

The counterfactual constructional family: Methodological and theoretical implications

Counterfactual constructions convey the speaker's belief that the actualization of a situation took place or did not take place (Olguín Martínez 2024; Olguín Martínez & Lester 2021; Olguín Martínez & Rogers 2024). They involve a reversal of polarity in that clauses with positive polarity include a corresponding negative proposition in their interpretation, and clauses with negative polarity include a corresponding positive proposition (Van linden & Verstraete 2008: 4).

Counterfactual constructions are typically associated with standard counterfactual conditionals, as in (1). However, they may show up in other guises as well (Olguín Martínez 2021; Olguín Martínez & Gries 2024), e.g., hypothetical manner constructions (2), 'if not for NP' constructions (3), evaluative constructions (4), and counteridentical constructions (5).

The present study explores the constructions mentioned above in a sample of 82 languages. The research question is as follows: If standard counterfactual conditionals are realized with a particular clause-linkage pattern and particular TAM in a language, do other counterfactual constructions, as in (2), (3), (4), and (5) also appear with the same clause-linkage pattern and the same TAM? To explore this question, I use two exploratory methods that have been used in the literature for identifying and representing (dis)similarity relations between constructions: a distance function known as HAMMING DISTANCE MEASURE and a technique known as MULTIPLE CORRESPONDENCE ANALYSIS. By using these methods, constructions can be compared to each other as to how similar their morphosyntactic properties are, yielding a principled, data-driven classification of counterfactual constructions.

The results show that 'if not for NP', evaluative, and counteridentical constructions are formally similar to standard counterfactual conditionals based on three morphosyntactic variables: the TAM of the protasis, the TAM of the apodosis, and the type of clause-linkage pattern. This contrasts with the picture of hypothetical manner constructions in that they are not formally similar to standard counterfactual conditionals in the languages of the sample. These patterns of synchronic constructional polysemy are the result of economy, i.e., the reduction of the constructional inventory in a system for the purposes of efficiency and simplicity and can be taken as suggestive of certain diachronic developments. I propose that the historical directionality may be from standard counterfactual conditionals to 'if not for NP', evaluative, and counteridentical constructions. This development seems to be a case of SUBJECTIFICATION, "a pragmatic-semantic process whereby meanings become increasingly based in the speaker's subjective belief state/attitude toward the proposition" (Traugott 1989: 35).

I argue that the advantage of using the approach adopted in the present study is that it can help us to determine how constructions with similar semantic-pragmatic characteristics are related to one another in a multifactorial way. Given that the grammar of each language consists of a network of constructions, in which they have associative connections with one another, the comparison of standard counterfactual conditionals to other neighboring constructions can allow us to uncover how associative connections between counterfactual constructions reflect the language users' experience with particular patterns (Diessel 2019).

Iquito (Zaparoan)

- (1) *ca=quias=ti=inica-rí,* *quia-cúhuaaja* *íti=quiao=átuu-quídana.*
NEG=2SG=CF=wake-MOM 2SG-heart CF=2SG.IRR=tell-PFV.REP
'Had you not awakened, your heart would have warned you.' (Michael 2009: 157)

Donno So (Dogon)

- (2) *î yǎ: yà:-dê-Ø, kîdè wò=íj mí bènd-é-Ø gìnè.*
child tears weep-IPFV-3SG.SBJ thing 3SG=ACC 1SG.SBJ hit-PFV-3SG like
'The child is crying, as if I had hit him.' (Heath 2014: 269)

Khmer (Austro-Asiatic)

- (3) *baeu kom ba:n kun bawn preah lo:k cuaj, srac bat tev haeuj.*
if NEG get merit grace lord monk help ready disapper go already
'If not for the help of God, I would have been lost.' (Haiman 2011: 226)

Sidaama (Lowland east Cushitic)

- (4) *aiyaan-ú baiččo mar-oo-mm-o-ro buša=ho hee'r-ø-i.*
festival-GEN.M place go.PRS.PERF-1SG-M-if bad=NPC live-3SG.M-PERF.3SG.M
'It would have been bad if I had gone to the festival (I am glad that I did not go there).' (Kawachi 2007: 412)

Emai (Edoid)

- (5) *í khà ú ùwèwè í ló shòò vbí áfúzé ré.*
I PST.PERF.HYP be you I PRED exit LOC Afuze arrive
'If I were you, I would leave Afuze.' (Schaefer & Egbokhare 2017: 884)

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