The survival of the subjunctive in Australian English: Ossification, indexicality and stance

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Abstract
Research on the subjunctive in Australian English has typically relied on corpus interrogation to ascertain frequency of occurrence of the target forms across text types (e.g., Collins and Peters 2004, Peters 2009). Such work has been valuable in confirming trends in usage, such as the increasing use of the mandative subjunctive and the decline of the were subjunctive, but has yet to explore in detail motivations behind the continued survival of what had widely been described as a moribund variant.

Based on syntactic evidence, we distinguish the plain form subjunctive, which includes the traditional mandative subjunctive, from the were subjunctive. Using existing corpus-based results as well as data from additional corpus searches, we suggest that there are two primary factors in the subjunctive’s continued existence in Australian English; firstly, the presence of a growing set of ossifying subjunctive frames within which the subjunctive is marked, and secondly, the role of the subjunctive in indexing formal-prestigious-standard English style, with the were subjunctive indexing literariness and the plain form subjunctive indexing a stance of power and epistemic authority.

Key Words
1. Introduction

In English, the subjunctive is a grammatical construction, generally expressing some kind of non-factuality, such as what is imagined, hypothesised, wished or commanded. The following corpus-based examples along with their text type are drawn from Biber et al. (1999: 180):

(1) a. I told her she could stay with me until she found a place, but she insisted that she pay her own way. (fiction)
   b. The way in which we work, whether it be in an office or on the factory floor, has undergone a major transformation in the past decade. (news)
   c. My head felt as if it were split open. (fiction)

The imminent demise of the subjunctive has been predicted, with considerable vitriol, since at least as early as the 18th century. Samuel Johnson, for example, pronounced that ‘the conjunctive [mood] is wholly neglected’ (1755), while Bradley (1904: 53) predicted it would ‘survive no longer than a generation’. By the mid-twentieth century, opinions often classified the construction as a relic, ‘a vestigial survival’ (Strang 1968: 152); ‘Poetry, and adolescent romantic poetry at that, is the last stronghold of this tense’ (Vallins 1952: 54). And yet, as early as the 1950s linguists had begun to highlight some curious goings-on in American English (AmE). Barber (1964: 133) notes ‘a surprising reversion’ during and after World War II to older subjunctive forms and by the 1970s studies were beginning to be carried out into subjunctive usage in AmE and British English (BrE), with most indicating that the subjunctive was not so moribund as previously thought (e.g., Johansson 1979, Haegeman 1986). In the first detailed examination of the subjunctive in Australian English (AusE), Peters (1998) concludes that ‘it is still enjoying an active retirement’ (p. 101).

So it seems that the subjunctive is alive and, if not kicking, it is at least wriggling a bit. This is the central mystery we address in this paper – why is it that the subjunctive, which is seemingly so narrow and constrained, still found in a range of frames in a wide variety of contexts? By all accounts it should be disappearing, so what is it ‘buying’ speakers that is justifying its continued existence?

We begin by delineating the subjunctive (Section 2) and briefly surveying previous work in order to assess general trends (Section 3). From here we describe a reorientation in methodology (Section 4) that we take in order to get behind the numbers of traditional corpus interrogation and look more closely at the syntactic environments in which the subjunctive is surviving (Section 5). Using these findings we turn to our central question of why the subjunctive is still around proposing that there are two primary reasons: the increasing levels of ossification of subjunctive
constructions, and the indexing of style and stance that the subjunctive performs (Section 6).

2. Delineating the subjunctive

While in Old English the subjunctive was a grammatical mood of the verb with both past and present inflectional verb forms, over its historical development the same processes that have eaten away much of Old English morphology have effectuated the reduction of the subjunctive paradigm (Need & Schiller, 1990: 323-5). In this paper we analyse what remains of the subjunctive and on the basis of the form of the verb distinguish two types: the plain form and the *were* subjunctive.¹

The plain form subjunctive, which is traditionally called the present subjunctive and includes the much-studied mandative subjunctive, is realised by the plain, or base form, of the verb, as in (2a), with the present tense or a modal as stylistic alternatives, as in (2b) and (2c), respectively:

(2) a. *It is essential that the park remain open.* (subjunctive)
b. *It is essential that the park remains open.* (present tense)
c. *It is essential that the park should remain open.* (modal)

For the verb *be*, the plain form subjunctive contrasts with present tense forms (*am, are, is*) across the paradigm:

(3) a. *She requests that we//you//they be suitably attired.* (subjunctive)
b. *She requests that we//you//they are suitably attired.* (present tense)

For all other verbs, though, it only contrasts with the present tense form in the 3rd person singular, as in (2a) and (2b).

The *were* subjunctive, traditionally called the past subjunctive, is confined to the verb *be* as all other verbs have lost person/number inflections in the past tense.²

However, even here it is only a stylistic variant of the past tense form *was* in the 1st and 3rd person singular:

(4) a. *It looked as if it were valuable.* (subjunctive)
b. *It looked as if it was valuable.* (past tense)

It is curious that many studies of the subjunctive only examine the mandative subjunctive (cf. Övergaard 1995, Hoffmann 1997, Hundt 1998, Algeo 2006, Peters 2009). In this study we examine both remnants, finding some crossover in distribution of the two (see Section 5.2) as well as evidence that speakers are grouping the two

¹ As noted here, for the purposes of this study, we are defining the subjunctive in terms of form and sidestepping discussion of the applicability of the traditional notion of mood in contemporary English. In contrast, Allan (2006), for example, has focused on the semantics of English clause-types, arguing that subjunctives in contemporary English are better treated within a five clause-type system identified in terms of typical primary illocution.

² Some grammarians, including Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 86-88), argue against treating the *were* form as a subjunctive and instead call it the irrealis *were*.
types together in their hypercorrective modelling of subjunctive use (see Section 6.3). Furthermore, in our analysis we only consider contrastive (i.e. unambiguous) forms as actual remnants of the subjunctive. Thus, examples of the plain form are limited to cases where either the verb is *be*, as in (3a), or, as in (2a), the subject of the *that* clause is 3rd person singular. Similarly, examples of the *were* subjunctive are limited to cases where the verb *be* has the past tense form *were* and the subject of *were* is 1st or 3rd person singular, as in (4a).

The plain form subjunctive is found most notably in four types of constructions. First, there is a range of formulaic phrases and frames such as *so be it*, *God damn it*, and *if need be* that are ossified subjunctives. Second, we find plain form subjunctive subordinate clauses occurring after a set of mandativ, or suasive, verbs, nouns and adjectives, expressing a demand, recommendation, proposal, resolution, intention, or the like. Consider, for example:

(5) [...] *Before they left they demanded that Yiorgos the Apeface at least pay for the octopus they had given him* [...]  
(ICE-AUS W2F-018:22)

In (5) the subjunctive subordinate clause with plain form *pay* is governed by the verb *demanded*. The more common mandative governors of subjunctive constructions include *advise, ask, demand, insist, move, order, request, suggest, essential, and important* (see, e.g., Algeo 1992: 601, Johansson and Norheim 1988: 29, Peters 1998: 92-96).

Although less frequent, plain form subjunctives are also found with a small set of subordinators, of which *if* and *whether* are the most common. In (6), for instance, we see contrasting usage in the two conditional *if* clauses:

(6) "*It’s important that if the government is going to subsidise the cost of providing power to people in regional Western Australia, that be as transparent as possible,*" he said.  
"And, it’s better if that be done through a government subsidy than being paid for directly by businesses and households in the South West."

(Labor promises to reduce power costs, ABC News (abc.net.au) 8th August 2012)

Here the first conditional *if* clause is tensed whereas the second is a plain form subjunctive.

Finally, one primary place where the plain form subjunctive is found after a subordinator is in an exhaustive conditional construction (Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 993-1001):

(7) *One of the first problems that result from antibiotic use, whether it be in infants, children or adults, comes as a result of their effect on the microorganisms in the digestive tract.*

(ICE-AUS W2B-023:203)
In this construction the subordinate clause gives an exhaustive set, one member of which must be satisfied. We return to the use of the plain form subjunctive in this type of conditional in Section 5.3.

Looking at the were subjunctive, there are four parallel types of constructions where it is principally found. First, it is ossified in various formulaic phrases and frames such as as it were and if I were you. Again like the plain form subjunctive, it occurs with a certain set of subordinators including as if, as though, even if, if, though, unless, and whether, as illustrated in (8):

(8) The same ice that once crushed Shackleton’s ship Endurance as though it were no more than a Japanese car
(ICE-AUS W2B-035:9)

Along with as though, the occurrence of were in the subordinate clause frames the event as being a simile rather than as having actually happened. As we see in (8), the were subjunctive typically expresses some degree of remoteness from factuality.

Like the plain form subjunctive we can also separate a particular construction where the were subjunctive occurs with relative frequency – here the remote conditional with the subordinator if:

(9) [...] and if there were an election next week, which way would they vote?
(ICE-AUS S1B-027:173)

In this example the conditional subordinate clause with were implies that satisfaction of the condition in the actual world is relatively unlikely, thus conveying a sense of factual remoteness. We return to this construction in Section 6.1.

Finally, the were subjunctive occurs as the complement of certain verbs such as wish and suppose, as in (10):

(10) Suppose I were as fortunate as her, to have a woman that she loves enough to want to marry, and my brother opposed it.
(Abbott should listen to his sister, Letters to the Editor, The Age 4th September 2012)

This type of construction, which Berk (1999: 150) calls a volitional subjunctive, is used to convey a hypothetical or unreal meaning; that is, it has a counterfactual interpretation.

3. Approaches to investigating subjunctive-use

In assessing the subjunctive, researchers have predominantly applied traditional methodologies for corpus interrogation, with most earlier work using the 1961 Brown Corpus of American English (Brown) and the 1961 Lancaster/Oslo-Bergen Corpus of British English (LOB). The most notable studies of the subjunctive in AusE are Peters’ (1998) paper using the 1986 Australian Corpus of English, a 1 million-word corpus designed to be parallel to the Brown and LOB corpora, and Vaughan’s (2006) and
Peters’ (2009) works using the Australian component of the International Corpus of English (ICE-AUS), a 1 million-word corpus with data, 60% spoken and 40% written, from 1991-95.\(^3\)

The methodology to date has largely been based on number counts, where subjunctives are searched for occurring after an established set of ‘triggers’ – namely, mandative expressions and subordinators – and then tallied up. Setting aside issues of low rates of occurrence of the subjunctive, differences in the numbers of triggers searched, and potential skewing in the token counts (see, e.g., Kastronic and Poplack 2013), such an approach has been invaluable in telling us about trends in usage over time and regional differences. Studies such as Nichols (1987), Johansson and Norheim (1988), Övergaard (1995), Hoffmann (1997), Hundt (1998), Peters (1993, 1998, 2004, 2009), Vaughan (2006), and Leech et al. (2009) reveal that, although on the rise in BrE, the use of the plain form subjunctive with mandative expressions is much more frequent in AmE than BrE. For the were subjunctive, what discussion there is suggests that it is used fairly equally in AmE and BrE, with it being the preferred variant in both varieties in hypothetical-conditional clauses after as if and as though. In positioning AusE, the counts indicate that the rate of plain form subjunctive usage in AusE, although still somewhat lower, is closer to that of AmE than it is to BrE, while the rate of were subjunctive usage is much lower than in either variety. The broad picture that emerges is that in AusE the plain form subjunctive, while constrained, appears to be relatively stable, being used across text types and age ranges, whereas the were subjunctive looks to be in decline, particularly as it is being used less by younger speakers.

Furthermore, many researchers have noted an association of plain form and were subjunctives with a formal register (e.g., Quirk et al. 1985, Johansson & Norheim 1988). However, on the surface, corpus-based results initially suggest only mixed support for this association. For example, in the LOB the plain form subjunctive construction is most widely attested in informative prose whereas in the Brown there is a somewhat more even distribution across the defined text types (Hundt 1998). In ICE-AUS the highest numbers of unambiguous plain form subjunctives occur in the public dialogue and scripted monologue categories (Vaughan 2006). While such results might be taken as suggesting that stylistic neutralisation is taking place, they may also be a product of how the texts are classified. As Peters (2009) concludes after looking at mandative subjunctives in spoken English across six different national varieties in ICE, ‘most cases are found in institutionalized settings, where the directive speech acts with which they are associated are used for the management of others or ritual purposes’ (p. 134).

\(^3\) Other prominent corpora that have been interrogated include the Freiburg/Brown Corpus of American English, the Freiburg/LOB Corpus of British English, the Leeds Corpus of English Dialect, the British National Corpus, the Wellington Corpus of New Zealand English, and the New Zealand, Great Britain, Singapore, India and Philippine components of the ICE set.
Using these corpus-based results and the trends that emerge from them as a starting point, we are particularly interested in exploring how speakers and writers use the subjunctive in constructing stylistic and social meanings. However, as Cheshire (2005: 480) observes, sociolinguistic analysis of syntactic variation is often seen as inherently problematic due to the low frequency of syntactic forms (particularly when compared to phonetic and phonological variation). She argues, though, for thinking beyond conventional frameworks of language variation and change as ‘speakers use syntactic forms to construct discourse, and through discourse they perform many different kinds of social activities and construct many different kinds of social meanings’ (p. 503).

Looking to both the situational and the social aspects of language use, the interesting questions for us with respect to subjunctives are:

• In which syntactic environments are the plain form and were subjunctive actually surviving in AusE?
• Why do they occur in some textual contexts (i.e. text types, interactional contexts) more than others?
• What kinds of pragmatic work do they perform? (i.e. what kinds of indexical links do they exploit? How are they recruited in interactional stance-taking?)

Through addressing such questions our aim is to better understand why the were and plain form subjunctives are still around.

4. Data and methodology
The data interrogated here has been drawn from: ICE-AUS; the Australian talkback radio corpus (ART), a 200,000 word corpus with data from 2004-2006; as well as from various online Australian news archives, such as that of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (http://www.abc.net.au/news) (a full list is given in the Reference section).

Taking the traditional methodologies for corpus interrogation outlined in Section 3 as a starting point, we began by doing comprehensive ‘trigger’ searches based on lists established in the literature. Triggers that were unattested in ICE-AUS or ART were then searched for in the online media sources. As noted in Section 2, we only analysed unambiguous forms as actual examples of the subjunctive; namely, for the plain form, cases where either the verb is be or the subject of the that clause is 3rd person singular, and for the were subjunctive, cases where the verb be has the past tense form were and the subject of were is 1st or 3rd person singular. The textual context was established for each example in order to facilitate a closer analysis of the pragmatic work of subjunctives in indexicality and stance-taking. Descriptions of ‘textual context’ included both the text type (e.g. for ICE-AUS the corpus’ given classification, such as ‘private dialogue’ or ‘unscripted monologue’) and the local interactional context (e.g. the interlocutors, the interpersonal roles implicated in the dyad).
However, a more complete characterisation of the range of syntactic environments in which the plain form and *were* subjunctives are actually surviving in AusE necessitated a move away from these established triggers. We approached this in two ways. First, we exhaustively searched ICE-AUS and ART for tokens of *be* and *were* to identify any constructions not previously noted (either novel triggers or ‘non-governed’ subjunctives – i.e. tokens that are not clearly triggered by a particular expression). Secondly, we expanded our searches to include the online news archives. Here we searched instead for particular phrases (e.g. [unambiguous pronoun + *be/were*] and [that * be/were] – of which the latter is possible only where wildcard searches are allowed) to identify novel constructions. We must note, however, that archive search engines can be unreliable for this kind of search. For example, *The Age* newspaper’s archive turns up no results for the string ‘that it be’, and yet a Google search for the same string (with the addition of ‘The Age’) returns seven *The Age* articles. As such, this kind of searching can be fruitful in identifying additional environments but cannot be considered to be exhaustive; nor can these results be used in any quantitative way. Finally, we again looked more closely at each individual unambiguous subjunctive example identified to explore the textual context and pragmatic work of the particular usage. In total, we examined 123 unambiguous plain form subjunctives and 85 unambiguous *were* subjunctives.

5. Getting behind the numbers
This section presents a range of novel subjunctive constructions and more general trends that have not been described in previous literature on the subjunctive, but which we were able to identify through our methodological approaches (see Section 4) that were designed to move beyond traditional number counts.

5.1 Beyond traditional triggers
Once we moved away from the established search lists of mandative triggers of the plain form subjunctive, we were able to turn up some additional verbs that have not been considered in detail before in studies of the subjunctive.4

(11) a. *Macris, from Mosman, is currently the target of the NSW Crime Commission which has gone to the Supreme Court seeking that he be forced to pay to the state government the value of his unexplained wealth.*  

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4 Note we also identified a number of examples of mandative subjunctives in ICE-AUS with known matrix verb, noun and adjective triggers that previous interrogations of this corpus had not addressed, namely *argue, decree, imperative, important, make sure, mandate, mechanism, prefer, proviso, question, resolve and vital.*
b. Hunt and the responsible minister, resources minister Ian Macfarlane, are understood to be determined to keep the election promise to keep the RET, but several MPs are pushing that it be scrapped altogether.

(Renewable energy target faces delay amid calls for Abbot to scrap policy, The Guardian Australia Edition 8th January 2014)

In these examples, seek and push express intention and occur with a plain form subjunctive complement.

Another example revealed by our searches is the modal idiom would/had rather occurring with both the plain form and were subjunctives, as in (12a) and (12b), respectively:

(12) a. “In the end, I’d rather it be me than her.”
   (I wish I had died instead, jet-skier says, Sydney Morning Herald 24th August 2012)

b. “Sometimes you get the sense they’d rather he were dead, as if his death were some great news.”
   (Garcia Marquez suffering from dementia, news.com.au 2nd August 2012)

While noticing would rather taking a were subjunctive is not innovative, as it is mentioned in grammars such as Quirk et al. (1985: 1183) and Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 86), this trigger has not been investigated before in the subjunctive literature. Examples were found in both the exhaustive be and were searches, as well as in more specific searches carried out based on impressionistic accounts. It seems reasonable that this modal idiom may be modelled on another more common subjunctive-triggering expression like would prefer (see Section 5.2 below) given that ‘would rather has the volitional meaning “would prefer to”’ (Quirk et al. 1985: 142) and that like prefer, rather is also found occurring in this frame taking verbal morphology:

(13) “Apart from doing housework, he couldn’t use a tool either but I’d have rathered he be that amazing dad than anything else.”
   (He meant the world to us, The Border Mail 13th June 2012)

The manual search of ICE-AUS and the online searches of news archives for particular constructions such as [that * be/were] (see Section 4) also identified cases where the subjunctive seemed to be more contextually governed, or at least governed in a more complex way than by a single trigger, as in (14):

(14) Professor Bolton said there was nothing stopping such a change taking place as the only mention of the national capital in the Constitution was that it be more than 100 miles from Sydney.
   (Move over eastern states – Perth could be moving on up, WAtoday 26th October 2012)
Here it seems that the interaction of the context itself with the use of be allows the intended mandative meaning to be conveyed without requiring the explicit use of a mandative lexeme trigger.

While examples such as these cannot be taken as evidence that the distribution of the were and plain form subjunctives is expanding, they do highlight the importance of searching corpora in a variety of ways, particularly when trying to determine where low frequency variants like these subjunctives are surviving.

5.2 Crossover of distribution

The be and were searches also revealed some examples of crossover in terms of the traditional environments of the were and plain form subjunctives, which we followed up with more specific searches of a broader range of texts. For example, prefer is listed as one of the mandative expressions governing a plain form subjunctive complement (e.g., Algeo 1992, Övergaard 1995, Quirk et al. 1985, Huddleston and Pullum 2002):

(15) *Unions Tasmania is working hard behind the scenes to maximise this centre’s economic potential. We *would prefer* that the employment and skilling of Tasmanians *be* a top priority, and we will resist any plans to fly in construction teams and contractors from interstate to run the place. [...]The Government intends for this to be a temporary arrangement, expiring in October this year. That is short sighted and I’d *prefer* Tasmania *be* regarded strategically as a longer-term centre for sheltering refugees.*

(Opinion, *The Mercury* 11th April 2011)

Note that as illustrated in (15), in our searches prefer was overwhelmingly preceded by *would*.

What is of significance for our discussion here is that we also found the were subjunctive occurring with *(would)* prefer:

(16) *January 26 just doesn’t sit right with me and I’d prefer it were changed.*

(Move Australia Day to May, says Ron Barassi, *The Australian* 25th January 2009)

Particularly when coupled with the modal *would, prefer* has very weak mandative force, similar to *wish*, which occurs with a were subjunctive complement. This can be seen as providing a link to the central use of the were subjunctive as expressing factual remoteness.

Equally, the plain form subjunctive was found in contexts where only the were subjunctive is usually described as occurring. In (17), interrogative if is followed by *be* rather than the anticipated *were*:

(17) *We asked if governments be looking to raise money by taxing goods bought overseas.*

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5 Note that (18) is not ambiguous, but that it would be if it occurred with the anticipated were.
In this example the use of be in the indirect speech interrogative may be triggered by the presence of ask, a mandative expression that typically governs a plain form subjunctive complement as shown in (18): 

(18) This is a sensitive subject for some veterans; but that is hardly reason to deny its existence. Better to ask that it be properly done than cancelled so that, like the Hiroshima museum, it could be an enduring deterrent to man's inhumanity to man.

(ICE-AUS W2E-007:87) 

Even where overlaps in the distribution of the plain form and were subjunctives have been noticed, what has been overlooked is their significance – a matter we return to in Section 6.2 below.

5.3 Narrow range of occurrence

Taking a closer look at the syntactic environments in which subjunctives occur we found that for both forms many triggers from the traditional search lists were unattested followed by a subjunctive in ICE-AUS. This does not necessarily mean that they are not used in AusE, though; some were attested in online news archives (e.g. insistence, propose, recommend + plain form; unless, even if + were) and presumably the lack of examples of others may be a product of the sampling.

Of more import, however, we found that after many triggers the plain form and were subjunctives occur in a narrow range of constructions. This is illustrated in Figure 1, which summarises our search results from ICE-AUS of verbs in plain form subjunctive complements following a standard set of mandative expressions:

Figure 1. Be vs. other plain form verbs following a mandative expression
Clearly, it is only a small number of mandative expressions – namely, *advise*, *demand*, *request* and *suggest* – that are occurring with verbs other than *be* in the subjunctive complement. Note, though, that we need to bear in mind one of the pitfalls of subjunctive counting here (which is another issue with relying solely on number counts). With the ‘other’ verbs a number of tokens were discounted as ambiguous as they did not occur in the 3rd person singular. However, even with these examples included in the count, *be* is overwhelmingly the most common verb, due, of course, in part to the verb’s more general high frequency (to be further discussed in Section 6.1).

In looking at plain form subjunctives after subordinators in ICE-AUS, it was found that that *whether* has the highest frequency with 11 unambiguous tokens. The exhaustive conditional construction (see Section 2) occurs in 10 of these, while in all 11 tokens the verb in the plain form subjunctive is *be*. Looking more closely at the complements of the subordinator *whether*, Cowley (2010) found that there were only two plain form frames, *whether it be* and *whether they be*:
In contrast she found a much broader range of constructions across the 147 tokens with a verb in the present tense.\(^6\)

Of the 147 tokens included in Figure 3, the verb *be* occurs in 116 (79%) with 26 different verbs occurring across the remaining 31 tokens. While only the pronouns *it* and *they* were found in the subjunctive complements, a wider range of pronouns as well as proper names and more complex noun phrases occurred with the present tense complements.\(^7\)

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\(^6\) Note that the complement set in Figure 3 only includes verbs in the present tense to avoid any potential overlap with the *were* subjunctive and its alternates (although the searches did not in fact turn up any unambiguous *were* subjunctives).

\(^7\) Correspondingly, Kastronic and Poplack’s (2013) examination of subjunctive usage in the Quebec English Corpus, a 2.8 million word-corpus of spontaneous speech representing contemporary AmE, revealed the subjunctive as surviving in only two adverbial constructions (*if X were* and *whether it be*) and only three mandative triggers (*wish, insist, suggest*) governing a subjunctive more than once, for a total of 11 subjunctive examples.
Based on evidence from ICE-AUS, Cowley (2010) concludes that the whether + plain form subjunctive is predominantly restricted to the set frames whether it/they be in AusE. Furthermore, within these frames the subjunctive complement is overwhelmingly restricted to the exhaustive conditional construction. One reason for the high use of be after both mandative expressions and subordinators may be the fact that it is the most marked plain subjunctive form. As we discuss in Section 6.1 and 6.2 below, its use may well be targeted for just this reason.

5.4 Contexts of occurrence
As we observed in Section 3, both the plain form and were subjunctives are associated with a formal register. When we looked more closely in our data at the contexts where subjunctives typically occur, we found an association for the plain form subjunctive with legal and institutional textual contexts, as in (19), which is an example of formulaic ritualistic meeting language:

(19) George I’d like to move that a vote of thanks be extended to those people who helped organise it
(ICE-AUS S1B-075:124)

This was not surprising as it has been noted before, for example, by Quirk et al. (1985) that the plain form subjunctive is ‘rather legalistic in style’ (p. 157).

In turn we found that the were subjunctive occurs commonly in quite literary prose and speech, as in the example here of creative writing:

(20) She thought of her children and their kid faces became mnemonics for domestic detail she now dug up, gently sifting earth and sand, to lay each moment out as if it were a bowl, vase, tile, of simple but searing beauty.
(ICE-AUS W2F-005:57)

The association of the were subjunctive with literariness was first observed by Jespersen (1924: 318) and is oft mentioned in grammars of English.

We hypothesise that these cross-correlations, or associations, have become ingrained in the minds of speakers and writers, the impact of which we consider in sections 6.2 and 6.3.

6. Why is the subjunctive still around?

6.1 Ossification
In addressing the question of why the plain form and were subjunctives continue to survive we hypothesise that one major factor is the presence of a growing set of ossifying subjunctive frames. In Section 5.3 we saw that not only is the range of triggers after which we find plain form and were subjunctives potentially narrowing

8 In addition, Johansson & Norheim (1988) have noted that a high proportion of subjunctives in their data are in the passive, which 'also illustrates the formal nature of the subjunctive in British English; as is well-known, the passive is characteristic of formal, impersonal prose' (p. 30).
but that be is overwhelmingly the most common verb following a mandative trigger. While this is due in large part to the more general high frequency occurrence of be, this high frequency in combination with the markedness of the suppletive plain form is potentially a reason why be continues to be such a 'stronghold of the subjunctive' (Turner 1980: 276). As such, it is perhaps more stylistically 'salient', creating greater potential for indexing and stance-taking (see Section 6.3).

In Section 5.3 we also saw that across the data, the actual range of subjunctive frames is quite narrow; for example, in ICE-AUS whether plus a plain form subjunctive complement only occurs in the frames whether it/they be. Similarly, it has been noted that 'in Australia the use of the were subjunctive is stiffening into a formulaic if x were' (Peters 1998: 101), as in (21) below. What is more, one particular frame, if I were you, has so ossified that it is now considered a formulaic phrase (Quirk et al. 1985: 158 and Peters 2007: 768). In terms of the motivation for this, as newspaper columnist Jan Freeman (2009) tangentially underlines in the following comment, the ossification of if I were you may have partly been driven by prescriptive commentary:

Bergen Evans, an English professor and a popular usage maven in the mid-20th century, often criticized 'rules' that were really just crotchets. And he said it was OK to use was instead of subjunctive were pretty much anywhere except in the expression, 'if I were you.'

Interpreting our findings for contemporary AusE alongside previously established trends in usage over time and regional differences discussed in Section 3, we propose that the various subjunctive frames can be placed along a continuum according to their degree of ossification:

Figure 4. Continuum of ossification

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>productive</th>
<th>solidifying</th>
<th>formulaic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>demand</td>
<td>whether it/they be</td>
<td>if need be</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>suggest</td>
<td>if X were</td>
<td>if I were you</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

First, subjunctive constructions like the mandative expressions demand and suggest, which are still largely productive, contrast with solidifying constructions like whether it/they be and if X were. We would suggest that mandative expressions like imperative, important, and require, which only occurred in ICE-AUS with be in the subjunctive complement, are starting to solidify, while move, which only occurred with be and in ritualistic meeting language as in (19) above, are somewhat further along in terms of ossification. Finally, there are frames that have completely ossified, like if need be and if I were you. This is not to say that all subjunctives will necessarily progress along this pathway of ossification, but it has certainly been a clearly observable trend for those listed here.

One upshot of the increasing levels of ossification in a number of were and plain form subjunctive constructions is that they create a set of conventionalised frames for
speakers and writers to draw on in constructing the stylistic distinction of the subjunctive (a matter we take up in the next section). In this way ossification, which we believe is affecting more constructions than has previously been suggested, appears to be playing a major role in the continued survival of the subjunctive.

6.2 Metalinguistic awareness
Speakers and writers often have metalinguistic awareness about the subjunctive and its role in constructing a particular style. For example, consider author Ursula Le Guin’s (1989) comments on the power of the subjunctive in narrative:

The indicative points its bony finger at primary experiences, at the Things; but it is the subjunctive that joins them, with the bonds of analogy, possibility, probability, contingency, contiguity, memory, desire, fear, and hope: the narrative connection. (p. 44)

Through exposure and socialisation, speakers and writers learn the social meanings of this stylistic alternation, which they are then able to draw on to express a particular stylistic distinction. This acquisition of the connection of social meaning to linguistic behaviour is of course a vital aspect of language socialisation more generally:

[The] relation between linguistic structures and sociocultural information is indexical, in the sense that the use of certain structures points to and constitutes certain social contexts and certain cultural frameworks for thinking and feeling. [...] What transpires in the course of language socialization is that normally developing children become increasingly adept at constituting and interpreting sociocultural contexts from linguistic cues. (Ochs and Schieffelin 2008: 8-9)

We understand this process as operating more specifically within an interactional-based model of grammar such as exemplar theory. As Bresnan and Hay (2008) lay out:

The grammar arises as a set of analogical generalizations over stored chunks of previously experienced language – lexical phrases or constructions – which are used to build new expressions analogically. (p. 256)

Furthermore, in an exemplar theoretic model of grammar and language use, episodic memory is understood as preserving detail not only about linguistic structures but also about social and contextual information and this underlies the cognitive representation and processing of language (Mendoza-Denton 2007: 443).

What this means for the subjunctive is that along with learning a set of increasingly conventionalised frames speakers and writers learn a set of associations
about subjunctive use, the principle one being the association with formal-prestigious-standard\(^9\) English style.

A powerful type of evidence that speakers and writers actually orient toward this association is the occurrence of hypercorrection, which has been noticed in a range of syntactic environments, especially with the *were* subjunctive (e.g., Quirk et al. 1985: 158, Peters 1998: 97 and Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 87, 1153). Perhaps the most common hypercorrection we have found is the use of the *were* subjunctive in a subordinate interrogative:

(21) “*Of course I am not dismissing such talks,*” he said, asked *if* he *were* open to discussions with the winner of the American presidential election.

(iran president Ahmadinejad wants ‘new world order’, news.com.au 27\(^{th}\) September 2012)

As we mentioned in Section 2, the *were* subjunctive has a high frequency of occurrence in remote conditionals with the subordinator *if*. Indeed, prescriptive grammar used to insist on *were* rather than *was* in this syntactic environment and as Peters (1998: 97) puts it, ‘for some Australians [...] there is a lingering awareness of formal rules about the use of the *were* subjunctive’ in this context. What appears to be happening then in examples like (21) is that this awareness has led to the use of *were* in certain related environments such as a subordinate interrogative with *if*. It is as if at times speakers or writers experience a kind of linguistic panic, a moment of ‘nervous cluelessness’ as Pullum (2012) calls it, when they encounter what looks like a potential subjunctive environment, and produce a subjunctive. Philip Corbett, responsible for *The New York Times*’ style manual, has referred to this phenomenon as ‘subjunctivitis’ (Corbett 2008).

Like hypercorrection, overlaps in the distribution of the two types of subjunctives discussed in Section 5.2 can be viewed as extended uses and hence further evidence of speakers and writers’ metalinguistic awareness of the subjunctive. Correspondingly, it can be supposed that when wishing to bring a formal-prestigious-standard English style into play, speakers and writers will tend to draw on the most distinctive forms, which for the plain subjunctive is the highly marked form *be*, as discussed in the previous section. Thus, frequency of use and markedness can be considered to contribute to increasing levels of ossification of the forms we examined in Section 5.3.

6.3 *Indexicality and stance*

\(^9\) ‘Standard’ here refers to ‘Standard Australian English’, although this is by no means an unambiguous category. We concur with Bex and Watts (1999: 7) that the ‘standard’ refers in general to the variety accorded respect within society as whole, that is taught in schools and that individuals are encouraged to orient to by those possessing authority. However, we also acknowledge that the notion of the ‘standard’ is a ‘social myth constructed for ideological purposes’ (p. 9).
Returning to the particular associations of subjunctive use developed in Section 5.4, we address the question of what kinds of pragmatic work the use of a plain form or were subjunctive is performing for speakers and writers by considering the kinds of indexical links that are available and how the subjunctive may be recruited in interactional stance-taking.

In order to facilitate a closer examination of the particular context of each subjunctive, we limited our analysis to the plain form and the were subjunctives found in ICE-AUS and ART. For each token, we looked closely at the local interactional context, noting the interlocutors (where retrievable) and the interpersonal roles implicated in the dyad. As noted in Section 3, Vaughan (2006: 43) found that the highest numbers of unambiguous plain form subjunctives occur in the public dialogue and scripted monologue categories. As such, we were particularly interested in ascertaining whether these text type categories imposed in ICE-AUS reflected or masked the reality of the local interactional context of subjunctive use.

As expected, we certainly found examples of plain form (largely mandative) subjunctives within legal and institutional settings (as Peters (2009: 134) notes). Equally, were subjunctives were commonly drawn from literature/creative writing. However, we found that in almost every other case speakers and writers seemed to be exploiting the established indexical ties that these associations have created (see Section 6.2) in order to construct a particular style or stance (e.g., Schilling-Estes 1998, Silverstein 2003, Du Bois 2007). Based on an examination of the contexts of each of these tokens, then, we propose that in AusE the subjunctive is available to be strategically employed to index:

- **FORMAL-PRESTIGIOUS-STANDARD ENGLISH STYLE** (both forms)
- **LITERARINESS** (*were* subjunctive)
- **stance of POWER AND EPISTEMIC AUTHORITY** (plain form subjunctive)

The indexical force of both types of subjunctives in constructing a formal-prestigious-standard style has been widely noted (see discussion in Section 3 and Section 6.2). This index was corroborated in the data in this study, with no tokens drawn from contexts that could be characterised as particularly informal. In describing the contexts of all were subjunctive tokens, the primary stylistic characteristics to emerge were those of *formality, literariness* and a sense of *storytelling*. To illustrate, the first example given below is from an informative text in a popular publication describing a community from ancient history, while the second is drawn from an informative nature article:

(22) **While they waited and prayed for such a Restoration, their priests performed all the services in a courtyard on the barren plateau, acting as if it were a temple.**
(ICE-AUS W2B-008:2)

(23) **Wombat, she whispered, gesturing towards a strange-looking, shuffling creature that had appeared at the entrance of a large hole beneath one of the eucalypt’s**
horizontally growing roots. I watched as it paused, one paw diffidently raised, its broad, blunt head drooping as if the animal were still asleep.

(ICE-AUS W2B-021:17)

In each of these examples, the author appears to take a side-step from the dominant informative tone of the articles to present a more narrative-based, character-driven ‘storytelling’ section within it. The stylistic indexicality of the subjunctive is available to support this change in style by evoking a sense of significance and import in the storytelling. As such, this index is also fundamentally reliant on and connected to the formal-prestigious-standard index.

A second set of examples is drawn from an advice-giving piece on travel and a complaint letter to a photographic-development company:

(24) If it is to be a long trek, schooling must be weighed up. For primary school children the first step is to talk to the child’s teacher and principal, who may well advise that each child make a daily journal of the trip.

(ICE-AUS W2D-018:66)

(25) You suggested the film and packaging are not matched using these numbers but rather other identifiers. This may be the case but could I suggest that the identifiers on the film and package be checked to see if they were used on or about the date of processing.

(ICE-AUS W1B:39)

Here we can observe that the authors are enabled to exploit the indexical ties of the plain form subjunctive in order to position themselves within a dyad as someone with knowledge, with epistemic authority, as someone who is the ‘expert’ in relation to the audience. Peters (2009) touches on this aspect with respect to mandative expressions:

Such verbs are probably more acceptable as part of professional consultation, where professional advice is sought in an unequal dyad. They resonate with that, even when they do not come from the lips of a professional. (p. 134)

Peters goes on to comment that mandative expressions followed by a plain form subjunctive make a much more frequent appearance in the commercial radio transcripts in ART than in the non-commercial, and suggests that perhaps this is due to shock-jock types using this construction to bolster their expert credentials. In looking more closely at those examples we found that indeed all such tokens in ART were from the commercial stations, but that in fact only one was actually from a presenter. Nevertheless, in every other case the subjunctive user is positioning themselves as an expert on the topic at hand, such as in the following example where the speaker is a doctor offering advice regarding a medical concern:
(26) I would think that she’s probably going to be on it more or less for the rest of her life however what I would suggest she do is ask her GP if she could get a referral to an endocrinologist who specialises in osteoporosis.

While the indexes suggested here represent only the first step in a fuller investigation of the role of the subjunctive in pragmatic work, it is clear that the subjunctive is ‘buying’ speakers something significant in interaction that is reinforcing its survival, and that it is being strategically recruited in constructing stylistic and social meanings. In answer, then, to the questions raised in Section 3, it seems that it is not the case that the subjunctive is becoming stylistically neutral, but rather that its stylistic indexicalities are able to be exploited in a range of genres, text types and dyads.

7. Conclusions
In conclusion, we have proposed that there are two primary reasons for the continued existence of the were and plain form subjunctives in AusE: first, the presence of a growing set of ossifying subjunctive frames within which the subjunctive is marked, and second, the shift from the purely syntactic/semantic distinctions the subjunctive has traditionally been thought to communicate towards an increasingly robust role as marker of style and stance. It remains to be seen if these factors are also relevant in understanding the continuing survival of the subjunctive in other English varieties. In addition, we have found it useful to conceptualise the process of learning and being socialised about the use of the subjunctive (and indeed syntactic variants in general), and then reproducing it, within an interactional-based model of grammar such as exemplar theory. Finally, we wish to underline the value in looking ‘behind the numbers’ in low frequency variation (and syntactic microvariation more generally), as some of these rarer variants truly punch above their weight in terms of pragmatic force.

Corpora
Online news archives 2009-2012:
The Age (www.theage.com.au)
The Australian (http://www.theaustralian.com.au/)
Australian Broadcasting Corporation (http://www.abc.net.au/news)
The Border Mail (http://www.bordermail.com.au/)
The Daily Telegraph (http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/)
The Mercury (http://www.themercy.com.au/)
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