

Life-cycles of counterfactual mood across a millennium of Ancient Greek (VIII BC–III AD)

Cross-linguistically counterfactual markers take part in a life-cycle, a phenomenon noted by Dahl (1997) and elaborated into a diachronic typology by Yong (2018). They start out as past counterfactuals in contexts with pragmatic cues of counterfactuality (Ziegeler 2000, Patard 2019) after which they conventionalize to present-referring and, ultimately, future-referring counterfactuality. At that stage, they are in danger of losing their counterfactuality (Dahl 1997) and of being replaced or renewed (Yong 2018). From a cross-linguistic perspective counterfactuals typically consist of a combination of a prototypically realis operator such as past, perfective or perfect with a prototypically irrealis operator such as future, subjunctive, conditional or modal verb (Givón 2001: 333, Van linden & Verstraete 2008). Whereas many studies have yielded insights into the synchronic marking strategies of counterfactuals (e.g. Haiman & Kuteva 2002, Karawani 2014) and how to theorize their counterfactuality (Iatridou 2000), very few studies have provided diachronic corpus evidence not only to support the full life-cycle but also to test existing diachronic typologies.

This paper uses the diachronic data from a substantial diachronic corpus study of Ancient Greek from the 8th century BC to the 3rd century AD to test these diachronic typologies of counterfactuals. To do this I detail the developments of counterfactual mood forms, focusing on counterfactual mood forms in conditional subordinate clauses (i.e. without modal particle) and declarative main clauses (i.e. with modal particle). In Archaic Greek (VIII–V BC) we witness both the tail end of a previous life-cycle and the onset of a new one, as the counterfactual optative, which had extended its temporal reference to present and future reference already and was losing its counterfactuality, is replaced by the counterfactual indicative (cf. Wakker 1994). The corpus evidence illustrates that the counterfactual indicative is first only used for past counterfactuality with pragmatic cues of counterfactuality, subsequently in contexts without pragmatic cues of counterfactuality and also in some declarative clauses extends its temporal reference to the present but only with the imperfect whose imperfective construal enables temporal extension. In Classical Greek (V–IV BC), further extensions of temporal references take place across the different aspects (i.e. aorist, pluperfect and imperfect), where aspect constrains the frequency of extension (e.g. imperfect referring to the counterfactual present and future the most). Also, counterfactual modal verbs begin to occupy the same syntactic and illocutionary places as the counterfactual indicative. At the same time, past counterfactuals had developed a past habitual use through an invited implicature of certainty (i.e. what would have happened in the past must have happened regularly). In Post-Classical Greek (III BC–III AD), the supposed loss of the modal particle has been said to trigger further replacement of the counterfactual indicative by counterfactual modal verbs (Horrocks 2010: 237–238), but no systematic corpus evidence has been provided for that. Using the corpus evidence of this study, I demonstrate that this supposed process has not only started earlier but is also more complicated than a one on one replacement. Finally, I conclude with a contrastive discussion of diachronic typologies of counterfactuals and the history of counterfactual mood across a millennium of Ancient Greek.

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