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LAUERBACH ON THE AMBIGUITY OF CONDITIONALS

0. The last few years have seen an upsurge of interest in the meaning of conditionals and especially subjunctive conditionals. It is largely due to the influential work of Stalnaker /1968/ and Lewis /1973/ and most of the investigators involved are logicians or logically inspired linguists /e.g. von Kutschera, 1974; Pollock, 1976; Karttunen and Peters, 1977; Cooper, 1978/. One of the issues in the analysis of subjunctive conditionals is that they are ambiguous or vague. A subjunctive conditional can imply, implicate or presuppose - the exact nature of this relation defines another important issue - that the antecedent is false. This is the counterfactual reading, paraphrased in /1/. The 'but not p' phrase makes the implication, implicature, presupposition or what have you, explicit.

/1/ If it rained, he would definitely come.
but, of course, it is not raining.

But a subjunctive conditional can also imply, implicate or presuppose that the antecedent is unlikely or improbable. I will call this the 'hypothetical' reading. It is paraphrased in /2/.

/2/ If it rained, he would definitely come.
but it is rather unlikely that it would be raining.

Though many logicians and affiliated linguists are aware of the distinction between hypothetical and counterfactual readings, they have not given it a fair treatment.¹ Neither have the

traditional grammarians of English, for that matter. In her Form und Funktion englischer Konditionalsätze mit 'if' Eine konversationslogische und sprechakttheoretische Analyse /1979/ Gerda Lauerbach has offered a provocative proposal. Part of its attractiveness is that it is paralleled by an analysis of an apparently similar distinction for indicative conditionals. According to Lauerbach, indicative conditionals have a 'factual' reading, if their antecedents are taken to be true, in which case 'if' would be replaceable by 'as' and 'since'.

/3/ You say you saw Bob in the Strand this morning? Well then, if/as/since he is in town, he will call.

When the 'if' of an indicative conditional is not replaceable by 'as' and 'since', the truth-value of the antecedent is left open. This is the 'open' reading.

/4/ If Bob is in town, he will call us; but, of course, we do not know whether he is in town.

In this note I will scrutinize Lauerbach's proposals. The conclusion will be a negative one. But even negative conclusions have a value. They should provide added spur for a renewed investigation.

1. Lauerbach's / 1979:183-186 / challenge to the traditional view that all indicative conditionals have the truth-value of the antecedent /the question of the fulfillment of the condition/ unresolved and her claim that indicative conditionals are no less ambiguous or vague than subjunctive ones may gratify our sense of symmetry, but I believe that they are mistaken. I contend that the 'if' of /3/ is still the normal open 'if'. In other words, I claim that the conditional 'if he is in town, he will call' leaves the truth-value of the antecedent unresolved. As such, this view does not yet imply that the 'if' in question may not be replaced by 'as' or 'since'. Perhaps one would argue that the context of the 'if' implies that the antecedent is true. Surely, one would also

want to hold that the combination of a context that shows a proposition 'p' to be true and an indicative conditional 'if p, then q' implies a true 'p' and allows one to say 'as/since p, q'. If this argument was valid, however, it would still disprove Lauerbach, for then the interchangeability would be due to context, and not to an ambiguity of 'if'. But the argument is not valid, for the context does not imply -or even implicate or presuppose - that the antecedent is true. John's appearance in the Strand in the morning of the day of the utterance of /3/ says nothing about whether he is in town at the moment of speaking. Hence I do not think that the 'if'-'as'/'since' switch in /3/ is meaning-preserving. I furthermore suspect that such a switch is never meaning-preserving, not even in a context like that of /5/.

/5/ I knew that John is in town now. Well then,
if/as/since he is in town, he will call.

In my view, the 'if' of /5/ leaves it open whether John is in town. This conditional could, though it need not, be used to undercut the claim that one knows that John is in town.

According to Lauerbach /1979:186/ the factual interpretation of an indicative conditional is impossible when /i/ the conditional employs a simple present to express a law or a law-like connection and when /ii/ the antecedent uses an event verb in the simple present to refer to the future. Thus conditionals like /6/ and /7/ would not admit a factual reading.

/6/ If water is heated to 100^o, it boils.

/7/ If he comes, I shall go, too.

As I do not think that there is such a thing as a factual reading, the most I can do with this thesis is to check whether a substitution of 'if' with 'as' or 'since' produces an unacceptable utterance. Well then, I believe that /8/ and /9/, given a suitable context, are quite acceptable.

/8/ As water is heated to 100^o, it boils.

/9/ As John comes, I shall go, too.

2. Contrary to Lauerbach /1979:202,212/ I believe that the time reference and the state/event contrast do not determine whether a subjunctive conditional is counterfactual or hypothetical. Lauerbach's proposal has three parts. First, if the antecedent refers to the present or the future and its verb stands in the modal past and designates an event, the subjunctive is hypothetical. Second, if the antecedent refers to the present and if its verb is in the modal past and designates a state, the subjunctive is counterfactual. Third, if the antecedent refers to the past and if its verb is in the modal past perfect, whether it designates an event or a state, then the subjunctive is counterfactual.

The first two claims are easily falsified. If they were correct, /10/ should be given a hypothetical reading.

/10/ If he came, I would go.
 event
 modal past
 future reference

I agree that /10/ can be given a hypothetical reading :

/11/ If he came, I would go, but it's rather unlikely that he will come.

But what is wrong with a counterfactual interpretation?

/12/ If he came, I would go, but in fact he won't go.

So Lauerbach's first two claims are wrong. Here is another counterexample: /13/ should be counterfactual:

/13/ If John resembled his mother, we'd easily recognize him.
 state
 modal past
 present reference

In my view, /13/ may be counterfactual, but it need not.

/14/ If John resembled his mother, we'd easily recognize him, but in fact he does not resemble his mother.

/15/ If John resembled his mother, w'd easily recognize him, but it is unlikely that he would resemble his mother.

The third claim is the hardest to refute. The large majority of past reference antecedents with modal past perfect verbs, clearly seem to be interpreted counterfactually.

/16/ is most typical :

/16/ If he had listened to me, but in fact he didn't listen, he wouldn't have made this mistake.

Yet in an old /1951/ and forgotten paper Alan Ross Anderson has supplied a beautiful counterexample:

In the investigation of Jones's death, a doctor might say ' If Jones had taken arsenic, he would have shown just exactly those symptoms which he does in fact show'. Now in this context the doctors's statement would probably be taken as lending support to the view that Jones took arsenic - it would certainly not be held to imply that Jones did not take arsenic.

/Anderson, 1951:37/

Maybe Anderson exaggerates, should he suggest that his counter-example does not allow of a counterfactual reading at all. /17/ is weird, but perhaps not impossible:

/17/ If Jones had taken arsenic, but, to be sure, Jones didn't take arsenic, he would have shown just exactly those symptoms which he does in fact show.

But Anderson certainly establishes that counterfactuality is not a necessary feature of past reference antecedents with modal past perfect verbs.

Conclusion, Lauerbach /1979:202,212/ can be added to the ever-growing list² of names of people that have noticed that subjunctive conditionals are ambiguous or vague between counterfactual and hypothetical readings, but have not accounted for it.

NOTES

- ¹ A partial reason for why the logico-linguistic clan has neglected the ambiguity or vagueness seems to be the idea that it would not effect the logical structure as such.
- ² This list contains: Anderson /1951/, Schneider /1953:623-624/, von Wright /1957:134/, Rescher /1964:1, 1973:265, 273/, Ayers /1965/, Adams /1970/, Sobel /1970:430/, Bacon /1971:64/, Lewis /1973:4/, Mackie /1973:63-119/, von Kutschera /1974: 258/, Fine /1975:453/, Chisholm /1975:155/, Cooper /1978: 164/ and Davis /1979:545-546/.

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LAUERBACH O ZDANIACH WARUNKOWYCH

Streszczenie

Krytyczna ocena pracy Lauerbach, w której autorka proponuje nowe podejście do analizy zdań warunkowych. W konkluzji stwierdza się, że proponowana analiza w pracy Lauerbach nie wyjaśnia dwuznaczności zdań warunkowych.