

AGAINST THE INDICATIVE

V.H. Dudman

I.

The war over the legitimacy of ascribing moods to English has dragged on for two hundred and eighty-odd years,¹ and many thinkers must be wearying of it. But *not me*: before enthusiastically joining the fray in a skirmish or two of my own, I find I have time to harangue the numbed reader touching what this war is really about and just how much is at stake.

At stake is the right, widely exercised by philosophers nowadays, to offer precisely the same semantics for claims about the future as for certain claims about the present and past. For exactness, examples at once. Each of the sentences (1) to (3) has an interpretation² which is intuitively about Grannie being furious on a particular occasion, whether future, present or past:

- (1) Grannie will be furious
- (2) Grannie is furious
- (3) Grannie was furious.

Call them m_1 , m_2 and m_3 respectively. Now, 'the indicative mood' assimilates these three messages, and in this way its defenders support the right to offer the same semantics for them all. (Sometimes, we shall find, they permit themselves exercise of that right in the course of their defences.) The notion is that the three differ only in the times they assign to Grannie's fury, so that m_1 formulates about the future exactly what m_2 and m_3 formulate about the present and past. This is a very popular view, and may well approximate to the reader's own.

It is untenable. If m_1 merely formulated about the future what m_2 formulates about the present, then the obvious interpretations m_4 and m_5 of

- (4) Grannie will not be furious
- (5) Grannie is not furious

would be similarly related; whereas the facts are that while m_2 and m_5 are textbook contradictories, the other pair are not. Back when they were being touted, m_1 and

¹ Thus [6, pp.424-435].

² English is a system for putting ideas into words. It does this by generating sentences from *messages*. The distinction between sentence and message is forced upon us by ambiguous sentences. When a sentence S is generated from a message m , I say that m is *encoded in* S , and call m an *interpretation* of S . Thus, at greater length [1, sections 2 and 4].

m_4 behaved as *contraries*: there was the third possibility of saying ‘Grannie may be furious and she may not’. *Q.e.d.*

At the same time, the indicative is taken as excluding certain messages, among them the natural interpretation — call it m_6 — of

(6) Grannie would be furious.

These are assigned to a complementary mood: the ‘subjunctive’.

On several grounds, this taxonomy surprises. First, ‘will’ and ‘would’ are alternative inflectional forms of the same lexeme, as intimately related as ‘cat’ and ‘cats’. Astonishing to find them working for opposing moods like this. Secondly, if X affirms m_1 and we want to report the fact, we give the substance of her claim as m_6 :

X said Grannie would be furious.

One might have expected the shared substance to be contrived by a common mood, but apparently No. Rather, therefore, exponents of the received view owe the world theories of mood and reported speech according to which one mood will sometimes be reported in another. Thirdly, m_2 has a strict negative in m_5 , as we have seen; whereas if m_1 has a negative, it is an interpretation of ‘Grannie *may* not be furious’, and if m_6 has a negative, it is an interpretation of ‘Grannie *might* not be furious’.

I post with dexterity to a less adventurous diagnosis: m_1 belongs with the ‘subjunctives’. Observing, indeed, that (not just (1) but) every variant of (7), (8) or (9) below has an interpretation which is intuitively about Grannie being furious upon a single future occasion, I conclude that any tenable account of m_1 would be as a member of this whole echelon of messages about the future:

- (7) Grannie will/ may/ should/ ought to/ needn’t/ daren’t be furious
- (8) (Were she present) Grannie would/ could/ might be furious
- (9) (Had she been present) Grannie would/ could/ might have been furious.

Future-occasion interpretations of (8) and (9) are obviously and uncontentiously bound by strong family resemblances to present-occasion interpretations of (8) and (9), and past-occasion interpretations of (9). Members of this family share an intriguing property: the time t registered by the predicate of the sentence — the *tense* of the message — is earlier than the time y that the message is intuitively about. There are five combinations, but t , whether past or pastpast, is always earlier than the future, present or past time y . This discovery is crowned by another: that m_1 completes the pattern. With its present t and future y , m_1 realizes the sixth and final combination for which $t < y$. As, of course, do all our future interpretations of (7). Here is a powerful systematic reason for classifying m_1 with m_6 and its family, and another strike against the indicative.

Having y later than t is characteristic of the echelon to which m_1 belongs. I call

such messages *projective*.

An account of m_1 as a projective message must sharply diverge from its received treatment. For consider: every variant of (7), (8) or (9) contains an inflectional form of a modal,³ and in each encoded message there must be a factor responsible for selecting this modal. How shall we describe this factor? Comparisons within the echelon discover a plurality of what can innocently be called *verdicts* about Grannie being furious, and it is evident that when a sentence is generated from a member of the echelon, the modal is chosen to express the verdict. The same comparisons reveal the verdicts as always *immediate* factors of these messages: 'She *should* be furious'; 'She *might* have been furious'. In sum, m_1 differs from m_2 and m_3 by containing an extra immediate factor: impossible the three should be semantically indiscernible. Victory for my side would see received opinion revised and the old familiar right revoked.

In received thought the subjunctive is the indicative's *de facto* complement. But the two moods are not in fact jointly exhaustive. There remains unconsidered another category of simple message. Unnoticed, the various sentences

- (10) Grannie will/ can't/ may/ must/ should/ ought to/ needn't/ daren't/ would/ could/ might be furious

all have interpretations with modals expressing verdicts about Grannie being furious at present, while the sentences

- (11) Grannie will/ can't/ may/ must/ should/ ought to/ needn't/ daren't/ would/ could/ might have been furious

have corresponding past interpretations. I call these messages *practical*. Comparison of (10) and (11) will discover a relationship between form and the time y which is characteristic of practical messages.

We can define as *simple* just those messages which are encoded in subject-predicate sentences. Now, grammatically and semantically, simple messages divide into *propositions* and *judgements*, and judgements into *projectives* and *practicals*.

There are two main differences between propositions and judgements. A judgement contains every factor of a proposition *plus* a verdict. And t and y are different points for a judgement, but identical for a proposition.

To recognise a simple message as a proposition is to construe it as being *about* its *tense*.⁴ Indeed a proposition is a claim of fact about its tense. More exactly, t is

³ The English *modals* are WILL, CAN, MAY, SHALL, MUST, SHOULD, OUGHT, NEED and DARE, of which the first four each have two inflectional forms and the last five only one. See [2, esp. pp.164-194].

⁴ Even when a modal is used in its encodement, a message about its tense is a proposition. For instance every variant of (12) or (13) has an interpretation about the currency *at t* of some propensity of Grannie's to lose:

(12) These days, Grannie will (often)/ can (sometimes)/ may (occasionally) lose

(13) In those days, Grannie would (often)/ could (sometimes)/ might (occasionally) lose.

Now plainly, these habitual messages are just slightly more complex variants of the obvious habitual interpretations of (14) and (15):

an *A*-series location of the *date* *D* of the fact alleged by asserting the sentence, this being what the message is about. Accordingly, propositions are ‘true or false’: they can be transmitted truly or falsely depending on the facts of *D*. *m*₂, *m*₃ and *m*₅ are typical examples.

Verdicts occur only as immediate factors of their messages, so a judgement is a simple message with a verdict for an immediate informational factor.⁵ But evidently the verdict of a practical message relates to something’s *actually* happening or holding, whereas the verdict of a projective relates to its happening or holding in a situation that can only be *imagined*. In illustration, ‘Grannie might have been furious’ is ambiguous between a practical interpretation to roughly the effect that maybe Grannie actually was furious and a projective interpretation appropriate given that she actually wasn’t.⁶

Also, *t* and *y* are differently related. For a projective, *t* < *y*, as we have seen. For a practical message, *t* and *y*, both registered in the sentence, are independent, as dissection of (10) and (11) will confirm. In time of peace, the roles of tenses in judgements would command our investigation.⁷

Strict regularities relate our two categories of judgement. For instance, suppose *X* no sooner asserts a variant of

Grannie will/ may/ should/ ought to/ daren’t be furious

under a projective interpretation than is banished from the scene and kept incommunicado until after the occasion. Given that she remains of the same mind, how does she express that conviction at the later time? Why, by asserting the corresponding variant of

Grannie will/ may/ should/ ought to/ daren’t have been furious

under a *practical* interpretation! Left to itself, a verdict about the future can evidently mature into the *same* verdict about what actually transpired. This result looks as if it ought to be important. And it is the tip of an iceberg. A huge body of data

⁴ *continued...*

(14) These days, Grannie (often/ sometimes/ occasionally) loses

(15) In those days, Grannie (often/ sometimes/ occasionally) lost.

So, since by general acceptance these latter messages count as propositions, the former must also. And indeed the sponsor of a variant of (12) or (13) is naturally taken as reporting a fact.

Modals, we see, need not express verdicts, for in (12) and (13) they merely help to formulate a habit. It is only when the modal is used to express a verdict that we have a judgement.

⁵ The first semantic question raised by judgements is whether there is anything out there to which a verdict corresponds. My own answer is No: the sponsor of a judgement is offering a personal venture of her own, which of its nature requires rational justification, and the logic of these messages is to be sought in the justifications. Thus [4, *passim*]. But none of this bears upon present concerns, and I can thankfully avoid the contested issue whether judgements can be ‘true or false’.

⁶ It was to ensure projective interpretations for them that I sneaked ‘were she present’ alongside (8) and ‘had she been present’ alongside (9) above. Standing alone, each has an obvious practical interpretation as well.

⁷ [4] attempts an account of tense in projective messages.

awaits empirical investigation in these waters.⁸

Observe that an X who initially affirms m_1 is by no means committed after the occasion to the proposition m_3 . Indeed an incommunicado X who affirmed m_3 after the event would thereby *overstate*. Just intuitively, affirming m_3 gives the effect of reporting a fact, and an incommunicado X would be in no position to do that. Her *mots justes* after the event are 'Grannie will have been furious'. This is another black eye for the indicative, for if as postulated m_1 and m_3 differ only in the times assigned to Grannie's fury, it is quite unclear why the former *shouldn't* 'mature' into the latter.

So far I have attended only to simple messages at their most basic: *atomic* messages.

II.

Mostly, though, 'indicative' and its complement are applied to interpretations of 'if'-sentences. Those concerning which there is generally received doctrine include the simple, familiar, ones of

- (16) If Grannie lost she was furious
- (17) If Grannie loses she will be furious
- (18) If Grannie was/were to lose she would be furious
- (19) If Grannie had lost she would have been furious.

Call these m_{16} to m_{19} .⁹ Now, by general acceptance, the 'indicative' unites m_{16} and m_{17} , while m_{18} and m_{19} are both 'subjunctive'.

The amalgam of 'indicative' doctrine thus far is untenable. For

- (A) Someone shot Kennedy. Therefore if Oswald did not shoot Kennedy someone else did

encodes a valid argument, while

- (B) Someone will shoot Kennedy. Therefore if Oswald does not shoot Kennedy someone else will

does not. Persuaded that some unidentified illwisher, acting alone, is poised to shoot Kennedy, and with excellent prospects of success, X may well assent that someone will shoot Kennedy, but she will dissent from the future conditional inferred in (B) if she thinks the lone malefactor could be Oswald, unless she already knows of some other plot to shoot Kennedy. (A), on the other hand, encodes a

⁸ Not all involve time lapse. There are straightforward inferential relations across categories. In 'Grannie can't have lost or she would have been furious', for instance, the *practical* conclusion that Grannie can't have lost is drawn enthymematically from the *projective* premiss m_{19} and the suppressed *proposition* that she wasn't furious.

⁹ These examples will recur, and it might benefit the reader to make a note of them now.

straight out deduction. By assimilating the atomic premisses *and* the ‘conditional’ conclusions, the indicative precludes this observed logical difference; *Q.e.d.*

On several grounds, the received taxonomy surprises. First, (17), (18) and (19) share an inflectional form of the same modal, while (16) contains no form of any modal. Secondly, it makes sense to interpolate ‘as I believe’ immediately after ‘if’ in (16), but not in (17), (18) or (19). Thirdly, m_{17} , m_{18} and m_{19} all share the same understanding as to time order, an understanding which m_{16} quite lacks. There is an obvious difference between saying (17) and saying

If Grannie is not furious she will not lose,

and similarly for (18) and (19), but there is no answering difference between saying (16) and saying

If Grannie was not furious she did not lose.

The natural taxonomy would class m_{17} with m_{18} and m_{19} .

Indeed the natural taxonomy would assimilate a whole echelon of messages, including all the obvious single-sequence interpretations of variants of

If Grannie loses she will/ may/ should/ ought to/ needn’t/ daren’t be furious
 If Grannie lost (was/ were to lose) she would/ could/ might be furious
 If Grannie had lost she would/ could/ might have been furious.

I call these messages *conditionals*. Each, we observe, invokes an understanding about time order.

It takes a message to formulate a belief. When ‘as I believe’ is found to make sense in (16), I maintain it is because it latches onto a component message in m_{16} , namely the proposition that Grannie lost. m_{16} , we perceive, is a *compound* message: it is compounded out of two *prior* messages, there for all to see, each encoded in a constituent sentence of (16). Likewise natural interpretations of (20), below. But m_{17} is a *simple* message, like m_1 . Indeed it is merely an *elaboration* of m_1 : m_1 ’s verdict is about Grannie’s being furious, m_{17} ’s about Grannie’s being furious in the aftermath of her losing. So there is no component message in m_{17} for ‘as I believe’ to latch onto; and it is therefore, I maintain, that it makes no sense in (17). Similarly for m_{18} and m_{19} .¹⁰ From this perspective, the indicative m_{16} is *compound-ed* out of two *propositions*, while m_{17} , also indicative, is a *simple judgement*.

An *X* kept incommunicado after asserting a variant of

If Grannie loses she will/ may/ should/ ought to/ daren’t be furious

¹⁰ Ramsey evidently had messages like m_{17} in mind in his well-thumbed footnote beginning

If two people are arguing ‘If *p* will *q*?’ . . . [7, p.143fn.]

The ‘Ramsey Test’ involves ‘adding *p* hypothetically’ to one’s stock of beliefs: see [8, p.43]. But there is no believable *p* in any of m_{17} to m_{19} .

can express her conviction after the event by asserting the corresponding variant of

- (20) If Grannie lost she he will/ may/ should/ ought to/ daren't have been furious,

another result of apparent semantic significance.

Interpretations of (20) remind us that ground still remains uncovered by our examples: practicals can figure in interpretations of 'if'-sentences. But of course the received taxonomy leaves this whole area uncovered. Nor does it recognise 'habituals'. Examples like 'If Baby cries we beat him' are ignored.¹¹

III.

Both taxonomies discern m_{16} and m_{19} . Just as well: Ernest Adams established their semantic difference beyond peradventure with his Oswald-and-Kennedy examples, secure starting point for any taxonomy. The strategy thereafter, for an indicative supporter, would be to assimilate m_{17} to m_{16} and m_{18} to m_{19} . Submissions of this tendency are found in an argument from Frank Jackson, who urges a respect in which, as a matter of observation, m_{17} stands to m_{18} as m_{16} stands to m_{19} .

The passage we are to examine articulates a certain differentium between 'indicative conditionals' and 'subjunctive conditionals'. See [5, pp.74f]. First, the difference is discovered between 'past subjunctives' and 'past indicatives'. It involves comparison with how things *are*. How things 'actually are', to be precise:

It is perfect sense to say that if Oswald had not shot Kennedy, things would be different today from the way things actually are It is, on the other hand, nonsense to say indicatively that if Oswald did not shoot Kennedy, things are different from how they actually are.

In the continuation, Jackson turns to a future pair like m_{17} and m_{18} , looking for the same difference. But lo! unheralded and unsung, a change: this time the comparison is with how things 'actually *will be*':

Despite the fact that you regard rain as unlikely, and so think that the way things actually will be is that the match will be played, you do not say 'If it

¹¹ Nor does it notice embarrassing examples like interpretations of

If Sly Pete will call, he will win,
different from the natural interpretation of

If Sly Pete calls he will win,

but sufficiently like it to have to count as indicative, too; whereupon we have *different* 'indicative conditionals' with presumably the *same* 'antecedent' and 'consequent'. Evidently the indicative is smarter than we thought. We need to hear more from those many thinkers who venture a single semantics for indicative conditionals in terms of their antecedents and consequents. Interpretations of

If Sly Pete would call, he would win
create the same embarrassment for the subjunctive.

It may be that these unusual examples are of scant logical or philosophical interest. *Nevertheless*, no taxonomy with pretension to adequacy can afford to ignore them.

rains, things will be different from the way they actually will be', that's nonsense; rather you say 'If it rains, things will be as they actually will be, and that way is that the match will be cancelled'. By contrast, there is nothing wrong with saying in the subjunctive 'If it were to rain, things would be different from the way they actually will be' or 'If it had rained, things would have been different from the way they actually were'.

There is much here to discuss. But my first point is that this whole exercise is underwritten by the indicative doctrine that m_1 merely formulates about the future what m_2 and m_3 formulate about the present and past. What else could justify the equivalent roles confidently assigned to 'actually are', 'actually were' and 'actually will be' in the comparisons?

In the passage the adverb 'actually' is reserved for use with 'are', 'were' and 'will be', in exact accord with the adage that actuality is the preserve of the indicative. But not in accord with usage at large, where 'If Hitler had actually invaded England . . .' and '. . . Germany would actually have won the war' are both attested, where someone maintaining 'Sly Pete will actually win' just when Sly Pete is shot dead will switch like as not to saying 'Sly Pete would actually have won', and where 'actually' can be inserted without solecism at any of the marked places in

If she () returned tomorrow, things would () be different from how they would () have been if she had never () left in the first place.

We must take it, then, that Jackson's submission does not rely on facts about usage. Rather, he must be ignoring the profligacy with which some English speakers fling 'actually' around, and reserving the adverb to a considered use of his own. This seems an eminently reasonable reaction. Why, I myself teach that messages like m_2 and m_3 are transmitted truly or falsely depending exactly on how things actually are or were. If Jackson would only keep 'actually' away from projective messages, I should think his considered use would pretty well coincide with mine.

Now plainly, if there is an argument for taking m_{17} to m_{18} as m_{16} to m_{19} , Frank Jackson's considered habits with 'actually' can play no part in it. And indeed with 'actually' deleted from the passage there is no difficulty in discerning such an argument. It resorts to the notion of things being different.

It is 'nonsense' to say that things are different from how they are, or will be different from how they will be. Perhaps this twice-invoked premiss instances a little general law: crudely,

things M different from how they N

is always nonsense when ' M ' = ' N '. Ah, but that is before we let in *if*-conditions, with their attendant ambiguities of scope. What if it rains? Things will be exactly as they will be? Not necessarily. Here, on my right, are how things will be: no rain, and match played. And here on my left are things as they will be if it rains: match cancelled. And as you can see, they are different. On this construal,

If it rains, things will be different from how they will be

seems no more nonsensical than the run of such speculations.

For that matter, consider *modus tollens*. When *X* infers that Grannie did not lose from the co-premisses that Grannie was not furious and m_{16} , is she not arguing from a difference between how things were and how things were if Grannie lost?

In sum, Jackson uncovers no difference that I can see among his examples.

Particularly, there is no solecism in maintaining *both* that the match will be played *and* that if it rains the match will not be played. Whether Jackson is denying this here is obscured from me by the 'things being different' conception. Of course it would be requisite also to maintain that it will not rain, which shows that the two tenets are not wholly unconnected. But one's reasons for thinking that it will not rain are utterly unconnected from one's reasons for thinking that the match will be cancelled if it rains, and there is no difficulty in maintaining them both.

It is true that one *also* encounters: 'The match will be played', in harness with the 'subjunctive' interpretation of

If it rained (was/ were to rain) the match would be cancelled

favoured by Jackson. For that matter, when the day of the match dawns bright and clear, one may even find 'The match will be played' coupled with *another* 'future subjunctive':

If it had rained, the match would have been cancelled.

And in all three cases, not just the first, it would need to be maintained simultaneously that it will not rain. In time of peace these matters would command our attention. Suffice it here that the all-'future-indicative' combination does occur. Notably in urgent matters: a nurse who is confident that the patient will not die can also be confident that he will if the surgeon doesn't operate.

But wait: we are overlooking another such result. For although we can maintain both that the surgeon will operate and that the patient will die if he doesn't, we *never* say

(21) If the surgeon did not operate the patient died

while committed to the proposition that the surgeon operated. True, that proposition is *inferred* when (21) is used in *modus tollens*. But of course that happens only *after* (21)'s assertion. 'The surgeon operated *and* if he didn't the patient died' is nonsense.¹²

¹² That is why the argument 'Oswald shot Kennedy; *therefore* someone shot Kennedy; *therefore* if Oswald did not shoot Kennedy someone else did' fails despite its two impeccable inferences. So generally for 'A so A or B so if not-A B'. Every semantics for compound interpretations of 'if'-sentences needs to explain why one cannot say 'if not-A . . .' while maintaining that A. I attempt this at [3, p.183].

A real difference at last in what we do and don't say! But one which sunders m_{16} and m_{17} , lobbing the burden of proof straight back into the court occupied by Jackson and those many thinkers whose easy preconceptions he defends.

IV.

To my best awareness, no one, in almost three centuries, has succeeded in wresting a serious definition of the indicative from its teeming supporters. Ironical, that: I can delineate the received extensions of 'indicative' and 'subjunctive' exactly, in independently explained grammatical terms. But traditional expositions, rare anyway, tend to stall at the level of words, powerless to exclude (for example) the practical interpretation of

It would have been last Thursday

from the ranks of their subjunctive. And the traditional conception of what makes indicatives indicative must remain a matter for speculation.

I, of course, recognise 'subjunctives' as past-tensed projectives. And 'the indicative', tonight's topic, stands revealed as the union of propositions, certain but not all present-tensed projectives, and certain but not all compound messages. Small wonder its essence has eluded the tradition. At least the subjunctive is homogeneous.

Limited, mind, for a basic category. Past-tensed projectives are one kind of projective, and projectives are one kind of judgment, and judgments are one kind of simple message, and simple messages are one kind of message: taxonomologically, the subjunctive is exactly *that* important. But indubitably whole.

Whereas the indicative is a monster, born of the illicit desire for future-y analogues to m_3 and m_{16} .

Macquarie University

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¹² *continued. . .*

Incidentally, any who thought to apply the 'Ramsey Test' to messages like m_{16} would need to explain why 'Grannie won, but if she lost she was furious' is nonsense, yet 'I believe Grannie won, but if she lost she was furious' is not.