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Proxy counterfactuals

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The following sentence is a paradigmatic example of a proxy counterfactual:

    (1) If I were you, I would go to the beach.

According to Lewis (1973), these conditionals quantify over worlds in which the counterparts of the speaker and the counterparts of the addressee are the same. Such an analysis is problematic in that it fails to predict a number of properties of the construction. In particular, Lakoff (1996) noted the contrast here illustrated by (1) and (2):

    (2) #If I were you, you would go to the beach.

It seems that Lakoff's challenge has been ignored by formal semanticists ever since. Here, I would like to argue that an account of the unacceptability of (2) needs to rule out two conceivable interpretations of the pronoun *you* in the consequent. I will assume a counterpart theory of cross-world identity.

In the first interpretation, the second occurrence of *you* in (2) would denote counterparts of the addressee that are identical to the counterparts of the speaker in each world that is quantified over by the conditional. Under this interpretation, (2) should be synonymous with (1). Note that the analysis of Lewis (1973) does not explain why this is impossible: if the antecedent identifies the counterparts of the speaker with the counterparts of the addressee and if the counterpart relations used in the consequent and the antecedent are the same, we should be able to use first and second person pronouns interchangeably as subjects of the apodosis of the conditional. That this is not so might constitute an argument against an identificational analysis of the copula in (1).

In the second interpretation, the second occurrence of *you* in (2) would denote counterparts of the addressee that are not the same as the counterparts of the speaker in the worlds quantified over by the conditional. In an analysis *a la* Lewis, this would require that two different counterpart relations be applied to the two occurrences of the pronoun *you* in (2). Moreover the subject of the protasis and the subject of the apodosis would not be coreferent. That these two conditions are not problematic as such is suggested by (3) and (4):

(3) If I were you, I would kiss me.

(4) If I were you, Michelle would go to school instead of hanging out all day
long.
[context: Michelle is the daughter of the addressee]

In (3), the two occurrences of the first person pronouns in the apodosis have two different interpretations, which can be analyzed as the result of using two different relations to pick out the counterparts of the speaker in each case. In (4), the subject of the apodosis is not coreferent with the subject of the protasis.

Given the amount of work on related issues, such as the analysis of *De Se* pronouns, it is surprising that this construction has not received more attention from formal semanticists. While analyses of proxy counterfactuals do exist (cf. Arregui 2007), they should be extended to account for the unacceptability of sentences like (2).

References
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