Revisiting the marking of counterfactuality

Östen Dahl

A quarter of a century ago, I published a paper entitled "The relation between past time reference and counterfactuality: a new look", where I criticized the idea that the role of past tenses in the marking of counterfactuality could be explained by seeing past tenses and counterfactuals as sharing a common meaning or by assuming that non-temporal uses of past tenses are extensions from their basic, temporal meanings. One difficulty that I pointed to was the fact that past tenses relatively rarely are the only marking in counterfactual constructions. I also noted that the "irreality" of counterfactuality marking depends on the time referred to in the sense that the markings that are used for past counterfactual statements often express "contrary to assumption" rather than "contrary to fact" when used about the present or future. I then suggested that the key to the role of past tenses in counterfactuality marking could be the grammaticalization processes by which the marking develops. Counterfactual marking starts out in past contexts, as it is there that the distinction between real and unreal is most crucial. It will typically involve a combination of modal and temporal (past) marking. The reinterpretation of the past element as part of a composite expression of counterfactuality makes possible the use of the construction in non-past contexts with a simultaneous weakening of the counterfactuality element, which, in its turn, may trigger the addition of another past morpheme to the construction when used in the past. Evidence for such a process can be found in various languages, some of which had already been discussed in the literature; further examples have been added later.

Returning in 2022 to the field of counterfactuality marking, I find that the relationship between counterfactuality and past tenses is still at the centre of attention but that the proposed solutions do not differ much from the ones I criticized. I have been asked to comment on a recent paper by Kai von Fintel and Sabina Iatridou; in a way, it is not so easy to critique them since their conclusions are very modest. However, they postulate three methodological principles, which can be summarized by the terms universality, meaning invariance, and compositionality. I will argue that these principles cannot be upheld if we want to come to an understanding of counterfactuality in grammar, and I will discuss the problems that arise for each of them. This will take me to the application of perspectives from language typology, diachronic grammar, and pragmatics. Among other things, I will argue that the way grammatical systems evolve sometimes makes it unrealistic to expect full compositionality of grammatical markings. I will also question the wisdom of assuming that all languages have a grammaticalized marking of counterfactual sentences and discuss the role of pragmatic factors behind the use of counterfactual marking in deontic and boulomaic modality contexts.

References

Dahl, Östen. 1997. The relation between past time reference and counterfactuality: a new look. A. Athanasiadou & R. Dirven (eds.), *On Conditionals Again* (pp. 97–114). Amsterdam: Benjamins.
Fintel, Kai von & Iatridou, Sabine. 2022. Prolegomena to a theory of X-marking. Ms. under review. URL: http://mit.edu/fintel/fintel-iatridou-2022-x.pdf.