

# The Last Word

## Giving voice to a bad mood

by Karen Virag

*“If it weren’t for pickpockets, I’d have no sex life at all.”*

~ Rodney Dangerfield

Fie on any editor who would change *weren’t* to *wasn’t* in Dangerfield’s timeless zinger. Indeed, such an act would cause your Grammar Grumbler to voice her displeasure and put her in a bad mood. And not just grammatical voice or mood, either.

Now we all know about voice in English, don’t we? I don’t mean that devilish interior voice that tells people there should be an apostrophe in a sign for bananas or that makes them say “between you and I.” Rather, I speak of grammatical voice, whether the subject of a sentence is performing the action (*active* voice) or receiving it (*passive* voice). The passive is always formed by a form of the verb *to be* (e.g., *is*, *were*) or, colloquially, with a form of the verb *get*, and a past participle. The previous sentence is a good example of the passive voice. An active sentence can almost always be made passive, often with the use of a *by* phrase.

In addition to voice, English has different moods, much like a fickle woman (or man—why must women always been seen as fickle? The Grumbler has known her share of flighty, unpredictable male humanoids). In grammar, *mood* refers to the way the verb expresses an action or a state of being. English has three moods (also called modes):

1. **Indicative**—the most common, used in normal everyday speech for making statements, asking questions, making exclamations
2. **Imperative**—expresses a demand
3. **Subjunctive**—expresses an action

or state that is doubtful, desirable, imagined, conditional or contrary to fact

It is the last, the subjunctive, that I wish to expound upon further, for the poor subjunctive mood is under threat, and I fear that it will soon suffer the same consignment to oblivion as the floppy disk, the Backstreet Boys, and newspapers.

Language maven Bryan Garner tells us that the subjunctive appears in the following six instances in English.

1. Conditions contrary to fact. If I were you I would think of the song “If I Were a Rich Man” from *Fiddler on the Roof*, which shows the correct use of the subjunctive; the popular American folk song “I Wish I Was in Dixie” does not.
2. Suppositions. For example, “If he were to forget the subjunctive, he wouldn’t be able to write formal English properly.”
3. Commands or demands. For example, “The teacher insisted that he write an essay on the subjunctive.” In this sentence, the indicative is *writes*.
4. Statements of necessity. For example, “It is necessary that editors be aware of the correct use of the subjunctive.” In normal speech, the indicative would be *are*.
5. Wishes. For example, “I wish that the poor subjunctive were not falling out of use.”
6. Suggestions and proposals. For example, “We suggest that he sit down and think over his hostility to the subjunctive.” The indicative would be *sits*.

According to Garner, suppositions and wishes are the most common use of the subjunctive in conversation, and the others are the most common in writing. He adds that despite its declining popu-

larity, the subjunctive is “worth keeping.”

Perhaps one of the reasons the subjunctive is so disrespected is that, as Burchfield tells us in *Fowler’s Modern English Usage*, the “notionally subjunctive and the indicative forms are identical.” In other words, it is often hard to tell the difference between the subjunctive and indicative. For example, the simple past (indicative) and subjunctive of the second person of the verb “to be” is the same: “you were.” It is also to be noted that not all “if” clauses call for a subjunctive, as number one above might suggest. As the *Oxford Guide to Canadian English Usage* cautions us, do not use the subjunctive when “if” means “whether.” For example, “The editor wondered if it was [not *were*] time to bid adieu to the subjunctive.” The *Oxford Guide to Canadian English Usage* also says not to use the subjunctive with real or hypothetical possibilities in the past. For example, “If he was [not *were*] tongue tied, it was because he was shy around pretty girls who know their voice and mood.”

### Idiomatic subjunctive expressions

Even though the Grumbler mourns the decline of the subjunctive, she admits that there are many subjunctive constructions in the form of fixed expressions that are still commonly used: *as it were*, *be that as it may*, *long live the Queen*, *lest we forget*, *suffice it to say*, *the powers that be*, *serve you right*, *woe betide*, et cetera.

In other words, we often use the subjunctive without even realizing it. If I were a betting woman, I would say that we will continue to do so. Come what may, God forbid that the subjunctive fall out of favour. Indeed, perish the thought. ☞