Moessner’s *History of the present English subjunctive* is nothing short of impressive when it comes to its diachronic coverage and in-depth analyses of the present subjunctive. The book is a welcome addition that provides a comprehensive overview of the development of the subjunctive in a range of contexts and syntactic construction types from the Old English period to the end of the Early Modern English period. The book is very readable and well-organized, making it a practical reference work for any scholar who wants to study the English subjunctive synchronically or diachronically.

The English subjunctive can be described as a form that survived into the present day against all odds (p. 1, and 242; Waller 2017: 24). Yet, its distinctive formal features have been drastically reduced, leaving only three morphologically distinct forms, namely the present uninflcted *be* form (*if he be excused*), the *were* subjunctive (*if it were true*), and the *morphological* subjunctive (*it is important that he admit the truth*), which is only overtly realized in the third person singular (Kastronic and Poplack 2021: 107). Also, the contexts in which the subjunctive may occur are highly restricted, i.e., subordinate clauses with a mandative force, specific adverbial subordinating clauses, and fixed phrases. Yet, despite earlier claims that these restrictions are reflexes of a form going extinct entirely (cf. Fowler 1965: 595; Givón 1993: 274), more recent studies find that the subjunctive appears to be alive and kicking, particularly in mandative sub-clauses in American English and increasingly so in noun clauses (cf. p. 17; Leech et al. 2009: 69; Övergaard 1995: 1; Waller 2017: 20, and 256). How can these newly emerging patterns be explained when most diachronic studies point to a steady decline of the subjunctive from at least the Middle English period onward? As Moessner states (p. 16), existing studies only address specific aspects that played a role in the development of the subjunctive. For instance, they only focus on a particular text type or trace the subjunctive in a limited range of syntactic construction types, limiting our understanding of its development over time.

Using a corpus-based approach, Moessner’s work sets out to address this caveat by investigating the competition between the present subjunctive and
verbal syntagms such as modal constructions, the imperative, and indicative in a wide range of syntactic construction types (main clauses, adjectival clauses, relative clauses, noun clauses, adverbial clauses). The study takes into account several conditioning parameters such as person and number, text type, text format (prose versus verse), and region, but also clause type-specific factors such as temporal versus conditional adverbial clauses and the mood of the matrix verb in relation to its sub-clause. Such fine-grained analyses require close-reading and meticulous manual coding, which is no small feat, especially considering the relatively extensive data set that comprises almost 500,000 words.

Moessner’s aim to provide a comprehensive overview is a rather ambitious one, which may also underlie some inevitable weaknesses. Most importantly, the study ignores past subjunctives and, most conspicuously, past uninflected be subjunctives. The latter is a somewhat puzzling decision as this is one of the forms that survived into the present and apparently experienced less competition than other subjunctive forms (p. 18). If one of the book’s aims is to try and explain the survival of the subjunctive, you would expect this form to feature. An equally surprising choice is that the Late Modern English period is not included. The main reason provided for this is that the sampling of existing Late Modern English corpora is not compatible with that of the Helsinki Corpus, which covers the time periods included in Moessner’s study (p. 15). Still, there is no clear explanation for why the sampling makes the corpora incompatible. The studied data comprise only a subset of the Helsinki corpus, so why not sample a sub-set from corpora such as ARCHER? However, considering the mammoth task in hand, the need to reduce the workload is understandable. Another issue presented by the fine-grained analyses is that some of the sample sizes appear to be very small, which makes the generalizability of some of the results questionable. Three appendices show the raw frequencies of all the matrix verbs, and the introduction provides information about the sample sizes for each time period, but it is not altogether clear what the sample sizes are for the more fine-grained analyses involving text type and region. It is simply stated that a subset was used on the basis of a selection of 31 texts from each time period of the Helsinki Corpus (p. 16), but, to my knowledge, no information is given as concerns the size of the individual texts that were selected, nor is there any mention of how many words per text type or region were included in these subsets. The author is sufficiently careful in making strong claims based on smaller sets, but more transparency regarding the smaller samples would allow readers to make more informed judgments.

The book consists of six chapters and a helpful epilogue that provides a concise summary and outlook with ample topics for further research. Chapter 1 defines the research problem and outlines methodological concerns. As mentioned before, very few corpus studies provide a comprehensive diachronic
overview in a balanced way; a representative and balanced corpus study that considers the subjunctive in a variety of construction types over time and in various contexts could help explain its unexpected resilience in present-day English. Chapter 1 also presents the author’s view on mood and modality. The existence of mood in English is disputed for present-day English, mainly because there are very few formal markers of mood left (p. 3). However, from a historical perspective, it makes sense to speak of a mood system, as Old English had a system that afforded inflectional endings for different moods in both the past and present tense. At the same time, precisely the reduction of inflectional endings and the emergence of competing forms that are not exclusively expressions of mood are of interest here. The author tackles the latter problem by considering mood as just one formal realization of modality. In this view, modality is a semantic category that may operate independently of the grammatical category of mood and account for competition between various constructions that express “the status of a proposition which describes an event or a situation” (p. 4). Following Searle (1976), Moessner distinguishes between epistemic and root modality. The former is associated with assertions and explanations, the latter with requests, vows, promises, etc. (p. 10). The subjunctive typically expresses root modality through the formal category mood, but root modality can thus also be realized through alternative competing structures such as modal constructions and adverbs like probably, maybe, surely, certainly.

Chapters 2 to 5 zoom in on the competition between the subjunctive and other verbal syntagms that express root modality in main clauses, adjectival clauses, noun clauses, and adverbial clauses respectively. Each chapter is, in turn, divided into sub-sections that deal with the Old English, Middle English, and Early Modern English periods. Each sub-section starts with a concise but overall comprehensive account of previous research on the construction type in question and provides plenty of references to relevant sources should the reader want to find out more about the subjunctive of the specific construction type. Inevitably, some theoretical considerations are dealt with only superficially. For instance, on page 24, a number of Old English verbs are identified as potential equivalents of hortative and optative subjunctives and are referred to as modal constructions. Though briefly mentioning it, the author steers clear of a detailed discussion as to the disputed auxiliary modal status of these verbs. I suppose this is justified as the main point is that they could convey root modality. However, it is reflective of the nature of the book, and of the fact that it is genuinely a descriptive corpus study and not a highly theoretical one. The book primarily presents frequency patterns of the different verbal syntagms expressing root modality. It does this in two useful ways; firstly, relative frequencies of the relevant verbal syntagms are provided, and, secondly,
frequencies per 1,000 words are given. This way, it is possible to observe which verbal syntagms competed with each other and the overall frequency of the verbal syntagms over time.

Readers who want to obtain a general overview of all construction types in one specific time period can immediately turn to Chapter 6, which presents the overall findings for all syntactic-construction types synchronically. The chapter concludes with a much-needed diachronic overview that synthesizes all the results of the chapters dealing with the individual construction types. This is also where readers will find many insightful graphs that allow them to see the overall development patterns of the different syntactic construction types at a glance.

Moessner’s book presents the first truly comprehensive diachronic study of the subjunctive and considers syntactic construction types hitherto not considered extensively, most notably main clauses and relative clauses. Based on this, the author was able to establish that the subjunctive was the least resilient in relative clauses throughout most of the period investigated. At the same time, there is a surprising increase of the form in main clauses throughout the Early Modern English period. Sadly, there are no Late Modern English data to confirm if this trend continued, but these findings warrant future studies on this topic. The study also sheds new light on the role of text type in the preservation of the subjunctive. Particularly legislative texts were high in expressions of root modality. Naturally, the rate of subjunctives was generally higher in these texts, but, interestingly, the distribution rates across the different syntactic construction types changed over time and point to changing genre conventions. It might also explain why the subjunctive is associated chiefly with formal contexts in present-day English.

Overall, the volume is well-edited, but I did come across a few errors. The most important one can be found on page 54, Table 2.17; the percentage given for the subjunctive in the category NN is 0%, whereas this should be 20%, based on the raw frequencies shown in the table. Generally, though, typos are rare and inconsequential (e.g. p. 17 “languge” instead of language).

In conclusion, despite some caveats, this book is a valuable contribution that invites further research on the unexpected survival of the subjunctive and provides novel insights into the diachronic developments of the form and the relevance of text type as an important conditioning factor, amongst others. It is very well-structured, allowing the reader to quickly look up information on specific aspects of the subjunctive, as well as to obtain a comprehensive overview.

References


