

Abstract: Heim Sequences and Why Most Unqualified 'Would'-Counterfactuals are Not True

The problem of reverse Sobel sequences (alternatively known as “Heim sequences”) is taken by some to be an important objection to the classic Lewis-Stalnaker semantics for counterfactuals. Responses to the problem have been wide-ranging. Some (von Fintel, Gillies) have argued that the Lewis-Stalnaker semantics should be rejected, and a version of a strict conditional semantics, which better handles the troublesome sequences, should be endorsed in its place. Others (Karen Lewis, Ichikawa) have argued that the problem motivates a contextualist rendering of counterfactuals similar to contextualist accounts of knowledge or taste. And Moss has argued that there is a plausible, entirely pragmatic way to account for the (apparently) problematic sequences.

It is my contention that none of these responses to the problem is right. After showing why I think each extant solution is inadequate, I defend a novel way to make sense of the troublesome sequences. The solution I endorse avoids the problems faced by the alternative analyses. In addition, there is good independent reason to think that it is right. There is, however, a difficulty for my view: its truth suggests that many ordinarily accepted counterfactuals are not true. I argue that this (apparent) cost is an acceptable one.