

# Binary Structure of English Preterit Subjunctive

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## I English is a simplified European language

English is a European language of which the grammatical structure is considerably simplified. It has lost much of its former complicated structures consisting of declensions and conjugations, which are still used in other European languages. The conjugation system based on person, number, and tense has virtually disappeared for English verbs except “be”. We can see a trace of this system only in the use of “-s” for third person / singular / present. Preterite forms of regular conjugation verbs are made just by putting “-ed” after the root. This is quite different from typical conjugation systems of other European languages.

Some obsolete grammatical structures are compensated for by other structures which are simpler and more rational. For example, the concept of “case” formerly expressed by declensions is often expressed now by prepositions. It is possible to consider that in Present English the traditional complicated grammatical structures of other European languages has been replaced by a rational grammatical system that combines simple elements.

## II Confusion between form and meaning in the English subjunctive

Language has two aspects — form and meaning. Language is a place and structure where form and meaning meet. The two aspects, however, tend to be confused. The confusion is severe in the consideration of the English subjunctive. In current grammar books, the subjunctive is usually classified into subjunctive past, subjunctive past perfect, subjunctive present, and subjunctive future. Among them, the first and the second are labelled according to their forms, and the third and the fourth to their meanings.

There has been much confusion between form and meaning in the study of the English subjunctive, among previous grammarians (e.g. Curme, Jespersen, Kruisinga, Long, Onions, Poutsma, Scheurweghs, Sonnenschein, Sweet, Zandvoort). Explanations about the subjunctive in grammar books are extremely complicated because of that confusion.

## III English subjunctive as a fossil

The subjunctive of Present English is something like a fossil. Its original structure disappeared but its usage has remained. There was an actual and concrete structure for the subjunctive in Old English. Conjugations specific to the subjunctive, like in Latin and German, existed. In Present English, those conjugations, which functioned as the factor to distinguish the subjunctive and indicative mood, have been leveled out and worn away, and have disappeared.

The English subjunctive takes a different form from the indicative in using the “root” for the subjunctive present, and using “were”, regardless of person and number, for the subjunctive past. The “root” and “were”, however, are not forms specific to the subjunctive. Present English doesn’t have conjugation or any form specific to the subjunctive.

#### IV English subjunctive is based on Latin

The history of English is dynamic especially because of its contact and conflict with French in the Middle English Period. As a result, the structure of English was unstable even in the Modern English Period. Also, such an incredible phenomenon as the Great Vowel Shift caused great confusion in English and might have made English more unstable.

Then, after the Renaissance and the Reformation, vernacularism came up in Europe as a part of modernization of society. British people also made efforts to standardize English. When formalized modern European languages were created, their grammars were based on Latin which had been the common academic language in Europe. The English subjunctive was formed based on the Latin subjunctive.

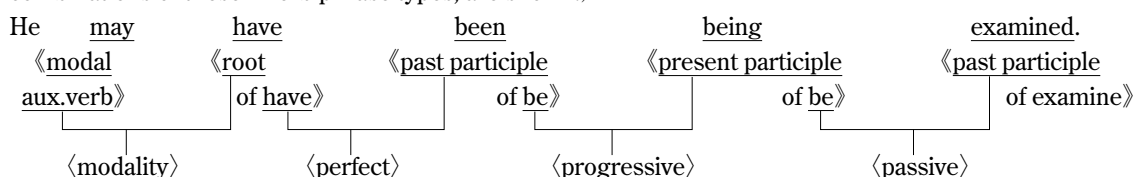
Here I describe the formation of Present English subjunctive as reorganization of the system, from a synthetic to an analytic one. After the synthetic structure of the Old English subjunctive, consisting of conjugations, faded away, an analytic system to express the subjunctive developed and replaced the old one. What should be kept in mind is that the morphological structure of the Old English subjunctive disappeared yet its function remained.

#### V From synthetic to analytic language (development of periphrases)

English, in its dynamic history, has changed from a synthetic language to an analytic language. The main aspect of an analysis of something is to separate it into its parts and, in general, the simplest division is a division into two parts. There are two types of two-parts-divisions: the dual-element structure and the binary structure. The former is the structure of two coexisting elements, and the latter is an either-or structure, like an electrical switch which is either on or off.

English, through its change from a synthetic language to an analytic one, developed many periphrases of dual-element structure. Periphrasis is the grammatical expression using two or more words together instead of using one word and changing its form. Examples are: future tense (will/shall + root), perfect tense (have + past participle), progressive form (be + present participle), and passive form (be + past participle).

What is important is that it is possible to combine more than one periphrastic structure. For example, “He may have been being examined.” (a sentence of the modal, perfective, progressive, and passive verb phrase) can be analysed as below. (Cited from R.Quirk, S.Greenbaum, G.Leech, J.Svartvik 1972, 1976<sup>6</sup> *Grammar of Contemporary English* London: Longman, p.73, where 11 different sentences, in various combinations of these 4 verb phrase types, are shown.)

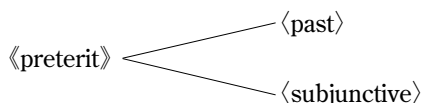


N.B. In this paper, to make a clear distinction between form and meaning, brackets 《》 are used for form, and brackets ⟨⟩ for meaning.

## VI Dual-element structure and binary structure of English subjunctive

Periphrasis is often used for the subjunctive. Though, as remarked in III, the conjugation for the subjunctive which existed in Old English does not exist in Present English, there has always been a need for subjunctive expressions. As a result, Old English subjunctives expressed by conjugations came to be expressed by periphrases in Present English. An Old English sentence “Ic gelêfe þæt he cume.” is translated as “I believe that he may come.”

As mentioned in V, periphrasis is of “dual-element structure”. In this paper, focus is put on another structure consisting of two elements — “binary structure”. This paper will show that the subjunctive past of Present English has the binary structure of ⟨past tense⟩ and ⟨subjunctive mood⟩, with 《preterit》 as the pivot.



Generally it is considered that 《preterit》 has ⟨subjunctive⟩ as well as ⟨past⟩. Some grammarians categorize the subjunctive as one of the usages of past tense. Otto Jespersen is one of them. He called the subjunctive past “the preterit of imagination,” categorizing it as a part of “imaginative use of tenses.” (O. Jespersen, *Essentials of English Grammar* London: Allen, 1933. p.254ff)

There are also many grammarians who try to explain subjunctive past by contrasting ⟨past⟩ and ⟨present⟩. It is possible to associate the contrast of past and present with remote vs. near, indirect vs. direct, imaginary vs. actual, and subjunctive vs. indicative. Those grammarians assume that ⟨subjunctive⟩ and ⟨past⟩ have derived from a common concept.

The relation between 《preterit》 and ⟨past⟩ in Old English is different from that in Present English. In Old English, 《preterit》 did not have the meaning of ⟨past⟩ as it is understood now. It was not purely the concept of time but rather mood. Old English 《preterit》, in this sense, was akin to 《subjunctive》.

Apart from whether it is true or not that ⟨past⟩ and ⟨subjunctive⟩ have historically originated from a common source, it is possible to think from the synchronic point of view that the ⟨past⟩ and ⟨subjunctive⟩ of Present English 《preterit》 has a binary structure.

## VII Only one grammatical meaning applies at a time when plural grammatical meanings correspond to a single grammatical form

In this section, the relation between form and meaning, which was briefly remarked on in II, is considered again. Language was described in II as a structure where form and meaning meet. It is difficult, however, to understand forms and meanings as individual existences. Meanings, especially, are often abstract and hard to count one by one.

The correspondence between form and meaning is of three types: one form having one meaning, multiple forms having the same meaning, and one form having different meanings depending on the context. With regard to lexical meaning, it is possible for a single form to have different meanings simultaneously, as in connotative expressions. This is impossible as to grammatical meaning, however. For example, “-s” can have the meaning of “plural,” “third person / singular / present,” and “possessive” (with

an apostrophe added before “s”), but not at the same time. Though 《preterit》 can have ⟨past⟩ and ⟨subjunctive⟩, it will never have both meanings simultaneously. If it does, it would lose its grammatical function because of the confusion it created.

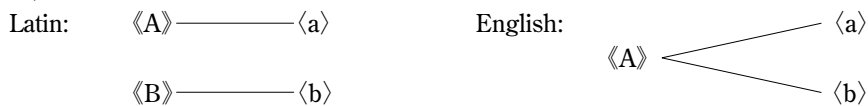
It was remarked in II that there is confusion between form and meaning in the English subjunctive; however, it would not be the structure of the English subjunctive but the analysis of grammarians that is confusing. In my opinion, the English subjunctive itself is a rational system in which both form and meaning are included without confusion.

It is a system where a single grammatical form, 《preterit》, is used for two different grammatical meanings: ⟨past⟩ and ⟨subjunctive⟩, as shown in the above mentioned proposition that only one grammatical meaning functions at a time when there are plural grammatical meanings corresponding to a single grammatical form. It seems this system has been developed to make up for the loss of conjugation which existed in the Old English subjunctive, by successfully dealing, without confusion, with the two grammatical meanings attached to a single grammatical form.

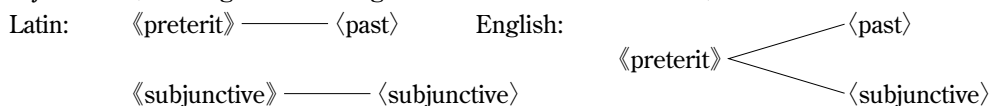
### VIII English uses one grammatical form for two grammatical meanings

One of the reasons the Present English subjunctive is preserved even after the loss of conjugation specific to subjunctive would be the diverted usage of the preterit form of the indicative mood. In other words, the loss of the original grammatical form (《conjugation》) for expressing subjunctive is compensated by using a single grammatical form (《preterit》) for expressing two different functions (⟨subjunctive⟩ and ⟨past⟩).

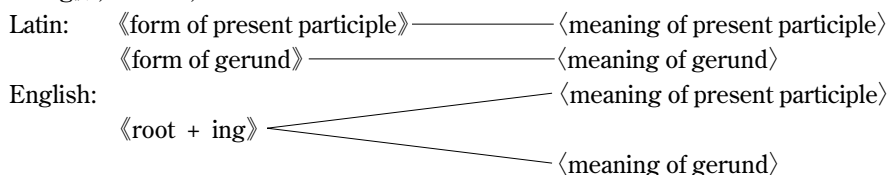
As stated in IV, the subjunctive of Present English is based on Latin. The grammatical form of Latin is more complicated and diverse than that of English. The diagram below shows the situation that while, in Latin, grammatical form 《A》 indicates grammatical meaning ⟨a⟩, and 《B》 indicates ⟨b⟩; English does not have 《B》, and 《A》 indicates both ⟨a⟩ and ⟨b⟩.



The diagram below is an actual example of what is explained in the preceding paragraph and diagram. It illustrates the situation of the English subjunctive referred to at the beginning of this section and that of the Latin subjunctive. (The diagram on the right is identical to the one in VI.)



Other examples, besides the subjunctive, of two grammatical forms for expressing two grammatical meanings in Latin while English has only one grammatical form for two grammatical meanings, are “gerund” and “present participle”. In English, the gerund and the present participle have the same form (《root + ing》); in Latin, different.



Incidentally, German has only present participles, and no gerund. Gerund is not necessary in German

because it is possible to make neuter nouns by capitalizing initial letters of every root-infinitive. In French also, it is possible to use every infinitive as a noun without changing its form. *Gérondif* (French translation of *gerund*), by the way, is not the English *gerund* but the present participle preceded by “en” for adverbial usage.

Comparing Latin and English grammar, we can recognize how efficiently English, which does not have a complete inflection system like Latin, could analytically modify Latin grammar especially by making multiple use of a single grammatical form, to gain the power of expression which is no less effective than Latin. Thus, the tense, the voice, and the mood are expressed in English by periphrases that use auxiliary verbs, while Latin uses complicated inflections. Latin, by the way, does not have auxiliary verbs. The binary structure of the English subjunctive past is a perfect example of the twofold use of a single grammatical device.

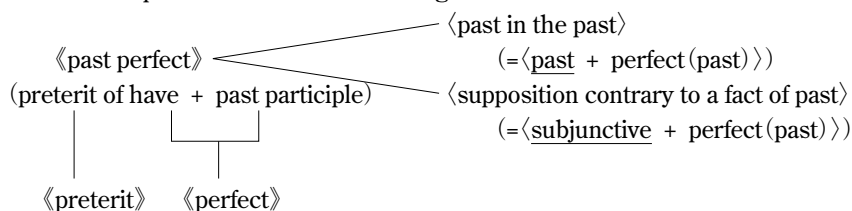
## IX Analysis of preterit subjunctive based on symmetrical image of time flow

The diagram below — a line on which ⟨present⟩ is put in the middle, ⟨past⟩ on the left, and ⟨future⟩ on the right, giving the image of time flow — is often used to explain the structure of tense.

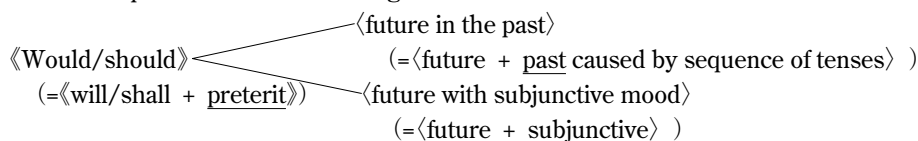
————— ⟨past⟩ ————— ⟨present⟩ ————— ⟨future⟩ —————

English has only two tenses consisting of conjugations — ⟨present⟩ and ⟨past⟩. The above shown symmetrical image of tense with ⟨future⟩ on the right would be influenced by Latin and French of which ⟨past⟩, ⟨present⟩, and ⟨future⟩ are all formed by conjugations. As is well known, English ⟨future⟩ does not use conjugation, but is formed by ⟨periphrasis using will/shall⟩.

English uses periphrasis for the past time expression as well as future; that is, ⟨periphrasis using have⟩ for ⟨perfect tense⟩. Further, by combining ⟨periphrastic perfect⟩ with ⟨preterit⟩, ⟨past perfect⟩ is formed. ⟨Past perfect⟩ expresses ⟨past in the past⟩ when used for the indicative mood; it expresses ⟨supposition contrary to a fact of past⟩ when used for the subjunctive mood. ⟨Preterit⟩ as a component of ⟨past perfect⟩, when subjunctive, does not have ⟨past⟩ but ⟨subjunctive⟩. The above statement is illustrated below, where the underlined parts extracted from the diagram form the same structure shown in the diagram in VI.



⟨Would/should⟩ can be analyzed as ⟨will/shall + preterit⟩. The ⟨preterit⟩ here is treated in the same way as the ⟨preterit⟩ as a component of ⟨past perfect⟩. The same analysis will be applied to this ⟨preterit⟩; that is, it has the meaning ⟨past⟩ caused by the sequence of tenses when used for indicative, and ⟨subjunctive⟩ when used for subjunctive. The diagram below is similar to the above one. Here again, the underlined parts make the same diagram as in VI.



In this section, the preterit form used for subjunctive is analysed in connection with the symmetrical image of time flow. The following tables are a summary. The first table is the list of tools to construct the

structure of tense and mood. Those numbered tools are arranged in the second table of the time flow. The last table is added to clarify the second one by giving fragments of example sentences.

form	meaning			
《present》 (conjugation)	〈present〉 ①			
《past》 (conjugation)	〈past〉 ②			
	〈subjunctive〉 ③			
《future》 (periphrasis)	〈future〉 ④			
《perfect》 (periphrasis)	〈perfect (past)〉 ⑤			

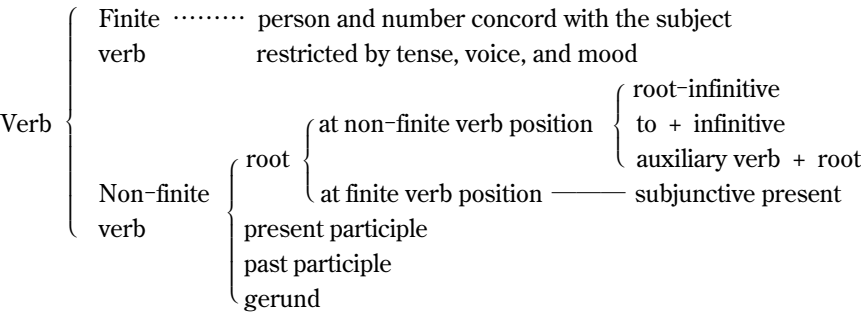
	past in the past	past	present	future
indicative	② + ⑤	②, ⑤	①	④
subjunctive		③ + ⑤, ③ + ④ + ⑤	③	③ + ④

	past in the past	past	present	future
indicative	I had been	I was I have been	I am	I will be
subjunctive		I had been I would have been	I were	I would be

X About subjunctive present

In VI, 《subjunctive past》 was described as the binary structure of 〈past〉 tense and 〈subjunctive〉 mood, with 《preterit》 as the pivot. What about 《subjunctive present》? Does this, of which predicate verb consists of 《root》, also have the binary structure?

English 《preterit》, as to all verbs except “be”, always takes the same form for all persons and numbers. As a result, 《preterit》 can be regarded as having no conjugation, and in this regard 《preterit》 and 《root》 are the same. They, however, take quite different positions in the category of verb forms as shown below.



《Preterit》 is one of the forms of a finite verb, which is syntactically placed at the position of the predicate verb. Though 《root》 is a non-finite verb, it has the syntactic position of a finite verb when used for 《subjunctive present》. It is a contradiction to put what is classified as a non-finite verb at the syntactic position for a finite verb.

《Preterit》 can have the binary structure in 《subjunctive past》 because the two meanings of 《preterit》, 〈past〉 and 〈subjunctive〉, are presented in opposition in the same syntactic circumstance. Such circumstance is not given to the 《root》 of 《subjunctive present》.

Except for some limited usage, 《subjunctive present》 is rarely used. In some grammar books, it is explained that “If it is fine .....” and “If it be fine .....” are different in their meaning in the possibility of

being fine or not; the possibility is unknown in the former, and very little in the latter. According to several native speakers of English, they say they do not feel such difference of meaning. A certain American said that the difference of the two expressions is rather a matter of style. He remarked that “If it be fine ……” sounds like black English if uttered in an American accent and it gives affected impression if pronounced in a British accent.

As a conclusion, it would be difficult to treat 《subjunctive present》 and 《subjunctive past》 in the same way and to categorize what has been termed 《subjunctive present》 in grammar books so far, as the subjunctive. It is because, as mentioned above, the binary structure found in 《subjunctive past》 does not exist in 《subjunctive present》.

## XI Tense and subjunctive should be analyzed independantly

From the viewpoint that German keeps the structure of the original Germanic language more than English, the structure of Old English remains more in present German than in English. The difference between English and German would show how Present English changed itself from Old English.

Comparing the tense system of German with that of English, I point out three prominent differences. (1) In German, there is no rule for sequence of tenses, as there is in English. (2) The difference between 《preterit》 and 《present perfect》, which is important in English for the usage of tense, does not exist in German. (3) German has two kinds of conjunctives (subjunctives): 《conjunctive I》 of which the conjugation comes from 《root》, and 《conjunctive II》 of which the conjugation comes from that of 《indicative preterit》. Though the former is called 《conjunctive present》 and the latter 《conjunctive past》, the difference of usage between the two is not about the tense but about the mood.

In Old English, tense and the subjunctive were not as clearly distinguishable as in Present English. The demarcation between ⟨past⟩ and ⟨subjunctive⟩ was not clear in Old English.

The form 《preterit (past)》, as it is so called, is supposed to have the meaning ⟨past⟩. Historically, however, the meaning of 《preterit》 was not purely ⟨past⟩ but rather akin to ⟨subjunctive⟩. The meaning ⟨past⟩, in a sense, has developed from ⟨subjunctive⟩.

The three points referred to above would show, in my opinion, that English tense system is more accurate and logical than that of German. The tense system of Present English is the result of the effort to make English a more rational and logical language; by, as mentioned in IV and V, seeking for its base in Latin grammar and by contriving periphrastic structures.

In Old English, tense and the subjunctive were both expressed by conjugations; in other words, they were dealt with by using the same kind of grammatical device. With the disappearance of conjugations specific to subjunctive, tense and the subjunctive became separated and independent, and the demarcation between the two became clearer.

Old English:

tense ← correlated → subjunctive

Present English:

tense ← independant → subjunctive

According to current grammar books, the subjunctive is explained within the category of tense, which makes the system of the subjunctive complicated. The English subjunctive and the tense system should be studied in isolation, not in integration.

## XII Analytic structure of the English preterit subjunctive should be analysed analytically, not synthetically

It was stated in III that the subjunctive of Present English is something like a fossil of the original structure that existed in Old English. In IV, the formation of Present English subjunctive was described as reorganization of the structure, from a synthetic to an analytic one: the disappearance of the synthetic structure of the Old English subjunctive and the compensational appearance of the analytic structure of the Present English subjunctive. In XI, it was concluded that the English subjunctive and the tense system should be studied in isolation, not in integration. The problem is that the grammatical rules of English subjunctive so far contrived attempted to explain the analytic structure as synthetic, which makes the grammar unnecessarily complicated and English subjunctive difficult to learn.

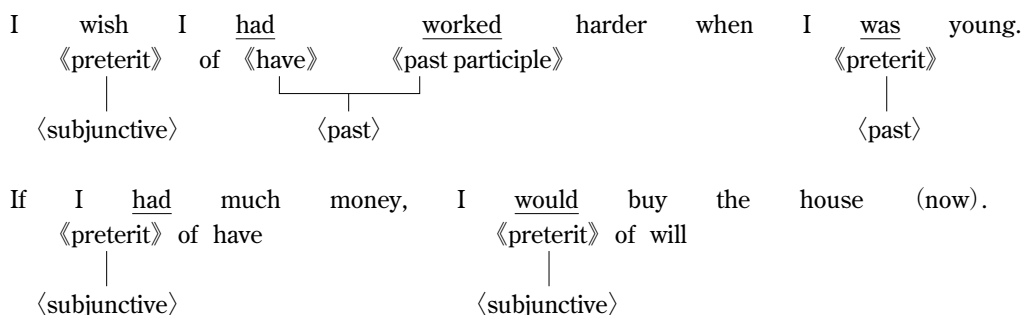
Reading explanations about the subjunctive in grammar books, we feel as if we could understand them. However, when we try to use the subjunctive in actual linguistic activity helped by those explanations, we become confused. The trouble is a matter of memory capacity. The grammatical rule to explain the English subjunctive is so complicated that one's memory will be used up just in grasping the rule, and extra memory for further linguistic activity is scarcely left.

When we read grammar books, we can direct all our attention and memory, and enough time to understand the grammatical explanations themselves. The actual linguistic activity, however, is not like that. The grammar, for actual use, should be simple and logical enough so as to be used automatically and half unconsciously.

European languages other than English have complicated conjugations for the subjunctive. Though it might be laborious to memorize them, they function as the backbone for recognizing and managing the total structure of the subjunctive. This backbone disappeared in Present English when the conjugation of the subjunctive disappeared. The grammatical rule for the English subjunctive written in grammar books does not seem to function well because of its irregularity and illogicality. It is possible to memorize it but difficult to use it.

To conclude, I will analyze several sentences of the preterit subjunctive, based on the idea of the binary structure of ⟨past⟩ and ⟨subjunctive⟩ with 《preterit》 as the pivot introduced in VI, and the diagram of the symmetrical image of time flow in IX.

First, the element of 《preterit》, existing in a word in duplication with the lexical meaning, is extracted from a verb or an auxiliary verb. Then, it will be decided whether the 《preterit》 means ⟨past⟩ or ⟨subjunctive⟩. If ⟨subjunctive⟩, the meaning of the subjunctive will be decided more in detail according to the context — wishes, uncertainty, politeness, etc.





Nov. 2005

## Binary Structure of English Preterit Subjunctive

If I had much money,  
 «preterit» of «have» «past participle»  
 |  
 <subjunctive> <past>

I could have bought the house (at that time).  
 «preterit» of can «have» «past participle»  
 |  
 <subjunctive> <past>

If my father had given me much money when he died,  
 «preterit» of «have» «past participle» «preterit»  
 |  
 <subjunctive> <past> <past>

I would have bought the house (at that time).  
 «preterit» of will «have» «past participle»  
 |  
 <subjunctive> <past>

If my father had given me much money when he died,  
 I would buy the house (now).  
 «preterit» of will  
 |  
 <subjunctive>

## Postscript:

This paper was started as a translation of my treatise written for the collection of treatises (to be published in Oct. this year) for the celebration of Kannreki (60th birthday) of Prof. Yagi, Katsumasa of Kwanseigakuin Univ. In the process, however, the translation was sometimes difficult or impossible because of the difference of terminology, grammatical category, etc. between Japanese and English. As a result, there are many additions and change of descriptions, and this paper might be called to be another treatise based on the original one. I would like to express my gratitude to Prof. Rodney A. Dunham of Tezukayama Univ., who gave me the chance to study at that university during my sabbatical year and checked this paper.

(2005年7月6日受付)