Rough draft—comments welcome.

A synthesis view of counterfactuals

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A lot of recent literature on counterfactuals is centered around capturing a handful of intuitive judgments. The first is that *Sobel sequences* such as (1) are felicitous:[1]

(1)   a.   If Sophie went to the parade, she would see Pedro.

           b.   But if Sophie went to the parade and got stuck behind a tall person, she wouldn't see Pedro.

Relatedly, *Antecedent Strengthening* seems invalid:[2]

(2)   a.   If Sophie went to the parade, she would see Pedro.

           b.   #Therefore, if Sophie went to the parade and got stuck behind a tall person, she would see Pedro.

Meanwhile, the following *Heim sequence* is infelicitous:[3]

(3)   a.   If Sophie went to the parade and got stuck behind a tall person, she wouldn't see Pedro.

           b.   #But of course, if she went to the parade, she would see Pedro.

The two dominant views of counterfactuals explain these judgments in different ways. On one side of the debate, variably strict conditional theorists argue that (1) sounds fine and (2) sounds bad because Antecedent Strengthening is an invalid rule of inference.[4] On the other side of the debate, strict conditional theorists argue that Antecedent Strengthening is valid. They say that (2) isn't a genuine counterexample to Antecedent Strengthening, because the context shifts when (2-b) is uttered. As this view is standardly developed,

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1. Lewis 1973 introduces these sequences to the literature, crediting them to J. Howard Sobel.
2. Antecedent Strengthening is the rule that one may infer from 'If p, would q' to 'If p and r, would q.'
3. Sequences such as (3), also known as "reverse Sobel sequences," are originally due to Irene Heim; I follow von Fintel 2001 in calling them "Heim sequences."
4. See Stalnaker 1968 and Lewis 1973 for canonical defenses of variably strict accounts.

context shifts in just the same way when (3-a) is uttered, and (3-b) sounds bad because it's false in the later context in which it's uttered.

This paper defends a third view of counterfactuals, one that reaps the benefits of both views just described while avoiding their pitfalls. In §1, I give an overview of the debate as it currently stands. In §2, I present a limited defense of a view that I ultimately reject, the strict conditional view defended by VON FINTEL 2001. On von Fintel's behalf, I respond to concerns that have been raised for his account of Heim sequences. Then in §3, I raise a more serious concern for von Fintel and other strict conditional theorists, including GILLIES 2007, ICHIKAWA 2011, HÁJEK 2014, WILLIAMSON 2020, LOEWENSTEIN 2021, and GREENBERG 2021—namely, that their view makes bad predictions about probabilistic variants of Heim sequences, as well as other probabilistic judgments. Similar problems arise for other extant views of counterfactuals, including those defended by KRIŽ 2015 and LEWIS 2018. In §4, I consider an attempt by BENNETT 2003 and HÁJEK 2021 to dismiss the sort of judgments that I present, and I describe several problems for their approach.

In §5, I introduce and defend a more satisfactory view of the semantics and pragmatics of counterfactuals. I argue that strict conditional theorists have been too quick to assimilate the context sensitivity of counterfactuals to the context sensitivity of nominal quantifiers such as 'all' and 'every'. In fact, the gradable adjective 'nearby' provides a better model for the way in which the truth conditions of counterfactuals depend on context. The synthesis view that I defend incorporates a key insight of variably strict accounts—namely, that the antecedent of a counterfactual often influences what worlds are relevant to its truth conditions at a given context. But unlike variably strict accounts, my view preserves a strict conditional semantics according to which Antecedent Strengthening is valid. For instance, there is no context where both sentences of a Sobel sequence are true. By adopting the right account of the pragmatics of counterfactuals, we can endorse a strict conditional semantics and still straightforwardly capture the full range of our intuitive counterfactual judgments.