

# Subjunctive ‘Were’ vs. Indicative ‘Was’ Wish-Clauses: Why the Use of ‘Was’ Should Not Be Considered “Incorrect”

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## Abstract

While it is recognized that there has been a gradual shift from the subjunctive *were* to the indicative *was* in hypothetical, *if*-contexts (e.g., formulaic *If I/he/she were* x... statements) (e.g., Leech et al., 2009; Skevis, 2014), it is important to point out that the same kind of variation occurs in clauses of wishing (e.g., I/he/she **wish(es)** (that) I/he/she *were* the Queen/King of the world; I/he/she **wish(es)** (that) I/he/she *was* more affectionate). Similar to the former, variability between subjunctive and indicative in *wish*-clauses does not always constitute free variation. In other words, there are certain environments in which one mood may be preferable to the other.

The present paper, thus, has as its objective to distinguish between the contexts in which each of the two forms tends to be used. Our discussion leads us to the conclusion that, *wish*-clauses with the subjunctive *were* (i.e., as related to desires pertaining to the pronouns ‘I’, ‘she’, and ‘he’) tend to be associated with desires that are **unrealistic** or **quixotic**, **unattainable** or **impossible**, and/or **unnatural** or **extraordinary**, whereas those with the indicative *was*, are generally tied to aspirations that are **realistic** or **reasonable**, **attainable** or **possible**, and/or **natural** or **unexceptional**.

**Keywords:** subjunctive, indicative, wish-clauses, World Englishes, mood variation

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 On “Informal” Language

On the topic of slang, Heiman (1967) states the following:

So often we hold a stigmatic view of slang. We red-pencil it in compositions; we correct it in class recitations; and we are amused by it, or ignore it in the corridors, where the classroom dialect we foster within our own rooms seems somehow to have lost its franchise. Over the years of teaching standard English, teachers have developed the idea that slang is a use of the language which needs to be squelched or at least resisted. Yet slang is undeniably a part of the language. It may even be considered a distinct dialect, and sometimes it is almost a second language within the school. It is impossible to squelch and difficult to resist. Perhaps by recognizing it, analyzing it as English, and putting it to use, we might teach its users some things they may not know about the language, the way they use it, and, the way we would like them to use it. We may even discover that some of the excitement students exhibit in using a slang dialect can be transferred to their learning the standard dialect (p. 249).

This reasoning also applies to other informal, language structures whose interface spans the syntactic, semantic, and morphological linguistic boundaries. Put differently, students’ acquaintance with informal, linguistic constructs (e.g., cant, jargon, slang, colloquialisms, vernaculars, etc.) should not be considered to be detrimental to their learning of standard forms, but instead, highly beneficial to their understanding of pragmatics and nuance. Additionally, such knowledge can better prepare them to communicate with native speakers (e.g., Fein, 2011) – whose language use tends not to coincide with stagnant classroom-grammars. With this in mind, our discussion on the variability between two forms of the verb *to be* (one, standard and subjunctive; i.e., *were* – and the other, traditionally, “non-standard” and indicative; i.e., *was*) will follow.

### 1.2 The Morphology of Counterfactual Wish-Clauses

Wishes are one of several environments in which English traditionally requires that the particular complement appear in the subjunctive. Such wishes are counterfactual in nature, in that the subject expresses a desire for the circumstance in question to be different from how it currently is or previously had been (Iatridou, 2000). The sentences below serve to exemplify said contexts.

- 1) She **wishes** she *were* more productive. – This is a **present** counterfactual statement, since the subject, “she”, is not, at present, very productive (i.e., she is not very productive *now*).
- 2) She **wishes** she *had been* more productive when she was/as a student. – This is a **past** counterfactual statement, since the subject was not a very productive student, at some point prior to the utterance time.
- 3) I **wish** she *would be* more productive. – This sentence may be understood to be a **future** counterfactual, in that the individual is not very productive now, which, consequently, leads to the subject’s desire that she will exhibit a greater level of productivity in the future.

In examples (1) and (2) above, the past morphology present in the predicates directly following *wish* (i.e., *were* and *had been*), is understood to be a ‘fake’ (past) tense, since neither form receives a true, temporal past interpretation (i.e., Iatridou, 2000). In other words, as related to (1), *were* temporally coincides with the **present**, while in (2), *had been* conveys a particular demeanor or disposition that the individual did *not* actually possess at the relevant **past** point in time. In the case of example (3), the use of the modal *would* (in the subordinate clause), projects futurity (e.g., Iatridou, 2000); the speaker desires that the minimally productive individual in question, subsequently begin to use her time more constructively. Thus, in all three instances, the use of the subjunctive (i.e., past tense forms), and conditional (i.e., *would*), communicates that the coveted quality or attitude (i.e., being a more productive worker) has not yet (as related to the present) or did not ever (as related to the past) manifest(ed). Put differently, the individual’s efficient use of her time and labor is **untrue** with respect to both the past and present. As a follow up to these points, Iatridou (2000) importantly highlights that *wish* is counterfactual, only when its complement is tensed.

- 4) “We **wish** you a Merry Christmas.”

(Iatridou, 2000)

- 5) “He **wished** for a car.”

(Iatridou, 2000)

- 6) “I **wish** to go to Holland for my sabbatical.”

(Iatridou, 2000)

As such, examples (4), (5), and (6) would only have been counterfactual if they had been presented similarly to the below:

- 7) We **wish** that you *had/had had* a Merry Christmas: i.e., In the case of *had*, the subject did not have a Merry Christmas **recently**; Conversely, with respect to *had had*, the individual did not have a Merry Christmas **back then, less recently, or some time ago**, etc.,
- 8) He **wished** that he *had had* enough money to buy a car three years ago: i.e., He did not have the sufficient monetary resources to buy a car **three years ago**.
- 9) I wish that I *were able to go/went/had gone* to Holland for my sabbatical: i.e., I am not **currently** able to go to Holland for my sabbatical (as related to *were*); I did not go to Holland for my sabbatical – which likely took place **recently** (as related to *went*); I did not go to Holland for my sabbatical – which took place **back then, less recently, or some time ago**, etc., (as related to *had gone*).

As observed in examples (1) and (2) and (7) through (9), subjunctive (past and past perfect forms), in addition to conditional clauses (example 3), may be used to represent counterfactuality. In regard to the latter, it is increasingly common for speakers of American English to use the **conditional** in **present/future counterfactual** statements (e.g., “Our world would be a better place **if** there *would be* respect for all people, races and religions” (Davies’ Corpus of Contemporary American English, 2008-)) and **conditional perfect** in **past counterfactual** propositions (e.g., “Okay, and then **if** he *would have charged* me, you’d be complaining about that” (Davies’ Corpus of Contemporary American English, 2008- as cited in Faulkner, 2022)), instead of the subjunctive ((e.g., Faulkner, 2022; Fillmore, 1990; Ishihara, 2003; Leech et al., 2009); i.e., as related to both *if*- and *wish*-clauses). Other alternatives to the subjunctive (used to express counterfactuality) include modal auxiliaries apart from *would* (e.g., *might, will, could*, etc.,) and the indicative (e.g., *was*) (Faulkner, 2022).

## 2. Variation Between the Subjunctive *Were* and Indicative *Was* in *Wish*-Clauses

While it is recognized that there has been a gradual shift from the subjunctive *were* to the indicative *was* in hypothetical, *if*-contexts (e.g., formulaic *If I/he/she were* x... statements) (e.g., Leech et al., 2009; Skevis, 2014), it is worth mentioning that the same kind of variation occurs in clauses of wishing (e.g., I/he/she **wish(es)** (that) I/he/she *were* the Queen/King of the world; I/he/she **wish(es)** (that) I/he/she *was* more affectionate). Similar to the former, variability between subjunctive and indicative in (**present, counterfactual**) *wish*-clauses does not always constitute free variation. In other words, there are certain environments in which one mood may be preferable to the other. The sections to follow will focus on distinguishing between these semanto-pragmatic constraints. Additionally, it is important to note that our analysis will only involve the first-person, singular 'I', and the third-person, singular 'she' and 'he', since these are the pronouns with which such variability occurs.

### 2.1 First-person, Singular 'I'

#### 2.1.1 I Wish I *Were*...

We will begin our analysis with the first-person, singular pronoun 'I' and its appearance alongside the subjunctive *were*. In analyzing examples (10) through (20) below, we should observe that *were*-subordinate-clauses tend to co-occur with events or conditions that are **unrealistic** or **quixotic**, **unattainable** or **impossible**, and/or **unnatural** or **extraordinary**. In other words, it is understood that the wished-for occurrence, in each sentence, is unlikely to manifest, since the realization of the state or happening is either inconceivable or unachievable.

- 10) "[...] the blue sky above my head once more, and no prison bars? **I wish I were** your son, Hubert" (Davies' Corpus of Contemporary American English, 2008-).
- 11) "[...] use the subjunctive case in your last sentence. It should have been "**I wish I were** that wealthy"" (Davies' Corpus of Contemporary American English, 2008-).
- 12) "**I wish I were** young again, and full of piss and vinegar like you guys" (Davies' Corpus of Contemporary American English, 2008-).
- 13) "[...] sad, sad, sad. The last time I said to myself "**I wish I were** straight", I was a 7-year-old kid still praying to god [...]" (Davies' Corpus of Contemporary American English, 2008-).
- 14) "**I wish I were** a cat, I thought, a tiny and adorable animal who did [...]" (Davies' Corpus of Contemporary American English, 2008-).
- 15) "Sometimes **I wish I were** a baby because I'd be learning new stuff every day" (The Corpus of Contemporary American English, 2008-).
- 16) "I am pooped. **I wish I were** a robot too. It is perfectly exhausting having to reason all the time [...]" (Davies' Corpus of Contemporary American English, 2008-).
- 17) "**I wish I were** a fairy, just like you" (Davies' Corpus of Contemporary American English, 2008-).
- 18) "Sisters "Take Your Mama" to Little Peggy March's "**I Wish I Were** a Princess", and performers from Dead or Alive to Tammy Wynette [...]" (Davies' Corpus of Contemporary American English, 2008-).
- 19) "How **I wish I were** a duck," he said" (Davies' Corpus of Contemporary American English, 2008-).
- 20) "As he spins around and shows them all his tricks? Oh, how **I wish I were** a little boy again? Living in a child's dream" (Davies' Corpus of Contemporary American English, 2008-).

Let's analyze each of the above 10 sentences in order to commit to the aforementioned evaluation. As follows, the use of the subjunctive *were* in:

- Example (10) puts forth that the speaker is *not* Hubert's son and that it is improbable that he will, at some future point in time, legally attain this familial connection (whether by adoption, time travel, etc.);
- Example (11) suggests that the subject is not currently wealthy and that them one day attaining such affluence is not likely to be a feasible proceeding;
- Example (12) indicates the impossibility of the subject returning to a youthful state, since the aging process progresses (as opposed to regresses);
- Example (13) signals that the speaker identifies themselves to be a sexuality other than straight and, of course, had no control (i.e., played no role in) over the particular sexuality with which they identify. In other words, since their sexuality is not a choice, a conscious change towards straightness (i.e., heterosexuality) is, but, fanciful thinking;

- Example (14) points to the irrationality of the mentioned aspiration; i.e., that the human subject's desire to become a cat is absurd;
- Example (15) communicates that the speaker, who is a non-baby (i.e., an adolescent or adult), cannot ever return to babyhood;
- Example (16) compares the actual world (the individual being human) with an envisioned (i.e., unrealistic) world in which they are able to transform into a machine. The use of *were*, therefore, highlights the disparity between reality and the fantasized-about event;
- Example (17) triggers thoughts of a make-believe territory in which fairies (and, possibly other creatures) do exist. Thus, one can infer that turning into a magical, mythical being would be an incredible occurrence;
- Example (18), again, signals that there is little likelihood that the subject be one day granted the title of princess;
- Example (19) speaks to the impossibility of the subject becoming a duck; and,
- Example (20), like (12), calls attention to a state that cannot ever materialize – as no one, to my knowledge, is capable of returning to previous age.

As such, all have in common the fact that the wished-for event is only remotely possible.

### 2.1.2 I Wish I *Was*...

The next set of data we will look at involves the use of the indicative *was* in *wish*-clauses, as also related to the first-person singular. Sentences (21) through to (31) exemplify *was* as a means of representing events or conditions that are **realistic** or **reasonable**, **attainable** or **possible**, and/or **natural** or **unexceptional**.

- 21) “especially at Christmas time. Thank you very much for the pictures: **I wish I was** there for some R & R [...]” (Davies’ Corpus of Contemporary American English, 2008-).
- 22) “compared to other things. I simply do not know. Interesting though.... **I wish I was** as optimistic as you [...]” (Davies’ Corpus of Contemporary American English, 2008).
- 23) “selling it for pennies a gallon to communities outside the basin. **I wish I was** wrong, but the city is becoming poorer” (Davies’ Corpus of Contemporary American English, 2008-).
- 24) “money on hair products, sewing, and talking with a lisp. (**I wish I was** joking)” (The Corpus of Contemporary American English, 2008-).
- 25) “Although I haven’t been there, and I don’t fully understand, **I wish I was** there to just hold your hand while you go through this” (Davies’ Corpus of Contemporary American English, 2008-).
- 26) ““Clip, clap, clip, clap, for my wee red cap. **I wish I was** home!” he sang” (The Corpus of Contemporary American English, 2008-).
- 27) “What a post. **I wish I was** a US citizen so I could cast one more vote for Obama” (The Corpus of Contemporary American English, 2008-).
- 28) “Lord, and I go ragged all the time. Oh, Lord, don’t **I wish I was** a single girl again” (The Corpus of Contemporary American English, 2008-).
- 29) “Man, **I wish I was** a fly on the wall of the backroom negotiations which convinced Roberts to [...]” (Davies’ Corpus of Contemporary American English, 2008-).
- 30) “God, **I wish I was** a part of this. I’ve informed the home office” (Davies’ Corpus of Contemporary American English, 2008-).
- 31) “**I wish I was** prettier” is my usual go-to apology [...]” (Davies’ Corpus of Contemporary American English, 2008-).

We will, again, analyze each example with the aim of demonstrating the above-mentioned points. Accordingly, the indicative *was* in:

- Example (21) signals that the speaker is not currently at the mentioned location in which they would be able to spend some time resting and relaxing. However, unlike the sentences in section 2.1.1 (i.e., *were*-clauses), it is not beyond belief that the speaker could actually turn up. In other words, the subject's potential arrival is not intuited to be unrealistic;
- Example (22) suggests that, although the individual does not consider themselves to be as hopeful as their addressee, a future change in or adjustment to their worldview may cultivate increased levels of optimism;

- Example (23) indicates that, in spite of the speaker not believing themselves to be wrong about the city's present economic status, there is still a chance that their assumptions could be erroneous;
- Example (24) demonstrates that, although the wish in question might be thought to be a joke, it is indeed not. Put differently, the idea that the speaker might be joking is not far-fetched thinking;
- Example (25) implies that, despite the speaker not being able to hold their listener's hand at present, finding a means by which this may be carried out is not impossible. For instance, if transportation is the issue, the speaker, if able, could attempt to find the resources necessary to fly, drive or be driven, ride a bicycle, or walk to visit their addressee, or if time is a factor, take days off so as to effectuate the visit. Additionally, it may even be possible that the subject is already on their way to the individual's location, with the intention of surprising them. Consequently, rational means by which the subject might execute the particular trip do exist;
- Example (26) puts forth a tenable desire, since, in many cases, going back to one's home is an achievable circumstance;
- Example (27) discusses a status that is not currently held by the speaker-subject. However, its use, again, describes an aspiration that is obtainable, in that, there are legal processes in existence that stipulate the steps needed to begin or complete the path towards U.S. citizenship;
- Example (28) details a yearned-for marital status that is accessible, since the dissolution of relationships is a commonplace occurrence;
- Example (29) may at first seem fantastical, since one turning into a fly is not humanly possible. However, it is important to remember that this is an idiomatic expression, whose aim is to reveal the subject's desire to be at a location at which they are not at present (i.e., at the time of the utterance). Thus, if we delve into the figurative meaning of the desire, we see that it is one that may be brought about successfully;
- Example (30) sets forth that the speaker is not a part of the situation being discussed. However, similar to the former, becoming a part or member of a group or experience, subsequent to its formation or development, is not an unusual affair; and,
- Example (31) speaks to a condition that can be altered in order for the desired likeness to manifest. For instance, by a change of "look" (e.g., through make-up, clothing, hairdo, general sense of style, etc.) or mindset (e.g., by working on one's self-confidence and overall sense of worth).

Accordingly, all of the discussed *wish*-clauses describe desires that may feasibly manifest.

## 2.2 Third-person, Singular 'She'

### 2.2.1 She Wishes She *Were*...

Similar to the first-person 'I', if the third-person, singular pronoun 'she' is the subject of a clause of wishing, the subordinate clause standardly appears in the subjunctive. Thus, in the case of *to be*, the traditionally-expected, present-counterfactual form is *were*. The following sentences have as their objective to further illustrate the link between *were*-clauses and situations that are only, negligibly possible.

- 32) "She dressed herself up **as though she were** a little princess. **She wishes she were** a little princess" (Davies' Corpus of Contemporary American English, 2008-).
- 33) "[...] nervous, having never dyed her hair. However, she now says **she wishes she were** a natural redhead" (Davies' Corpus of Contemporary American English, 2008-).
- 34) "[...] and, in this moment, **she wishes she were** invisible" (Davies' Corpus of Contemporary American English, 2008-).
- 35) "The young woman known as [...] on social media said **she wishes she were** born [in] Nigeria" (Davies' Corpus of Contemporary American English, 2008-).
- 36) "[...] **she wishes she were** a caterpillar under [a green] gooseberry bush" (Davies' Corpus of Historical American English, 2010). In (COHA)
- 37) "[...] is no idle boast. Lucy has made no secret of the fact that **she wishes she were** an only child, and has actually tried to throw Linus out [...]" (Davies' Corpus of Contemporary American English, 2008-).
- 38) "Sometimes **she wishes she were** invisible or that she could just vanish to some secret place and be alone" (McBride, 2014).
- 39) "That's it, Dee thinks, letting out an unenthusiastic sigh. **She wishes she were** a turnip [...]" (Graves, 2022).

- 40) “Today Sophie says **she wishes she were** a deer. When I ask her why, she says it’s because she feels as big as an elephant” (Meno, 2010).
- 41) “**She wishes she were** someone else’s child, allowed to do such things on a Sunday” (Davies, 2018).
- 42) “**She wishes she were** a cat: free to do her own thing in her own house, to walk about naked, snack on gherkins, and not stumble across items of men’s underwear in the crevices of her sofa” (Legat, 2019).

The use of *were* in:

- Example (32), again, emphasizes the unlikelihood of the wished-for proposition. In the world as we know it, the title “princess” tends to be inherited hereditarily or through marital union with a member of a reigning monarchy. Therefore, a commoner being conferred such a designation, would deviate from the norm (i.e., would be an exceptional happening);
- Example (33) highlights the impracticability of someone who was not born a redhead (or who did not have red hair as a young child) having naturally red hair in adulthood;
- Example (34) calls attention to the fact that human beings do not have the capacity to conceal themselves by disappearing. In other words, as much as we are able to hide by means of camouflage or otherwise, to literally “vanish into thin air” is an action that we have not yet determined to be realizable;
- Example (35) describes an event that cannot ever be altered; i.e., it is impossible for someone who was not born in Nigeria to time travel and, subsequently, change their original motherland;
- Example (36), not only reveals that the subject is not currently a caterpillar, but also suggests that their longing to turn into one constitutes illogical thinking;
- Example (37) underscores the subject’s current situation of having siblings, as well as the unnaturalness of becoming an only child after previously having occupied the aforementioned role (i.e., being a sibling);
- Example (38), similar to (34), brings focus to the unrealistic nature of human invisibility;
- Example (39) shows that the individual is not a turnip, in addition to highlighting the absurdity of this aspiration;
- Example 40, like the above, points out the ludicrous nature of the individual’s ambition;
- Example 41 brings to the reader’s forefront the discomfort and disappointment that the individual feels regarding their belonging to a particular family. It is, however, also understood that it is very unlikely that said person will be able to change this attribute – for example, by means of adoption or some altering of time and space; and,
- Example 42, implies that the subject in question is not a cat, as well as it speaks to the little possibility that they may fulfill this desire.

Again, we see that, the use of the subjunctive *were*, in the subordinate complements of verbs of wishing, is well-suited in contexts that are characterized by irrationality and/or senselessness.

### 2.2.2 She Wishes She *Was*...

Like the data examined in section 2.1.2, the use of an indicative, *was*-clause (in this case, with the third-person, singular ‘she’) tends to describe logical events that could conceivably be fulfilled. Examples (43) through (53), thus, illustrate the use of *was* as a means of signaling rational and attainable desires.

- 43) “[...] she texts back that **she wishes she was** snuggling me” (Davies’ Corpus of Contemporary American English, 2008-).
- 44) “She speaks with her friend Faezeh early in the film, and mentions that **she wishes she was** out joining the protests” (Davies’ Corpus of Contemporary American English, 2008-).
- 45) “[...] fact she is trying to envision a memoir, which, unlike the poems **she wishes she was** writing, feels to Scarlet like a kind of betrayal-of Addie [...]” (Davies’ Corpus of Contemporary American English, 2008-).
- 46) “Oh, yes. In fact, she told me that **she wishes she was** the one who was getting married” (Davies’ Corpus of Contemporary American English, 2008-).
- 47) “Sarah sitting here, and she told me in the commercial break, **she wishes she was** home smoking her pipe” (Davies’ Corpus of Contemporary American English, 2008-).
- 48) “[...] **she wishes she was** able to give her children something better, she is disturbingly sorry [...] (Davies GloWbE, 2013).

- 49) “**She wishes she *was*** a better writer” (Gluth, 2009).
- 50) “**She wishes she *was*** brave enough to tell him” (Knight, 2015).
- 51) “Then, years later when she and her best friend read the book, **she wishes she *was*** there, and finds herself transported to the kingdom of Avalon” (Davies’ Corpus of Contemporary American English, 2008-).
- 52) “[...] worried that she has run away because he saw a note she wrote saying **she wishes she *was*** not there” (Davies’ Corpus of Contemporary American English, 2008-).
- 53) “**She wishes she *was*** single again” (Weldon, 2018).

In analyzing the above, we may observe that *was* in:

- Example (43) elaborates on a possibility that would transpire if the individual in question traveled to the subject’s abode;
- Example (44), similarly denotes a desire that would likely manifest if the subject in question had the physical, emotional, monetary, and time-oriented (etc.,) resources to arrive at and take part in the protests;
- Example (45) is, again, indicative of a wish that is reasonable, in the sense that, it is assumed that there is no force preventing the party in question from writing the poems she desires. In other words, it is likely that she is able to choose the poetry she produces, even if other factors may hinder her from prioritizing her preferences;
- Example (46) is suggestive of a situation that may take place at some future point in time. Put differently, getting married is an act that is conventionally performed;
- Example (47) speaks to the imaginable practicality of the discussed affair; i.e., the prospect of the person returning home to smoke her pipe;
- Example (48), although depicting the current unattainability of the subject’s desire, encompasses an aspiration that in a more equitable world (i.e., not one that is fantastical or incredible), could come to fruition;
- Example (49) details a wish that would likely come true if the individual were to put in additional practice and effort, and/or if they had access to formal training;
- Example (50) reports on an urge that might be facilitated with time, an increased level of comfort with the addressee, pressure (e.g., peer, societal, etc.), or “liquid courage” (e.g., alcohol). This is to say that the subject building up the courage to share the particular information is not an unrealistic or unreasonable possibility;
- Example (51) comments on a future happening that would be likely with the appropriate resources (e.g., monetary, transportation, etc.);
- Example (52), similar to the aforementioned, discusses a desired action that might reasonably take place; i.e., it is possible that the individual may actually run away; and
- Example (53) considers a preference that can readily come to pass by means of a break up.

Therefore, as related to all of the analyzed examples, the indicative *was* designates cogent wishes that may (unsurprisingly) successfully become reality.

### 2.3 Third-person, Singular ‘He’

#### 2.3.1 He Wishes He/She *Were*...

The last set of data we will examine involves that of the third-person, singular ‘he’. Our goal will, again, be to distinguish between the meanings of *were* vs. *was* in wish clauses pertaining to the mentioned pronoun. The sentences to follow should instance the use of *were* as a representation of impracticality and incredulity.

- 54) “**He wishes he *were*** rich” (Correct English and Current Literary Review, 1899).
- 55) “**He wishes she *were*** here, so he could say goodbye, even if she couldn’t hear him” (Gockel, 2015).
- 56) “**He wishes he *were*** younger so he could pretend, pretend he was a swan and Aretha his mate” (Wells, 2011).
- 57) “When Mr. K dies in Kafka’s *The Trial*, **he wishes he *were*** guilty; **he wishes he *were*** being executed for something he has actually done. But no, he dies like a dog as they turn the knife in his heart” (Kohut, 2013).
- 58) “One day, when Sylvester is out, he sees a hungry lion approaching, and in a moment of panic, **he wishes he**

*were* a rock” (Hilderbrand, 2007).

- 59) “When a lion frightens him, **he wishes he were** a rock. He becomes one. His parents miss him” (Yellin, 2017).
- 60) “**He wishes he were** a machine” (Chapman, 2021).
- 61) “**He wishes he were** a stupid animal, lying in the sun, so that he would not have to face change” (Shaw, 1965).
- 62) “**He wishes she were** his mother – so he could run away from home” (Safian, 2000).
- 63) “He reads about Jack Dempsey knocking out Firpo and presto! **He wishes he were** Jack Dempsey” (The Jewel, 1923).
- 64) “[...] **he wishes he were** Captain America” (Davies’ Corpus of Contemporary American English, 2008-).

As related to the above, we may notice that *were* in:

- Example (54) refers to a state that the individual does not currently possess. Additionally, suddenly becoming rich or acquiring substantial wealth is not usually a “run-of-the-mill” type of happening. Such circumstances tend to be characterized by processes that are either gradual or plainly impossible, if not for winning the lottery;
- Example (55) describes an unrealistic aspiration, as it is implied that the lady in question is either at a distant location or deceased. Thus, it would be impossible (at the given time) for the subject’s desire to have an in-person conversation to come true;
- Example (56) speaks to the impracticality of reversing one’s age;
- Example (57) puts forth that the opposite of what is being discussed has occurred. In other words, Mr. K is *not* guilty and is *not* being executed for something he had actually done; Nevertheless, since Mr. K’s execution still appears to be taking place, his wish is futile, as it is too late for his unfortunate fate to change;
- Example (58) details an improbable intention (i.e., disappearing) that is only likely to manifest if understood metaphorically; i.e., if the individual in question stands still and stays quiet (i.e., acts like a rock) in order to remain unnoticed. It is, however, unlikely that this particular utterance is to be understood figuratively;
- Example (59), similar to (58), relays an objective whose realization can only conceivably be understood as metaphorical. In its literal sense, the statement would be nonsensical;
- Example (60) is suggestive of the quixotic nature of the desire to become a machine;
- Example (61) reveals the subject’s rejection of his humanity, as well as his current dilemma of facing change. It is, however, clear, through the sentence’s wording, that his acceptance of the situation is the more reasonable path to embark on (i.e., as opposed to believing in the possibility that his wish will come true);
- Example (62) discusses a longing that, under normal circumstances, can only (legally) take place through adoption – otherwise, a reversal of time to change or adjust the past is, at present, not possible;
- Example (63), like the aforementioned, denotes a wish that cannot naturally be realized; and,
- Example (64), similar to (63), identifies a desire that is better described as fantastic or far-fetched.

As such, in accordance with our discussion of the first-person ‘I’ and third-person ‘she’, *were*’s co-occurrence with ‘he’ is also a depiction of wishes that are only marginally, likely to realize.

### 2.3.2 He Wishes He *Was*...

Consistent with the data elaborated on in sections 2.1.2 and 2.2.2, *wish*-clauses with ‘he’ as the subject and the indicative *was* as the mood of complement, correspond with desires that may be deemed more reasoned or rational than those containing the subjunctive ‘were’. An examination of examples (65) through to (75) aim to further validate this point.

- 65) “Always use the subjunctive mood [were] with the word ‘wish’. The following phrases are always wrong: I wish I *was*/I wish it *was*/**he wishes he was**/he wishes it *was*/she wishes she *was*/she wishes it *was*, etc.,” (Joshi, 2014).
- 66) “**He wishes he was** someplace else, not in the country” (Silverstein, 2013).
- 67) “**He wishes he was** here at this moment” (Rogers, 2016).
- 68) “He says **he wishes he was** an American” (The Journal of the National Education Association, 1941).

- 69) “**He wishes he was** a member of the Union League Club!” (Gleeson, 2023).
- 70) “**He wishes he was** a photographer instead of an actor” (O’Dell and Broadhead, 2014).
- 71) “**He wishes he was** a better reader - it would help pass the time in jail” (Sapp, 2002).
- 72) “[...] that it’s just words and stays words, and **he wishes he was** in bed or at a movie” (The New York Times Book Review, 1970).
- 73) “He is a college graduate and a lawyer - **he wishes he was** a mechanic or a miner” (The History and Achievements of the Fort Sheridan Officers’ Training Camps, 1920).
- 74) “He says **he wishes he was** back working here. So do we, but it won’t be long” (Baltimore and Ohio Employees Magazine, 1946).
- 75) “He says **he wishes he was** already in Congress where it wouldn’t matter” (Life, 1932).

The indicative *was* in the case of:

- (65), unlike the previous examples, provides a prescriptive description of how *wish*-clauses “should” be structured. Interestingly, Joshi (2014) states that any clause of wishing containing the indicative *was* as the mood of the complement is “incorrect”. However, as we have clearly seen, by means of the many examples contemplated throughout this paper, and in considering native-speaker, speech patterns (corresponding with several dialects of English), variation between *were* and *was* is a frequently-occurring, grammatical phenomenon – thus, rejecting the idea that the use of *was* is “improper”. In addition to this, we have also observed that the choice between either does not (always) constitute free variation – each form may carry along with it semantic and pragmatic consequences (i.e., distinctions);
- Example (66) is suggestive of a desire that may be fulfilled if the individual’s personal and/or financial resources, etc., were in order. Put differently, moving tends to be a routine part of life;
- Example (67), like the former, relays a want that is not impossible to accomplish;
- Example (68), again, describes an intention or ambition that is capable of coming into being if the subject finds a means of going through the legal route of becoming a U.S. citizen;
- Example (69) discusses the person in question’s aspiration to form part of the Union League Club. Said association is a private social club that can be joined by invitation and subsequent payment of monthly dues. Thus, representative of a want that could successfully be realized;
- Example (70) details the subject’s wish to change his career. Such a yearning is, once more, achievable, since changing one’s career may be possible by means of networking and the relevant training;
- Example (71) highlights the attainability of wanting to become a better reader, as such a goal can be carried out with time, patience, and practice, etc.;
- Example (72) reports on the subject’s longing to be in bed or at a movie; i.e., an intent that could be executed with the adequate transportation, time-oriented, and monetary (etc.,) resources;
- Example (73) points to the reasonableness and practicality of the subject’s wish to become a mechanic or miner. Like (70), a change of careers is a conventional and accessible occurrence;
- Example (74) emphasizes the attainability of the desired occurrence, as evidenced by the sentence following; and,
- Example (75), focuses on an aspiration that appears to be sensible, as the presence of the word ‘already’ indicates that the individual will eventually become a member of Congress.

Therefore, in the case of all 10 examples, *was* corresponds with wishes that are sagaciously contrived.

### 3. Concluding Remarks

#### 3.1 *Were* vs. *Was*

In analyzing the data present in sections 2.1, 2.2, and 2.3, we may observe that, while *wish*-clauses with the subjunctive *were* as the mood of the complement (i.e., as related to desires pertaining to the pronouns ‘I’, ‘she’, and ‘he’) tend to be associated with desires that are **unrealistic** or **quixotic**, **unattainable** or **impossible**, and/or **unnatural** or **extraordinary**, those with the indicative *was*, are usually tied to aspirations that are **realistic** or **reasonable**, **attainable** or **possible**, and/or **natural** or **unexceptional**. In summary, the customary use of each form may be understood as follows:

*Were* ➡ I/she/he **wish(es)** (that) I/she/he were *x*, where *x* is unlikely to occur;

and,

**Was** ➡ I/she/he **wish(es)** (that) I/she/he **was** *x*, where *x* may potentially take place, given the relevant resources.

In other words, situation *x* is more likely to occur if *was* is used in comparison to *were*.

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