Counterfactual conditionals in focus: A contrastive analysis of French and Norwegian

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Abstract
This paper is a comparative exploration of counterfactual conditionals introduced by the conjunction ‘if’ in French and Norwegian, a subject which has not been undertaken before. My analyses are based on examples from monolingual and plurilingual corpora, complemented by a questionnaire. Both languages have two main patterns corresponding to A: [‘if’ + imperfect + conditional simple] and B [‘if’ + pluperfect + conditional perfect], but their use of them is somewhat different. Regarding counterfactual present, both have two patterns at their disposal. In French, however, pattern A seems preferred, whereas in Norwegian there is a clear preference for B. Confronted with examples of counterfactual future, both groups of informants initially hesitated a little, but considered after all pattern B as an acceptable solution in many cases. Not only the tenses but also the type of verb, eventual temporal adjuncts and the context are important for the interpretations. Neither French nor Norwegian grammars give a satisfying presentation of the issue and therefore need to be revised.

Introduction
I will compare French and Norwegian as regards the counterfactual conditionals. My analysis accounts for conditional clauses introduced by the conjunction si in French, and by the corresponding conjunctions (hvis, dersom or om) in Norwegian. French normally uses
indicative in these constructions and Norwegian uses only indicative. Actually, we do not have subjunctive in Norwegian. Consider the following examples (1a) and (1b):

(1a) Si j’étais malheureuse, je ne partirais pas. [lit.: ‘If I was unhappy, I would not leave’.]
(1b) Hvis jeg var ulykkelig, ville jeg ikke dra av gårde. [lit.: ‘If I was unhappy, would I not leave’].

I have chosen this subject for two reasons. First, important reference grammars of the two languages give an inadequate description of the issue in some respects. French grammars, including some recent ones, seem too influenced by the grammatical tradition (e.g. *Foundations of French syntax* 1996, *Le bon usage* 2008, *Grammaire méthodique du français* 2009), and Norwegian grammars often ignore the issue. The most recent reference grammar of standard Norwegian (“bokmål” and “nynorsk”), *Norsk referansegrammatikk* (1997), for instance, mentions the subject, but leaves out important aspects. Regarding French, I want to show that actual usages are more complex than the grammariens claim, and with respect to Norwegian, I want to fill the gap in the grammars. Second, to the best of my knowledge, a comparison of French and Norwegian counterfactual constructions has not been undertaken before.

Almost all my examples come from the two monolingual corpora, *Oslo-korpuset* and an electronic corpus of *Le Monde* for the period 1996 - 1997, as well as from the *Oslo Multilingual Corpus (OM S)*, a collection of text corpora which contains original texts in English, French, German and Norwegian, and aligned translations into at least one of the other languages. Finally, I have some examples from the net, from other novels than those included in the *OMC* and from a questionnaire I have developed and submitted to 20 Frenchmen and 20 Norwegians.
1. The patterns and their interpretations

I will examine the two main patterns of the counterfactual conditionals in French and Norwegian, which will be referred to as pattern A and pattern B. Other combinations of tense forms will not be analysed. The interpretation of these patterns depends not only on the tenses used in the conditional constructions, but also on the type of verb in the conditional clause. In fact, in general, the difference between a telic and an atelic verb is very important to the meaning of the construction, as we will see. Furthermore, the presence of a temporal adjunct in the sentence can be decisive in cases where the example would otherwise be ambiguous. Finally, the linguistic context outside the sentence or pragmatic factors, such as the non-linguistic context or the common knowledge of the speaker and the addressee(s), are sometimes necessary for the interpretation of the sentence. It must be emphasized that the examples with a translation will be examined if the original or the translation (or both) contains one of the two main patterns.

With respect to the terminology, a conditional clause introduced by ‘if’ is called protasis, and the matrix is named apodosis. Regarding the Norwegian terms for tense, those closest to the English ones have been used.

1.1 The patterns correspond to [if + imperfect + conditional simple] in English

A. Si + l’imparfait + le conditionnel présent.

(2) Si Pierre recevait ma lettre, il nous aiderait. [lit.: ‘If Pierre received my letter, he would help us’.] 

(3) Si Pierre était à la maison, il nous aiderait. [lit.: ‘If Pierre was at home, he would help us’.]
In A, the imperfect is used in the protasis, and the conditional simple in the apodosis. According to French grammars, the counterfactual present is expressed only by this pattern. This traditional point of view is however contrary to many of my examples, which show that also pattern B can be used to express the counterfactual present.

The type of verb in the conditional clause is very important to the meaning of pattern A, what most of the grammars do not mention. In (2), the verb is telic and refers to the future. This use of pattern A, is named *le potentiel* in French. The chances that the event will be realised are not good, but they are not zero. As I will examine counterfactual conditionals, examples expressing clearly *le potentiel* are not included in my corpus. According to Martin (1991: 88), pattern A with a telic verb in the protasis expresses by default *le potentiel* (a possible but not probable event) as in (2), but the context can turn its interpretation into counterfactual future:

(4) Non vraiment, il est impardonnable. Si encore il revenait lundi, je ne dirais rien. Mais samedi soir, non ! C’est odieux ! [lit.: ‘No, he is inexcusable! If only he came home Monday, but Saturday evening, no! It is scandalous!’] (Martin, 1999: 90)

In (3), the verb is atelic, and according to Michael Jones (1996: 173), this type of example has one single interpretation, namely counterfactual present, called *l’irréel du présent* in French. The imperfect has a counterfactual value, according to him: “sentence (111b) implies that Pierre is not at home: (111b) Si Pierre était chez lui, il répondrait au téléphone”. Example (3), which is very close to of Jones’ example (111b) can also be given three other interpretations, however: The protasis in (3) can be interpreted as a conjecture about the future. Whereas a telic verb in the protasis implies a reference to the future, an atelic verb can
eventually get the same meaning. Example (3) is ambiguous: it is either a counterfactual present or a *potentiel*. The insertion of a temporal adjunct like *la semaine prochaine* (*next week*) would make the reference to the future quite clear:

(3’) Si Pierre était à la maison la semaine prochaine, il nous aiderait. [lit.: ‘If Pierre was at home next week, he would help us’.]

According to a third interpretation of example (3), proposed by Martin (1971: 131), Pierre can possibly be at home now, but the speaker does not have sufficient information to confirm this:

(5) Si Pierre était à la maison - je ne sais pas s’il est là ou non - il nous aiderait. [lit.:’If Pierre was at home - I do not know if he is there or not - he would help us’.]

Finally, pattern A can be used as a counterfactual future, if the context enforces this meaning, as we saw in (4).

To summarize, pattern A with an atelic verb in the protasis is principally interpreted as counterfactual present or as *le potentiel*. With a telic verb in the protasis, the pattern is usually interpreted as *le potentiel*.

The Norwegian pattern A’ has tense forms corresponding to those in French and the possible interpretations seem to be the same. All the different interpretations existing in French have not been explored yet in Norwegian, however.

A. *Hvis* + *preteritum* + 1. *kondisjonalis*  
   *If*+ imperfect + conditional simple
(6) Hvis Per mottok brevet mitt, ville han hjelpe oss. [lit.: ‘If Per received my letter, he would help us’.] 

(7) Hvis Per var hjemme, ville han hjelpe oss. [lit.: ‘If Per was at home, he would help us’.] 

It must be emphasized that whereas pattern A’ can be interpreted as counterfactual present without problem, the interpretation as potentiel seems somewhat restricted in Norwegian when the verb is telic, according to my data. Hagen (2002: 258), who gives the following example, declares that the use of this pattern as potentiel has no lexical restriction,: 

(8) Dersom du besøkte din gamle mor i dag, ville hun sikkert bli glad. [lit.: ‘If you visited your old mother today, she would probably be happy’.] 

This example sounds somewhat archaic for different reasons, one reason being the use of pattern A’ combined with a telic verb in the protasis. Pattern A’ expressing potentiality seems however to be used often in passiv and in indirect speech, but examples in direct speech exist too: 

(9) Hvis du fikk hus uten å gjøre din plikt, ville kanskje andre også komme og forlange det samme. (Oslo Corpus) [lit.: ‘If you got your house without doing your duty, others would perhaps demand the same thing too’.] 

(10) Hva ville du egentlig gjøre, hvis tuaregene kom til makten igjen? (Oslo Corpus) [lit.: ‘What would you do, if the Touareg came back to power’?]
I will not go deeper into the problems regarding the use of pattern A’ interpreted as *potentiel*, which are not the issue of this article. Thus, the examples of A and A’ which clearly express *le potentiel*, will not be analysed further. Hereafter, examples interpreted as clear counterfactual conditionals and examples that could possibly have this meaning will be in focus.

1.2 The patterns correspond to [*if + pluperfect + conditional perfect*] in English.

Consider now the second of the two main patterns, which, according to French grammatical tradition, expresses exclusively the counterfactual past, called *irréel du passé* in French. This is the pattern of counterfactuality *par excellence*, because it seems to express only counterfactual events, except in the situations where this value might be cancelled by the context. I will come back to this question below (cf. section 1.3).

In pattern B, the pluperfect occurs in the protasis and the conditional perfect occurs in the apodosis. As we will see, the importance of the type of verb used in the protasis depends, in B, on the temporal reference of the event: past, present or future.

**B. Si + le plus-que-parfait + le conditionnel passé (= *if + pluperfect + conditional perfect*).**

(11) Si Pierre était rentré, il nous aurait aidés. [lit.: ‘If Pierre had come back, he would have helped us’.]  
(12) Si Pierre avait été à la maison, il nous aurait aidés. [lit.: ‘If Pierre had been home, he would have helped us’.]  

According to all French grammars I have consulted, except one, this construction expresses a conjecture about the past which did not become reality, i.e. the counterfactual past.
Even the recent reference grammars of French, which I have already mentioned, give this same traditional analysis of the pattern. *La Grammaire pratique du français* (1968) by Mauger is an exception however. Mauger mentions already in 1968 that pattern B can also express the counterfactual present:

(13) Si j’avais eu vingt ans de moins, je vous aurais accompagné (maintenant ou demain).

(Mauger, 1968: 250) [lit. ‘If I had been twenty years younger, I would have accompanied you (now or tomorrow’].

Moreover, Robert Martin, has shown in several of his works (1971, 1983, 1991) that the pattern can be used about counterfactual situations not only in the past, but also in the present and the future:

(14) Si j’avais eu moins de travail en ce moment, je vous aurais volontiers accompagné.

(Martin, 1991: 88) [lit.:’If I had had less work now, I would have accompanied you’].

(15) S’il avait pu venir demain, nous serions sortis ensemble. (Martin, 1971: 131) [lit.:’If he could have come tomorrow, we would have gone out together’].

With reference to the sentence in (15), Martin (1971: 131) declares: “Cette valeur d’irréalité, obtenue au moyen du COND passé, peut par transposition, se rapporter à l’avenir”. According to Martin, the speaker knows that the person cannot come.

B’ *Hvis + pluskvamperfektum + 2. Kondisjonalis or pluskvamperfektum* (*If + pluperfect + conditional perfect or pluperfect*)
The Norwegian pattern B’ corresponds to the French one with respect to tense forms and meaning. The pluperfect appears in the conditional clause and conditional perfect in the matrix. In Norwegian, however, the pluperfect is often used also in the apodosis with the almost same interpretation as conditional perfect. It must be added that in Norwegian even other tenses are possible with the same reading, but I will limit my analysis to the main patterns. In general, the Norwegian grammatical tradition is not as prescriptive as the French one. Norway does not have any *Académie française* to rule over the change and development of the grammar; thus, the native speaker of standard Norwegian seems to be given more alternatives.

The Norwegian grammar by Jon Erik Hagen (2002: 258) is the only one which mentions explicitly that this pattern can be used not only about the past, but also about the present and the future. The following examples have three different temporal references expressed by the temporal adverbs *i går* (‘yesterday’), *nå* (‘now’) ou *i morgen* (‘tomorrow’), situated in the protasis:

(16) Hvis jeg hadde fått en million i går, ville jeg ha blitt veldig glad [lit.:’If I had got a million yesterday, I would have been very glad’.]

(16’) Hvis jeg hadde fått en million i dag, ville jeg ha blitt veldig glad. [lit.:’If I had got a million today, I would have been very glad’.]

(16’’) Hvis jeg hadde fått en million i morgen, ville jeg ha blitt veldig glad. [lit.:’If I had got a million tomorrow, I would hav been very glad’.]

1.3 *The interpretations of B and B’: a supplement*
In section 1.2, I have not discussed the special problems caused by the verbal opposition
telic/atelic in the patterns B and B’, problems which I would like to examine more in detail
now.

If the verb of the protasis is atelic, as in (12), the interpretation does not cause any
problem neither in French nor in Norwegian, whatever the temporal reference might be. The
reference must be expressed by a temporal adjunct, however:

(12’) Si Pierre avait été à la maison la semaine dernière, il nous aurait aidés. (‘last week’)
(12’’) Si Pierre avait été à la maison aujourd’hui, il nous aurait aidés. (‘today’)
(12’’’) Si Pierre avait été à la maison la semaine prochaine, il nous aurait aidés. (‘next week’)

The first of the examples expresses the counterfactual past, the second expresses the
counterfactual présent and the third expresses the counterfactual future. It must be added, that
French native speakers influenced by prescriptive grammar would perhaps not accept the two
last examples, because they do not correspond to what they have learnt at school. The
interpretations of the parallel Norwegian examples are the same.

A telic verb can be used about the past without any problem. If the temporal reference
is meant to be the present time, the situation is more delicate. To express the counterfactual
present, the event ‘come’, for instance, must occur exactly at the point of speech. The adjunct
maintenant (‘now’) can express this exact coincidence:

(11’) Si Pierre était rentré maintenant, il nous aurait aidés. [lit.: ‘If Pierre had come back now,
he would have helped us’.]
The insertion of another deictic adjunct like *aujourd’hui* (‘today’) would not do, however. *Aujourd’hui* denotes an interval of 12 hours and cannot express the exact coincidence between the point of speech and the punctual event *rentrer*. This implies that the following example must be interpreted as the immediate past or the immediate future relative to the point of speech, i.e. the counterfactual past or the counterfactual future:

(11’’) Si Pierre était rentré aujourd’hui, il nous aurait aidés. [lit. : ‘If Pierre had come back today, he would have helped us’.]

Martin (1991) discusses in detail the influence of the tenses and the type of verb (telic vs. atelic), but curiously, he does not take into account the impact of the different temporal adjuncts, such as *maintenant/en ce moment* vs. *aujourd’hui*, on the reading. Nor does Hagen (2002) pay attention to this problem in his short presentation of the counterfactual conditionals in Norwegian. On the contrary, in his example of the counterfactual present, he uses the adverb *i dag* (‘today’) instead of *nå* (‘now’), which would have given the wanted effect.

Above, I have called B and B’ the patterns of counterfactuality *par excellence*. In fact, the combination of the pluperfect in the protasis and the conditional past in the apodosis gives the greatest distance between the real world and the counterfactual world, in other words the highest degree of counterfactuality. This is incontestable for atelic verbs. Martin, who has worked many years on the conditional constructions and who has been a great inspiration for me, declares (1991: 88) : “associé un procès imperfectif, le PQP s’interprète exclusivement par l’irréel: *Si j’avais eu moins de travail…*; If the verb in the protasis is telic, however, the combination of “PQP et d’un procès perfectif laisse ouverte l’interprétation potentielle ou irréelle.”, in other words, the potential reading also is possible. He mentions (1991: 89) that the
following protasis can be interpreted as potential: *Si par extraordinaire il avait fini son travail* (‘if exceptionally, he had finished his work’) + a temporal adjunct. However, he does not clarify what tense must be used in the apodosis to express the potentiality, a major point.

In his article about conditional constructions, among other things, Kronning (2009) claims, like Martin (1991: 93), that pattern B can have two readings: counterfactuality or potentiality; the former is the interpretation by default, whereas the latter is possible if the counterfactuality is cancelled by the context. Referring to an English example of Comrie (1986: 90), illustrated in (18), Kronning presents the following French example, which seems inspired by Comrie’s:

(17) *Si Pierre avait pris de l’arsenic, il aurait eu exactement les symptomes que nous avons pu constater.* [lit.: ‘If Pierre had had some arsenic, he would have had exactly the symptoms which we have found’.

According to Kronning, the relative clause *que nous avons pu constater* blocks the counterfactual interpretation, in other words, Pierre has perhaps swallowed some arsenic after all. I am not totally convinced by this interpretation, however. To me, the interpretation of (17) is primarily that ‘he has the same symptoms as if he had had some arsenic’ and secondarily the one Kronning proposes. Consider now Comrie’s example:

(18) If the butler had done it, we would have found just the clues that we did in fact find.

(Comrie 1986: 90)

Comrie introduces his example (48), i.e. my example (18), by the following observation:
“It is harder to find convincing examples where the protasis is not necessarily false, and speaker judgements do seem to vary somewhat.

For many speakers, however, the following example will serve”.

After his example, he notes that: “The final clause of (48) makes it clear that we did in fact find the clues in question, i.e. the apodosis is true; the sentence also leaves open the possibility that the butler did indeed do it” (Comrie, 1986: 90). As Comrie observes, examples like (17) and (18) have two readings, what Kronning does not note.

To a great extent, however, I agree with Kronning’s analysis of pattern B and his references to Comrie all well as to Martin (1991). They claim that pattern B “does not have counterfactuality as part of the meaning of either protasis or apodosis” (Comrie 1986: 90), i.e. the linguistic or extra-linguistic context can cancel the counterfactuality. Comrie’s observations, quoted above, are however marked by some reserves: “it is harder to find convincing examples”, “speaker judgements do seem to vary somewhat” (do seem expresses more scepticism than seem to vary). This could have been a little more emphasized by Kronning, even if their viewpoints seem very much alike. In my analysis of the answers to the questionnaire I have developed, I have found the same reticences from my French and Norwegian informants. In a prior study including French informants, I have found the same reticences concerning the use of pattern B with the value of potentiality, see Hobæk Haff (1990: 39 - 40) for some more examples.

Until now I have not found any attested examples of pattern B interpreted as a potential event, but I cannot exclude this possibility, of course. I will come back to this question beyond.

2. Analysis of my corpus
We have seen that French and Norwegian have essentially the same patterns. The issue in this section is to explore how they are used in my corpus. I will examine successively the counterfactual past, the counterfactual present and the counterfactual future.

Regarding my corpus, the two monolingual corpora, the *Oslo-korpuset* and the electronic corpus of *Le Monde*, have the advantage of presenting only attested examples, but they do not permit the comparison of the same example in its context in both French and Norwegian. They show however the tendencies for each language with respect to counterfactuality and give thereby the opportunity to compare them. The multilingual corpus, the *OMC*, including the original example and its translation, makes it possible to compare each example in both languages. This type of corpus is therefore an excellent tool for comparative grammar and translation studies among other things.

2.1 The counterfactual past

The illustration of the counterfactual past in French and Norwegian do not cause any problem. The patterns B and B’ are used with both telic and atelic verbs. Some examples are:

(19a) Ka ville du ha gjort, dersom ungen din hadde vore den som tok i handtaket som tomte luta utover? (HW 2) [lit.:’What would you have done, if it was your child who had thouched the handle and poured out the lye’?]  

(19b) Qu’est-ce que t’aurais fait, si ç’avait été ton enfant qui avait touché la manivelle qu’fait déverser toute la lessive. [lit.:’What would you have done, if it had been your child who had touched the handle and poured out the lye’?]
(20a) Hvis myndighetene var kommet på sporet av dem, ville det ha blitt en alvorlig sak for rederen og hans medviter. (BHH1) [lit.:'If the authorities had got on their tracks, it would have been a serious matter for the shipowner and his accomplice'.]

(20b) D’évidence, si les autorités avaient retrouvé leurs traces, l’armateur et sa complice auraient pu craindre le pire. [lit.:‘Naturally, if the authorities had got on their tracs, the ship owner and his accomplice could have feared the worst’.

(21a) Hvis Inkvisisjonen ikke hadde tatt affære, ville han selv ha lagt ut på en embedsreise. (BHH 2) [lit.:‘If the Holy Office had not intervened, he would have undertaken this journey himself’.]

(21b) Si l’Inquisition n’avait pas pris les choses en main, il serait lui-même parti en mission. [lit.:’If the Holy Office had not intervened, he would have undertaken this journey himself’.]

In (19) and (20) and (21), we find a congruent correspondence between the Norwegian original and the French translation. The verb of the protasis is telic in the three examples. None of the examples has a temporal adjunct to indicate if the statement is a conjecture about the past or the future. The context clarifies however that the condition is related to the past.

The following example has two temporal adjuncts. The adjunct in the protasis marks the past relative to the speech point and the adjunct in the apodosis marks the future.

(22a) Hadde vi ikke dratt hit i dag, så kunne ikke du vært i Sydney i kveld, sa Andrew. (Nesbø, 1997) [lit.:’Had we not come here today, you could not have been in Sydney this evening, said Andrew’.

(22b) Si nous n’étions pas venus ici aujourd’hui, tu n’aurais pas pu être à Sydney ce soir.
As we can see, the condition in the protasis of the Norwegian original is not expressed by a conjunction, but by the inversion of the verb (a marking which can be used in French, as well as in German and English, for instance), whereas in the French translation of (22a), the conditional conjunction introduces the subordinate clause and the common word order has been restored. The marking by means of inversion has been used also in (27a) and (28a), for instance.

With respect to reference of the adjunct in the protasis, *i dag/aujourd’hui*, I refer to section 1.3. In (22), the context indicates clearly that this event belongs to the immediate past. In (23) below, there is no temporal adjunct and it is difficult to determine the temporal reference: Has Mel Gibson already refused, or is it certain that Gibson will refuse in the future because he has other plans? The context, this time, does not give any clear answer (but in general it does). We must conclude that example (23) can be interpreted as counterfactual past or counterfactual future.

(23a)  Hvis vi hadde fått Mel Gibson i hovedrollen, ville det kanskje (ha) gått. (LSC3)
     [lit.: ‘If we had got Mel Gibson in the lead, it would perhaps (have) been possible’]

(23b)  Si on avait réussi à avoir Mel Gibson pour le rôle principal, ça aurait peut-être marché.
     [lit.: ‘If we had got Mel Gibson in the lead, it would perhaps have been possible’]

As we have seen, pattern B causes different problems of interpretation, especially regarding the time reference of the counterfactuality, because it can be used for the past, the
present and the future. As mentioned in the introduction, the temporal adjuncts are important to the disambiguation task, so is also the extra-linguistic context.

2.2 The counterfactual present

To be interpreted as the counterfactual present, the event in the protasis must be coincident with the speech point. This means that the event expressed by an atelic verb must include the speech point and that the event expressed by a telic verb must occur exactly at the speech point, as emphasized in section 1.3. Consider some examples with original and translation:

(24a) S’il était là, qu’est-ce qu’il me conseillerait? (CA 1)
[lit.: ‘If he was there, what would he advise me to do’? ]
(24b) Hvis han hadde vært her, hva ville han ha rådet meg til?
[lit.: ‘If he had been there, what would he have advised me to do ’?]
(25a) Hvis du nå hadde hatt valget mellom Vera og Laura, hvem ville du ha valgt? (JG3)
[lit.: ‘If you now had had the choice between Vera and Laura, who would you have chosen’? ]
(25b) Si tu avais le choix entre Véra et Laura, laquelle choisirais-tu ? (JG3)
[lit.: ‘If you now had the choice between Vera and Laura, who would you choose’? ]
(26a) Dersom jeg hadde hatt lov til å svare med en hel setning, ville jeg ha sagt noe om at livet er vidunderlig og gøtefullt. (JG3) [lit.: ‘If I had been allowed to reply with a full sentence, I would have touched on how marvellous and mysterious life is’.]
In the French original in (24a), the pattern A has been used to express the counterfactual present. In the Norwegian translation, this pattern has been replaced by pattern B. In (25) and (26) we find the opposite situation: Pattern B in the Norwegian original is replaced by pattern A by the French translator. These examples illustrate a more general tendency, namely that Norwegian seems to prefer pattern B to signify counterfactual present, whereas French no doubt prefers pattern A. However, I have found several French examples, originals or translations, where the counterfactual present is expressed by pattern B, a usage not mentioned in French grammars:

(27a) Hadde jeg hatt det, skulle jeg (ha) gitt den til deg, din jævlig, kukksuger. (Nesbø, 1997) [lit.: ‘Had I had that, should I (have) given it to you, lousy cucksucker’.]

(27b) Si j’en avais eu un, je te l’aurais filé, pauvre enculé. (Nesbø, 1997) [lit.: ‘If I had had one, I would have given it to you, lousy cucksucker’.]

(28a) Hadde jeg ikke vært i politiet, så hadde jeg kanske vært i denne bransjen selv, hvem vet? (Nesbø, 1997) [lit.: ‘Had I not been in the police, then had I perhaps been in this business myself, who knows’?]

(28b) Si je n’étais pas devenu policier, j’aurais pu atterrir dans ce milieu, moi aussi, qui sait? [lit.: ‘If I had not become a policeman, I could have landed in this business myself, who knows’?]
In (27), both the Norwegian original and the French translation have used patterns B/B’. Also (28) uses pattern B in the two languages. But in this example, the situation is somewhat different. In (28a), the Norwegian original has an atelic verb in the protasis, namely \textit{være} (‘be’), which renders the counterfactual present, whereas the French translation with the telic verb \textit{devenir} in the protasis must be interpreted as a counterfactual past here. The meanings are not very different, however, because the pluperfect of a telic verb can express the result of the event: ‘If I was not in the police, …’

(29) – (31) are original French examples and the context clarifies that pattern B renders the counterfactual present:

(29) Non, j’aime mieux les Grecs. Et si j’avais voulu vivre à une certaine époque, cela aurait été plutôt au temps de Périclès ou au temps d’Alexandre le Grand. J’aurais aimé être Onésicrate. (\textit{Le Nouvel observateur} 1983) [lit. : ‘No, I prefer the Greeks. And if I had had to live in a certain era, it would rather have been at the time of Pericles or Alexander the Great. I would have liked to be Oneiros’.]

(30) Si nous avions été libres tous les deux, les choses auraient été différentes, mais je ne peux pas dire que je n’aime pas Annie après tant d’années. (Chapsal, 1993), [lit.: ‘If we had been free both of us, it would have been different, but I cannot say that I do not like Annie after all these years’.]

(31) J’aime l’économie de la nouvelle. Dans la Bible, la création du monde tient en une page. Si elle en avait occupé cinquante, rien aurait été pareil. (\textit{Le Monde}, 1995) [lit.:’I love the briefness of the short story. In the Bible, the creation of the world comes to one page. If it had counted fifty pages, nothing would have been the same’.]
Examples of Norwegian originals in which pattern B is used as a counterfactual present are numerous. Let us look at some of them:

(32) Ville det vært enklere å få aksept for kirkeasylantene hvis kirken ikke hadde tilhørt staten? (Oslo-korpuset) [lit.: ‘Would it have been easier to get acceptance for the church refugees if the church had not belonged to the State’?]

(33) Hvis dere hadde vært overbeviste sionister, ville jeg ha forstått hvorfor dere tok oss med hit. (Oslo-korpuset) [lit.: ‘If you had been convinced Zionists, would I have understood why you took us here’.]

(34) Gustav Lorentzen påstår at han hadde vært sivilingeniør i dag hvis det ikke hadde vært for vennskapet med Øystein Dolmen. (OsloCorpus) [lit.: ‘Gustav Lorentzen asserts that he would have been engineer today if it had not been for the friendship with Øystein Dolmen’].

In these three examples, the protasis contains atelic verbs which can express counterfactuality without problems. In (34), the adjunct in the apodosis, i dag (‘today’), has a broad meaning covering not only 12 hours. I want to emphasize that, in all my attested examples of pattern B used as counterfactual present, the verb of the protasis is atelic. This might indicate that the use of telic verbs in order to express the counterfactual present involve certain restrictions. Furthermore, in Norwegian, my examples show that pattern B is used more often than A to express the counterfactual present. I will come back to this question in 2.4 in examining the questionnaire I have used.

2.3. The counterfactual future
Whereas the terms *irréel du passé* et *irréel du présent* are consecrated by the French grammatical tradition, the term *irréel du futur*, i.e. counterfactual future, is not used in the grammars, but this type of counterfactuality exists in both French and Norwegian, as I have already mentioned. The fact, however, that pattern B is used, does not *necessarily* imply counterfactuality, because the linguistic or contra-linguistic context can cancel it and replace it with potentiality, as some of the examples of my corpus will show.

Apart from the more or less constructed examples from grammars and articles, I have not found many French examples in which pattern B is used about the future. Consider the following examples:

(35) Si la crise avait débouché sur de nouvelles élections le mois prochain, ces peu recommandables dignitaires du régime seraient passés au travers des mailles du filet. *(Le Monde, 1989)*  [lit.'If the crisis had ended in new elections next month, these hardly recommendable leaders of the regime would have passed through the net'.]

(36) Personnellement, mes chances auraient *sans doute* été plus grandes si les élections avaient eu lieu à la date prévue. *(L'Express, 1997)*  [lit.'Personally, my chances would probably have been greater if the elections had taken place at the fixed date'.]

(37) J'ai manqué un peu de compétition, et, si j'avais eu deux ou trois courses de plus, cela aurait marché. *(Le Monde 1989)*  [lit.'I have lost some competition, and if I had had two or three games more, it would have succeeded'.]

Only the first example has a temporal adjunct in the protasis, referring clearly to the future, i.e. ‘next month’. Regarding (36) and (37), however, the context is necessary to interpret the temporal reference, which is actually the future. Isolated, these examples could also receive the
interpretation as counterfactual past. In example (36), we find the adverb sans doute (‘probably’) in the apodosis. This adjunct does not modify the meaning of the apodosis, however, but the relation (R) between protasis (p) and apodosis (q), as proposed by Kronning (2011). Thus, this adverb of probability does not make the meaning of the apodosis potential. This is the case also for the adverb nok (‘probably’) in the Norwegian example (38).

Regarding Norwegian, I have found several examples of the counterfactual future in Oslo-korpuset. Consider the following ones:

(38) Jeg skulle nok overlevd det, hvis jeg hadde vunnet en million eller to i Lotto. Skjønt jeg vet ikke. [lit: ‘I should probably have survived, if I had won one million or two in Lotto. Though I do not know’.]

(39) Hvis noen hadde tilbudt meg én million dollar for å spille basketball i et år, ville jeg sagt nei, sier Tami Jameson. [lit: ‘If someone had offered me one million dollar to play basketball for one year, I would have refused, says Tami Jameson’.]

(40) Hvis jeg bare hadde fått 5 dager i Lisboa, ville jeg ikke hatt noe imot å dø. [lit: ‘If I only had got 5 days in Lisbon, I would not have minded to die’.]

In these three examples, as well as in the three French examples above, the verb or VP in the protasis is telic. That is also the case in example (23), which can also be interpreted as a counterfactual future. Some examples from web pages have an atelic verb in the protasis. In (41) as well as (42), the temporal adjunct i morgen connects the counterfactuality to the future, as we can see:
It is interesting that, in my corpus, the verbs in the protasis are atelic when they are used in pattern B as counterfactual present, whereas most of them are telic concerning the future, except (42). But as emphasized several times, in certain cases, it is difficult to determine if the situation has a counterfactual or a potential reading. In (38), for instance, the previous linguistic context clarifies that pattern B renders the counterfactual future and not potentiality. But the sentence after the conditional construction, Skjønt jeg vet ikke (‘Though I do not know’) leaves some doubt about the situation. I will come back to the use of the counterfactual future in section 3.

2.4. The highest degree of counterfactuality

Whereas the conjectures examined until now could have been realized under certain circumstances, there exists another category of conditions which could never have been real or will never be real at any moment. In fact, Martin (1983) affirms that counterfactuality exists in to degrees: first, the counterfactual event which could have been possible at some moment and second: “un irréel «pur», où m appartient à un imaginaire qui, de fait, se trouve délié du temps, parce que, à aucun moment, on ne pouvait penser qu’il serait réel (Si j’étais immortel… ; Si Napoléon était né trois siècles plus tôt”, (1983:141), i.e. a “pure” counterfactuality, where the
imaginary situation is disconnected from the time, because at no moment you could think it could be real (If I was immortal, … ; If Napoleon had been born three centuries before, …)

Martin’s examples incontestably meet the definition of “pure counterfaculty”. Consider now the following French examples included in my corpus:

(43) Et si Modigliani et El Greco avaient été des poètes? Cela aurait donné ça: Le Monde  
[lit. ‘And if Modigliani and El Greco had been poets? The result would have been this: …’]

(44) Si j’avais été une femme, j’aurais aimé être comme elle. (Ovaldé, 2008)  
[lit. ‘If I had been a woman, I would have liked to be like her’.]  

(45) Si j’avais été Français et si Jacques Delors s’était présenté aux élections présidentielles, j’aurais voté pour lui, a-t-il récemment confié dans un entretien à l’AFP.  
(Le Monde 1995) [lit. ‘If I had been French and if Jacques Delors had been candidate at the presidential elections, I would have voted for him, confided he recently in an interview with AFP’.]  

(46) Moi, si j’avais été immortel, j’aurais été faire la nique à Ponce Pilate, pour bien lui montrer que j’étais résuscité. (actualites.forum.orange.fr/messages/index/…/benoit-xvi-les-introuvables.html)  
[lit. ‘Me, if I had been immortal, I would have made fun of Pontius Pilate, to show him that I had raised from the dead’.]  

(47) "Si j’avais été intelligent, je n’aurais pas envoyé ma lettre, a plaidé le conseiller d’Etat. Mais nous avons l’habitude, à la commission, … [lit.: ‘If I had been intelligent, I would not have sent my letter, pled the State Secretary’.]  
(www.lemonde.fr/…/affaire-perol-la-commission-de-deontologie-a-ete-tout-pres-de-demissionner-collectivement_1166953_823448.html)  

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As we can see, both pattern A and pattern B can express the counterfactuality of the highest degree in French, just like Martin’s two examples above. My Examples (44) and (50) express both a hypothesis about being of the other sex, nevertheless the patterns used are not the same. (46) and (49) are also parallel examples, but pattern B figures in the first and pattern A in the second. In (47) and (48) the quality ‘intelligent’ is the core of the hypothesis, but both patterns have been used.

The definition of “pure” counterfactuality vs. counterfactuality of the first degree is another problem, which makes the distinction between them difficult. Regarding (44) and (51), it is possible to object that the change of sex is not an event which can never come true. Moreover, intelligence is quality which is difficult to measure and it can vary in the life of one person. It must be added that intelligent does not have the same meaning in (47) and (48). I have included example (47) to show that the meaning of the adjective ‘intelligent’ corresponds here rather to ‘smart’, which is really a variable quality. Thus, (47) belongs to the first degree of counterfactuality, according to Martin’s definition. With respect to example (48), Martin (1991: 92) considers this quality as permanent, at least here. The change of nationality in example (45) (‘if I had been French’) is perhaps not easy, but not impossible. With respect to the second conjunct in (45), Jacques Delors could have been candidate at the presidential elections; therefore this second conditional clause belongs also to the first category, explored in the previous sections. Still some situations are of a kind that could never have been real or will...
never be real, as for instance: *if I was you, if I was immortal*, etc. Look at the French translated example in (55b), where the original Norwegian example has been replaced by pattern A in French: *Si j’étais toi*, … (*If I was you,*') But which other situations or qualities should be classified in this group?

The “pure” counterfactuality exists also in Norwegian, of course:

(51) Hadde jeg vært deg nå, hadde jeg ikke gjort det. (Svein Lie, 1976: 64)
[lit.: ‘Had I been you now, I had not done it’.]

(52) Hvis James Bond virkelig hadde levd, ville han ha vært død for lenge siden. (*Oslokorpuset*) [lit.:’If James Bond had really lived, he would have died long ago’.]

(53) Hvis kjæresteparet på lærretet hadde vært en mann og en kvinne, ville neppe noen ha reagert. (*Oslo-korpuset*) [lit.:’If the lovers on the screen had been a man and a woman, no one would have reacted’.]

(54) Hvis Homer hadde levd i dag, ville han hatt en høy stilling på TV. (*Oslokorpuset*)
[lit.: ‘If Homer had lived today, he would have had an important position in TV’.]

(55a) Jeg ville uansett trådd varsomt om jeg var deg. Nesbø, 1997 [lit.:’I would in any case (have) been careful, if I was you’.]

(55b) Quoi qu’il en soit, si j’étais toi, je ferais attention. [lit.: ‘Whatever may be, if I was you, I would be careful’.]

(56) Jeg ville ikke stresse så mye hvis jeg var deg. (*forum.snartmamma.com/archive/index.php/t-189359.html*) [lit.:’I would not rush so much if I was you’.]
(57) Hvis jeg var deg, ville jeg gått til en fysioterapeut istedenfor.

[www.iform.no/forum/index.php?action=printpage;topic=2332.0] [lit.:’If I was you, I would (have) gone to a physiotherapist instead’.]

In Norwegian, pattern B seems more frequent than A in this use. Pattern A is illustrated in only one of these examples, namely in (56). Apart from this one, I have found several examples with “mixed” patterns: with A in the protasis, i.e imperfect, and B in the apodosis, i.e. conditional perfect. These examples are: (55a) from a novel, (57) from the web pages and the following example from Norsk referansegrammatikk (1997: 1044): “Viss eg var deg, ville eg ikkje ha teki jobben. (‘if I was you, I would not have taken the job’). All express the same hypothesis, If I was you,..., which must be classified in the category of “pure” counterfactuality, as above. It is interesting that in (51), also from a Norwegian grammar, namely Innføring i norsk syntaks (1976), we find the same situation about ‘beeing you and not myself”; nevertheless pattern B has been used here. This confirms what was illustrated by the French examples above, i.e. the two patterns can be used about the same situation in both languages.

Pattern B is the construction of counterfactuality par excellence, as mentioned several times. Since the degree of counterfactuality cannot be higher than in this type of examples, the exclusive use of pattern B would not have been surprising. French and Norwegian can use both patterns to express the “pure” counterfactuality, even though the occurrences I have found of A are not numerous in Norwegian. It is necessary to find more examples in the two languages, however, to say something more definitive about this utmost type of counterfactuality. This must be left to future research.

3. The voice of the native speakers
Before any conclusion could be drawn, I wanted to request some information about the following questions. Regarding the counterfactual present, I wished to have the opinion of French and Norwegian native speakers about the use of pattern A and pattern B. Regarding the counterfactual future, I did not find many examples and the judgment of informants might compensate for this lack. Therefore, I developed a questionnaire, which about twenty Norwegians and twenty Frenchmen responded to. I asked them if the examples were acceptable, acceptable only in informal language or unacceptable. Here are some of the examples they have evaluated.

Examples (58) (61) illustrate the counterfactual present, what is marked by the temporal adjuncts nå (‘now’) in Norwegian and maintenant (‘now’) in French:

(58) Hvis jeg hadde hatt penger nå, ville jeg ha kjøpt en fin bil. [lit.: ‘If I had had money now, I would have bought a fine car’.]

(59) Hvis jeg hadde penger nå, ville jeg kjøpe en fin bil. [lit.: ‘If I had money now, I would buy a fine car’.]

(60) Si j’avais eu moins de travail maintenant, je serais allée en France. [lit.: ‘If I had had less work now, I would have gone to France’.]

(61) Si j’avais moins de travail maintenant, j’irais en France. [lit.: ‘If I had less work now, I would go to France’.]

My Norwegian informants accepted both (58) and (59) as standard Norwegian, but almost unanimously they preferred (58). Nearly all the French informants accepted (60), but half of them only as an example of informal or familiar French. They added that in standard French they would use pattern A, illustrated in (61). Several French informants thought that pattern A
and pattern B used as counterfactual present did not have exactly the same interpretation. Used as counterfactual present, pattern B expressed a closed situation without any hope of change in the future, whereas pattern A, in some cases, left a little hope of change. In (61), for instance, it is not impossible that very soon I will perhaps have less work. The idea, expressed by some of the informants, that, in French, there are two different patterns, A and B, to express the counterfactual present is interesting, because almost all French grammars announces the existence of only one pattern, namely pattern A. The question is if the counterfactual present is expressed differently by these two patterns: pattern A might present the counterfactual present as open, with a possibility of change, whereas pattern B might present it as closed, without any hope of change of the situation. This could explain why the use of pattern B as counterfactual present signifies often a regret. A corpus-based study of this issue must be left for future research.

With regard to the counterfactual future, almost all my French and Norwegian informants accepted respectively (62) and (64) among other examples, whereas (63) was accepted by 16 of the 20 Norwegian informants, i.e. the informants are some more negative towards (63) than towards the two other examples. With respect to (62) and (64), the speaker knows that he is occupied tomorrow, whereas in example (63), how can he be so sure not to win in Lotto next week that he considers the event as counterfactual? The more negative judgement of the informants is probably caused by the fact that they cannot consider this future prize as impossible. The interpretation of a conditional construction depends often on the linguistic or extra-linguistic context of the sentence. Let us try to imagine different contexts as regards example (63). If the context gives the information, for instance, that the speaker has not bought any Lotto ticket, he can be sure not to win a million. In that case, example (63) can be interpreted as a counterfactual future without any problem. The following context would make
the interpretation more difficult: The speaker does not know if his wife has bought any ticket this week. As already mentioned, Comrie, Martin and Kronning emphasize that pattern B can express potentiality if the counterfactuality is cancelled by the context (see examples 17 and 18). Martin (1991:93) declares that for instance ignorance about a situation is a context which might turn counterfactuality into potentiality. Perhaps, with such a context, the protasis in (63) leaves open the possibility that the speaker might have a little chance to win. It is not surprising that my informants are some more sceptical about examples like (63), because they can be difficult to interpret. I want to remind about the hesitation of certain of Comrie’s informants towards the examples in which pattern B expresses potentiality. If the verb in the protasis is atelic, pattern B is always interpreted as counterfactual. If, on the contrary, the verb of the protasis is is telic, as in (63), pattern B expresses the counterfactuality by default; but, by means of the context, pattern B can be “forced” into potentiality. Consider now the examples judged by the informants:

(62) Hvis jeg ikke hadde vært opptatt i morgen, skulle jeg ha kommet.
    [lit :’If I had not been occupied tomorrow, I should have come’]

(63) Hvis jeg hadde vunnet en million i pengelotteriet neste uke, ville jeg ha kjøpt en fin bil.
    [lit.:’If I had won one million in lotto next week, I would have bought a nice car’]

(64) Si je n’avais pas eu ce rendez-vous demain, je serais venue.
    [lit :’If i did not have this meeting tomorrow, I should have come’]

The opinion of the native speakers reveals that even though the use of the counterfactual future might not be frequent, they seem to accept this construction more or less. It must be emphasized that, regarding counterfactual future, an alternative or concurrent pattern
does hardly exist. In (4), I have presented one of Martin’s exemples, in which pattern A has been used as a counterfactual future. This is, however, the only example I have seen of that type.

**Conclusion**

I have shown that French and Norwegian have the same main patterns regarding the counterfactual conditionals. I have called these two patterns A and B. With respect to the counterfactual present, both languages seem to have two patterns at their disposal. The preferences, however, are not the same. In French, pattern A is clearly the one preferred. In fact, I have not found many examples of pattern B, and several informants had some reticence concerning it. In standard Norwegian, both patterns are accepted as counterfactual present, but pattern B is clearly preferred. Some of my French and Norwegian informants hesitated a little when they were confronted with the counterfactual future, with which they were not familiar. But after some reflection, they considered pattern B as a good solution in many cases.

There seems to be a difference between the two languages as regards the use of pattern B. It is used more in Norwegian than in French, not only regarding le counterfactual présent, but also with respect to the counterfactual future. Moreover, even though both patterns are used in both languages to express the “pure” counterfactuality, pattern B seems to be preferred in Norwegian contrary to French.

I have consulted many French and Norwegian grammars about the counterfactual constructions, but none of them seems completely satisfactory in this domain. Every French grammar mentions these constructions, but very often in a normative and traditional way, as if nothing could have changed during the last century. The Norwegian grammars hardly mention the constructions, and never in a systematic way. Both French and Norwegian grammars need
to be revised regarding counterfactual constructions. The two patterns signifying the counterfactual present should be described and compared, and the term *counterfactual futur* should be introduced.

**Notes**

1. This literal English translation marks that Norwegian is a V2 language, contrary to English and French. See also example (33), for instance.

2. Norway has three official written standard languages: *bokmål*, *nynorsk* and *Sami*, which is a Finno-Ugric language. *Bokmål* and *nynorsk* are the two official forms of written Norwegian, which are similar in many respects and which have the same official status. *Bokmål* (lit. "book language"), which stems from Danish, is the most commonly used of the two Norwegian written standard languages. *Bokmål* is used by about 85–90\% of the population in Norway, while *nynorsk* is used by a minority (10-12\%).

3. The Oslo Corpus of Tagged Norwegian Texts, established in 1999, is a large corpus of literary and non-literary Norwegian texts.

4. When I “googled” : *Hvis han kom, ville jeg bli glad*, the great majority of the examples proposed were Danish.

5. The problem is, however, that after a past tense, you cannot know if *[si + imperfect + conditional present] in indirect speech is just a transformation of *[si + present + futur] in direct speech. After the present tense, these tense modifications do not take place in general cf. example (34).

6. In literary French, it is possible to use pluperfect subjunctive in the protasis, in the apodosis or in both, but such usage is not frequent. I have found the following example in *Le Monde*: *Mais si elle s’était trouvée dans des régions plus civilisées, c’eût été beaucoup moins*
énent. [lit.: ‘But if it had been placed in some more civilized regions, it would have been less evident.’] This pattern will not be examined here.

References


