

Counterfactuality without Past Tense and the Morphology-Pragmatics Interface

Iatridou (2000) has argued that many languages employ past tense morphology to express counterfactuals (CFs). According to this proposal, languages employ the past tense because it functions as an exclusion operator; in the temporal domain, the set of topic times excludes the time of utterance. In the modal domain, then, past tense morphology allows the set of topic worlds to exclude the actual world, thus establishing the implicature of counterfactuality. Iatridou analyzes the counterfactuality contributed by past tense morphology as an implicature, rather than an assertion, following arguments in the philosophical literature (Anderson (1951), Stalnaker (1975)) that counterfactuality is cancelable (1). The goal of this paper is twofold: **first**, to examine how counterfactuality is expressed in a language without past tense morphology, and **second**, to explore whether, at the morphology-pragmatics interface, the choice of particular morphological means to express counterfactuality affects the set of resulting implicatures.

In exploring how counterfactuality is expressed in languages that lack past tense morphology, we consider the case of Mandarin Chinese, in which a specialized complementizer, *yaobushi*, signals counterfactuality in the protasis of a conditional, and can be used for past (2), present (3), and Future-Less-Vivid (FLV) (4) CFs. Importantly, *yaobushi* can never be used in a non-CF environment (5), in which a *ruguo*-type conditional is used (Cheng and Huang (1996)). We point out two important morphosemantic differences between Chinese *yaobushi* CFs and those in which past tense expresses CF. **A)** In contrast to the Iatridovian systems in which verbal-inflectional material (tense, aspect) is used to express CF, in Chinese, any aspectual morphology that co-occurs with *yaobushi* makes the expected semantic contribution (and is not co-opted for CF/modal purposes). **B)** Contrary to almost all CF cases (but cf. Krause (2001)) in which both protasis and apodosis of conditional have morphological CF expression, the apodosis of the CF need not have any counterfactual marking to be interpreted as such; suprisingly, however, while interpreted as counterfactual, the apodosis is not in the scope of the *yaobushi* complementizer.

An important fact about those CFs not expressed through past-tense morphology is that they are not cancelable in the sense described above (6). We suggest that cancelability as it has been demonstrated for past-tense type CFs may be a result of the past tense operator itself, which is cancelable in temporal domains (7). The past tense operator establishes that the topic worlds exclude the actual world; however, since the topic worlds are a subset of the P-worlds, it is only an implicature, and thus remains cancelable. In examining one particular case of specialized counterfactual complementizers, we note an important semantic difference between *yaobushi* and other CF constructions. In effect, while past-tense CFs establish the implicature that topic worlds exclude the actual world, *yaobushi*-type CFs establish the assertion that in all of the $\neg P$ worlds, Q holds. In a counterfactual conditional of the form *yaobushi* P \rightarrow Q, the assertion is not, as one might expect, that the eventuality P did not occur, but rather, that P *did occur*. In other words, for a past CF, *yaobushi* P \rightarrow Q carries the implication “If it had not been the case that P had happened, then Q would have happened”. In the absence of past tense, then, Mandarin Chinese employs negation to express counterfactuality; *yaobushi* is morphologically compositional, comprised of *yao*, with a conditional “if” meaning, and *bu*, a negation operator. In considering other languages that signal counterfactuality via specialized morphemes (Tagalog, Hebrew, Burmese) we consider the possibility that the noncancelability of *yaobushi* CF implicatures may be independent from the fact that they contain negation. We show then, that what years of philosophical investigation has concluded – that counterfactuality is an implicature – is the result of the morphological expression of CFs in Indo-European languages, and not a hallmark of counterfactual constructions at large.

Examples

- (1) If the patient had the measles, he would have exactly the symptoms he has now. We conclude, therefore, that the patient has the measles.
- (2) Yaobushi ta he le neige duoyao, ta jiu bu hui si le
YAObUSHI he drank LE that poison, he then not would die LE
“If he hadn’t drank that poison, he wouldn’t have died” (PastCF)
- (3) Yaobushi Lisi you qian, tade nupengyou jiu bu hui dasuan gen ta jiehun
YAObUSHI Lisi have money, his girlfriend then not would plan with him marry
“If Lisi didn’t had money, his girlfriend wouldn’t plan to marry him.” (PresCF)
- (4) Yaobushi ni qu Jiazhou, women keyi mingtian wanshang zai zheli war.
YAObUSHI you go California, we could tomorrow evening at here have-fun.
“If you weren’t going to California, we could have fun here tomorrow night.” (FLV)
- (5) *Yaobushi ni gen wo lai kan dianying, wo jiu hui yige ren qu.
YAObUSHI you with me come watch movie, I then will one person go.
“If you don’t come with me to watch the movie, I will go alone”.
- (6) *Yaobushi ta mei you fengzhen, tade pifu shang hui you bao. Qishi,
YAObUSHI she didn’t have measles, her skin top would have bumps. Actually,
yinwei tade pifu shang xianzai you zhei yang de bao, ta haoxiang you fengzhen.
since her skin top now has those kind of bumps, she appears have measles.
*“If it were the case that she had measles, she would have bumps on her skin. Actually,
since she does have bumps on her skin now, she appears to have the measles.”
- (7) When I saw her, she was in the library. In fact, she may still be in the library.

Selected References

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