

Presupposing Counterfactuality

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There is long standing agreement both among philosophers and linguists that the term ‘counterfactual conditional’ is misleading if not a misnomer. Speakers of both *non-past subjunctive* (or ‘*would*’) *conditionals* and *past subjunctive* (or ‘*would have*’) *conditionals* need not convey counterfactuality. The relationship between the conditionals in question and the counterfactuality of their antecedents is thus not one of presupposing. It is one of conversationally implicating. This paper provides a thorough examination of the arguments against the presupposition view as applied to past subjunctive conditionals and finds none of them conclusive. All the relevant linguistic data, it is shown, are compatible with the assumption that past subjunctive conditionals presuppose the falsity of their antecedents. This finding is not only interesting on its own. It is of vital importance both to whether we should consider antecedent counterfactuality to be part of the conventional meaning of the conditionals in question and to whether there is a deep difference between indicative and subjunctive conditionals.

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Introduction

There is by now long standing agreement both among philosophers and linguists that the term ‘counterfactual conditional,’ though often used and well entrenched, is misleading if not a misnomer. Speakers felicitously using the conditionals in question may commonly convey that the antecedent is false, but contrary to what the label ‘counterfactual’ suggests, they by no means need to. In other words, speakers using the conditionals in question need not convey counterfactuality.¹ The relationship between these conditionals and the counterfactuality of their antecedents is thus not one of presupposing. It is one of conversationally implicating.

¹Here and in the following, I am using ‘to convey that p’ in a broad sense similar to Grice’s ‘to (speaker) mean that p.’

This agreement enfold two types of the conditionals in question, typically individuated by tense:² so-called ‘would’ or ‘non-past subjunctive conditionals’ (*NPSCs* for short), such as

- (1) If Jones took cocaine, he would be dancing all night.

and so-called ‘would have’ or ‘past subjunctive conditionals’ (*PSCs* for short), such as

- (2) If Jones had taken cocaine, he would have been dancing all night.³

Neither *NPSCs* nor *PSCs* presuppose the falsity of their antecedents, it is held. If the speaker of either conditional conveys the falsity of the antecedent at all, she conversationally implicates it.⁴

There are two prominent arguments against the presupposition and in favor of the conversational implicature view. The first goes back to Alan Anderson and provides cases in which speakers use conditionals of the relevant form without committing to the falsity of the antecedent. The second is due to Bob Stalnaker and offers a reductio against the presupposition view: if *NPSCs* and *PSCs* were to presuppose the falsity of their antecedents, modus tollens arguments containing them as premises would come out as question begging.

Though widely endorsed, neither of these arguments has been discussed in detail. In fact, most researchers these days almost exclusively talk about the various aspects of the alleged conversational implicature, such as how it is calculated and under which conditions it arises. The claim that the counterfactuality assumption actually is a conversational implicature is often simply taken for granted.⁵ This is surprising because the conversational implicature view is not without problems. Not only has developing an account of the calculation of the alleged conversational implicature proven to be more complicated than one might have hoped.⁶ We also seem to be forced to accept that some of the

²I will confine myself to English counterfactual conditionals. For crosslinguistic investigations, see, e.g., Iatridou (2000), Nevins (2002), and Karawani (2014).

³I am borrowing the labels ‘non-past subjunctive conditional’ and ‘past subjunctive conditionals’ from Ippolito (2003). Further common labels are ‘present counterfactuals’ and ‘past counterfactuals.’

⁴The conversational implicature view is defended in, e.g., Stalnaker (1975), Karttunen and Peters (1979, 4 ff.), Comrie (1986, p. 89), von Stechow (1998), von Stechow (2012, p. 467), Iatridou (2000, p. 232), Nevins (2002), Ippolito (2003, p. 147), Edgington (2008), Leahy (2011a, 258 f.), Leahy (2011b), Leahy (2017), and Arregui and Biezma (2015). See, similarly, Starr (2014, p. 1024). The only more recent proponents of the presupposition view are Portner (1992) and Karawani (2014). For the claim that the falsity of the antecedent is ‘implied,’ see Will (1947), Hampshire (1948), and Pears (1950).

⁵See, for instance, Iatridou (2000), Ippolito (2003), Leahy (2011a), Leahy (2011b), Leahy (2017), and Arregui and Biezma (2015). One exception is von Stechow (1998), who discusses in detail whether (past-)subjunctive conditionals could be true counterfactuals.

⁶For the most recent discussion, see Leahy (2017). For criticism of (an early version of) Leahy’s approach, see Starr (2014, p. 1025).

proclaimed conversational implicatures are not cancellable.⁷

This paper is a first step towards filling this glaring gap in the debate on the semantics and pragmatics of the still-called ‘counterfactual conditionals.’ It provides a thorough examination of the arguments against the presupposition view as applied to PSCs—the second type of conditionals listed above—and finds none of them conclusive. All the relevant linguistic data, it is shown, are compatible with the assumption that PSCs presuppose the falsity of their antecedents. So, even though not yet a full-fledged case, the paper is a move towards rejecting the conversational implicature and adopting the presupposition view for PSCs.

Importantly, the paper is not—or at least not primarily—about the term ‘counterfactual conditional.’⁸ It is about a substantial and all too often unchallenged claim in the debate on conditionals. Whether the claim is true is interesting on its own, I take it. But it is also of vital importance to more general questions in the debate on the semantics and pragmatics of various types of conditionals, such as whether we should consider antecedent counterfactuality to be part of the conventional meaning of PSCs and whether there is a deep difference between indicative and subjective conditionals.⁹

The paper is divided into four sections. In section 1, I will examine different versions of Anderson’s argument. In section 2, I will investigate Stalnaker’s argument. In section 3, I will consider two further arguments against the presupposition view for PSCs due to Dorothy Edgington and Kai von Stechow. In section 4, I will briefly sum up.

Before I start, let me clarify two things. First, I will stay neutral on the controversy of whether PSCs have true values.¹⁰ I take the conclusion of this paper to be compatible with and relevant to both sides of the divide, but I will not dwell on the various ways to incorporate it here.

Second, I will not start from a specific view of presuppositions. I will only make the following assumption: (Ass) If *PSCs* presuppose the falsity of their antecedents, then *speakers* using PSCs presuppose the falsity of the respective antecedents at every context of felicitous use. Support for this claim comes from two different directions. (i) (Ass) plausibly entails that presuppositions, unlike conversational implicatures, are not contextually cancellable (neither are they explicitly cancellable) in the sense specified by Grice: they are present at every context at which the sentences triggering them are felicitously used.¹¹ (ii) (Ass)

⁷See, e.g., Arregui and Biezma (2015). See also my example (8) below (‘If Jones had taken potassium cyanide, he would have shown completely different symptoms than he actually shows’). Examples like (8) seem to have gone unnoticed in the literature so far.

⁸For the claim that there are no conditionals living up to the name ‘counterfactual conditional,’ see, e.g., Comrie (1986, p. 89).

⁹For the claim that there is a ‘profound semantic difference’ between indicative and subjunctive conditionals, see Gibbard (1981, p. 211), and also Bennett (2003, p. 256). For the opposite claim, see, e.g., Edgington (2008) and Starr (2014). For discussion, see, e.g., von Stechow (2012).

¹⁰For the claim that they do not, see, e.g., Adams (1975), Gibbard (1981), and Edgington (1986).

¹¹For Grice’s view of cancellability, see, e.g., Grice (1989, ch. 2) and Zakkou (2018).

is plausible as a claim about the connection between what are often called *semantic* or *sentence presuppositions* (left hand side of (Ass)) and what are often called *pragmatic* or *speaker presuppositions* (right hand side of (Ass)). Note as an aside that (Ass) is also compatible with both semantic characterizations of presuppositions, according to which false presuppositions make the sentences triggering them gappy, and conversational characterizations, according to which presuppositions are secondary, non-at-isse, non-proffered, or backgrounded contents. (Ass) is thus impartial to different views of presuppositions and can be taken on board by scholars from different backgrounds. Most importantly, however, (Ass) seems to be shared among opponents of the presupposition view for PSCs. For often enough they object to the claim that PSCs presuppose the falsity of their antecedents by arguing that speakers using PSCs do not presuppose the falsity of the respective antecedents at every context of felicitous use (i.e. they deny the left hand side of (Ass) by arguing against the right hand side of it). By way of (Ass) I will mostly talk about speakers of PSCs presupposing things, while I will ultimately counter objections that are commonly directed against PSCs themselves presupposing things.

With this in mind, let us start our investigation. As indicated above, we will begin with Anderson's argument.

1 Anderson's argument

Consider the following PSC, which I am going to call the *Anderson Conditional*:

- (3) If Jones had taken arsenic, he would have shown the same symptoms he actually shows.

Assume that this sentence is used by a doctor, call her A, at the autopsy of Jones's body. Anderson holds that ...

in [the autopsy] context the doctor's statement [of (3)] would probably be taken as lending support to the view that Jones took arsenic—it would certainly not be held to imply that Jones did not take arsenic. (Anderson, 1951, p. 37)

We can give the thought expressed here a more linguistic spin by looking at the following two utterances by our doctor A:

- (4) A: If Jones had taken arsenic, he would have shown the same symptoms he actually shows. So he did not take arsenic.
 (5) A: If Jones had taken arsenic, he would have shown the same symptoms he actually shows. So he took arsenic.

Anderson seems to assume that, given the presupposition view, (4) should sound fine and (5) should sound bad. Intuitively, though, it is the other way around: (4) is bad and (5) is fine. The presupposition view should thus be rejected. In the

autopsy context, A does not presuppose that the antecedent of the Anderson Conditional (i.e. (3)) is false.¹² But why exactly would one think that the presupposition view makes these counterintuitive predictions?

Let's start with (4). The presupposition view seems to predict that A is not contradicting herself. She is presupposing that Jones did not take arsenic and she is stating precisely the same: that Jones did not take arsenic. Her contribution should thus come out as fine. Consider furthermore the following utterance:

- (6) A: The man with the martini is wearing pink shorts. So there is someone drinking martini.

According to the presupposition view, this utterance is similar to the one in case (4): A first presupposes and then explicitly states that someone is drinking martini. This utterance sounds perfectly fine. By analogy, (4) should thus come out fine as well.

Let's next consider (5). The presupposition view seems to predict that A is contradicting herself. She is presupposing that Jones did not take arsenic and she is stating that Jones did take arsenic. Her contribution should thus come out as bad. Consider also the following utterance:

- (7) A: The man with the martini is wearing pink shorts. So there is nobody drinking martini.

According to the presupposition view, this utterance is similar to the one in case (5): A first presupposes that somebody is drinking martini and then explicitly denies that this is the case. This utterance sounds bad. So by analogy, (5) should come out bad as well.

How convincing are these arguments? I will postpone the discussion of the arguments by analogy to section 1.3 and for now concentrate on the first type of the challenge. My objection to both parts of this challenge will rely on the claim that for contributions of the form (4) and (5) to be fine not one but two conditions have to be met:

- (i) A is not contradicting herself.
(ii) A is providing a good reason for the claim made by the second sentence.

Why the second condition? Well, by introducing the second sentence of (4) and (5), respectively, with 'so,' A triggers the expectation that this second sentence is the conclusion of some kind of argument and that what she said before provides good reasons for the conclusion. I will argue in the next two sections that Anderson-style arguments overlook that (4) violates the second condition (sec.

¹²Various authors make use of this argument. See, e.g., Stalnaker (1975, p. 277): 'If the butler had done it, we would have found just the clues which we in fact found. Here a conditional is presented as evidence for the truth of its antecedent. The conditional cannot be counterfactual, since it would be selfdefeating to presuppose false what one is trying to show true.'

1.1) and that they are wrong to assume that, on the presupposition view, (5) violates the first (sec. 1.2). To foreshadow, I will defend and make use of two crucial claims. First, if one uses a conditional with an obviously true proposition in the consequent, one provides a fairly good reason for the truth of the proposition in the antecedent; in any case, one does not provide a good reason for the falsity of the proposition in the antecedent. Second, since presuppositions and assertions aim at mutual acceptance (rather than belief), one can consistently presuppose and assert jointly incompatible propositions. The relevance of both claims will become clear in the discussion to follow.

1.1 Stating the falsity of the antecedent

Recall that, intuitively, contribution (4) sounds bad. Can the presupposition view make sense of this? Does (4), on the presupposition view, violate one of the two just-given conditions for a fine contribution?

It is clear that condition (i) (the no contradiction condition) is fulfilled: by presupposing that Jones did not take arsenic and then asserting precisely the same, A is not contradicting herself. It is anything but clear, however, that condition (ii) (the good reasons condition) is fulfilled as well. With her utterance of the Anderson Conditional, A is conveying that a certain relevant, necessary condition for Jones's having taken arsenic is met. This, though, only provides a good reason for the claim that Jones *did* take arsenic. It does not provide a good reason for the claim that Jones *did not* take arsenic. That a relevant necessary condition for a given circumstance is met speaks in favor of this circumstance being met; it certainly does not speak in favor of it not being met.

This shows that proponents of the presupposition view can explain why (4) sounds bad after all: it sounds bad because A does not provide a good reason for what she presents as a conclusion.

Before we move on to the second part of Anderson's argument, let me offer some evidence for my claim that our intuitions about (4) are driven by a violation of condition (ii). Cases that are similar to (4) but in which A does provide a good reason for what she presents as a conclusion come out fine. Consider the following extension of (4):

- (4') A: If Jones had taken arsenic, he would have shown the same symptoms he actually shows. But there are other substances that explain his symptoms much better. So he did not take arsenic.

Intuitively, this sounds fine. This is as it should be given condition (ii) because with the second sentence 'But there are other substances that explain his symptoms much better,' A makes clear that there is a good reason for assuming that Jones did not take arsenic.¹³

¹³If you do not like (4'), insert the following between the second to last and the last sentence: 'Potassium cyanide, for instance, also explains the intensity of the symptoms.' Alternatively, try the following: 'If Jones had taken arsenic, he would have shown the symptoms he actually

Consider also the following PSC:

- (8) If Jones had taken potassium cyanide, he would have shown completely different symptoms than he actually shows.

Assume that it is used in the following case structurally analogous to (4):

- (4'') A: If Jones had taken potassium cyanide, he would have shown completely different symptoms than he actually shows. So he did not take potassium cyanide.

Intuitively, this sounds fine, again, as it should be given condition (ii) because with the PSC (8) A conveys that there is a good reason for assuming that Jones did not take potassium cyanide. With (8), A conveys that a certain relevant, necessary condition for Jones's having taken potassium cyanide is not met: clearly, Jones is not showing completely different symptoms than he is actually showing. This provides a very good reason for the claim that Jones did not take potassium cyanide. That a relevant necessary condition for a given circumstance is not met simply entails that this circumstance is not met.

Note that I do not take (4') and (4'') to provide evidence for the presupposition view. Proponents of the conversational implicature view can make sense of them as well. In fact, they can embrace the very same reasoning I have given to explain our intuitions regarding (4) and its variations. What is important to me at this stage is only that proponents of the presupposition view can make sense of them as well. Therefore such cases do not provide a reason to reject the presupposition view.

I will discuss a couple of worries later on. But let us first have a look at the second part of Anderson's argument.

1.2 Stating the truth of the antecedent

Recall that, intuitively, contribution (5) sounds fine. Does the presupposition view predict a violation of condition (i) (the no contradiction condition), as indicated above? Is A contradicting herself by presupposing that Jones did not take arsenic and then asserting the exact opposite?

Let us rehearse a well-known and widely-shared picture according to which presuppositions and assertions, though different in several respects, share an important feature: with them, speakers take a stand on the common ground. More precisely, by presupposing that *p* and asserting that *p* alike, speakers either suggest to put *p* in the common ground or they endorse the fact that *p* is already in the common ground.¹⁴ Does this picture entail that by presupposing

shows. But potassium cyanide explains his symptoms equally well. Arsenic has not been in circulation in over a century, but potassium cyanide is purchasable over-the-counter. So Jones did not take arsenic.'

¹⁴See, most prominently, Stalnaker (1973) and Stalnaker (1978). This general assumption is compatible with various theories of presuppositions and assertions. In particular, it is

that not p and then asserting that p the speaker takes jointly inconsistent stands and thus contradicts herself?

Let us call to mind a couple more details of the above picture. The common ground is conceived as the set of propositions that the participants of the conversation mutually accept. Acceptance of p is taken to be a weak positive attitude towards p that is compatible with a range of different more specific attitudes towards p. Most often, one will accept that p because one believes that p, but one can also accept that p because one, for instance, assumes it for certain purposes (be that because one takes p to be a helpful simplification, to reduce p to absurdity or what have you).¹⁵ Importantly, these more specific attitudes are not only independent (one can believe that p without assuming that p and *vice versa*). They can also be consistently held towards incompatible propositions. For instance, one can consistently believe that p *and* assume that not p. Given the notion of acceptance in play, participants of a conversation can thus (individually or mutually) accept incompatible propositions: if they accept that p because they believe p to be the case and accept that not p because they assume that for a given purpose, no inconsistency arises.

This shows that by presupposing that not p and then asserting that p the speaker need not take jointly inconsistent stands on the common ground. If she presupposes that not p in order for not p to be mutually accepted as an assumption for a given purpose and then asserts that p in order for p to be mutually accepted as something that is actually the case, no inconsistency arises. She is thus not contradicting herself.

But isn't the speaker still aiming for a common ground that contains incompatible propositions? And aren't such cases commonly taken to result in a break down of the conversation?

If one thinks of the common ground (a) as a homogenous whole (b) to which propositions can only be added as the conversation proceeds, it seems indeed natural to expect a break down of the conversation. After all, if both speech acts are successful the common ground will be inconsistent in an obvious way and so allow for all kinds of mad inferences. It has been argued, however, that both alleged features of the common ground are controversial and should at best be accepted as simplifications or idealizations. To adequately model the complexity of our conversational reality, we should either—opposed to (a)—think of the common ground as being compartmentalized so that propositions associated with different attitudes are stored in different compartments (e.g. there is one for propositions that are merely assumed and one for propositions that are actually believed), or we should—in contrast to (b)—think of the common ground as something to and from which propositions can be added and subtracted as the conversation proceeds.¹⁶ Either modification would be sufficient to prevent a

compatible with the different ways of thinking about presuppositions mentioned in the introduction. Note that it may be easier to felicitously endorse a proposition that is already in the common ground by presupposing it than by asserting it, but since this difference is not going to be important in the following, I will gloss over it.

¹⁵See, most prominently, Stalnaker (1974, p. 51) and Stalnaker (2002, p. 716).

¹⁶For suggestions along the first line, see, e.g., Yalcin (2018). For suggestions along the second

break down of the conversation in the cases in question. According to the first, successfully presupposing that not p and then asserting that p will result in a common ground that stores not p and p in different compartments. According to the second, successfully presupposing that not p and then asserting that p will result in a common ground which, at a first stage, contains not p , but, at a second stage, does not contain not p anymore.

But wouldn't it follow that speakers can always unproblematically string together speech acts that suggest or endorse jointly incompatible propositions? More specifically, wouldn't it follow that there is nothing strange about conjoining a presupposition of p with a presupposition of not p , and likewise, an assertion of p with an assertion of not p ?

The modified view of the common ground needs to be worked out in more detail to avoid these problematic consequences. I have no full-fledged theory to offer, but let me point to two plausible addenda. First, it may well be that with presuppositions and assertions alike, speakers take a stand on what the participants of the conversation should mutually accept, but this is compatible with presuppositions and assertions being governed by different norms. While the norm of assertion seems to be belief or something even stronger, the norm of presupposition seems to be weaker than belief. That is, for a speaker's assertion that p to be proper, she has to at least believe that p , but for a respective presupposition to be proper, she only has to assume that p for certain purposes.¹⁷ (I cannot provide a detailed defense of this claim here. Note, though, that (i) the talk of 'asserting something for the purposes of the conversation' is far stranger than that of 'presupposing something for the purposes of the conversation,' and that (ii) we are far less happy to explicitly assert the existence of fictional characters than to presuppose it. This should give the assumption of different norms at the very least some initial plausibility.) Being governed by different norms would help to explain why it is easier to felicitously concatenate a presupposition and an assertion of jointly incompatible propositions than it is to felicitously concatenate two presuppositions or two assertions of jointly incompatible propositions. Second, if two speech acts suggest or endorse jointly incompatible propositions, it is the speaker's responsibility to clarify to her audience her attitudes towards the propositions in question. One option is to tell her audience outright about her attitude towards the propositions in question; another is to provide more indirect evidence, for instance, by giving reasons which undermine the one proposition (and so make clear that it was merely assumed) and support the other (and by that make clear that it is supposed to be believed). If the speaker does not clarify her attitudes, then her contribution comes out odd. This too would forestall the overgeneralization worry. Both

line, phrased in terms of 'temporary revisions of the common ground,' see, e.g., Karttunen and Peters (1979, 8, n. 5) and, more recently, Leahy (2017, p. 17). Interestingly, these latter two papers use the possibility of a temporary revision of the common ground to defend the view that indicative conditionals presuppose the epistemic possibility of their antecedents. Using the same idea to defend the presupposition view of PSCs can thus not count as an *ad hoc* move.

¹⁷For norms of assertion, see, e.g., Williamson (1996), Lackey (2007), and Turri (2017).

addenda need to be worked out in more detail, but I take them to be plausible enough to shift the burden of proof to those who press the overgeneralization worry.

We can thus conclude that the presupposition view as applied to contribution (5) does not predict a violation of condition (i) (the no contradiction condition). If the proposition that Jones did not take arsenic is meant to be accepted only as an assumption for certain purposes and the proposition that Jones took arsenic is meant to be accepted as something to be believed, no inconsistency arises.¹⁸

What about condition (ii) (the good reasons condition)? Does A provide a good reason for what she presents as a conclusion in (5)? With her utterance of the Anderson Conditional, A is conveying that a certain necessary and also clearly relevant condition for Jones's having taken arsenic is met: there is no doubt that Jones is showing the symptoms he is actually showing. This, recall, does not provide a good reason for the claim that Jones did not take arsenic. But it does provide a good reason for the claim that Jones did take arsenic. Admittedly, it does not provide a full, but only a partial reason. But still, given certain background assumptions, even a partial reason can be a good enough reason for a claim.

This shows that proponents of the presupposition view can explain why (5) sounds fine after all: it sounds fine since A is not contradicting herself and provides a good reason for what she presents as a conclusion.

1.3 Analogous cases?

So far we have only addressed the first challenge presented at the beginning of this section. What about the argument by analogy? Recall the relevant two utterances:

- (6) A: The man with the martini is wearing pink shorts. So there is someone drinking martini.

¹⁸I will provide cases which work analogously to (5) in section 1.3. But immediate support for my claim could already be given here by looking at the following cases known from the debate on protagonist projection (see, most prominently, Holton (1997), but also Stokke (2013) and Buckwalter (2014); Recanati (2010, ch. 4) discusses a similar (if not the same) phenomenon under the label *displayed assertion*):

- (5') A: Tim knew that Tom would never let him down, but, like all the others, he in the end did.
(5'') A: Jill saw a shooting star last night. She wished on it, but it was just a satellite.

According to one prominent construal at least, A is here presupposing something which, as she immediately afterwards reveals, she does not take to be the case. In the first case, she presupposes that Tom was never going to let Tim down and then makes clear that she actually believes that Tom in the end did let Tim down; in the second case, she presupposes that there was a shooting star when Jill looked in the night sky and then makes clear that she actually believes that there was only a satellite. Both cases sound fine, though. So there seem to be cases in which a speaker presupposes one thing and then states the opposite which come out fine.

- (7) A: The man with the martini is wearing pink shorts. So there is nobody drinking martini.

It seems that, on the presupposition view, these utterances are similar to the ones in cases (4) and (5). In (6), A is presupposing something that she then confirms. And in (7), A is presupposing something that she immediately afterwards denies. A's utterance in (6) sounds fine and her utterance in (7) sounds strange, though. So, shouldn't we expect the same pattern for (4) and (5), given the presupposition view?

In light of the discussion above, it should be clear that (6) and (7) are relevantly dissimilar from (4) and (5). Relevantly similar cases would have the speaker first presuppose a proposition and then present reasons for doubting this very proposition, such as in the following two cases:

- (9) A: The man with the martini is drinking something that looks, smells and tastes like water. So there is someone drinking martini.
- (10) A: The man with the martini is drinking something that looks, smells and tastes like water. So there is nobody drinking martini.

By using the definite description, A is presupposing that somebody is drinking martini and by attributing 'is drinking something that looks, smells and tastes like water' she is providing reasons against this proposition. She is providing reasons for thinking that the man in question is not drinking martini. So (4) and (5) are much more like (9) and (10) than like (6) and (7). And with (9) and (10), we have the same intuitive pattern as with (4) and (5): concluding that the presupposition is true is off and concluding that the presupposition is not true is fine.

If you are suspicious of the examples because they contain definite descriptions that are used referentially (as opposed to attributively), take a look at the following cases:¹⁹

- (11) A: The round square has two properties that very rarely show up together. So there is a round square.
- (12) A: The round square has two properties that very rarely show up together. So there is no round square.

Just like with the Anderson Conditional, A is presupposing something and providing reasons for doubting the proposition in (11) and (12). Here, too, we

¹⁹For the distinction between referential and attributive uses of definite descriptions, see, most prominently, Donnellan (1966). To be clear, I don't think that the examples are suspicious just because the descriptions are used referentially. Following Kripke (1977), they are good cases in point: just as referentially used definite descriptions carry a presupposition that need not be believed by the speaker, Anderson-style PSCs (i.e. PSCs with a necessarily true consequent) carry presuppositions that need not be believed by the speaker.

have the same intuitive pattern as with (4) and (5): concluding that the presupposition is true is off and concluding that the presupposition is not true is fine.

One might be fine with one or more of the cases just introduced (recall also (5') and (5'') from footnote 18 containing factive or veridical verbs), but object that one cannot replicate the data for just any presupposition triggers.

There are in principle two ways for me to respond. The first, obviously, is to reject the claim just made; it is to argue that one can felicitously free oneself from all kinds of presupposition commitments in the way indicated—one only has to be more creative when it comes to placing the cases in conversational contexts. The second, more moderate response is to grant that we cannot felicitously get rid of all kinds of presupposition commitments and to tell a story of what distinguishes the good from the bad cases. I want to stay neutral here on which option to prefer. I do see that a complete account of the phenomenon has to do more, but I am not sure the burden is on me to present such an account here already. Neither of the two options seems to be hopeless or ruled out and, more importantly and independently from that, as the examples provided attest, the phenomenon does seem real. There are cases that function in the way requested. This, I take it, should suffice to get my account going.

To avoid misunderstandings, let me be clear that the presupposition view I suggest does not entail that presuppositions are cancellable. That a given proposition p is cancellable basically means that one can use the sentence in question without conveying that p .²⁰ This condition is fulfilled by conversational implicatures. Speakers do not always convey that Hannah did not have all the cookies when they say 'Hannah had some cookies.' (If they use a cancellation clause like 'But I don't mean to suggest that she didn't have all the cookies' or 'In fact she had all the cookies' to make this clear, the proposition is explicitly cancelled, if they can rely on the context to make this clear, it is contextually cancelled.)²¹ But, on my view, the condition is not fulfilled by PSCs: with them, speakers always convey that the antecedent is contrary to the facts. They always suggest to add p to the common ground or endorse the fact that it is already in the common ground. It's just that the suggestion or endorsement is merely temporary, or concerns a specific compartment of the common ground. So, to reiterate, the presupposition view I suggest does not entail that presuppositions are cancellable.

1.4 Troubling cases?

Up until now, we have focused on (4) and (5), in which our speaker first utters the Anderson Conditional and then states the falsity or truth of the antecedent. But these utterances are not the only cases proponents of the presupposition view need to make sense of. So what about cases in which our speaker first states the falsity or truth of the antecedent and then utters the Anderson Conditional?

²⁰See Grice (1989, ch. 2) and Zakkou (2018).

²¹For the distinction between explicit and contextual cancellability see, e.g., Grice (1989, 39, 44, 270f.) and Zakkou (2018).

And what about cases in which she intersects the plain statements within the Anderson Conditional?

As for the first question, consider the following exchanges between A and her colleague B:

- (13) B: Jones did not take arsenic.
A: Right. If Jones had taken arsenic, he would have shown the same symptoms he actually shows.
- (14) B: Jones took arsenic.
A: Right. If Jones had taken arsenic, he would have shown the same symptoms he actually shows.

A's response in (13) sounds strange while her response in (14) sounds fine. Can the presupposition view account for these two data points as well?

A first thing to note is that even though, compared to (4) and (5), the order of the sentences is reversed, (13) and (14) are similar to (4) and (5) in that we naturally take A to give the conditional as a reason for the affirmation of the claim that Jones did not take arsenic and that Jones did take arsenic, respectively. If you are not sure, insert an explanation marker like 'for' after 'Right.' That is, consider the following:

- (15) B: Jones did not take arsenic.
A: Right. For if Jones had taken arsenic, he would have shown the same symptoms he actually shows.
- (16) B: Jones took arsenic.
A: Right. For if Jones had taken arsenic, he would have shown the same symptoms he actually shows.

The original intuitions about (13) and (14) are retained: A's response in (15) is strange (just like in (13)) and her response in (16) is fine (just like in (14)). So it seems safe to assume that in (13) and (14) the conditional is supposed to provide a reason for the speaker's affirmative response.

Proponents of the presupposition view can thus offer the very same account of the two data points they have given before for (4) and (5): A's response in (13) sounds strange because even though she is not contradicting herself with first stating that Jones did not take arsenic and then presupposing that he did not take it, the Anderson Conditional does not provide a good reason for what needs confirmation. A's response in (14), in contrast, sounds fine because, as spelled out above, she is neither contradicting herself with asserting that Jones took arsenic and then presupposing that he did not take it, nor does she fail to provide a good reason for what she is trying to show.

A second thing to note about (13) and (14) is that if we insert a contrast marker like 'but' instead of 'for' after 'Right,' intuitive verdicts reverse. Consider

- (17) B: Jones did not take arsenic.
 A: Right. But if Jones had taken arsenic, he would have shown the same symptoms he actually shows.
- (18) B: Jones took arsenic.
 A: Right. But if Jones had taken arsenic, he would have shown the same symptoms he actually shows.

A's response in (17) seems fine now and her response in (18) strange.

Proponents of the presupposition view can account for this as well: A's response in (17) is fine because even though she commits to the view that Jones did not take arsenic by 'Right,' she provides a reason against this claim with the Anderson Conditional. So her use of the contrast marker makes perfect sense. A's response in (18) is strange, however, because A does not only commit to the claim that Jones took arsenic by 'Right,' she also provides a reason for this very claim. Her use of the contrast marker is thus surprising, to say the least.

Of course, there is a difference between (4) and (5) and the cases just discussed: while in (4) and (5) A first presupposes the relevant proposition and then explicitly states her view about what Jones did, in (13) and (14) A first expresses her view about Jones and then presupposes the proposition in question. This, however, does not cause a problem for the presupposition view: just like it is possible to first presuppose something for a given purpose and then explicitly state whether one agrees or disagrees with this proposition, it is possible to first state a given proposition and then presuppose for the purposes of the conversation the vary same or the opposite.

To further support my suggestion, consider, for instance,

- (19) B: Somebody is drinking martini.
 A: Right. The man with the martini is drinking something that tastes, smells and looks like water.
- (20) B: Nobody is drinking martini.
 A: Right. The man with the martini is drinking something that tastes, smells and looks like water.

Just like A's response in (13), her response in (19) sounds strange. And just like her response in (14), her response in (20) sounds fine.

As for the second question raised at the beginning of this section, consider the following utterances:

- (21) A: If Jones had taken arsenic—which he didn't—he would have shown the same symptoms he actually shows.
- (22) A: If Jones had taken arsenic—which he did—he would have shown the same symptoms he actually shows.

Intuitions might not be univocal but it seems that there are contexts in which (21) and (22) are fine. Can proponents of the presupposition view account for this as well?²²

Consider (21) first. One might think that, given the presupposition view, this utterance should strike us as redundant, because A is both presupposing and then stating that Jones did not take arsenic. In light of what I said before, however, it should be clear that this would be much too quick.²³ According to the presupposition view, we can understand A as signaling that she accepts the proposition that Jones did not take arsenic for the time being and as going then on record that she actually believes this. Of course, in conversations in which it is either entirely uncontroversial that Jones did not take arsenic or completely irrelevant whether he did, stressing her belief will sound somewhat strange. But in a conversation in which the question of whether Jones took arsenic is controversial and of great importance, revealing her belief that Jones did not take it can make perfect sense.

Compare the following exchange:

- (23) B: Who is wearing pink shorts? The man with the martini or the man with the vodka?
A: The man with the martini—who is really drinking martini—is wearing pink shorts.

If, in the conversation, it is either entirely uncontroversial or completely irrelevant that the man in question is actually drinking martini, A's utterance will sound strange. But if the question of whether it really is martini that he is drinking is controversial and relevant, A's utterance will sound perfectly fine.

Consider also

- (24) A: The man with the martini—who is really drinking martini—is drinking something that looks, smells and tastes like water.

This utterance patterns with (21) in that it sounds fine if the speaker continues to explain why what at first seems to be a good reason against the intersected claim is not a sufficient reason. In the case of (21) this could be something like 'There are other substances that explain his symptoms equally well;' in the case of (24) this could be, for instance, 'His martini is strongly diluted.'

Consider next (22). One might think that, given the presupposition view, A's utterance should strike us as contradictory, because, on the presupposition view, A is here presupposing and asserting jointly incompatible propositions. But, again, in light of what I said before, it should be clear that things are more complicated. There surely are conversations in which everyone will be just fine with assuming a certain proposition, say, for simplicity's sake, and where the

²²For the claim that the acceptability of utterances similar to (22) speak in favor of the conversational implicature view, see Ippolito (2003, p. 147).

²³See in this context also Mayr and Romoli (2016) and Sudo (ms) who claim that it is not always redundant to assert what can be taken to be presupposed.

actual truth of the proposition is not of great importance. But there are other contexts in which one is happy to go along as far as a certain assumption is concerned but in which one still finds it important to go on record that one actually believes the opposite. In these latter cases, at least, (22) will sound fine.

Compare the following:

- (25) B: Who is wearing pink shorts? The man with the martini or the man with the vodka?
A: The man with the martini—who is actually not drinking martini—is wearing pink shorts.

If, in the conversation, it is completely irrelevant whether the man in question is actually drinking martini, A's utterance will sound somewhat peculiar. But if A fears that she will be held accountable for not making explicit that she did not take the assumption that the man is drinking martini to be true, A's utterance will sound acceptable.²⁴

Consider also

- (26) A: The man with the martini—who is actually not drinking martini—is drinking something that looks, smells and tastes like water.

This utterance patterns with (22) in that it sounds fine unless the speaker goes on and explains why what appears to be a good reason for the interested claim is not a good reason after all.

So, to sum up, proponents of the presupposition view can counter Anderson's objection. The assumption that by using the Anderson Conditional—the PSC (3)—one presupposes that the antecedent is contrary to the facts does not have counterintuitive consequences.

This concludes my response to Anderson's objection as it has been presented at the beginning of this section. Before we move on to Stalanker's objection, however, let us get out of the way a further potential reason for thinking that in some version of the autopsy context, A does not presuppose that Jones did not take arsenic.

1.5 Missing alternatives?

Assume that our doctor A is agnostic about whether Jones took arsenic and that, accordingly, she does not want to convey anything about whether Jones actually took it. Assume furthermore that A nonetheless believes that taking arsenic is a good (though not the only) explanation for why Jones is showing the symptoms he is actually showing. In other words, assume that A believes that

²⁴Acceptable, one might object, but not perfectly fine. I agree. Note though that (22) does not sound perfectly fine either.

taking arsenic is a sufficient condition for showing the symptoms that Jones is actually showing.

How can A express this thought? She can of course say things like ‘If one takes arsenic, one shows the same symptoms that Jones is showing.’ But assume that A does not want to make a conditional statement about people in general, but only about Jones. Then it seems that she has to choose from the following four conditionals:²⁵

- (27) If Jones takes arsenic, he’ll show the same symptoms he’ll actually show.
- (28) If Jones took arsenic, he showed the same symptoms he actually showed.
- (29) If Jones took arsenic, he would show the same symptoms he actually shows.
- (3) If Jones had taken arsenic, he would have shown the same symptoms he actually shows.

One might think that, given what A wants to get across, she basically has to pick the PSC (3) (i.e. the Anderson Conditional). It seems clear that A should neither use the non-past indicative conditional (27) nor the non-past subjunctive conditional (29). With these sentences, she would misleadingly suggest that, at the time of her utterance, Jones has not taken arsenic yet. It seems equally clear that she should not opt for the past indicative conditional (28) either. With (28), she would misleadingly suggest that, at the time of the utterance, Jones no longer shows the symptoms in question. So she has to pick the PSC (3). This, one might argue, shows that, by using (3), A does not presuppose the falsity of the antecedent. For if she did, she could not stay neutral on whether Jones took arsenic.

Compelling as it may seem, this argument does not pose a serious problem for the presupposition view. Firstly, if (3) were indeed the best option for A to express the thought outlined above, it could still be the case that (3) is not an ideal or even good option for her purposes. Nothing about the English language guarantees that there is a conditional about Jones that serves A’s needs. Secondly, and more importantly: it is simply not true that (3) is the single best option for A. To see this, consider the following two sentences:

- (30) If Jones had taken the maths exam *tomorrow*, he would have been done with his studies by tomorrow evening.²⁶
- (31) If Jones took the maths exam *yesterday*, he would be done with his studies by now.²⁷

²⁵The assumption that the speaker has to choose from the four given conditionals is modeled after the idea there are four ‘canonical tense patterns’ (those in (28), (29), and (3), listed as the tense patterns ‘traditionally distinguished by grammatical handbooks’ in Declerck and Reed (2001, ch.7), plus the one in (27)). It serves *reductio* purposes only.

²⁶So-called *mismatched past counterfactuals* or *future-shifted conditionals* (PSCs that refer to the future) are discussed in, e.g., Ogihara (2000), Ippolito (2003), and Arregui and Biezma (2015).

²⁷Of the 10 native English speakers I consulted, 8 shared my impression that (31) (as well

Conditional (30) has an antecedent that refers to the future; conditional (31) has an antecedent that refers to the past. In addition to the before-mentioned four conditionals, there are thus the following two:

- (32) If Jones had taken arsenic *at some point in the future*, he would have shown the same symptoms he will actually show.
- (33) If Jones took arsenic *at some point in the past*, he would show the same symptoms he actually shows.

The latter conditional seems to be a good means for A's purposes. So there is no pressure from considerations about expressibility that forces us to conclude that, with using (3), A does not presuppose the falsity of the antecedent.

To put the point somewhat differently: the default reading of a sentence such as (29) which does not specify a time parameter in its antecedent might indeed be one according to which the antecedent event is taken to happen in the present or future. That is, the default readings of

- (29) If Jones took arsenic, he would show the same symptoms he actually shows.

might be something like

- (34) If Jones took arsenic right now, he would show the same symptoms he actually shows.
- (35) If Jones took arsenic at some point in the future, he would show the same symptoms he actually shows.

But (29) also seems to have a reading that is equivalent to the before-mentioned sentence (33). So if the context is clear enough, even (29) itself might be a good means for A's purposes.

This rounds up my discussion of Anderson's challenge. In the next section, I will address Stalnaker's objection.

2 Stalnaker's argument

Consider the following PSC:

- (36) If Jones had taken cocaine, he would have been dancing right now.

as (33) below) can be fine in context. Of course, a bigger, representative sample has to be queried. For one case in my favor, though, see episode 15 of season 7 of the show *Friends* ('The One With Joey's New Brain') where, at 12.46, Joey's colleague Cecilia (like Joey a star of the soap opera *Days Of Our Lives*) says: 'If I left [*Days of Our Lives*] 15 years ago, the landscape of Mexican cinema would be very different today.' Note that I am not committed to saying that (31) has subjunctive marking in both the consequent *and* the antecedent. It may also be a mixed mood conditional.

Assume that this sentence is used by an detective, call her C, as part of a drug investigation. More concretely, assume that C utters the following:

- (37) C: If Jones had taken cocaine, he would have been dancing right now. He is not dancing right now. So Jones did not take cocaine.

Stalnaker claims that the presupposition view falsely predicts that C's reasoning is bad. Not because, according to the presupposition view, C is contradicting herself, nor because C is not giving a good reason for what she presents as a conclusion. The problem rather seems to be that, by presupposing that Jones did not take cocaine, C would be begging the question. She would presuppose something that she only tries to establish in the course of her reasoning. Case (37) should thus come out as question begging even though, intuitively, it sounds perfectly fine. Or to use Stalnaker's own words:

The subjunctive conditional premiss in [a] modus tollens argument cannot be counterfactual since if it were the speaker would be blatantly begging the question by presupposing, in giving his argument, that this conclusion was true. Stalnaker (1975, p. 277)

Stalnaker would thus conclude that, in (37), C does not presuppose the falsity of the antecedent.

What should we make of this argument? I agree that, intuitively, (37) sounds fine. But the assumption that the presupposition view predicts otherwise seems to rest on a confusion of two senses of the word 'presupposing.' There is not only the somewhat technical sense used before; there is also a perhaps more intuitive sense according to which 'presupposing the conclusion' roughly means 'tacitly introducing the conclusion as a premise.'

The proponent of the presupposition view will happily acknowledge that, given the first, technical sense, C presupposes the conclusion in (37). But it is not clear why she should accept that presupposing the conclusion in this sense would make (37) question begging. By presupposing the conclusion, the proponent of the presupposition view can argue, C only anticipates the conclusion. She merely indicates the argumentative direction she is taking. Compare the following utterance which does not feature a PSC:

- (38) C: Jones did not take cocaine yesterday. If Jones took cocaine yesterday, he would be dancing right now. He is not dancing right now. So he did not take cocaine.

(38) is like (37), the proponent of the presupposition view can claim, in that C anticipates the conclusion of the argument right at the beginning. Her argument in (38) does not sound question begging, though. Anticipating the conclusion does not make arguments question begging.

If you are not convinced, ask yourself why presupposing the conclusion in the first, technical sense would lead to question-beggingness any more than

conversationally implicating the conclusion would. You might think this has something to do with the fact that conversational implicatures are cancellable whereas presuppositions are not. Or you might hold that it is due to the fact that, on the presupposition view, the PSC (36) depends for its truth on whether Jones took cocaine, while, on the conversational implicature view, it does not. Consider the before-mentioned PSC (8), though:

- (8) If Jones had taken potassium cyanide, he would have shown completely different symptoms than he actually shows.

Now look at the following contribution:

- (39) C: If Jones had taken potassium cyanide, he would have shown completely different symptoms than he actually shows. Obviously, Jones does not show completely different symptoms than he actually shows. So Jones did not take potassium cyanide.

Scholars from all sides will have to agree that, whether its a conversational implicature or a presupposition, the proposition that Jones did not take potassium cyanide as conveyed by C's use of PSC (8) is not cancellable. 'If Jones had taken potassium cyanide, he would have shown completely different symptoms than he actually shows. But I don't mean to suggest that Jones did not take potassium cyanide' sounds clearly off. Additionally, people from both sides will most likely grant that (8) entails the falsity of the antecedent. They will thus acknowledge that (8) depends for its truth on whether Jones took potassium cyanide. Still, the argument in (39) is not question begging. So questions about cancellability or dependence do not seem to be relevant.

The proponent of the presupposition view will also grant that, given the second, more ordinary sense of 'presupposing,' presupposing the conclusion should make (37) question begging. For, no doubt, tacitly introducing the conclusion as a premise will beg the question. But she need not accept that C presupposes the conclusion in (37) in this second sense, because the claim that Jones did not take cocaine does not function as a premise in the argument. Consider the following utterance which again does not feature a PSC:

- (40) C: If Jones took cocaine yesterday, he would be dancing right now. He is not dancing right now. So he did not take cocaine.

(40) differs from (37), the proponent of the presupposition view can argue, in that C does not presuppose the conclusion. Still her argument is valid. So the claim that Jones did not take cocaine does not function as a premise of the argument—neither in (40) nor in (37).

We can thus conclude that whether we assume the first or the second sense of 'presupposing the conclusion,' the presupposition view does not predict that (37) sounds question begging. If we assume the first, more technical sense, presupposing the conclusion does not entail question-beggingness. If we assume the

second, more intuitive sense (‘tacitly introducing the conclusion as a premise’), then C does not presuppose the conclusion in (37). Just like Anderson’s argument, Stalnaker’s objection to the presupposition view seems inconclusive. All the relevant linguistic data are compatible with the presupposition view.

3 Further arguments

Anderson’s and Stalnaker’s arguments are by far the most cited objections to the presupposition view. But they are not the only ones. In this final section, I will briefly address two further reasons for abandoning the presupposition view. The first can be attributed to Edgington (2008), the second is due to von Stechow (1998).

3.1 Investigating the truth of the antecedent

Assume that our detective C utters the following in an investigation to a drug crime:

- (41) C: If Jones had taken cocaine, he would have been dancing right now. So let’s go to his place and see whether he is dancing right now.

Intuitively, this utterance sounds fine. One might think that this poses a challenge for the presupposition view.²⁸ Not so much because of the possible outcomes of C’s inquiry: given the PSC (36), it can be the case that Jones *is* dancing right now and that he did not take cocaine, just as it can be the case that he *is not* dancing right now and that he did not take cocaine. The alleged problem rather seems to be why C would want to go and find out what Jones is doing in the first place. If C already knew that Jones did not take cocaine, why would she go to his place to see whether he is dancing? To spell this out a bit: if C finds that he is dancing right now, she cannot infer anything regarding the question at hand, and if she finds that he is not dancing right now, she can only infer what she already knew, namely that Jones did not take cocaine. So why would she bother to go to Jones’s place?

Given what we said above, it should be clear where the argument goes wrong: presupposing that Jones did not take cocaine does not require knowing or even believing that Jones did not take cocaine. So C may very well feel the need to go to Jones’s place to see whether he is still dancing. For even though the result of her inquiry cannot disconfirm her view that he did not take cocaine, it might well confirm it.

3.2 Forcing the truth of the antecedent

Assume that our doctor A utters the following in response to B’s question about how the dinner was with their colleagues Polly and Uli:

²⁸See, e.g., Leahy (2017, sec. 4.3).

- (42) A: If Polly had come to dinner tonight, we would have had a good time. If Uli had made the same amount of food that he in fact made, she would have eaten most of it.

Intuitively, this utterance sounds fine. Unlike the Anderson Conditional, though, which has a consequent that cannot be false, the second conditional here has an antecedent that cannot be false: necessarily, Uli made the same amount of food he in fact made. One might think that this rules out the presupposition view, because it never makes any sense to presuppose a necessary falsehood, in any case not an obvious necessary falsehood like the falsity of the respective antecedent.²⁹

I see the challenge, but it seems to me that (42) is a case of modal subordination in the sense of Roberts (1989): by evaluating the second conditional, we do not think of the actual situation in which Uli made the same amount of food he in fact made. We think of a counterfactual situation in which Uli made the same amount of food he in fact made and in which Polly came to the party (which is no longer necessarily true). It is thus not clear that (42) provides a counterexample to the presupposition view. I acknowledge that this needs to be elaborated further, but for the time being I take some confidence in the fact that PSCs with necessarily true antecedents cannot be discourse initials. That is, they are fine when preceded by another PSC as in (42), but they are strange if they are the first sentence in a conversation. This seems to support the modal subordination view.

4 Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that the most prominent and presumably strongest arguments against the claim that past subjunctive conditionals (PSCs) presuppose the falsity of their antecedents are inconclusive. All the relevant linguistic data involving PSCs are compatible with the assumption that speakers of such conditionals always presuppose the falsity of the respective antecedents. This means that the conversational implicature view cannot be taken for granted. The presupposition view is a viable alternative.

²⁹See von Stechow (1998, p. 39).

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