

If I were you...

Counterfactuals: functions and typology

René van den Berg
SIL Papua New Guinea

LSPNG
University of Goroka
17-19 September 2025

Outline

1. Counterfactuals: definition and examples
2. Functions: pragmatic, psychological, literary
3. Counterfactuals and irrealis
4. Counterfactuals in the Bible
5. Towards a typology of counterfactuals
6. Summary and recommendations

1. Definition and examples

Counterfactuals are statements that describe **possible situations in an alternative reality**, often referring to the past, but also with present or future reference.

“Counterfactuals are conditionals concerning hypothetical possibilities.”

Typical examples (in conditional clauses):

If you had studied harder, you would not have failed the exam.

If it wasn't for the life jacket, I would have drowned.

If I were you, I wouldn't do it.

Considerable literature on the topic, e.g. Karawani (2014), Qian (2016). See also references.

1. Definition and examples

Less typical examples of counterfactuals (not in conditional clauses):

We should have taken an earlier train!
(But we took the last train, and now we're stranded.)

Don't you realise we could have drowned? (But we survived.)

I should have seen that. (But I didn't.)

I wish I had not been born. (But I was.)

Wouldn't a sunny day be nice? (But it's cold and raining.)

2.1 Pragmatic functions

Usage of counterfactuals:

- **reproach**: blaming others for missed opportunities, accidents

If you had not missed that penalty, we would have won!

- **realising good fortune**: chance encounters, unplanned events

If I hadn't met you, I would still be a raskol.

- **regret**: *I should never have gone there.*

- **frustration**: *If only I were twenty years younger.*

- **advice**: *If I were you, I'd stay home.*

2.2 Psychological functions

Counterfactual thinking



Negative: reproach, regret, disappointment. What-if questions, related to e.g. a missed job opportunity or a car accident.

How would the job interview have gone if I had dressed differently?

Positive: an effective teaching tool. A teacher, coach, or mentor, might use prompting language to encourage this type of thinking.

Let's focus on that mistake you made half-way through. What would have been different if you had made a different decision at that point?

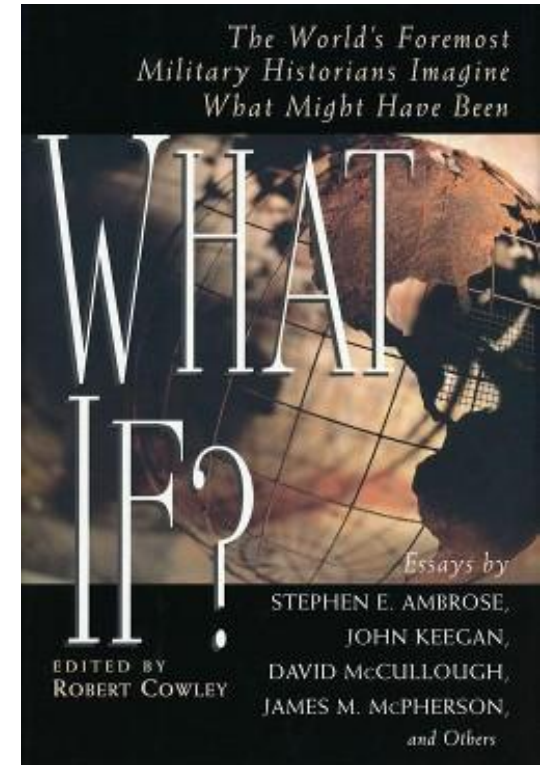
2.3 Literary functions

Counterfactual novels, science fiction, time travel etc.

- *Your vacation on the moon.*

Alternative history: a genre of fiction.

- *What if the Allied invasion of Europe had failed in June 1944?*
- *What if Australia had not pushed PNG towards independence in 1975?*
- *What if the PNG government had spent more money on education in the past 50 years?*

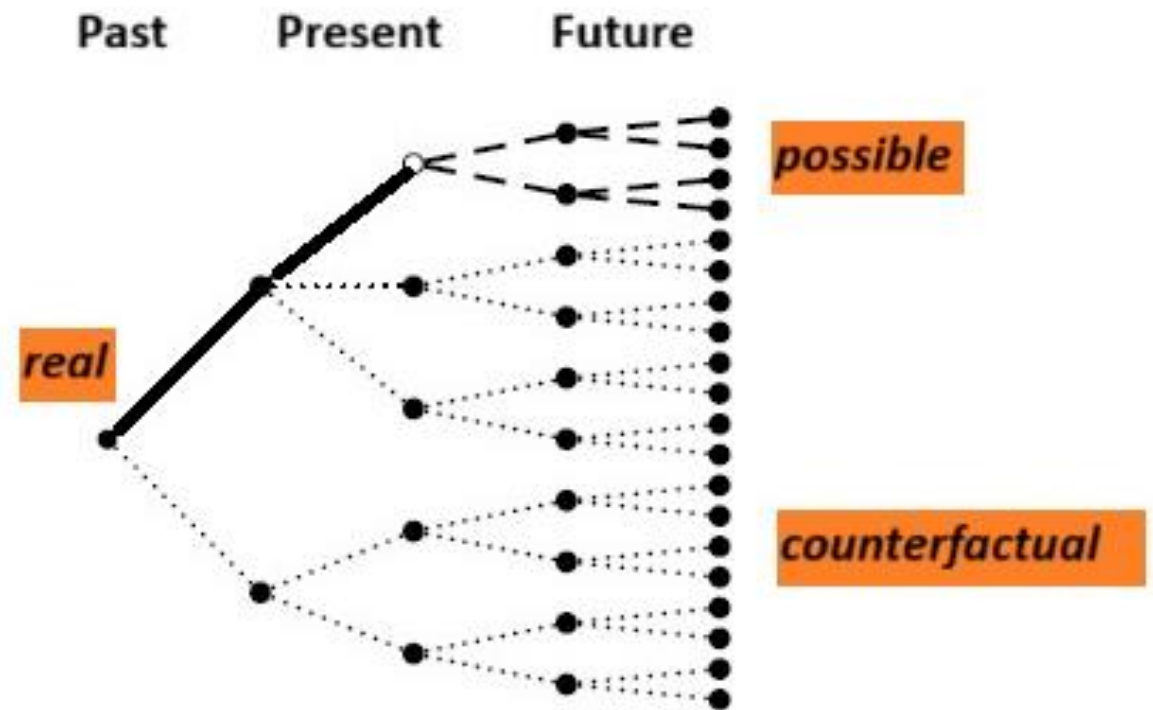


3. Counterfactuals and irrealis

Work by Von Prince (2019, 2022)
'Irrealis is real'.

"The semantic domain of irreality is split into **two domains**—the **possible** and the **counterfactual**."

"An 'irrealis' marker in a given language may refer either to only one of these domains or to both."



4. Counterfactuals in the Bible

Search on *would not have* in the NIV (18x):

- *Lord, if you had been here, my brother **would not have** died.* (John 11:32)
- *If the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he **would not have** let his house be broken into.* (Luke 12:39)
- *If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord **would not have** listened.*
(Psalm 66:18)

But also others, e.g. *could have* (9x):

- *If we had not delayed, we **could have** gone and returned twice.* (Genesis 43:10)

5. **Towards a typology:** the morphosyntax of counterfactuals

- 5.1 English
- 5.2 Tok Pisin
- 5.3 Bola (West New Britain; Austronesian)
- 5.4 Mauwake (Madang; Papuan [TNG])

5.1 Counterfactuals in English

- a) past reference: past perfect (*had V-ed*) + modal auxiliary *would / could*:
- (1) *If you **had** studied harder, you **would** not have failed the exam.*
 - (2) *If John **had** been on our team, we **could** have won.*
- b) present reference: simple past (also: subjunctive *were*)
- (3) *If you **had** her looks, you would not be here.*
 - (4) *If I **were** you, I would not do it.*

5.2 Counterfactuals in Tok Pisin

Future marker ***bai*** + modal auxiliary ***inap*** ‘can, able’.

- (5) *Sapos em i bin ren, ating **bai** mi no **inap** kam.*
‘If it had rained, I would not have come.’
- (6) *Sapos em i no bin ren, ating **bai** mipela **inap** go long Lae.*
‘If it had not rained, we would have gone to Lae.’
- (7) *Sapos mi olsem yu, mi no **inap** wokim.*
‘If I were you, I would not do it.’

5.2 Counterfactuals in Tok Pisin

- (8) *Bikpela, sapos yu bin i stap hia, **bai** brata bilong mi i no **inap** i dai.*

‘Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.’

(John 11:21)

- (9) *Sapos em i no man bilong mekim pasin nogut, orait mipela i no **inap** bringim em i kam long yu.*

‘If he was not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you.’ (John 18:30)

5.3 Counterfactuals in Bola

Bola [bnp], Austronesian (Meso-Melanesian), West New Britain.
(van den Berg and Wiebe 2019)

Counterfactuals marked by **modal particles** *bara* and *gi*.

bara: used for weak future, apprehensive, in conditional sentences (both conditional and main clause), past habitual, counterfactuals

gi (variant *ge*) used for irrealis: simple future, purpose, ‘should’, habitual conditionals

(10) *Bara i uka vala ravi, bara mete rehi.*
MOD 3S NEG rain yesterday MOD 1PA.EX play

‘If it hadn’t rained yesterday, we would have played.’ (elic)

5.3 Counterfactuals in Bola

- (11) *Bakovi Dagi, ioe bara o made koea, e kuraba-gu i uka ma
man big 2S MOD 2S stay here ART.P d.s.sibling-1S 3S NEG NEG
ge mate.
IRR.3S die*

‘Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.’ (John 11:21)

- (12) *Ra bakovi iea, ge ia a bakovi kamumu, i uka ma mi gi
DEF man DEM IRR.3S 3S ART man good, 3S NEG NEG 1PL.EX IRR
tuli vili-a vomu.
bring come-3S 2S.OBL*

‘That man, if he was a good man, we would not have brought him to you.’ (John 18:30)

5.4 Counterfactuals in **Mauwake**

Mauwake, Papuan (Trans-New Guinea; Madang), Madang Province
(Berghäll 2015)

Verbal suffix **–ek** marks counterfactuals, always in combination with the past tense suffix **–a**, even if the reference is to the present or the future.

- (13) *Yena aamun aakisa uruf-ek-a-m=na kemel-ek-a-m.*
1S.GEN younger.brother now see-CNTF-PAST-1S=TOP rejoice-CNTF-PAST-1S

‘If I saw my younger brother now, I would be happy.’

- (14) *Lawiliw akena waki-ek-a-m.*
nearly very fall-CNTF-PAST-1S

‘I very nearly fell.’

6. Summary and recommendations

Counterfactuals are well-studied, but under-researched in PNG (frequently absent in grammars, no areal typology).

General typology (see also Qian 2016):

- a. **modal auxiliaries** (English, Tok Pisin)
- b. **modal particles** (Bola, many Oceanic languages, NT Greek)
- c. **verbal suffixes / special verb forms** (many Trans-New Guinea languages)
- d. **special conjunctions** (Hebrew *lule* 'if not')
- e. **no marking**. Context will differentiate between *If he does not come...* and *If he had not come...*

6. Summary and recommendations

Recommendations for field workers:

- Collect a natural body of counterfactuals (from texts and conversations)
- Elicit examples through creating hypothetical scenarios:
 - *If I was 20 years younger, I would be able to climb that coconut tree.*
 - *If people were to live on the moon, what would they eat?*
- Check translated material for naturalness.
- Devote a separate section in a descriptive grammar to this topic.

Conclusion

If more people studied counterfactuals, would the world be a better place?

If more people studied counterfactuals, we would know more about language and about ourselves.

Thanks to Malinda Ginmaule for helping with Tok Pisin.

References

For an overview of the literature on philosophical and semantic approaches to counterfactuals, visit <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/counterfactuals/>

- Berghäll, Liisa. 2015. *A grammar of Mauwake*. (Studies in Diversity Linguistics 4). Berlin: Language Science Press. DOI: 10.17169/langsci.b67.96
- Birke, Dorothee, Michael Butter, Tilmann Köppe (eds). 2011. *Counterfactual Thinking - Counterfactual Writing*. Berlin: Walter De Gruyter.
- James, Deborah. 1982. Past tense and the hypothetical: a cross-linguistic study. *Studies in Language* 6(3): 375-403.
- Karawani, Hadil. 2014. The real, the fake, and the fake fake: In counterfactual conditionals, crosslinguistically. [Thesis, fully internal, Universiteit van Amsterdam]. LOT.
- Qian, Yong. 2016. A typology of counterfactual clauses. Unpublished PhD thesis, City University of Hong Kong.
- van den Berg, René and Brent Wiebe. 2019. *Bola Grammar Sketch*. (Data Papers on PNG Languages vol 63). Ukarumpa: SIL.
- Von Prince, Kilu. 2019. Counterfactuals and past. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 42:577–615 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10988-019-09259-6>.
- Von Prince, Kilu, Ana Krajinović and Manfred Krifka. 2022. Irrealis is real. *Language* 98(2): 221-249.