COUNTERFACTUAL *UNLESS*

TAKAO FUJITA

Toyo University

In Geis (1973), the ungrammaticality of counterfactual *unless*-clauses is pointed out:¹

- (1) a. If you hadn't helped me, I would never have been able to finish on time.
- b. *Unless you had helped me, I would never have been able to finish on time.

But the occurrence of *unless* in hypothetical clauses of condition is not uncommon:

- (2) a. I knew him very little, but he interested me because once he gave me a great surprise. Unless I had heard the story from his own lips I should never have believed that he was capable of such an action. (S. Maugham, 'A friend in need' (Pan Books, 1975), p. 321)
- b. If I hadn't heard the story from his own lips I should never have believed that he was capable of such an action.

It should be remembered, however, that what is implied in 2a and 2b may be different, in that the *if*-clause is normally interpreted as counterfactual while the *unless*-clause would be ambiguous without the context.

In fact, the unacceptability of counterfactual *unless*-clauses is asserted in Geis, but no convincing explanation is offered for why this should be so. What is evident here is that the reason counterfactual *unless*-clauses

¹ That hypothetical *unless*-clauses are ill-formed is also noted in Quirk, et al. (1985, p. 1093) and the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (1978, p. 1204). As exemplified in the (b) sentences below, the occurrence of *unless* is ungrammatical:

- (i) a. If you hadn't studied hard, you'd have failed the exam.
- b. *Unless you had studied hard, you'd have failed the exam.
- (ii) a. If I hadn't stopped her she would have jumped.
- b. *Unless I had stopped her she would have jumped.
- (iii) a. If she weren't so silly she would understand.
- b. *Unless she were so silly she would understand.

are considered ill-formed or unlikely is partly attributable to the semantic implications of *unless*, that is, the kind of meaning it generates within a sentence. It is axiomatic that *unless* and *if ... not* are not strictly interchangeable owing to the syntactic as well as the semantic differences between them.

Consider the following citations:²

- (3) 'You must realize,' said my father, 'he had great problems. I mean, I'd never have taken over Oxmoon unless I'd honestly felt he couldn't cope—although now when I look back I can see this must have aggravated his sense of failure and driven him further along the road to suicide. I shouldn't have allowed him to give Oxmoon to me—Christ, if only you knew how guilty I feel about that now—' (Susan Howatch, *The Wheel of Fortune* (Fawcett Books, 1984), p. 1010)
- (4) This would be a strain, but nothing like the strain it would have continued to be unless it had happened. Since it had, and could not be denied, he was enabled to bear the thought of the future with equanimity. (Frank O'Connor, *My Oedipus Complex and Other Stories* (Penguin Books, 1983), p. 74)

Under standard assumptions, both 3 and 4 would be either ungrammatical or else not counterfactual. These examples, however, are 100% grammatical, and can also be said to be, from the context in which they occur, counterfactual.

What should be made clear here is that in counterfactual *unless*-clauses

² The citations below would be additional evidence for the counterfactual use of *unless*:

- (i) 'Unless you had been told the contrary, you would in all probability have considered her to be in poor circumstances—at any rate to begin with. Who was it exactly who told you that she was well off?' (A. Christie, *The Hound of Death* (Fontana Paperbacks, 1982), p. 91)
- (ii) If this had been a tale I was inventing I would certainly have made it more probable. As it is, unless I had heard it with my own ears I am not sure that I should believe it. (S. Maugham, 'A man with a conscience' (Pan Books, 1978), p. 224)
- (iii) Language, as has been implied often in this book, is essentially a controlled behaviour, *shared* in various degrees by all the people in a given speech-community. Language transcends idiosyncrasy. Unless we all shared basically the same set of vocal conventions, we would not be able to communicate with each other. (David Crystal, *Linguistics* (Perican Books, 1972), p. 243)

the notion of exclusion is much less predominant than has generally been assumed, and, in fact, more often than not almost or totally absent. More specifically, when counterfactually used, *unless* might be virtually tantamount in meaning to an *if ... not* construction.³

Further verification for this view can be found in the use of the negative-polarity item *any*, which gives syntactic support as well to the supposition that *unless*- and negative *if*-clauses are practically equivalent pragmatically. As might be expected, since *any* has a negative polarity it would be unlikely to, or 'cannot' (according to Geis), occur in *unless*-clauses, which are positive in polarity.

The ungrammaticality of the co-occurrence of *unless* and negative-polarity items is argued in Geis (1973) and Bolinger (1977), as in 5a and 5b:

- (5) a. *Unless John writes you much, it can only be because he has a broken arm.
- b. *Unless you have any objection, I'll wait.
- c. Unless anyone has any questions, the meeting is adjourned.

Leech-Svartvik (1975), however, indicates that example 5c is well-formed, which seems to be confirmed by the citations given in 6-8:

- (6) 'But I could not gamble for money,' protested the priest. 'Unless any winnings went to a Church charity?' suggested O'Connor. (Frederick Forsyth, *No Comebacks* (Corgi Books, 1985), p. 317)
- (7) He then announced that, unless she had anything special to say, he must visit the wine-cellar, and they went off together in search of Burton. (E. M. Forster, *Howards End* (Penguin Books, 1975), p. 219)
- (8) 'If so, I can give you a lift.'
'Thanks.'

³ With regard to the interchangeability of an *unless*-clause and a negative *if*-clause, suffice it to say here that the equivalence of (ia) and (ib) is noted in Leech-Svartvik (1975, p. 97):

- (i) a. Unless Peter improves his work, he'll fail the exam.
- b. If Peter doesn't improve his work, he'll fail the exam.

Incidentally, care must be taken of the fact that *unless*, when used counterfactually, usually cannot be replaced by 'except if' or 'except on condition that', since the exclusive implications of these expressions might render the meaning unintelligible.

'Unless you have any more street fighting to do?' (P. G. Wodehouse, *Summer Moonshine* (Penguin Books, 1983), p. 185)

Of particular interest is the frequent occurrence in spoken English of polarity *any* in *unless*-clauses. Furthermore, observe the counterexample to 5a:

- (9) 'Unless I much mistake,' he remarked, 'that is my old friend, Baron Lollipop.' (A. Christie, *The Secret of Chimneys* (Pan Books, 1976), p. 109)

The citations 6-9 help to corroborate the claim that *unless* might not infrequently be interpreted as having some of the same syntactic properties as *if ... not* constructions.

Logically, negative-polarity items should not be employed in *unless*-clauses, which are indubitably positive in polarity. It strikes me, though, that this subordinator might be construed as a purely negative word; for instance, *not* might be mistakenly interpreted as a constituent of *unless*, although, in fact, *unless* is etymologically derived from *less* preceded by *on* or *in*. The occurrence of polarity *any*, and, for that matter, of *unless* in counterfactual conditional clauses may stem partly from such an unconscious misinterpretation.⁴

This squib is intended to call attention to the fact that *unless*-clauses

⁴ Although it must be borne in mind that *unless* is far more likely to be met with in open conditions than in hypothetical ones, it might be worth mentioning that hypothetical *unless*-clauses are not uncommon, even if not counterfactual, and examples like those cited below can be found in abundance:

- (i) a. 'Except that you'd never *met* Jack Armstrong, of course, and you couldn't have known what he looked like. Unless you'd read Muriel's diary.' (Ed McBain, *Blood Relatives* (Pan Books, 1977), p. 150)
- b. 'A man with his leg in a cast couldn't possibly ride a lift or jump from it, could he? Unless he'd been in and out of that cast for God knows how long!' (*id.*, *The Empty Hours* (Pan Books, 1981), p. 188)
- (ii) a. Unless Baker could bring home some good news from Paris, Reagan administration officials fear, America's protectionist mood might turn uglier. (*NEWSWEEK*/MARCH 2, 1987, p. 34)
- b. 'What the hell is he doing on that side of the Capitol?' said Marc softly. 'You couldn't shoot anyone on the Capitol steps unless you were in a chopper.' (Jeffrey Archer, *Shall We Tell the President?* (Coronet Books, 1984), p. 267)
- c. Unless she confessed, or unless someone came forward with information that proved criminal complicity, Di Silva would not be able to touch the girl. (Sidney Sheldon, *Rage of Angels* (Pan Books, 1980), p. 42)

can be counterfactual contrary to the widely accepted view that they cannot, and that, when they occur counterfactually, they may be interpreted as being pragmatically interchangeable with negative *if*-clauses.

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