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English Adjectival Predicates Taking Subjunctive Complements: What to Change in Curricula

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ABSTRACT

Background: Similar projects have been undertaken before with the objective to improve English instruction. However, our work is different in that a) it is based on formal theoretical premises; b) the range of the studied data goes far beyond any analogous paper; c) we compare the subjunctive uses to those of indicative and modal auxiliaries; d) we focus on adjectives and their variable selectional properties concerning the mood in complement clauses.

Purpose: We use vast corpus data to reconsider the information about the English subjunctive mood in complement clauses of adjectival predicates. This is needed to fine-tune the English language curricula for undergraduate language and linguistics students, as well as postgraduate students of different areas.

Method: We searched for eleven non-factive adjectives in two English corpora: the academic subcorpus of the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) and the Corpus of Global Web-Based English (GloWbE). The latter is divided into the British and American subcorpora. The adjectives are *advisable, anxious, desirable, eager, essential, imperative, important, necessary, obligatory, urgent, vital*. We manually sorted the findings in such a way as to discard all unsuitable, wrong, and deficient contexts relying on syntactic and contextual analysis. Then we calculated the number of occurrences of each structure of interest (the subjunctive mood, modal auxiliaries, the indicative mood) after the adjectives. Finally, we analysed the patterns and made appropriate generalisations for further didactic implementation.

Results: We found that the selectional preferences of the adjectives under study fall into three distinct groups: for modals (*anxious, desirable, eager*), for the indicative (*essential, important, vital*), for the subjunctive (the rest). We also came across some by-products in our analysis: modal agreement between predicates and auxiliaries in complement clauses; an unexpected contrast in adjectival selectional patterns across the English varieties; a cross-variety robustness of our generalisation concerning the makeup of the established classes.

Conclusion: The conclusions must be taken into account in designing English for Academic Purposes curricula with the new information replacing outdated facts. It should be made clear that English does not have predicates solely selecting for the subjunctive. This statement is corroborated by a fairly regular variation of mood patterns in complements of non-factive adjectives stemming from certain semantic features inherent in them. However, the nature and the realisation of such features in grammar is to be further tested in linguistic theory.

KEYWORDS

generative linguistics, corpus-based study, mood and modality, subjunctive mood, adjectival predicate, selectional property, English language curriculum

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INTRODUCTION

The challenge of teaching the English subjunctive mood intricacies could not have escaped researchers pondering on such a necessity: the mood itself seems to be rapidly disappearing from the language. A few authors diligently inspect-

ed school and university curricula on the subject and arrived at conclusions full of controversy (see Bastien & Vinz, 2014). Other papers just outlined how to teach the English subjunctive to ESL students (Li, 2023; Azizpour & Alavinia, 2021, etc.), or investigated the mood from the position of second language acquisition



(Jabbarpoor & Tajeddin, 2013). Simultaneously, ongoing formal theoretical research into the selectional properties of predicates taking subjunctive complements appears to be ignoring the English language, which is understandable due to the feeble status of the phenomenon in it. Nevertheless, some persistence in recording the use of the subjunctive is encouraged by the opportunity to undertake corpus studies (see, e.g., Moessner, 2020). In (Deshors & Gries, 2020) and (Lee, 2006), attempts were made to apply corpus tools to the study of acquisition and teaching of the English subjunctive. However, the three disparate issues above – EFL curricula, sound theoretical background, and corpus findings – have never been combined and discussed as a system. To us, it looks vital to find out whether the current usage of the subjunctive constructions reflected in corpus studies can receive a theoretical foundation similar to the one available for the Romance languages, and whether this foundation can serve a firm ground for reconsidering the ESL and EAP curricula.

At different levels of English language teaching targeted at undergraduates in foreign language departments and graduate students preparing for their exit examination, we deal with the necessity of explaining and drilling the subjunctive mood. However, both didactic and linguistic sources differ on a number of issues related to this subject. In order to clarify grammatical, semantic and distributional basis of the phenomenon, we need to understand the subjunctive morphology. Moreover, we should determine the place of the subjunctive mood within the modal system of the English language. Finally, we have to identify the most common contexts where this mood occurs. In this paper we aim to fill in these gaps by demonstrating the contemporary usage of the subjunctive mood in the English language to alter the theoretical basis and empirical content of the related curriculum.

In the textbooks published abroad¹ and in Russia (the USSR) (Rubtsova, 1989; Shevtsova et al., 1984; Mikhelson & Uspenskaya, 1989; Blokh, 2000), the topic of the subjunctive mood seems to be among the messiest ones. The reason for this disorder lies in the fact that there are two historical approaches to the subjunctive mood. The first approach follows the development of the actual morphological system English used to have (the formal or “true” subjunctive) (Moessner, 2020; Depraetere & Reed, 2021; Aarts, 2012). The second approach disregards English grammar and focuses on semantic interpretations typical of subjunctive verbs in other languages, e.g. Latin (the notional subjunctive (Portner, 2011)).

In the sources above, the subjunctive mood is defined when corresponding expressions denote hypothetic, possible, or desirable events. Due to the vagueness of such a definition, the formal properties of the subjunctive are manifold and include modal auxiliaries with infinitives, past tense forms, and zero morphology. To refer to past tense forms in conditional clauses by the term *subjunctive* has been a long-standing tradition not only in the Soviet textbooks² (Blokh, 2000), but also in those published abroad. For example, Simon³ (2013) states:

“The subjunctive <...> is usually difficult to notice, as it has no distinctive forms in current English, only those that resemble other verb forms (bare infinitive, past simple and past perfect).”

An approximate semantic description underlying the subject matter in the above-mentioned textbooks makes the grammatical account of it a tricky task. Thus, we had to investigate what exactly is required from teachers in EAP curricula. We analysed some of such curricula recently designed in several top Russian educational institutions to teach PhD students. Ten English programs were selected, including those of MGIMO University, HSE University, Moscow State University, as well as several institutes of the Russian Academy of Sciences. Seven curricula were published in 2022, which means that the documents are quite up to date. We rigorously examined their contents with particular regard to irrealis (for example, the subjunctive mood, modal verbs, and modality). 50% of the analyzed materials do not specify what grammatical material PhD students have to master while doing their EAP course. It is just indicated that students are to write and speak grammatically or know the basic grammatical rules characteristic of scientific language. Three curricula mention modal verbs and the subjunctive mood separately in their grammatical-competence requirements. The other two documents specify that various means of expressing modality (including mood) are part of the EAP course.

Nevertheless, no detailed recommendations are given. Formulated in generalities, the programs do not provide any relevant didactic materials. Modality is a very broad category, and it can be expressed with numerous linguistic means belonging to various language levels (lexical, morphological, and others). The reference lists offered to PhD students fail to solve the issue as they often include outdated resources or suffer from the major drawbacks thoroughly criticized above. Thus, we face the same challenge: what exactly we should teach when introducing our PhD students to irrealis in (scientific) English.

¹ For instance, see Simon, P. (2013). *The grammaring guide to English grammar with exercises* (2nd ed.). Kindle edition. <https://www.amazon.com/Grammaring-Guide-English-Grammar-Exercises-ebook/dp/B00G321AYO>

² Shevtsova, S. V., Brandukova, M. A., Kuz'mina, I. S., & Parkanskaya, L. V. (1984). *The Intermediate Modern English Course. Second Year*. Vysshaya shkola.

³ Ibid.

We should raise the following questions concerning this particular Grammar topic:

- RQ1: How widespread is the subjunctive mood in academic and other sources that our students read in English and translate into Russian?
- RQ2: What theoretical generalisations can be drawn from corpus findings?

To show how the subjunctive is treated and understood in modern linguistics, we will start our paper by reviewing relevant literature. As a comprehensive account of existing works on the topic has been provided in numerous sources and would be excessive here, we will look into the main issues commonly raised by generative linguists. Representing the formal approach to language, generativists do not base their studies on the semantics of the subjunctive mood only. Their spheres of interest include the predicates that take subjunctive complements; the morphology of the subjunctive; the syntax-semantics interface; the universal properties of the subjunctive found across languages.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Different Understandings of the Term Subjunctive

The term *subjunctive mood* has no uniform definition across and even within various linguistic frameworks. This is due to the fact that grammar and semantics can interact, but in fact do remain separate modules. Thus, according to Portner, mood can be distinguished following the criteria of form, meaning, and use. Consequently, there are a variety of descriptions, including the notional mood based on verbal mood-like meanings, similar to the descriptions (2011, pp. 1263–64). Even though the idea of the subjunctive is not uniformly understood in the literature, there is some consensus on the number of moods in English, namely indicative, imperative, and subjunctive, both in this country⁴ and abroad (Bergs & Heine, 2010; Depraetere & Reed, 2021).

From the formal point of view, there are two main strands of thought. Some linguists, like Giannakidou (2011, p. 3), claim that “one can make the case that the formal category of mood does not really exist as a distinct category in English”. Others still find examples of the subjunctive mood in English, but they are really scarce. Nevertheless, they seem to have two clear forms: the first coincides with bare infinitives, and the second is *were*. Most linguists believe that that is what remained from the old system which has largely died out⁵.

Depraetere & Reed (2021) call these forms the present subjunctive and the past subjunctive, respectively. The present subjunctive is used in formulaic expressions, for instance, *God **save** the Queen* (dismissed by B. Aarts (2012) as unproductive and obsolete); in conditional clauses (*if need **be***); after verbs, adjectives, and nouns expressing volition, called the mandative subjunctive (*the board desires that changes **be made** to the plans*). The past subjunctive is employed to represent non-factual or counterfactual situations (*it would be great if it **rained** tonight; I wish he **had told** me about it*). The authors treat the second form more broadly adding to *were* any past-marked verbs. Like their Soviet colleagues, Depraetere & Reed (2021) subdivide various instances of the English mood into inflectional (described above) and analytic (involving modal auxiliaries).

Speaking of the past tense marking, von Fintel & Iatridou (2023) claim that the extra layer of past tense in conditional clauses (*If Miranda **knew** the answer...*) is referred to as “counterfactual” in linguistics and “subjunctive” in philosophy and logic (see also Iatridou, 2000; Stowell, 2008; Crowley, 2024).

Thus, the understanding of the subjunctive mood varies from author to author. In the subjunctive are included:

- (1) the morphologically null non-agreeing forms of the so-called present subjunctive; they are clearly discernible only next to 3rd person Sg subjects;
- (2) “unreal” past forms expressing counterfactuality;
- (3) the so-called analytic subjunctive making use of modal auxiliaries.

What unites them is their non-factual semantics, and a few researchers base their classifications on the meaning, thereby promoting the idea of the “notional subjunctive”, as you remember from the Introduction. So, next we will closely look at how the semantics of the subjunctive mood is understood in the literature.

What the Subjunctive Mood Means

The study by Giannakidou (2009) contains a fairly long list of approaches to the semantics of the subjunctive, for example, speech acts and illocutionary force; *realis* (indicative) and *irrealis* (subjunctive) distinction; veridicality and nonveridicality; a null ordering source, and gradability. The oldest and most general distinction is *realis* vs *irrealis*. In the Cambridge Dictionary of Linguistics (Brown & Miller, 2013, p. 293), mood is defined through this prism: it is “usually realized by affixes on verbs but also by different types of clause. It relates to speakers’ judgements of situations as real or factual vs unreal/irrealis or non-factual.” A. Giannakidou (2009, p. 1889) refines this distinction and develops the notion of ve-

⁴ Gordon, I. P., & Krylova, Ye. M. (2021). *Grammatika sovremennogo angliyskogo yazyka* [Modern English grammar]. Izd. KDU.

⁵ But see (Blok, 2000), where it is unexpectedly claimed that the English system of the subjunctive mood is in the making.

ridicality. Veridicality is a formal semantics phenomenon: “a propositional operator F is veridical if from the truth of Fp we can infer that p is true according to some individual x (i.e. in some individual x 's epistemic model)”.

However, Baunaz & Puskás (2022) claim that veridicality does not relate to the subjunctive. According to the definition above, predicates like *regret* or *be happy* should be considered veridical, yet they trigger the subjunctive mood in French:

(6) Léon est content que Georges ait fini son chapitre.
Leon is happy that Georges have.3SG.SUBJ finished his chapter
'Leon is happy that Georges finished his chapter.'

Similar examples can be found in other languages. We will illustrate this point by a sentence from Russian (Dobrushina, 2012, p. 134), where a fully veridical predicate requires a subjunctive complement.

(7) On vse-taki dobilsja, čtoby ekzamenacionnye raboty devuški byli prosmotreny ešče raz i oceneny bolee ob"ektivno.
'In the end he managed to get the girl's exams reconsidered and re-evaluated in a fair way.'

The veridicality approach hinges on the fact that “descriptively, the subjunctive is considered to express some kind of “modality” but what kind exactly is never made specific” (Giannakidou, 2011, pp. 4–5). Givon (1994, p. 277) also underlies the modal nature of the subjunctive and says that although “an air-tight, categorical definition of “subjunctive” remains an unrealistic goal, one could certainly identify the most likely subjunctive foci along the two scalar sub-dimensions of irrealis – epistemic and valiative/deontic”.⁶

In formal semantics, there is another long-standing approach to mood and modality originating from a few studies (Hintikka, 1962; Stalnaker, 1979; Cresswell & von Stechow, 1982 as cited in Giorgi & Pianesi, 1997, p. 205) and in different works by Angelika Kratzer summarised in (Kratzer 2012). Discussing conditions behind mood choice in subordinate clauses, Giorgi & Pianesi (1997) indicate that “such conditions have traditionally been analysed by hypothesising the presence of a modal operator requiring the clause to be true in a particular set of worlds, distinguished from the actual ones, the so-called *doxastic alternatives*”, that is “possible states of affairs” can be different from the actual one, “albeit possibly connected with it”. The idea of some normalcy characteristic of the actual world and possibilities and necessities realised in alternative (modal) worlds gave rise to the whole system of modal descriptions.

Crosslinguistically, notional modality is expressed through a variety of means. A. Kratzer (2012) lists its instantiations,

such as modal auxiliaries, modal suffixes in adjectives, and modal lexical units. Translating her German examples into English, we get such instances of modality as the adjectives with the suffix *-able* (*sociable, accessible, conceivable, infallible*, etc.), modal auxiliaries (*must, can*, etc.), adverbs (*possibly*), impersonal constructions (*it is necessary that*), and adjectival phrases (*to be able*). She concludes that there is no syntactic category of modality and asks “What, then, is modality?”. Answering this question, she introduces the term *conversational background*, which serves to reflect the role of context in the semantically vague category of modality. This background specifies the *modal base* and the *ordering source*. The modal base is formed, for example, when a realistic conversational background

<...> determines the set of accessible worlds by tracking the actually available evidence in closely related worlds. <...> Stereotypical conversational backgrounds can be used to rank worlds according to how close they come to the normal course of events in the world of evaluation, given a suitable normalcy standard. In that case, they function as ordering sources. (Kratzer 2012, p. 39)

Semantic underpinnings of modality are developed in other groundbreaking publications. Giorgi & Pianesi (1997, p. 217) claim that the ordering source can be null and non-null and the modal base realistic and non-realistic. A comprehensive review of modal semantics is beyond the scope of this paper. What we will focus on further, is the choice of mood by the speaker. As it will be demonstrated below, it depends on a language and characteristics of a predicate selecting for a form of the subordinate predicate.

Where the Subjunctive Mood Occurs

Terminology and Universality

Despite the fact that terminology describing different predicate types taking subjunctive or indicative complements varies from author to author, it is possible to find the common core behind each class name. From a large array of terms proposed for different languages (Giorgi & Pianesi, 1997; Giannakidou, 2009, 2011a, 2011b; Baunaz & Puskás, 2014, 2022; Dobrushina, 2012; Cornilescu, 2003), we have selected the terms to be used from now on: 1) desideratives (verbs expressing desires or wants: *to want, to desire, to hope*; adjectives *eager, anxious, willing, reluctant*); 2) directives (*to order, to suggest, to insist*); 3) modals (*it is possible, it is necessary*); 4) fiction verbs (*to dream, to imagine*); 5) epistemic verbs (*to think, to believe*); 6) verbs of saying (*to say, to claim, to observe*); 7) factive emotives (*to regret, to be surprised*); 8) non-emotive factives (*to realise, to remember, to discover*).⁷

⁶ “Epistemic modality (also sometimes called evaluative modality) is concerned with the speaker’s assessment of the truth of a proposition. <...> Deontic modality is concerned with the granting of permission and the imposing of obligation.” (Brown & Miller, 2013, p. 289)

⁷ Most of the information can be found in (Baunaz & Puskás, 2022, pp. 10–11).

Most languages seem to coincide in a small group of predicates selecting for the subjunctive; they are desiderative (*prefer, wish, want...*), directive (*suggest, order, insist...*), and modal (*it is necessary that...*) (Portner, 2011, p. 1265; Giorgi & Pianesi, 1997; Baunaz & Puskás, 2022, pp. 20–21).

Apart from these three categories, we observe a range of patterns. In some languages, certain predicates obligatorily select for subjunctive complements, but in others the same predicates take indicative ones. Moreover, even language-internally the selectional properties of the same predicate can alternate. See the examples for the Italian verb *pensare* ‘think’ (8) (Giorgi & Pianesi, 1997, p. 223) and the French verb *comprendre* ‘understand’ (9) (Baunaz & Puskás, 2014, 2022). N. Dobrushina (2012, p. 129) cites a lot of cases of such intralinguistic alternation (see (10)): the paper arranges 58 predicates along the scale of mood selection frequency and shows that most of them can take both subjunctive and indicative complements⁸.

(8) Gianni pensa che Mario abbia/ha mangiato una mela
Gianni thinks that Mario has (SUBJ)/(IND) eaten an apple.

(9) a. Jean comprend que Jules prend des photos.
Jean understands that Jules take.ind des pictures

b. Jean comprend que Jules prenne des photos.
Jean understands that Jules take.subj des pictures

(10) a. Kogda-to mama mečtala, čto Glaša stanet vračom. Ind.
b. Kogda-to mama mečtala, čtoby Glaša stala vračom. Subj.
‘Years ago Mom wanted Glasha to become a doctor.’

In the previous section we showed that the selection for mood does not always depend on veridicality/reality/factivity of the selecting predicate. Considering this and the variation illustrated in (8) to (10), we can agree with Baunaz & Puskás (2022) and other authors that the realis/irrealis semantics of the predicate does not seem to be a decisive factor for the selection of a certain type of complement. What is the reason for such inconsistency and variability? Let us have a closer look at predicates taking subordinate clauses.

Classification of Predicates Taking Subordinate Clauses

Factivity and Emotivity. The relevant literature contains ample evidence that the distribution of the subjunctive is closely connected to the semantics of predicates it follows.

The seminal paper that gave rise to the discussion of various types of complements after different types of predicates was written as long ago as in 1970 (Kiparsky & Kiparsky, 1970). It distinguishes factive from non-factive predicates “that take sentences as their subjects” and shows that the former ones have a few features absent from the latter⁹. Moreover, both factive and non-factive predicates can be further subdivided into emotive and non-emotive, which also proves to be an important distinction for the choice of mood in the subordinate clause (Kiparsky & Kiparsky, 1970, p. 143; pp. 169–170). Table 1 summarises the Kiparskys’ theory.

Table 1

Classification of Predicates with Subordinate Clauses as Presented in Kiparsky & Kiparsky (1970)

	Factive	Non-factive
Non-emotive	<i>well-known, clear be aware, make clear, forget</i>	<i>likely, sure, possible, seem, probable suppose, assert, allege, claim, believe, anticipate, foresee</i>
Emotive	<i>important, relevant, instructive, sad, fascinate regret, resent, deplore</i>	<i>improbable, unlikely, urgent, vital</i> (the latter two are marked as future-related) <i>intend, prefer, anxious, willing, eager</i>

Even though the cited paper does not specifically cover the topic of the subjunctive mood, it laid a solid foundation for the analysis of predicates’ selection for mood. Later we will return to the classification offered above with a special focus on English examples.¹⁰

A Wider View. In Cornilescu (2003) a lot of focus is given to adjectives, which is especially valuable for us. The researcher follows Kratzer (2012) and Giorgi & Pianesi (1997) in treating non-realistic contexts as reflected in non-null ordering sources with “more than one alternative to the actual world” and adopts the four-fold classification from Kiparsky & Kiparsky (1970) into factive vs non-factive and emotive vs non-emotive now considering their selection for mood in subordinate clauses.

She claims that non-factive non-emotive adjectives (*(un)necessary, impossible, imperative, likely, conceivable*) are nearly always used with the subjunctive (where the author also

⁸ However, 38% of the listed predicates only take subjunctive complements and one verb (hope) is always followed by the indicative.

⁹ There is an alternative approach to extraposed subjects: such clauses are analysed either as complements of sentential predicates or associates of it (Hartmann, 2012). Obviously, there is a clear distinction between A and B. Only A can undergo raising to the subject position and replace it (A’):

- (A) It is important that he is helpful. (Realis)
- (B) It is important that he be helpful. (Irrealis)
- (A’) That he is helpful is important.
- (B’) *That he be helpful is important.

Whichever theory one follows, what we observe here is distinct syntactic behaviours of subjunctive and indicative clauses.

¹⁰ The problem is that most works on subjunctive complements of different verbs have been produced for the Romance languages and Greek, where, unlike English, the subjunctive is realised either morphologically or as a sentential mood.

includes clauses with modals). Interestingly, she accounts for the use of the modal auxiliary *may* as “a sort of modal agreement between the main predicate and the auxiliary in the complement clause”.

(11) It is conceivable that he may win.

Emotive predicates exhibit double mood selection (the subjunctive and the indicative). They are divided into factive and non-factive, like in the groundbreaking work by the Kiparskys (1970). Non-factive emotives include *good, right, essential, urgent, annoying, silly, understandable* <...>, and ‘importance adjectives’ *advisable, crucial, desirable, essential, imperative, important, necessary, obligatory, vital*. Factive emotive adjectives include *odd, tragic, crazy, surprising, bothersome*, etc. Adjectives *anxious* and *eager* are called volitional.

Next, we will look at the analysis of semantic features of emotive and non-emotive (cognitive) predicates.

Semantic Features. Also borrowing some of the terminology from Kiparsky & Kiparsky (1970), Baunaz & Puskás (2022) call epistemic verbs cognitive (= non-emotive) non-factives and desideratives future-referring. Basing on French data, they focus their study on emotive factives (*be happy*), which, unlike English counterparts, are followed by subjunctive complements. They try to isolate specific semantic features responsible for this phenomenon and come to the conclusion that those features are connected with the external argument of the main predicate. The distinctive feature seems to be emotivity present in emotive factive and future-referring predicates.

In the work partly discussing French adjectival predicates (Léger, 2006), we can see that different modal adjectives have heterogeneous syntactic distribution, some allowing both personal and impersonal constructions (*certain*) and most only impersonal ones (*necessary*). Moreover, such adjectives as *certain* take indicative complements, and *necessary* and the like take subjunctive predicates. The distinction lies in different types of modality, namely epistemic for *certain* and deontic for *necessary*. In Giorgi & Pianesi (1997) and Giorgi (2009) the feature responsible for mood choice in Italian is the presence or absence of the speaker’s coordinate: “Verbs of communication always require the representation of the speaker and feature the indicative. <...> Verbs concerning cognitive states (*regret*) do not require the speaker’s coordinate and select the subjunctive” (Giorgi, 2009, p. 1851). Grisot et al. (2023) experimentally studied the effect tense and aspect of the main predicate have on selectional properties of the complement mood in varieties of French.

As the analysed works demonstrate, despite some language specific details, realis/irrealis features are frequently not sufficient criteria underlying mood choice. In addition, such semantic features as emotive/cognitive, epistemic/deontic, speaker’s coordinate, and even tense and aspect can con-

tribute to the selection of either the subjunctive, or the indicative.

METHOD

Data Collection

We have studied the selectional properties of eleven adjectives: *advisable, anxious, desirable, eager, essential, imperative, obligatory, urgent, vital, important, and necessary*. The sample was extracted from two corpora created by Mark Davies at Brigham Young University (BYU, USA). We analysed concordance lines from the academic sub-corpus of the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA, 81 million words obtained from 100 different peer-reviewed journals; 1990–2019) and the US and GB sub-corpora of the Corpus of Global Web-Based English (GloWbE, each sub-corpus amounts to about 386 million words obtained from web pages; 2012–2013). Detailed guidelines for working with BYU corpora are given in (Davies & Fuchs, 2015).

The general number of hits is 17,095. Out of this number only 6,972 contexts were deemed suitable. The suitability was defined according to the following criteria:

- Time of use: they had to be created not earlier than 50 years ago to ensure the representation of the language spoken and written today;
- Register: they had to be found in modern academic and general English texts, so all religious (e.g. biblical) contexts, translations from Italian, French Renaissance literature into English, as well as not present-day English fragments were discarded;
- No agreement: all the cases where the agreement between the subject and the predicate is neutralised were ignored (12);

(12)

However, it is **advisable that you buy** the sunglasses from a shop (GloWbE).

- No ambiguity between factive and non-factive readings: whenever there was doubt as for the semantics of the adjectival predicative, the context was ignored (13);

(13)

a. ...It is **important that the reader is able** to first survey the entire page and then zoom in (COCA).

b. Nigel Waterson, chairman of The Equity Release Council, said it was **important that policymakers saw** equity release as a solution, not a problem.

- Full presence of the subordinate predicate: all incomplete cases were discarded as their number was infinitesimally small.

So, we created a continuous sample searching for the string *matrix adjective that* (such as *vital that, urgent that, essential that*, and others). Each concordance line was checked manually to identify its syntactic relevance and make sure all con-

texts under analysis were created within the last 50 years (present-day English).

Data Analysis

At this stage, we examined all obtained examples manually to see whether the subordinate clause (the context following *that*) contained a predicate with irrealis semantics. Five such predicate types were identified: the present subjunctive (14), the modal auxiliary *should* (15), other modal auxiliaries (*can/could, may/might, will/would, ought to, must*), the present tense (16) and the past tense (17) forms. Present subjunctive contexts were only considered suitable when found next to 3rd person Sg. subjects. Additionally, the verb *be* next to any subject was deemed appropriate as well. The present tense when clearly seen in its agreement forms, i.e. the 3rd person Sg. agreement suffix *-s* in present simple verbs, the agreeing auxiliaries in present continuous and present perfect, was considered indicative.

(14)
I think it's very, very **vital that** *President Obama understand* that he has not scraped his way to victory here (GloWbE, US).

(15)
In the hearing, Hamburg was found making one thing clear that it has become **vital that** *the roles of FDA should again be clarified* as well as re-enforced (GloWbE, US).

(16)
To really excel in the space, it is **vital that** *data is utilised* in the best way for your business... (GloWbE, US).

(17)
We have 108 MLAs because it was **vital that** *every section of society was represented* (GloWbE, GB).

To enhance the efficiency of the data analysis process, the forms were colour-coded. Green was selected for the present subjunctive, yellow for *should*, grey for the present indicative, red for the past tense, and so on.

Despite obvious advantages of using corpora for language analysis, we have faced several challenges while working with COCA and GloWbE. Firstly, technical issues pose a serious obstacle as text fragments can only be copied and pasted manually. Another difficulty consisted in the corpus size. Since many searches yielded immense data, their analysis was time-consuming. Moreover, though corpus methods are traditionally believed to be reliable (see, for instance Egbert & Baker, 2019, p. 4), we found numerous discrepancies in GloWbE. They are as follows: the specified and actual number of concordance lines often differs; concordance lines are repeated; sometimes materials were created elsewhere but not in GB or the USA. Next, some fragments appeared difficult to interpret since the context was incomplete; in the first place, this holds true for the search string *important that*. Finally, ambiguity between factive and non-factive interpre-

tations arose in several contexts, which is exemplified in (13). In its factive reading, the sentence underlines the importance of the reader's ability to survey the entire page etc.; in its non-factive reading, the fragment conveys modality.

RESULTS

The search for subjunctive complements of eleven adjectives yielded the total of 6,972 tokens. The frequency of occurrence largely varies across the adjectives. As can be seen in Table 3, the adjective with most tokens *important* takes up 53.1% of all findings, whereas the least frequent *obligatory* amounts to a disproportionate 0.05%.

How Widespread is the Subjunctive Mood?

We focused on the following types of predicates in post-adjectival subordinate clauses: the formal subjunctive mood, i.e., non-agreeing forms of verbs next to third person singular subjects; the modal auxiliaries of obligation (*must*), advice (*should/ought to*), ability/possibility (*can/could*), probability (*may/might*), volition (*will/would/shall*); agreeing forms of the present tense (obviously, indicative), and unclear past tense forms. At first glance, the most common form is the present tense, whereas the formal subjunctive constitutes just a third of all the findings, and instances of *should* take less than 10%.

Table 2

Breakdown of the Adjectives across the Studied Contexts

Forms in complement clauses	Number of tokens	Proportion
formal subjunctive	2,293	32.9%
must	67	1.0%
should/ought to	573	8.2%
can/could	209	3.0%
may/might	14	0.2%
will/would/shall	43	0.6%
present tense	3,506	50.3%
past tense	267	3.8%

Past tense forms were included in the picture due to the fact that several authors believe them to represent the subjunctive, too: they do not distinguish between the morphological indication of mood and syntactic expression of counterfactuality¹¹. The number of past forms is negligible (from 0 to 4.5% of the general quantity), and it is impossible to decide whether we deal with true past or counterfactual morphology (18–19).

¹¹ Counterfactuality is discussed in (Iatridou, 2000), where the author analyses the past tense morphology in if-clauses and after wish as an indicator of discrepancy between two points in worlds: i.e., we have the world where the speaker produces their utterance and the world where the content of the utterance is true.

(18) It was **important that** *we played* well... (GloWbE, GB).

(19) Closer to home, it was **vital that** *Tullamore itself felt* the value and impact of the event... (COCA).

Modal auxiliaries were included for the same reason as the past tense: a few researchers include them, especially *should*, in the so-called analytic subjunctive. As Table 2 demonstrates, the number of modal tokens is not very large either, with few exceptions.

Table 3 demonstrates the frequency of the predicative adjectives we considered and their individual selectional properties. The most common ones are *important*, *essential*, *imper-*

ative, *vital*, and *necessary*: they are found in at least several hundred relevant contexts.

Table 4 contains umbrella rubrics for modals (Modal verbs), as well as present and past tenses (we thought it was safe to combine them as indicative due to a very small amount of past tense forms in complement clauses and their unclear interpretation). Various modals, on the one hand, and indicative-looking verbs, on the other, were merged into two respective groups. That was done for the sake of convenience, as the main objective here was to reveal the ordering of adjectives with respect to the frequency of their subjunctive complements. The table also illustrates a correlation between high percentage in subjunctive complements and low percentage of indicative complements, and vice versa.

Table 3

The Combined Number of Complement Types Taken by Predicative Adjectives

Adjective	Suitable contexts	Formal subjunctive	Must	Should + ought to	Can + could	May + might	Will/ would/ shall	Present tense	Past tense
Advisable	37	17	-	8	1	1	-	10	-
Anxious	70	16	-	41	1	-	2	9	1
Desirable	112	40	-	45	3	-	4	17	3
Eager	10	4	-	5	-	-	1	-	-
Essential	1,134	383	7	78	29	1	13	587	36
Imperative	789	386	8	26	2	-	4	329	34
Important	3,704	1,083	23	254	140	6	6	2,038	154
Necessary	455	225	19	82	8	4	12	94	11
Obligatory	9	5	2	-	-	-	-	2	-
Urgent	44	22	4	5	2	-	-	9	2
Vital	608	112	4	29	23	2	1	411	26

Table 4

Subjunctive Complements Ordered from Highest to Lowest against Modals and Indicatives

Adjective	Formal subjunctive	Modal verbs	Indicative
Obligatory	55.6%	22.2%	22.2%
Urgent	50.0%	25.0%	25.0%
Necessary	49.5%	27.5%	23.0%
Imperative	48.9%	5.1%	45.0%
Advisable	46.0%	27.0%	27.0%
Eager	40.0%	60.0%	
Desirable	35.7%	46.4%	17.9%
Essential	33.8%	11.2%	55.0%
Important	29.2%	11.7%	59.1%
Anxious	22.8%	62.9%	14.3%
Vital	18.4%	9.7%	71.9%

Colour marks the most significant numbers approaching or above 50%.

Side-Findings of the Study

Modal Agreement. Even though the general number of modal verbs found after the investigated adjectives was fairly small, distinguishing between their semantic classes was not useless. By looking at specific modal verbs, we tested the hypothesis of modal agreement put forward in (Cornilescu, 2003) (see example (11)). In Table 5, we appear to have a whole lot of examples supporting this hypothesis. The darker the colour of a cell is, the higher the percent of respective findings. Cells without colour show insignificant yields.

The Subjunctive in British and American Varieties of English. As another side finding, the two English varieties turned out to be somewhat different. Table 6 demonstrates that there is a noticeable preference for the indicative mood in British English (46.7% indicative vs 26.4% subjunctive) and for the subjunctive mood in American English (58.2% subjunctive vs 16.4% indicative), whereas the number of *should*-complements is nearly the same. For the sake of convenience, the British data are marked green, the American data yellow.

Generalisations of Combined Findings from COCA, GloWbE (UK), and GloWbE (US)

Recall that cross-linguistically preference for subjunctive complements is found in directive, desiderative, and some modal predicates in impersonal constructions (Baunaz & Puskás 2022, pp. 20–21). In our case, all the adjectives can be considered modal predicates, only two cannot be used

in impersonal constructions (*eager* and *anxious*), yet they demonstrate distinctive selectional patterns:

- (1) *obligatory, urgent, necessary, imperative, and advisable* mostly select for the subjunctive mood, the remaining two complement types being equally split between modals and indicatives (except *imperative*);
- (2) *desirable* (along with *eager* and *anxious* used in personal constructions) prefers modal verbs, especially *should*;
- (3) *essential, important, and vital* display a strong preference for the indicative.

Preference of the latter for the indicative mood does not depend on their factive or non-factive interpretation:

- (20) It is **important that** *the act does not place* unreasonable burdens on institutions (GloWbE, GB) (non-factive).
- (21) It is very **important that** *all websites are checked* using some form of audit tool... (GloWbE, GB) (possibly, factive).

DISCUSSION

An Interim Summary: Frequency of Contexts

In this paper, we have analysed a large corpus sample containing subjunctive, indicative, modal, and past-marked complements of an array of English non-factive adjectives that have no coverage in the earlier literature sources. The comprehensive corpus study by Moessner (2020) is strictly diachronic and deals with the subjunctive in Old English, Middle English and Early Modern English. In the works closest to ours in intent, only a limited scope of corpus-based research was conducted. One such study employing corpus

Table 5
Breakdown of the Modal Auxiliaries According to Their Types

Modal findings per Adj	Must	Should + ought to	Can + could	May + might	Will/would + shall
Anxious (44/62.9 %)	-	93.2%	2.3%	-	4.5%
Eager (6/60.0%)	-	83.3%	-	-	16.7%
Desirable (52/46.4%)	-	86.5%	5.8%	-	7.7%
Necessary (125/27.5%)	15.2%	65.6%	6.4%	3.2%	9.6%
Advisable (10/27.0%)	-	80.0%	10.0%	10.0%	-
Urgent (11/25.0%)	36.3%	45.5%	18.2%	-	-
Obligatory (2/22.2%)	100%	-	-	-	-
Important (429/11.7%)	5.4%	59.2%	32.6%	1.4%	1.4%
Essential (128/11.2%)	5.5%	60.9%	22.7%	0.8%	10.1%
Vital (59/9.7%)	6.8%	49.1%	39.0%	3.4%	1.7%
Imperative (40/5.1%)	20.0%	65.0%	5.0%	-	10.0%

Note. Number of modal auxiliaries = 906. The table is organized according to the general percentage for the number of findings per adjective (from 62.9% for *anxious* to 5.1% for *imperative*).

Table 6

Comparison of Occurrences of Two Moods and the Modal Auxiliary *Should* in the British and American Varieties of English

Adjective	Subjunctive		Should		Indicative	
	British (GloW- bE GB)	American (CO- CA+GloWbE, US)	British (GloW- bE, GB)	American (COCA + GloWbE, US)	British	American
Obligatory	60.0%	100%			40.0%	
Urgent	23.0%	8.7%	23.0%	82.6%	54.0%	8.7%
Imperative	25.5%	70.2%	4.4%	2.9%	70.1%	26.9%
Advisable	33.3%	76.9%	23.8%	15.4%	42.9%	7.7%
Eager	42.9%	25.0%	57.1%	75.0%		
Desirable	17.8%	56.2%	62.2%	29.8%	20.0%	14.0%
Essential	15.5%	66.7%	9.3%	5.3%	75.2%	28.0%
Important	14.5%	60.0%	9.9%	4.2%	75.6%	35.7%
Anxious	11.1%	52.4%	71.1%	42.9%	17.8%	4.7%
Vital	11.5%	54.9%	5.6%	5.7%	82.9%	39.3%
Necessary	35.7 %	69.5%	29.3%	14.6 %	35.0%	15.9%

Note. The average of the subjunctive = 26.4% for BE, 58.2% for AmE; the average of *should* = 26.9% for BE, 25.3% for AmE; the average of the indicative = 46.7% for BE, 16.4% for AmE.

linguistics methodology (Deshors & Gries 2020) spans five varieties of English — BE, AmE, Australian English (AusE), and Indian English (IndE). However, it analyses the frequency of just two forms in complements of eight trigger verbs, namely the subjunctive and *should* constructions. Another similar paper (Lee 2006) considers specific Australian, Hong Kong, and Asian English corpora to compare the frequency of *was* and *were* in contexts traditionally linked to the use of the subjunctive. Like the present study, Lee (2006) aims to transform the teaching of this topic, but arrives at no definitive conclusion.

Our contribution then is wider in scope than the studies above as it focuses on Modern English rather than earlier periods in the language history and provides theoretical generalisations based on the patterns we observed. First, we looked at the frequency of occurrences of different structures in complement clauses of predicative adjectives, summarised in Table 2. In Table 4, we merged all the modal verbs into one rubric, and indicative-looking complement predicate forms into another, which together with the subjunctive left us with three general categories. These data show that the most frequent is the indicative form with 54.1% of the findings, next comes the formal subjunctive construction with 32.9% of contexts, and last modal auxiliaries (mostly *should*) with only 13% of all our findings. The result reflects the sentiment about the subjunctive mood going extinct in the English language (but see the contrast between the British and American varieties summarised in Table 6). However, our research also demonstrated that the studied adjectives clearly differ in their selectional preferences for one of the three general patterns. In their complement clauses, they

require the subjunctive form, the indicative form, or an agreeing modal auxiliary, and this generalisation is robust across the varieties.

So, the results of this investigation can become a good starting point for a theoretical analysis of the complement structures of non-factive predicates in the English language. Properly answering the question of what underlies the three patterns we have identified is far beyond the scope of this paper. Anyway, we can at least try to term our groupings appropriately. First, we will address the so-called emotive non-factives which along with directives, desideratives, and modals in impersonal constructions select for the formal subjunctive mood.

Repercussions for Language Theory

A Word on Emotive Non-Factives

To find out if it suits us to borrow the term *emotive non-factive* from (Baunaz & Puskás, 2022), we summarise the way it is utilised in different papers (see the Appendix).

As Table A in the Appendix shows, there is consensus only about *urgent*: all the authors whose works we inspected unanimously term this adjective emotive non-factive. Nevertheless, it is apparent that *eager* and *anxious* differ from the rest of the adjectives, even though they are included in the emotive non-factive class just in (Kiparsky & Kiparsky, 1970).

Used in impersonal sentences, most adjectives can be considered ergative, whereas *eager* and *anxious* are transitive¹²: they have an external argument. Consequently in (Baunaz & Puskás, 2022), they would probably correspond to predicates with sentient, cognitive, emotive, and volitional features (note that Cornilescu (2003) also calls them *volitional*). In (22) and (23), the subject is realised by animate sentient nominals, whereas (24) is impersonal.

(22)

...**Eastman was eager** that *such a display of wonders should not remain a dead letter*...(COCA).

(23)

...**Dewey was anxious** that *we should all contribute to a common stock of intelligent belief in the hope* (COCA).

(24)

It is desirable that *new arid lands should be brought under irrigation*... (GloWbE, US).

Our study shows that *anxious* and *eager* do not select for the subjunctive very often: *anxious* has only 22.0% subjunctive complements, *eager* has also less than a half (40.0%). Instead, they are followed by modals, mostly *should*. The third adjective which approaches *anxious* and *eager* in its behaviour is *desirable* rather than *urgent*: the former has 35.7% subjunctive complements vs 46.4% modal constructions as compared with 50.0% subjunctive vs 25.0% modals in structures with *urgent*. The desiderative future-referring semantics of *desirable* is also closer to that of *eager* and *anxious* than the semantics of *urgent*. Even if the argument structure might play some role in defining selectional properties of *eager* and *anxious*, the lexical semantics seems to be a more significant factor. Anyway, curious as these (desiderative) adjectives are, they can nonetheless be set aside as very rare.

Modal Verbs

We are only left with two groups of modals used in impersonal constructions (minus *desirable*): the ones with preference for the subjunctive (*obligatory, urgent, necessary, imperative, advisable*) and the ones with preference for the indicative (*essential, important, vital*). Following the long-standing tradition of subjective decisions and continuing to map our findings onto the existing template, we should call the first group directives and the second – after (Cornilescu, 2003) – ‘importance adjectives’. Again, there seems to be some semantic basis under this division. As Table 5 demonstrates, we also deal with modal agreement. Why our desiderative adjectives cooccur with *should* is yet to be found out. In (Kiparsky & Kiparsky, 1970, p. 171), it is called a future *should*, which would be appropriate for future-referring predicates,

as is the future auxiliary *will* found after all the three, but especially *eager*.

Another adjective agreeing with *should* – *advisable* – does so due to its semantics: *should* has always been considered a modal auxiliary for giving advice.

Obligatory is clearly a deontic adjective expressing obligation, hence its agreement with *must*.

Can and *could* are mostly observed after ‘importance adjectives’.

Thus, modal agreement indicates that all the studied adjectives possess some modal semantics. But, more importantly, it validates their division into the three classes. Possibly, it can do more: provide some idea of their comparative modal bases and ordering sources.

Subjunctive in English Varieties

There are several surprising findings in respect to the English varieties. At least after adjectives British English (BE) does not have a preference for *should* over the subjunctive contrary to what is stated in some textbooks: it prefers the indicative. American English (AmE) has approximately the same number of occurrences of *should* as BE, with predominantly subjunctive complements. What strikes most is that despite this subjunctive-indicative contrast, both varieties reflect the overall generalisation: there are three distinct classes of adjectives (only *urgent* ‘misbehaves’ in AmE, probably due to some diverging semantics).

In BE, the subjunctive group includes (decreasing, without desideratives) *obligatory, necessary, advisable, imperative, urgent* with *essential, important, and vital* last.

In AmE, the subjunctive group is comprised of *obligatory, advisable, imperative, necessary* with *essential, important, vital* last. The adjectives closing the lists in both varieties open the opposite list – that of the indicative-taking predicates.

A Rest Stop before the Road Ahead

As is registered in a bulk of literature, cross-linguistically subjunctive complements are mostly taken by directives, desideratives, and modals used in impersonal constructions. The distinction is probably appropriate to verbs, but with adjectives it is quite problematic. Non-factive adjectives are modal in nature and predominantly used in impersonal constructions. However, the lexical semantic classification into

12 *Ergative* is a type of argument structure similar to *unaccusative* in verbs: the only semantic argument of the predicate is internal – in transitive structures they are passive participants taking the object position. Presumably, the only argument of an ergative adjective is a proposition (or some other type of clause, opinions here vary), consequently it is used in impersonal constructions. External arguments are represented by agents or experiencers, like here, in transitive and unergative structures. For deeper and more extensive discussion of adjectival argument structure see (Cinque, 1990; Meltzer-Ascher, 2011; Ramchand, 2018).

directives and desideratives does work with the English adjectives we looked into. Like in other languages, the English directive adjectives (*obligatory, urgent, necessary, imperative, advisable*) favour the subjunctive mood in complement clauses. It is not so with the English desiderative adjectives (*desirable, eager, anxious*): they prefer *should*. In addition, there is a third group of adjectives (*essential, important, vital*) with a strong preference for indicative complements: we termed them ‘importance adjectives’ following (Cornilescu 2003).

Since the group of desideratives is really tiny with 192 tokens out of 6,972, further research can focus on two clearly-cut classes: deontic directives followed by subjunctives, and ‘importance adjectives’ followed by indicatives. Does this split fit in the system outlined in (Léger 2006) and developed in (Baunaz & Puskás 2022) for French? Can we characterise the ‘importance adjectives’ as epistemic modals? What can be said about their modal force? Answering these questions is another undertaking.

Our Suggestions with Respect to the Topic of the Subjunctive

To be able to cover this extensive and variable topic when teaching, one should address several issues. Firstly, it is necessary to introduce the notion of modality and show that subjunctive-taking predicates are possibly connected with it. Explanations should be based on the modal interpretations of possibility vs necessity, on the one hand, and deontic vs epistemic, on the other hand. We advise that educators pay closer attention to the split between realis and irrealis, as well as different ways of their syntactic realisation. It is of the utmost importance that it be decided whether the subjunctive mood is a form or a notion. Treating the subjunctive from the morphological angle is more convenient since this way the term is restricted to two forms: the so-called Present subjunctive (a non-agreeing infinitive-like form) and the so-called Past subjunctive (non-agreeing *were*). Next, English teachers should discuss the distribution of the pure subjunctive form mentioning that it mainly occurs in complements of a few verbs and adjectives. Another critical step consists in describing the semantics of these verbs and adjectives. With this end in view, it is worth mentioning the three types of non-factive predicates with different selectional properties, namely directives, desideratives, and perhaps ‘importance predicates’, with respect to mood. It is recommended that they be presented as instances of a larger phenomenon of modality and modal gradability. Moreover, the variability of selection characteristic of subjunctive-taking predicates should be shown, underlying that this is not only specific for English. However, in English there is some contrast in patterns across the varieties: indicative complements are preferred in British English, subjunctive complements are favoured in American English, whereas

should is equally infrequent in either of them. Last but not least, the term *counterfactual* must be introduced to speak of past tense forms occurring in if-clauses of conditional sentences and in complements of *wish* and some other expressions as “unreal” past, briefly explaining the possible world approach.

CONCLUSION

This paper has demonstrated that the approach to teaching subjunctives, modals, and conditionals as the EAP topic has to be reviewed. We have found that a number of grammatical and semantic phenomena pertaining to the subject of unreality are either not represented, or misrepresented in the EAP curricula. First of all, the umbrella notion of modality is not explained or discussed. Second, our findings indicate that the issue of the subjunctive mood alone requires a more flexible coverage. It should include a speculation about the difference between form and content, an extensive introduction into the distribution of the subjunctive, and a demonstration of variable selectional properties of the subjunctive taking predicates linked to their syntactic and semantic features.

To assess the study limitations, in addition to the above-mentioned technical issues and malfunctions, we should also note that corpus-based studies (and ours is no exception) focus mainly on monologic speech. Thus, the distinctive features of written grammar we have identified may differ from spoken conversation intricacies. Despite the complexity of the whole matter, different ways of realising real and unreal situations through distinctions between modality, mood, and counterfactuality have to be included in the curricula. After all, this can help connect the two main disciplines PhD students are to master: the English language and philosophy.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

None declared.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Eugenia Romanova: conceptualization; data curation; formal analysis; investigation; methodology; project administration; writing – original draft; writing – review & editing.

Anna Oveshkova: conceptualization; data curation; formal analysis; investigation; project administration; resources; writing – original draft; writing – review & editing.

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APPENDIX

Works Using the Term *Emotive Non-Factive* Summarised

Adjectives Classified as Emotive Non-Factive in the Literature

Adjective	K & K	Cornilescu	Léger
advisable	n/a	yes	n/a
anxious	yes (fut.)	no	no
desirable	n/a	yes	yes
eager	yes (fut.)	no	no
essential	n/a	yes	yes
imperative	n/a	yes	yes
obligatory	n/a	yes	yes
urgent	yes (fut.)	yes	yes
vital	yes (fut.)	yes	n/a
important	no	yes	yes
necessary	n/a	yes	yes

Note. K & K = (Kiparsky & Kiparsky, 1970), Cornilescu = (Cornilescu, 2003), Léger = (Léger, 2006), n/a = non-attested, fut. = future reference.