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Crosslinguistically
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This study examines crosslinguistic patterns of the expression of counterfactuality as manifested in counterfactual conditionals. The focus of attention of this study is divided between a morpho-syntactic/semantic inquiry concentrating on the interaction between tense, aspect, mood and modality, on the one hand, and a semantic/pragmatic inquiry focusing on the presuppositions and implicatures of counterfactual conditionals in a dynamic framework, on the other.

In chapter 1, the author discusses a handful of proposals regarding the contribution of morphological combinations found in counterfactuals to counterfactual meaning. These proposals are presented while trying to find a common denominator for the different morpho-syntactic means of the crosslinguistic examples that are discussed. Specifically, a common denominator is sought for the different means that languages employ as manifested in a dedicated strategy as opposed to a tense strategy or a spatial /participant oriented strategy in those languages that lack a tense system. This chapter concludes that a unifying semantics for tensed, spatial, and participant oriented languages may be construed along the lines of the semantic proposal discussed in Karawani and Zeijlstra (2010) – namely, a meaning rooted in Non-Actual Veridicality (NAV). In simple words, a NAV morpheme presupposes that the proposition it applies to is true in a world and time pair different from the one consisting of the actual world and the time of utterance. Hence, defining past tense morphemes in terms of NAV captures the fact that these can be used both as tense markers (expressing past tense) and as mood markers (expressing counterfactuality). As a NAV morpheme denotes that the proposition it applies to cannot be verified at the here-and-now, a meaning construed along these lines is easily adaptable to account for the meaning of those morphemes that are analogous to past tense morphemes but in the spatial or participant-oriented domain in less familiar languages, as well as for the meaning of dedicated markers that achieve counterfactuality directly via their lexical semantics. In this chapter, the view that there is uniform semantics underlying counterfactuals which are derived through different morpho-syntactic means is merely an assumption. What is more important for the purposes of this chapter is that certain combinations give rise to counterfactual readings. The subtle differences between different forms of counterfactuals within and across languages is orthogonal in this chapter, but is picked up in the following chapters until dealt with in depth in chapter 4.

Chapter 2 zooms in on counterfactual constructions in Palestinian Arabic providing a description and analysis of the morpho-syntax and semantics of those ingredients that play an essential part in yielding counterfactuality. The discussion of Palestinian Arabic data is important for the typological debate that is the center of attention in chapter 3, because Palestinian Arabic provides a relatively transparent case of the interaction between morphological ingredients and syntactic structure in yielding counterfactual interpretation. Evidence is presented showing that three simple assumptions can account for the composition of counterfactuality: (i) there is a restriction on finite clauses according to which every sentence is obligatorily tensed, (ii) the meaning of past tense morphology in Palestinian is construed in terms of NAV, (iii) the syntactic skeleton of CF sentences includes a projection XP above TP which is able to host world variables. This projection, in Palestinian, is a second TP that is part of a unit called a counterfactual complex and it consists of [CP ⟨⟨ MoodP ⟨⟨ TP].

Chapter 3, tries to fine-tune our understanding of the typology of counterfactuals by looking more closely at languages like English, Hebrew, Hindi and Zulu through the lens of chapter 2. It concludes that there is crosslinguistic evidence for a counterfactual complex but that the requirement for a second TP and that tense be overtly realised is parametrized. Further, this chapter sheds light on an important crosslinguistic puzzle which concerns the role of imperfective aspect in counterfactuals. This chapter concludes that imperfective aspect shows up in (specifically the consequents of) counterfactual conditionals mainly because it is selected for by the required (necessity) modals expressing future/habituality. Importantly, modals are required due to the assumption that they are semantically specified for tense. Hence, this supports the conclusion that tense as a place holder is a necessary ingredient in counterfactuals but that languages differ in whether this requirement is syntactic or semantically saturated.

Chapter 4 is mainly concerned with the nature of the falsity inference that accompanies counterfactual conditionals. It concludes that this inference is best regarded as a presupposition in the dynamic sense. A simple theory of morpho-syntactic markedness together with a semantic-pragmatic theory alluding to information states explains how the falsity inference comes about, but more generally a semantic account of conditionals is given which divides conditionals into three types. The division alludes to presuppositions of information states that pertain to knowledge and expectation and is shown to be crosslinguistically attested. Given an information state that a speaker/hearer holds, indicative conditionals presuppose that the antecedent is consistent with what is known; singly marked counterfactual conditionals presuppose that the antecedent is not consistent with what is expected; and doubly marked counterfactual conditionals presuppose that the antecedent is not consistent with what is known.

The dissertation concludes by addressing some of the important issues raised that leave questions for further investigation – most notably, the role of lexical aspect in saturating time specification in counterfactuals is discussed and whether further investigation into the matter can shed more light on the role of tense and aspect in counterfactuals in general.