



# Talking about counterfactual worlds: A comparative study of French and Spanish

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**Talking about counterfactual worlds**  
**A comparative study of French and Spanish**

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**Abstract**

Counterfactual thinking is a cognitive process in which reality is compared to an imagined view of what might have been. Previous studies in Linguistics have focused on the description of the conditional construction if P (then) Q. Our study aims to compare the grammatical devices used by thirty French native speakers and thirty Spanish native speakers. Participants were presented with a story that led to a particular outcome and were asked to provide alternative scenarios that might have prevented such an outcome from happening. The results showed (i) that counterfactuality is not expressed most frequently by conditional constructions and (ii) that the use of evaluative modal markers within the mutation core is a salient difference between French and Spanish. The minor role of conditional constructions suggests that the boundaries of conditionality as a conceptualization process need to be reconsidered within the realm of irreality. In addition, the frequency of evaluative modals in French suggests a preference for counterfactual scenarios that integrate an overt critical judgement from the speaker.

**Keywords:** conditionality, counterfactuality, modal verbs

**1. Introduction**

Counterfactual thinking is the cognitive process in which reality is compared to an imagined view of what might have been (Kahneman and Tversky 1982). Previous studies dealing with the description of counterfactuality have focused on the analysis of conditional sentences (Bates 1976; Bloom 1981; Reilly 1982; Au 1983; Bernini 1994; Chini 1995; Harris et al. 1996; Katis 1997; Schouten 2000; Yeh and Gentner 2005; Grevisse 1986; Renzi and Salvi 1991; Campos 1993; Alarcos-Llorach 1999). However, evidence of the marking of counterfactuality in ways other than using conditional sentences has been found in simple clauses in natural languages (Hellberg 1971; Van Linden and Verstraete 2008). This article provides original insights into the expression of counterfactuality in French and Spanish. Eventual differences in the grammatical devices preferred in French and Spanish might underlie different semantic patterns in the conceptualization of counterfactual states of affairs. The ultimate objective of the present study is to analyse whether the grammatical categories by which the native speakers talk about irreality are salient in the same way in French and Spanish. This article is organized in seven sections. In the next Section, we provide a formal description of conditional constructions and we present the conceptual foundations of counterfactuality. In Section 3, we offer a typological description of counterfactual conditional clauses in French and Spanish. Subsequently, we introduce the materials and instructions used to elicit counterfactual responses. Statistical results are presented in Section 5. The main findings are discussed and related to previous studies, and the conclusions summarized in the final sections.

## 2. State of the art

The notion of counterfactuality has typically been linked to a particular linguistic construction, the conditional construction If P (then) Q:

(1) If kangaroos had no tails, they would topple over.

This kind of construction generally consists of two clauses, called the protasis and apodosis, respectively. The protasis is a subordinate clause introduced by a conjunction (if) and characterized by a particular tense form: in the English example (1), a form that looks like a simple past, but is considered to be a past subjunctive. The apodosis is a main clause typically characterized by a particular verb form, again in (1), the combination of would + infinitive (the present conditional). In fact, it is this construction in English, and its counterparts in other languages, that are generally described in traditional grammar books as pertaining to counterfactuality (Section 3) and most of the work on the description of counterfactuality deals with this type of construction (Sections 2.2 and 2.3). However, this is not the only way in which speakers can talk about worlds that are explicitly contrasted to what is really the case. In this study, our goal is to see how speakers proceed when they are attempting to speak about counterfactual worlds in French and Spanish. Do they employ conditional constructions, or do they use different strategies?

### 2.1 Conceptual foundations

It is not our aim to present a complete theoretical picture of the contributions of philosophy, psychology and linguistics to counterfactuality but rather to introduce three frameworks from which counterfactuality has been studied. We consider counterfactual thinking to be a cognitive process in which reality is compared to an imagined view of what might have been (Kahneman and Tversky 1982). This process is based on the mental construction of alternatives to factual states of affairs (Wells and Gavanski 1989). Counterfactuality has been described as a semantic domain related to three main topics:

- causality, because of the causal relation that may hold between the main clause (Q) and the subordinate clause (P) within conditional constructions (Hume 1739; Lewis 1973; Mackie 1980);
- epistemic modality, because of the speaker's degree of uncertainty involving the content of their statement (Lyons 1977; Palmer 1986; Fauconnier 1984; Dancygier and Sweetser 1996);
- irreality, because of the definition of counterfactuality as one semantic subdomain within irreality, alongside the non-exclusion-of-factuality and non-referentiality (Pietrandrea 2012).

Along a semantic scale, counterfactual conditionals express a low degree of probability and a high degree of hypotheticality (Comrie 1986). In counterfactual conditional constructions, the relationship between P and Q holds in the past. This is because counterfactuality is deeply related to the speaker's state-of-knowledge and in particular to their certainty about the non-actualization of a given process. The past is a better known domain compared to the present and the future and thus counterfactuality represents a well delimited frame from which people can conceive other possible worlds ( $W_1$ ,  $W_2$ ,  $W_3$ )

which differ from the world as it is ( $W_0$ ). This means that any antecedent (P) introduced by the speaker is false at the time when something is said (the time of utterance). Consider the example below:

(2) If Karen hadn't eaten seafood, she would still be alive.

This is regularly understood to mean that the speaker asserts that Karen had in fact eaten seafood, i.e. the sentence Karen has not eaten seafood is false. The certainty of the speaker about the non-actualization of the process is a major feature that differentiates counterfactuality from potentiality (Verstraete 2005). Beyond conditional constructions, the combination of a past tense and a modal particle has been described as a frequent marker of counterfactuality (Van Linden and Verstraete 2008). For example:

(3) The police should have done something to prevent the killing.

These authors posit that counterfactual statements are semantically double-layered, since they combine potentiality, i.e. the speaker presents a given state of affairs as possible, desirable, imminent or intended, and pastness, i.e. the speaker is aware of the non-actualization of what is being said. In English, the interpretation of a counterfactual statement comes from the compositional semantics of the modal element *should*, which frames it in a virtual locus, and the past marker *have done*, which marks a non-actualized state of affairs.

## 2.2 Rationale

A detailed reading of the literature on counterfactuality leads us to affirm that (i) in general this concept has failed to be analysed beyond conditional constructions and that (ii) a terminological problem remains in respect to its meaning. A major contribution to the linguistic properties of counterfactuality was made by the publication of the collective volumes *On Conditionals* and *On Conditionals Again* (Ferguson et al. 1986; Athanasiadou and Dirven 1997), in which conditionality was introduced as a semantic category covering both hypotheticality and counterfactuality. These volumes, together with earlier studies (Bates 1976; Bloom 1981; Reilly 1982; Au 1983; Liu 1985) and later studies (Bernini 1994; Chini 1995; Schouten 2000; Yeh and Gentner 2005), contributed to placing counterfactuality under the umbrella of conditional constructions. To date, terminological incoherence subsists across grammatical traditions and some authors claim that counterfactuality strictly covers the semantic domain of irreality (Renzi and Salvi 1991; Riegel et al. 1994; Real Academia Española 2009), whereas other authors consider it as a broader notion covering both irrealis and imagined conditions (Grevisse and Goosse 2008). Within the realm of irreality, it is generally assumed that conditional constructions can express values related to a past irrealis or a present irrealis (Harris 1986; Riegel et al. 2001; Grevisse and Goosse 2008).<sup>1</sup> We adhere to the theoretical framework that places counterfactuality in the semantic subdomain of irreality, alongside subdomains of non-exclusion-of-factuality and non-referentiality (Pietrandrea 2012). We consider counterfactuality to be a well delimited field that, unlike potentiality, implies the certainty of the speaker about the non-actualization of the process (Verstraete 2005).

## 3. Cross-linguistic description of counterfactual conditionals

The typological distance between French and Spanish in counterfactual conditionals resides in the protasis: French requires the indicative mood whereas Spanish requires the subjunctive mood. Concerning the apodosis or main clause, the two languages converge in the canonical use of the perfect conditional.

### 3.1 Counterfactual conditionals in French

In spoken French the canonical mood in the protasis is the pluperfect indicative (cf. Table 1).<sup>2</sup> This means that the indicative mood in French is associated with two different readings: factual and hypothetical, although the presence of the morpheme *si* (if) usually disambiguates this dichotomy. More problematic is the disambiguation of the pluperfect indicative in the protasis, which can encode either potential or irrealis semantic values. In this case, it is generally assumed that the disambiguation depends on the context (Riegel et al. 1994; Vetters 1994; Patard 2007; LeBlanc 2009).<sup>3</sup> Double conditional marking in both the protasis and the apodosis (4) is considered a violation of the French standard. For example:

(4) *Si vous m'auriez ennuyé, je vous l'aurais dit.* (Grevisse 1986: 1686)  
If you 'would have annoyed' me, I would have told you.

Example (4) is generally attributed to familiar uses (Grevisse 1986) and to verbal symmetry between the protasis and the apodosis in some hypothetical and concessive constructions (Riegel et al. 1994).<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, when the protasis is introduced by the constructions *au cas où* or *dans le cas où* (in case) the use of verbal forms of the conditional or the subjunctive is considered canonical, instead (Grevisse 1986). Among the less frequently described grammatical markers in French, we find the modal verbs *pouvoir* and *devoir* appearing in the past participle verbal forms of the perfect conditional:

(5) *Jean aurait pu être quelqu'un d'autre.* (Fauconnier 1984: 144)  
Jean could have been someone else.

Table 1. Counterfactual canonical conditionals in French and Spanish

	<i>If P</i>	<i>(then) Q</i>	Example
FR	Indica- tive	Condi- tional	<i>Si tu avais admis cette opinion, tu aurais eu tort</i> (Grevisse 1986) <i>If you had agreed with that opinion you would have been wrong</i>
SP	Subjunc- -tive		<i>Si te hubieses quedado, habrías visto algo bueno</i> (Alarcos-Llorach 1999) <i>If you had remained you would have seen something good</i>

### 3.2 Counterfactual conditionals in Spanish

135 Disambiguation between factual and counterfactual conditionals in Spanish is achieved by using the  
136 indicative mood or the subjunctive mood in the protasis (Alarcos-Llorach 1999). The main clause or  
137 apodosis is generally in the conditional, whereas the perfect subjunctive in the protasis (6) frames the  
138 content of the proposition in the past.

139 (6) Si te hubieses quedado, habrías visto algo bueno. (Alarcos-Llorach 1999: 474)  
140 If you had stayed, you would have seen something good.

141 In practice, a wide range of verbal combinations are observed in Spanish counterfactual conditionals,  
142 including symmetrical verb forms in the conditional tense in both the protasis and the apodosis (8) or in  
143 the subjunctive mood (7). For example:

144 (7) Si hubiera tenido dinero, hubiera ido a España. (Campos 1993: 163)  
145 If I had money, I would have gone to Spain.

146 (8) Si habría tenido dinero, habría ido a España. (Campos 1993: 163)  
147 If I had money, I would have gone to Spain.

148 The use of (7) has been described as a frequent structure in the Mexican variety of Spanish (Wald 1993)  
149 while the use of (8) has been observed in general in some dialectal varieties of Spanish (Alarcos-Llorach  
150 1999) and in particular in Buenos Aires (Lavandera 1976) and in the variety of Spanish spoken in the  
151 Basque Country (Silva-Corvalán 1982).

#### 152 4. Method

153 The study is based on a task that requires participants to discuss alternative scenarios based on a story  
154 describing a chain of related events. We henceforth refer to this task as the ‘mutation task’. Note that  
155 previous studies dealing with conditional constructions have elicited their data from spontaneous  
156 speech (Bowerman 1986; Chini 1995; Katis 1997; Schouten 2000), what if- questions (Bates 1976; Reilly  
157 1982; Harris et al. 1996) or written questionnaires (Bloom 1981; Au 1983; Liu 1985; Schouten 2000). The  
158 mutation task has been previously used by psychological studies as a way to obtain critical judgements  
159 related to causality (Wells and Gavanski 1989; Mandel and Lehman 1996). The data we discuss come  
160 from two groups of adults: thirty French native speakers and thirty Spanish native speakers; thirty-five  
161 women and twenty- five men, the majority of them recruited at the Aix-Marseille University (cf.  
162 Appendix). Guided interviews were recorded and stored as WAV files, then transcribed using the CLAN  
163 editor for CHILDES. Data collection was done mainly in the Aix-Marseille area but also in Nijmegen (the  
164 Netherlands). The stimulus was the following 200-word text, which participants had to read.

165 Karen was an assistant editor for a small publishing firm. She had a rare hereditary disease  
166 called Karpinson’s hemotrysoma, characterized by the lack of an enzyme that normally breaks  
167 down certain proteins in the digestive system. Because of this, fermented drinks such as wine  
168 and liqueurs can cause a severe allergic reaction in someone with the disease.

169 Karen had just received a promotion so her boss, Mr Carlson, took her to an expensive French  
170 restaurant to celebrate. Mr Carlson had been to this restaurant several times, so he ordered for  
171 both of them. As he looked over the menu, Mr Carlson considered what to order for Karen. He  
172 first thought about ordering the Coquilles Saint-Jacques, but at the last moment decided on the  
173 Moules Marinieres instead. Although Mr Carlson did not know this, the Moules Marinieres was  
174 made in a wine sauce whereas the Coquilles Saint- Jacques did not contain any wine.

175 Karen enjoyed her meal greatly, but began to feel ill shortly after finishing. Within minutes, she  
176 went into convulsions and was rushed away in an ambulance. She died on the way to the  
177 hospital.

178 The original text was in English (Wells and Gavanski 1986). For the experiment, it was translated in  
179 French and Spanish and then edited by two native reviewers in each language (cf. Appendix). After  
180 reading the text, the participants were asked to comply with the following instruction:

181 Imagine three modifications that could have been different in the story to avoid Karen's death.

182 We assume that every text answers an implicit question (Klein and Stutterheim 2006).<sup>5</sup> The  
183 identification of the mutation cores, i.e. the segments of the information responsible for a modification,  
184 was possible after a qualitative analysis that allowed us to distinguish foreground structures and  
185 background structures. Consider the following example:

186 1. \*SBJ: bon déjà il aurait pu choisir les coquilles Saint-Jacques.  
187 He could have chosen the Coquilles Saint-Jacques.

188 2. \*SBJ: au lieu de choisir les moules marinières.  
189 Instead of the Moules Marinieres.

190 3. \*SBJ: puisque dans les coquilles Saint-Jacques il n'y avait pas d'alcool.  
191 Since the Coquilles Saint-Jacques contained no alcohol.

192 4. \*SBJ: alors qu'y en avait dans les moules marinières.  
193 Whereas the Moules did.

194 5. \*SBJ: elle aurait pu choisir toute seule son plat.  
195 She could have chosen her own dish.

196 6. \*SBJ: au lieu de laisser choisir par lui.  
197 Instead of allowing him to choose it.

198 7. \*SBJ: ou je [ne] sais pas.  
199 Or I don't know.

200 8. \*SBJ: elle aurait pu ne pas être allergique aussi.  
201 She could have not been allergic for instance.

202 9. \*SBJ: et du coup elle aurait pu les manger.  
203 And thus, she could have eaten the Moules.

204 10. \*SBJ: sans être malade et sans mourir.  
205 Without getting sick and without dying.

206 In the example above, lines 1, 5 and 8 correspond to the text's foreground structure containing the core  
207 information that really answers the quaestio, whereas lines 3, 4, 9 and 10 can be considered background  
208 structures. The mutation cores were classified according to their formal composition in an Excel file.  
209 Statistical analyses were run using the software R.

## 210 5. Results

211 Among the different elements encoding counterfactuality we can distinguish (i) syntactic elements, e.g.  
212 conditional constructions, (ii) lexical elements, e.g. modal verbs, and (iii) inflectional elements denoting  
213 a particular verbal tense and mood.<sup>6</sup> We elicited ninety responses per group (three responses per  
214 participant). The alternative scenarios to factual past events were encoded by mutation cores produced  
215 within four types of clauses in French and Spanish:

216 A. Conditional constructions. Example:

217 (9) Si Karen n'avait pas eu de promotion, elle (ne) serait pas morte.  
218 If Karen had not got the promotion, she would not have died.

219 (10) Si no la hubieran ascendido, no la habrían invitado a cenar.  
220 If she had not been promoted, she wouldn't have been invited to dinner.

221 B. Clauses combining a conditional tense and a modal marker. Example:

222 (11) Elle aurait pu choisir toute seule son plat.  
223 She could have chosen her own dish.

224 (12) Carlson podría haber pedido las vieiras.  
225 Carlson could have ordered the scallops.

226 C. Coordinate clauses in verbal forms of the indicative mood, either the present tense (13) or past tenses  
227 (14). This type of structure recalls that of a chronological narration because of the recurrent use of the  
228 additive conjunctions *et* in French and *y* in Spanish (and). Example:

229 (13) Karen est invitée par son patron donc au restaurant mais elle l'avertit qu'elle a une allergie et elle  
230 lui demande de choisir elle-même son plat.

231 Karen is invited by her boss to the restaurant but she tells him she's allergic and she asks him if she can  
232 choose her dish herself.



233 (14) Karen comió las vieiras, se empezó a sentir mal y en el propio restaurante había un médico [...] y  
 234 entonces finalmente sí salvó su vida.  
 235 Karen ate the scallops, she felt ill but a doctor was in the restaurant [...] and eventually she survived.

236 D. Simple clauses introduced by *que* – in verbal forms of the subjunctive. Example:

237 (15) Qu'il commande autre chose que les moules.  
 238 Let him order something other than the Moules.

239 (16) Que ella hubiera informado en su trabajo que sufría esa enfermedad.  
 240 She might have informed people at her job that she had that disease.

241 Table 2 summarizes the frequency in the use of the four constructions listed above in French. Statistical  
 242 analyses using the chi-squared test revealed a significant difference between the frequency in the use of  
 243 Type B and Type C (p-value = 0.0004). This suggests an overt preference to produce mutation cores  
 244 combining a conditional tense with a modal marker over coordinate clauses in verbal forms of the  
 245 indicative. No significant differences were found between Type B, i.e. the combination of a conditional  
 246 tense and a modal marker, and Type A and Type D, i.e. conditional constructions and simple clauses in  
 247 the subjunctive, respectively. The lack of significant differences suggests that these three grammatical  
 248 devices play a prominent role in the expression of counterfactuality in French.

249 Table 2. Mutation cores in French (n=90)

Type A	Type B	Type C	Type D
19	32	11	19

250  
 251 Table 3 summarizes the frequency in the use of the four constructions in Spanish. The frequency in the  
 252 use of Type D was found to be significant compared to any of the other three constructions. In other  
 253 words, simple clauses introduced by *que* in a subjunctive verbal form are the preferred way to  
 254 conceptualize counterfactual scenarios in Spanish. The use of conditional constructions (Type A) in the  
 255 mutation task in Spanish was significantly lower compared to clauses in the subjunctive mood (p-value =  
 256 8.566e-15).

257 Table 3. Mutation cores in Spanish (n=90)

Type A	Type B	Type C	Type D
6	3	7	58

Table 4 compares the ways in which the mutation cores are encoded in French and Spanish. We established a decision threshold of 0.001 to minimize Type I errors.<sup>7</sup> The results of the comparison of French and Spanish underlines two salient differences concerning the distribution of the grammatical devices encoding counterfactuality. Spanish speakers preferred the subjunctive mood introduced by *que*, whereas French speakers favoured the combination of a modal marker and the conditional tense.

Table 4. Conditional constructions v. other verbal predicates (n=90)  
P-values resulting from the X<sup>2</sup> analysis

	Type A	Type B	Type C	Type D
French	19	32	11	19
Spanish	6	3	7	58
	0.009	1.34e-04*	0.456	1.036e-08*

## 6. Discussion

Conditional constructions are not the most common way of referring to counterfactual worlds, neither for the French native speakers nor for the Spanish native speakers. The attention paid to conditional constructions in previous studies devoted to hypotheticality and counterfactuality has been explained because of its iconicity within the cognitive process of thinking about alternative situations (Ferguson et al. 1986). Our study provides empirical evidence that conditionality is one possible way among others in which one can refer to counterfactual worlds. However, counterfactuality is frequently expressed using grammatical devices other than conditional constructions. In French, evidence has been given about the prominent role of clauses combining the conditional tense and a modal marker (Type B), simple clauses in the subjunctive mood (Type D) and conditional constructions (Type A). In Spanish, we have shown that conditional constructions are rare compared to clauses in the subjunctive introduced by *que*.

Our results support the conclusion by Hellberg (1971) about the predominance of simple sentences with a conditional tense as the most frequent device to express hypotheticality in French. Our study suggests that the role assigned to conditional constructions as a prominent category to express hypotheticality and counterfactuality (Grevisse 1986; Renzi and Salvi 1991; Campos 1993; Alarcos-Llorach 1999; Traugott et al. 1986; Athanasiadou and Dirven 1997) is not empirically based on the observation of natural languages. Previous studies have portrayed conditionality as a way ‘to reason about situations, to make inferences based on incomplete information, to imagine possible correlations between situations and to understand how the world would change if certain correlations were different’ (Ferguson et al. 1986: 19). The interest paid to conditionality as a resource for conceptualizing irrealis or imagined scenarios has neglected the description of other ways to express these semantic domains and thus has provided an incomplete description of the conceptualization of counterfactuality. The non-prominent role of the conditional constructions to speak about what might have been but was not in

Spanish and French suggests that the status of conditionality as a conceptualization process needs to be reconsidered. This idea finds support in the balanced distribution of the conditional constructions, the subjunctive mood and the combination of the conditional tense and modal markers across the mutation cores in French. Each group's preferences in respect to marking counterfactuality have implications in terms of typological distance. The compositional semantics of counterfactuality, i.e. the features of virtuality and non-actualization, was satisfied by the use of the subjunctive in Spanish and by the combination of a past marker and a modal marker in French. The presence of a modal marker in the mutation core was the most salient difference when comparing these Romance languages. The frequent use of evaluative particles in the mutation cores in French was implemented by means of the modal verbs *pouvoir* and *devoir*, i.e. *pu* and *dû* (could and should in English), in the past participle form within the past conditional structure. This is coherent with the description of the most frequent counterfactual marker in natural languages, which is not one single dedicated marker but rather the combination of a past tense and a modal marker (Van Linden and Verstraete 2008). Modalizers are well known for their wide range of forms, meanings and uses, and by the absence of univocal relationships between these three dimensions (Roulet 1993). However, this is not the case for the modal markers elicited in the French mutation cores. As we explained *supra*, the French modal verbs *pouvoir* and *devoir* were systematically used in the past participle form in a perfect conditional framework. For instance, no *pu* / *dû* were found in the *passé composé* (e.g., *Elle a pu choisir toute seule son plat*). To us, this fact reveals the univocal relationship between the 'modalized conditional' and its use for altering a factual past scenario in French. A further question concerns the type of modality expressed by this form. When saying *Elle aurait pu choisir toute seule son plat* ('She could have chosen her own dish'), the speaker is not expressing any epistemic or deontic modal value, since she is not attaching beliefs or nuances of obligation. We posit that the modal values expressed when using the modalized conditional for mutation purposes are evaluative. By saying *Elle aurait pu choisir toute seule son plat* ('She could have chosen her own dish'), the speaker attaches the pertinence of a specific action within a set of particular conditions. This coincides with the notion of evaluative modality (Palmer 1986: 119), which expresses the speaker's attitude over known factual events. This is why the expression of regret is often linked to evaluative modals (Palmer 1986: 115). The frequency in the use of this 'modalized conditional' in the mutation task is coherent with the French pattern of retelling a linear story from a narrator's point of view by the use of predicates relating to intentions, attitudes and perceptions (Carroll et al. 2008). These authors have shown that the predicates of French speakers generally refer to the mental states of the protagonist in the story, e.g. *il est perplexe*, *il s'aperçoit*, *il s'est dit que...* (he's perplexed, he realizes, he told himself that...). The use of the 'modalized conditional' in counterfactual contexts sounds concordant with the subjective pattern in narrative tasks. There are various reasons that might explain the frequent use of the modalized conditional by native speakers of French. First, the modalized conditional results from the combination of two processes: the grammatical activation of a specific past tense, i.e. the past conditional, and the lexical activation of a modal verb in the past participle form. When these two processes converge, the listener may have access to the speaker's subjectivity in a more direct way than through other structural devices such as conditional sentences or even the indicative mood, which generally do not accommodate modal values in the mutation core. These pragmatic implications may be the first factor in explaining the high frequency of this structure in French. The second explanation

concerns the economy factor. Unlike conditional constructions, the modalized conditional is generally not subordinated to a main clause. Moreover, in just three syllables (*aurait pu / dû*) the speaker is opening the door to another possible world by using the same verb tense as they might have used in a main conditional clause while avoiding the production of an antecedent (P). It could be argued that the prominent role of the ‘modalized conditional’ in French may be explained by the fact that the task instruction itself contains the ‘modalized conditional’. If that was the case and the input structures of the mutation task played a real effect on the data elicited, then one might expect the same effect in the Spanish corpus. However, in Spanish, the ‘modalized conditional’ of the input is not prominently reproduced by the Spanish native speakers. Additional data elicited in Italian L1 (Repiso 2013) confirmed no correlation between the ‘modalized conditional’ of the input and the responses of the native speakers of Italian. The prominent use of the subjunctive in Spanish in the mutation task might be explained because of the frequency in general of this type of structure in Spanish. In fact, the subjunctive in Spanish is semantically associated with the irrealis domain (Real Academia Española 2009: 1866). Among the uses of the irrealis subjunctive, we find the expression of threat related to the future, e.g. *Que se quejen* (‘Let them complain’) or *Que vengan mañana* (‘We’ll see if they come tomorrow’). We maintain that, unlike the examples mentioned, the occurrences elicited in the mutation task, e.g. *Que ella hubiera informado en su trabajo que sufría esa enfermedad* (‘She might have informed people at her job that she had that disease’), are semantically anchored to the unreal past frame (Harris 1986). In Spanish, different grammatical devices may allow a counterfactual reading: the past perfect subjunctive presented here, but also the combination of the Spanish imperfect indicative and the modal markers *poder* ‘could’ or *tener que* ‘have to’ (17) or the combination of the simple past tense and the modal *deber* ‘should’ (18). For example:

(17) *Ella tenía que haber informado que sufría esa enfermedad.* She should have informed that she had that disease.

(18) *El señor Carlson debió preguntar qué prefería comer ella.* Mr Carlson should have asked what she preferred to eat.

We interpret the use of the modal markers in (17) and (18) as evaluatives, since the speakers use them to express a critical judgement within a set of particular conditions (i.e. those established in the stimulus). Even if the counterfactual meaning may well be encoded by the Spanish imperfect indicative, our data showed that the subjunctive mood is significantly more frequently used by Spanish native speakers. In Spanish L1, we elicited 5 responses over 90 (5.5%) combining an indicative tense plus a modal marker as in examples (17) and (18). Four responses followed the pattern of example (18) and only one response followed the pattern of example (17). The possibility of a link between certain varieties of Spanish and the use of the simple past tense and a modal marker to encode counterfactuality cannot be ruled out, but has not been statistically tested. However, it is interesting to note that three out of the four responses coherent with example (18) were produced by Colombian native speakers. Further studies devoted to the expression of counterfactuality are still necessary to explore possible differences across the American and peninsular varieties of Spanish.

## 7. Conclusion

Our objective has been to examine the grammatical devices encoding counterfactuality in French and Spanish. Previous studies dealing with the expression of counterfactuality have approached this category by analysing conditional constructions (Bates 1976; Bloom 1981; Reilly 1982; Au 1983; Bowerman 1986; Bernini 1994; Chini 1995; Katis 1997; Schouten 2000; Yeh and Gentner 2005). Our main contribution to these studies has been to show that the mutation cores encoding counterfactual scenarios were rarely marked by bare conditional sentences in Spanish. In French, the most frequent device was the combination of the past conditional and a modal verb (e.g. *Il aurait pu choisir une autre assiette*, 'He could have chosen another dish'). Significant differences were found between this 'modalized conditional' and coordinate clauses in symmetrical verbal forms, suggesting that either present or past linear narrations are rare when conceptualizing what might have been but was not. In Spanish, simple clauses in the subjunctive mood were found to demonstrate significant differences compared to any of the other mutation cores, including conditional constructions. The non-prominent role of the conditional constructions suggests that the role of conditionality as a conceptualization process within irreality needs to be reconsidered. The major difference when comparing the two languages lay in the presence of a modal marker within the mutation core, significantly higher in French. The use of evaluative modals in the mutation task confirms that French tend to integrate subjective values in narrative texts, in argumentative contexts.

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## Notes

1. The existence of counterfactuals related to the future is controversial. Some authors claim that counterfactuality cannot be related to the future, since the future has not been realized nor is known at the time of utterance and thus cannot be considered against any factual state of affairs (Iatridou 2000).

2. Historically, the subjunctive mood in the protasis comes from Latin but it has been used less and less in French since the thirteenth century (Brunot and Bruneau 1949). The canonical system – composed of the pluperfect indicative in the protasis and the conditional perfect in the apodosis – appeared in the sixteenth century.

3. The spoken Ottawa-Hull variety of French resolves this ambiguity by using the conditional form in the protasis as a mark of potentiality and the pluperfect indicative as a mark of counterfactuality (LeBlanc 2009).

4. Example: *J'aurais un peu d'argent, je m'achèterais l'intégrale de Mozart* ('Had I a little money, I would buy the complete works of Mozart', Riegel et al. 1994: 558).

403 5. A text is generally composed of main structures, i.e. the skeletal structure of discourse, and sub-  
404 structures, i.e. supportive material which does not answer the Quaestio.

405 6. For the sake of clarity, nominal clauses, i.e. clauses containing a nominal predicate, have been  
406 omitted from our analysis.

407 7. In statistics Type I errors consist in rejecting the null hypothesis when it is in fact true. The lower the  
408 threshold, the smaller is the probability to be wrongly rejecting the null hypothesis. Choosing a  
409 threshold where  $\alpha = 0.001$  implies less than one-in-a-thousand chance to be wrong.

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## 523 **APPENDIX**

524 Stimulus and instructions: Mutation task

525 Karen était assistante à l'édition dans une petite agence de publicité. Elle avait une rare maladie  
526 héréditaire, l'hémotrisoma de Karpinson, caractérisée par le manque d'une enzyme qui normalement  
527 divise certaines protéines du système digestif. En raison de cela les boissons fermentées comme le vin  
528 ou les liqueurs pouvaient lui causer des sévères réactions allergiques. Karen avait eu une promotion  
529 dans son travail et son supérieur, monsieur Carlson, l'avait emmenée dans un restaurant français plutôt  
530 cher pour l'y fêter. Etant donné que monsieur Carlson avait mangé plusieurs fois dans ce restaurant il  
531 commanda pour les deux. Pendant qu'il regardait le menu il considérait quel plat commander pour

532 Karen. Il pensa d'abord aux coquilles Saint-Jacques mais au dernier moment il choisit les moules  
533 marinières. Monsieur Carlson ne le savait pas mais les moules marinières étaient cuites dans une sauce  
534 à base de vin tandis que les coquilles Saint-Jacques ne contenaient pas de vin. Karen savoura son plat  
535 mais elle commença à se sentir mal peu après avoir fini. Quelques minutes plus tard elle souffrit de  
536 convulsions et elle fut transportée en ambulance. En chemin pour l'hôpital elle mourut.

537 Proposez trois modifications qui auraient pu empêcher la mort de Karen et expliquez pourquoi elles  
538 auraient empêché sa mort.

539 \*\*\*

540 Karen era asistente a la edición en una pequeña empresa de publicidad. Padecía una rara enfermedad  
541 hereditaria llamada hemotrisoma de Karpinson, caracterizada por la falta de una enzima que  
542 normalmente divide algunas proteínas en el aparato digestivo. Por ello las bebidas fermentadas como el  
543 vino o el licor podían causarle graves reacciones alérgicas. Karen había sido ascendida de manera que su  
544 superior, el señor Carlson, la llevo a un caro restaurante francés para celebrarlo. El señor Carlson había  
545 comido en dicho restaurante varias veces, así que pidió por ambos. Mientras miraba el menú se  
546 preguntó que pedir para Karen. Primero pensó en pedir unas vieiras pero en el último momento se  
547 decidió por los mejillones a la marinera. Aunque el señor Carlson no lo sabía, los mejillones a la marinera  
548 llevaban una salsa a base de vino mientras las vieiras, no. Karen disfrutó de la comida pero empezó a  
549 sentirse mal poco después. En cuestión de minutos sufrió convulsiones y fue socorrida en una  
550 ambulancia. Karen murió de camino al hospital.

551 Imagina tres modificaciones de la historia que habrían podido evitar la muerte de Karen y explica por  
552 qué habrían evitado su muerte.