

“We wouldn't have got this far if we wouldn't have had faith”: A variationist account of the protasis of English counterfactual conditional sentences

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This study examines two variants found in the protasis of counterfactual conditional sentences: the pluperfect, as shown in (1), and the conditional perfect, as shown in (2).

- (1) If this *had been* easy, it would've been taken care of by Teddy Roosevelt. (COCA)
- (2) Well, if they *would have felt* guilty about it, they would have stopped doing that. (COCA)

Variation in conditional sentences is found cross-linguistically in, for example, the protasis and apodosis of potential conditional sentences in Spanish (e.g. Silva-Corvalán 1984; Gutiérrez 2003), and in the protasis of both potential and counterfactual conditional sentences in French (e.g. LeBlanc 2009, 2010). Although variation in the protasis is attested in English in counterfactual conditional sentences (e.g. Ishihara 2003; Molencki 1998), previous research on English has not been variationist in focus. Given this lack of research, the present study explores the linguistic factors that may affect the variation found in the protasis of counterfactual conditional sentences, including: (i) grammatical person (of protasis and apodosis); (ii) polarity (of protasis and apodosis); (iii) modality/tense of apodosis; (iv) inversion; (v) distance; and, (vi) verb type (of protasis and apodosis).

All tokens used for this investigation were extracted from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), containing written and oral data from the years 1990-2012, totaling 450+ million words. The current study employs oral data from the years 2005-2012. This period yielded 945 occurrences of the pluperfect, and 327 of the conditional perfect, in the protasis, which were coded for the aforementioned linguistic factors. A multivariate statistical analysis was then performed on the data using Goldvarb X (Sankoff et al. 2005).

Preliminary results show that of the nine factors analyzed, three were significant: (i) grammatical person of apodosis; (ii) polarity of protasis; and (iii) modality/tense of apodosis.

Grammatical person of the apodosis has the highest magnitude of effect (range = 36). First-person singular pronouns favor the use of the conditional perfect in the protasis. Polarity of protasis has the second highest magnitude of effect (range = 25). Affirmative polarity in the protasis favors the conditional perfect in the protasis, while negative polarity in the protasis favors the pluperfect in the protasis. In this way, the results are consonant with Poplack and Turpin's (1999) findings in their study on future temporal reference in French, which suggest a link between negation and the inflected future (the prescribed form). Consequently, given that the pluperfect is the prescribed form in English in the protasis of counterfactual conditional sentences, these results indicate a correlation between the use of the pluperfect and negation. Modality/tense of apodosis has the lowest magnitude of effect (range = 16). The use of the conditional perfect in the apodosis favors the conditional perfect in the protasis. This is not surprising, since it creates a symmetry of form across the two clauses.

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