THE IF YOU BE CONSTRUCTION
AS A SPEECH ACT CONSTRUCTION

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The if you be construction, exemplified by sentences like If you be quiet, I'll take you to the zoo, has never gone through an in-depth grammatical analysis. The present paper investigates its syntax and semantics closely and argues that it counts as an independent speech act construction which conventionally conveys a request in exchange for a reward. It also explores the relation between the form and function of the construction and reveals that most of its syntactic properties are reducible to its communicative function and that its formal markedness is in proportion to its functional specialization.*

Keywords: if you be construction, speech act construction, functional motivation for syntax, formal markedness, functional specialization

1. Introduction

This paper is concerned with an idiomatic and colloquial conditional construction in English which contains the sequence if you be. It is illustrated by sentences like the following:

(1) a. If you be good, I'll get you a present.
    (Ransom (1986: 66, fn. 15))

b. If you be quiet, you can stay here. (Davies (1986: 100))

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We will call expressions of this kind the *if you be* construction. Perhaps because of its very idiomatic and colloquial nature, the *if you be* construction has not been paid enough attention to in the literature. True, there are a few studies, such as Palmer (1974), Davies (1986), and Ransom (1986), that give examples of the construction, but they do not make its whole picture clear.

The present paper is devoted to giving a full description of the nature of the *if you be* construction from both syntactic and semantic/pragmatic perspectives. Section 2 describes the surface syntax of the *if you be* construction and shows that it is a partially fixed construction. Section 3 examines the semantics/pragmatics of the *if you be* construction and points out that it counts as a speech act construction and functions as a request in exchange for a reward. Section 4 compares the *if you be* construction with the present subjunctive construction and argues that the former is different from the latter and should be regarded as an independent construction. Section 5 investigates the relation between the form and function of the *if you be* construction and demonstrates that it is systematic in the following two respects: (i) most of its syntactic properties are reducible to its communicative function and (ii) its formal markedness is in proportion to its functional specialization. Section 6 is a short conclusion.

There is one thing that has to be noted before entering into the discussion. As is often the case with idiomatic and colloquial expressions, acceptability judgments of the *if you be* construction vary widely from speaker to speaker. There are even speakers who are dubious about the existence of the construction to start with. The argument in this paper is based on judgments by our informant, who is a speaker of Midwestern American English, in order to keep its consistency. See the appendix for a brief discussion of this issue.

2. The Syntax of the *If You Be* Construction

We will begin by describing the syntax of the *if you be* construction and show that the construction is partially fixed. In doing so, we will focus on the protasis, for it is the protasis, rather than the apodosis, that

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1 I am indebted to two anonymous reviewers for their comments on this point.
involves syntactic idiosyncrasies pertaining to the partially fixed status of the construction.

A first property concerns the conjunction which introduces the protasis. It is sometimes the case that *if*-clauses can be replaced with *when*-clauses, as in sentences like *If/When there’s smoke, there’s fire* (Quirk et al. (1985: 1086)), and idiomatic phrases like *if/when it comes to the point* (OALD⁶). The alternation, however, is not possible in the *if you be* construction, and the protasis has to be introduced by *if*, as shown in (2b):

(2)  a. If you be nice, I’ll give you a big kiss.
    b. *When you be nice, I’ll give you a big kiss.

Secondly, the subject of the protasis is restricted to *you*. Changing the person of the subject yields unacceptability:

(3)  a. If you be a good girl, I’ll give you a piece of candy.
    b. *If John be a good boy at the kindergarten, I’ll take him to the zoo.

As is generally the case with constructions other than imperatives, the protasis prohibits the absence of the subject:

(4)  *If be quiet, I’ll give you a big kiss.

Thirdly, as suggested by the occurrence of *be*, the main verb of the protasis lacks tense inflection. In this connection it is worth noting that, as is well-known, nonfinite *be* does not undergo auxiliary reduction and that the *be* in question does not, either, as seen in (5b):²

(5)  a. If you be quiet, I’ll take you to the zoo.
    b. *If you’re quiet, I’ll take you to the zoo.

This contrasts with finite *be*. For instance, the *are* in (6a) may be reduced, as in (6b):

(6)  a. If you are quiet, I’ll take you to the zoo.
    b. If you’re quiet, I’ll take you to the zoo.

With respect to verbs other than *be*, we cannot tell whether they are in the present tense or in the bare-stem form, because, as we have just seen, the subject of the protasis is restricted to *you*. We therefore keep those verbs other than *be* out of discussion.

A fourth syntactic property has to do with negation. The protasis

² I am grateful to Masao Okazaki for drawing my attention to this issue.
rejects negation with *not: 

(7)  
a. *If you not be naughty, I’ll take you to the zoo.  
b. *If you not be a bad boy, I’ll give you many pieces of candy.  

This contrasts with the present subjunctive construction, which is compatible with negation with *not, as in The senate has decreed that such students not be exempted from college dues (Quirk et al. (1985: 156)).  

In addition, the situation does not improve even if supportive *do is inserted:  

(8)  
a. *If you don’t be naughty, I’ll take you to the zoo.  
b. *If you don’t be a bad boy, I’ll give you many pieces of candy.  

Note also that the protasis is incompatible with emphatic *do as well:  

(9)  
a. *If you do be nice, I’ll play with you in the yard.  
b. *If you do be a good girl, I’ll give you a piece of candy.  

In this respect, the protasis is different from imperatives, which are compatible with either supportive or emphatic *do, as seen in Don’t be silly/Do be nice (Stockwell et al. (1973: 660)).  

Fifth, it is possible for adverbs to intervene either between if and you or between you and be:  

(10) If, on the other hand, you be nice, I’ll give you a big kiss.  

(11) a. If you never be naughty again, I’ll take you to the zoo.  
     (cf. *If you be never naughty again, I’ll take you to the zoo.)  
     b. If you {always/just} be quiet, I’ll give you a big kiss.  

In (10) the conjunctive adverb on the other hand intervenes between if and you, and in (11) the preverbal adverbs never, always, and just between you and be. Thus, though what makes the if you be construction morphosyntactically marked is the sequence if you be, it is not the case that it is completely frozen. The acceptability of (11a) also shows that the protasis can be negated with never, although it precludes negation with *not, as we have seen in (7) and (8).  

Sixth, a wide variety of syntactic categories can follow the sequence if you be:  

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3 Fuller discussion will be presented in section 4 about the differences between the if you be and present subjunctive constructions.
(12)  
\begin{enumerate}
\item If you be \([\text{AP nice}]\), Father will buy you a toy.
\item If you be \([\text{NP a good girl}]\), I'll give you a piece of candy. \((=3a))\)
\item If you be \([\text{PP on time for class tomorrow}]\), I'll reward you.
\item If you be \([\text{VP guided by what I say}]\), I'll give you whatever you want.
\end{enumerate}

As illustrated, either an AP, NP, PP, or VP can follow it. The protasis shows (partial) productivity mainly in this position.\(^4\)

Finally, the protasis, like adverbial clauses in general, can precede or follow the apodosis:

\begin{enumerate}
\item If you be quiet, I'll take you to the zoo. \((=5a))\)
\item I'll take you to the zoo, if you be quiet.
\end{enumerate}

From the observations made so far, the surface syntax of the \textit{if you be} construction is schematized as follows:

\begin{equation}
[C (lause)1 if (ADV) you (ADV) be XP], C2
\end{equation}

The parentheses indicate optional materials. The "X" stands for either A, N, P or V. The comma indicates that the order of the two clauses is reversible. As the schema indicates, the \textit{if you be} construction is syntactically fixed in that the protasis is subject to the three lexical specifications (i) that it be introduced by the conjunction \textit{if}, (ii) that the subject be \textit{you}, and (iii) that the (main) verb be the bare stem \textit{be}. At the same time, the construction is syntactically flexible in that it allows variants as far as they are not in contradiction with the three specifications. Thus, the \textit{if you be} construction is syntactically characterized as a partially fixed construction. We will consider its function in the next section.

3. The Semantics/Pragmatics of the \textit{If You Be} Construction

The \textit{if you be} construction is a colloquial expression and its most

\(^4\) Although these syntactic categories can follow the sequence in principle, it is AP that is the most unmarked category among them, according to my informant. It is, therefore, expected that there would be variation among speakers in their acceptability judgments of examples involving the other three categories.
appropriate context is one in which a parent tries to coax his/her child into doing something. In relation to this contextual property, it has four interrelated functional idiosyncrasies.

A first idiosyncrasy is concerned with the function of the protasis. Observe the following example:

(15) If you be quiet while the dentist examines you, I’ll buy you whatever you want.

(15) is paraphrased roughly as Be quiet while the dentist examines you, and I’ll buy you whatever you want. As the paraphrase of the protasis into an imperative suggests, the protasis describes what is requested by the speaker, which, as we will see shortly, is further confirmed by the existence of certain grammatical reflexes.

The protasis is compatible with preverbal please, as observed in the following:

(16) a. If you please be quiet, I’ll give you a big kiss.
    (cf. *If you be please quiet, I’ll give you a big kiss.)
  b. If you please be a good girl, I’ll buy you whatever you want.
    (cf. *If you be please a good girl, I’ll buy you whatever you want.)

What then does this fact tell us about the nature of the protasis?

It is widely accepted that the distribution of please in preverbal position is restricted and that it is grammatical only in constructions which conventionally convey a request in the sense of Grice (1975) (cf. Sadock (1974), Morgan (1978), and Stefanowitsch (2003) among others). To illustrate the point, let us consider the following grammatical contrast pointed out by Sadock (1974: 104):

(17) a. Will you please close the door?
    b. *When will you please close the door?

Sadock’s argument is summarized as follows: the compatibility with preverbal please in (17a) suggests that the interrogative sentence Will you close the door? is conventionally used as a request, and the incompatibility in (17b) that When will you close the door? only conversationally functions as a request.

With this in mind, let us return to the if you be construction. The grammaticality of the examples in (16) tells us that the protasis conventionally conveys a request and further that although the protasis is expressed as an adverbial clause, realization of the event described by it
is requested by the speaker.\textsuperscript{5} Thus, the protasis belongs to what Lakoff (1984, 1987: 473–481) calls “performative subordinate clauses.”

By contrast, the protases of the following indicative conditionals do not allow preverbal please, although they appear similar to that of the if you be construction, except that the verbs are inflected in the former:

(18) a. *If you \{please are/are please\} quiet, I’ll give you a big kiss.
   b. *If you \{please are/are please\} a good girl, I’ll buy you whatever you want.

The unacceptability indicates that these protases do not conventionally convey a request, unlike that of the if you be construction.

Given that the protasis of the if you be construction conventionally expresses what is requested by the speaker, it is easily predicted that its predicate must describe controllable situations. This is in fact the case:

(19) a. *If you be 7 years old, I’ll take you abroad. (So be patient now.)
   b. *If you be a genius, I’ll buy you whatever you want. (So read as many books as you can.)

Both of the predicates of the protases in (19) describe situations over which the subject cannot have control; one cannot control his age or intelligence. Hence (19a, b) are both unacceptable. Note also that even when a controllable act is inferred by the sentences in (19) as indicated by the parenthesized materials, their acceptability does not

\textsuperscript{5} This might sound unnatural, but there are some other cases in which an if-clause is used to convey a request. Observe the following examples, whose if-clauses contain modal auxiliaries:

(\textit{i}) a. I have not heard back from you since then, and I wondered if you could please confirm that you are still interested in receiving a copy of the tape?
   b. If you will please hold the line a moment I will see if Mr Wyatt is available.
   c. Now, if you would please excuse me. (The British National Corpus)

As suggested by the occurrence of preverbal please, all of these if-clauses describe what is requested by the speaker. In (ia), the if-clause is used nominally and functions as the complement of the verb \textit{wonder}. In (ib) it is used adverbially like that of the \textit{if you be} construction. In (ic) it occurs independently as if it were a main clause. For an analysis of “independent” if-clauses like (ic), see Panther and Thornburg (2003).
improve; the protasis must directly describe what is requested by the speaker.

In this connection, let us reconsider example (12d), *If you be guided by what I say, I'll give you whatever you want*. At first sight, the fact that it is acceptable might appear incompatible with what we have just said, since the subject of this clause might be considered to be a patient. But a little reflection shows that there is nothing problematic in (12d), for the predicate be guided by what I say means something like *follow what I say* and in fact it can be used as an imperative:

(20)  Be guided by what I say. (Quirk et al. (1985: 827))

Thus, although the protasis of (12d) is in the passive voice, its subject still has control over the described situation. As expected, complete loss of control by the subject of the protasis results in unacceptability, as in (19):

(21)  *If you be praised by your teacher, I'll tell your father to buy you that toy you want.*

In (21) it is the teacher, not the hearer, who is responsible for the realization of the state of affairs described by the protasis. The hearer, being a patient, has no control over the situation described. As we have seen, the protasis of the if you be construction conventionally expresses what the speaker requests the hearer to carry out.

A second idiosyncrasy involves the function of the apodosis, which is reflected in the following grammatical fact:

(22)  a.  *If you be good, sit down.*  
      b.  *If you be a good boy, go to bed now.*

As shown in (22), the apodosis cannot be an imperative. This, we argue, means that the speaker of the if you be construction offers to the hearer what the apodosis describes as a reward. A reward is supposed to be what (the giver, i.e. the speaker for our purposes, assumes) is desirable to the receiver, i.e. the hearer. The imperative construction generally conveys what is requested by the speaker and its content is what is desirable to the speaker, but not necessarily to the hearer. The imperative construction is therefore not considered to be a description of a reward, which is incompatible with the function of the apodosis. Hence the unacceptability of the sentences in (22). As easily predicted, the apodosis of conditionals other than the if you be construction readily occurs in the imperative mood:

(23)  *If you get to Berlin, please ring me up.*

(Wunderlich (1977: 31))
A third characteristic has to do with the illocutionary force of the if you be construction as a whole. To understand this, it is useful to begin by reconsidering example (15). In (15), the protasis expresses the mother’s desire that her son be quiet and the apodosis her promise to meet that desire of her son for a present which is assumed by her. From the speaker’s viewpoint, the protasis, rather than the apodosis, describes what is most important to her, since it is the former that expresses what she herself wants. Recall here that the protasis of the if you be construction conventionally functions as a request and that the apodosis counts as a reward. Hence by uttering (15), she requests her son to keep quiet during the examination in exchange for a reward expressed as the promise that she will buy him whatever he wants. Most importantly, the if you be construction conventionalizes this illocutionary force or the speaker’s subjective stance, which has a certain grammatical ramification.

The performative expression I hereby promise, as its very form suggests, requires its complement as a whole to function as a (genuine) promise. The conditional sentence If you are good, I’ll take you to the zoo, which uncontroversially functions as a promise, readily occurs with it:

(24) I hereby promise that if you are good, I’ll take you to the zoo.

The promise expressed by the apodosis can be emphasized by the performative, which shows that the protasis does not have any serious effect on the illocutionary force of the whole sentence. In such cases, the apodosis is functionally more prominent than the protasis.

By contrast, if we embed the if you be construction into I hereby promise, it sounds less acceptable than (24):

(25) ?I hereby promise that if you be good, I’ll take you to the zoo.

The difference in acceptability between (24) and (25) means that the protasis of the if you be construction, which conventionally conveys a request, is functionally more prominent than the apodosis. This functional prominence inherent in the protasis clashes with the function of the performative, which necessarily foregrounds the promise described by the apodosis. Hence the marginality of (25). Thus, the if you be construction is used to convey a request in exchange for a reward which is often expressed as a promise, although it appears to function as a promise in exchange for a request.
The fourth idiosyncrasy concerns the flexibility of the communicative function of the *if you be* construction. Akatsuka’s (1998) analysis of conditionals helps to understand this point. Her claim can be summarized for our purposes as follows: in a conditional, (i) if the protasis states what is desirable to the speaker, then the apodosis must be about what the speaker supposes to be desirable to the hearer (DESIRABLE-LEADS-TO-DESIRABLE (Akatsuka (1998: 15)), and (ii) if the former states what is undesirable to the speaker, then the latter must be about what the speaker supposes to be undesirable to the hearer (UNDESIRABLE-LEADS-TO-UNDESIRABLE (ibid.)). As she observes, conditionals in general and what Bolinger (1977) calls “conditional imperatives” can describe either of these two situations:

6 For more comprehensive analyses of the latter construction, see Bolinger (1977), Davies (1986), and Clark (1993) among others.
Let us return now to the if you be construction. It does not have the functional flexibility shared by the three constructions mentioned above. Observe the following:

(29)  
   a. If you be nice, I’ll give you a big kiss. ($=2a$)
   b. ?If you be naughty again, I’ll slap you.

(30)  
   a. If you be a good girl, I’ll give you a piece of candy.
       ($=3a$)
   b. ?If you be a bad boy again, I’ll give you a punch on the head.

As the contrast between the (a) and (b) sentences shows, if we force the if you be construction to describe undesirable situations, it sounds bookish, and thus clashes with its colloquial flavor. Hence the marginality of the (b) sentences in (29) and (30). Thus, the if you be construction can describe desirable situations but cannot describe undesirable ones, which, together with what we have seen in this section, shows that the construction can function as a request in exchange for a reward, but cannot express a prohibition with a threat. In this way, the communicative function of the if you be construction is fixed.

Why, then, does the if you be construction exhibit this tendency? The key to the question lies in the contextual specification pointed out at the very outset of this section. From this contextual specification, it may safely be inferred that parental love has something to do with the function of the construction; it urges parents to say what they hope for their children in a positive way.

All these observations naturally lead us to characterize the communicative function of the if you be construction as follows:

(31)  
The if you be construction is conventionally used to request the hearer to bring about the state of affairs expressed in the protasis in exchange for a reward described by the apodosis.

The if you be construction is thus best characterized as an instance of what Lakoff (1984: 473, 1987: 474) calls “speech act constructions, that is, constructions that are restricted in their use to expressing certain illocutionary forces that are specified as part of the grammar of English” (cf. also Sadock and Zwicky (1985)).

Our discussion so far has clarified the syntax and semantics of the if you be construction. Here, two questions arise as to (i) whether the if you be construction is an instance of a more general construction, and (ii) what the relation between the syntax and semantics of the construction is. In the following two sections, we will consider these questions
4. Comparison of the *If You Be* Construction with the Present Subjunctive Construction

Is it possible to identify the *if you be* construction with any established construction? At first sight, (the protasis of) the *if you be* construction might appear to be an instance of the present subjunctive construction. Ransom (1986: 66, fn. 15), classifying example (1a) as a present subjunctive, in fact assimilates the two constructions in question. This view appears to gain empirical support, because in both constructions, the main verb occurs uninflected and *do*-support is prohibited, as (32) and (33) show, respectively:

(32) a. If you be good, I’ll get you a present. (=1a)
    b. It was intended that you be the candidate.

(Quirk et al. (1986: 1014))

(33) a. *If you do be nice, I’ll play with you in the yard. (=9a)
    b. *It is important that Bill do be polite.

(Culicover (1976: 151))

However, the syntactic parallels in (32) and (33) only suggest the possibility that the two constructions are related; they do not entail that the two are identical at all. In fact, there is abundant syntactic and semantic/pragmatic evidence against the identification, as will be seen below.

4.1. Syntactic Differences

A first syntactic difference is observed in the following contrast:

(34) a. *If John be a good boy at the kindergarten, I’ll take him to the zoo. (=3b)
    b. I am anxious that John be allowed to go.

(Chiba (1987: 6))

The subject of the *if you be* construction is restricted to *you*, as seen in section 2. In contrast, that of the present subjunctive construction is not.

Secondly, as shown in section 2, the protasis of the *if you be* con-
struction rejects negation with *not*, while the present subjunctive construction requires it. We repeat the relevant examples here:

(35)  
a. *If you not be naughty, I’ll take you to the zoo. (=(7a))  
b. The senate has decreed that such students not be exempted from college dues.

In this way, the *if you be* construction is syntactically more constrained than the present subjunctive construction, which means that they are syntactically different.

4.2. Semantic/Pragmatic Differences

There are also semantic/pragmatic differences between the *if you be* and present subjunctive constructions. A first semantic difference is a contextual one. The *if you be* construction is a colloquial expression, as pointed out at the outset of section 3. By contrast, the use of the present subjunctive mood in an *if*-clause is by no means colloquial. Quirk et al. (1985: 1012), giving the example *If any person be found guilty, he shall have the right of appeal*, state that “the present subjunctive ... is used very occasionally in formal style in open conditional clauses” (see also James (1986: 5, 7)). This statement is empirically justified; the following examples are judged to be unacceptable or stylistically infelicitous because they sound unnecessarily bookish:

(36)  
a. *If it rain tomorrow, I won’t go to school.  
b. *Taro will not go on if his effort not be rewarded.

Secondly, the *if you be* construction can describe only desirable situations, while the present subjunctive construction can describe either desirable or undesirable situations, as observed in (29) and (28), repeated below as (37) and (38), respectively:

(37)  
a. If you be nice, I’ll give you a big kiss.  
b. ?If you be naughty again, I’ll slap you.

(38)  
a. It is desirable that John leave.  
b. It is undesirable that a male teacher make a personal visit to his female student even if it is for academic purposes.

The final difference has to do with the kind of situations described by the two constructions. The protasis of the *if you be* construction cannot describe uncontrollable situations, as pointed out in section 3, while the present subjunctive construction can:

(39)  
a. *If you be 7 years old, I’ll take you abroad. (=(19a))  
b. It is imperative that you understand this part of the
book. (Stockwell et al. (1973: 665))
(cf. *Understand this part of the book. (Stockwell et al. (1973: 664)))

It is now clear that the if you be construction is functionally more constrained than the present subjunctive construction, which means that they are semantically different, too.

These observations argue strongly against the identification of the if you be construction with the present subjunctive construction. Thus, the if you be construction should be seen as an independent construction.

5. The Relation between the Form and Function of the If You Be Construction

We will now consider the second question posed at the end of section 4: What is the relation between the form and function of the if you be construction? In view of the idiosyncratic nature of the construction observed so far, one might suppose that it is arbitrary. However, closer inspection reveals that the form and function of the construction are correlated systematically.

5.1. Functional Motivation for the Syntax

As made clear in section 3, the if you be construction has a fixed illocutionary force. Recall also that, as observed in section 2, (the protasis of) the construction is syntactically fixed as well. Thus, semantic specialization correlates with syntactic specialization in the if you be construction.

This is reminiscent of what is the case with performatives in general.\(^8\) Levinson (1983: 232) points out that among the four sentences in (40), only (40a), a first person indicative active sentence in the present tense, can be uttered performatively:

\[(40) \quad \text{a. I bet you five pounds it'll rain tomorrow.}
\]
\[\quad \text{b. I am betting you five pounds it'll rain tomorrow.}
\]
\[\quad \text{c. I betted you five pounds it'll rain tomorrow.}
\]
\[\quad \text{d. He bets you five pounds it'll rain tomorrow.}
\]

\(^8\) I am indebted to Masao Okazaki for bringing this parallelism to my attention.
As Levinson (1983: 231) notes, this is just as expected if we assume that "in uttering a performativethe speaker is concurrently performing an action." Thus, the communicative function of a construction is closely related to its syntax.

With the above discussion in mind, notice again that the if/when alternation is not possible in the if you be construction as seen in (2), repeated here as (41):

(41) a. If you be nice, I'll give you a big kiss.
   b. *When you be nice, I'll give you a big kiss.

Quirk et al. (1985: 1086) point out the following: “[t]he meaning of several subordinators that express time, place, or condition may be neutralized in certain contexts to convey a more abstract notion of recurrent or habitual contingency.” The if you be construction, however, does not express such a contingency. Rather, the dependence relation between what the protasis and apodosis respectively describe holds only in the context of utterance, as is clear from the function described in (31). In this way, it does not fulfill the licensing condition for the alternation. Hence the impossibility of the alternation in (41).

Next, recall that the subject of the protasis must refer to the hearer. We repeat the examples in (3) as (42) below:

(42) a. If you be a good girl, I'll give you a piece of candy.
   b. *If John be a good boy at the kindergarten, I'll take him to the zoo.

This subject specification is also reducible to the function of the construction. Since the construction tells the hearer to carry out what the predicate of the protasis describes, its subject must refer to that hearer, who is supposed to be responsible for the action.9

In this way, we can straightforwardly account for why the construction in question has the form it has by taking its function into consideration (cf. Hirose (1991)).

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9 As pointed out by an anonymous reviewer, it might be possible to argue that the function of the if you be construction only requires that what the protasis describes be controllable by the hearer; the subject of the protasis might not have to be you. We do not have enough data to consider this possibility, however. We will not pursue it any further in this paper.
5.2. Formal Markedness and Functional Specialization

As for the third lexical specification, that the main verb of the protasis be be, we have no functional account of it. This syntactic fact, however, offers another important insight into the relation between the form and function of the if you be construction.

The first thing to be noticed is that the occurrence of the bare stem be is against the general tendency for the main verb of if-clauses (or finite clauses in general) to agree with the subject. In this sense, the if you be construction is considered to be syntactically unusual or marked. In addition, as seen in section 3, the construction is functionally specialized to express a request in exchange for a reward. Thus, as far as the if you be construction is concerned, we can safely say that formal markedness is in proportion to functional specialization (cf. Horn (1984) and Levinson (2000) for a related pragmatic view).¹⁰

A comparison of the if you be construction with ordinary or unmarked conditionals helps to understand this point well. Consider again the examples in (29) and (26), repeated here as (43) and (44), respectively:

(43)  a. If you be nice, I’ll give you a big kiss.
    b. ?If you be naughty again, I’ll slap you.

(44)  a. If you eat your spinach, you’ll be strong.
    b. If you don’t eat your spinach, I’ll spank you.

To repeat our argument in section 3, the if you be construction can only describe desirable situations, while the ordinary conditional construction can describe either desirable or undesirable situations. Thus, the functional range of the if you be construction, which is syntactically marked, is narrower than that of the ordinary conditional construction, which is syntactically unmarked.

To sum up, we can say that there are systematic correspondences between the form and function of the if you be construction despite its apparent idiosyncrasy.

¹⁰ I am indebted to Manabu Kusayama for his suggestive comments, which have helped me to clarify this point.
6. Conclusion

Our close investigation of the syntax and semantics of the if you be construction has revealed that it is a partially fixed construction and counts as a speech act construction which conventionally conveys a request in exchange for a reward. The comparison of the if you be construction with the present subjunctive construction has made clear that the former is different from the latter and hence should be seen as an independent construction. We have further argued that the form and function of the if you be construction are systematically correlated in that most of the syntactic specifications are functionally motivated and that the formal markedness is in proportion to the functional specialization.

Appendix: Idiolectal Variation

Our argument above is based on judgments by our informant in order to maintain its coherence. It would be fair to note here that for unknown reasons judgments of the if you be construction vary among speakers. For one thing, there are speakers who accept the negation of the protasis with don’t. (In what follows, the parenthesized examples indicate judgments by our informant.)

(45) a. If you don’t be quick, you’ll miss them.  
(Palmer (1974: 153))
(cf. *?If you don’t be quick, you’ll miss them.)
b. If you don’t be quiet I’ll smack you! (Swan (1980: 95))
(cf. *?If you don’t be quiet I’ll smack you!)
c. If you don’t be quiet, I’ll send you away.  
(Davies (1986: 101))
(cf. *?If you don’t be quiet, I’ll send you away.)

Of special note here is a comment by Swan, who points out that (45b) has “a similar meaning to imperative sentences.” Note further that for these speakers, what we call the if you be construction can also describe undesirable situations, as shown by the examples in (45). It seems that for them, the if you be construction is syntactically and functionally more flexible than described above in the sense that it (also) allows negation with don’t and can describe undesirable situations in addition to desirable ones.

What is important in relation to our argument is, however, that even
for these relatively "liberal" speakers, the protasis of the if you be construction seems to receive more functional prominence than the apodosis, given an appropriate context, which is reflected in the above comment by Swan.

To make matters more complicated, Palmer (1974: 153–154) and Davies (1986: 100–104) point out that the following sentences, whose protases involve a third person singular subject, are also possible:

(46) a. If he doesn't be a good boy, I shan't give him anything.
    (Palmer (1974: 153))
    (cf. *If he doesn't be a good boy, I shan’t give him anything.)

b. If she doesn't be careful she’ll get into trouble.
    (Davies (1986: 101))
    (cf. *If she doesn’t be careful she’ll get into trouble.)

Related to our argument is the fact that (46a, b) convey assertions and that the protases no longer function as performative subordinate clauses; they convey neither a request nor a prohibition.

The possibility of do-support observed in (45) and (46) has led Palmer to posit a separate full verb be, which accidentally lacks inflectional morphology. Davies, giving the following contrast, argues against Palmer’s approach:

(47) a. If he doesn't be quick, he'll miss the train.
    b. *If he be quick, he’ll catch the train.
    (Davies (1986: 102))

When the subject of the protasis is in the third person singular, the protasis has to be negated with doesn’t. The judgments in (47) reject Palmer’s hypothesis, since it would incorrectly predict that (47a, b) are equally acceptable.

Finally, even for these liberals, it is still necessary for the protasis to describe a controllable situation or, to follow Davies’s terminology, “a dynamic act of being”:

(48) *If you don’t be happy here, we can leave.
    (Davies (1986: 102))

Based on this fact, Davies (1986: 104) accounts for the tendency for the be to occur more freely when accompanied by do, indicated by the contrast in (47), as follows: “the use of do with be in if- ... constructions is a means of expressing a semantic distinction, allowing the specification of a dynamic reading.” Note that this observation is compatible with the correlation between formal markedness and functional specialization.
Davies’s observation suggests that speakers who accept (45)-(47a) have a conditional construction with the bare stem *be* which follows only a functional specification that it describe dynamic eventualities and hence does not count as a speech act construction. Given this, what we call the *if you be* construction would be taken as a construction token, which is related to this more general construction type.

As argued in section 3, the *if you be* construction conventionalizes the speaker’s subjective attitude. Hence, the conditional construction in question might be derived by “desubjectifying” the *if you be* construction, or conversely, the latter by “subjectifying” the former (cf. Traugott and Dasher (2002) among others).

We, however, do not have enough data to discuss this matter or to offer a satisfactory account for why these idiolectal variations should exist. Therefore, we simply mention the two possibilities here without further comment.

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