

This paper has been published in *Theoretical Linguistics*

Please cite as:

Van linden, An. 2021. A usage-based approach to counterfactuality: optionality of the apodosis. *Theoretical Linguistics* 47(3–4): 277–286. [<https://doi.org/10.1515/tl-2021-2025>]

Invited response to target article by Klein:

Klein, Wolfgang. 2021. Another way to look at counterfactuals. *Theoretical Linguistics* 47(3–4): 189–226. [<https://doi.org/10.1515/tl-2021-2019>]

### **A usage-based approach to counterfactuality: Optionality of the apodosis**

An Van linden

*University of Liège & KU Leuven*

Wolfgang Klein’s alternative analysis of counterfactuals is indeed much closer to the linguistic facts of English and related languages than what has been proposed within the philosophical tradition so far. This response to his article contends that Klein’s fresh look at counterfactuality paves the way for a pragmatic, usage-based approach to counterfactuals, which calls for a more varied analysis of the illocutionary force of counterfactual declarative sentences. As a second point, while Klein proposes that “counterfactuals do not require an *if*-clause” (p. 223), I will discuss authentic language data featuring independent counterfactual *if*-clauses, among others from English, and build the case that the reverse also holds, viz. that counterfactual conditionals do not require a main clause. The problem these data seem to pose to Klein’s account, however, is only an apparent one. Above all, they will be shown to highlight in turn the illocutionary versatility of declarative counterfactuals.

#### **1. Paving the way for a pragmatic, usage-based approach to counterfactuals**

Klein’s analysis echoes basic ideas from Grice’s (1975) seminal theory of how speakers use language, which is still highly relevant within pragmatics. Grice proposes four principles or guidelines that are used as heuristics by cooperative language users when engaged in a conversation, viz. the so-called maxims of conversation (see Levinson 1983: 100-102). Klein’s requirement of “topic consistency” for propositional-logic arguments of the modus ponendo ponens form (p. 213), for instance, is captured by the Gricean maxim of relation/relevance, which stipulates that the speaker’s contribution should be relevant at the stage at which it occurs in the talk exchange (cf. Declerck & Reed 2001: 258). Klein’s proposal that “an *if*-clause specifies properties of the situation, about which the matrix clause asserts something – about the ‘topic situation’” (p. 209) is equally taken for granted by conversationalists. In fact, while examples like *If Isa were in Berlin, she would be in Marseille* may pop up in philosophical discussions (perhaps in their metalinguistic use), they are immediately felt to be ‘unnatural’ in everyday conversations because they are

semantically inconsistent, and the speaker is thus thought to violate the principle of manner – which stipulates that the speaker’s contribution should be perspicuous (cf. Levinson 1983: 102) – and this for no clear reason. That is, it is not the case that by flouting this maxim, the speaker hints at or ‘implicates’ some other meaning (cf. Levinson 1983: 104-105).<sup>1</sup> With his analysis in terms of topic features of the matrix clause, Klein has found an alternative way to exclude similar ‘unnatural’ examples from the analysis of counterfactual conditionals.

While Klein’s proposal thus frees us from uttering awkward examples, he writes it still leaves us with a “diffuse” feeling (p. 223) in the analysis of counterfactuals. For instance, he states that it is easy to understand an example like (1), but at the same time it is difficult to judge its truth.

(1) *If I were you, I would love me my whole life through.* (Klein p. 223, ex. (52b))

The problem, I believe, can be solved if the analysis of counterfactuality moves away from truth/falsity judgements and instead focuses on the communicative intention of the speaker, i.e. by adopting a pragmatic, usage-based approach. In uttering (1), the speaker – singer Billie Holiday – does not intend to make a true (or false) statement or assertion. Rather, she uses (1) to offer advice to her significant other in order to convince him/her to love her his/her whole life through. Note that Declerck & Reed’s (2001: 100-101) analysis of counterfactual conditionals like (1) as possibly involving a mixture of ‘projected deixis’ and speaker’s deixis helps answer Klein’s questions on p. 204 and 223. With *I would love myself* in the main clause, the sentence would mean ‘What I would do in your place is love myself’, which can be used to convey the message ‘I advise you to love yourself’ (projected deixis only). In its current shape, however, (1) means ‘What I would do in your place is love me’, and conveys the message ‘I advise you to love me’, which combines projected deixis (*I* and *my* in main clause) with speaker’s deixis (*me* in main clause) (cf. Declerck & Reed 2001: 100-101).

The interpretation of (1) as giving advice is backed up by the results of a small-scale corpus study. In a random sample of 100 examples of *if I were you* drawn from Collins *WordbankOnline* (WB), 99 examples serve the function of giving advice to the interlocutor, 87 of which show *I would* + bare infinitive in the main clause, like (1), whereas 12 examples contain *I should* + bare infinitive, as in (2).

(2) “*If I were you, Godfrey Thomas,*” she replied, “*I should refrain from making comments about people’s shapes.* At least I don’t look like an overfed midget.” (WB)

---

<sup>1</sup> As suggested by the editor, semantic inconsistency only obtains when *Berlin* and *Marseille* are used in their literal meaning, referring to cities in Germany and France respectively – as human beings cannot be at different places simultaneously. However, this inconsistency disappears when the speaker intends their utterance to have a figurative meaning, with *Marseille* metonymically referring to a neighbourhood in Berlin populated by expats from Marseille. In the latter case, the speaker has a good reason to flout the maxim of manner, that is, to trigger a non-literal interpretation of *Marseille*. It should be noted, however, that Klein does not entertain such an interpretation in his analysis of the example.

The sample includes only one example in which the speaker does not utter a recommendation, but makes a prediction. These results are in line with Declerck & Reed's (2001: 198) observation that the protasis *if I were you* is "most frequent in conditional sentences that are meant to give advice."

As discussed in speech act theory (Austin 1962), it does not make sense to evaluate speech acts like giving advice in terms of truth;<sup>2</sup> speech acts are assessed in terms of their felicity, that is, to what extent they are successful. Austin (1962) formulated a number of felicity conditions, including requisite thoughts, feelings or intentions on the part of the speaker. Insincerities would be violations of the latter conditions, and this may be relevant for our evaluation of (1). If you advise someone to do something when you really believe it would be beneficial for you but not for them, you violate the sincerity condition, and you produce an infelicitous speech act (cf. Levinson 1983: 230). So, rather than wondering whether what Billie Holiday says is true, or – for that matter – restrict the illocutionary force of declarative counterfactuals to assertions (p. 216), we should wonder whether she truly believes that this yearned-for life-long relationship would be advantageous to the interlocutor, and not just to herself. Here, I bet, we can be safely left in the dark.

## 2. Optionality of the apodosis

While Klein argues that the protasis of a counterfactual conditional construction is optional, this section will develop the argument that the reverse of Klein's claim holds as well: counterfactual conditionals do not require an apodosis, at least in English and related languages. Specifically, I will argue that even without an apodosis, counterfactuals may still have their own illocutionary force – and typically not that of making a true assertion. In some cases, however, the elided main clause – and its illocutionary force – need to be recovered from the context to infer the communicative intention of the speaker. While these data may seem to pose major problems to Klein's account at first sight, this is only seemingly so. In fact, they illustrate yet other illocutionary force types of declarative counterfactuals.

Looking at conditional clauses in authentic language data reveals that speakers sometimes use *if*-clauses without an accompanying main clause. Such independent *if*-clauses show different degrees of conventionalization, that is, the hearer's interpretation of the implied apodosis may be more or less variable depending on the type of independent counterfactual *if*-clause construction. Below, we take a closer look at two construction types at opposite ends of the conventionalization scale.

---

<sup>2</sup> Even at the locutionary level, I believe, we have to move away from truth/falsity judgements, now in favour of an account in terms of polarity reversal, as discussed in Verstraete & Luk (this issue) (see also Van linden & Verstraete 2008). While the clauses in (1) are marked for positive polarity, their tense-mood forms trigger the reversed-polarity interpretation that 'I am not you and I will not love me my whole life through' at the locutionary level, as a Gricean implicature of quantity (see Van linden & Verstraete 2008; Verstraete & Luk, this issue). Taking into account the mixture of projected deixis and speaker's deixis referred to above, we even get 'I am not you and you will not love me your whole life through', the latter of which is of course what the speaker fears at the moment of speech, and in any case impossible to judge as true or false.

### 2.1 Counterfactual wishes: a case of insubordination

Examples of a highly conventionalized type include English counterfactual *if*-clauses containing the restrictive particle *only*, like in (3). Such examples have been described as conventionally expressing the speaker's unfulfilled wish concerning a past situation (e.g. D'Hertefelt 2018: 78-82, and references therein).

- (3) “*If only he'd wrapped his Mercedes around a tree and not Paula Garcia,*” Kristen said bitterly. “*If only he hadn't been so drunk*” (Corpus of Historical American English 2004)

The *if*-clauses in (3) feature past perfect tense forms; accordingly, the represented speaker (Kristen) expresses wishes concerning situations anterior to the wishing event. That is, (3) conveys that particular situations were desirable, but did not occur.<sup>3</sup> Importantly, the situations assessed as desirable are beyond the control of the (represented) speech act participants, and the utterance will not affect their realization either (cf. Verstraete et al. 2012: 129). In addition, Kristen also seems to express regret at these unfulfilled wishes, an interpretation that arises as an implicature from the combination of the features of desirability and counterfactuality (D'Hertefelt 2018: 80). Constructions similar in form and meaning to (3) have also been observed for other Germanic languages by D'Hertefelt (2018: 78-80), such as Danish, Swedish, Icelandic, Dutch and German.

Examples like (3) are regarded as instances of insubordination, a phenomenon defined by Evans (2007: 367) as “the conventionalized main clause use of what, on prima facie grounds, appear to be formally subordinate clauses”. Cases like (3) are marked as subordinate by the subordinator *if*, but they occur without an accompanying main clause and conventionally express the speaker's unfulfilled wish concerning the past, and therefore have their own illocutionary force (see D'Hertefelt 2018: 78-80). More specifically, such optative constructions show a particular formal make-up, featuring the subordinator *if*, the particle *only* (discussed by Grosz 2014) and past perfect tense marking, which is paired with a conventionalized meaning: the speaker expresses the wish that a certain situation had occurred in the past but knows at the same time that this did not happen and can no longer be realized – or vice versa for constructions marked for negative polarity, such as *If only he hadn't been so drunk* in (3).<sup>4</sup> This form-meaning pairing holds for all the examples included in D'Hertefelt's (2018) study, which warrants us positing the insubordinate counterfactual wish construction as a distinct construction in the sense of Goldberg (2006: 5). By virtue of

---

<sup>3</sup> Note the double-layered counterfactual meaning referred to by Verstraete & Luk (this issue).

<sup>4</sup> That is, in uttering the example marked for negative polarity in (3), the speaker expresses the wish that a certain situation had *not* occurred in the past but knows at the same time that this *did* happen and can no longer be *reversed*. More generally, then, in the insubordinate counterfactual wish construction the reversed-polarity interpretation (see note 2) has semanticized, while in full-fledged counterfactual conditional constructions, the reversed-polarity interpretation is only an implicature and can easily be cancelled, as illustrated by Klein's example (4).

this conventional form-meaning pairing, examples like (3) are readily understood as ‘complete’ utterances; their interpretation is independent of elements in the surrounding discourse. If any apodosis were to be ‘reconstructed’, it would always be one along the lines of ‘the world would have been a better place’, or ‘I would have been happier’. This meshes well with Verstraete & D’Hertefelt’s (2014: 649) conclusion on polarity reversal in insubordinate constructions, viz. that the more semantically constrained the main clause is, the more predictable it is, and the more easily it can be omitted, without compromising the felicity of the speech act. The reverse also holds: highly conventionalized patterns of insubordination have specific semantics, which makes it easy to recover their main clauses.

## 2.2 Indirect argumentative if-clauses: denying the antecedent

Let’s now turn to the opposite end of the conventionalization scale, to focus on independent counterfactual *if*-clauses which do not show such a conventional form-meaning pairing as (3). A Dutch example is given in (4), which comes from a conversation between a young couple about another couple, i.e. Speaker A’s sister and her partner. They discuss A’s sister’s attitude regarding her partner’s new job, which involves weekend shifts.

- (4) A: *ja maar 'k denk dat ze wel weer kwaad was gisteren* [trigger]  
‘yeah but I think she was angry again yesterday’
- B: *ja maar hij heeft dat toch niet veel gedaan*  
‘yes, but it’s not like he’s done that a lot  
*weekend*  
weekend’
- |                 |            |               |                 |             |            |               |            |            |           |
|-----------------|------------|---------------|-----------------|-------------|------------|---------------|------------|------------|-----------|
| <i>als</i>      | <i>dat</i> | <i>nu</i>     | <i>elke</i>     | <i>week</i> | <i>zou</i> | <i>zijn</i>   | <i>dat</i> | <i>hij</i> | <i>de</i> |
| COND            | DEM        | PRT           | every           | week        | would      | be.INF        | that       | he         | the       |
| <i>zaterdag</i> | <i>de</i>  | <i>zondag</i> | <i>moet</i>     |             |            | <i>werken</i> | <i>en</i>  |            |           |
| Saturday        | the        | Sunday        | have.to.3SG.PRS |             |            | work.INF      | and        |            |           |
- zo*  
like.that  
‘if he had to work Saturdays and Sundays every week, that kind of thing’
- A: *nee nee dat is uh hm*  
‘no no that’s erm’
- B: *maar moet ie daar in de fabriek zelf zitten of zo of moet ie moet ie ergens naartoe*  
‘but does he have to be in the factory or does he have to go somewhere else?’  
(CGN – Spoken Dutch Corpus)<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> The glosses include the following abbreviations: COND – conditional conjunction; DEM – demonstrative; INF – infinitive; PRS – present tense; PRT – particle; SG – singular; 3 – third person.

As argued in D’Hertefelt & Van linden (2017: 589-590), the independent conditional clause (henceforth ICC) marked in bold in (4) has an argumentative function in that it serves to motivate the speaker’s implied standpoint regarding a preceding propositional content, termed the ‘trigger’, here the first turn of Speaker A. Specifically, the ICC functions as an argument in support of Speaker B’s implied disapproval of A’s sister being angry with her partner about his weekend shifts. Speaker B expresses a condition that – if it had held – would have warranted the conclusion (implied acceptance of the trigger, viz. understanding of A’s sister’s behaviour), but its counterfactual interpretation, marked by the future-in-the-past form *zou zijn* (literally ‘would be’), indicates that Speaker B knows that this condition is *not* fulfilled, and hence leaves Speaker A to infer that the implied standpoint of acceptance is not valid either. Speaker B’s argument can be paraphrased as follows: “if it were the case that he has to work weekends every week, then it would be understandable that she was angry; however, since he does not have to work weekends every week, she has no reason to be angry” (D’Hertefelt & Van linden 2017: 590). Examples like (4) have been termed ‘indirect’ arguments because they involve two layers in their interpretation, a propositional one and a counterfactual one (D’Hertefelt & Van linden 2017).<sup>6</sup>

This paraphrase of (4) suggests that indirect ICCs – together with the trigger proposition – set up a propositional-logic argument of the denying the antecedent form, whose conclusion is left to be inferred by the interlocutor (cf. D’Hertefelt & Van linden 2017). This form has two premises, the first of which is a material implication ( $p \rightarrow q$ , or *if p then q*). The second premise is that p is *not* true. From these two premises it is then inferred that q is not true either. Example (5), taken from D’Hertefelt & Van linden (2017: 606), restates example (4) in terms of a denying the antecedent form. Two classic examples are included as well (in italics).

(5) $p \rightarrow q$	If [he has to work weekends every week] <sub>p</sub> , then [it is understandable that she is angry] <sub>q</sub>
	(a) <i>If [Socrates is a man]<sub>p</sub>, then [Socrates is mortal]<sub>q</sub></i>
	(b) <i>If [it barks]<sub>p</sub>, then [it is a dog]<sub>q</sub></i>
Not p ( $\neg p$ )	He does not have to work weekends every week
	(a) <i>Socrates is not a man</i>
	(b) <i>It doesn’t bark</i>
Hence, not q ( $\neg q$ )	Hence, it is not understandable that she is angry
	(a) <i>Hence, Socrates is not mortal</i>
	(b) <i>Hence, it is not a dog</i>

Arguments like these are fallacious in formal logic, because the truth of the premises does not guarantee the truth of the conclusion. While the formal invalidity of the argument is most obvious for (5a), as its conclusion is clearly false, it is less clear for (5b), since its conclusion may seem to be true. However, within informal logic arguments of the denying the antecedent

<sup>6</sup> D’Hertefelt & Van linden (2017) distinguish ‘indirect’ arguments from ‘direct’ arguments, which are in fact independent instances of (non-counterfactual) epistemic non-predictive conditionals (cf. Dancygier 1993).

form can still have legitimate uses to the extent that “the argument provides *some reason* for its conclusion” (Duarte d’Almeida & MacDonald 2016: 36-37; emphasis in original). And this matches exactly the purpose of indirect argumentative ICCs in the everyday language examples D’Hertefelt & Van linden (2017) analysed; they present convincing arguments which do not appear fallacious at all. In (5), the argument launched by the ICC provides some reason for Speaker B’s lack of understanding of A’s sister’s anger referred to in the trigger proposition, but there may be other reasons as well (which are not considered). That is, the argument in (5) suggests that one sufficient condition is not fulfilled, but there might be others, which might lead to a different conclusion than *not q*. Imagine that A’s sister got angry because she had been robbed. In that case, speaker B may not have shown a similar lack of understanding. Crucially, that argument has not been invalidated by speaker B’s indirect argument produced in (4) (D’Hertefelt & Van linden 2017). The finding that the argument is nevertheless convincing can be explained by the tendency of interlocutors to interpret sufficient conditions (*if p then q*) as necessary-and-sufficient conditions (*if and only if p then q*, or *iff p then q*), a phenomenon known as conditional perfection, which has been described as crucial to the fallacy of denying the antecedent (cf. Horn 2000). After all, when the first premise of a denying the antecedent form is a biconditional (*iff p then q*) rather than an implication (*if p then q*), the argument is no longer formally invalid. So, while the examples of argumentative ICCs examined in D’Hertefelt & Van linden (2017) are formally coded as sufficient conditions rather than necessary-and-sufficient conditions, the interlocutors are found to perfect these conditionals, as the implied conclusion is never observed to be challenged in the following discourse.<sup>7</sup>

D’Hertefelt (2018: 133-136) reports on argumentative ICCs similar to the Dutch example in (4) in English and Swedish, where they had almost gone undocumented before. The description given above applies to all her examples examined.

In contrast to examples like (3), examples like (4) are not readily interpretable in isolation. Their argumentative function – as well as the speaker’s communicative intention – only becomes apparent in relation to the preceding context, more specifically the trigger proposition. That is, unlike structures like (3), examples like (4) are always discursively dependent on the previous discourse, in spite of being syntactically independent. Reconstructing their implied apodosis invariably involves entertaining their specific trigger proposition, which implies that across distinct examples of the indirect argumentative type, the implied apodosis is necessarily highly variable – it is not semantically constrained at all. This lack of discursive independence and conventionalization makes it hard to assign distinct constructional status to indirect argumentative ICCs and to regard them as instances of insubordination (cf. D’Hertefelt & Van linden 2017: 610). Consequently, it is difficult to argue – unlike for (3) – that the *if*-clause has an illocutionary force of its own. This, however, need not pose a problem to Klein’s account (see below).

---

<sup>7</sup> For more details on the conditions under which conditional perfection obtains and its interaction with denying the antecedent, the reader is referred to Moldovan (2013). I thank the editor for raising the issue of conditional perfection.

### 3. Conclusion

While Klein's account brings counterfactuality much closer to the linguistic facts of English and related languages than philosophical treatments have done so far, I have argued that we can do even more justice to authentic language data if we recognize that counterfactual declarative sentences show a wide range of illocutionary force types, depending on the speaker's communicative intention. (As if declarative counterfactuals only served to make true assertions!) Such an account, for instance, would do away with the "diffuse" feeling Klein is still left with in relation to counteridenticals, which are frequently used in everyday language. The importance of acknowledging different illocutionary force types also came to the fore in the second point I have made, viz. that counterfactuality needs to be extended to *if*-clauses (or *as if*-clauses for that matter) that are not accompanied by a main clause, but whose interpretation nevertheless includes two layers, i.e. some situation was at some point desirable or probable or possible, but did not occur (see Verstraete & Luk, this issue). Although this optionality of the apodosis may seem to have major repercussions for Klein's analysis, in fact it does not. Crucial to this assessment is the difference in degree of conventionalization of independent counterfactual *if*-clauses. That is, it is only in highly conventionalized constructions like the counterfactual wish construction (*if only*) – analysed as a case of insubordination – that the illocutionary force of the utterance resides (or comes to reside) in the *if*-clause only. By contrast, in the non-conventionalized cases of indirect argumentative *if*-clause structures, the apodosis – and hence its illocutionary force as well – is still very much implied. (Incidentally, the discussion of the latter might also bring solace for another remaining problem of Klein's, i.e. the missing modus ponens. Counterfactuals were shown to be used in the – fallacious – denying the antecedent form, also at work in Klein's example (4a).) All of this implies that Klein's proposal of the illocutionary force of counterfactuals residing in the apodosis (with the *if*-clause added optionally) can be upheld; we only need to recognize the workings of insubordination, which can turn *if*-clauses into utterances with an illocutionary force of their own, as well as the existence of incomplete counterfactual conditionals, whose illocutionary force is only implied. These phenomena would still have gone unnoticed if usage-based approaches studying authentic language data had not laid them bare.

### Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Wolfgang Klein for his interesting target piece and to Hans-Martin Gärtner for inviting me to formulate a response and for commenting on an earlier draft. My thanks also go to Jean-Christophe Verstraete for useful feedback on an earlier version. Work on this paper was funded by grant FSR-S-SH-17/15 of the Research Council of the University of Liège, grant PDR T.0065.20 of the Fund for Scientific Research (F.R.S.-FNRS) and grant C14/18/034 of the Research Council of the University of Leuven.

### References

Austin, John L. 1962. *How To Do Things With Words*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.



- Dancygier, Barbara. 1993. Interpreting conditionals: Time, knowledge, and causation. *Journal of Pragmatics* 19: 403-434.
- Declerck, Renaat & Susan Reed. 2001. *Conditionals: A Comprehensive Empirical Analysis*. Berlin: Walter De Gruyter.
- D'Hertefelt, Sarah. 2018. *Insubordination in Germanic: A typology of complement and conditional constructions*. Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton.
- D'Hertefelt, Sarah & An Van linden. 2017. Independent conditional clauses with argumentative function in Dutch. *Text & Talk* 37(5): 587-614.
- Duarte d'Almeida, Luís & Euan MacDonald. 2016. Denying the antecedent: The fallacy that never was, or sometimes isn't? *Informal Logic* 36(1): 26-63.
- Goldberg, Adele E. 2006. *Constructions at Work: The Nature of Generalization in Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Grice, H. P. 1975. Logic and conversation. In Peter Cole and Jerry Morgan (eds.), *Syntax and Semantics, Volume 3: Speech Acts*, 41-58. New York: Academic Press.
- Grosz, Patrick G. 2014. Optative markers as communicative cues. *Natural Language Semantics* 22(1): 89–115.
- Horn, Laurence R. 2000. From if to iff: Conditional perfection as pragmatic strengthening. *Journal of Pragmatics* 32(3): 289–326.
- Evans, Nicholas. 2007. Insubordination and its uses. In Irina Nikolaeva (ed.), *Finiteness. Theoretical and empirical foundations*, 366-431. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Levinson, Stephen C. 1983. *Pragmatics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Moldovan, Andrei. 2013. Denying the antecedent and conditional perfection again. *OSSA Conference Archive*. 117.
- Van linden, An and Jean-Christophe Verstraete. 2008. The nature and origins of counterfactuality in simple clauses: Cross-linguistic evidence. *Journal of Pragmatics* 40: 1865–1895.
- Verstraete, Jean-Christophe, Sarah D'Hertefelt & An Van linden. 2012. A typology of complement insubordination in Dutch. *Studies in Language* 36 (1): 123-153.
- Verstraete, Jean-Christophe & Sarah D'Hertefelt. 2014. Polariteitsomkering bij insubordinatie. In Freek Van de Velde, Hans Smessaert, Frank Van Eynde & Sara Verbrugge (eds.), *Patroon en Argument*. Leuven: Leuven University Press. 639-651.