

Unveiling Counterfactuality in Mandarin: A Comparative Study with English and Its Typological Implications

Abstract

This study investigates cross-linguistic differences in counterfactual (CF) expression, focusing on Chinese and English, through a corpus-driven approach that integrates phi-efficient correlation analysis to quantify the relationship between linguistic forms and CF meanings. The findings reveal a typological contrast: English heavily grammaticalizes CFs with explicit markers like “would” and “if,” resulting in frequency concentration and systematicity, while Chinese employs lexical variety and context, relying on dispersed, implicit encoding through conjunctions, modals, and particles. In Mandarin Chinese, CF marking strategies diverge between conditional CFs, which depend on realis elements (e.g., factive negation, PERF, PAST), and deontic CFs, where modal operators inherently establish closeness. This bifurcation reflects distinct mechanisms for modeling CF closeness, with conditional CFs relying on premise strengthening and deontic CFs using normative modals. The study further uncovers syntactic dependencies in pragmatically activated CF features, such as factive elements shifting towards the C⁰ position, challenging the assumption that pragmatic features operate independently of syntax. These findings highlight the distinction between “gestalt features,” an integrative approach relying on implicit structures, and “main trigger mechanisms,” where explicit grammatical markers systematically encode CF meanings. Future research should explore these mechanisms across languages to better understand how syntax, morphology, and pragmatics interact in CF expressions. By shedding light on the typological diversity of CF marking, this study advances broader theories of language universals and the interplay between linguistic structures and alternative world semantics.