

DOUBLING THE PAST HYPOTHESIS: OBSERVATIONS ON TWO NONSTANDARD THIRD CONDITIONALS

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Abstract: *The paper briefly looks at two nonstandard conditional constructions, if [Su] had have [pp] and if [Su] would have [pp], which present anomalous components. Various works mentioning them have been analysed, leading to the conclusion that the forms have not been treated seriously or exhaustively. Following a small study which tries to establish their spread in the language, the paper concludes that some questions remain unanswered, such as whether the constructions can be characterised according to their geographical spread, their exact vernacular status, and to what extent they may coexist alongside the standard form in a person’s idiolect.*

Keywords: *conditional constructions, corpus studies, counterfactuals, nonstandard, plupluperfect*

1. Introduction

Conditionals encode people’s experience of the world in a special way. Much ink has been spilt over the logical and philosophical implications and attributes of conditional sentences. Traditionally, they are analyzed as being made up of two parts which have been given many names: protasis and apodosis, antecedent and consequent, *if*-clause and main clause. But what the conditional relationship creates between the two, or how this can be abstracted, seems to have remained unsettled. Linguistically, conditionals are interesting due to their diverse and numerous means of expression. In English, *if* is the main candidate, and a conditional relationship can sometimes be identified between elements linked by *and*, or introduced by *wish*.

The temporal locations of the situations described in conditionals can complicate matters even more as, although English conditionals are often classed into three main types, many combinations are possible. Moreover, several nonstandard conditional constructions are known which involve the verb phrase of the *if*-clause. It is these constructions that the present paper focuses on. In addition to a somewhat rigid classification passed down to learners of English, conditionals are subject to a few strict rules, the best known being that of “no *will* after *if*”. Actual usage, however, flaunts these constraints.

The nonstandard constructions under consideration here will be consistently referred to as *if [Su] had have [pp]* and *if [Su] would have [pp]*. *[Su]* stands for the syntactic subject position while *[pp]* is the slot for the past participle of the verb. These constructions evince structures which are usually proscribed in standard English, as usage guides show. While they are relatively rare and not widely discussed in the literature, their age and persistence over centuries may indicate that the English language system allows them to be generated by speakers. This alone poses difficulties for anyone attempting to describe and explain the structures.

2. Various Treatments

The constructions under consideration have been mentioned by several authors before. A brief survey of their different approaches will serve to show the problems which these language variations pose. The texts can be roughly divided into those that deal with prescriptive usage rules, the so-called grammars of the English language which try to provide the reader with a detailed and comprehensive description, and broad or small linguistic studies usually focusing on conditionals, the English tense system or the particular forms in question. Some of the latter attempt to explain at least one of the nonstandard forms.

Fowler's *Modern English Usage*, second edition, mentions under the entry for *had* the "illiterate blunder" (Fowler 1965:35) of using the inverted *had [Su] have [pp]* in conditional protases. His argument that "no one would defend *If she had have done*, nor *if I had have been*" (*ibidem*) is not sustained, but is rather arbitrary, in line with a long tradition of complaint and prescriptivism (cf. Chapman 2010:146 ff.). Moreover, the other nonstandard *if [Su] would have [pp]* is not mentioned at all, and, perhaps importantly, neither is the well known rule of 'no *will* after *if*'.

Huddleston and Pullum's reference work, *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* (2002), notes the following when discussing 'remote conditionals':

A variant form of the protasis has *had've*: *If I had've followed your advice, I would be rich now*; we also find *I'd've*, etc., where it is debatable whether the '*d*' might also be construed as a cliticised form of *would*. These variants are increasingly common in informal speech, but are still generally regarded as non-standard. (2002:752)

Some observations are in order here. First, according to the authors, the nonstandard with *had have* is confined to speech, hence the focus on contracted forms. One might assume that full forms, as evinced by Fowler, are either extremely rare or altogether inexistent. Second, the nonstandard with *would have* after *if* is deemed a possibility only. It would be interesting to know on what basis the authors formed their judgment of the 'variants'.

A more recent book, the *Cambridge Grammar of English* by Carter and McCarthy (2006) gives the following examples and explanations under the entry 'Modal Verbs in Conditional Clauses':

Modal verbs (most typically *will* or *would*) may occur in conditional clauses if they have a meaning of willingness or prediction, or where it is important to mark politeness:

If you'll wait a minute, I'll fetch the porter to help you.

If you would all follow me, I'll show you to your rooms.

If you would have allowed them more time, I still think they would have done better. (if you had been willing to allow them more time)

I'll take care of the tea and coffee, if it'll help to get things done quicker. (if the assumption is true/valid that things will get done quicker)

I'll do it for you, if you could just wait a minute. (Carter and McCarthy 2006:750)

What seems striking here is using the 'willingness meaning' of *will* and *would* to explain away their presence in *if*-clauses. It can be easily shown that although 'willingness *will*' has a long history and tradition in grammars of all kinds, it does not in fact exist. 'Willingness' is an overtone which is deciphered at the level of the sentence and always depends on the nature of the subject in combination with that of the predicate. As exemplification, compare *If you would have*

allowed them more time, I still think they would have done better, from above, with *If he would have championed gay rights today, he would have done it while he was here* (WebCorp). It is the combination of the second person personal pronoun *you* with the verb *allow* which implies strong involvement and control on the part of the subject, which together create the impression of ‘willingness’. In the second sentence, the third person pronoun *he* suggests enough distance from the speaker and reader alike so that the ‘willingness’ interpretation is lost completely. A verb phrase converted to passive voice has the same effect of ‘bleaching’ the willingness. Thus, what is left is a *would* apparently devoid of meaning and function and the explanation does not hold.

One major study is Declerck and Reed’s *Conditionals* (2001) where both nonstandard forms are noted. Each is given a short section towards the end of the larger discussion on “The use of tenses in counterfactual-P conditionals”. The *if [Su] had have [pp]* construction is referred to as the “double perfect”. The authors mention that it “may be considered substandard by educated speakers of southern British English, but is not uncommon in some regional and social varieties of English” (Declerck and Reed 2001:193). However, the specific varieties to which this nonstandard conditional belongs are not named. Fifteen examples from the Cobuild Spoken and one from the Cobuild Written corpora are given, leading to the conclusion that the nonstandard is characteristic of spoken language. Thirteen of these examples evince contraction in different forms: *‘d have*, *had’ve* and *‘d’ve*. That *‘d* may also stand for *would* in British English does not seem to be considered a possibility. The *if [Su] would have [pp]* nonstandard may only have a “volitional interpretation” in British English, while it is common in informal American English (cf. Declerck and Reed:194-195). *If [Su] had have [pp]* is also said to be a much older form, present in the language as far back as the 15th and 16th centuries, while nonvolitional *would* is a more recent development. The authors note that *if [Su] had have [pp]* is sometimes used possibly due to a “need felt by the speaker to express not only counterfactuality but also anteriority” (Declerck and Reed:194). *If [Su] would have [pp]* is not given a similar explanation.

Approximately three pages are dedicated to nonstandard counterfactuals in Dancygier and Sweetser’s *Mental Spaces in Grammar: Conditional Constructions* (2005). Their general approach is very different from the previous ones quoted here due to the cognitive theoretical framework to which the authors adhere. Their stance is that both the *had*- and the *would*-nonstandards are mainly written “unpacked” versions of the contracted auxiliaries *‘da/ ‘d’ve/ ‘d of*. In the beginning, however, there were only forms of the *woulda* type in the apodosis, from which by analogy the *hadda* form came into being and was later transferred to the protasis as well due to the fact that both clauses of the counterfactual conditional express a false alternative of the past. It is also proposed that there must be a separate morphological category *-a* which functions in the third type conditional construction alongside the standard construction. The authors quote Fillmore as the proponent of the theory. The forms are initially presented as being colloquial American, but some examples from British English are also given, all from the same source. Interestingly, the nonstandards are regarded by the authors as “the only true ‘counterfactuals’ in modern English” (Dancygier and Sweetser 2005:63) because they “seem necessarily to convey the speaker’s belief that the described situation does not hold in the reality space” (2005:63).

The treatment of the nonstandard conditionals found in Dancygier and Sweetser’s book truly attempts to explain the phenomena. Unfortunately, the explanation seems to be suffering from a chicken or egg syndrome. A nonstandard conditional of the form *?If I had of known, I would have told you* is also known to exist in writing. Was the contracted form of *have*, pronounced /ə/ or /əv/, reinterpreted as *-a* in writing *woulda* and *hadda* or as *of* in *had of*? Or was it that a separate morphological category was subsequently interpreted as *have* due to

pronunciation similarities? The latter hypothesis appears less likely. Moreover, the appearance of an additional *had* after *if* still requires clarification. While it may be the case that *hadda* was produced analogically on the model of *woulda*, *shoulda* etc., it still remains to be explained why or how a non-modal auxiliary gets to be used in the same fashion as modals.

Another interesting article on the subject is Ishihara's "I Wish I Would Have Known!": The Usage of *Would Have* in Past Counterfactual *If*- and *Wish*-Clauses" (2003). As the title indicates, only the *if* [*Su*] *would have* [*pp*] nonstandard is thoroughly discussed. Amid an astute survey of grammars, usage guides and historical articles, an example of the full construction from 1594 is quoted, as well as another revealing a *would not a* [*pp*] form from c1479 (pages 24 and 27). The weight of the article lies in the recorded spoken data which revealed a 41% usage of the *if* [*Su*] *would have* [*pp*] construction in counterfactual conditionals of the third type. Moreover, the nonstandard was used in 52% of the produced *wish*-clauses. Ishihara concludes that "[t]hese results are clear evidence that *would have* in the past counterfactual *if*- and *wish*-clause is indeed quite common among these English speaking participants in the midwest [USA]" (Ishihara 2003:33). Furthermore, Ishihara presents the results of a judgment activity in which participants were asked to identify language errors. The outcome indicated that the nonstandard had a very high "acceptance rate" (Ishihara 2003:34). Perhaps the most interesting fact was that "[o]nly one non-ESL professional (out of 100) and five ESL professionals (out of 20) consistently indicated and corrected every *would have* according to prescriptive grammar rules" (Ishihara 2003:35). The inconsistencies observed in the participants correcting the nonstandard may be pointing to a deeper issue.

The dialectal status of both *if* [*Su*] *had have* [*pp*] and *if* [*Su*] *would have* [*pp*] remains uncertain. There does not seem to be any proof or agreement that either of the nonstandards belongs to any one region or social group. Moreover, and directly related to Ishihara's findings on the construction often remaining unnoticed, scholars themselves seem to ignore it. In presenting the particularities of Channel Island English, Mari C. Jones notes that in this particular dialect conditional clauses are often formed without *if* and gives the following example:

You'd have seen that, you'd never have thought there was any news in it. (Jones 2009:47)

The '*d have* [*pp*]' is not commented upon, inviting reflection. Two possibilities present themselves. It may be that the nonstandard was overlooked by chance. Or, it may be that it is not particular to Channel Island English, but fairly commonplace in the native English speaking world and impossible to pinpoint, which means that the nonstandard was overlooked by choice.

3. Corpus Data

In light of the above, the two nonstandard forms under scrutiny appear to be fairly common, but it is by no means clear to what extent. An obvious strategy is to use corpus linguistics methods in order to ascertain how frequently they appear in the language. This approach, however, is not as straightforward or reliable as it would seem. Conditional clauses are very rare in comparison with other structures. Biber (1993:249) shows them to be even rarer than *wh*-relative clauses in 1000-word long text samples. We can confidently expect past counterfactual conditionals to be even less frequent. In addition, published texts are more often than not purged of nonstandard, 'incorrect' constructions, meaning that most conventional corpora may prove inadequate. Thus, one option is to start using the Web as a huge text-archive, since a large part of Web language is self-published and not proof-read.

WebCorp (www.webcorp.org.uk) is an online tool for linguistic research which retrieves texts from the Web similarly to a traditional concordancer. In order to investigate the two nonstandards, a series of inquiries were made with the following settings: case insensitive, 100-character span, Google search API and English language. Each search involved typing in the *if [Su] had have* or *if [Su] would have* key words, where the *[Su]* position was filled in by *I, you, he, she, we, they, it* and *** (wildcard). The results are shown in *Figure 1* below:

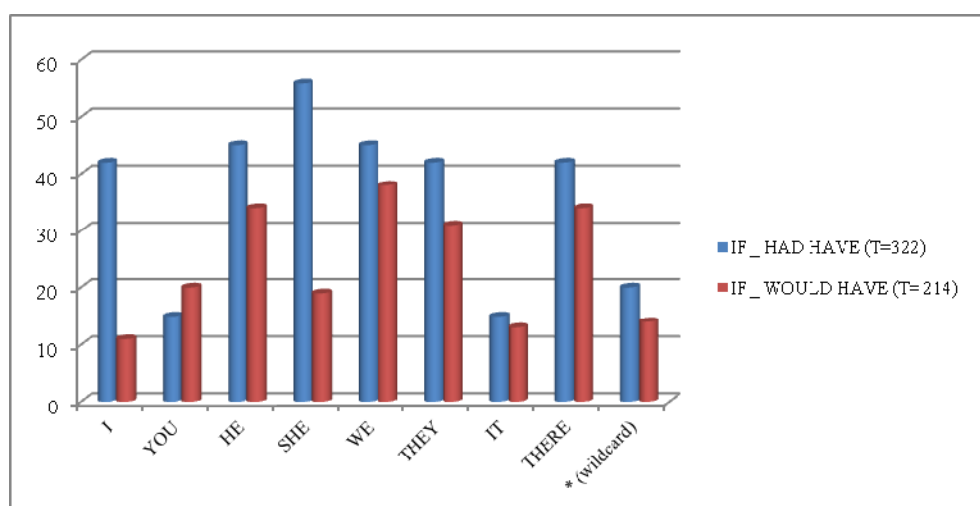


Figure 1. The number of sentences found with WebCorp which contain the two nonstandard conditional constructions for each specified subject, and the overall totals for each

The totals were computed after heavy elimination of irrelevant search results. For instance, if the constructions appeared in lyrics or on sites which discussed English grammar and usage, they were not included. Furthermore, care was taken to include those instances that were very likely written by native speakers, which meant that texts which had several or more spelling or grammar mistakes or those which did not make sense overall were not taken into account. This required careful examination of each website where the constructions were found.

The above totals seem to indicate that the *if [Su] had have [pp]* nonstandard is more frequent than *if [Su] would have [pp]*. However, many instances of the latter had to be removed because they were not conditionals. For instance, in:

Like I said, he does not take the time to consider if there would have been more “leaks” after the war logs were published by the Times. (WebCorp)

if introduces a subordinate object clause. No such cases involving *if [Su] had have [pp]* were recorded, although it may be argued that examples such as the following are borderline cases, as the *if*-clauses can be interpreted as the objects of *surprise* and *be nice*, respectively:

It would have surprised me if he had have lived on. (WebCorp)

And in a perfect world it would have been nice if he had have just gotten out of the way and kind of slowed down in the mechanics area there. (WebCorp)

In addition, one must note that WebCorp does not retrieve the totality of instances where the search items are found. It is dependent on the relevance algorithms of the search engine it uses, in this case Google, and it further cuts down on the results shown. Thus, it is impossible to say which nonstandard form is more frequent.

Some of the data retrieved supports Ishihara's observation that speakers are inconsistent in noticing the nonstandards, as they appear to be mercurial when forming past counterfactuals as well, as in the following example:

"Oh! Mary," said she, "I wish you had gone with us, for we had such fun! as we went along, Kitty and me drew up all the blinds, and pretended there was nobody in the coach; and I should have gone so all the way, if Kitty had not been sick; and when we got to the George, I do think we behaved very handsomely, for we treated the other three with the nicest cold luncheon in the world, and if you would have gone, we would have treated you too." (WebCorp)

If he had have driven into our street, parked and gone to sleep in his car I doubt anyone would have noticed, or if they had [noticed] they would not have worried. (WebCorp)

4. The Questions We Are Left With

Problems with the nonstandard conditionals *if [Su] had have [pp]* and *if [Su] would have [pp]* regard both their description and their explanation. Description-wise, it is a matter of clarifying their geographic spread and their relative frequency in the language. Regarding the latter point, a detailed study comparing the number of standard versus nonstandard past counterfactual conditionals in different types of texts would be needed. In other words, the level of informality of each of the nonstandards needs to be clarified. Furthermore, a better description of the combinatorial possibilities of each of the nonstandards would be desirable. For instance, it would be worth finding out whether *had have [pp]* occurs in *wish*-clauses as well, or whether either of the nonstandards appears in conditionals introduced in other ways, such as by *suppose* or *supposing*.

Finally, one wonders to what extent the several possible past counterfactual conditional constructions are used interchangeably by speakers. How many variants can an idiolect accommodate? There has been proof that it is possible to fluctuate between two, but could there be more? Specifically, could a person have assimilated the standard, the two nonstandards presented here and possibly a third one where only the past tense form of the verb is used in the protasis? Can and does anyone produce a combination of all of the following:

?If I had known, I would have told you.

?If I had have known, I would have told you.

?If I would have known, I would have told you.

?If I knew, I would have told you.

in one's lifetime or in one extensive stretch of language?

Explanation-wise, the difficulties begin with establishing how the nonstandards developed. Suppose they originate from a series of analogically similar forms which includes *woulda* and *hadda*, where *a* is a separate morphological category later re-interpreted as *have* and not a written expression of how the contracted *have* sometimes sounds. Then, it remains to be explained where *a* came from, and when. It also begs the question of how and why *hadda* was formed, since *had* has so far been analysed as being very different from modal auxiliaries. Even if the contracted '*d* allows for both *had* and *would* to be 'unpacked', how does a non-modal become to be used like a modal?

Due to the semantics of *had* as an auxiliary, or rather considering the contexts in which it can appear, convincingly explaining why a conditional nonstandard construction with a double perfect is possible is no easy feat. It is easier with *would* since its use in the protasis creates a perfect balance with the apodosis. There is no conceptual difference between what is expressed

by the antecedent and what is conveyed by the consequent. Both situations are in a sense alternative past worlds connected by an *if-then* relationship. For instance, in:

If he would have been franchised as a defensive end, he would have been guaranteed about \$11.2 million.
(WebCorp)

the reader understands that the past did not play out in the manner described by the conditional. One could argue that the symmetry of using *would* in both clauses allows them to be on the same level of past falsity, emphasizing the status of the whole.

However, an instance such as:

If he had have known of Murphy's Law, he might have decided to put a cover over it instead. (WebCorp)

seems a lot more difficult to explain. It is not so much our lack of imagination that hinders us from proceeding, but rather the lack of a proper theoretical framework which should allow for language items to move more freely within the system according to principled rules. For in truth *had* and *would* have a lot in common. As auxiliaries, their syntactic behaviour is identical and they both have a heavy 'past' load in their meanings. To this, one may add that there is another construction, hardly ever mentioned, which also fluctuates between having *had* and *would* in its formation: '*d rather*. A few swift inquiries with WebCorp will show that both *had rather* and *would rather* are possible. Which alternative is presented in grammars or usage books seems to be a matter of personal choice on the part of the author(s). Moreover, such a theoretical framework would also need to allow for competing structures to co-exist in a person's idiolect without resorting to the idea of 'error' or to that of 'slip of the tongue' for explanation.

Finally, the issue of the nonstandard conditionals reveals some of the inconsistencies and limitations of descriptive grammars. Specifically, while one would expect usage guides to endorse standard forms only, descriptive grammars still seem to be unable to provide a faithful image of actual usage. This in turn has consequences in the world of those teaching and learning English. While learners may be asked to notice and correct the nonstandard conditional constructions in exercises or texts, they may have encountered them in online texts or while conversing with native speakers. This may lead to confusion. The true status of these constructions may also prove important for designers of international exams, such as TOEFL or IELTS.

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