Morphological subjunctives in English have generally been decreasing since Middle English. Recently, however, subjunctives have been found to occur with surprising regularity in one specific linguistic environment: mandative complement clauses. These are complement clauses which express orders, requests or other directives (= ‘mandatives’), and which are introduced by verbal, nominal or adjectival predicates in the matrix clause, carrying corresponding mandative meaning (examples 1–2). In this context, the mandative subjunctive competes with a number of syntactic alternatives, notably modal periphrasis (example 3):

(1) President Bush even insisted that a bust of Churchill be installed in the Oval Office. (COCA)
(2) The film ends with a request that donations be sent to a Kompak bank account. (COCA)
(3) [H]e basically suggested that Governor Clinton should forget all the promises he made. (COCA)

Synchronic and diachronic studies (e.g. Övergaard 1995; Crawford 2009) have found that the mandative subjunctive has replaced the formerly dominant modal periphrasis in American English during the 20th century while it is presently on the increase in British English and other varieties. This revival of the subjunctive in mandative complement clauses is unexpected, considering its centuries-long trend of decline in all other main and sub-clause contexts.

The proposed study tries to account for the resurgence by mapping out the constructional network of the subjunctive while adopting a diachronic perspective and methodology. Following Aarts (2012), the English subjunctive is here conceived as a morphosyntactic construction rather than a morphological category in the traditional sense. In fact, it will be argued that the Present-Day English subjunctive is best understood as a ‘construction family’ (Hilpert 2013). Its loosely connected family members are micro-constructions which all exhibit a substantial degree of idiosyncratic behaviour regarding their syntactic and collocational preferences and which maintain partly independent inheritance links to different model schemas, from which they are historically derived. These models are (a) the remnants of the historic morphological subjunctive; (b) the schema supplied by the modal periphrasis construction after modal deletion; and (c) the functionally and formally similar imperative construction, especially relevant for collocational strings such as I suggest (that) you + PLAIN FORM.

The study makes extensive use of corpus evidence, extracted from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), the Corpus of Historical American English (COHA), the British National Corpus (BNC) and ARCHER. The data is analysed using exploratory and inferential statistical methods, including variability-based neighbour clustering (VNC) for identifying stages in the diachronic development of mandative complement clauses since the 19th century; multidimensional scaling (MDS) and hierarchical configurational frequency analysis (HCFA) for distinguishing micro-constructions; as well as regression modelling (Hilpert 2013; Baayen 2008). It is expected that the empirical analysis will lend support to the hypothesis that the English subjunctive is a family of micro-constructions rather than a high-level generalisation, and that only a small minority of constructs are actual descendants of the historical morphological subjunctive.

References


