Standard conditionals in Mandarin Chinese (MC) can be ambiguous between an indicative reading and a subjunctive reading, depending on the context. A special type of conditionals in MC, with the composite $yāobúshì$ ‘if-not-be’ in the antecedent, differ in three aspects with standard conditionals, which this paper aims to account for: 1) they only have counterfactual reading; 2) unlike the counterfactual inference coming with the subjunctive reading which is only an cancelable implicature, the counterfactual interpretation of $yāobúshì$-conditionals is not cancelable (1a); 3) they cannot be used to express certain epistemic reasoning (1b). $Yāobūshī$-conditionals pattern like ‘if-not-for’ conditionals in English (Henderson [2010]).

(1) *Assuming the only reason for the lawn to be wet is raining:*

a. $Yāobūshī$ xià, cǎopíng jiù shì gān de. #Xiànzài cǎopíng shì gān de, suǒyì méi xià yǔ.

‘If not for it raining, the lawn would have been dry. #Now that the lawn is dry, it must have not rained.’

b. #$Yāobūshī$ cǎopíng shī, wēi, jiù bù huì xià yǔ.

‘#If not for the lawn being wet, it would not have rained.’

Building on the distinction between the epistemic and the ontic readings of conditionals (Schulz [2007]), I argue that $yāobūshī$-conditionals only allow for the ontic reading and must be interpreted in a model enriched with causal relations. The causal model distinguishes a set of causal laws, independent variables which form the basis $b$ of a world, and dependent variables whose values can be derived from independent variables along with causal laws. A world $w_1$ is more similar to $w$ than $w_2$ iff its basis overlaps more with $w$ and, if they are equal with this respect, the part of its basis that does not overlap with $w$ is smaller than that of $w_2$.

I propose that $yāobūshī$ $ϕ$, $ψ$ has the structure [IF[NEG[GIVEN[$ϕ$]], $ψ$]]. The covert operator GIVEN presupposes: (i) $ϕ$ is a fact in the evaluation world; and (ii) $ϕ$ lies in the upstream of $ψ$ in the causal flow. I show that the obligatory and non-cancelable counterfactuality is a consequence of (i). The infelicity of (1b) is due to a violation of (ii). If the presuppositions are met, the evaluation of $yāobūshī$-conditionals follows an implementation of premise semantics: The NEG operator functions to remove $ϕ$-worlds, which include the actual world per the presupposition (i), from the worlds upon which $ψ$ will be evaluated. The remaining worlds are ranked by the order induced by the basis and the causal laws. Then $ψ$ is evaluated on the most similar world(s). (2) is predicted to be false because the most similar antecedent world would be the one with $S_1$ open, $S_2$ closed, and the light on.

(2) *Assume a circuit with two switches $S_1$ and $S_2$ and a light. The light is on iff at least one of the switches is closed. Assume further that now $S_1$ and $S_2$ are both closed and the light is on.*

$Yāobūshī$ $S_1$ bìhé, dēng jiù bù liàng.

if.NEG.be $S_1$ closed, light then NEG shine.

‘If not for $S_1$ being closed, the light would not have been on.’

References


1Abbreviations: NEG = negation; NOM = nominalizer.