

# As If and As Though

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**Abstract** This paper mainly deals with the following: first, what kind of change the period of about a hundred years 1900-1994 brought to the frequency of *as if* and *as though* in prose in American English (AmE) and British English (BrE), second, how the uses of the subjunctive and the indicative in *as if*- and *as though*-clauses changed during the same period, and third, what kind of syntactic role a comma plays in these clauses. The materials made use of here include 24 weeklies and monthlies published in the United States and Britain in 1900, 1930, 1960 and 1994.

Of *as if* and *as though*, *as if* has consistently been used more often than *as though*. *As though* seems to have been used less frequently, probably because the *though* in *as though* has been wrongly construed as concessive. As regards the subjunctive and the indicative, in the beginning of the twentieth century the subjunctive was used more frequently than the indicative. However, afterward, the indicative came to be used more often, and as a result, in 1994 there are more instances of the indicative than those of the subjunctive. Many of *as if*- and *as though*-constructions can be preceded by commas. It means that these constructions are not essential and that they can be left out without changing the meanings of the original sentences.

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**Key words** : *As if*, *As though*, *AmE*, *BrE*

## 1. Introduction

The aims of this paper are to examine the following: first, what kind of change the period of about a hundred years 1900-1994 brought to the frequency of *as if* and *as though* in prose in AmE and BrE, second, how the uses of the subjunctive and the indicative changed over the same period in both AmE and BrE, and third, what kind of syntactic role a comma plays in these constructions. With these aims in view, the period 1900-1994 was divided into four to see the changes minutely: 1900, 1930, 1960, and 1994, and three weeklies or monthlies published in each of these years in the United States and Britain were selected, totaling 24 magazines. It may be somewhat doubtful whether this is the best method and whether these magazines are the representative ones in each year and in each country. However, the fact that these magazines cover a wide variety of subjects will enable us to have some idea of the general trend.

The materials examined are as follows:

AmE:

*The Atlantic Monthly* (April 1900) (AT)/*Har-*

*per's New Monthly Magazine* (April 1900) (HA) / *The Dial* (April 1, 1900) (DI) / *The Atlantic Monthly* (Jan. 1930) (AT) / *Harper's Magazine* (Jan. 1930) (HA) / *The American Mercury* (Jan. 1930) (AM) / *The Atlantic Monthly* (April 1960) (AT4) / *The Atlantic Monthly* (May 1960) (AT5) / *Harper's Magazine* (May 1960) (HA) / *TIME* (Aug. 1, 1994) (TI) / *Harper's Magazine* (Aug. 1994) (HA) / *The New Yorker* (Aug. 1, 1994) (NE)

BrE:

*Blackwood's Magazine* (May 1900) (BL) / *The Gentleman's Magazine* (April 1900) (GE4) / *The Gentleman's Magazine* (May 1900) (GE5) / *Blackwood's Magazine* (May 1930) (BL) / *The English Review* (Jan. 1930) (EN) / *The Economist* (Jan. 11, 1930) (EC) / *Blackwood's Magazine* (April 1960) (BL) / *New Statesman* (April 2, 1960) (NE) / *The Economist* (April 2, 1960) (EC) / *The Spectator* (April 6, 1994) (SP) / *Tatler* (July 1994) (TA) / *The Economist* (April 6, 1994) (EC)

## 2. Frequency

In order to examine which of the two forms *as if* and *as though* was used more frequently than the other over the period of about a hundred years

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1900-1994, first of all the two forms must be interchangeable. Partridge (1973:47) says, "Logically or even semantically, *as if* makes sense, *as though* makes (virtual) nonsense." *As though* does make sense, however, because the *though* in *as though* etymologically means "if" (Bernstein 1965:53), and thus originally, *as if* and *as though* means the same thing, of which Partridge might not have been aware. However, regarding the difference in meaning between the two, nowadays almost every grammar seems to agree that *as if* and *as though* are interchangeable and that there is no difference in meaning between the two.

The actual figures of the occurrences of *as if* and *as though* in AmE and BrE from 1900 to 1994 are given in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1 AmE

	<i>As if</i>		<i>As though</i>		
1900	AT	27	56 (82%)	1	12 (18%)
	HA	26		11	
	DI	3		0	
1930	AT	19	44 (83%)	2	9 (17%)
	HA	15		2	
	AM	10		5	
1960	AT4	11	25 (68%)	1	12 (32%)
	AT5	10		3	
	HA	4		8	
1994	TI	3	36 (86%)	0	6 (14%)
	HA	16		5	
	NE	17		1	

Table 2 BrE

	<i>As if</i>		<i>As though</i>		
1900	BL	19	28 (57%)	15	21 (43%)
	GE4	2		6	
	GE5	7		0	
1930	BL	13	17 (74%)	6	6 (26%)
	EN	4		0	
	EC	0		0	
1960	BL	4	9 (53%)	6	8 (47%)
	NE	3		2	
	EC	2		0	
1994	SP	6	13 (76%)	0	4 (24%)
	TA	3		4	
	EC	4		0	

Table 1 shows that in AmE *as if* has been used more frequently than *as though* at all times since the beginning of the twentieth century. Table 2 shows that also in BrE *as if* has been invariably used more often than *as though* since 1900, although in BrE there were times in the past when it was not as saliently used as in AmE. In 1994 *as if* is used in more than 80 percent of all the instances in both AmE and BrE. Regarding the frequency of *as if* and *as though*, Wood et al. (1981:34) simply summarizes it like this: "One form is used as frequently as the other." However, it is clear from the tables above that it is wrong. It would be more correct to say, "One form (*as though*) is not as frequently used as the other (*as if*)."

Then, why has *as if* been invariably made more frequent use of than *as though*? It is not very clear why this is so. Perhaps it may be attributable to a person's likes and dislikes, or the euphony of a sentence. Or the grammars that have suggested using *as if* instead of *as though* may have been influential. For example, even Partridge (1973:47) says, "The most one can say is that unless the nuance or of course euphony demands *as though*, you will do well to use *as if*." More recently, French (1987:18) recommends the use of *as if*, saying that *as if* is "the preferred form, but *as though* is acceptable." Jordan (1976:17) also says, "*as if* is preferred, but *as though* is not incorrect."

In addition to the reasons referred to above, there seems to be another reason why *as though* has been less often used. At one time the propriety of *as though* seems to have been considered dubious. Ward (1989:131) says:

At one time the propriety of *as though* used for *as if* was considered dubious. Bierce 1909 damns the locution with faint recognition, mentioning that *as though* does have its defenders. Bernstein wrestled with the problem in a 1957 *Winners & Sinners*; by Bernstein 1971 he has accepted. Everyone else who even mentions the matter finds *as though* and *as if* interchangeable.

However, I believe that this kind of doubt about *as though* has not disappeared, and that it is lingering even now. I suspect that this doubt has arisen from the commonly held misunderstanding about the *though* in *as though*: it has been wrongly construed as concessive. If it had been known that the *though* in *as though* means "if", and not concession, it

would have been accepted more readily.

3. The subjunctive and the indicative

Our next interest is which of the subjunctive and the indicative has been made more frequent use of in *as if*- and *as though*-constructions since the beginning of the twentieth century.

Before proceeding to this problem, it will be necessary to define what is meant by the subjunctive and what is meant by the indicative here, for the instances that do not belong to either of these two moods must be excluded here. Among the following (1) (2) (3), the first two sentences in (1) that contain *were* are instances of the subjunctive (cf. Greenbaum and Quirk 1990: 43-44). The sentence (2) that has *was* is an instance of the past indicative. The sentences in (3) are examples of the present indicative. An unreal or imaginary meaning becomes weaker as we go downward from (1) to (3).

- (1) ...he hunches over the screaming engine...as if he were trying to escape a swarm of hornets... (NE, Aug. 1, 1994)  
They looked at me as if I were the devil incarnate.... ( NE, Aug. 1, 1994)
- (2) It was as if I was receiving instructions. (HA, Aug. 1994)
- (3) Foster raises her voice a couple of octaves almost as though she is about to burst into tears. (TA, July 1994)  
Memory closes down on it, as if it wants to see the end there. (HA, Aug. 1994)  
Everyone looks as if they have been cast rather than merely thrown up by events. (SP, Aug. 6, 1994)

The following sentences in (4) do not contain the subjunctive *were* and therefore cannot be included in the present consideration of the subjunctive and the indicative.

- (4) a. It is almost as though she came out of the world this way.... (TA, July 1994)
- b. She seemed genuinely stricken, as if I had callously, or stupidly, broken an important spell. (HA, Aug. 1994)

The sentence (5) contains the subjunctive *were*, but it is ambiguous because it is either the subjunctive or the indicative. Such instances are excluded here.

- (5) Our conversations...had an air of secrecy about them, as if we were talking behind America's back. (NE, Aug. 1, 1994)

Furthermore, *as if* and *as though* can be followed by a preposition (6), an infinitive (7), a participle

- (8), a past participle (9), or the negative *not* (10).
- (6) My mother, in her yellow gown, sat as if in a trance. (HA, Aug. 1994)
- (7) His long arm goes out as if to make a point.... (HA, Aug. 1994)
- (8) Elena Nocera seemed uncomfortable, as if wanting to be sprung from the tight white gown she wore.... (HA, Aug. 1994)
- (9) But my father moved about the room, appearing purposely stiff, as though guided by the stately measures of a piece of music. (HA, Aug. 1994)
- (10) He holds the camera a long time on her, as though not willing to turn away. (HA, Aug. 1994)

The elliptic parts of (6)-(10) can be filled out like (6a)-(10a).

- (6a) My mother...sat as if (she was) (she were) in a trance.
- (7a) His long arm goes out as if (it was) (it were) (it was going) (it were going) to make....
- (8a) E. N. seemed uncomfortable, as if (she was) (she were) wanting....
- (9a) But my father moved about..., appearing..., as though (he was) (he were) guided....
- (10a) He holds the camera..., as though (he is) (he was) (he were) not willing....

The fact that first of all these elliptic *as if*- and *as though*-constructions do not have the verb *were* in them makes it necessary to eliminate them from our present consideration of the subjunctive and the indicative.

And the fact that even if the elliptic parts are filled out like the above, they are still ambiguous, makes it doubly necessary to exclude these instances here.

Table 3 gives the actual figures of the instances of the subjunctive and the indicative that appear in *as if*- and *as though*-constructions in both AmE and BrE.

Table 3 The subjunctive and the indicative

	The subjunctive	The indicative
1900	20	5
1930	8	9
1960	7	7
1994	8	14

It can be said from Table 3 that in the course of approximately one hundred years, the situation was completely reversed: although in the beginning of the twentieth century, there were more instances of the subjunctive than those of the indicative in AmE and BrE, later the instances of the subjunctive decreased by degrees, while those of the indicative increased gradually. As a result, in 1994, there are more instances of the indicative than those of the subjunctive in *as if*- and *as though*-constructions in AmE and BrE. It is not very clear why the use of the indicative has increased and that of the subjunctive has decreased recently. However, nowadays, in general, the gradual disappearance of the subjunctive and the increasing use of the indicative can be seen in other areas of English as well. Probably the gradual decrease of the use of the subjunctive and the growing use of the indicative in *as if*- and *as though*-constructions may be in keeping with this general trend.

One more thing to be taken especial notice of here is that the verbs *look* and *seem* are almost invariably used with the indicative rather than with the subjunctive in *as if*- and *as though*-clauses. In 1994, there are six instances of the uses of these verbs in the indicative in AmE and BrE as against one instance in the subjunctive. The sentences in (11) are instances of the indicative, and the sentence (12) is an instance of the subjunctive.

- (11) But it looks as if Sinn Fein is unwilling to renounce violence as a precondition for talking. (*TI*, Aug. 1, 1994)  
 ...it seems as if someone was pregnant. (*NE*, Aug. 1, 1994)
- (12) They looked at me as if I were the devil incarnate,.... (*NE*, Aug. 1, 1994)

When the verbs *look* and *seem* are used with the indicative in *as if*- and *as though*-clauses, these *as if* and *as though* seem to have the meaning that is equivalent to the conjunctions *that* or *like*. The instances in (11) can be changed like the following (11ab). As can be seen from the following, when the verb is *look*, *like* would be appropriate.

- (11a) But it looks like Sinn Fein is unwilling to renounce violence....  
 ...it seems like someone was pregnant.
- (11b) \*But it looks that Sinn Fein is unwilling to renounce violence...  
 ...it seems that someone was pregnant.

#### 4. A syntactical problem concerning a comma

Partridge (1973:47) says, "*as though* is rarely preceded by a comma; *as if* is usually preceded by a comma." However, in my present study, in 1994 there are four instances in which *as though* is preceded by commas as against five instances in which *as though* is not preceded by commas. Regarding *as if*, in 1994, there are 18 instances that are preceded by commas as against 39 instances that are not preceded by commas. In this way, while *as if* has more instances that are preceded by commas than *as though* does, it cannot be said that "*as if* is rarely preceded by a comma", nor can it be said that "*as if* is usually preceded by a comma." Moreover, in connection with the problem of a comma, there is another problem of significance that is not referred to by Partridge. That is, it should also be considered whether there is any difference in meaning at all between the cases in which *as if* and *as though* are preceded by commas and those in which they are not preceded by them. In general, the *as if*- or *as though*-clauses that follow commas mean that they are nonessential, and that they can be left out without changing the meanings of the original sentences.

Let us examine the following examples.

- (13) a. It was as if the solid earth had evaporated. (*NE*, Aug. 1, 1994)  
 b. \*It was, as if the solid earth had evaporated.
- (14) a. It seemed as if her mother was OK.... (*TA*, July 1994)  
 b. \*It seemed, as if her mother was OK....
- (15) a. Donny acts as if the truth would kill her son. (*HA*, Aug. 1994)  
 b. \*Donny acts, as if the truth would kill her son.
- (16) a. The young man's hands flew up to his face, as if he'd just remembered something important. (*NE*, Aug. 1, 1994)  
 b. The young man's hands flew up to his face as if he'd just remembered something important.

In (13a), (14a) and (15a), the *as if* clauses are the complements of the verbs *was*, *seemed* and *acts* respectively. These clauses are essential, and therefore they cannot be separated by commas from the main clauses like (13b), (14b) and (15b). In (16a) the writer of this sentence probably thought that the *as if*-clause was not essential, and consequently this clause could be left out. Probably the sentence (16b) is not what the writer of this sentence intended.

### 5. Concluding remarks

The period of about a hundred years does not seem to have brought any remarkable change to the frequency of *as if* and *as though*. *As if* was consistently used more frequently than *as though* in both AmE and BrE from the beginning of the twentieth century to 1994. It is not very clear why this is so. Perhaps it may be attributable to a person's likes and dislikes, or the euphony of a sentence. Or the grammars that have recommended the use of *as if* instead of *as though* may have been influential. In addition to these reasons, I suspect that *as though* has been used less frequently because the *though* in *as though* seems to have been mistaken for the concessive *though*. If it had been known that it means "if", and not concession, and *as if* and *as though* are one and the same thing, *as though* would not have been avoided so frequently.

The period of about a hundred years seems to have brought at least some change to the uses of the subjunctive and the indicative. In the beginning of the twentieth century, there were more instances of the subjunctive than those of the indicative in *as if*- and *as though*-constructions in both AmE and BrE. But this trend was gradually reversed, and in 1994 there are more instances of the indicative than those of the subjunctive. I cannot say with certainty why this is so. However, the gradual disappearance of the subjunctive, the complete disappearance of which is utterly unlikely, and the increasing informalization, are not solely confined to *as if* and *as though*.

Nowadays the verbs *look* and *seem* are almost invariably used with the indicative rather than with

the subjunctive. The *as if* and *as though* used with those verbs have the meaning equivalent to the conjunctions *that* or *like*. However, when the verb is *look*, *like* would be appropriate.

As regards the problem of a comma, while there are not a few instances in which *as though* is preceded by a comma, *as if*-constructions have more of these instances. *As if*- and *as though*-clauses that are preceded by commas mean that these clauses are not essential, that they can be eliminated without changing the meanings of the original sentences, and that they are used merely to add various meanings to the main clauses.

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# *As If* と *As Though*

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**要 旨** as if と as though はほとんど同じ意味で使われているが、ここでは1900年から1994年までの100年ほどの間に英米においてこの2つのうちどちらかがより多く使われてきたか、また20世紀末の現在の英米語ではどちらがより頻繁に使われているかを見、あわせて、頻度の差が現れる原因、理由を考えてみた。参考にした資料はここ100年ほどの間に英米で発行された雑誌24冊である。これらの雑誌がそれぞれ完全に英米を代表する雑誌であるとは考えていないが、おおよその傾向は分かるはずである。

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