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SQUIB

Modals, subjunctives, and (non-)finiteness

JOHN M. ANDERSON
University of Edinburgh
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For grammarians, acquiring some understanding of 'finiteness' as a linguistic concept has been a longstanding problem, even if frequently unacknowledged as such.[1] It seems to me that the problem derives, in particular, from the fact that arriving at a universally applicable characterization of the syntactic status of finiteness is difficult to reconcile with how it has been claimed to be manifested morphosyntactically in different languages. In what follows I explore the consequences for our understanding of the role of morphological and periphrastic subjunctives in English of drawing a distinction between finiteness as a syntactic property and the possible signalling of this property in the morphology. The discussion presents no novel data or novel claims concerning the interpretation of the sentences cited (at least, not intentionally); it merely confronts the familiar with the characterization of finiteness proposed here.[2] And I have also tried, in the interests of accessibility and generality of application, to minimize appeal to parochial theoretical assumptions beyond that involving finiteness and the recognition of grammatical periphrasis, i.e. analytic expression of a category otherwise signalled morphologically, and of the traditional concept of reaction.[3]

Forms traditionally described as 'nonfinite' in various languages show a reduction in the nonrectional morphology associated with finite forms, as well as themselves bearing inflexions demanded by rection. Thus the English verb forms underlined in (1) are usually termed nonfinite:

(1) (a) Brad is eating
(b) Brad has eaten
(c) Brad wants to eat

Crucially, they lack the person/number and tense differentiation associated with finites, such as the verbs preceding them in (1) and (2):

(2) (a) Brad and Cathy are/were eating
(b) Brad and Cathy have/had eaten
(c) Brad and Cathy want/wanted to eat

[1] I am grateful to Graeme Trousdale for his comments on an earlier version of what follows, as well as to two anonymous referees for *English Language and Linguistics*.
[2] Hence the absence of reference to the extensive literature on subjunctives, modals, etc. in English and elsewhere.
[3] Hence the absence of any other references.

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And their form is determined under rection by the preceding finite. *To eat* in (1/2c) is often regarded as a periphrastic infinitive in which *to* plays the role carried by the participial inflexions in the (a) and (b) examples (and that is why the underlining in (1c) includes it).

This morphological marking singles out those verb forms that cannot constitute the 'core' of an independent simple sentence, in that they occur under rection. Finites, on the other hand, can be said to have the capacity to license sentencehood; traditionally, an unmarked simple sentence requires the presence of a finite verb form. Let us label this syntactic property of licensing sentencehood *syntactic finiteness*, to distinguish it from its (possible) morphological consequences, such as those mentioned in relation to (1) and (2). Such a distinction is necessitated by the fact that syntactic nonfiniteness is not necessarily accompanied in other languages with the morphological reductions we find in English – or indeed with any reduction at all.

Thus – to venture no further than Indo-European – the infinitives of Classical Greek show tense-marking, and there are infinitives in Portuguese which show agreement, while in both cases being syntactically nonfinite. Other discrepancies are even more striking. What are called 'subjunctives' in many languages, including Present-day English (PDE), are syntactically nonfinite, their presence being licensed by other elements, as their name suggests; but they are often described as 'finite' partly because of their (relatively) unreduced morphology, as well as their capacity to take an unmarked (nominative) subject. However, this latter too is not a necessary property of finites (as demonstrated by impersonal constructions like the Old English ones). Rather, I suggest that we need to recognize, in the case of such subjunctives, presence of morphological or, perhaps better, *morphosyntactic finiteness*, associated with (relatively) unreduced (nonrectional) verbal morphology, which may, but need not, coincide with syntactic finiteness. This noncoincidence is perhaps most strikingly exemplified by those languages, such as Wappo, in which main-clause and subordinate-clause verbs are distinguished only by a dedicated morphological marker of finiteness. In what follows, however, I focus on the subjunctive, particularly in English.

Certainly, such a subjunctive may signal certain marked (nondeclarative) independent sentence types, as with the English subjunctive in (3):

(3) Long live the Mayor

But this usage is very restricted. And it is paralleled by the availability of other types of syntactic nonfinite as signals of minor independent sentence types, as in the German instruction of (4):

(4) Rechts fahren
on-the-right to-drive

Syntactic nonfinites do not license unmarked declarative sentences, however.

As observed, syntactic nonfiniteness may be accompanied by reduction, though

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not necessarily of the same kind in different languages and different constructions. Subjunctives do not involve the same extent of reduction as we find with other syntactically nonfinite forms, such as infinitives. Indeed, we recognize 'subjunctives' by their retention of inflexional categories, typically person/number marking, even if tense-marking is frequently lost (as in, say, Bulgarian), and by their ability to license an unmarked (nominative) subject (where appropriate), as well as by their irrealis mood semantics.

More problematical in terms of finiteness than the PDE and some other subjunctives are, perhaps, those subjunctives in various languages which have a more extensive role in main or independent clauses, as a marker of irrealis combined with various modal notions, as in the use of the Latin P(erfect) S(ubjunctive) of (5):

(5) Nil ego contulerim iucundo sanus amico
nothing I compare-PS to-agreeable being-sane to-friend
('There is nothing I would compare to an agreeable friend, while I am sound of mind')

Such subjunctives are more ambivalent in status: they signal irrealis very generally in main clauses, and their occurrence in such is scarcely marginal; but they are also present under rection in subordinate clauses:

(6) Oportet esse ut vivas non vivere ut edas
it-behoves to-eat in-order-that you-live not live in-order-that you-eat
('You should eat to live not live to eat')

Here the subjunctives *vivas* and *edas* again can be associated with irrealis, but they occur under rection from *ut*. Use of the subjunctive in Latin may be finite or nonfinite, apparently, in syntactic terms, unless one associates the signalling of irrealis with a reduction in unmarked declarativeness. We should perhaps characterize such subjunctives as neither prototypically syntactically finite (cf. the indicative) nor prototypically morphosyntactically nonfinite (cf. the infinitive).

The PDE subjunctive is, despite a relic like (3), clearly syntactically nonfinite, however. And, moreover, it shows morphological reduction; if we recognize a continuum here, the subjunctive is relatively less morphosyntactically finite than the indicative, but more so than the infinitive, in so far as it distinguishes, as exemplified below, preterite vs. nonpreterite (though not necessarily as a reflection of temporal distinctions) and it licenses unmarked subjects. This evidence of reduction has been present to some extent throughout its history, and is not merely to be associated with its current marginal status, marginal both in use and expression; though, certainly, reduction has now extended to the complete elimination of person/number marking.

One main signal now of subjunctiveness is the absence of certain morphological distinctions, particularly person/number marking, as illustrated in the subordinate clauses in (7):

(7) (a) They demand(ed) that I leave on Tuesday
(b) They demand(ed) that Babsie leave on Tuesday

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compared with the clauses in (8):

(8) (a) I leave on Tuesday
(b) Babsie leaves on Tuesday

Given the absence of marking for third person on the verb, *Babsie leave on Tuesday*, as opposed to (8b), is not a viable simple declarative sentence: the subjunctive in (7b) has no main-clause use; its occurrence is rectionally determined. But notice too that, without the temporal adverbial, (8a) is not interpreted in the same way as (7a)-without-the-temporal-adverbial:

(9) (a) They demand(ed) that I leave
(b) I leave

(with interpretation of (9b) being moreover highly contextually determined). This suggests that the subordinate verb in (7/9a), though it is not morphologically marked as different from the indicative, is semantically distinctive by virtue of being subjunctive; it is interpreted as irrealis. And this is a reflection of the fact that it is syntactically nonfinite: such forms cannot on this interpretation appear as the core of a simple sentence. The subjunctive here, syncretic (as in (7/9a)) or not (as in (8a)) with the indicative, is triggered by a particular set of main-clause verbs; we have a form of rection.

The situation is admittedly somewhat muddied by the fact that the construction in (7) is recessive. Many speakers, indeed, use indicatives in such subordinate clauses, particularly with nonpast main-clause verbs; and the subjunctive system I have just described is now restricted to only some speakers. The indicative has extended into constructions and into irrealis interpretations formerly the domain of the subjunctive; there has been lost a dedicated irrealis form in these circumstances. I return below to other alternatives to the morphological subjunctive with such main-clause verbs, crucially involving periphrases incorporating modals, alternatives that preserve a dedicated marker of irrealis.

The other main morphological indication of subjunctiveness in PDE is sometimes seen as nontemporal use of the 'preterite' form, as in the *if*-clause in (10):

(10) If I left on Tuesday, you would regret it

And this is certainly a continuation of earlier subjunctive usage; and the 'preterite' in the *if*-clause in (10) signals irrealis rather than past-time reference. The 'preterite' form occurs under rection by the *would* of the following clause.

However, only with the item BE do both the preterite and nonpreterite subjunctives show reduction compared with the corresponding indicatives:

(11) (a) am/is/are VS. be
(b) was/were VS. were

Whereas with other verbs in PDE the preterite subjunctive is syncretic with the indicative, and the nonpreterite is partially syncretic, the preterite subjunctive of BE is only partially syncretic with the indicative and the nonpreterite is distinct

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throughout the paradigm. The syncretism we find with all other verbs will affect our interpretation of other alleged instances of the preterite subjunctive.

Before we turn to these, let us note finally concerning (10) that the *would* periphrasis has taken over from the subjunctive in the apodosis of the conditional, as in (10), underlining the syntactically nonfinite, subordinated status in PDE of the morphological subjunctive, which, as noted, is licensed by the presence in the main clause of (10) of the irrealis *would*. I return to this in a moment.

For some speakers the preterite can also be used in the past-tense variant of sentences like (7) and (9a), as a reflexion of tense concord, and of course with no overt marking of subjunctiveness, as in (12a):

(12) (a) They demanded that I/Babsie left
(b) Babsie left

Again the verb form in the subordinate clause is apparently not to be interpreted in the same way as that in the main clause in (12b): is *left* in (12a) thus a subjunctive, so a nonfinite form? In this case, however, given the complete syncretism that would be involved, and the availability of a tense-concord account of the occurrence of the 'preterite' here (contrast this with the conditional 'preterite' in (10)), we should perhaps simply recognize that the preterite indicative, as with the nonpreterite for many speakers (as observed above), has assumed the capacity to appear in such irrealis circumstances. The indicative is indifferent to the realis/irrealis distinction, with irrealis being suggested only by the semantics of the main-clause verb.

However, what is most intriguing here for the seeker after finiteness is the status of another modal periphrasis, one which offers an alternative to (7), (9a), and (12a) – and to (10). As well as the former set of sentences we find the possibility in (13):

(13) They demand(ed) that I/Babsie should leave

The occurrence of *should* here is not a reflection of concord of tense, in that the verb of the principal clause may be preterite or nonpreterite (and *should* in general does not involve past-time reference); rather, *should* is licensed rectionally by the verb in the main clause. Whatever semantic/pragmatic difference there might be between (13) and the equivalents in (7), (9a), and (12a) without *should*, it is clear that *should* is a (periphrastic) marker of subjunctiveness; and as such it has a distinctive semantics from other uses of *should* (cf. the discussion of (9)). (13) is not an indirect version of (14):

(14) They demand(ed): 'Babsie should leave'

Nor is (13) equivalent to (15):

(15) They demand(ed) that I/Babsie ought to leave

despite the shared senses one finds otherwise with *ought* and nonsubjunctive *should* (whatever detailed differences between them in interpretation or register or social status may be perceived by various groups of speakers):

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(16) (a) Babsie should/ought to leave
(b) That should/ought to be the postman now

The subjunctive *should* of (13) is semantically bleached compared with the nonsubjunctive *should* (or *ought*) of (16), as one would expect of a periphrastic realization. But if the *should* periphrasis is a subjunctive, associated with the occurrence of certain main-clause verbs, i.e. with its occurrence rectionally licensed, then it too is syntactically nonfinite, like the morphological subjunctive (where such can be motivated as distinct from the indicative), and *should* itself is the bearer of (syntactic) nonfiniteness. Even for those speakers for whom the alternatives to (13) bear no sign of being subjunctive, and therefore should probably be treated as indicatives, the *should* of (13) can still be seen as dedicated to the signalling of irrealis, i.e. as a subjunctive – whereas, as suggested above, the indicative is simply indifferent to the realis/irrealis distinction.

Subjunctive, syntactically nonfinite *should* also occurs in the alternative to (10) in (17a) (whatever, again, semantic/pragmatic differences, vis-à-vis (10) or (12a), may be attributed to it):

(17) (a) If I should leave on Tuesday, you would regret it
(b) If I *left/should leave on Tuesday, you will come to regret it
(c) If I *left/should leave on Tuesday, burn my books

In this case, as with the morphological subjunctive in (10), *should* is licensed in the *if*-clause by the irrealis modal in the main clause, as well as by other markers of mood/modality more reluctant to license the morphological subjunctive, as illustrated by (17b/c) – though we should note that *were to* is also licensed in these positions. Again – cf. (13) and (15)–(17a) is not equivalent to (18), however the latter is to be interpreted:

(18) If I ought to leave on Tuesday, you would regret it

And once more it is clear that subjunctive *should* is semantically bleached. Only the semantically bleached modal is available in the alternative, 'inverted' conditional of (19a), not the necessarily 'full' modal of (b) (as I was reminded by Graeme Trousdale), with *were to* again providing an alternative possibility (c) (which I shall, however, not pursue here):

(19) (a) Should I leave on Tuesday, you would regret it
(b) *Ought I to leave on Tuesday, you would regret it
(c) Were I to leave on Tuesday, you would regret it

And the modal in the protasis of (19a) indeed cannot be given a 'full' interpretation. We have another set of environments for the occurrence of (syntactically) nonfinite *should*, another aspect of its role as a subjunctive periphrasis.

Moreover, if one recognizes, say, *could* as an irregular, quasi-suppletive mood – as well as tense-congener of *can*, as illustrated, respectively, in (20):

(20) (a) If I could/*can swim, I would visit the Barrier Reef
(b) I could/*can swim when I was four

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then the *could* in (20a), as a subjunctive form which, like that in (10), is licensed by the irrealis in the main clause, is again syntactically nonfinite in these circumstances, whatever its status elsewhere. Note: I am saying that, while both forms in the protases of (17/20a) are nonfinite, *could* in (20a) is inflected for subjunctive, while *should* in (17) is a periphrastic realization of subjunctive.

Let us now try to pull together our observations concerning *should* and *would* in particular. The *would* of an apodosis may be simply a subjunctive-equivalent periphrasis, a marker of irrealis, as in (10) or (17a), or it may retain in addition its full (volitional or predictive) semantics, as in (20a). Other irrealis modals in the apodosis retain their full semantics:

(21) If I could swim, I could visit the Barrier Reef

The simple irrealis interpretation of *would* is not available in the *if*-clause itself; *would* in an *if*-clause is unbleached:

(22) *If that would be true, I would resign

Thus, simple irrealis *would* is clearly finite syntactically, and not available in environments calling for a nonfinite subjunctive (common as such a protasis as that in (22) is in the utterances of – particularly Germanic – speakers of English as a second or subsequent language).

By specializing *would* as the finite subjunctive and *should* and the residual morphological subjunctive as nonfinites, English has removed the ambivalence in earlier usage of the morphological subjunctive: in Old English the preterite subjunctive appeared in both protasis and apodosis of irrealis conditional constructions. A remnant of this usage is continued in examples like the 'inverted' conditional sentence of (23a) (with HAVE indicating past time reference) – compare (b), with finite periphrasis licensing the nonfinite morphological subjunctive:

(23) (a) Had she been a Whig, he had been one
(b) Had she followed Mr Fox, no doubt he would have abjured ruffles and a periwig

(adjacent sentences from Thackeray's *Henry Esmond*), whereas in (23a) the first morphological subjunctive is licensed by the second. Depending on the clause, the subjunctive in (23a) is apparently either finite or nonfinite syntactically; both uses are available, as in Latin (recall (5) vs. (6) above). Irrealis modals such as that in the apodosis of (21) are the rump of main-clause use of the morphological (preterite) subjunctive in English, otherwise supplanted by periphrastic *would*. The rectionally controlled, clearly syntactically nonfinite subjunctive survives alongside the *should* periphrasis.

I note finally that all of this reflects rather curiously on the familiar claim that modals in English are distinguished from (other) verbs as lacking nonfinite forms. It is not just that the modals largely fail to mark either finite or nonfinite morphologically: they are predominantly invariant – showing at most some marginal (tense or mood) suppletions, as in the case of *can* and *could*. Rather, they realize syntactic finiteness by their presence not their form. But there is also at least one modal,

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should, which syntactically realizes both finiteness and nonfiniteness. It seems to me that lack of explicitness concerning the character of finiteness has obscured our understanding of the syntax and morphosyntax of the PDE modals.[4]

Author's address:
University of Edinburgh
Department of English Language
David Hume Tower
George Square
Edinburgh EH8 9JX
elajmas@srv0.arts.ed.ac.uk

[4] And a postfinal observation. In a sense, *should* has after all maintained the finite/nonfinite ambivalence of the earlier (preterite) subjunctive, but not as a subjunctive periphrasis in the examples considered above, where it is only syntactically nonfinite; and nonperiphrastic *should* is always syntactically finite. However, there are signs, in the form of examples like those in (i), that *should* can also form part of a bleached (irrealis?) construction when syntactically finite:

(i) (a) I should have thought it could be true
(b) You should be so lucky

But this, I think, remains rather marginal, though worthy, I suggest, of investigation in these terms. Apart from anything else, such research should, or even would, throw some light on the development of periphrases.

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