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Counterfactuals

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(6,305 words)

1. Archaic to Classical Greek

1. Counterfactuals: Definition, Development and Distribution

Counterfactuals express situations in the past, present or future which, according to the speaker, could not arise (rather than only being unrealized, *pace* Kühner and Gerth 1898:205), e.g. *I wish she were coming round today* (but I suppose she cannot). The motivation for the counterfactuality can be explicitly put forward in the linguistic common ground, e.g. as conditional, adverbial expression, previous assertions, a wish etc., but may also depend on unexpressed communal common ground knowledge (cf. Wakker 1994:22, 136, 155) or simply be a subjective viewpoint (Basset 2004). Counterfactuals express a reversal of the polarity marked in the sentence in which they occur (Van Linden and Verstraete 2008, la Roi 2023a), e.g. *If/ I wish I was there*, implying I was/am *not* there.

Cross-linguistically, counterfactual constructions tend to consist of more than one linguistic ingredient and, as increasing typological research has shown, it is rather the combination of the past tense (and its aspect) with a certain 'modal' element that historically produce counterfactuals rather than past or imperfective alone (Dahl 1997; Van linden and Verstraete 2008; la Roi 2022). Similarly in Ancient Greek, we find many tense-aspects combined with a modal element as counterfactuals (**Tense/Aspect**): the modal particle *ἄν/κε(ν)* *án/ke(n)* with the past **aorist**, **imperfect** or **pluperfect**, the past indicative in conditionals, or imperfective modal verbs (e.g. *ἔδει édei* 'ought', *(ἐ)χρήν (e)khrên* 'should', *ἤ/ἐβουλόμην ē/eboulómēn* '(would

have) wanted'). Pragmatically, it is unsurprising that the past is used to express counterfactuals, since the past is inherently knowable (Wakker 1994:132) and can therefore be used to contrast a counterfactual reality to a knowable one, e.g. *If WO II had not happened*. For similar pragmatic reasons, we need not assume the existence of a 'past potential' meaning (cf. Wakker 1994:156–166; 2006:168) for markers that are actually all past counterfactuals in context, such as the past counterfactual uses of the optative and the past indicative with the modal particle in Homer (la Roi 2022a; 2023c).

Historically, counterfactuals typically come into existence as a past counterfactual through a quantity **implicature**: by stating a past potentiality with the aim to be as informative as possible, the speaker invites the addressee to interpret the opposite end of the modal scale, i.e. *not* past potentiality (Van linden and Verstraete 2008). Diachronically, counterfactuals (i) extend their temporal reference from past to the non-past until they lose their counterfactuality (cf. the existence of non-counterfactual present-referring $\chi\rho\eta\nu$ *khṛén* 'should', discussed by Ruiz Yamuza 2021:280, and more fully by la Roi 2023a and forthc.), (ii) their counterfactuality is strengthened (e.g. the modal particle is added to already counterfactual modal verbs such as $\epsilon\delta\epsilon\iota$ *édei*; la Roi 2022b; 2023a) and (iii) they may be replaced (e.g. the counterfactual optative by the indicative; la Roi 2022a).

Counterfactual modal verbs can also extend their scope and for example acquire additional illocutionary forces (e.g. from declarative (ϵ) $\chi\rho\eta\nu$ (*e*)*khṛén*, $\eta/\epsilon\beta\omicron\upsilon\lambda\omicron\mu\eta\nu$ *ē/eboulómēn* to directive or wish respectively; la Roi 2023a) or fossilize and embed other moods (Allan 2013 and Revuelta Puigdollers 2017 on $\omega\phi\epsilon\lambda\omicron\nu$ *óphelon* 'ought' > 'if only').

Counterfactuals have a wide syntactic and pragmatic distribution in Ancient Greek. Syntactically, they can occur in various subordinate and main clauses, e.g. relative, purpose, result, causal etc., and in both finite and non-finite contexts (i.e. the modal particle with the infinitive or participle from Classical Greek onwards). An important morphosyntactic difference among the marking strategies is that non-conditional subordinate clauses need the modal particle and main clauses need the modal **particle** (Kühner and Gerth 1898:259) except on three occasions: (i) conditionals or those formed like conditionals such as comparative $\omega\varsigma\ \epsilon\iota$ *hōs ei* 'as if', (ii) counterfactual modal verbs, (iii) when the subordinate clause inherits its counterfactuality from the matrix clause e.g. *If only he were still alive* (but he is not) *so that I could talk to him* (which I therefore cannot), a phenomenon traditionally called mood attraction (Napoli 2014) but recently explained as counterfactual implicature transfer (la Roi 2023b).

Finally, counterfactuals occur in a host of pragmatic environments such as declarative illocutions, wishes and (typically rhetorical) interrogatives, but also in various pragmatic types of conditional sentence structures such as predictive, direct inferential, indirect inferential, illocutionary, metalinguistic (see la Roi 2022c). To illustrate, in example (1) the counterfactuality of the postposed conditional clause is used to point out the counterfactuality of the matrix clause. In contrast to predictive counterfactual sentences (e.g. *If he had left earlier, he would have been here on time*), the temporal structure of this sentence is not iconic, as the event in the conditional clause of (1) precedes the event in the main clause. In example (2) we find both an avertive construction (la Roi 2023a), $\delta\lambda\acute{\iota}\gamma\omicron\upsilon$ *olígu* 'almost'+past indicative=*not* past, and a conventionalized counterfactual indicative which, unlike the previous one, extends its temporal reference diachronically (la Roi 2022a; 2023a). In the so-called indirect inferential of (3), the counterfactuality of the matrix clause is used to infer the counterfactuality of the preceding condition, i.e. *I am not a man of means* (cf. the explicit contrast with the factual now $\nu\nu\acute{\iota}$ *nuní* 'now').

1 $\kappa\alpha\acute{\iota}\ \nu\acute{\upsilon}\ \kappa\epsilon\ \sigma\acute{\eta}\kappa\alpha\sigma\theta\epsilon\nu\ \kappa\alpha\tau\acute{\alpha}\ \text{''}\text{I}\lambda\iota\omicron\nu\ \eta\acute{\upsilon}\tau\epsilon\ \acute{\alpha}\rho\nu\epsilon\varsigma,$
 $\epsilon\acute{\iota}\ \mu\grave{\eta}\ \acute{\alpha}\rho'\ \delta\acute{\xi}\acute{\upsilon}\ \nu\acute{o}\eta\sigma\epsilon\ \pi\alpha\tau\eta\rho\ \acute{\alpha}\nu\delta\rho\acute{\omega}\nu\ \tau\epsilon\ \theta\epsilon\acute{\omega}\nu\ \tau\epsilon\cdot$
kaí nú ke sékasthen katà Ílion ēúte árnes,
ei mē ár' oksù nóēse patēr andrôn te theôn te
 'They would have been penned in Ilios like lambs,
 had not the father of men and gods been quick to notice' (Hom. *Il.* 8.130–131)

2 $\omega\acute{\iota}\ \gamma\acute{\epsilon}\rho\omicron\nu,\ \eta\ \delta\lambda\acute{\iota}\gamma\omicron\upsilon\ \sigma\epsilon\ \kappa\acute{\upsilon}\nu\epsilon\varsigma\ \delta\iota\epsilon\delta\eta\lambda\acute{\eta}\sigma\alpha\nu\tau\omicron$
 $\acute{\epsilon}\xi\alpha\pi\acute{\iota}\nu\eta\varsigma,\ \kappa\alpha\acute{\iota}\ \kappa\acute{\epsilon}\nu\ \mu\omicron\iota\ \acute{\epsilon}\lambda\epsilon\gamma\chi\epsilon\acute{\iota}\eta\nu\ \kappa\alpha\tau\acute{\epsilon}\chi\epsilon\upsilon\alpha\varsigma.$
 $\kappa\alpha\acute{\iota}\ \delta\acute{\epsilon}\ \mu\omicron\iota\ \acute{\alpha}\lambda\lambda\alpha\ \theta\epsilon\omicron\iota\ \delta\acute{\omicron}\sigma\alpha\nu\ \acute{\alpha}\lambda\gamma\epsilon\acute{\alpha}\ \tau\epsilon\ \sigma\tau\omicron\nu\alpha\chi\acute{\alpha}\varsigma\ \tau\epsilon\cdot$
ô géron, ê olígu se kúnes diedēlésanto
eksapínes, kaí kén moi elenkheíen katékheuas
kaì dé moi álla theoi dósan álgeá te stonakhás te
 'Old man, truly the dogs might have torn you to pieces in an instant,
 and on me you would have shed reproach.
 And the gods have given me other griefs and sorrows as well' (Hom. *Od.* 14.37–14.39).

- 3 εἰ γὰρ ἐκεκτέμην οὐσίαν, ἐπ' ἀστράβης ἂν ὠχούμην, ἀλλ' οὐκ ἐπὶ τοὺς ἀλλοτρίους ἵππους ἀνέβαινον: νυνὶ δ' ἐπειδὴ τοιοῦτον οὐ δύναμαι κτήσασθαι, τοῖς ἀλλοτρίοις ἵπποις ἀναγκάζομαι χρῆσθαι πολλάκις (Lys. 24.11)
ei gār ekektēmen ousían, ep' astrábes àn ōkhóumēn, all' ouk epì toùs allotríous híppous anéβαινον: nuni d' epeidè toioúton ou dúnamai ktēsasthai, toís allotríois híppois anankázomai khrêsthai pollákis
 'If I were a man of means, I should ride on a saddled mule, and would not mount other men's horses. But in fact, as I am unable to acquire anything of the sort, I am compelled, now and again, to use other men's horses'.

2. The Historical Development of Counterfactuals

Counterfactuals display many types of diachronic change. Earlier and recent research has highlighted the following: (1) the inherited counterfactual **optative** is replaced by the counterfactual indicative (Ruijgh 1992; Hettrich 1998, but extensively now la Roi 2022), (2) the changing temporal reference between Archaic and Classical Greek (e.g. from past-referring counterfactual indicatives in conditionals to both past and present, la Roi 2022), (3) the development from non-counterfactual to counterfactual modals and, occasionally, to wish particles (Ruiz Yamuza 2008; Allan 2013; Revuelta Puigdollers 2017).

More recent research has sought to analyze these interrelated phenomena in a more systematic way, e.g. by (1) introducing the concept of **insubordination**, the diachronic conventionalization of formally subordinate clauses as main clauses (la Roi 2021), to insubordinate counterfactuals εἰ/αἶθε *e/aíthe* or εἰ/αἶ γάρ *ei/aì gár* 'if (only)' with the optative, **infinitive** or ὄφελ(λ)ον *óphel(l)on* 'would (have)/if only' (la Roi 2021:14–21), so as to be able to explain both the synchronic and diachronic differences between counterfactual wish optatives and insubordinate wishes (la Roi 2021; 2022), (2) proposing life-cycles for the counterfactual optative and indicative which explain all the available counterfactual moods in Archaic and Classical Greek, but also why the indicative replaced the optative and how (la Roi 2022a), and (3) connecting the meanings expressed with the same construction as the past counterfactual optative and past counterfactual indicative with its later past habitual and past generic meanings (la Roi 2023c; **Habituals**), a change that thus far had been explained as originating in a non-existent past potential (see section 1) or as just a synchronic matter of **emphasis** (van Emde Boas et al. 2019:415).

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2. Early to Late Post-Classical Greek

1. Counterfactuals: Definition, Development and Distribution

Counterfactuals express situations in the past, present or future which, according to the speaker, could not arise (for a more complete introduction, see [Counterfactuals, 1. Archaic to Classical Greek](#)). Counterfactuals express a reversal of the polarity marked in the sentence in which they occur (Van Linden and Verstraete 2008; la Roi 2023a), e.g. *If/I wish I was there, implying I was/am not there*. Historically, counterfactuals are first developed for past counterfactuality as the past is inherently knowable (Wakker 1994:132), after which their temporal reference extends to the non-past and they are consequently at the risk of losing their counterfactual meaning (Dahl 1997:199; la Roi 2022a; forthcoming. b).

In Post-Classical Greek one finds many counterfactual strategies which were developed in earlier periods of Greek, e.g. the modal particle $\acute{\alpha}\nu$ *án* with the past indicative, the past indicative in conditionals, or various counterfactual modal verbs such as $\eta/\acute{\epsilon}\beta\omicron\upsilon\lambda\acute{o}\mu\eta\eta$ *ē/boulómēn* 'I (would have) wanted' or $\epsilon\delta\epsilon\iota$ *édei* 'X ought (to have)'. At the same time, such older strategies continue to develop (e.g. the fossilized usage of $\acute{\omega}\phi\epsilon\lambda\omicron\nu$ *óphelon* 'ought' > 'if only' which starts to embed realizable non-