

On the role of ‘repurposed’ past and ‘fake’ imperfective in counterfactuals

Languages often encode counterfactuality through the appearance of ‘fake’ or ‘repurposed’ past tense and imperfective aspect morphology that does not receive its standard interpretation (cf. Iatridou 2000). There are several accounts of ‘repurposed’ morphology in counterfactuals (CFs) that focus on the use of past tense morphology (Iatridou 2000, 2009; Ippolito 2002, 2003, 2006; Han 2006; Ogihara 2000; Arregui 2004, 2008). With respect to ‘repurposed’ aspect, however, much less has been said (cf. Iatridou 2009; Arregui 2004, 2007).

Focusing my attention on the meaning of past morphology and its contribution to the meaning of CFs, I note that, in a way, everybody agrees that the meaning of past morphology is the unequal, but they disagree with respect to its index – as to whether it is able to range over times (and hence is fake in CF environments) or in fact it ranges over times and worlds. I opt for the latter. By doing so, I argue for the view that it is a “historical mistake” (to quote Iatridou 2000) to view the meaning of past morphology as basically temporal.

I argue that, in order to account for conditionals in particular, but also tense in general, we need branching histories (also known as a “branching times”) and we need possible worlds. One can emulate the possible world via branching – which is what proponents of the past-as-tense camp do – and one can emulate the branching via possible worlds – which is what the proponents of the past-as-modal camp do – but, I will show that that ends up mixing virtues with vice. There are examples for which the one approach is favourable, and others for which the other approach is favourable, but to account for a wide array of examples one needs the fusion I propose here.

I also focus my attention on the distribution of aspect in counterfactual environments, bringing in data from Amharic, Arabic, Greek, Hindi and Zulu. Focusing on the question of what accounts for the cross-linguistic differences we see in how ‘standard’ aspect (and tense) is realized in CF constructions, I propose that languages attempt to maximize the exponents of tense/aspect that correspond to the interpretation of the sentence, while still always realizing the ‘fake’ tense/aspect morphology required by the CF construction. This conclusion suggests that ‘fake’ aspect selected in these constructions is an indirect expression of counterfactuality – and is better treated as an embedding phenomenon rather than a means of conveying counterfactual modality, *per se*.