

What makes counterfactuals counterfactual?

Hadil Karawani & ILLC
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Counterfactual conditionals come along with the inference that their antecedent is false or unlikely. Projection tests (cf. Levinson 1983 a.o.) and the ‘hey wait a minute’ test (von Stechow 2000) show that the falsity inference in counterfactuals behaves like a real presupposition. I conclude that it is a presupposition in dynamic semantics terms; and I show that a simple theory of morpho-syntactic markedness together with a semantic-pragmatic theory alluding to information states explains the falsity inference. Special examples which have been an obstacle for presupposition analysis are argued to not be special in the strict sense but examples of cases in which speaker and hearer disagree. For the falsity inference to be a presupposition in the dynamic sense, it amounts to claiming that for any state s , $s[\textit{If it had been the case that } \varphi, \textit{ then it would have been the case that } \psi]$ is defined only if s supports $\neg\varphi$. In this account, the difference between indicative and subjunctive conditionals is captured in terms of the number of past tense morphemes (re-analysed as Non-Actual Veridicality, NAV) morphemes operating on worlds in the structure. Indicatives include no NAV marking, while subjunctives are distinguished by being singly or doubly marked. This three way distinction is captured semantically by making a difference between the expectations and the knowledge of the speakers. A *state* s is a triple $\langle W, K, E \rangle$, where (i) W is a nonempty set of worlds. (ii) K and E are nonempty subsets of W such that $\emptyset \neq E \subseteq K$. W is the set of logical possibilities the speaker has to take into account. Given what the speaker knows, the world is one of the elements in K . But among the possibilities in K some are more likely to be the real one than others. These are the elements of E ; they represent those possibilities that meet the speaker’s expectations. The speaker knows φ iff φ is true in all worlds in K ; the speaker expects φ iff φ is true in all worlds in E . Given that $E \subseteq K$, the speaker expects every φ s/he knows. This means that (i) an indicative conditional presupposes *it might be the case that* φ — in other words, $s[\text{NAV}]$ is defined only if $K \cap \varphi \neq \emptyset$. (ii) A singly marked conditional presupposes *it’s unlikely that* φ — $s[1\text{-NAV}]$ is defined only if $E \cap \varphi = \emptyset$. (iii) A doubly marked conditional presupposes *it’s not the case that* φ — $s[2\text{-NAV}]$ is defined only if $K \cap \varphi = \emptyset$.

References: von Stechow, P. 2000. What is presupposition accommodation? Manuscript.