

What are they good for? A constructionist account of counterfactuals in ordinary Chinese



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Abstract

The ubiquity of counterfactual thinking as an experiential universal is well established in social psychology, decision research and neuropsychology. It challenges both the premise and the conclusion of earlier studies on the linguistic relativity of Chinese counterfactuality, which focused on the cognitive effect of the assumed absence of counterfactual marking in Chinese (Bloom, 1981; Au, 1983, 1984; Liu, 1985; Yeh and Gentner, 2005). Recent corpus-based as well as formal semantic research indicates the role of patterned combinations of lexical and grammatical structures in counterfactual interpretations in Chinese (Feng and Yi, 2006; Wang and Jiang, 2011; Wang, 2013), a finding consistent with recent formal pragmatic research that rejects the notion of a single grammatical category as a dedicated marker of counterfactuality across languages (Jiang, 2000; Van Linden and Verstraete, 2008; Patard, 2014; Elder and Jaszczolt, 2016). Despite the demystification of the lack of counterfactual marking in Chinese, little is known about the form-function mapping of Chinese counterfactuals. This study takes a constructionist approach to counterfactual language in Chinese and analyzes the pairing of counterfactual constructions with particular discourse functions in ordinary communication. The analysis elucidates the affective force and interpersonal functions of counterfactual language, and affirms the human relevance and significance of counterfactual reasoning.

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1. Introduction

Counterfactual thinking is the thinking of what might or could have been (Lewis, 1973; Olson, 1995; Byrne, 2002). It occurs in everyday life when people spontaneously evaluate real events and outcomes with reference to mentally constructed alternatives that are contrary to a past or present fact, but might or could have happened under a different condition (Kahneman and Miller, 1986; Olson, 1995; Roese, 1997; Roese and Olson, 1995a, 1996). This mode of thinking has been intensely researched from a functional perspective in terms of its role in decision-making, behavior regulation, and performance improvement. Despite differences in research focus, decision researchers in behavioral economics, social psychologists, and emotion researchers agree that counterfactual thoughts are affectively significant and influence decision making (Mandel, 2003; Roese, 1999; Roese and Hur, 1997; Roese and Olson, 1995b, 1997; Zeelenberg et al., 1996, 1998a,b; Zeelenberg, 1999). Counterfactual thoughts are “mental representations of alternatives to past events, actions, or states,” and are “evaluative” in that they specify alternatives “that are in some tangible way better or worse than actuality” (Epstude and Roese, 2008:168). Central to the mental simulation underlying counterfactual reasoning is

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causal attribution, which serves to explain reality by reconstructing the causal sequence of past events and deriving significance from the evaluation of reality against its alternative (Collins et al., 2004; Mandel et al., 2007; Gerstenberg and Lagnado, 2010; Lagnado et al., 2013; Zultan et al., 2012).

The emotions experienced in this spontaneous evaluative process are counterfactual emotions, in particular regret and relief, which are ubiquitous in human experience and serve critical adaptive functions in human evolution. The defining feature of regret is the causal attribution of an undesirable outcome to one's own faulty decision. This causal insight serves to regulate behavior in decision-making and thereby helps improve performance (Loomes and Sugden, 1982; Roese, 1994, 1997; Markman et al., 1993; Kahneman, 1995; Landman, 1993; Gilovich and Medvec, 1995; Zeelenberg et al., 1998c; Foster and Vohra, 1999; Connolly and Zeelenberg, 2002; Van Dijk and Zeelenberg, 2002; Zeelenberg and Pieters, 1999; Zeelenberg et al., 2000; Smallman and Roese, 2009; Reichert and Slate, 2000), as well as increase motivation and subjective control, which facilitates learning and problem solving (Epstude and Roese, 2007, 2008). Opposite to regret, relief is a positive affect that occurs when a threat is successfully removed or avoided (Carver, 2009; Baas et al., 2011; Sweeny and Vohs, 2012). It contributes to affective wellbeing by making people feel fortunate about their reality in which a potential dire situation has been resolved, and by infusing them with gratitude (Roese, 1994, 1997).¹

The foregoing brief overview suggests that counterfactual emotions as they are privately experienced serve heuristic functions in the sense that they help us make sense of reality and learn from the consequences of our actions. Do they serve the same functions when they are socially expressed? Using both naturalist and experimental data, Summerville and Buchanan (2014) found that personal experience of regret serves a learning and preparatory function whereas publicly expressed regret fulfills a social closeness function. In other words, privately felt regret helps us improve our performance by avoiding a past mistake, whereas expressing regret in front of others help us achieve interpersonal intimacy: by sharing the emotion with a friend or family member, we strengthen the mutual trust with them. The distinction is important for research on the function of counterfactual language, which can represent privately felt counterfactual emotions as well as publicly expressed counterfactual thoughts.

The ubiquity of counterfactual emotions in human experience implies their status as experiential universals. Indeed, their universality is underscored by their neural underpinnings revealed in cognitive neuropsychology and affective neuroscience (Camille et al., 2004; Coricelli et al., 2005; Chua et al., 2009; Liu et al., 2007; Lohrenz et al., 2007; Marchiori and Warglien, 2008; Coricelli and Rustichini, 2010; Nicolle et al., 2011a,b; Giorgetta et al., 2012; Van Hoeck et al., 2013).

Given the universality of counterfactual reasoning, it would seem reasonable to assume that as an experiential universal it should be crystallized as a semantic universal in the sense of a basic concept "that must be expressed if language is to be a successful means of communication" (Sapir, 1949:93).² Such a concept finds formal representations in all languages, which differ in their structural properties (Slobin, 1985; Bowerman and Choi, 2001; Croft, 2001). Surprisingly, articulations of this idea are rather rare in linguistic research on counterfactuals. Two studies come to mind. Wierzbicka (1997:27) considers the concept encoded by the English counterfactual construction *if ... would* with pluperfect and its counterparts in other languages an "irreducible semantic primitive," and maintains that all languages have a counterfactual construction. Akatsuka (1997) draws on authentic discourse data to show the fundamental and universal socioemotional power of counterfactual language in constructing alternative realities for the purpose of coping with irreversible real-world disasters.

The lack of awareness of the ubiquity of counterfactual language and thought suggests itself perhaps most clearly in the psycholinguistic research on Chinese counterfactuality that dominated the debate about linguistic relativity in the 1980s (Bloom, 1981; Au, 1983, 1984; Liu, 1985). Bloom (1981) put forth two conjectures about counterfactuality in Chinese: (1) The Chinese language possesses no linguistic device of communicating counterfactual alternatives. (2) As a result of the linguistic gap native speakers of Chinese have difficulty thinking counterfactually. Bloom's research became part of the standard discussion of linguistic determinism in the psychology of language (Cheng, 1985). In the two decades following this publication, a number of scholars critically responded to Bloom's findings by questioning the empirical rigor of his study (Au, 1983, 1984; Liu, 1985; Lucy, 1992; Wu, 1994) and the inadequacy of his descriptive framework (Lucy, 1992). Au (1983, 1984) and Liu (1985) effectively refuted Bloom's conjecture (2), but failed to challenge his conjecture (1). For them, the lack of counterfactual marking does not hinder Chinese speakers' counterfactual thinking, and the invalidation of Bloom's study logically led to a more general conclusion that there is little support for linguistic determinism. Similarly, Yeh and Gentner (2005) adhered to conjecture (1) as their premise, but made a finer distinction between transparent counterfactuals that are

¹ Another counterfactual emotion is envy, which is less intensively studied than regret and relief. In this study we will confine our discussion of counterfactual emotions to regret and relief. Interested readers can consult Schoeck (1969), Coricelli and Rustichini (2010), Feather and Sherman (2002), Hill et al., (2011), Smith and Kim (2007), and Bault et al. (2008) for further discussions.

² For example, across languages, the lexicalization of the emotion of regret indicates the role of the concept of belatedness of the emotion involved in regret as an afterthought. For examples, *meta-* in the Greek lexeme *μετανιώνω*, *eftir-* in the Icelandic *eftirsjá*, and *hou-* in the Chinese *houhui* all share a morpheme that means 'after,' which conveys the irrevocability of a past action for which self-blame is experienced.

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