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# English Revisited: Tips, Tidbits & Tutorials

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## EDITORIAL

### GLOSSARY

*abound:*

be plentiful, abundant

*straddle:*

stand or sit with your legs on either side of something (in the middle)

*follow suit:*

follow the example of someone else

*holdout:*

a person or thing that will not change while the rest have

Having grown up in Canada, I have always been well aware that there was no such thing as one standardized English language. Regional variations have always existed and continue to abound today. Caught between empire and geography, Canadian English was either viewed as colonial by the British or dialect by the Americans. In our first look at world Englishes, we examine the rich multiplicity of the English language. Culturally, Canada has also straddled the UK/US divide, one example being the adoption of the metric system in the 1970s. The US did not follow suit and has remained a holdout. Find out more about the Americans' flirtation with the metric system in this issue. Lastly, in our grammar section we take a look at the subjunctive, a suitable topic for our advanced learners or grammar enthusiasts.

Happy reading!

John Nixon

### Style Guidelines for Writing Official University Texts in English

The University Communications Department has in collaboration with the Language Center developed a number of style guidelines for publishing official university texts in English, e.g. websites and brochures. Please take a look at these useful tips when publishing university documents in English.

[Guidelines](#)

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## The Subjunctive

### GLOSSARY

*harken (hearken) back to:*

recall, bring to mind

*pore over:*

read through carefully and at length

*cram:*

study and memorize, often at the last minute

*unbeknownst to:*

not known to

*purported:*

claimed

*extensions:*

(here) more time for an assignment

*spurious:*

false

*holdover:*

sth. from another time or place

*diachronic:*

related to the development of language over time

*dispense with:*

leave out

*suffice (it) to say:*

in short

*concessive (from the verb to concede):*

making a concession, admitting sth. to be true, but not at first

For many native English speakers, the subjunctive is something that harkens back to high school French and Spanish classes when they pored over conjugation tables trying to cram obscure verb tenses before a test. It certainly is not something that is associated with English and consequently seldom taught explicitly in English classes for speakers of other languages. In actual fact, however, English does have a subjunctive and unbeknownst to many speakers of English (including native speakers) it is still in use. So what is the subjunctive and when is it used?

The subjunctive is not a verb tense, but rather a mood, with other moods being for instance the indicative and the imperative. The subjunctive mood is used to express wishes, orders, imperatives, doubts, personal opinions, emotions and hypothetical situations. In English there is no separate and distinct form for the subjunctive and that is partly why it is frequently thought not to exist. It is only recognizable in the third person singular, where the /s/ is dropped, e.g. "God save the Queen", or with the verb "to be" as in "be he alive or be he dead." In all other cases, there is no inflection.

### Subordinate Clauses

Another reason for the purported non-existence of the subjunctive is the fact that "should + bare infinitive" can be used in its stead in subordinate clauses, in this case clauses that follow "that". All three of the following are possible

It is crucial that he arrives well before the start of the meeting. (informal, indicative)

It is crucial that he arrive well before the start of the meeting. (formal, subjunctive)

It is crucial that he should arrive well before the start of the meeting.

In North America the subjunctive form is generally favoured in formal discourse over the "should + bare infinitive."

The example sentences above used the subjunctive on account of the imperative phrase "it is crucial that". Similar structures, such as "it is essential/important/imperative/(un)necessary/vital that", also trigger the subjunctive. The same applies to structures expressing advice, requests and orders.

The minister proposed that construction of the airport (should) be postponed. I would kindly ask that each student submit requests for extensions by e-mail. The judge ordered that the spurious claims (should) be disregarded.

### Main Clauses

The subjunctive exists in many main clauses that have become fixed expressions. Here the subjunctive is a holdover from a time when it was used more frequently in English.

Come what may,...

Suffice (it) to say that...

Be that as it may,...

So be it

### Wishes and Hypothetical Clauses (Past Subjunctive)

When expressing a wish or speculating about an unreal situation, the past subjunctive form of the verb "to be" is most often used.

I wish she were here.

The indicative mood can also be used in this example. However, it is considered informal.

I wish she was here.

Similarly, with if-clauses referring to a hypothetical situation, we find the past subjunctive form of "to be".

If I were you, I would do it differently.

Were he to start now, he could finish.

### Historical Perspective

While it is true that the subjunctive mood is still in use today, it has been displaced in many cases by the indicative in modern English. Linguists often compare passages from the Bible in order to achieve a diachronic view since it is a book that has been regularly revised to reflect the language of the times. Here is a verse from John 11:25.

"...he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live...."

(King James Bible, 1611)

"...he that believes on me, though he have died, shall live...."

(Darby Bible, 1890)

"Anyone who believes in me will live, even if he dies."

(New Int. Reader's Version, 1998)[1].

In this verse, we can see that the subjunctive was used in editions right up to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century for concessive clauses, i.e. with "though", while modern versions dispense with it.

We can therefore observe that language is dynamic and organic and the subjunctive is no exception to this phenomenon. Suffice to say that come what may, the subjunctive is likely here to stay.

John Nixon

### Footnote

[1] <https://biblia.com>

## The (Failed) History of the Metric System in the US

### GLOSSARY

*strange bedfellows:*  
unusual allies  
(expression attributed to Shakespeare, The Tempest)

*bucking:*  
opposing, resisting

*unwieldy:*  
difficult to handle

*whim:*  
a sudden change of mind or wish

*take hold:*  
start to take effect

*posited:*  
presented as an argument; affirmed

*prohibitive:*  
restrictive; too high

*disintegrated:*  
broke into pieces

*mishap:*  
unfortunate accident

*vestiges:*  
traces of sth. that has disappeared

*for the time being:*  
at the moment (the situation could change)

Myanmar, Liberia, and the United States: These three strange bedfellows are the only countries who still predominantly use British imperial units of measurement today, bucking the common sense of a base 10 system and instead opting for unwieldy units such as 12 (inches in a foot) or 16 (ounces in a pound).

As the only industrialized nation on this lonely list, the rest of the modern world is left to wonder why the United States has not joined them yet. It may surprise you to learn that the metric system actually has quite a long history in the US, and it was officially adopted there over 150 years ago. The Metric Act of 1866 established the legality of utilizing the metric system in all contracts. In 1975, Congress passed the Metric Conversion Act to make it “the preferred system of weights and measures for trade and commerce” [1]. The act also established the 17-member United States Metric Board to promote the metric system. Some progress was made, with many cars at the time featuring speedometers in both miles and kilometers per hour and wine bottles sold in liters. However, the act was subject to the whims of the times since adherence to it was left completely voluntary, and in 1982 the Reagan administration dissolved the Metric Board.

A number of reasons have been proposed as to why the metric system has never truly taken hold in the United States. In his address to Congress in 1906, Alexander Graham Bell, a strong proponent of the metric system, posited that Americans shy away from it “on account of the un-English appearance of the terminology” [2]. The prohibitive costs of switching over are often cited as another reason. NASA, for example, projected that it would cost them \$370 million to convert to the metric system for their Space Shuttle in 2009, or roughly half the amount required to launch it and thus far too high. On the other hand, the lack of consensus cost the US space agency \$125 million in 1999 when its Mars Climate Orbiter’s onboard systems, which were programmed to handle metric units, were given imperial units by the ground software. The spacecraft was lost as a result, and scientists believe that it either slammed into the Martian atmosphere and disintegrated or bounced off the atmosphere and was catapulted towards the Sun.

Despite such mishaps, NASA continues to work with two systems of measurement as do several other US-based entities who have strong international alliances.

Although the vast majority of countries have adopted the metric system, many use a mixture of metric and imperial units. As vestiges of British colonialism, imperial units are present to varying degrees in such countries as Canada, Australia, and India. In Canada, for instance, a person’s height is measured in feet in everyday usage while road signs are shown in kilometers. The same mix of systems for height and road signs can also be found in the Philippines and South Africa. In addition, imperial units are present in a wide variety of applications worldwide. In Germany, for example, the inch and foot can be found in heating and plumbing components, ISO containers, monitor sizes, and the construction of ships and organ pipes.

So while Americans may still run a 10K, they will continue to fill up their tanks in gallons, at least for the time being.

Dr. Joseph Michaels

### Footnotes:

[1] “Metric Conversion Act of 1975 – US Metric Association.” *Usma.org*, [usma.org/laws-and-bills/metric-conversion-act-of-1975#locale-notification](https://usma.org/laws-and-bills/metric-conversion-act-of-1975#locale-notification). Accessed 2 Dec. 2021.

[2] “Alexander Graham Bell Address to Congress – US Metric Association.” *Usma.org*, [usma.org/laws-and-bills/alexander-graham-bell-address-to-congress#](https://usma.org/laws-and-bills/alexander-graham-bell-address-to-congress#). Accessed 2 Dec. 2021.



A sign on Interstate 19 in Arizona, the only continuous highway in the US that uses the metric system. With permission from Christina Estes, KJZZ

## World Englishes

### GLOSSARY

#### *dialect:*

a regional variation of pronunciation, wording and/or grammar

#### *variety:*

refers "to any variant of a language which can be sufficiently delimited from another one" [5]

#### *diaspora:*

the places where migrants of a particular group move to (from the Greek word for "scatter")

#### *knock someone up:*

(UK) = wake someone up by knocking on their door  
(US) = get someone pregnant

#### *suspenders:*

(UK) = straps to hold up socks (called "sock suspenders" or "sock garters" in the US)  
(US) = straps slung over the shoulders to hold up pants (called "braces" in the UK)

English is a requirement in our global world. Of the approximately 7.8 billion people on earth, 1.38 billion speak English as their native or second language. [1] This is reason enough to take a closer look at the Englishes, yes, Englishes, that exist worldwide.

A little clarification here: Whereas the term World English refers to English as the *lingua franca* or "BAD English" [2] used globally, World Englishes (plural!) refers to the different varieties of English that exist today.

So, how did all these Englishes come about? British English is rooted in several Germanic dialects [3] and Romance languages and was fixed as a standard in the 18<sup>th</sup> century [4]. It spread with colonization and, as some of England's former colonies became more influential on the world stage, their varieties of English evolved in response to the socio-linguistic contexts of their speakers. To establish order in the multitude of Englishes, several linguistic models have been established, amongst them Braj Kachru's "Three Circles of English" [6]. In the inner circle of this model there are the varieties of the first diaspora, Britain, Ireland, North America, Australia and New Zealand, where English is spoken as a native language (ENL). In the second, the outer circle, there are the Englishes of the second diaspora, Asia and Africa. Here English is spoken as a second official language (ESL) and plays a role in government, education, jurisdiction, diplomacy, trade and commerce. In the last circle, the expanding circle, English is used for global communication and spoken as a foreign language (EFL). Currently, there are 77 territories in which English is used as either a first language or an official second language and which have developed a distinct variety of English. They are mapped in the *Electronic World Atlas of English* [7], a great interactive tool.

The adaptation process from standard English to variety is reflected in dictionaries such as the *Merriam Webster Dictionary* [8], the *Hobson-Jobson* [9] and smaller dictionaries, such as the *Dictionaries of Nigerian English* [10] and *South African English* [11]. In addition, the *Corpus of Global Web-Based English (GloWbE)* [12] provides an awesome research tool to retrieve examples from. For instance, in some varieties of English, double negatives can be expressed as negative concord

He won't do nobody no ham.

Other non-standard forms include:

nomo

(contraction of "no more", Australia)

ain't

(negative of "to have", USA)

no woman no cry

("no" as pre-verbal negation, Jamaica)

He don't do this.

(a few different varieties)

Other variations include the pluralization of mass nouns (e.g. "informations" instead of "information") in a number of outer circle varieties. A mistake in British English might be the accepted standard in the variety.

As far as nouns are concerned, you buy beer and wine in the off-license in Britain, but in North America in the liquor store and in India in the liquor/wine shop. A shop selling palm wine only is called toddy shop in India. Where Brits use the loo, bog or the more neutral toilet, Americans go to the restroom or simply "wash their hands" and Canadians go to the washroom. British mobile phones become cell phones in the US and hand phones in Singapore and Malaysia. And of course there are the parts of cars, for example "boot" versus "trunk". And when a British parent carries their baby on their back, Nigerians simply "back a baby" turning the noun into a verb.

Needless to say that this can cause a lack of clarity when speakers of different varieties communicate and even lead to embarrassment, for instance when a British native speaker asks an American native speaker to knock them up at 9 o'clock or Americans tell Brits that suspenders have become quite fashionable for males.

Dr. Ines Böhner

### Footnotes:

Click [here](#) to view the extensive footnotes for this article.