

International Conference on Tense and Aspect in Conditionals

INALCO Paris, November 2-4, 2022

Past or modal?

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Elaborating on earlier work (starting with Ippolito 2002 Ph.D. dissertation), Ippolito 2013 proposed an analysis of different types of so-called subjunctive conditionals. The term ‘subjunctive conditionals’ was used mostly for historical reasons and to ensure continuity with an already existing literature (in philosophy and linguistics) that had long been interested in the semantics of these conditionals but had mostly focused on familiar languages that (at least at some point) possessed a morphologically distinct subjunctive mood. However, Iatridou (2000) pointed out that a large number of (genetically unrelated) languages mark so-called subjunctive conditionals by using past tense morphology. Since then, elaborating on this important observation, theories of subjunctive conditionals have mostly fallen into two camps: to use Schulz’s terminology, the *past-as-past theories*, where the past which marks these conditionals is interpreted temporally, and *past-as-modal theories*, where the past tense we see in subjunctive conditionals receives a modal interpretation. The goal of my previous work in this area of research was to develop an analysis where the semantic properties of these conditionals would follow from the temporal interpretation of the past tense (a past-as-past theory). In this talk I will review some key elements of the debate over the last 20 years with the goal of highlighting at least some of the issues and points of contention that linguists and philosophers have raised in the last two decades, and look at the current state of this debate.

Selected references

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