

Differences in counterfactual strength

Two Dutch constructions

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Antecedent falsity

Subjunctive conditionals typically come with the inference that their antecedent is false:

- (1) If I had left two minutes earlier, I would have caught my train.
>> I did in fact *not* leave earlier

But there are exceptions (Anderson, 1951):

- (2) If Jones had taken arsenic, he would have shown exactly those symptoms which he does in fact show.
✗✗ Jones has in fact not taken arsenic

Outline of this talk

1. Two Dutch counterfactuals
2. A closer look at Anderson-type contexts
 - ▶ Von Stechow on the presupposition of subjunctive conditionals
 - ▶ Portner's contender
3. Predictions

Two Dutch counterfactuals

Past modal + infinitive

- (3) Als Jan niet gedronken had, **zou** hij niet **zijn verongelukt**.
if Jan not drunk had, would he not be died
'If Jan hadn't drunk, he wouldn't have died.'
>> Jan in fact had drunk

Past tense on the verb:

- (4) Als Jan niet gedronken had, **was** hij niet **verongelukt**.
if Jan not drunk had, was he not died
'If Jan hadn't drunk, he wouldn't have (lit. hadn't) died.'
>> Jan in fact had drunk

A contrast

The two constructions cannot be used interchangeably, but come apart in Anderson-type contexts:

- (5) Als Jan mazelen had, ...
If Jan measles had, ...
- a. **zou** hij precies deze symptomen **vertonen**.
would he exactly these symptoms show
'he would show exactly these symptoms.'
 - b. #**vertoonde** hij precies deze symptomen.
showed he exactly these symptoms
'he would show (lit. showed) exactly these symptoms.'

Inference to the best explanation

In general, the bare past cannot be used in an inference to the best explanation.

- (6) A: I think Susan's interview went well.
 B: What makes you say that?
 A: She is smiling, and *that's what she would be doing if it went well*.
- (7) a. en dat is wat ze **zou doen**, als het goed gegaan was.
 and that is what she would do, if it well gone was
 b. #en dat is wat ze **deed**, als het goed gegaan was.
 and that is what she did, if it well gone was

What is responsible for this difference in counterfactual strength?

Von Fintel on the presupposition of subjunctive conditionals (I)

Schematic 'strict' truth-conditions for bare conditionals:

if p, q has the logical form $\forall_D (\text{if } p) (q)$

If defined, it is true in a world w iff:

$$p \cap D(w) \subseteq q$$

So when is a subjunctive conditional defined?

First try: it requires that the context set C contains no p -world.

(8) 'strong counterfactuality'

$$p \cap C = \emptyset$$

Anderson's example shows that this cannot be correct, for it seems to be uttered in a context where it is epistemically possible that Jones took arsenic.

Von Fintel on the presupposition of subjunctive conditionals (II)

Second try: the subjunctive requires that the domain of quantification is partly outside the context set:

- (9) 'weak counterfactuality'
 $D(w) \not\subseteq C$

Why would it be necessary to select a domain outside of C ?

- ▶ It could be that $p \cap D(w) \not\subseteq C$, i.e. the antecedent is known to be false.
- ▶ But it could also be that the conditional wouldn't be informative if $D(w)$ was entirely within C .

Von Fintel on the presupposition of subjunctive conditionals (III)

The indicative version of the Anderson-example seems trivial:

(10) #If Jones took arsenic, he showed just exactly those symptoms which he does in fact show.

- ▶ the consequent expresses a proposition that is true in all worlds in C
- ▶ therefore, if the domain of quantification were entirely within C, (10) would be automatically true

Applied to Dutch

Does it make sense to maintain that

- ▶ the Dutch past-modal + infinitive (**zou vertonen** 'would show') triggers a weak counterfactuality presupposition, i.e. $D(w) \not\subseteq C$,

while

- ▶ the bare past construction (**vertoonde** 'showed') triggers a strong one, i.e. $p \cap C = \emptyset$?

Not quite; one would expect division of labor, to the effect that the version with the modal no longer conveys the falsity of the antecedent.

Portner's contender (I)

We can make strong counterfactuality work, if we allow for a *multitude* of context sets (see also Karawani, 2014)

- (11) 'strong counterfactuality'
 $p \cap C = \emptyset$

Examples:

- (12) a. Did Jones take arsenic? If he had, he would have shown just exactly those symptoms which he does in fact show. [So, it is likely that he took arsenic]
b. I will claim that Jones took arsenic. ??If he had, he would have shown just exactly those symptoms which he does in fact show. [So, it is likely that he took arsenic]

In (12a) the question introduces a context split, and the subjunctive presupposition is satisfied in the context where he didn't take arsenic.

Portner's contender (II)

Similarly, indicatives require that there are p -worlds in C , but in restricted cases a speaker can use an indicative when she believes that p is false:

- (13)
- a. Where's my umbrella? If it's not in the closet, my memory is failing. [So, it's likely that it's in the closet.]
 - b. I will claim that my umbrella is in the closet. ??If it's not in the closet, my memory is failing. [So, it's likely that it's in the closet.]

Portner's contender (III)

What rules out (14)?

(14) #If Jones took arsenic, he showed just exactly those symptoms which he does in fact show.

On Portner's account, this must be due to constraints on the domain of quantification, which is independent of the indicative/subjunctive distinction.

- ▶ for example: in the absence of an overt modal, quantification ranges over *epistemically* accessible worlds
- ▶ these preserve as much of what is known as possible
- ▶ but in all of these, the consequent is true

Applied to Dutch

Can we maintain that both Dutch constructions

- ▶ are strongly counterfactual ($p \cap C = \emptyset$), which is marked by past tense

while they differ w.r.t.

- ▶ the domain of quantification, depending on the presence of an overt modal?

Then the bare past is out in Anderson-type contexts, because the epistemic domain fails to include non-q worlds, resulting in triviality.

Predictions (I): the bare past as an epistemic counterfactual

Suppose that one Sunday night you approach a small town of which you know that it has exactly two snackbars. Just before entering the town you meet a man eating a hamburger. You have good reason to accept the following indicative conditional:

(15) If snackbar A is closed, then snackbar B is open.

Suppose now that after entering the town, you see that A is in fact open. Would you now accept the following conditional?

(16) Als snackbar A dicht was, **was** B open.
if snackbar A closed was, was B open
'If snackbar A were closed, then B would be open.'

Predictions (II): the bare past isn't always counterfactual

In investigating a murder, you have found evidence that either the butler or the gardener did it. Thus far, everything points to the butler, but you decide to take the gardener's DNA just in case. When asked to explain your actions, you can say:

- (17) Als de butler het niet gedaan had, **had** de tuinman het
if the butler it not done had, had the gardener it
gedaan. En dat was ook zo.
done. And that was too so
'If the butler hadn't done it, the gardener would have (lit. had).
And he did.'

Conclusion

- ▶ Dutch counterfactuals suggest that presuppositions about the status of p and constraints on the domain of quantification both have a different role to play in the distribution of indicatives and subjunctives.
- ▶ What may look like differences in counterfactual strength are actually differences in modal flavor.
- ▶ Dutch seems to have a counterfactual construction designated for the epistemic reading.