

## Short communication

## Another view of the Gooniyandi “counterfactual” and its implications to the Van linden–Verstraete typology

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**Abstract**

Van linden and Verstraete (2008) present a compelling typological investigation of counterfactuals in simple clauses, showing that they are usually marked by both a modal element and a marker of tense. They propose that polarity reversal in the counterfactual represents a Generalised Conversational Implicature derived via the Gricean maxim of quantity, applied to a modalised past tense clause; in some languages this has grammaticalised, they suggest, into a coded rather than implicated meaning. In this note I attempt to do two things. First, I point to what seems to me to be a weakness of this pragmatic proposal: it fails to recognise the variety of meanings that can be coded by modal categories of the types employed in counterfactuals. This raises doubts about the universality of the suggested grammaticalisation pathway. Second, I examine one of the languages in their sample, Gooniyandi, and argue that the mono-clausal counterfactual is not double-marked in the way Van linden and Verstraete (2008) presume. It is double-marked paradigmatically rather than syntagmatically. I conclude with an alternative explanation that links counterfactuals to negative constructions, and may provide another motivation for their double marking in some languages.

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Van linden and Verstraete (2008) present a compelling typological investigation of simple-clause counterfactual constructions, demonstrating that in the majority of instances simple-clause counterfactuals are marked by a combination of a modal marker and a marker of tense, or less commonly aspect. For convenience, though not entirely aptly, I will refer to this as *double-marking*.

Van linden and Verstraete (2008) further argue that this double-marking pattern is so consistent cross-linguistically as to cast doubt on the arbitrariness of the construction as a grammatical sign. It reflects, they propose, a source in a Generalised Conversational Implicature (GCI) derived via the Gricean maxim of quantity. In some languages this meaning has grammaticalised, they suggest, into a coded rather than an implicated meaning.

This note has two main aims. One is to identify an apparent weakness in the Van linden–Verstraete pragmatic proposal, namely that it fails to adequately recognise the variety of meanings that are coded cross-linguistically in modal categories employed in single clause counterfactuals. This in turn casts doubt on the universality of the developmental pathway they advocate (Van linden and Verstraete, 2008:1882–1885). The other is to examine one of

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the languages in their sample, Gooniyandi (a non-Pama-Nyungan language spoken in the Kimberley, Western Australia—see McGregor, 1990), and argue that closer scrutiny of the situation in this language indicates the need for some refinements to the typology. Specifically, I will argue that the Gooniyandi simple-clause counterfactual is not double-marked in the way that Van linden and Verstraete (2008) suggest. Rather, it is double-marked on the paradigmatic rather than syntagmatic axis. I conclude with an alternative explanation of the putative syntagmatic double-marking of Gooniyandi, which links to negative constructions and may provide an alternative motivation for double-marking of counterfactuals in some languages.

In regard to the first point, Van linden and Verstraete's pragmatic account fails to recognise an important type of meaning potentially coded by modal elements, namely that the proposition is false and that the event did not occur. I refer to the type of irrealis found in a number of Australian languages, including most members of the Nyulnyulan family (see McGregor and Wagner, 2006),<sup>1</sup> a small genetic group consisting of about ten languages spoken in the far north-west of Australia, on the Dampier Land peninsula and nearby parts of the Kimberley region (Stokes and McGregor, 2003). This is illustrated in the Warrwa (Eastern Nyulnyulan) example (1), which codes the meaning that the speaker did not actually step on the snake, and typically implicates that they nearly did so, as per the gloss. In the remainder of this paper I use the term 'irrealis' specifically in reference to this type of irrealis mood; I exclude from the discussion other moods that have been labelled irrealis, and express epistemic uncertainty.<sup>2</sup>

- (1) *miliyarri nga-l-janba-na kinya juurru ngayu-na* Warrwa  
 long.ago 1MIN.NOM-IRR-step-PST this snake I-ERG  
 'I nearly stepped on the snake.' More literally, 'I might have stepped on the snake (but didn't).'

The existence of such irrealis categories in Nyulnyulan and some other Australian languages raises doubts concerning the uniqueness of the grammaticalisation pathway Van linden and Verstraete (2008) suggest for counterfactual constructions, that invariably begins with modal categories expressing potentiality.

I would argue that the proposals of Van linden and Verstraete (2008) are viable for one important macro-class of modals, namely those that modulate the proposition in terms of potentiality, which specify it as less than certain—but more than 'certainly not'. This allows the modalised proposition to be placed on a Horn scale with respect to a proposition expressed by a clause in plain past tense: potential  $p < p$  ((24) on p. 1878). The Gricean maxim of quantity (or equally Levinson's Q-principle, Levinson, 2000) can be applied to derive the negation of  $p$  as an implicature, since otherwise the speaker would not have modalised the proposition, and would have used a clause in the plain past tense. (The scale and implicature, as Van linden and Verstraete (2008) rightly observe, apply regardless of whether the modal is epistemic (as presumed here, for simplicity), deontic, or dynamic.)

However, for Nyulnyulan-type irrealis moods no uncertainty whatever is expressed. Rather what is expressed is 'certain that not': irrealis mood specifies the lowest point on the scale, at the opposite end to the plain unmodalised past (expressing certainty), namely that the proposition is false, and the event did not occur. Non-occurrence, or the negation of  $p$ , is coded, not presumed, meaning of the irrealis. In other words, there is no less certainty about a proposition in the irrealis than one in the plain (realis) past tense. But whereas in uttering a clause in the plain past tense, for instance, 'I stepped on the snake' it is not admitted that there is any uncertainty as to truth, in examples like (1) there is no uncertainty concerning falsity: the event can't have occurred.

A minority of the languages in Van linden and Verstraete's sample use a single dedicated and unanalysable marker of counterfactuality (Van linden and Verstraete, 2008:1869–1870). Such a marker may be considered a type of irrealis marker, though it is presumably more than merely that, if restricted to counterfactuals, which cannot refer to events located in future time. A genuine irrealis category effectively situates the event off the time line, and is non-specific as regards the relation to the here-now. The explanation then for a counterfactual marked by a combination of the irrealis and the past would be quite different to the pragmatic proposal suggested in Van linden

<sup>1</sup> According to some linguists, for instance, Bybee (1998), irrealis does not exist as a grammatical category in any language. McGregor and Wagner (2006) present evidence against this claim.

<sup>2</sup> The following abbreviations are used—ABL: ablative; ERG: ergative; IRR: irrealis mood; MIN: minimal number; NOM: nominative; PL: plural; PRS: present; PST: past; REP: repetition ('again'); SG: singular; and SUB: subjunctive. The first three integers indicate person categories. Morpheme boundaries are indicated by a hyphen; in the inflected part of the Gooniyandi verb, they are indicated by +; again in that language, verbal classifiers are represented in full capitals in the gloss line rather than translated.

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