The return of an English pluperfect subjunctive?

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ABSTRACT

The introduction of the superfluous morpheme [əv] into past unfulfilled *if*-clauses in modern English raises serious questions of analysis. How is one to parse a clause like: "If I had've known that..."?

It is proposed that the intrusive morpheme can be viewed as a marker of subjunctivity, whereby "real" and "unreal" pluperfects can be explicitly distinguished.

Linguists are above all concerned to observe and analyse linguistic facts. While it is obviously indispensable for them to be aware of what constitutes standard usage and what is non-standard, this awareness does not dictate what it may be proper or improper to investigate. Here we shall examine structures such as:

1. If we had known that, we would have (would've) told you.
    - (i.e., past unfulfilled conditions) - in their non-standard version:
2. If we hadə / had've known that, we wouldə / would've / would have told you.

This construction (perhaps by virtue of its non-standard nature) has not been widely discussed from a synchronic point of view. There is a brief diachronic reference in Quirk *et al.* (1985, 14.23, note [c], 1011-1012), where it is proposed that the 'would əv' of the main clause is copied to the conditional clause, yielding "If I would əv...". This is then reduced to "If I'd əv...", and the resulting "I'd əv" is misinterpreted as a contraction of "I had əv". Quirk *et al. (ibid.)* characterise this structure as "an error that is found in uneducated writing and its fictional representation...", and appear to suggest that it is "[I]nformal Am[erican] E[nglish]. Their diachronic remarks, be they accurate or not, do not, however, address the spread of the phenomenon, e.g., to the inverted version "Had I əv..."; nor does there seem to be a contraction "*If I'd'nt əv..." that could directly underlie the now common "If I hadn't əv...". The following discussion seeks to provide a synchronic view of the structurally (and geographically) expanded, (presumably) hypercorrect, "have".

The verb *have,* when used as an auxiliary with the past participle, is in spoken English frequently reduced to [əv] or simply [ə]: cf.

3. He must've (mustə) forgotten.

4.   They could've (couldə) hurt themselves.
5.   She won't've (won'tə) read the letter yet.

A similar contraction occurs for *have* as a present tense finite verb, but only, it seems, to [(ə)v]:

6.   I've lots of work to do.

but not

7.   *I ə lots of work to do.

We find

8.   My friends've lots of work to do.

but not

9.   *My friends ə lots of work to do.

Also implicated is the relationship of this reduction to the phenomenon of *h*-dropping, whereby

10.   Hand us the hammer, Harry.   may become
11.   'And us the 'ammer, 'Arry.

but this question will not be pursued here.

Likewise, the preposition *of* is frequently reduced to [əv] or [ə]:

12.   a pint əv milk   a pint ə milk
13.   lots əv people   lots ə people
14.   a cup əv tea   a cup ə tea   (cf. the noun *cuppa*)

and the notorious

15.   a cup ə cino   (for: *a cappuccino*)

When confronted with the morpheme ə or əv, a listener has to reconstruct, for the purposes of interpretation, the underlying *have* or *of.* This reconstruction is not a particularly difficult task, since the answer is *have* in a verbal context, but *of* in a prepositional context. Thus *wouldə, mustə, couldə, won'tə* lead us automatically to *would have, must have, could have, won't have,* while *cup ə tea* and *pint ə milk* clearly represent *cup of tea, pint of milk.* Simple though the reconstruction task may be, it would appear that a growing number of people are unable to make the distinction. Whether this is because of their inability to distinguish (intuitively or explicitly) between a verb and a preposition, or whether some other explanation is to be sought, the fact remains that we really do find examples like:

16.   We would of told you.
17.   He must of forgotten.

By contrast, we seem not to find the reverse misinterpretation:

18.   *a cup have tea

19.   *a pint have milk

For some people, then, the generalisation of əv or ə to *of* seems to have taken root as a morphophonemic principle.

In what follows, we shall focus on syntax, and specifically on the *had* əv / *had* ə in the *if*-clause of sentence 2. Here it does not matter whether we reconstruct *had have* or *had of* - either way, we fail to reach the standard "If we had known that....", which forbids the insertion of əv or ə altogether. The motivation for the parasitical morpheme is not obvious, but one may speculate.

It is non-controversial that, in the standard sentence "If we had known that, we would've told you" (see No 1 above), we have a main clause (or apodosis) containing a conditional perfect (*would have told, would've told*) and a (subordinate) *if*-clause (protasis) containing a pluperfect indicative (*had known*). Note also that the conjunction *if* may be omitted, provided that we invert the subject and auxiliary verb:

20.   Had we known that, we would have told you.

Our exemplary sentence expresses a past unfulfilled condition, and it may be instructive to examine how certain other languages deal with this sub-set of hypotheticals.

In Latin the sentence appears as:

21.   Si scivissemus, tibi dixissemus.

where we have (obligatorily) a pluperfect subjunctive in both the main clause and the *if*-clause. In Latin there is no distinct morphological entity that could be called a conditional or a conditional perfect. It is only with the sweeping restructuring of the largely synthetic Latin verbal system, which occurred as part of the transition to the modern Romance languages (in which the verbal system is much more analytical), that the distinct forms we now know as the conditional and conditional perfect came into being. Thus in French our exemplary sentence reads:

22.   Si nous avions su cela, nous te l'aurions dit.

where the main verb (*aurions dit*) is in the conditional perfect and the verb of the *if*-clause (*avions su*) is in the pluperfect indicative. This is the same structure as in standard modern English.

In Italian, the main clause is likewise in the conditional perfect, but the *if*-clause is in the pluperfect subjunctive (reminiscent of Latin):

23.   Se l'avessimo saputo, te lo avremmo detto.

In Spanish, we have the same structure as in Italian:

24.   Si lo hubiésemos (*or* hubiéramos) sabido, lo habríamos dicho.

Even in German, a non-Romance language, we have:

25.   Wenn wir das gewußt hätten, würden wir es gesagt haben.

with a conditional perfect (*würden gesagt haben*) in the main clause and a pluperfect subjunctive (*gewußt hätten*) in the *if*-clause.

However, variations on the above (Nos 22-25) are possible, or have been possible in the past. Of some interest is the long-standing symbiosis between the conditional perfect and the pluperfect subjunctive. Thus, until relatively recently, it was possible in French to replace any conditional perfect by a pluperfect subjunctive, giving (in the case of No 22):

26.   Si nous avions su cela, nous te l'eussions dit.

For Italian the alternation appears to be no longer possible, but there is historical evidence for the phenomenon, which was not rare in old northern texts, but rather more extensive in the south, particularly in Sicily (see Rohlfs III, 141-142, §744). We may thus reconstruct:

27.   Se l'avessimo saputo, te lo avessimo detto.

In Spanish the alternation (even today) is quite common:

28.   Si lo hubiésemos (*or* hubiéramos) sabido, lo hubiésemos (*or* hubiéramos) dicho.

In modern German the pluperfect subjunctive is generally preferred to the conditional perfect, since this latter (a three-word form) is felt to be rather unwieldy:

29.   Wenn wir das gewußt hätten, hätten wir es gesagt.

This was possible in older English as well, as demonstrated by Shakespeare in *Macbeth* (II, ii):

30.   Had he not resembled my father as he slept, I had done't.

The *had done* of the main clause is a pluperfect subjunctive, substituting for a conditional perfect, and such usages continued well into the 19th century.

We saw above (Nos 21, 23-25) that in Latin, Italian, Spanish and German the *if*-clause contains a pluperfect subjunctive, whereas as in English (No 1) and French (No 22) the *if*-clause contains a pluperfect indicative. But even here a slight modification produces an interesting result. By omitting the *if,* and inverting the subject with the auxiliary verb, we get in French

31.   Si nous l'avions su.... $\Rightarrow$ L'eussions-nous su....

where the change from pluperfect indicative to pluperfect subjunctive is obligatory. In older English too this inversion requires the pluperfect subjunctive, as in the Shakespearean example (No 30) "Had he not resembled....". Unfortunately for the ease of the demonstration, "had... resembled" is not unambiguously subjunctive to a modern reader, who, judging by present-day English, may take the example as an indicative. The difficulty stems from the historical coalescence of the subjunctive (originally distinguished by different endings) with the indicative, due partly to the loss of numerous inflections in English including the disappearance of *thou* and its attendant —*st* inflection of the indicative. Indeed, in present-day English, I too see no need to take *had resembled* as a subjunctive rather than an indicative - the question is: how is it to be described in older texts? I lean to the subjunctive because of the continuing use in parallel contexts of an imperfect subjunctive with the verb *to be:* cf.

32.   If I was / were to do that... (where either indicative or subjunctive is now possible)

33.   Were I to do that...   (where only the subjunctive is allowable: the corresponding

34.   *Was I to do that...   is impossible in the sense required.)

One is therefore led to conclude that, in those Western European languages which are either directly descended from Latin, or which historically and culturally have been heavily influenced by Latin - a sort of Western European Latinate *Sprachbund* - there is (or was) a strong connection between the semantic category of past unfulfilled conditions and the syntactic category of subjunctive - more precisely, pluperfect subjunctive - as well as a strong connection between the pluperfect subjunctive and conditional perfect in main clauses. Limiting ourselves to the *if*-clauses, it is plain at least that the pluperfect subjunctive has (just about) always been at home in them, and that, given the historical context, it is reasonable to regard them as a subjunctive-friendly structure.
Returning now to the original example

35. (= 2)   If we hadə / had've [= had əv] known that,....

I shall propose that the seemingly parasitical morpheme ə / əv can be viewed as a marker of subjunctivity, and thus that *hadə / had əv known* can be viewed as a neo-pluperfect-subjunctive. We find interesting support for this proposal in the fact that the morpheme ə / əv is not - and cannot be - used with pluperfects that are obviously indicative. Thus

            36a I had already eaten when they came.
but not   36b *I hadə(v) already eaten when they came.

            37a We had done nothing wrong.
but not   37b *We hadə(v) done nothing wrong.

            38a They had been trying to turn lead into gold.
but not   38b *They hadə(v) been trying to turn lead into gold.

            39a The doctor asked what you had eaten.
but not   39b *The doctor asked what you hadə(v) eaten.

Since ə(v) is clearly seen to be limited to certain (subjunctive-friendly) contexts, and furthermore to be excluded from pluperfect indicatives, there would seem to be ample justification for viewing it as a marker of the subjunctive. Even if this classification is not accepted, the fact remains that the distribution of ə(v) needs to be described and explained - and explanation is always a more complex matter than mere description.
What is it that makes the use of ə(v) impossible in simple indicative examples? Looking at the asterisked sentences above (Nos 36b, 37b, 38b, 39b), and wondering just what it is that is wrong with them, one might incline (even if only intuitively) to the view that there is something in the semantics of ə(v) which links it to non-reality, the unfulfilled nature of a hypothesis, and we have seen that across the major languages of

Western Europe this is fertile ground for subjunctive verbs. Since these asterisked sentences all contain pluperfects which relate to real events (the basic domain of the indicative), there is an irreconcilable semantic conflict (real v. unreal). This, it could be said, accounts for their non-acceptability.

Returning to our *if*-clauses, we observe also that this "new" morpheme ə*(v)* continues to fit as we make slight modifications to the structure:

40a (= 2)   If we hadə(v) known that,....

40b   If we hadn't ə(v) known that,....
                         [but oddly, perhaps, not *If we hadə(v) not known that,....]

40c   Had we əv known that,....

40d   Had we not əv known that,....
                         [but oddly perhaps, not *Had we əv not known that,....]

But we also observe that its placement appears to vary: in 40a it follows the auxiliary verb, in 40b and 40d it follows the negative particle, while in 40c it follows the subject. If we need a rule to characterise its placement, the simplest one would be to say that ə*(v)* always immediately precedes the past participle. One of two things follows from this observation.

(i)   The ə*(v)* is felt to be prefixed to the past participle in the manner of the German augment *ge-* (as in *gekommen*) or older English *y-* (as in *yclept*). I shall leave to others the task of making comprehensible the notion of a subjunctive past participle, preferring myself the second, perhaps more traditional, option.

(ii)   The new form *had* ə*(v)* is analytical rather than synthetic, allowing the ə*(v)* to occupy different positions in the clause. Other English verb forms operate in this way - cf. the future.

41a   They will come.   - *will* before infinitive OR after subject
41b   They won't [= will not] come   - *will* before negative OR after subject
41c   Will they come?   - *will* before subject
41d   Won't [= Will not] they come? -*will* before negative

There is nothing inherently odd in the mobility of formants in analytical verbal units. If *will* can move around, why couldn't ə*(v)* move around as well?

Thus, for some underlying psychological reason (on which I shall not speculate here), it would appear that the collective subconscious of English speakers is pushing for a clearer distinction between the real and the unreal in pluperfects. At any event, however one may wish to take the data presented here, it is clear that non-standard syntax is mounting a non-trivial challenge to the received syntax of past unfulfilled conditions, and that this calls for plausible explanation. Perhaps this attempt will lead to others.

REFERENCES

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NOTE