

The Subjunctive in Spoken British English

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Questions to be addressed

- Is the subjunctive undergoing a revival in spoken English as is said to be the case in written English?
- Is the indicative a real alternative to the mandative subjunctive in spoken British English?
- Does the *were* subjunctive only survive in “fixed formulas” such as *if I were you*, as is said to be the case by Jespersen (1931)?

The Diachronic Corpus of Present-Day Spoken English

- Contains only spoken English.
- 400,000 words London-Lund (late 1950s-late 1970s).
- 400,000 words ICE-GB (early 1990s).
- Tagged and parsed.

Grammatical analysis

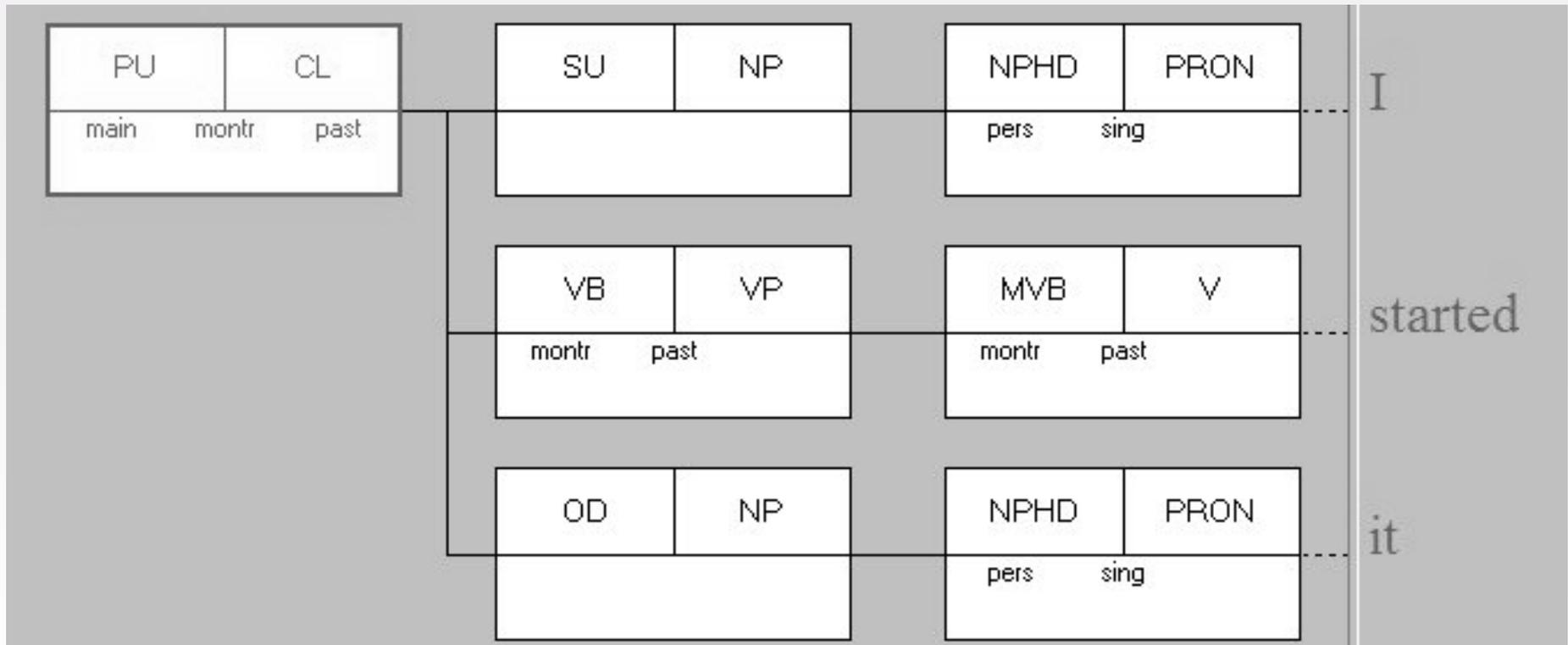


Figure 1. The grammatical analysis of the sentence *I started it* in DCPSE. PU= Parsing Unit, SU = Subject, VB = Verbal, MVB = Main verb, OD = Direct Object, NPHD = Noun Phrase Head, PRON = Pronoun.

Fuzzy Tree Fragments (FTFs)

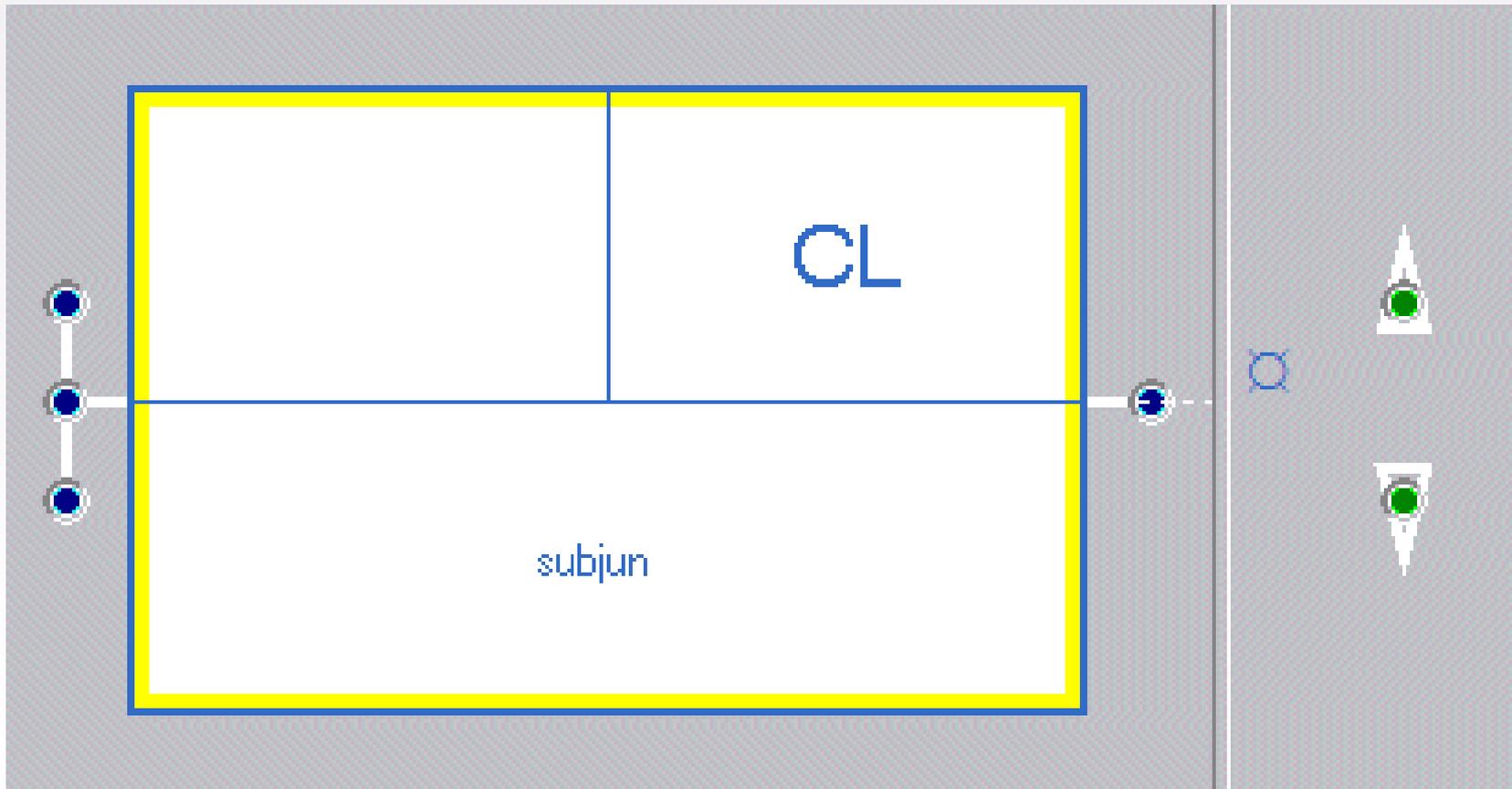


Figure 2. FTF which retrieves subjunctive clauses from the corpus.

Formulaic subjunctives

- Johansson and Norheim (1988: 31): Brown and LOB “contain a sprinkling of examples”.
- In DCPSE formulaic subjunctives are fairly uncommon.
- *As it were*:
 - most common formulaic subjunctive;
 - stable across the thirty year period;
 - most frequent in informal face-to-face conversation.

The *were* subjunctive

- The past subjunctive “survives as a distinguishable form only in the past tense of the verb BE” and is “invariably *were*” (Quirk *et al.* 1985: 155-6).
 - Only with 1st and 3rd persons are the indicative and subjunctive morphologically distinct.
- e.g. If I/he/she *were* leaving, you would have heard about it. (subjunctive)

The *were* subjunctive

- Jespersen (1931: 130): “[i]n colloquial English, *were* in the singular hardly survives except in the fixed formula “If I were you” [...] but even here “if I was you” is sometimes found”.
- Johansson and Norheim (1988): *were* subjunctive is infrequent and when it does occur it is in formal texts and with the verb *be*.
- Leech *et al.* (forthcoming): results indicate a decrease in the *were*-subjunctive in BrE; subjunctive and indicative are used with almost equal frequency.

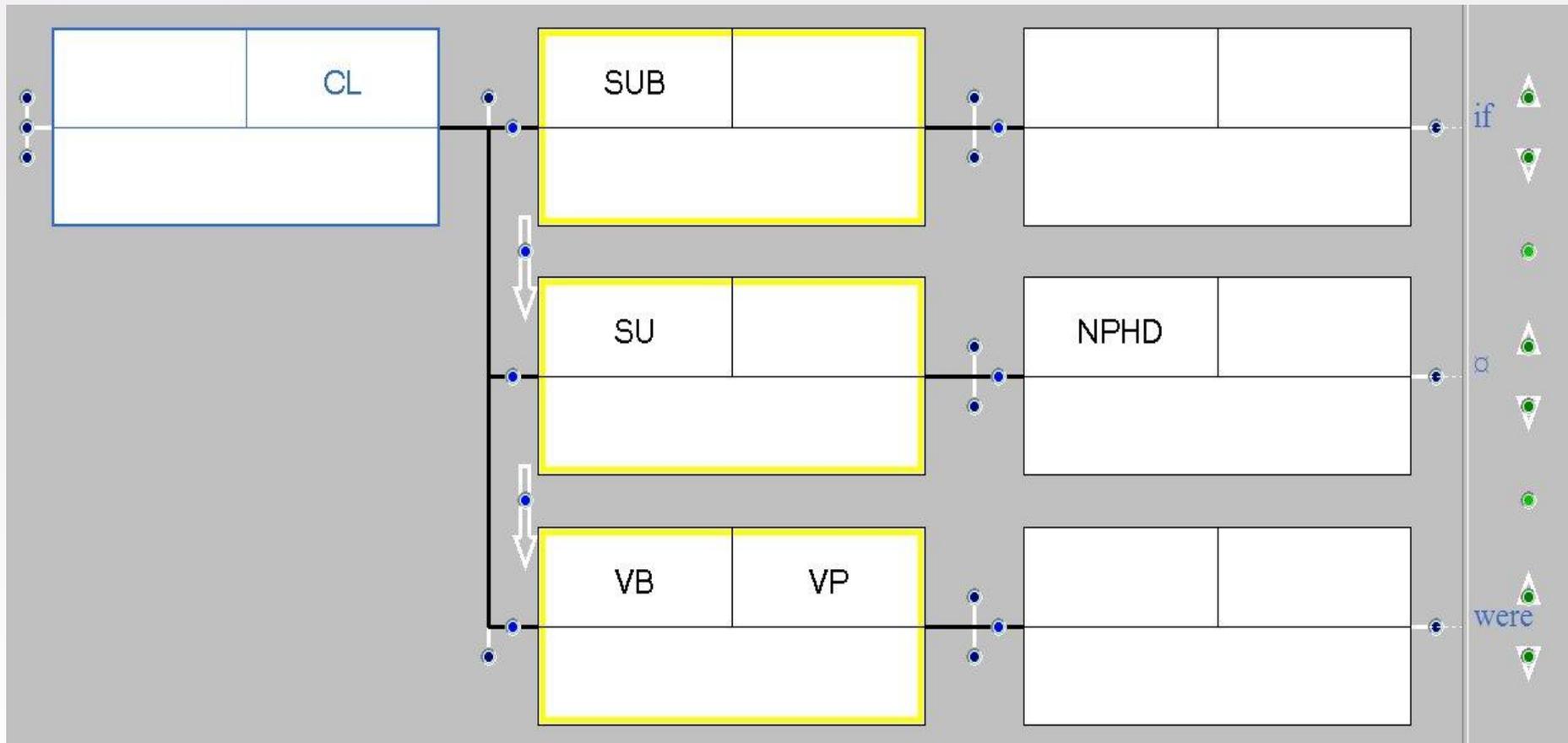


Figure 3: FTF to retrieve clauses introduced by a subordinator *if* (including *as if*, *even if*), followed by an NP subject or existential *there* and a verb phrase headed by *were*.

Results: *Were* vs. *was*

	LLC frequency		ICE-GB frequency		Change in frequency	
	raw	per 100,000 words	Raw	per 100,000 words	%	X ²
<i>were</i>	41	8.83	17	4.03	-54.33	3.39
<i>was</i>	56	12.07	51	12.10	+0.30	1.84

Table 1: A comparison of *was* and *were* in conditional clauses in DCPSE (not statistically significant).

Results: text types

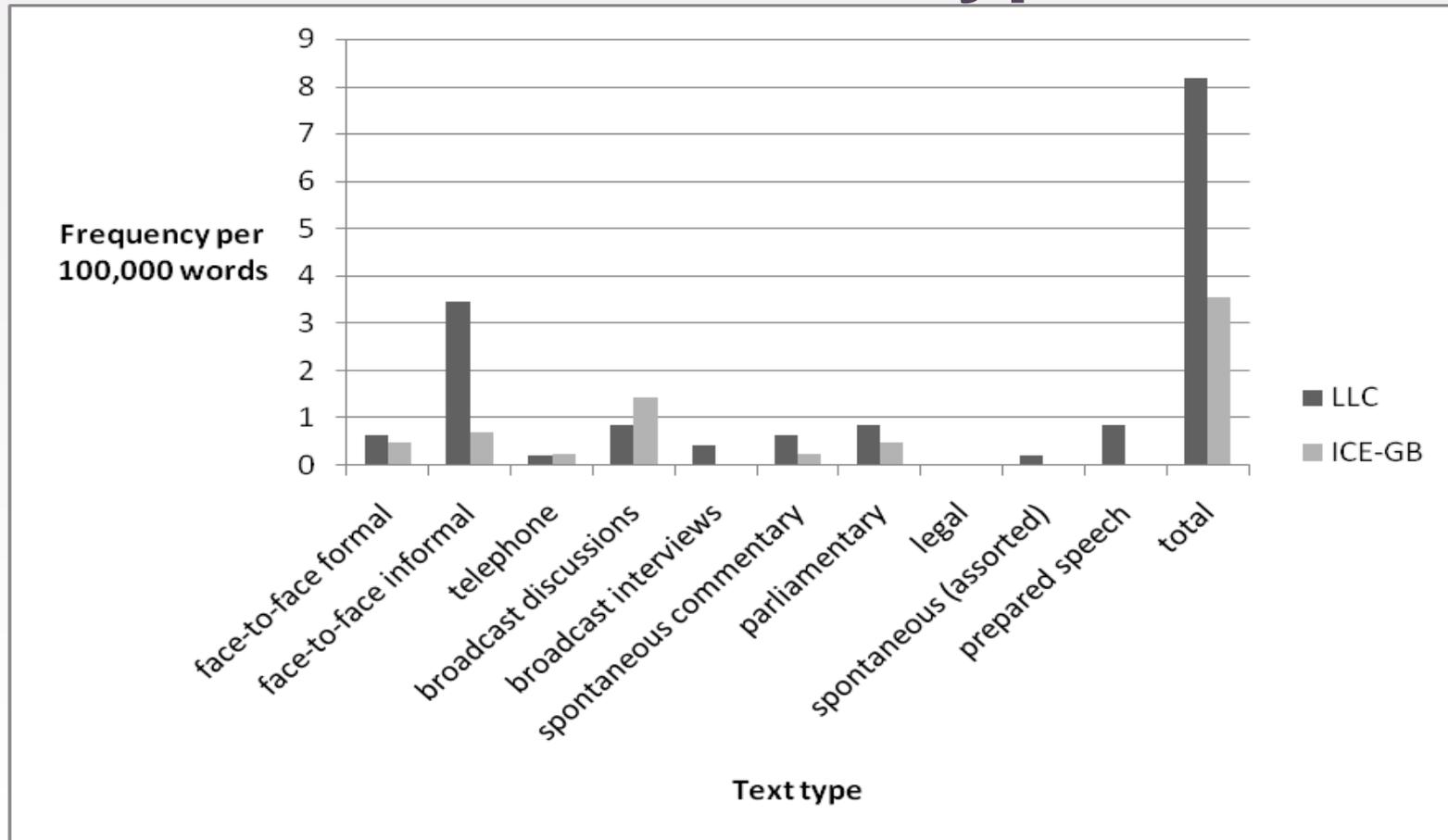


Figure 4: Distribution of the *were* subjunctive across text type in DCPSE.

Results: informal conversation

	LLC frequency		ICE-GB frequency		Change in frequency	
	raw	per 100,000 words	raw	per 100,000 words	%	X ²
<i>were</i>	19	4.09	3	0.71	-82.61	6.27
<i>was</i>	34	7.33	32	7.59	+3.66	2.09

Table 2: Comparison of *was* and *were* in conditional clauses in informal conversations (figures in bold significant at $p < 0.01$).

The mandative subjunctive

- Most common use of the subjunctive in English (Quirk et al. 1985).
- Productive; possible with any verb in a *that*-clause introduced by a superordinate clause expressing demand, recommendation, proposal, etc.

e.g. Peter came and begged that he **be** allowed to accept a job at the bottom of the scale.

(DCPSE:DL-A02 #0259:2:A)

Current change in the mandative subjunctive

- Increasing in written English (see Johansson and Norheim 1988, Övergaard 1995, Leech *et al.* forthcoming), although British English lagging behind American English (Hundt 1998).
- No increase in spoken English, although this is based on a restricted number of triggers (Waller 2005).

The mandative subjunctive in DCPSE

- This study: data from full list of triggers (over 100 compiled from Huddleston and Pullum 2002 and Quirk *et al.* 1985) using DCPSE.
- Consider variants to the subjunctive:
 - Indicative forms
 - Modal forms
 - Non-distinct forms

Variants

Subjunctive: Peter came and begged that he **be** allowed to accept a job at the bottom of the scale. (DCPSE:DL-A02 #0259:2:A)

Indicative: will he ensure that Concorde **is not** allowed to fly in and out of Heathrow ... (DCPSE:DL-G01 #0127:1:Q)

Non-distinct: ... what they will probably come up with is the proposal that we **put** all of the text in this onto a cassette tape ... (DCPSE:DL-A02 #0359:3:A)

Modal: It was obviously important from the very beginning that Eurotra **should** have a very precise specification ... (DCPSE:DI-I04 #0097:1:A)

Distribution of variants in DCPSE

Variants	LLC frequency		ICE-GB frequency		Change in frequency
	raw	per 100,000 words	raw	per 100,000 words	%
subjunctive	5	1.08	2	0.47	-56.48
indicative	9	1.94	12	2.85	+46.91
should	8	1.72	7	1.66	-3.49
other modals	21	4.53	13	3.09	-31.79
non-distinct	12	2.59	10	2.37	-8.49
total	55	11.85	44	10.44	-11.90

Table 3: Distribution of variants in mandative clauses in DCPSE
(not statistically significant).

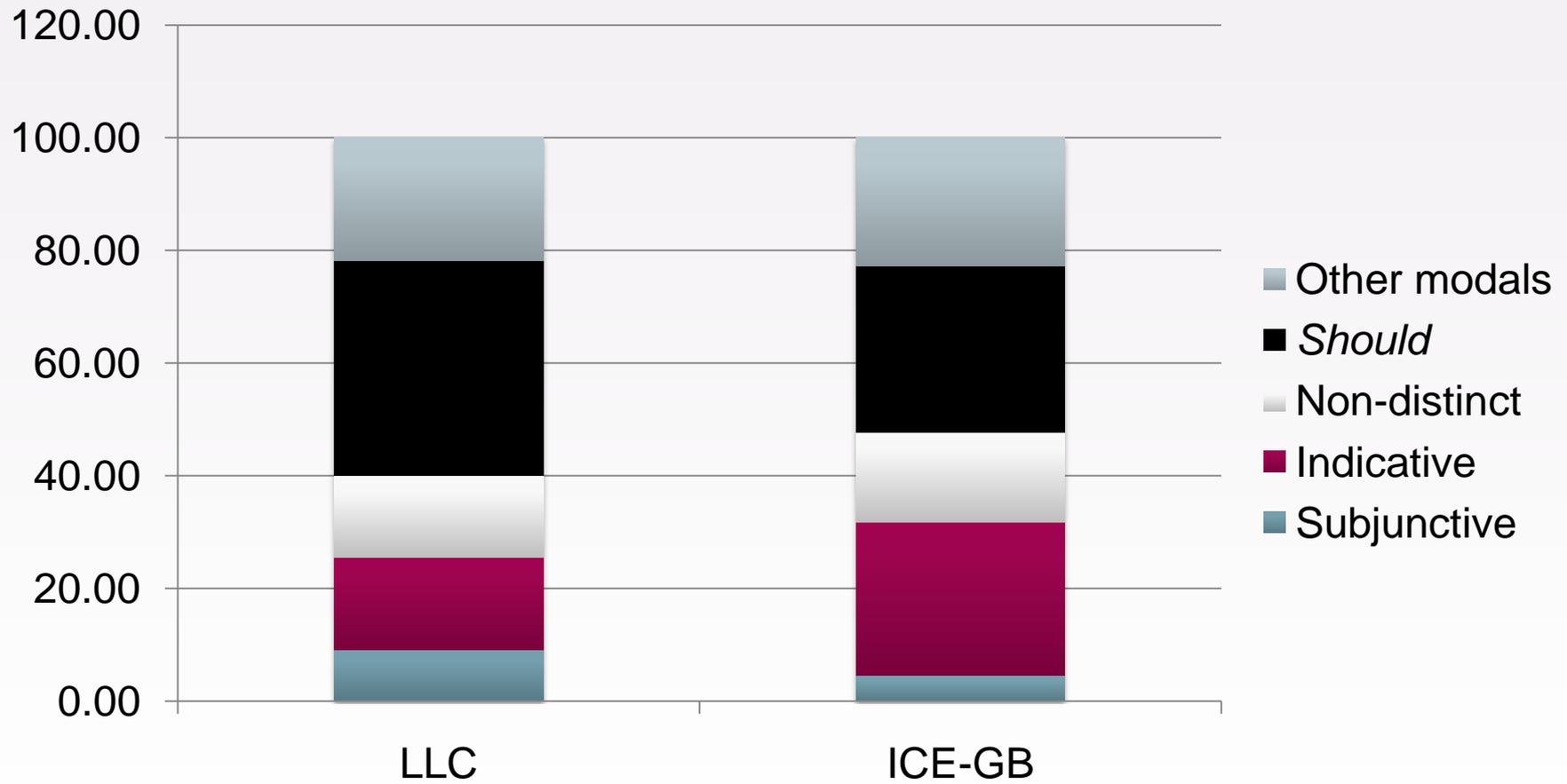


Figure 5: Variants in mandative clauses as percentages of the total.

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