Shana Poplack, Allison Lealess and Nathalie Dion

The evolving grammar of the French subjunctive

Il n’y a point de grammaires éternelles; il faut changer avec le temps et se soumettre à l’usage.
‘There are no eternal grammars; we must change with the times and go with the flow.’
– Bescherelle 1877: 658

Abstract: This paper compares the evolution and contemporary distribution of subjunctive and indicative in spoken Quebec French with the development of normative injunctions on variant choice over five centuries of grammatical tradition. The subjunctive has been prescribed with hundreds of lexical governors, verb classes and semantic readings since the 16th century, but in spontaneous speech, it is virtually limited to a handful of matrix and embedded verbs. Our analysis shows that the overriding determinant of variant choice is not meaning, as most would claim, but the lexical identity of the governor. The only other factors that play a role are those pertaining to the construal of the context as canonical for subjunctive (e.g. suppletive morphology, presence of the complementizer que, and adjacency of main to embedded clause); where these are present, subjunctive is favored. Quantitative discrepancies among governors and embedded verbs, their previously undocumented associations (or lack thereof) with the subjunctive, and the unpredictable mood preferences they display at different points in time have all conspired in obscuring community patterns. Once actual usage facts are systematically analyzed, however, the grammar of subjunctive selection emerges as regular and stable. Its discrepancies with respect to both normative and theoretical linguistic accounts stem from attempts to impose the doctrine of form-function symmetry on a phenomenon which is inherently variable.

Keywords: mood variation, language change, Canadian French, subjunctive

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1 Introduction

In this paper we revisit what is perhaps the most elusive and mysterious feature of French grammar: the subjunctive. Grammarians have invested centuries of time and reams of pages in delimiting the conditions requiring it and the readings it conveys. A rough summary of this huge normative effort would be that the subjunctive is obligatory after a class of subjunctive-selecting governors, but is also, somewhat contradictorily, dependent on the degree to which the speaker wishes to commit herself to the reality or truth value of the complement proposition, as befits a grammatical mood. It has also garnered much attention from linguists. Though cognizant that subjunctive is in the first instance an embedded-clause phenomenon, which is not free, but triggered by some (unspecified) class of matrix elements, most would nonetheless argue that the overriding determinant of mood selection is semantic. There is a good deal of controversy over just what its contribution is, as well as over whether the relevant feature is inherent in the verb, can be inferred from its complement, resides in a presupposition, etc. (see Quer 2009a, b for a variety of proposals in this regard). But it is generally agreed that mood selection is largely, if not solely, semantically motivated. This commitment to meaning as the controlling factor has made it difficult, despite much effort, to account for many “unwarranted” uses of the subjunctive, like the realis-subjunctive and irrealis-indicative mismatches well-documented in French and in Romance more generally. No consensus has emerged on the way the class of subjunctive-selecting verbs is constituted, nor what the semantic contribution of the morphological form is.

An earlier study of spoken Quebec French (Poplack 1992) showed that although the subjunctive had developed in a highly regular fashion in the community, the way it was used bore little resemblance to either prescriptive injunctions or theoretical accounts. Its major characteristic was inherent variability, as exemplified by the sentences in (1), in which subjunctive, indicative and conditional morphology alternate under the same governor, without changing the reading of the embedded verb.
(1) a. Tu sais, tu aimerais mieux qu'ils soient (SUBJ) pas là. (20C.25.608)¹
    ‘You know, you’d like it better if they weren’t there.’

    b. J’aimerais ça que vous verreriez (COND) mon mari. Vous allez voir comme
    c’était un bel homme. (20C.072.1335)
    ‘I’d like it if you would see my husband. You’ll see how handsome he was.’

    c. Tu aimerais qu’il guérit (IND) ta paralysie, parce je suis paralysée dans le
    visage. (20C.044.1554)
    ‘You would like for him to cure your paralysis, because my face is
    paralyzed.’

The extent of the differences between published accounts and these previously undocumented usage patterns naturally raised the question of how and why the subjunctive developed in just this way. Was this a community-specific change away from a prior state of “standard” subjunctive use, possibly provoked by long-term contact with English (a favored explanation for unruly usage facts; e.g. Laurier 1989, Silva-Corvalán 1994, 2001, Montrul 2009), the result of erosion, or some other pathological state?

The idea that the utterances reproduced in (1b) and (1c) are non-standard derives from the belief that there is a canonical use to which speakers are not adhering. Certainly that is the assumption, at least implicit, of both prescriptive and linguistic treatments of the topic. Just what is that canonical use? In this paper we explore this question, an undertaking which turns out to be much like opening Pandora’s box. We will argue that the pervasive indeterminacy surrounding the subjunctive arises from three widespread preconceptions: the assumption of form-function symmetry, the neglect of inherent variability, and insufficient attention to actual usage data. We will show that the overwhelming majority of occurrences of the subjunctive in our data come from a very small stereotyped repertoire of more or less frozen constructions.

In ensuing sections, we assemble and analyze a vast compendium of materials pertinent to the evolution and contemporary distribution of subjunctive and indicative in Quebec French. One set consists of natural speech data spanning an apparent-time frame of a century and a half. We use this to assess the extent to which claims about what mood selection conveys and how it is interpreted are reflected in speech. The other data set draws on the evolution of normative injunctions with respect to contexts in which one or the other of the morphological

¹ Codes in parentheses refer to corpus (19C = Récits du français québécois d’autrefois [Poplack & St-Amand 2007], 20C = Corpus du français parlé à Ottawa-Hull [Poplack 1989], 21C = Français en contexte, milieux scolaire et social [Poplack & Bourdages 2005]), speaker and line number. Examples are reproduced verbatim from audio recordings.
variants is deemed grammatical. The latter are important both because they form
the basis, albeit implicit, for the intuitions on which most current accounts of
mood distribution are based, and also because they furnish a benchmark against
which to assess whether usage has changed. We begin with a meta-analysis of five
centuries of prescriptive tradition regarding the subjunctive, followed by a brief
overview of contemporary linguistic treatments. Section 4 describes the vari-
able usage data considered here and the methods we employ to analyze them. In
Section 5 we determine the factors contributing to selection of subjunctive under
verbal and non-verbal governors in spontaneous speech over time. Section 6 con-
fronts prescription with praxis. We conclude by exploring how insistence on the
doctrine of form-function symmetry works to shroud the orderly heterogeneity of
spontaneous speech, and the implications this has for understanding variable
subjunctive use.

2 The prescribed grammar of the subjunctive

To arrive at an understanding of the standard uses of the French subjunctive, how
these may have evolved over time, and how they inform current treatments and
uses, we appealed to the Recueil historique des grammaires du français (RHGF;
Poplack, Dion, Jarmasz, LeBlanc & Rosen 2002). This is a compilation of 163 pre-
scriptive grammars of French published between 1530 and 1999, and distributed
across five periods distinguished for analytical purposes: I: 16th–17th centuries, II:
18th century, III: 19th century, IV: early 20th, and V: late 20th, a period we associate
with the flowering of modern linguistics. Beyond its obvious function as a reposi-
tory for what the normative enterprise ratifies as “correct”, this corpus serves as a
tool to situate contemporary variability, such as that in (1), by assessing whether
there are diachronic precursors to these alternate expressions of (seemingly) the
same thing, dating them, and establishing the conditions, if any, under which
one or the other of the variants is deemed admissible (Poplack & Dion 2009).

The meta-analysis of this grammatical tradition, presented in the next sec-
tion, will focus on three key elements: overall salience of the subjunctive, as ex-
pressed by the number of grammars mentioning it, persistence of the contexts
and/or meanings they associate with it, and consistency of the treatment accorded
it. We assess these across grammars and over time. Results are based on exhaus-
tive searches of all 163 grammars in the RHGF for any mention in which the sub-
junctive was prescribed, as in (2), proscribed as in (3), or deemed variable, as in
(4), noting at the same time grammars that failed to mention it at all.
(2) On se sert encore du Conjonctif\textsuperscript{2}, avec la conjonction que. 1. Après les verbes suivants, vouloir, souhaiter, désirer, prétendre, commander, prier, permettre, défendre, persuader, dissuader, exhorter, craindre, appréhender, avoir peur, douter, s’étonner, être surpris, admirer & après les autres qui ont la même signification, ou à peu près ... (De la Touche 1730: 287)

‘We still use the subjunctive, with the conjunction que ‘that’. 1. After the following verbs ... and after the others that have the same meaning, or almost ...’

(3) Après des constructions impersonnelles exprimant: ... la certitude, la vraisemblance, le résultat: il paraît, il s’avère, il s’ensuit, il résulte, on ne trouve pas de subjonctif dans le prédicatoïde. (Martinet 1979: 124)

‘Following impersonal constructions expressing: ... certainty, likelihood, result: (…), we do not find the subjunctive in the predicatoid.’

(4) La négation de douter ou de nier entraîne l’emploi possible (mais non obligatoire) de l’indicatif. (Pougeoise 1998: 358)

‘With the negation of douter ‘doubt’ or nier ‘deny’ comes the possible (but not obligatory) use of the indicative.’

2.1 The place of the subjunctive in the French grammatical tradition

We note first that the subjunctive has always been highly salient: a full 78% of the RHGF grammars make overt reference to it, a very substantial proportion in comparison with other grammatical features (e.g. expression of the future 52% [Poplack & Dion 2009]). And this preoccupation has been increasing steadily since the earliest times, such that close to 90% of 20th- and 21st-century grammars now feature rules on subjunctive use.

The material side of this preoccupation shows up in the prodigious number of pages (up to 203!) devoted to the subjunctive in a typical grammar. A chapter may feature sections, subsections and paragraphs, organized in terms of rules (e.g. use subjunctive after an impersonal verb), followed by literary citations illustrating the rule, exception(s), also accompanied by illustrations, and remarques, which may contain additional rules, further specifications or even recantations, and/or an exegesis of an author’s usage, purportedly exemplifying the rule, as in (5). The entire series may be repeated under each of the many headers (e.g. comparative subordinate clauses) making up the chapter.

\textsuperscript{2} The subjunctive is variously referred to in the RHGF as conjonctif, optatif and mode relatif.
(5) a. When Mme de Sevigné says: *il me semble que mon coeur veuille [SUBJ] se fendre*, ‘it seems to me that my heart wants to break’, she is not at all convinced of what she is asserting; it is as if she said: I am tempted to believe that my heart wants to break. This is not at all the case when Voltaire says: *il me semble que Corneille a donné [IND] des modèles de tous les genres* ‘it seems to me that Corneille has given models of all genres’. Voltaire is asserting here a positive fact, about which he has no doubt, he is convinced of it, he has examined it and judged. From these observations, and even more from our citations, we believe, against the grammarians, that one should use: 1° the indicative every time one asserts ... a fact of which one is entirely convinced; 2° the subjunctive in the opposite case. (Bescherelle 1877: 651; translation ours).

b. The alternation between *il est certain qu'il est venu* ‘it is certain that he has come’ and *qu'il soit (ou est) venu, c'est certain* ‘that he has come [SUBJ, IND] is certain’ can be explained by the fact that *certain*, when postposed to the subordinate clause, corrects the suspension of the truth value introduced by *que* less energetically: for the indicative to be reinstated, the certainty must be established from the moment the beginning of the phrase is uttered. The same kind of explanation accounts for the subjunctive after *le fait que* ‘the fact that’. (Arrivé, Gadet & Galmiche 1986: 638; translation ours)

As we will show in what follows, the plethora of rules, exceptions and observations, not to mention the acknowledged grey areas (6), that characterize the diachronic development of normative discourse surrounding the subjunctive are directly reflected in contemporary indeterminacy over its function and meaning.

(6) *Après les interrogans on peut mettre le conjonctif, ou l’indicatif; il y a néanmoins des occasions où l’un est mieux que l’autre, & c’est à l’oreille d’en décider.* (Mauvillon 1754: 370)

‘After interrogatives, one can put the subjunctive or the indicative; there are nonetheless occasions where one is better than the other; and it’s up to the ear to decide.’

### 2.2 Prescriptive treatment of subjunctive-selecting contexts

Prescriptive discourse has always taken two (seemingly conflicting) directions: the major one deals with identifying the class of lexical *governors* that require or prohibit the subjunctive in the embedded clause, usually taking the form of lists,
and the other with the semantic readings that the subjunctive expresses. Ex-
tensive content analysis of nearly 2000 such mentions reveals a surprising number
of inconsistencies and contradictions.

2.2.1 Subjunctive governors

Perhaps the most remarkable result of our meta-analysis is the improbably large
number of governing elements cited as requiring subjunctive in the embedded
clause over the duration: no fewer than 619 were prescribed explicitly, and that
number rises to 785 if we include those simply appearing in grammarians’ illus-
trations (7).

(7) Le subjonctif s’emploie obligatoirement dans une subordonnée complément
d’objet d’un verbe exprimant une volonté ou un sentiment: Je veux, ordonne,
souhaite, désire, regrette, crains, doute qu’il vienne. Je tiens à ce qu’il vienne. Je
m’étonne de ce qu’il vienne. (Riegel, Pellat et Rioul 1998: 324)
‘The subjunctive is obligatory in the complement of a verb expressing a desire
or sentiment: I want, order, wish, desire, regret, fear, doubt that he will come. I
insist that he come. I am astonished that he is coming.’

Close to half (N = 304) of these are governing verbs, as (2a, 7), another third
(N = 191) are non-verbal expressions, as in (8), and the remainder consist of se-
manitically defined verb classes, as in (9).

(8) Ces locutions sont toujours suivies du subjonctif. À condition que – afin que
– à moins que . . . (Bayole et Bavencoffe 1995: 81)
‘These locutions are always followed by the subjunctive. On condition that, so
that, unless . . .’

(9) Passons maintenant aux temps du subjonctif. Les verbes qui suivent un que
conjonctif ou un qui relatif, précédés par d’autres verbes qui marquent le sou-
hait, la crainte, le doute ou l’avenir, doivent toujours être mis au subjonctif.
(Antonini 1753: 328)
‘Let’s turn now to the subjunctive tenses. Verbs that follow the conjunction
que or a relative qui, preceded by other verbs that express desire, fear, doubt
or the future, must always be put in the subjunctive.’

3 Only a very few grammars contained prescriptions that did not fall into either of these
categories.
Interestingly, the number of governors prescribed per period has risen steadily over time (Table 1), reaching a zenith of 131 in Period V, to which we have referred as the Modern Linguistics period.

### Persistence

Surprisingly few of these prescriptions have persisted over the duration, however: only 2% of the verb classes (N = 2, ‘verbes de désir’, ‘verbes de volonté’), 3% of the verbal governors (N = 8, avoir peur, craindre, désirer, falloir, permettre, prier, souhaiter, vouloir), and 9% of the non-verbal governors (N = 17, à condition que, à Dieu ne plaise que, afin que, au cas que, avant que, bien que, de peur que, encore que, jusqu’à ce que, plutôt à Dieu (aux dieux) que, pourvu que, que, qui que, quoi que, quoique, sans que, soit que) recurred in all five periods studied (Figure 1). In fact, well over half of all prescriptions involving verbal governors were simply ephemeral: prescribed in one period only, never to recur again. Examples of these include verbs avertir ‘warn’, devenir urgent ‘become urgent’, constructions like ma crainte est que ‘my fear is that’, and verb classes like “indécision”, or “mécontentement” ‘discontent’. Approximately 2/3 of these ephemeral prescriptions also date from Period V (Figure 2).

#### Table 1: Number of governors prescribed

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#### Fig. 1: Persistence of prescriptions
Consistency

Given the sheer number of prescriptions, and the fact that so many of them are idiosyncratic, it stands to reason that rates of inter-grammar agreement on the identity of lexical governors would be reduced. Still, consistency levels as low as those shown in Figure 3 were unexpected. Only 3% of the 619 governors explicitly prescribed were mentioned in even a quarter of the grammars studied. Only one matrix verb (white bar) vouloir ‘want’ achieves this 25% rate. Of the five verb classes (black bars) that made the cut, the frontrunner (“doubt”) is cited by only
54% of RHGF grammars. And the recurrence rate for the leading non-verbal matrix (grey bars), *afin que* ‘so that’, is even lower (46%).

Further inconsistencies damaging to any claim that the subjunctive co-occurs with a specific (discoverable) set of triggers arise from discrepancies in the treatment of different lexical governors that are (at least) broadly synonymous. For example, while 33% of all grammarians prescribe subjunctive with *verbes de souhait* ‘verbs of wishing’, the lexical verb *souhaitez* is mentioned by only 19%, and *être à souhaiter* ‘to be desired’ and *être souhaitable* ‘to be desirable’ by only 1% each. Likewise, 18% of grammarians agree that *faire* ‘be necessary’ requires subjunctive in the embedded clause, but three other verbal governors with arguably the same meaning, *être essentiel, être obligatoire* and *avoir besoin* are prescribed by no more than 2% each. Verbs of *volonté* ‘will’ (recurrence rate: 43%) and *désir* ‘desire’ (44%) rank second and third among prescribed verb classes, but the presumably synonymous *aimer, souhaitez, désirer* and *vouloir* ‘want’ contained within them are prescribed by far fewer. Although the non-verbal governors are treated somewhat more consistently (e.g. *pour que* and *afin que*, both signifying ‘so that’, achieve agreement rates of 36% and 46% respectively, and *mais que* and *quand* ‘when’ have 2%), the same kinds of discrepancies show up here as well: e.g. *pourvu que* ‘provided that’ is prescribed in 42% of grammars, but synonyms *en autant que, à condition que* and *à la condition que* recur in only 2–11% of grammars. And these examples could be multiplied.

2.2.1.3 Proscriptions

Proscriptions are another precious window on the usage of the past, since offending forms must have reached a critical threshold well before the date that grammarians undertook to condemn them. Though nowhere near as frequently as they prescribe them (619 vs. 120), grammarians do occasionally *proscribe* the subjunctive with specific verbal governors, as exemplified in (10), and somewhat more frequently, with non-verbal governors, in (11).\(^4\)

(10) *Verbes après lesquels on ne met de mode relatif.*

Il est certain qu’il viendra.
Il est certain qu’il viendrait.

Dites la même chose des suivants:
Il est manifeste/clair/évident que le messie est venu (Vallange 1721: 288)

\(^4\) Verb classes are never proscribed.
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Verbs after which we do not put the subjunctive. It is certain that he will come [FUT]. It is certain that he would come [COND]. Say the same thing about the following: It is manifest/clear/evident that the Messiah has come [PRES PFCT].

Or, la faute qui consiste à faire suivre après que du subjonctif est de plus en plus fréquente dans l’usage parlé. (Frontier 1997: 564)

Yet the error of using a subjunctive after après que ‘after’ is more and more frequent in spoken usage.

Like prescriptions, most proscriptions are also idiosyncratic. Only 10 recur in even 5% of the RHGF grammars (Figure 4). The highest agreement rate achieved by a verbal governor is 10% (on the proscription against être certain ‘to be certain’ taking a subjunctive), while that by a non-verbal governor (après que ‘after’) is 5%. For the most part (59–70%, depending on type of governor), they are also ephemeral and are concentrated here again in Period V.

Interestingly, closer inspection (Table 2) shows that 1/3 of the proscribed matrices were also prescribed, most within the same period! Examples of these include verbal governors like souhaiter ‘wish’, affirmer ‘affirm’, être vrai ‘to be true’, and non-verbal governors like à condition que ‘on condition that’, tout . . . que ‘as . . . as’, and après que ‘after’.

Summarizing, from the earliest times there has been a profound preoccupation with subjunctive governors, in the sense that virtually all grammars mention them, most prolifically in Period V. Yet although a suspiciously high number of governors (hundreds!) have been prescribed to take the subjunctive over the duration, the great majority of them turned out to be limited to no more than one grammar, and appeared during the period spanning the last 50 or so years. Not one governor recurred across all grammars. Among the few that were cited in more than one, inter-grammar consistency rates were generally still very low.
Where prescriptions involved whole classes of governors, their presumed members were rarely invoked. Several of the governors that were prescribed were also proscribed, sometimes within the same time frame. Such pervasive discrepancies in the very identity of the subjunctive governors are difficult to reconcile with the widespread ideology that French features a well-defined set of subjunctive-selecting matrices readily available to speakers of the standard language. A more accurate characterization would be that the prescriptive tradition has failed to establish the set of subjunctive governors. And the many further inconsistencies we investigate in the next section are at odds with the generally accepted idea that subjunctive makes a semantic contribution.

2.2.2 Meanings

Though the bulk of the normative effort has focused on enumerating the subjunctive-selecting matrices, nearly 2/3 of the RHGF grammars also assign one or more semantic readings, a trend which has increased dramatically in
20th-century treatments (Figure 5). We have identified a total of 76 distinct putative meanings, a remarkable number, even taking into account inevitable overlaps. These include not only the familiar “core” meanings of the (Latin) subjunctive: desire, doubt and volition, but also many more elusive concepts like attenuation, causation, displeasure, hyperbole, indecision, modesty, non-existence, obligation, surprise and regret. The treatment of these is essentially the same as that involving lexical governors (Figure 6): close to half (46%) are ephemeral, and once again, the majority surfaced post-1950.

In terms of consistency among the meanings the subjunctive conveys, we observe even less than among governors. If we adopted the 25% inter-grammar agreement threshold used for establishing the identity of the governors, only two
readings would make the cut: the quasi-synonymous *doute* ‘doubt’ (33%), illustrated in (12), and *incertitude* ‘uncertainty’ (26%), as in (13).

(12) On met le verbe au subjonctif quand par ce verbe on veut marquer une chose qui tient du _doute_ ou du souhait, sans affirmer absolument qu’elle est, étoit, a été, sera, seroit, ou auroit été. (de Wailly 1768: 279)
‘We put the verb in the subjunctive when by that verb we want to mark a thing that is in doubt or wished for, without absolutely asserting that it is, was, has been, will be, would be or would have been.’

(13) Le subjonctif montre l’événement tel qu’il est regardé par la personne (en l’occurrence, en toute _incertitude_). (Leeman Bouix 1994: 95)
‘The subjunctive shows the event as it is envisaged by the person (in this case, with complete uncertainty)’.

Indeed, only 11 readings (15%) of the 76 we documented achieved so much as a 10% inter-grammar agreement, as shown in Figure 7.

These results raise the following questions: why have so very many meanings been invoked for this single form? Why have more than 3/4 of them surfaced in the last 50 years alone? Why have so few recurred over time, and why have they been marked by so much inconsistency? Do speakers actually _use_ subjunctive morphology to convey these meanings, and if so, are they interpreted as such by the interlocutor? Perhaps most important, what clues would signal – to the analyst or to the interlocutor – that they had? In other words, what sort of evidence would be required to conclude that the subjunctive was selected to express one of the meanings putatively associated with it?

Consider now the type of readings said to be embodied by the subjunctive. In keeping with its widespread characterization as a grammatical _mood_, these relate

![Fig. 7: Semantic readings achieving an inter-grammar agreement of 10% (N = 10) or better](image-url)
to nonfactive modalities, irrealis states, and most recurrently, the desires, fears, intent or commitment of the speaker with respect to the truth of the proposition in the embedded clause. The subjunctive has thus been variously defined as the mood of “non-judgment” (Damourette & Pichon 1930: 479), “delicate nuances” (Fischer & Hacquard 1959: 330), “psychic energy” (LeBidois & LeBidois 1971: 501), “imaginary” (Galichet 1964: 74) “doubtful modesty” (Fischer & Hacquard 1959: 328), “sentiment” (Laurence 1957: 140), and more simply of “ideas” (Bruneau et Helluy 1950: 145, Sternon 1954: 231) or “consideration” (Regula 1957: 175). It is often associated with the expression of heightened affectivity, sensibility and emotion, as illustrated in (14).

(14) a. Le subjonctif exprime les dispositions de l’âme relativement à des faits.
   (Crouzet et al. 1912, Section 400)
   ‘The subjunctive expresses the dispositions of the soul relative to facts.’
b. Toutes les fois que la parole est comme chargée de sentiment, dans toutes les phrases qui supposent une tension et un élan de l’âme, le subjonctif a ses raisons suffisantes en soi-même. (LeBidois & LeBidois 1971: 510)
   ‘Whenever speech is as it were charged with feeling, in all phrases that imply a tension and an impulse of the soul, the subjunctive is appropriate.’
c. Le subjonctif . . . infuse au verbe la personnalité et l’opinion du sujet.
   (Dauzat 1943: 178)
   ‘The subjunctive . . . infuses the verb with the personality and opinion of the subject.’
d. Le subjonctif est le mode que l’on emploie lorsqu’on veut exprimer non pas la réalité même, mais la réalité telle que la veut l’esprit. (Dupré 1972: 2451).
   ‘The subjunctive is the mood one uses when one wishes to express not reality itself, but reality as the mind wishes it to be.’

The meaning of the subjunctive is often “specified” in opposition to that of the indicative, as exemplified in (15).

(15) a. Sans doute, l’indicatif eût été correct dans les deux cas, mais le subjonctif apporte un supplément précieux de subjectivité. (Fischer & Hacquard 1959: 330)
   ‘The indicative would have undoubtedly been correct in both cases, but the subjunctive contributes a precious supplement of subjectivity.’
b. Le subjonctif exprime une idée de potentialité et de doute, […] permettant de distinguer: “croyez-vous qu’il vienne”, plus dubitatif et surtout plus subjectif, de “croyez-vous qu’il viendra”. (Dauzat 1943: 178)
‘The subjunctive expresses an idea of potentiality and doubt . . . permitting a distinction between “do you think he will come [SUBJ]?” , more doubtful and especially, more subjective, than “do you think he will come [IND]?” ’

c. L’indicatif le pose [le fait] comme probable ou certain tandis que le subjonctif le pose comme également possible et impossible. (Leeman Bouix 1994: 95)

‘The indicative presents the proposition as probable or certain, while the subjunctive presents it as equally possible and impossible.’

If we dwell on the nature of these semantic prescriptions (or perhaps more accurately, disquisitions) at such length, it is to highlight the difficulty in reconciling the expression of such affective states with a lexically-mandated requirement for the subjunctive, especially where the mood in the embedded clause is not consistent with the semantic attributes of the governing element. This is the case when subjunctive morphology is required with a factive governor and vice-versa, for example, or, still more puzzling for proponents of form-function symmetry (i.e. a 1:1 relationship between form and meaning), when moods alternate under a single governor. We have been referring to this phenomenon as variability, and we turn to its prescriptive treatment in the next section.

This abiding tension between a lexical, or “intensional” (Farkas 1982) subjunctive and one which makes a semantic contribution has not gone unnoticed by prescriptivists, and may explain why, in contrast with the more straightforward, and in a sense more proactive, prescriptions involving lexical governors (see 8), so much of the activity surrounding the meaning of the subjunctive appears to be devoted to post-facto exegesis of why it was used in a particular context (16).

(16) En étudiant tous ces passages, peut-être trouvera-t-on que ce qui a décidé les écrivains en faveur d’un mode plutôt que d’un autre, ce sont certaines nuances de la pensée: ils ont mis l’indicatif quand ils ont voulu énoncer un fait précis, et le subjonctif quand ils ont voulu indiquer un doute. (Chassang 1886: 339)

‘Upon inspection of all these passages, perhaps we will find that what decided the authors in favor of one mood rather than another were certain nuances of thought: they put the indicative when they wanted to express a specific fact, and the subjunctive when they wanted to indicate a doubt.’

As illustrated in (16), and confirmed in ensuing sections, the favored explanation for unwarranted or otherwise mysterious uses is speaker intent: s/he used the subjunctive because s/he “wanted” to express X. This of course begs the ques-
tion: how does the analyst know what the speaker wanted to express, beyond the fact that s/he selected the subjunctive (or did not)? Even if this were not entirely circular, how can we tell whether it was the intended meaning or the identity of the governor or still other factors that determined a given mood choice? We return to these issues in Section 5 below.

2.2.3 Indicatives in subjunctive-selecting contexts (a.k.a variability)

The standard interpretation of the prescriptions and proscriptions discussed in Sections 2.2.1 and 2.2.2 above is something like: “with verbs of volition, use the subjunctive”, or “with the conjunction après que, do not use the subjunctive”. These are categorical rules; they are meant to apply without exception. Nonetheless, there has been some recognition that occasionally they do not. In this section we examine admissions of variability made for verbal governors in Period V, the period which saw the development of the scientific study of linguistic variability, and that for which we have the most actual usage data featuring such variability. We will address in Section 6 the extent to which the variability sanctioned by grammarians dovetails with that attested in speech.

Of the 301 verbal governors prescribed in Period V, a total of 127 were conceded by grammarians to admit both indicative and subjunctive morphology in the embedded clause. As with the other grammatical injunctions we have reported, nearly half (43%) were idiosyncratic to a single grammar. Very few were qualified as variable with any regularity, as shown in Figure 8, and only seven recurred in more than 10 of the 52 Period V grammars in the RHGF.

Recall that our construal of the concept of variability revolves around alternate ways of saying broadly the same thing. For only nine verbal governors was such inherent variability, as exemplified in (17), admitted in even one grammar.

![Fig. 8: Verbal governors qualified as variable by 10 or more Period V grammars](image-url)
(17) Les verbes faire et supposer sont suivis tantôt de l’indicatif, tantôt du subjonctif. (Togeby 1951: 169)

‘The verbs faire ‘do’ and supposer ‘suppose’ are followed sometimes by the indicative, sometimes by the subjunctive.’

Rather, wherever more than one morphological option is deemed possible, including with the aforementioned nine governors, the choice between them is justified by linking each variant to a distinct outcome. This has the effect of factoring out the variability, in keeping with the prescriptive mandate of achieving form-function symmetry (see Poplack & Dion 2009 for discussion).

One substantial class (46%) of justifications for the alternation of subjunctive and indicative under the same governor has to do with the syntactic structure of the sentence as interrogative, negative or conditional (Table 3). This is illustrated in (18). Note, however, that though explicitly structural, such justifications are implicitly semantic, in that they appeal to the way the truth value of the proposition, and hence mood selection, is altered by sentence polarity (18b). A much lesser proportion invokes other structural restrictions (19), and finally, a few grammars attribute different social or stylistic values to the variant forms, as in (20), with the subjunctive enjoying prestige status.

(18) a. Si le verbe signifiant “dire, croire, penser” est négatif ou interrogatif, le verbe de la subordonnée complétive est au subjonctif. (Gougenheim 1963: 197)

‘If the verb meaning “say, believe, think” is negative or interrogative, the verb in the subordinate clause is in the subjunctive.’

b. Le subjonctif est employé toutes les fois que la subordonnée doit exprimer le doute ou l’incertitude, ce qui a lieu quand la principale est negative, dubitative ou interrogative. (Nyrop 1935: 315)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Justification</th>
<th>% governors</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Semantic difference</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sentence structure</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other structural restriction</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social/stylistic difference</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total governors qualified as variable</td>
<td></td>
<td>125*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Some governors counted in more than one category.
‘The subjunctive is used whenever the subordinate clause must express doubt or uncertainty, which happens when the main clause is negative, conditional or interrogative.’

(19) *Il arrive* et les verbes de sens analogue (*il advient*, plus rarement *il survient*) se construisent aujourd’hui le plus souvent avec le subjonctif, sauf quand le verbe support est au passé simple. La langue littéraire n’est pas bien fixée. (Grevisse 1993: 1617)

‘It happens’ and verbs with similar meanings (…) are now constructed most often with the subjunctive, unless the support verb is in the *passé simple*. Literary language is not fixed.’

(20) a. Si en effet quelques personnes en parlant commettent parfois cette négligence [*je doute qu’il viendra* (*IND*) pour *je doute qu’il vienne* (*SUBJ*)], pour peu qu’elles aient de culture, elles s’en gardent quand elles écrivent. (LeBidois & LeBidois 1971: 344)

‘If some people in fact commit this negligence [using IND for SUBJ] in speaking, if they have any culture at all, they avoid it in writing.’

b. Son emploi [du subjonctif] judicieux est une des marques de la culture et de la distinction d’esprit. (Dupré 1972: 2452)

‘Its judicious use is a mark of culture and of a distinguished mind.’

But by far the most common (74%) explanation of mood alternation under the same governor is semantic: the subjunctive is used to convey one meaning; indicative to convey another. This line of reasoning is exemplified in (21).

(21) a. Avec *il me semble*, *il nous semble*, l’indicatif a toujours été beaucoup plus usité qu’avec *il semble*, comme si celui qui parle, prenant à son compte ce qu’il avance, en faisait une certitude. (Brunot 1965: 535)

‘With *il me semble*, *il nous semble*, ‘it seems to me, it seems to us’, the indicative has always been used more often than with *il semble*, ‘it seems’, as though the person speaking was taking responsibility for his proposal, making it a certainty.’

b. On met le subjonctif bien que la subordonnée exprime un fait réel; c’est une manière d’insister sur le sentiment du sujet. (Laurence 1957: 140)

‘We put the subjunctive even if the subordinate clause expresses a real fact; it’s a way of insisting on the feelings of the subject.’

Even from this brief overview of the prescriptive treatment of variability, it is plain to see that despite the occasional admission that more than one variant
form is tolerated, in the minds of grammarians there is in fact nothing free about the choice among them. On the contrary, each variant comes with consequences, if “only” extra-linguistic. It is particularly noteworthy, despite the extraordinary amount of attention devoted to ascertaining the set of subjunctive governors, that where prescriptions involving them are not couched in categorical terms, or where conflict arises between them and the embedded verb, the explanations resorted to are (explicitly or implicitly) semantic. Categoricity in grammatical injunctions (the idea that a specific governor should always co-occur with a specific morphological variant) is difficult to reconcile with the idea that variability in tense/mood selection results in different meanings for the same governor.

3 Contemporary linguistic treatments

The preoccupations of the normative tradition have filtered down almost unaltered to contemporary linguists, who handle them in appreciably the same way. Indeed, given the advances of modern linguistic theory in almost every area, it is remarkable how little the treatment of mood choice has changed. In this section we review the main threads.

There is general agreement that the subjunctive functions as a mood, despite no more consensus on its precise semantic contribution than in the past. Some scholars approach the issue by analyzing the properties of the subjunctive-selecting context, others deal with those of the matrix predicate, and still others with the meaning of subjunctive morphology more broadly, invoking in addition to the core notions of irrealis and non-assertion, concepts like extra-assertion (Abouda 2002), strong intensionality (Farkas 1982), non-veridicality (Giannakidou 1999), evaluation of contextual alternatives (Villalta 2008) and speaker “coordinate” (Giorgi 2009), among many others. The difficulty of arriving at a unified semantics, already amply illustrated in the prescriptive literature, has led some (e.g. Portner 1997) to conclude that the subjunctive has no semantics, or has a vacuous semantics, to be used in case the indicative would have triggered a presupposition failure (Schlenker 2005) or resulted in redundancy (Siegel 2009).

Whatever its precise meaning, there is general support for the idea that subjunctive morphology is only permitted in certain complements, and that these are determined by some semantic feature(s) carried by the governing element, with which the relevant features of the complement must agree (e.g. Abouda 2002). These are the lexically-selected subjonctives. The precise membership of this set has not been spelled out; instead, the implication is that these are somehow “given”. Presumably they correspond to a subset of the prescribed governors, but we have discovered no indication of which ones, nor whether there is agreement
with respect to them (though failure of grammarians to achieve consensus casts doubt on this eventuality).

Regardless, the existence of a 1:1 relationship between meaning and variant choice, such that where meaning A is intended, variant A will be selected and conversely, is widely endorsed. On these accounts, semantic features requiring subjunctive in the complement would naturally exclude indicative and vice-versa, as required by the doctrine of form-function symmetry.

Espousal of the twin assumptions that lexically-selected subjunctives (or the environments in which they occur) admit of only one mood, and that that mood will be consonant with the semantics of its governor, means that, as in the past, much contemporary literature continues to be devoted to solving the problem of “unwarranted” subjunctives. These are the myriad cases where the “wrong” mood is selected to express the apparently intended meaning, or where both moods alternate to express a single meaning heretofore associated with only one, or when matrices whose semantic features would link them (under such an analysis) with one mood surface with the other. Particular attention has been lavished on the mismatches embodied in “realis subjunctives” (e.g. subjunctives in complements of factive-emotive or causative verbs) and “irrealis indicatives” (e.g. indicatives in complements of mental creation predicates). “Polarity” subjunctives, in which the semantic content associated with indicative purportedly gives rise to subjunctive only when eligible verbs are negated or in interrogatives, are also widely studied. And of course there is the abiding mystery of predicates admitting both subjunctive and indicative in the complement clause.

A variety of proposals have been put forward to explain these recalcitrant cases. They all have in common the intent to rule out the possibility of vacuous variability and restore form-function symmetry to the process of mood selection.\footnote{We do encounter the very occasional admission that variability may not admit a simple explanation, e.g.: “For reasons that I do not understand, to have the hope that (‘avoir l’espoir que’) can select either the indicative or the subjunctive” (Schlenker 2005: 25, fn 11).} This can only be achieved by showing that the different variant forms contrast semantically. One way of accomplishing this is by reanalyzing the semantics of the governor or the embedded proposition. On one such analysis, the operations giving rise to polarity subjunctives would transform the semantic features of the matrix verb into features requiring the other mood, thereby resolving any clash. In this way, “subjunctive in complements embedded under such [polarity] verbs is easily explained” (Abouda 2002: 14). A more common method is to impose a semantic contrast on a constructed example. This is exemplified in the analysis of the difference between Jean se lamente qu’il pleut\textsubscript{ind}/pleuve\textsubscript{subj}, ‘John is sorry that it’s raining’, reproduced in (22).
(22) To my ear the subjunctive version is rather neutral, but the indicative requires a particular situation – one in which Jean says something, to others or himself, to the effect that he is unhappy that it is raining. (Schlenker 2005: 23)

But the most powerful weapon in this quest for form-function symmetry is the appeal to the speaker – his intentions, convictions, emotions, desires, indeed his very soul, in the terminology of traditional grammarians (14a–b), and to a much lesser extent, the hearer (23).

(23) Mood choice is related to the subject’s attitude and is linked to emotional/affective state readings of the predicate (Baunaz & Puskas 2011)

Since the speaker is the ultimate arbiter of what s/he wanted to express, failing all else, the analyst can always revert to the inference that if s/he selected the subjunctive, s/he must have wanted to express A. And since no one but the speaker is privy to that information, the doctrine of form-function symmetry remains unchallenged.

All of these “mismatches” are of course symptoms of inherent variability, and as will be amply confirmed below, this is what characterizes the way the subjunctive is actually used in spoken discourse. The extent and nature of this variability has remained opaque to the syntacticians and semanticists who have written on this topic, since belief in the primacy of speaker intent and allegiance to the idea that to every form corresponds a meaning together conspire to obscure its existence. On the other hand, intuitions, even native-speaker intuitions, cannot begin to capture the robust and systematic – but implicit – community norms that dictate mood selection. We turn to those in ensuing sections. But first we describe our data and method.

4 Data and method

4.1 Data

Our analyses are based on data from corpora representing three stages of spoken Quebec French. The Récits du français québécois d’autrefois (Poplack & St-Amand 2007), a compendium of folk tales, legends and interviews, was collected by folklorists in the 1940s and 1950s (Lacourcière 1946; Roy 1981) from 44 elderly rural Quebec francophones born between 1846 and 1895. Given the apparent-time hypothesis (Labov 1966, 1994, Bailey et al. 1991, Bailey 2002), and accumulating
research pointing to the stability of the morphosyntax across the lifespan (e.g. Blondeau 2001, Cukor-Avila 2002, Zilles 2005, G. Sankoff & Wagner 2006), these materials can be taken to represent Quebec French as it was spoken in the second half of the 19th century, when these speakers were acquiring it. A 20th-century counterpart is typified by the *Corpus du français parlé à Ottawa-Hull* (Poplack 1989), collected in the early 1980s.7 These speakers, born between 1893 and 1964, were stratified according to standard sociolinguistic factors. Twenty-five years later, the Quebec neighborhoods sampled for this corpus were revisited to build the *Corpus du français en contexte: milieux scolaire et social* (Poplack & Bourdages 2005). Here we focus on the speech of teenagers born between 1989 and 1991. Taken together, these three corpora afford a unique opportunity to track subjunctive use over an apparent-time span of nearly a century and a half; 61 years in real time.

Though gathered at different periods and by different fieldworkers, virtually all these data consist of spontaneous everyday speech, i.e. the *vernaculars* of their respective times (Poplack & St-Amand 2007). As the style least affected by self-monitoring or, crucially for these purposes, a superimposed standard, the vernacular offers the “most systematic data for linguistic analysis” (Labov 1984: 29). This makes it ideally suited to studying the unreflecting use of the subjunctive. As depicted in Table 4, analysis of the speech of the 304 participants in this study yielded 4,400 tokens of contexts where the subjunctive could have been selected.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Century represented</th>
<th>Corpus name</th>
<th>Data collected</th>
<th>Speaker date of birth</th>
<th>Number of speakers</th>
<th>Token count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>19th century</td>
<td><em>Récits du français québécois d’autrefois</em></td>
<td>1940s–1950s</td>
<td>1846–1895</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>583</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20th century</td>
<td><em>Corpus du français parlé à Ottawa-Hull</em></td>
<td>1982</td>
<td>1893–1965</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>2767</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Characteristics of the data used for the current study

7 Though Ottawa is geographically located in the province of Ontario, we refer to the French spoken there as *Quebec French*, since a) the region was originally settled by Québécois, and b) there is little to distinguish it linguistically from the French spoken on the Quebec side of the border (Poplack 1997).
The usage patterns we invoke in the remainder of this paper refer to those emerging from analysis of these data.

4.2 The subjunctive as a linguistic variable

Thus far, we have been referring informally to the subjunctive as a variable, but it is one whose study poses formidable methodological challenges. The standard definition of the linguistic variable invokes alternate ways of “saying the same thing” (Labov 1972). If we could determine the nature of that “thing”, we could ascertain the alternate means of expressing it. But as has become amply evident (Section 2.2.2), inferring the meaning(s) of the subjunctive is far from straightforward. There has been no shortage of readings in both the prescriptive and descriptive literatures, but little consensus with respect to them. In addition, some are contradictory, others are at odds with the semantics of their governor. Even if this were not the case, most would be difficult, if not impossible, to identify in running speech. Indeed, the most insurmountable problem is that nearly all depend on the intent, affect or state of mind of the speaker, elements to which the analyst (and possibly even the speaker) has no independent access. Thus the standard procedure for positing a linguistic variable – demonstrating that its variant expressions can alternate with no change in referential meaning – cannot be followed here.

To complicate matters, these variant expressions, instantiated as indicative, conditional and subjunctive morphology, all convey different meanings in main-clause contexts. In such cases, the variationist appeals to the principle of neutralization in discourse (D. Sankoff 1988), which holds that even if different forms have different meanings in some contexts, the differences may be neutralized in others. Those constitute the variable context, the locus in discourse where forms may alternate with no change in referential meaning. Accurately defining the variable context is the sine qua non for any study of linguistic variation.

What is the variable context for variable subjunctive use? We know that only in certain types of embedded clauses is the subjunctive even an option. This means that whatever the meanings it may (be said to) embody, these can only be expressed in the presence of a member of the set of main-clause governors. It follows that if these could be enumerated, it would be possible to circumscribe the variable context to clauses embedded under just these governors. But determining the constitution of this set also proved impossible; as with the meanings, the identity of the subjunctive governors varies wildly from one treatment to the next. Linguistic analyses tend to single out only the few matrix verbs or verb classes in
vogue, and while the normative tradition errrs in the opposite direction, citing in
the aggregate hundreds upon hundreds of governors, so little consensus obtained
amongst grammarians with respect to them that they could not be operational-
ized as components of the variable context either (Section 2.2.1). The problem, for
the variationist or any other linguist with empirical leanings, is thus that we can-
not evaluate whether the subjunctive was used appropriately, or even systemati-
cally, if we do not know where it was “supposed” to be used.

Here we take a pragmatic approach to this problem, following earlier studies
morphology in the corpus was located and the governor under which it occurred
was noted. The set of governors thus identified was taken to be the locus in which
subjunctive selection was a possibility. In a second step, all verbs embedded
under these governors were exhaustively extracted, regardless of their morphol-
yogy. By determining the identity of potential subjunctive governors, this proce-
dure not only yields an accountable circumscription of the variable context, it
also enables us to assess the propensity of each governor to select for a given
morphology, as well as its frequency in running speech. Each of these measures
will play an important role in establishing patterns of subjunctive use.

Despite the enhanced accountability of the method, it is worth noting that
approximately 50% of the data thus extracted ultimately had to be discarded,
since they consisted of ambiguous verbs which do not distinguish subjunctive
from indicative morphology in certain persons, mostly first-conjugation (-er)
verbs (e.g. que tu manges_{subj}/manges_{ind}).

8 The only cases which this procedure will not account for are potential subjunctive governors
which only occurred with indicative or conditional. We have no evidence that there are any, but
we recognize that this is a limitation (on any corpus-based study). On the other hand, the method
does limit the rampant overgeneralizations in the non-variationist literature about which gover-
nors do and do not occur with the subjunctive.

9 These include some -er verbs with non-standard regularization in the 3rd p. pl., as in marissent
for mariennent ‘marry’. While some (e.g. Damourette & Pichon 1936; Laurier 1989) have analyzed
these as innovative instances of subjunctive usage, they in fact appear in indicative contexts as
well (Poplack 1992), making their status as subjunctives ambiguous. As such they were excluded
from the quantitative portions of the analysis, as were tokens of subjunctive with no governor,
and governors which did not occur with an embedded subjunctive in a given corpus.
4.3 Coding and analysis

In order to determine the effects exerted by the linguistic context on mood selection, all tokens extracted from the three corpora were coded for a number of factors hypothesized to influence subjunctive use.

Since the types of meanings the subjunctive is said to embody figure so prominently in prescriptive and theoretical treatments, we addressed claims that it is triggered semantically through the presence in the utterance of elements which could contribute to a non-factual reading, thus operationalizing the semantic hypothesis. These include the degree of assertion with which the speaker imbibes the embedded complement, as expressed by the sentence type of the matrix clause (affirmative, negative, interrogative or conditional). For verbal governors, we controlled for presence in the clause of other indicators of non-factual modality, whether expressed lexically (e.g. peut-être ‘maybe’, mettons ‘let’s say’), through tense choice (e.g. conditional or imperative mood), or choice of modal auxiliary (e.g. devoir ‘have/need to’, pouvoir ‘be able to’). Non-verbal governors were distinguished according to the reality of the predication, contrasting events known to have already occurred at speech time (realis) from those which had not (irrealis). The semantic class of the governor, operationalized via umbrella categories like volitive, emotive, evaluative, opinion, necessity (Grevisse (1993) and Section 2.2.2.) was also considered.

Other potentially contributory factors are purely morphosyntactic in nature. Tense of the verbal governor evaluates the possibility of nonstandard tense concordance between matrix and embedded verbs, which would disfavor subjunctive use. Morphological form of the embedded verb, inspired by the saliency effect reported for number concord in Brazilian Portuguese (Scherrer & Naro 1991), evaluates whether the more salient suppletive verbs (e.g. puisse < pouvoir, soit < être, fasse < faire, etc.) are more likely to occur with subjunctive morphology than those whose subjunctive forms are drawn from the indicative paradigm (e.g. compare devienne/mette/doive ‘1st/3rd p. sg. [SUBJ]’ with deviennent/mettent/doivent ‘3rd p. pl. [IND]’, etc.). Since extraneous elements may obscure the relationship between governing and embedded verbs, and by extension any lexically-mandated requirement for subjunctive, presence and type of intervening material (parenthetical or syntactically-related) were taken into account. We also consider the role of the presence of complementizer ‘que’, since this stereotypical component of subjunctive constructions is frequently deleted in vernacular Quebec French (e.g. Martineau 1985; Warren 1994; Dion 2003). Finally, the lexical identity of each governor was noted.

Effects of these factors were analyzed using the multiple regression procedure incorporated in the variable rule program GoldVarb (Rand & Sankoff 1990;
Sankoff, Tagliamonte & Smith 2005), which allows us to determine which contribute to variant choice when all are considered simultaneously, as well as the relative importance of each. In interpreting the results, we make use of three lines of evidence: statistical significance of the effect (at the .05 level), size of the effect, as assessed by the range for each factor group, and most important, direction of effect, as instantiated by the relative ranking of favoring or disfavoring factors within a factor group. The resulting constraint hierarchy is construed as a portion of the grammar underlying variable selection of the subjunctive.

5 The facts

We are now in a position to confront these prescriptive dictates and theoretical accounts of subjunctive selection with the usage facts instantiated in the three corpora representing 19th, 20th and 21st-century Quebec French. A first surprising result, given reports that it is receding in contemporary speech (e.g. Laurier 1989), is that selection of the subjunctive has in fact risen substantially since the 19th century (Table 5).

Table 5: Overall rate of subjunctive use across time (Total N = 4400)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>19th century</th>
<th>20th century</th>
<th>21st century</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% subjunctive</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total N</td>
<td>330/583</td>
<td>2116/2767</td>
<td>827/1090</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Since both the number of governors requiring it and the number of semantic readings it is purportedly capable of expressing have also risen exponentially since the 1950s alone (Section 2), in this section we investigate whether the increase in prescriptions is responsible for this increase in use (and presumably, productivity) of the subjunctive.

5.1 Verbal matrices

5.1.1 Governors

Turning first to the verbal governors (Table 6, top half), we see that this prescriptive promiscuity does not account for the rise in subjunctive usage. In stark contrast to the 304 verbs and non-verbal governors and the 124 verb classes that
have been prescribed to take the subjunctive since the 19th century, the overwhelming majority of subjunctive morphology in spoken Quebec French over the same time frame is accounted for by only three matrix verbs, *falloir* ‘be necessary’, *vouloir* ‘want’, and *aimer* ‘like’. Table 6 depicts their trajectory over time, as revealed on three measures: the proportion each governor represents out of the entire pool of verbal governors (defined as those that hosted an embedded subjunctive at least once; % POOL), the strength of its association with subjunctive

Table 6: “Importance” of verbal governors and embedded verbs over time as assessed by preponderance out of the respective pool (% POOL), associated rate of subjunctive (RATE SUBJ) and proportion of all subjunctive morphology (% SUBJ)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Governor</th>
<th>19th century</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>20th century</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>21st century</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% POOL</td>
<td>RATE SUBJ</td>
<td>% SUBJ¹⁰</td>
<td>% POOL</td>
<td>RATE SUBJ</td>
<td>% SUBJ</td>
<td>% POOL</td>
<td>RATE SUBJ</td>
<td>% SUBJ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>falloir</em></td>
<td>59 (154/247)</td>
<td>62</td>
<td></td>
<td>65 (1493/1669)</td>
<td>76</td>
<td></td>
<td>63 (498/530)</td>
<td>75</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>vouloir</em> / <em>aimer</em></td>
<td>18 (42/78)</td>
<td>17</td>
<td></td>
<td>14 (315/372)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td></td>
<td>11 (83/89)</td>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>others¹¹</td>
<td>23 (54/97)</td>
<td>22</td>
<td></td>
<td>21 (145/528)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td>26 (82/222)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100 (250/422)</td>
<td>101*</td>
<td></td>
<td>100 (1953/2569)</td>
<td>99*</td>
<td></td>
<td>100 (663/841)</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Embedded verb</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>aller, avoir, être, faire</em> others</td>
<td>59 (162/248)</td>
<td>65</td>
<td></td>
<td>64 (1297/1635)</td>
<td>66</td>
<td></td>
<td>66 (441/551)</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>41 (88/174)</td>
<td>35</td>
<td></td>
<td>36 (656/934)</td>
<td>34</td>
<td></td>
<td>34 (222/290)</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100 (250/422)</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
<td>100 (1953/2569)</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
<td>100 (663/841)</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Here and in subsequent tables, percentage totals other than 100 are due to rounding.

¹⁰ Proportion of subjunctive morphology (“% SUBJ”) is calculated for each verb from the number of subjunctive variants (“RATE SUBJ”) divided by the total number of subjunctive variants in the respective corpus.

¹¹ This includes 21 distinct matrices in the 19th-century data, 34 in the 20th, and 41 in the 21st-century corpus.
morphology (as measured by overall rate of subjunctive use in verbs embedded under it; RATE SUBJ), and the proportion of subjunctive morphology it represents out of all subjunctive morphology (% SUBJ).

A single matrix verb, *falloir*, has represented nearly 2/3 of all subjunctive governors since the 19th century (% POOL), and up to 3/4 of all subjunctive morphology (% SUBJ). This is because verbs embedded under it have traditionally, and increasingly, been heavily associated with subjunctive morphology, with rates rising from 62% in the 19th century to 94% in the 21st. We refer to *falloir* as a first-tier governor. *Vouloir* and *aimer* are also historically very frequent, albeit far less so than *falloir*, and although diminishing in frequency, they too have become more entrenched with subjunctive (54%–93% RATE SUBJ). These are second-tier governors. Their frequency of use and strong associations with subjunctive make it the case that these three account for 88% of all subjunctive morphology in the data by the 21st century. All other verbal governors are much rarer (together comprising only about 1/4 of the governor pool) and far more likely to co-occur with a variant other than the subjunctive.

5.1.2 Embedded verbs

The identity of the embedded verb also plays a role (Table 6, bottom half). Every verb in the language is theoretically eligible to be embedded under a subjunctive governor, and thus theoretically eligible to carry subjunctive morphology. It is thus most striking that the lion’s share (65–67%) of all subjunctive morphology is found with just four of them: *aller* ‘go’, *avoir* ‘have’, *être* ‘be’ and *faire* ‘do’. These first-tier embedded verbs are also highly frequent (accounting by themselves for 2/3 of the embedded verb pool), highly associated with subjunctive, and becoming increasingly so. The suppletive subjunctive morphology that they all feature distinguishes them maximally from their indicative counterparts (e.g. *aillés subj* vs. *vas ind*, *aies subj* vs. *aies ind*, *sois subj* vs. *sois ind*, *fasses subj* vs. *fais ind*). We will see below that such morphological salience is a persistent predictor of subjunctive selection. These results are best visualized in Figure 9.

---

12 As discussed in section 4.2, only verbs with the potential to display unambiguous subjunctive morphology were included in this study.

13 The alternative conjugation base for *aller*, *all-* also present in these data, is not strictly speaking suppletive, since it is (non-standardly) formed according to the regular model. For purposes of consistency, and to capture its distinctions from indicative morphology, we have nonetheless coded these with the true suppletives.
Given the strength of these associations, it should come as no surprise that when favorable top-tier governors are combined with first-tier embedded verbs, rates of subjunctive skyrocket (Table 7, context A, RATE SUBJ). And the effect has become entrenched: note the rise in subjunctive from 70% in the 19th century to a quasi-categorical 99% today in this most favorable context A. The likelihood that subjunctive will be selected is thus far greater here (indeed, now almost guaranteed!) than with any other combination of matrix and embedded verbs, a difference which is extremely statistically significant ($p < .0001$) by Fisher’s Exact test (one-tailed). It is also worth noting that context A alone accounts for approximately half of the 4400+ tokens involving the subjunctive (% POOL) studied here.

In the 19th century, the favorable effect of the top-tier governors was largely restricted to first-tier embedded verbs; any other verb was as likely to host a subjunctive as not: 47% (context B, RATE SUBJ). By the 20th century, that effect had spread, and today these top-tier governors trigger the subjunctive at a rate of 86%, regardless of the lexical identity of the embedded verb (although we do note that non-first tier embedded verbs are themselves less frequent, making up about 1/3 of the embedded verb pool (context B, % POOL)). At the same time, use of subjunctive in contexts involving any matrix verb other than falloir, vouloir or aimer has declined since the 20th century, generally hovering around 30%, although the four first-tier embedded verbs appear to be somewhat resistant (context C, RATE SUBJ). These results are best visualized in Figure 10.

The bulk of contemporary subjunctive usage involving verbal governors thus appears in top-tier matrix + embedded verb “chunks”. These relatively fixed combinations, illustrated in (24) below, can be likened to prefabs: they contain subjunctive morphology, but are arguably not analyzed as such.

Fig. 9: “Importance” of verbal governors and embedded verbs over time
Table 7: Distribution of subjunctive use in matrix + embedded verb combinations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context</th>
<th>19th century</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>20th century</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>21st century</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% POOL</td>
<td>RATE SUBJ</td>
<td>% SUBJ</td>
<td>% POOL</td>
<td>RATE SUBJ</td>
<td>% SUBJ</td>
<td>% POOL</td>
<td>RATE SUBJ</td>
<td>% SUBJ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A falloir/ vouloir/ aimer + aller/ avoir/ être/ faire</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B falloir/ vouloir/ aimer + other embedded verbs</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C other matrix verbs + aller/ avoir/ être/ faire</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D other matrix verbs + other embedded verbs</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 10: Distribution of subjunctive use in matrix + embedded verb collocations
(24) a. Moi je suis dans le ghetto, fait que là il faut que tu sois (subj, être) tough. (2IC.103.561)
   ‘I’m in the ghetto, so there, you have to be tough.’
b. Fallait que moi j’aille (subj, aller) espionner chez le voisin. (2IC.113.131)
   ‘I had to go spy on the neighbor.’
c. Bien, ils aiment mieux que je fasse (subj, faire) du sport que je fasse (subj, faire) des niaiseries. (2IC.116.325)
   ‘Well, they prefer that I do sports than make mischief.’
d. Elle veut que j’aie (subj, avoir) une peine d’amour. (2IC.007.676)
   ‘She wants me to have a broken heart.’

These results confirm our contention (Poplack 1992) that the overriding constraint on subjunctive selection, in Quebec French at least, is lexical. It involves first and foremost the identity of the governor. References to subjunctive-selecting governors were of course legion throughout the grammatical tradition, and these continue to abound today. But there has never been any acknowledgement that so few of them (i.e. three!) in fact admit subjunctive morphology with any regularity, nor that some governors favor it so much more than others, let alone that it appears on only a minuscule portion of the thousands of verbs in the language eligible to be embedded under (what someone considers to be) a “subjunctive-selecting” governor. These are hidden conditions, implicit community norms for subjunctive use, and they have been firmly in place since at least the 19th century.

5.1.3 Conditioning of variant choice: verbal governors

Operation of the lexical constraint does not leave much room for purely productive use, but the analyses in this section confirm that there still is some. Because a single governor (falloir) accounts for so much of the material and is so highly correlated with the subjunctive, any independent effect it might exert would irreparably skew the remainder of the data. So we first analyze its behavior separately. Table 8 displays a variable rule analysis of the factors contributing to variant choice in verbs embedded under falloir. Factor weights here and in ensuing tables vary between 0 and 1; the higher the figure, the greater the contribution of that factor to the probability that subjunctive morphology will be selected. The lower the figure, the more disfavoring the effect.

Table 8 shows that since the 19th century, only three conditions have ever operated to weaken the overwhelming association between matrix falloir and an embedded subjunctive. Each detracts in some way from the canonical form of a subjunctive-selecting construction, thereby licensing another variant in its place.
Most consistent of these, and gaining in importance (as inferred from the range), is the morphological form of the embedded verb. The propensity observed in Table 7 of first-tier embedded verbs, all of which are irregular, to appear with subjunctive morphology is echoed in the class of suppletive verbs more generally. These contrast with regular embedded verbs, which are far more likely to host
other variants, presumably because they are less salient in such contexts, as illustrated in (25).

(25) Puis il dit, “faut que vous *arrivez* (IND) [for *arriviez* (SUBJ)] propre là”. (19C.004.1871)
    ‘And he said, “you have to show up clean”.’

Likewise, the greater the distance between matrix and embedded clauses, as when parenthetical material is interposed between them (26), the less *falloir* constrains choice of the subjunctive. This factor achieves statistical significance in the 20th and 21st centuries.

(26) Même les batailles temps en temps ça fait du bien, il faut au moins tu te c – tu *fais* (IND) [for *fasses* (SUBJ)] pas mal à l’autre personne. (20C.025.1114)
    ‘Even fights sometimes are good, you have to at least you – not hurt the other person.’

Finally, when *falloir* itself featured conditional morphology, an embedded subjunctive was highly disfavored in both 19th and 20th centuries. This factor of *tense of the matrix verb* captures a previously observed tendency (Poplack 1990; Poplack & St-Amand 2002) toward tense harmony between matrix and embedded verbs when the subjunctive was not selected in the latter. We interpreted that effect as a (non-standard) remnant of the Classical French Period, when tense concordance was frequent (Grevisse 1993, §869c). In 19th-century Quebec French, such tense harmony was the norm, reaching particularly high proportions when the matrix tense was conditional (27a) or imperfect (27b). By the 20th century, the effect was largely restricted to the conditional, as in (27c). Today, it is no longer operative.

(27) a. *Il faudrait* (COND) je *voirais* (COND) pour me trouver des filles pour me marier. (19C.011.8)
    ‘I’d have to see about finding girls so I can get get married.’

b. Morue verte, morue sèche, *fallait* (IMP) que je *viraïs* (IMP) toute ça de bord là. (19C.051.399)
    ‘Green cod, salt cod, I had to flip all that over.’

Crucially, the effects on variant choice of all of these factors, where selected as significant, have remained consistent over time, as evidenced by the parallels in conditioning.

Beyond *falloir*, what of the other matrix verbs? Table 9 suggests that the factor we have labelled “semantic class” has always had a strong, and apparently growing (ranges 48–74) influence on variant choice.
Table 9: Variable rule analysis of the contribution of factors to the selection of subjunctive morphology in verbs embedded under governors OTHER than falloir in 19th, 20th, and 21st century Quebec French

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Corrected mean:</th>
<th>19th century</th>
<th>20th century*</th>
<th>21st century</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prob.</td>
<td>.521</td>
<td>.526</td>
<td>.529</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>69/112</td>
<td>296/384</td>
<td>86/108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Semantic&quot; class of governor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volition</td>
<td>.58</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotion</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>.66</td>
<td>.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluative</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opinion</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presence of complementizer que</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absent</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td>.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morphological form of embedded verb</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suppletive</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>.56</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regular</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>.36</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tense of governor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present indicative</td>
<td>.68</td>
<td>.51</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imparfait</td>
<td>.38</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td>.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passé composé</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>.42</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Periphrastic future</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>.38</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conditional (pres. or past)</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>40</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factors not selected as significant:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sentence type</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other indicators of non-factual modality</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>not tested</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance btw/governor and emb. verb</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morphological form of emb. verb</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presence of complementizer que</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tense of governor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Adapted from Poplack (1990)
Members of the various classes do not all appear in all periods (evaluative verbs, largely être + predicate adjective combinations like c’est cool, c’est con ‘it’s cool, dumb’, first appear in the 21st century, for example), but where they do, their effects are perfectly parallel: verbs falling under the umbrellas of “emotion” or “volition”, and to a lesser extent, evaluative verbs, always appear to favor the subjunctive, consistent with at least some grammarians’ (and linguists’) take on the prescriptive norm. Yet verbs of “opinion”, albeit also evaluative in nature, disfavor subjunctive strongly. This is because, on closer inspection, the “classes” turn out to consist of just a few lexical verbs, which in turn, as we have seen, entertain their own characteristic associations with variant choice. In each century, at least 2/3 of the tokens labelled volitive are made up of vouloir, for example, while those labelled emotive consist mainly of aimer. Both are known “high-subjunctive” governors (Table 6). Opinion verbs, on the other hand, are largely represented by negated penser, which has always disfavored subjunctive strongly. We conclude that the apparent semantic effect is in fact reflecting the same lexical effect reported earlier.

As of the 20th century, presence of the complementizer que also begins to play a role: when it is absent, as in (28), the probability that subjunctive will be selected is reduced.

(28) Fallait [ ] tu mets (IND) un chapeau pour aller à église. (20C.064.2119)

‘It was necessary [ ] you put on a hat to go to church.’

Given the traditional symbiotic relationship between que and subjunctive morphology, even in independent clauses, it stands to reason that its absence would detract from the canonical form of the subjunctive-selecting construction. Finally, the effects of the other factors, morphology of the embedded verb and tense of the governor, where selected as significant, replicate those operating on matrix falloir.

Summarizing the results of this section, subjunctive selection under verbal governors evolved as follows. The lexical effect which is today the major predictor of embedded verb morphology was already manifest in the 19th century by the strong propensity of a few top-tier matrix and embedded verbs to select subjunctive (Table 5). This propensity was checked by the equally strong countervailing effect of tense concordance, which inhibited subjunctive by copying the tense of the matrix verb onto the embedded verb, especially with conditionals. By the 20th century, the lexical effect had become further entrenched, while tense concordance was weakening (range = 40). Nonetheless, speaker awareness of the components of the “prototypical” subjunctive construction (dedicated suppletive morphology, adjacency of main to embedded clause, presence of complementizer...
que) remains in evidence: when any of these was absent, the subjunctive variant was far less likely. The effects of these factors have been largely usurped by lexical identity, now mainly restricted to the governor. At 99%, the subjunctive is de rigueur in chunks composed of top-tier matrix + embedded verb combinations (Table 7), explaining both the morphological effect in Table 8 and the “semantic class” effect in Table 9. But it is also achieving very high rates (86%) in other verbs embedded under top-tier governors, especially if these are accompanied by the prototypical subjunctive components. These patterns do not detract from, and in fact are intensified by, the massive disproportions in distribution (Poplack 1990, 1992 and Section 5.1.1 above): the three top-tier governors have always accounted for close to 80%, and the four top-tier embedded verbs for close to 2/3, of their respective pools.

5.1.4 The semantic contribution of the subjunctive

We noted above that few of the 76 semantic readings reported to be expressed by the subjunctive could be operationalized and tested empirically, as we have done above for the variable lexical, morphological and syntactic constraints. This is because so many of them reside in speaker intent or hearer interpretation, elements to which the analyst does not have independent access (beyond what is embodied in subjunctive morphology itself). Nonetheless, we did attempt to capture some of the meanings typically associated with subjunctive mood through the factors of sentence type, indicators of non-factual modality and semantic class of governor. Table 9 shows that the first two have never contributed significant effects to variant selection, no matter the identity of the governor, and the third, albeit statistically significant, was in fact reflecting the by now familiar lexical effect.

5.2 Non-verbal matrices

5.2.1 Governors

We now turn to the behavior of the non-verbal governors, illustrated in (29). In comparison with their verbal counterparts, far fewer of these (191 vs. 304) have ever been prescribed. Still, here as well, barely 15% (N = 28) actually co-occurred with, and only five have persisted with, an embedded subjunctive over the three periods studied.
Table 10: “Importance” of non-verbal governors over time as assessed by preponderance out of the nonverbal governor pool (% POOL), associated rate of subjunctive (RATE SUBJ) and proportion of all subjunctive morphology (% SUBJ) (top-tier governors enclosed)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Governor</th>
<th>19th century</th>
<th></th>
<th>20th century</th>
<th></th>
<th>21st century</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% POOL</td>
<td>RATE SUBJ</td>
<td>% POOL</td>
<td>RATE SUBJ</td>
<td>% POOL</td>
<td>RATE SUBJ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pour que</td>
<td>37 (42/59)</td>
<td>71 (53/54)</td>
<td>27 (27/31)</td>
<td>98 (32/35)</td>
<td>33 (53/54)</td>
<td>95 (93/98)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>avant que</td>
<td>20 (9/33)</td>
<td>27 (11/16)</td>
<td>16 (87/87)</td>
<td>87 (17/17)</td>
<td>4 (8/10)</td>
<td>80 (8/10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mais que</td>
<td>12 (14/19)</td>
<td>74 (18/18)</td>
<td>18 (91/91)</td>
<td>91 (20/20)</td>
<td>2 (5/5)</td>
<td>100 (5/5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jusqu’à tant que</td>
<td>9 (5/14)</td>
<td>36 (6/9)</td>
<td>9 (82/82)</td>
<td>82 (9/9)</td>
<td>3 (7/8)</td>
<td>88 (7/8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>soit que</td>
<td>5 (2/8)</td>
<td>25 (3/14)</td>
<td>14 (50/50)</td>
<td>50 (9/9)</td>
<td>0 (0/0)</td>
<td>(0/0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>à moins que</td>
<td>0 (0/0)</td>
<td>70 (4/70)</td>
<td>3 (7/7)</td>
<td>70 (4/70)</td>
<td>4 (5/5)</td>
<td>77 (10/13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>après que</td>
<td>2 (4/202)</td>
<td>0 (0/0)</td>
<td>0 (0/0)</td>
<td>0 (0/0)</td>
<td>7 (8/7)</td>
<td>40 (8/8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sans que</td>
<td>1 (2/2)</td>
<td>100 (3/3)</td>
<td>3 (100/100)</td>
<td>100 (3/3)</td>
<td>3 (83/83)</td>
<td>83 (5/5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>à/en cas que</td>
<td>0 (0/0)</td>
<td>67 (2/67)</td>
<td>2 (67/67)</td>
<td>67 (2/67)</td>
<td>1 (1/1)</td>
<td>50 (1/1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>à/en ce que</td>
<td>2 (1/2)</td>
<td>33 (1/3)</td>
<td>2 (33/33)</td>
<td>33 (1/3)</td>
<td>4 (4/4)</td>
<td>45 (4/4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jusqu’à ce que</td>
<td>1 (2/2)</td>
<td>100 (1/1)</td>
<td>1 (100/100)</td>
<td>100 (1/1)</td>
<td>1 (100/100)</td>
<td>100 (1/1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governors</td>
<td>16 (5/26)</td>
<td>19 (6/19)</td>
<td>6 (60/60)</td>
<td>60 (6/10)</td>
<td>4 (30/30)</td>
<td>27 (20/74)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>idiosyncratic to the period</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total « top-tier » governors</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall total</td>
<td>100 (80/161)</td>
<td>50 (100/100)</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>82 (100/100)</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Excluded from overall total.

14 20th-century results for non-verbal matrices are based on reanalysis of St-Amand’s (2002) subsample of the Corpus du français parlé à Ottawa-Hull.
Table 10 displays their trajectory over time with respect to the three measures of importance examined for the verbal governors.

The first-tier *pour que* ‘so that’ has been the frontrunner since the earliest times, accounting on its own for more of the governor pool (27–39% pool) and more subjunctive morphology (33–57% subj) than any other non-verbal governor by far. Like its verbal counterparts, it too has become increasingly associated with the subjunctive, reaching near-categorical levels by the 20th century. The other non-verbal governors follow more divergent paths. Three major players dating back to the 19th century, *avant que* ‘before’, *mais que* ‘when’ and *jusqu’à tant que* ‘until’ have also become entrenched with the subjunctive variant, but today are rarely used in speech (together representing only 9% of the governor pool as opposed to over 40% previously). As a result, they now account for far less subjunctive usage (12% subj) than they did in the past. A fifth conjunction, *soit que* ‘either’, increased both in overall frequency and in association with the subjunctive between the 19th and 20th centuries, ranking 4th among all matrices, with 50% subjunctive in the 20th century. By the 21st, however, though equally frequent, it no longer licenses the subjunctive at all. Just the opposite occurred with *à moins que* ‘unless’: used only once in the 19th century, and not with the subjunctive, it now ranks among the recurring “high subjunctive” governors (rate subj = 77%). Perhaps most striking is the trajectory of *après que* ‘after’: by far the most frequent potential subjunctive governor through the 20th century, it rarely (4/202 in the 19th century) or never (0/90 in the 20th) occurred with the subjunctive. Today, despite a rapid (and inexplicable) decrease in use, it accounts for more of the total subjunctive morphology than all but two other governors. The association of *après que* with subjunctive, purportedly on hypercorrect analogy with *avant que* (since subjunctive modality should be precluded in the factive context of *après que*), has been widely decried in the normative literature.

15 *rendu que* (6%, 1/16), *pourvu que* (29%, 2/7), *hormis que*, *la durée que*, *moyennant que* (each 100%, 1/1)
16 *le temps que* (60%, 3/5), *jusqu’à ce que*, *en tout cas que* (each 50%, 1/2), *de façon à ce que* (100%, 1/1)
17 *dès que* (6%, 2/31), *le fait que* (24%, 7/29), *en autant que* (71%, 5/7), *bien que* (67%, 2/3), *afin que*, *le risque que*, *au lieu que*, *à condition que* (each 100%, 1/1).
as a recent change (Gobbe & Tordoir 1986, Grevisse 1998). Indeed, the proscription against subjunctive with *après que* (exemplified in (11)) is the most recurrent in the RHGF grammars. The remaining 21 conjunctions to have governed a subjunctive even once are idiosyncratic to a period, sparsely represented, or both.

These lexical vagaries are compounded by the introduction as of the 20th century of novel governors (e.g. *à/en ce que*, ‘in that’, *jusqu’à ce que* ‘until’). Today, a full 30% of the current governor pool had never hosted a subjunctive before. Some of them (e.g. *le fait que* ‘the fact that’ and *dès que* ‘as soon as’) are very frequent, but have low subjunctive associations, a pattern already observed (Poplack 1990 and Section 5.1.1 above) for certain verbal governors like *penser*<sub>neg</sub>. The volatility of content words in general is a well-known fact, but the behavior of the conjunctions we report on here seems less familiar. That a conjunction like *mais que* ‘when’ should be receding is perhaps not so surprising, given its somewhat archaic flavour. But the sharp reduction in use of such neutral forms as *après que* ‘after’ is quite unexpected. Even more unpredictable are the relatively abrupt and apparently unmotivated shifts in propensity of certain conjunctions to subcategorize for the subjunctive.

Frequency considerations may provide a partial explanation. Recall that very few conjunctions ever co-occurred with a subjunctive to begin with, and at any given period, most of them were rare, singletons or altogether non-existent. Adopting an arbitrary cut-off point of 5% of subjunctive morphology as a measure of a governor’s “importance” at a given period (enclosed cells in Table 10), we can better visualize the evolving inventory of top-tier non-verbal governors. In each century, the overwhelming majority (between 73% and 88%) of subjunctive morphology appears on verbs embedded under a small cohort of only four or five governors. Much of this activity, as we have seen, is due to the lexical strength and persistence of *pour que*. Beyond this first-tier governor, however, the membership of the top-tier cohort changes over time. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it included *avant que*, *mais que* and *jusqu’à tant que*. The 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the addition of *soit que*. By the 21<sup>st</sup>, the latter three had receded, and two novel governors (*à moins que* and *après que*) were added. These unruly facts can be understood by recognizing that not only is selection of subjunctive largely lexically determined, but that community norms (much like prescriptive norms!) regarding which lexical items qualify as governors may change unpredictably over time, especially when the potentially stabilizing factor of high lexical frequency is lacking. This explains why the top-tier governors, both verbal (*falloir*, *vouloir* and *aimer*) and non-verbal (*pour que*), have become entrenched with subjunctive, while the others have been subject to so much fluctuation.
5.2.2 Embedded verbs

Under the favorable top-tier verbal governors, the first-tier cohort of embedded verbs displayed a greater propensity to co-occur with subjunctive than any others. At first blush, Table 11 shows no such effect for their non-verbal counterparts, since in both the 19th and 21st centuries, the rate of subjunctive among the top tier taken together is actually lower than with other embedded verbs.

That the same embedded verbs should behave differently according to whether they are governed by a verb or a conjunction seems counter-intuitive. But closer inspection shows that once again the determining factor is the lexical identity of the matrix. The lower overall rate of subjunctive with first-tier embedded verbs in both the 19th and 21st centuries turns out to result from a coincidental disproportion of high frequency, low subjunctive governors (avant que and jusqu’à tant que in the former; dès que and le fait que in the latter), artificially lowering

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Embedded verb</th>
<th>19th century</th>
<th>20th century</th>
<th>21st century</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% POOL</td>
<td>RATE SUBJ</td>
<td>% SUBJ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-tier embedded</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>être</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>45 (21/47)</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>avoir</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>39 (16/41)</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aller</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>44 (4/9)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>faire</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>100 (3/3)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pouvoir</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>20 (2/5)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total first-tier</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>44 (46/105)</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other embedded</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>61 (34/56)</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>50 (80/161)</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
the overall rate of subjunctive in this cohort. On the other hand, à/en ce que, with its moderate association with subjunctive, happens to be concentrated among other embedded verbs, likewise raising their rate in the 21st century. Such disproportions among governors in frequency and propensity to co-occur with the subjunctive blur the effect of the embedded verb.

That an embedded verb effect had nevertheless emerged as of the 20th century, albeit far inferior to that of the governor, is evident from Table 12, which breaks down the data into collocations.

As with the verbal governors (Table 7), the combination of first-tier pour que with the five first-tier embedded verbs (context A) produces quasi-categorical rates of subjunctive, exceeding those displayed by other verbs embedded under pour que (context B), though this difference is only statistically significant in the 19th century (p = .0408). Once matrices other than pour que begin favoring the subjunctive in the 20th century, an embedded verb effect can also be observed under both second-tier (context C vs. D) and other matrices (context E vs. F). In general then, when not influenced by the lexical tendencies of the period (i.e. the particular preponderance of the subjunctive governor and its associated propen-

**Table 12: Rate of subjunctive use across time by governor + embedded verb combination**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context</th>
<th>19th century</th>
<th>20th century</th>
<th>21st century</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>27/33</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>15/26</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>13/45</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>15/21</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>6/27</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>4/9</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>80/161</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

18 Pouvoir ‘be able to’, became frequent (ranking third) and highly associated with subjunctive (96%) as of the 20th century, and increased thereafter, warranting its addition to the first-tier embedded pool. No other verb represents more than 3% of the embedded verb pool in any of the corpora.
sity to select a subjunctive), first-tier embedded verbs do tend to behave similarly across the board. Establishing this effect here is complicated by too few data in some of the cells to achieve statistical significance19, coupled with changing allegiances of most of the non-verbal governors over time. Ultimately, however, the major effect remains that exerted by the governor, since differences in rates of subjunctive on first-tier verbs embedded under top-tier matrices as opposed to other matrices are very large and highly significant.20

5.2.3 Conditioning of variant choice: non-verbal governors

Table 13 displays three independent variable rule analyses of the factors contributing to variant choice in verbs embedded under non-verbal governors in each century. These replicate those carried out for the verbal matrices, substituting for operational reasons the semantic factor of “other indicators of non-factual modality” with reality of the predication, which distinguishes events that had occurred at speech time, coded as realis, as in (30), from those that had not (31).

(30) Comme, son père il est mort avant que je sois (subj) née. (21C.158.842)
‘Like his dad died before I was born.’

(31) Tu vas devenir gros après que tu aies (subj) pris ça. (21C.168.959)
‘You’re going to get fat after you’ve taken that.’

As with the verbs, few of the factors hypothesized to affect variant selection turn out to be significant, and with one exception, those that are differ from one period to the next. If this were an accurate depiction of the facts, it would suggest that in addition to fluctuation over time in preponderance of governors and propensity to trigger subjunctive observed in the last section, the variable grammar of subjunctive selection is labile as well. In actuality, however, Table 13 reveals that only two kinds of constraints are operating, and this, across the board: an apparent semantic effect reflecting the familiar lexical effect, and a structural effect involving components of the canonical subjunctive construction.

In the 19th century, only the two factors measuring the semantic role of the subjunctive, sentence type and reality of the predication, contribute an effect, and

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19 Combinations allowing for most productivity (other matrices + other embedded [Context F]) are relatively rare, for example.

the latter is apparently also operative in the 21st century. Irrealis predications appear to favor subjunctive, as do negated sentence types, consistent with at least some prescriptive and most theoretical claims ("polarity" subjunctives). But closer inspection shows that the negative clauses which appear to favor subjunctive so highly all turn out to be embedded under a matrix *pour que*, which, as we have seen above (Table 11), is independently associated with a high rate of subjunctive. There is no difference between negative and affirmative contexts in rate
of subjunctive under *pour que* in either century.\(^{21}\) Thus, the polarity effect observed in Table 13 is in reality a lexical one, and not semantic.

The apparent effect displayed by *reality of the predication* in Table 13 can be explained in the same way. The uneven data distributions that have emerged repeatedly in this research resulted, here too, in a concentration of some governors in one context to the (virtual) exclusion of the other. One such governor is the highly favorable, and until recently, very frequent *mais que*. In the 19\(^{th}\) century it only occurred in irrealis contexts, explaining why they appear to promote subjunctive in that period. In the 21\(^{st}\) century, about half (46\%, \(N = 57/123\)) of the irrealis contexts happened to be embedded under (the highly favorable) *pour que*, while about 1/3 (32\% \(N = 37/117\)) of the realis contexts are embedded under (the highly disfavorable) *dès que* and *le fait que*.\(^{22}\) Thus the apparent association of subjunctive morphology with irrealis contexts is due not to its capacity to convey such readings, but is rather reflecting the primordial lexical effect. Beyond this, the only factors affecting variant selection are structural, involving the properties of the canonical subjunctive construction, complementizer presence and adjacency: when *que* is overt, and the governor is *adjacent* to the embedded verb, subjunctive selection is promoted, just as we saw with the verbal matrices.\(^{23}\)

### 6 Prescription vs. praxis

Having reviewed prescriptive and theoretical accounts of when subjunctive should be used and to what end on the one hand, and the data of when it actually was selected in over 4000 contexts in which it could have been, on the other, we are now in a position to confront them systematically. We have seen that the vast majority of these injunctions and observations have always revolved around

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\(^{21}\) Using Fisher’s Exact test (one-tailed), \(p = 0.4079\) for 19\(^{th}\) century and \(p = .3180\) for 21\(^{st}\) century.

\(^{22}\) That this is an effect of the governor and not of the context is confirmed by the fact that other governors also restricted to irrealis contexts (e.g. *soit que*) display their own idiosyncratic (high or low) rates of subjunctive (St-Amand 2002), rather than the expected elevated rate irrealis contexts would evoke if subjunctive were selected to convey say, doubt or irrealis. In fact, there was no difference between realis and irrealis contexts for *mais que* in the 19\(^{th}\) century (\(p = 0.1825\)). Likewise the difference in subjunctive use in realis versus irrealis contexts is not statistically significant under *pour que* (\(p = 0.2911\)), under *le fait que* and *dès que* (alone or combined; \(p = 0.0676, p = 0.7241, p = 0.1946\)), under all other matrices with these three excluded (\(p = 0.4431\)) or under all matrices excluding these three and those with data in only one context (\(p = 0.5719\)).

\(^{23}\) Even the categorical “knockout” effect of complementizer absence on subjunctive selection in the 21\(^{st}\) century is due to lexical identity: here the favorable effects of *pour que* and *mais que*. 

two parameters: the lexical identity of the governor and the semantic contribution of subjunctive morphology. By far the bulk of the normative effort has been channeled into the former, while the linguistic literature has privileged the latter. In both camps, however, the final arbiter in case of discrepancy or mismatch has always been the semantics. With this in mind we review the usage facts, comparing them first to what has been prescribed. To enhance the comparison, we limit the following analysis to grammars published, and presumably available for consultation, within the lifetimes of the speakers we have studied, i.e since 1846.24

6.1 Governors

A first measure is of governors prescribed vs. governors used. Of the 417 verbs and conjunctions prescribed to take the subjunctive during this period, little more than 1/4 (N = 106) actually occurred with this variant in speech, and nearly half (47%) of those could be qualified as marginal: they occurred no more than twice (at least once with the subjunctive), in any given corpus. Of the prescribed verbal governors that recurred more frequently, over half (56%) were ephemeral, i.e. idiosyncratic to only one of the periods studied, mainly the 21st. Only nine (falloir, vouloir, penser\textsubscript{neg}, aimer, arriver, avoir peur, croire\textsubscript{neg}, être content, demander) could be considered to be established, having persisted over the duration, albeit at vastly different frequencies. Such disproportionate distributions are equally characteristic of the non-verbal governors; five (pour que, avant que, mais que, jusqu'à tant que, sans que) could qualify as established in this sense. Even restricting the comparison to injunctions issued during the lifespan of the individuals whose speech we have analyzed, only a very small number of the governors prescribed were actually used in speech, and even fewer with any regularity.

Even this minor overlap could arguably have been predicted from the sheer quantity of prescriptions alone: if enough governors are prescribed, some of them are bound to turn up in speech. A more sensitive measure of the relationship between prescription and praxis, especially in view of the distributional discrepancies outlined above, would target a governor’s relative prominence in each. We can determine prominence in speech from overall rank on the combined measures of relative preponderance, rate of subjunctive and proportion of subjunct-

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24 This is not to suggest that any of them would have consulted one for directives on how to use the subjunctive, an eventuality we doubt strongly.
tive morphology accounted for, as detailed in Section 5. Prescriptive prominence is based on recurrence and rate of inter-grammar agreement.

As shown in Table 14, which compares the top speech-prominent governors with their prescription ranks, falloir qualifies as the #1 verbal governor (preponderance rank = 1, rate = 3, proportion = 1), while pour que is the #1 nonverbal counterpart. They and the nine other governors which scored in the top 10 on all three measures make up the class of speech-prominent governors. Among the prescription-prominent governors, vouloir, prescribed by 30% of the 81 grammars published since 1846, ranks #1. If usage were informed by prescription, or vice-versa, one would expect at least the highest-ranked governors in the two cohorts to coincide.

Table 14 shows that only occasionally is this the case. The two top-ranked speech-prominent verbal governors, falloir and vouloir, do figure among the top 10 prescribed, as do three of the speech-prominent non-verbal governors, pour que, avant que and à moins que. Their respective rankings only match up sporadically, however, most closely in the case of vouloir (rank 2 in speech, 1 in

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall</th>
<th>Rank in speech\textsuperscript{25}</th>
<th>Rank in grammars (1846–1999)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>RATE SUBJ</td>
<td>% SUBJ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal governors</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>falloir</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3 (88%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vouloir</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5 (85%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aimer (mieux/bien)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6 (73%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>attendre</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2 (89%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>avoir peur</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8 (60%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Non-verbal governors | | | | | |
| pour que | 1 | 2 (89%) | 1 (46%) | 2 (26%) | 4/5 (46%) |
| mais que | 2 | 3 (86%) | 2 (12%) | 4 (7%) | 90–160 (1%) |
| avant (même) que | 3 | 6 (59%) | 3 (11%) | 3 (9%) | 6 (43%) |
| jusqu’à tant que | 4 | 5 (67%) | 4 (6%) | 5 (5%) | N/A |
| à moins que | 5 | 4 (74%) | 5 (4%) | 9 (3%) | 8 (38%) |
| soit que | 6 | 7 (44%) | 8 (3%) | 7 (4%) | 23–26 (19%) |

\textsuperscript{25} Note that some governors that ranked highly on individual measures do not figure in this table, which displays only the top 10 on all three measures.
grammar). *Falloir*, which we have seen to account on its own for the vast majority of subjunctive usage in speech, comes in 7–8. *Mais que* (speech rank = 2) is only mentioned in 1% of grammars (rank 90–160); *aimer* (speech rank = 3), in only 11%, etc.

Taking prescription as the starting point, as in Table 15, does not improve matters. Six of the top 10 prescribed verbal governors never co-occurred with the subjunctive in speech. Two others (*désirer* and *souhaiter*) account for <1% of subjunctive morphology. Only *vouloir* and *falloir*, already discussed above, display

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 15: Top 10 prescribed verbal and non-verbal subjunctive governors as compared to usage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grammars</strong> (1846–1999)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Verbal governors</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>vouloir</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>craindre</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>désirer</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>être possible</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>souhaiter</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>ordonner</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>falloir</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>regretter</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>être nécessaire</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>importer</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Non-verbal governors</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>afin que</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>pourvu que</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>quoique</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>bien que</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>pour que</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>avant que</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>sans que</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>à moins que</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>de peur que</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>jusqu’à ce que</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

26 Only the governors that ranked in the top five of their respective governor type categories are assigned a rank here.
any kind of match. Likewise, the three non-verbal governors tied for first place
together account for <1% subjunctive morphology in speech, while bien que and
pour que, tied in 4–5 place, account for <1% and 46% respectively.

Adding to these discrepancies is the finding that half of the governors used in
speech had never been prescribed at all! Indeed, a number of them (e.g. hormis
après que ‘after’) have actually been proscribed since the mid-19th century,
although the latter four were prescribed as well.

In terms of governors, then, there is little common ground between prescrip-
tion and praxis. If speakers were sensitive to grammatical prescription, the gover-
nors they use in speech would coincide with (at least some of) those prescribed,
or at a minimum, the top-ranked prescriptions would be followed. By the same
token, if grammarians were sensitive to usage, speech-prominent governors
would figure in many more grammars. This is not the case. On the contrary, what
little overlap our analyses did reveal is more likely due to the plethora of prescrip-
tions than to any real convergence with praxis. This becomes apparent as soon as
we attempt to reconcile the hundreds of prescribed governors with the tiny cohort
that accounts for almost all the subjunctive use in speech. Grammarians never
invoke the vast disparities among governors in terms of frequency of use, nor the
idiosyncratic rate of subjunctive associated with each. Those are what underlie
these regular patterns of subjunctive use. Indeed, detailed comparisons of the
relative position of each governor (in terms of rank and importance) in each
medium confirm that speech and grammar are opaque to each other. With the
possible exception of vouloir, the top-ranked prescribed never correspond to the
top-ranked used.

6.2 Conditioning

The discrepancies between prescription and usage surface again in the patterns
of subjunctive selection, instantiated in the conditioning of variant choice, as
emerged from the multivariate analyses in Tables 8, 9 and 13. In these analyses
we confront other injunctions and observations culled from the prescriptive and
descriptive traditions with usage data. As noted above, for prescriptivists and
theoretical linguists alike, the pre-eminent determinant of subjunctive selection
is semantic. We detailed in Section 4.3 how we operationalized and tested the
semantic contribution indirectly by considering the effect of intervening vari-
ables, e.g. the presence of indicators of non-factual modality, reality of the predi-
cation, sentence type, tense and semantic class of governor. A number of these
are also staples in both the prescriptive and theoretical works.
In the RHGF for example, tense of the governor (e.g. “verbe au propos conditionnel” ‘verb of conditional proposition’ [4% of grammars since 1846], or “verbe impératif” ‘imperative verb’ (9%)) is occasionally invoked as a subjunctive trigger, though the reference there is clearly to the resulting meaning of the sentence. In usage, the significance of this factor through the 20th century lay in its capacity to trigger tense harmony, thereby reducing the probability that subjunctive would be selected in the embedded clause. This effect was never mentioned in the relevant literature.

A more straightforward measure of the semantic contribution of the subjunctive lies in the semantic properties of the governors requiring it. One hundred and eleven classes of such governors have been prescribed since 1846 alone, though their actual constitution remains vague, if not altogether undefined (e.g. verbes d’affirmation atténuée ‘verbs of attenuated affirmation’, verbes d’exhortation, portant impulsion ou pourvoyance à quelqu’un ‘verbs of exhortation, inciting or encouraging someone’). We found that the bulk of the governors in the data could be accommodated within the few featured in Table 9. While volitive and emotive governors did appear to favor the subjunctive variant consistently, in keeping with many claims, closer inspection showed that this owed nothing to their inherent meaning. Rather, the effect was due to the concentration in the “classes” so labeled of one or two independently favorable verbs. The factor of semantic class was again reflecting the lexical effect.

Another major explanatory factor of subjunctive selection is sentence type. Nearly half of all RHGF grammars invoke “verbes négatifs” ‘negative verbs’ or “verbes interrogatifs” ‘interrogative verbs’ as subjunctive triggers, and “polarity subjunctives” are frequently invoked in contemporary theoretical literature as well. This factor was only selected as significant in verbs embedded under non-verbal governors in the 19th century (i.e. in one out of nine variable rule analyses), albeit in the expected direction: negated main clauses appeared to favor subjunctive more than affirmative clauses. Here too, however, the apparent polarity effect was shown to be entirely due to the familiar lexical effect.

The favoring effect of irrealis predications on subjunctive selection that emerged under non-verbal matrices in the 19th and 21st centuries has a similar explanation. Indeed, in every one of these cases, closer inspection revealed that any apparent semantic effect was an epiphenomenon of the overriding effect of the lexical identity of the matrix, itself a result of disproportionate distributions of (independently) favoring and disfavoring governors across the relevant categories. We stress that these facts are invisible to any but systematic quantitative analysis. Taken together, they confirm that the favored constraint on subjunctive use of prescriptivists and theoretical linguists – meaning – is simply not operative in speech.
Beyond the lexical identity of the governor, the only factors affecting variant choice in usage are those pertaining to the construal of the context as one which resembles what we have called a canonical subjunctive construction. These include the morphological class of the embedded verb, presence of the complementizer que, and distance between main and embedded clauses. When favorable conditions on each of these factors are present, the use of the subjunctive is nearly guaranteed. None of these were ever invoked in any of the relevant literature. Yet they constitute robust and regular, if untaught, community norms for subjunctive use, and they have been firmly in place since at least the 19th century. Regardless of the way we analyze it, usage bears little resemblance to prescription.

7 Discussion

We have shown in this paper that the uses and non-uses of the French subjunctive have been shrouded in indeterminacy since the earliest times. Our analyses suggest that this is the product of prescriptive (and more recently, theoretical linguistic) attempts to impose the doctrine of form-function symmetry on a phenomenon which is inherently variable. The hundreds of governors and dozens of semantic readings proposed over the centuries can be directly linked to a tradition of post-facto efforts to match attested, observed or intuited cases with an associated motive: a subjunctive selected in context A could be explained by the presence of governor B, meaning X or both. But problems arise when governor B or meaning X surface elsewhere with an alternative variant. And as our analyses have made clear, this situation is (and apparently always has been) far from uncommon. This makes it difficult to maintain the conceit of form-function symmetry.

It also goes a long way towards explaining the grammatical treatments we have exposed. Governors and meanings come and go because their authors are attempting to account for what they can observe, all the while failing to distinguish the ubiquitous sporadic and nonce uses from the overwhelmingly regular patterns that make up the bulk of actual usage. Instead of acknowledging the facts of variability, grammarians and linguists have redoubled their efforts to stamp it out. They go about this by proposing ever more contexts which would require a subjunctive. These have enjoyed a startling increase over time, reaching a zenith of 461 governors and 59 readings in Period V alone. Access to the way speakers were actually using the subjunctive during the very same period has afforded us an unprecedented opportunity to demonstrate that few if any of these novel prescriptions could be matched in speech. Although Period V, like Period IV before it, was a time of intense subjunctive use, it was not a period of increased
productivity, however measured. The novel uses already attested in the first decade of the 21st century are sporadic nonce forms. We argue that these are the product of speakers’ perplexity over where to use the subjunctive, while acceding to some independent (e.g. prestige) motivation for doing so. There is little correspondence between the novel Period V prescriptions and novel Period V uses. But the quantity of idiosyncratic and ephemeral prescriptions that pepper the RHGF is reminiscent of prescriptive efforts to impose order on the apparent chaos of variability in other areas of the grammar (Poplack & Malvar 2007, Poplack & Dion 2009). In any event, we can confirm that the discrepancies between prescription and praxis in Period V reflect, not the evolving use of the subjunctive, but rather the evolving imperative to beat those uses into submission.

It is in this context that we can best apprehend the primordial role that meaning has assumed as explanatory of subjunctive selection. Inconsistencies and contradictions can be (and have been) straightforwardly laid at the doorstep of meaning, since there can be no argument about what the speaker “wanted” to say. (No one knows for sure!) What we find particularly disturbing about this development is that for many, these interpretations have morphed into (apparently widely shared) intuitions about subjunctive use, which are in turn serving as the basis for numbers of elegant and highly ramified theories, which have little if any basis in fact. This raises the epistemological question of whether a form can embody a meaning when it is not used by speakers to express it.

The huge quantitative discrepancies among governors and embedded verbs, their previously undocumented associations (or lack thereof) with this variant, and the unpredictable and, to all appearances, arbitrary preferences displayed by different matrices and embedded verbs at different points in time, all conspire in obscuring the regularity of the community grammar of subjunctive use to any but systematic quantitative analysis. Once the actual usage facts are uncovered, however, it is obvious that the system of subjunctive selection is quite straightforward. The key characteristic of this system is its inherent variability. Almost without exception, no governor of even moderate frequency (i.e. five occurrences) could be shown to trigger subjunctive categorically. This is true not only of the hundreds prescribed throughout the grammatical tradition, but also of the few dozen that ever actually governed a subjunctive in usage. There are thus no subjunctive governors; only potential governors, each of which features its own characteristic associations.

A very small cohort of governors (falloir, vouloir, aimer, pour que) and embedded verbs (aller, avoir, être, faire), to which we have referred as “top-tier”, do co-occur quasi-automatically with the subjunctive. A few other matrices also entertain moderate to strong associations, but these have proven more labile over time. Among the non-verbal matrices especially, some have receded from usage while
others have proliferated. Still others have remained available over the duration, but arbitrarily lost or gained their association with the subjunctive.

The vast majority of these uses will of course appear perfectly standard, as they are so heavily concentrated in prefabs made up of top-tier components. This is what leads some scholars (e.g. Comeau 2011, Jones 2000) to maintain that the subjunctive retains vitality in some varieties of French, while at the same time reporting that it is restricted to a small handful of matrices. Interestingly, it is precisely in the most productive, i.e. the least lexically constrained, contexts, that the illusory nature of this claim becomes most obvious. Our analyses of a variety of factors that could potentially contribute independent effects to variant choice, including both semantic and purely structural factors, showed repeatedly that where semantic factors appeared to be operating, they could be shown to be masking the ubiquitous lexical effect, favoring or disfavoring. The most persistent non-lexical conditions are those pertaining to the construal of the context as canonical for subjunctive. Where the components of such a context are present, subjunctive is consistently favored. This suggests that beyond the highly frequent and frozen prefabs containing subjunctive morphology, speakers have stored subjunctive schemas which they fill with material which is determined not by considerations of meaning, but by linguistic, stylistic and extra-linguistic community norms. It will by now be obvious that the grammar of the subjunctive referred to in the title as evolving is prescriptive grammar. The grammar of actual usage, in contrast, has remained remarkably stable, despite pervasive variability.

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