan Trainor sing, “If I was you”? Why is it so widely accepted in our language to vary this usage? Two years ago, these questions inspired me to dive deeper into studying English structure and conjugation, beginning with the subjunctive form. I wrote an article about how the use of the subjunctive *if I were you* was more common than the indicative *if I was you*. I then left home for eighteen months to serve as a missionary, and when I returned, I reexamined my research and the results given by my corpora search had changed: the indicative form had become more common! I was blown away by how quickly language could change. What follows is a revised version of my article, indicating research from over the years about this fascinating debated usage and how it has changed over time.

The debate over the use of the subjunctive form (typically used to express a requirement, suggestion, desire, or hypothetical situation) and indicative form (typically used to express a simple statement or question) has been around for decades. Even *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*, written in 1985, explains that the past subjunctive, also known as the *were*-subjunctive, “is nowadays a less usual alternative to the hypothetical past indicative” (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 158). In contrast to the indicative, the subjunctive mood is often considered more formal and referred to as an “optional and stylistically somewhat marked variant of other constructions” (Quirk et al., 1985 p. 155). But is the informal usage of the indicative form technically incorrect? Evidence points to the idea that one form may be better, but *incorrect* could be too strong of a word for living languages, such as English, that constantly evolve.

More recent academic studies show that the overall use of the subjunctive seems to have no concrete declaration of an increase or decrease in frequency, correctness, or formality. However, according to Kovacs (2009) and Waller (2017), the subjunctive forms and functions have been reduced in present-day English; the ways people use the subjunctive have

changed, and some forms have disappeared. Kovacs (2009) reports that the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) from 1990–2008 shows a significant drop in the use of the subjunctive, from 5.5 per million to 3.6 per million (p. 81), and Waller (2017) acknowledges that there was a substantial shift away from the use of the *were*-subjunctive specifically (p. 104). In agreement with Quirk et al. (1985) and other studies, Waller (2017) also states that “the mandative subjunctive [the type of construction that expresses requirement, suggestion, or desire] is vastly more common in writing than in speech” (p. 79), which implies formality. However, he also claims that, in general, the subjunctive association with formality seems to be less evident in American English (AmE) than British English (BrE) and other English varieties (p. 88). Kovacs (2009) believes that the AmE use of the mandative subjunctive is still “formal and rather legalistic in style” (p. 80). In summary, both sources agree that the subjunctive is commonly used in the mandative construction, but they vary in their conclusions on subjunctive formality and popularity.

These different claims about the decreasing use of the subjunctive led me to search the Corpus of Historical American English (COHA) to see which claim the data supported. I searched the indicative phrase *if I was* and found that its frequency has increased significantly over the past two hundred years (see figure 1). I then searched the subjunctive phrase *if I were* and found that its usage has decreased over the past two hundred years (see figure 2). In fact, according to COHA, since 2010 the usage of *if I were* (occurring 13.96 times per million words) has a lower frequency than the usage of *if I was* (occurring 14.24 times per million words). Similarly, according to COCA, from 2015–2019 *if I were* occurred 9.38 per million words and *if I was* occurred 10.42 per million words.

After those searches, I searched how often the subjunctive and indicative forms have been used specifically with subject complements. Some subject complements are predicate adjectives, as in *if I were right* and *if I were younger*. Other subject complements are predicate nominatives, as in *if I*

**Figure 1**

*Frequency of the phrase if I was according to COHA*

SECTION	ALL	1820	1830	1840	1850	1860	1870	1880	1890	1900	1910	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010
FREQ	5250	26	95	122	118	143	212	176	131	229	303	239	300	271	302	344	413	331	475	515	505
WORDS (M)	405	7.0	13.7	15.8	16.5	16.9	18.8	20.1	20.4	22.0	23.1	25.7	27.7	27.4	28.7	29.1	28.8	29.9	33.1	34.8	35.5
PER MIL	12.96	3.72	6.93	7.72	7.14	8.44	11.28	8.77	6.41	10.42	13.12	9.30	10.83	9.89	10.54	11.81	14.33	11.09	14.33	14.79	14.24

**Figure 2**

*Frequency of the phrase if I were according to COHA*

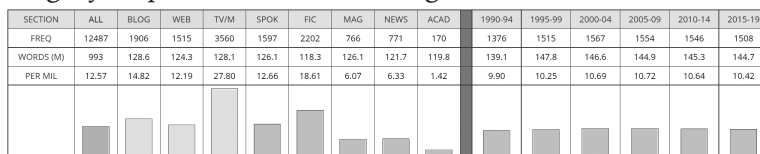
SECTION	ALL	1820	1830	1840	1850	1860	1870	1880	1890	1900	1910	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010
FREQ	8668	137	202	164	248	338	461	468	464	467	418	456	580	522	571	577	504	509	537	550	495
WORDS (M)	405	7.0	13.7	15.8	16.5	16.9	18.8	20.1	20.4	22.0	23.1	25.7	27.7	27.4	28.7	29.1	28.8	29.9	33.1	34.8	35.5
PER MIL	21.40	19.62	14.73	10.38	15.00	19.96	24.54	23.32	22.72	21.25	18.09	17.74	20.93	19.05	19.92	19.81	17.48	17.05	16.20	15.79	13.96

were you and *if I were president*. Surprisingly, when used with a predicate adjective, the indicative form is cited significantly more often (2.45 occurrences per million words in COHA and 1.76 occurrences per million in COCA) than the subjunctive (1.04 occurrences per million words in COHA and .83 occurrences per million in COCA), but, when used with a predicate nominative, the subjunctive is still slightly more common (.32 as opposed to .25 in COHA and .31 as opposed to .20 in COCA; note that these statistics are based on overall citations listed by COCA since 1990 and COHA since the early 1800s.). This shows that, whereas the subjunctive used to be more common (and is still more common when used with predicate nominatives), the indicative has crept into our language more and more, especially among use with predicate adjectives.

The frequency of the indicative may be higher overall in recent years, but the following analysis suggests that the subjunctive is still considered more academic, and as such, more formal (Davies, 2008–). According to COCA, in overall usage since the 1990s, the indicative phrase *if I was* is only more common than its subjunctive alternative in TV and News (as shown by figures 3 and 4). By dividing the total usage per million by the academic usage for both the subjunctive and indicative phrases, I found that the use of the

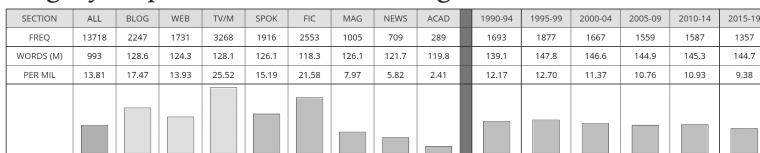
**Figure 3**

*Usage of the phrase if I was according to COCA*



**Figure 4**

*Usage of the phrase if I were according to COCA*



subjunctive form is used in academic settings approximately seventeen percent of the time, and the indicative form is used in academic settings approximately eleven percent of the time. By combining these statistics with the fact that the subjunctive has had more overall usage (since the corpora started collecting the data), the implication is that the subjunctive is more traditional, formal, and academic.

This rise in the use of the indicative form, despite its informality, is represented in contemporary media. For example, in Meghan Trainor’s hit song “Me Too,” the chorus repeats “If I was you,” exemplifying the informal tone associated with the indicative use (2016). President Donald Trump also employed the indicative form when he stated, “I think if I was, you know, more modified, more moderate in that sense, I don’t think I would have done half of the things that I was able to get completed” (Saldivia, 2018). This example is particularly interesting because President Trump is a rather authoritative political figure, yet he often displays an informal tone, as in this case where he uses the indicative mood. Lastly, the popular movie *The Polar Express* (2004) demonstrates usage of both the indicative and subjunctive forms. The train conductor, who is an authoritative, well-spoken character, says to the protagonist, “If I were you, I would think about climbing on board.” The ghost, however, is a

less formal, mysterious character who says to the protagonist, “If I was you . . . I[’d] keep all my valuables right here.” Each of these examples reflect what I have observed in my personal experiences, and they support the conclusion that the indicative is rising in popularity yet is considered less formal.

By pulling these various sources together, we see that although the traditional rule implies that the subjunctive *were* is technically correct, both COCA and COHA demonstrate that the indicative form is more common in general modern usage. This shift has occurred gradually and is especially dramatic with predicate adjectives and predicate nominatives. The fact that neither form is incorrect should be recognized by linguists, teachers, and other academics. If I were you, I’d use the subjunctive because it’s the safest option to build credibility and formality, especially in professional settings. But, if I was you, I’d stick to using the indicative to sound more casual and modern.

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