Western Kentucky University

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Taking ‘Might’-Communication Seriously

Benjamin Lennertz, Western Kentucky University

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Abstract

In this paper, I show that, given seemingly plausible assumptions about the epistemic ‘might’ and conditionals, we cannot explain why in some circumstances it is appropriate to utter conditional ‘might’-sentences, like “If Angelica has crumbs in her pocket, then she might be the thief” and not the corresponding simple ones, like “Angelica might be the thief.” So, one of our assumptions must be incorrect. I argue that the root of the problem is an umbrella thesis about the pragmatics of ‘might’-communication – one that says that the communicative impact of an utterance of a ‘might’-sentence is the performance of a consistency check on the information of the context. I conclude that we must reject this thesis. And I close the paper by sketching an alternative view about what assertive uses of ‘might’-sentences typically do – one which avoids the problem. Such uses typically present a possibility as a serious option in reasoning and deliberation.

1. Overview

The cookie jar was full of cookies this morning. Phil checks the jar in the afternoon and the cookies are gone. He thinks that stealing the cookies is just the sort of thing Angelica would do. He consults Lil. They start to deliberate:

(Cookies)\(^1\) Lil: Let’s see what we think. Who stole the cookies?

Phil: Well, Angelica might be the thief.

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\(^1\) In this paper I give conversations parenthetical names, and I use italics for substantive claims.
Consider the sentence that Phil utters:

(1) Angelica might be the thief.

I shall call (1) an epistemic ‘might’-sentence.

Here is the question this paper will explore: What is Phil doing when he utters (1)? And in general, what are speakers typically doing when they utter epistemic ‘might’-sentences? I will show that an initially attractive answer to this general question cannot be right. It is important to note that this is a question about the pragmatics of uses of ‘might’-sentences, not a question about the semantics of these sentences. So, by showing that one attractive sort of answer cannot be right, I am not showing that any particular view of the semantics of ‘might’-sentences is incorrect. There has been less discussion of the pragmatics of ‘might’-sentences than of their semantics. This paper aims to display the importance of giving a pragmatic theory by offering a problem for a natural set of such theories.\(^2\)

Our guiding question, again, is *what are speakers typically doing when they utter epistemic ‘might’-sentences*. We will be helped in answering this question by contrasting (Cookies) with the following conversation. Tommy and Chuckie are also investigating the cookie theft. They have some evidence that suggests that Susie is the thief and some that suggests that Stu is the thief. They have no evidence that suggests that Angelica is the thief. So, Angelica is not a serious suspect in their search, though they can’t decisively prove that she isn’t the thief. They have the following conversation:

(If Cookies) Tommy: Susie and Stu are serious suspects. But, given our information, we shouldn’t now consider Angelica a serious suspect.

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\(^2\) I suspect that an account of the pragmatics of ‘might’-sentences is also the place to look for solutions to some of the extant popular puzzles in the epistemic modal literature – for instance, the puzzles in Egan, Hawthorne, & Weatherson [2005] and Yalcin [2007] – as these are fundamentally puzzles about the uses of epistemic terms. I say a bit more about these issues in footnote 31, but they are, for the most part, outside the scope of this paper.
Chuckie: Yes, but if Angelica has crumbs in her pocket, then she might be the thief.

We want a theory that explains both Phil’s use of (1) and Chuckie’s use of the conditional ‘might’-sentence, (2):

(2) If Angelica has crumbs in her pocket, then she might be the thief.

Notice, however, that it would be inappropriate for Chuckie to use (1) in this scenario (where Chuckie pronounces ‘might’ with *ordinary* intonational stress – *not* with strong focus and in a higher register):

(If Cookies*) Tommy: Susie and Stu are serious suspects. But, given our information, we shouldn’t now consider Angelica a serious suspect.

Chuckie: Yes, but Angelica might be the thief.

Surprisingly, a simple and natural theory of the pragmatics of ‘might’-sentences cannot, together with some plausible assumptions, give a straightforward explanation of why (If Cookies) is an appropriate conversation and (If Cookies*) is not.

What would a straightforward explanation look like? We can get an idea from looking at a pair of non-modal sentences:

(3) Susie will bring her world-famous chili.

(4) If Susie comes, she will bring her world-famous chili.

It is obvious that in some situations it is appropriate to utter (3) and in others it’s appropriate to utter (4). We should, if we can, utter (3) rather than (4). But sometimes we aren’t sure whether Susie is going to come to our potluck. However, we know that she wouldn’t dare come without

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Chuckie’s utterance may sound more appropriate if he stresses ‘might’ and pronounces it in a higher register. But the contrast is between (1) and (2) said with ordinary stress. I will say more about the stressed use of ‘might’ at the end of section 8.
bringing her world-famous chili. In this situation, it is appropriate to utter (4) and it is not appropriate to utter (3). All of this is rather mundane. What is interesting is that this mundane sort of explanation cannot, given a natural theory about the pragmatics of uses of ‘might’-sentences, be transferred over to explain why we can, in some cases, appropriately utter (2) but not (1) (for example in the situation surrounding (If Cookies)). This makes the theory inconsistent with the data that we can, sometimes, appropriately use conditional ‘might’-sentences and not the corresponding simple ‘might’-sentences.4

In this paper I will show how this theory of the pragmatics of uses of ‘might’-sentences leads to the false prediction that it is always at least as appropriate to utter a simple ‘might’-sentence as the corresponding conditional ‘might’-sentence. This will allow us to see what we need to do to avoid the false prediction. I will conclude by presenting an alternative account of the pragmatics of uses of ‘might’-sentences – one which allows us to co-opt the simple explanation just given.

2. The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’

First, I want to characterize the position that I will be arguing against. It is inspired by modal logic. A common interpretation of modal logic treats possibility modals as existential quantifiers over possible worlds (which are just possible ways the world could be). So, letting P be a possibility modal and q be a non-modal sentence, we get that Pq is true if and only if q is true in some relevant possible world. Likewise with necessity modals. They are universal quantifiers over possible worlds. Many semanticists attempt to interpret natural language modals – like ‘might’

4 For a conditional ‘might’-sentence, the corresponding simple ‘might’-sentence is just the consequent of the conditional. For a simple ‘might’-sentence, a corresponding conditional ‘might’-sentence is any conditional which has the simple ‘might’-sentence as a consequent.
and ‘must’ – in similar ways. Here, different flavors of modality correspond to differences in the possible worlds that are relevant. For example, for deontic modals, the possible worlds that are relevant are those that are best according to some set of rules. For epistemic modals, the relevant possible worlds are the ones in which all of propositions that make up some body of information are true.\textsuperscript{5,6} These semanticists characterize the epistemic ‘might’ as a possibility modal that quantifies over these worlds.

Remember that we are interested in giving a theory of the pragmatics of uses of ‘might’-sentences. So, our next step is to say what an assertive use of a ‘might’-sentence does in conversation. A natural suggestion is that it checks to make sure that the prejacent is consistent with the information of the context (a quick definition: when a ‘might’-sentence is in the form, ‘It might be that S’, the sentence that is substituted for S is called the ‘prejacent’\textsuperscript{7}). Such a use, then, looks at the relevant possible worlds and checks if its prejacent is true in any of them. Remember that we are focusing on the epistemic ‘might’ and the relevant possible worlds are determined by the information relevant in the context. So, checking for a relevant possible world in which the prejacent is true is equivalent to checking whether the prejacent is a priori consistent with the relevant information. Here is a more precise characterization:

\begin{quote}
The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’: Suppose p is the content of S in a context. Then the communicative impact of an assertive utterance of ‘It might be that S’ at that context is a check of whether p is consistent with the relevant information in the context. If it is, nothing
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{5} I take a body of information to be a set of propositions. In many cases, these will be the propositions a person or group knows. A body of information can be (partially) characterized by the set of possible worlds in which all of the propositions in the body of information are true.

\textsuperscript{6} We may want to begin not with metaphysically possible worlds, but with some wider class – perhaps epistemically possible worlds. See Soames [2006] and Chalmers [2011] for more on this, and Braun [2012] for the claim that we should start with worlds that are possible simpliciter. These issues make no difference with respect to the problem I raise.

\textsuperscript{7} The prejacent is, strictly speaking, a sentence. But, for readability, I sometimes use the word ‘prejacent’ to talk about what is really the content of the prejacent – a proposition.
changes; if it is not, the information of the context becomes defective.

Let’s make a bit more sense of *The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’* by seeing how it applies to the example, (Cookies). According to the theory, Phil’s utterance of (1) checks whether it is consistent with the information of the context that Angelica is the thief. If it is consistent, then the information remains unchanged and the conversation proceeds normally. If it is not, then something has gone wrong. Their information proved defective, and, if they want to continue their inquiry, they will have to go back and repair it. So we can see that, according to *The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’*, an assertive utterance of a ‘might’-sentence just checks the consistency of the prejacent with the information of the context.

*The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’* is an umbrella pragmatic thesis about what is communicated by utterances of ‘might’-sentences. It is not entailed by any particular theory of the semantics of ‘might’. So, showing that it is false does not show that any particular theory of the semantics of ‘might’ is false. Many attractive views of the semantics of ‘might’ are compatible with *The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’*. And on many of these views, accepting *The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’* is tempting, given natural assumptions. For instance, dynamic semantic views (like those endorsed in Veltman [1996] and favorably discussed in von Fintel and

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8 We need not accept a general view about what the information of the context is. All that it important in generating the problem is that epistemic modals and conditionals both (at least in most cases) relate to the same body of information. And this is something we need to accept for independent reasons. Here are von Fintel and Gillies [2007, 59] (this assumes a corresponding checking theory of must, where it checks whether a proposition is entailed by the information of the context):

Suppose we have lost our marbles. We have found all of them but two – the red one and the blue one – and know that exactly one of them is in the box. Thus:

a. The marble in the box might be red. And it might be blue.

b. If it’s not red, it must be blue.

c. If it’s not blue, it must be red.

In order to get these three sentences to all be true at once there has to be some interaction between the if-clauses and the set of worlds that the modals act as (quantificational) tests on. Otherwise we get inconsistency.

I will say more about the interaction between modals and conditionals in section 4.

9 Presumably, they will do this by making their own presuppositions explicit and seeing why it falsely seemed to Phil that it was consistent with the information of the context that Angelica is the thief.
Gillies [2007]) model semantic values as functions from bodies of information to bodies of information – and they model the semantic value of a ‘might’-sentence as a function that checks for the consistency of the prejacent with the relevant information. This semantic picture, together with the general pragmatic rule which says that a communicative impact of an utterance of an expression is the application of its semantic value to the information, yields a consistency check as a pragmatic upshot of an utterance. Expressivists, like Yalcin [2007, 2011], also think that an assertive utterance of a ‘might’-sentence performs a consistency check (though the connection between Yalcin’s semantics and this pragmatics is not dictated by general rules in the way it is for dynamic semantics). In section 7, I will revisit the relationship between these views and The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’ – arguing that they must incorporate some further pragmatic effect to avoid falling prey to the problem of The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’. I’ll also argue there that contextualists about ‘might’ can become committed to The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’ if they accept some pragmatic theses. Thus, all of these theorists of the semantics of ‘might’ should be sensitive to the pragmatic issues involving ‘might’-sentences. A natural way to do so is by following the general strategy I suggest in section 8.

It is important to note that both the consistency part and the checking part of The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’ matter in the argument that follows. What follows does not constitute an argument against the position that the communicative impact of an assertive utterance of a ‘might’-sentence is conveying some propositional content about what is consistent with the information of the context. I’m also not arguing against the position that the

10 The interesting view sketched in Willer [2011] and developed in Willer [2013] is dynamic. But Willer conceives of information states in a non-standard way, which allows the update by a ‘might’-sentence to be more than simply a check for consistency.

11 Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for urging me to emphasize how the semantic account of ‘might’ combines with a general pragmatic rule to yield The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’ in the case of dynamic semantics, but not for Yalcin’s expressivist semantics nor for contextualist semantics.

12 However, see section 7 for a discussion of how adopting this view along with some other assumptions leads to
communicative impact of an assertive utterance of a ‘might’-sentence is the performance of some other, non-consistency sort of check (for instance, a check that the probability of the prejacent is above some threshold). Rather, my argument is against The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’.

Now that we have an understanding of The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’, I want to give a preview of what will happen in the rest of the paper. The goal of the first part of this paper – sections 3-5 – is to show that The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’ is false. I show how this theory, together with a plausible framework of a view about conditional ‘might’-sentences, makes the false prediction that in all cases, it is at least as appropriate to utter a simple ‘might’-sentence as it is to utter the corresponding conditional ‘might’-sentence. I suggest we should, to avoid this prediction, reject The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’. If The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’ struck you as a particularly strong generalization about the pragmatics of ‘might’-communication, you may not find it surprising that we need to reject it. But in section 6, I strengthen this result, by showing how to reconstruct our problem with a much weaker thesis.

The goal of the second part of the paper – sections 7 and 8 – is to diagnose what has gone wrong. I suggest that the primary upshot of a typical utterance of a ‘might’-sentence is to convey that the prejacent is a serious option in reasoning and deliberation. And, for conditional ‘might’-sentences, the primary upshot is to convey that the prejacent is a serious option on some supposition. So, the primary communicative upshot of Phil’s utterance of (1) in (Cookies) is to convey that it is a serious option in reasoning and deliberation that Angelica is the thief. Besides being extremely plausible, this view has the virtue that, when we accept it instead of The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’, we avoid the problem set out in the first half of the paper.

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accepting The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’.
3. Inquiry

Before getting to our other assumption – about conditionals – I’ll introduce a way of modeling conversational inquiry based on Stalnaker [1970, 1978]. This will give us a framework for clearly seeing the problem.

We begin by considering the set of all of the possible ways the world could be – the set of possible worlds, for short. When agents engage in inquiry, their information usually entails that the world is not, in fact, some of these ways – that is, it entails that some possible worlds are not actual. Different inquiries correspond to different sets of possible worlds, since the participants in those inquiries will have different information about the world. And the same inquiry will correspond to different sets of possible worlds at different times since the participants will have different information about the world at different times. Let’s follow Stalnaker in calling the set of open possible worlds at a stage of the inquiry the context set.13

One can affect the information of the inquirers – and so affect the context set – by making conversational contributions. A conversational contribution will often narrow the context set by ruling out all the possible worlds in that set which are not the way the contribution says the universe is. The point of inquiry is to figure out how the universe is – which possible world is actual – or how the universe is in some respect or other – which class of possible worlds contains candidates for being actual. We do this by narrowing the context set to include only the actual world or only a class of possible worlds.

13 I am intentionally avoiding Stalnaker’s notion of common ground here, in favor of the more liberal notion of a group’s information (or the information of the context of the inquiry). This information may sometimes be the common presuppositions of the inquirers or conversational participants (as Stalnaker suggests), but it may also be the information distributed among the members of the group or the information of a member of the group who is the authority or representative for the group in that context (to name a couple of options). I find it plausible that in some contexts these are the relevant bodies of information for inquiry, so I use the broader notion of the information of the context to allow this. Nonetheless, my formulation is neutral and could accept that common presuppositions are what matter in every context. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for encouraging a more liberal conception of the relevant information than the common ground.
On this view, inquiry proceeds by ruling out possible worlds. And when one makes a successful conversational contribution, one often rules out a class of possible worlds. Often, but not always. There is an interesting class of contributions that, if successful, will not rule out any possible worlds – utterances of ‘might’-sentences. Given The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’, an assertive utterance of a ‘might’-sentence checks whether its prejacent is consistent with the context set. If it is, then that set stays the same. Thus, utterances of ‘might’-sentences seem not to advance inquiry in the same way as utterances of most sentences. Instead of ruling out open possibilities, they make sure the prejacent is consistent with the context set.

According to this account, ‘might’-sentences are used to perform consistency checks on the context set. But this is not, in fact, the communicative upshot of typical uses of ‘might’-sentences. By showing that The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’ is false, I will refute the claim that ‘might’-sentences typically have this function in the process of inquiry.

4. Conditional ‘Might’-Sentences

Let’s remember what we are trying to do. We want to form reasonable pragmatic principles about ‘might’-sentences and conditional ‘might’-sentences which will explain why Phil’s use of (1) in (Cookies) is appropriate and why Chuckie’s use of (2) in (If Cookies) is appropriate, though a use of (1) as in (If Cookies*) is not. We saw in section 2 that The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’ allows us to explain why Phil’s use of (1) in (Cookies) is appropriate. It performs a successful consistency check on the information of the context. In order to explain the assertability facts about (2), we need a principle that tells us what the communicative impact of a conditional ‘might’-sentence is.

In this section I will give such a principle. In order for the principle to be generally attractive, we need to restrict it to a subset of the total possible utterances of a conditional
‘might’-sentence. In particular, this principle will only deal with utterances of a conditional ‘might’-sentence in a conversation in which the antecedent of the conditional is an open possibility. Before stating the principle, I want to argue that this restriction does not affect our purposes.

Consider the cases that our principle about conditional ‘might’-sentences will ignore. These are cases where the antecedent of the conditional is not an epistemic possibility. But it is typically not appropriate for a speaker to utter an indicative conditional whose antecedent she takes to be epistemically impossible. As Stalnaker [1975, 277] says, “It is appropriate to make an indicative conditional statement or supposition only in a context which is compatible with the antecedent.” For example, consider again the conditional:

(4) If Susie comes, she will bring her world-famous chili.

If we know that Susie will not come, it is not appropriate to utter (4). In general, in cases where a speaker knows that the antecedent of an indicative conditional is false, it isn’t appropriate for her to utter the conditional (in such cases the speaker could, instead, use a counterfactual conditional).\(^{14}\)

Because the situation surrounding (If Cookies) is one in which it is an open epistemic possibility that Angelica has crumbs in her pocket, our principle only needs to deal with the communicative impact of a conditional ‘might’-sentence in such a scenario. This makes the task of giving our principle considerably easier. Just as with The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’, the following principle is not a particular theory of conditional ‘might’-sentences, but is an

\(^{14}\) There is at least one non-typical sort of scenario in which it is acceptable to utter an indicative conditional whose antecedent the speaker knows to be false. This is in cases of echoing uses in verbally producing reasoning, starting with a conditional premise that all accept:

(5) True, if Susie comes, she will bring her world-famous chili. But I know she won’t come. So we cannot rely on her chili as the main course.

Chuckie’s use of (2) in (If Cookies) is not this sort of use.
umbrella thesis that different sorts of theories may accept:

*Conditional ‘Might’-Sentences:* In situations in which the antecedent is an epistemic possibility, assertively uttering a conditional ‘might’-sentence has the effect of assertively uttering the consequent on the supposition that the antecedent is true.

There are two (related) types of theories of conditionals that fit well with *Conditional ‘Might’*-Sentences.

The first is the dynamic or expressivist version of the modal restrictor-inspired account of indicative conditionals – given by Willer [2011] and Yalcin [2007]. These theorists view the antecedent of a conditional as a restrictor on a modal consequent. This means that when a conditional is assertively uttered, we take the context set and consider only the worlds in which the antecedent is true. A consequent that is not a modal sentence is treated like a ‘must’-sentence. So we treat the conditional like we would an assertion of a ‘must’-sentence in the restricted context set. In the case of conditional ‘might’-sentences, the modal in the consequent is an explicit ‘might’. And so, by supposing that the antecedent is true, we restrict the possibilities on which ‘might’ operates. In the case where the antecedent is epistemically possible, this restricted set of possibilities is always non-empty. The effect of an assertive utterance of a

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15 These views stand to the modal restrictor account in Kratzer [1986], in the way that dynamic and expressivist views of epistemic modals stand to contextualist views. The idea, somewhat formally, is that on Kratzer’s view, there are two levels of modal displacement. We evaluate a conditional at a world in the context set by seeing whether the consequent is true in the subset of worlds accessible from that world in which the antecedent is true. On the views of Yalcin [2007] and Willer [2011], there is only one level of modal displacement – we simply restrict the worlds in the context set that we are testing. The reason for the difference in indicative conditionals springs from the difference in how the authors treat epistemic modals generally – with Kratzer, but not Yalcin and Willer, treating modal statements as factual. It’s worth noting that the accounts would collapse if we pair Kratzer’s account with the assumption that context sets have the property that Gillies [2009] calls *Well-Behavedness*. A context’s being well-behaved implies that the set of the worlds accessible from each world of the context is the set of worlds of the context set (such an accessibility relation is *total*). The idea is that the two levels of modal displacement collapse given this assumption.

16 The view adopted by Gillies [2004, 2010] is related to these views (though note the few differences suggested in Gillies [2010]). However, it has a special feature, by which it avoids the problem that I will discuss. This feature is that the antecedents of conditionals can, in some circumstances, admit *more* worlds into a context set (and not just narrow the context set).
conditional ‘might’-sentence in such a case is the effect of an assertive utterance of the corresponding simple ‘might’-sentence given that restricted set of possibilities.

*Conditional ‘Might’-Sentences* is also closely related to the views of Edgington [1995], DeRose and Grandy [1999], Bennett [2003], and Barnett [2006]. The idea behind these views is that accepting a conditional involves accepting the consequent on the supposition that the antecedent is true. And assertively uttering a conditional has the effect of assertively uttering the consequent on the supposition that the antecedent is true. *Conditional ‘Might’-Sentences* is a special case of this. I should note that some of these views – Edgington [1995], Bennett [2003], Barnett [2006] – have a probabilistic dimension that is not reflected in *Conditional ‘Might’-Sentences*. This makes it hard to evaluate whether they really accept *Conditional ‘Might’-Sentences*. But in non-probabilistic cases, these views naturally lead to *Conditional ‘Might’-Sentences*.

There are views of indicative conditionals that aren’t compatible with *Conditional ‘Might’-Sentences*. In particular, the material account of indicative conditionals isn’t. For this paper, I assume that this view is false. For arguments against it, see Kratzer [1986], Edgington [1995], and Bennett [2003], among others.¹⁸

5. The Difference Between Non-modal Conditional Sentences and Conditional ‘Might’-Sentences

We are now in a position to see that the explanation of why we can sometimes utter

¹⁷ DeRose and Grandy think that conditional antecedents are markers of conditional assertions. They think there are (at least) two reasons to make a conditional assertion – that one is not in an epistemic position to assert the consequent and that one does not know that the consequent is relevant. Their view agrees with the suppositional view when conditional assertions are made for the former, but not the latter, reason. And these are the sort of cases we are concerned with here.

¹⁸ Whether Stalnaker [1973] accepts *Conditional ‘Might’-Sentences* depends on whether he agrees that context sets are *Well-Behaved*, in the sense discussed in note 15. I won’t engage in the necessary Stalnaker exegesis needed to answer this question here.
ordinary, non-modal conditional sentences rather than their simple counterparts doesn’t extend
to conditional and simple ‘might’-sentences. One should utter a non-modal conditional sentence
only in cases where one is not in an epistemic position to utter the consequent. But, given our
assumptions, whenever one is in a position to utter a conditional ‘might’-sentence, one is also in a
position to utter its consequent.

Let’s start with our example of ordinary, non-modal conditional sentences. Consider
again:

(3) Susie will bring her world-famous chili.

(4) If Susie comes, she will bring her world-famous chili.

It is appropriate to utter (4) in some situations. These are situations in which a speaker has
adequate evidence that Susie will bring her world-famous chili if she comes but does not have
adequate evidence that she will bring her world famous chili (since she may reasonably doubt
that Susie will come). Since we shouldn’t say things for which we lack adequate evidence, ala
Grice’s [1989] second maxim of Quality, a speaker should utter (4) and not (3) in such situations.
This is a simple explanation for why, sometimes, we should utter (4) and not (3).

Unfortunately, this explanation doesn’t extend to the case of ‘might’-sentences. Consider
again:

(1) Angelica might be the thief.

(2) If Angelica has crumbs in her pocket, then she might be the thief.

The problem is that, given our assumptions, any situation in which a speaker has adequate
evidence to utter (2) is a situation in which she has adequate evidence to utter (1). That is, unlike
in the non-modal case, if a speaker is in a position to utter a conditional ‘might’-sentence, she is
also in a position to utter its consequent. In what follows I’ll show this with the example of (2)
and (1), but the result is general.
Consider a scenario in which a speaker is in a position to utter (2). According to "Conditional ‘Might’-Sentences," an utterance of (2) has the same communicative impact as an utterance of (1) on the supposition that Angelica has crumbs in her pocket. So, assume that C is the context set of our conversation and C- is the largest subset of C containing only worlds in which Angelica has crumbs in her pocket. Then an utterance of (2) in a conversation in which C is the context set has the effect of an utterance of (1) in a conversation in which C- is the context set. By "The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’" the communicative impact of an utterance of (1) in a context with C- as context set, is a check of whether there is a world in C- where Angelica is the thief. A speaker is in a position to utter (2) when she knows that this check of C- will succeed, i.e. when she knows C- contains a world in which Angelica is the thief. Let’s assume that our speaker is in such a position.

Here, then, is the problem. Any speaker who knows that C- contains a world in which Angelica is the thief is in a position to know that C contains a world in which Angelica is the thief (since C-, a subset of C, contains such a world). Since she is in such a position, C is the context set, and she is aiming to say something about what body of information the proposition that Angelica is the thief is consistent with, she is, I assume, irrational if she does not come to know this. Let’s assume our agent is not irrational and that she knows that C contains a world in which Angelica is the thief. Then, given "The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’", she is in a position to utter sentence (1). This is because, given that theory, the communicative impact of an utterance of (1) is a check of whether C contains any worlds in which Angelica is the thief. And, given that she knows C does contain such a world, she knows that this check will succeed. Thus, she is in a position to utter (1).

What this shows, then, is that any rational speaker who is in an epistemic position to utter (2) is in a position to utter (1). Since the choice of (1) and (2) was arbitrary, any rational speaker
who is in a position to utter a conditional ‘might’-sentence is in a position to utter its consequent.

Because of this, we can’t explain the cases where uttering a conditional but not a simple sentence is appropriate in the modal case in the same way that we can explain it in the non-modal case.

In the modal case, our assumptions predict that it is at least as appropriate to utter the simple as the conditional ‘might’-sentence. This is problematic, since there are scenarios – like the one in which Tommy and Chuckie find themselves – where it is appropriate to utter (2) but not (1).

We confronted this problematic result by assuming The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’ and Conditional ‘Might’-Sentences. I won’t argue for Conditional ‘Might’-Sentences. But I will remind the reader that it is plausible and is closely related to multiple popular theories of conditionals. So, I will assume that it is true for the remainder of this paper. I will suggest, therefore, that we need to reject The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’. In section 8, I will propose a replacement theory on which the explanation of why it is sometimes more appropriate to utter a conditional ‘might’-sentence than a simple one mirrors the explanation outlined above for the non-modal case. Before doing this, I will, in the next section, briefly show that we actually need to reject a weaker assumption than The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’. And in the following section, I will pinpoint the flaw of The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’ and discuss its relationship to a number of views of the semantics of ‘might’.

6. Weakening the Assumption

19 Strictly speaking, I have shown that, given The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’, Conditional ‘Might’-Sentences, and Grice’s second maxim of Quality – “Don’t say that for which you lack adequate evidence” [1989, 27] – we cannot explain why sometimes a conditional, but not its corresponding simple ‘might’-sentence is appropriate. But there is actually a stronger result than this. We cannot explain this even with the help of all of Grice’s maxims [1989]. None of his maxims – Quality, Quantity, Relation, or Manner – give a reason for uttering the conditional rather than the simple ‘might’-sentence. It is relatively straightforward, on some reflection about each maxim and submaxim, why this is so, and I leave this exercise to the reader.

20 I don’t mean to imply that there are no prima facie plausible ways of avoiding the puzzle by rejecting Conditional ‘Might’-Sentences. But an investigation of these responses is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, I want to suggest my own diagnosis of the puzzle in order to sketch a plausible theory that avoids it.
Some may not be particularly worried about the result we’ve just seen. After all, *The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’* tells us about the communicative impact of all uses of ‘might’-sentences. But, we might think that some uses have at least some further communicative impact than a consistency check. So, it would be unsurprising if at least some substitution instances of *The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’* were false.

However, a false prediction about a single case follows from a considerably weaker assumption than the one that all instances of *The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’* are true. We were able to derive the false prediction by considering a single case involving possible uses of sentences (1) and (2). And so, the problematic result follows just from thinking that *The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’* is true not for all substitution instances, but only for those involving (1) and (2) in contexts like those surrounding (If Cookies). This is a much weaker thesis.

More generally, we can generate a problem if there is a simple ‘might’-sentence and a corresponding conditional ‘might’-sentence for which the following two conditions hold: (i) there is a context in which it is appropriate to utter the conditional sentence and not the simple one and (ii) the substitution instances of *The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’* for both sentences are true with respect to that context. We get a problem because, given (ii), our theory will predict that it is at least as appropriate to utter the simple ‘might’-sentence as it is to utter the corresponding conditional in that context, contra (i).

It is easy to find simple and conditional ‘might’-sentences to satisfy condition (i) (think of (If Cookies)). And (ii) is a pretty minimal requirement. Denying (ii) requires a rather strong (though true) thesis – that every simple and corresponding conditional ‘might’-sentence pair that satisfies (i) is such that either the simple sentence, the conditional, or both have some different or more forceful communicative impact than simply checking for consistency with the context set. This suggests that those who think of consistency checks as the main part of the story of ‘might’-
communication can’t be right. The story must include some more robust communicative impact.

In the next section, I’ll say a bit more about the relation of various semantic views to The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’ and the weaker assumption discussed in this section. And in the following section I’ll give a theory of ‘might’-communication which says that uses of ‘might’-sentences typically (in all cases where we have a situation satisfying condition (i)) have some more robust communicative function.

7. What is The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’?

I’ve suggested that the root of our problem is The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’. In this section I’ll say more about this theory and show how one could become committed to problematic instances of it. In the next section I’ll give a plausible suggestion for what to put in place of The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’.

A helpful way to view the problem we’ve encountered is as showing us that The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’ is not sensitive to the likelihood of particular possibilities, though the likelihood of these possibilities seems to be tied to whether we can appropriately utter ‘might’-sentences about them. An account that can distinguish between good possibilities and bare possibilities can avoid the problem. Such an account can tie the assertability of ‘might’-sentences to good possibilities – allowing the supposition of the antecedent to take a possibility from bare to good. There would then be situations in which a ‘might’-sentence is not appropriate to utter but a corresponding conditional ‘might’-sentence is. The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’ is not this sort of account. According to The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’, all possibilities are equal with respect to whether it is appropriate to use a ‘might’-sentence. This is what leads to the difference between ordinary conditional sentences and conditional ‘might’-sentences and,
ultimately, the false prediction. So, by rejecting the equal treatment of possibilities of *The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’*, we can avoid the problem.

Before we look for a particular alternative, let’s see how *The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’* relates to some extant views of the semantics of ‘might’. I’ll warn the reader that figuring out whether particular authors accept *The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’* (and even whether they accept some instances of it) is not possible. This is because much of the attention in the literature has been paid to the semantics of ‘might’-sentences, and *The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’* is a theory of the pragmatics of uses of such sentences. All authors are free to add that uses of ‘might’-sentences have some further pragmatic impact beyond that predicted by their semantic theory. Thus, rejecting *The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’* does not require rejecting any particular theory of the semantics of ‘might’. But it does require thinking seriously about the communicative impact of utterances of ‘might’-sentences – regardless of their semantics. Realizing the importance of this project – and not disproving any particular semantic theory – is the real upshot of the problem I’ve presented.

Nonetheless, let’s see how *The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’* relates to some views in the literature. An obvious way to view *The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’* is as the theory of the pragmatics of ‘might’ for dynamic semantics, as advocated by Veltman [1996] and discussed by von Fintel and Gillies [2007]. The idea behind the dynamic semantic account is that the semantic value of a ‘might’-sentence is an update rule on the information of the context. It checks whether the prejacent is consistent with the information – returning that information if it is and returning the defective body of information if it is not. This, together with a general pragmatic rule which says that uttering a sentence results in applying that sentence’s semantic value (function) to the information of the context, predicts that an assertive utterance of a ‘might’-sentence will perform such a check. If an account says that this is the only communicative
function of a use of a ‘might’-sentence, then it is committed to *The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’*. So, the problem I’ve presented shows that it is important for dynamic semanticists to accept that there is some further communicative impact of an utterance of a ‘might’-sentence than just a consistency check. And the weakening of the assumption in the last section shows that they must accept this further communicative impact in a *wide range* of cases.

The same sort of update rule is also the basis for Seth Yalcin’s [2007, 2011] expressivist or nonfactualist pragmatics of ‘might’ (though his compositional semantics, in contrast to that of the dynamic semanticist, does not, together with general pragmatic principles, force on him this consistency checking interpretation). For Yalcin, an utterance of a ‘might’-sentence does not rule out any possible worlds. Instead, Yalcin [2007, 1010] says, following a passing suggestion of Stalnaker [1970] (where $\Diamond \phi$ is a ‘might’-sentence in his language), “To say $\Diamond \phi$ . . . is to make explicit that $\phi$-possibilities are compatible with the common ground.” This supports the idea that Yalcin thinks that an utterance of a ‘might’-sentence checks if the prejacent is consistent with the context set. If this is the *only* communicative function of a use of a ‘might’-sentence, then the problem of *The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’* follows. So, Yalcin should accept that there is some other general communicative function of utterances of ‘might’-sentences. He has resources in his picture that could be used to cash out this function – for instance, he could say that an utterance of a ‘might’-sentence suggests that the conversational participants become sensitive to the question of whether the prejacent is true (where his account already accepts question-sensitive belief states).

Again, it is important to note that it is open to dynamic semanticists and expressivists to

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21 In von Fintel and Gillies [2008, 83], they suggest that there is a further communicative impact of an utterance of a ‘might’-sentence: “A *might*-claim is (pragmatically) more than just a profession of ignorance. By choosing a particular prejacent, the speaker is highlighting that possibility as one that should not be ignored.” This is outside their discussion of dynamic semantics, but it is reasonable to conclude that they think such utterances have this impact *regardless* of the semantic account we choose.
supplement the simple checking story about the pragmatics of uses of ‘might’-sentences. Though their semantics suggest that one impact of uttering a ‘might’-sentence is to perform a consistency check, they can add some further pragmatic impact. Such a move would constitute a rejection of *The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’*. Noting the possibility of such a move does not weaken my argument. I have not set out to show that particular views of the semantics of ‘might’ must be wrong. Rather, I’ve set out to show that ‘might’-sentences are typically used to do more in communication than *The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’* says. And any complete theory of ‘might’-communication must account for the fact that uses of ‘might’-sentences, in general, have a more robust communicative impact than the performance of a consistency check – whether or not this is written into the semantics.

Now I want to show that our problem is also a constraint on traditional, contextualist theories of ‘might’. Given some reasonable assumptions, contextualist theories of ‘might’ are committed to *The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’* applying in some cases. Let’s lay out the three ingredients:

*The Traditional Theory of ‘Might’*: Suppose p is the content of S in a context. Then the semantic content of ‘It might be that S’ at that context is the proposition that p is consistent with the information of the context.\(^{22}\)

*The Assertive Assumption*: An assertive utterance of a ‘might’-sentence at a context is just an assertion of its semantic content at the context.

*Asserting is Checking*: Asserting at a context that p is consistent with the information of the context just is checking whether p is consistent with the information of the context.

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\(^{22}\) For such semantic theories, see von Fintel and Gillies [2007, 2008, 2011], Dowell [2011], Schaffer [2011], and Stanley [2005]. The statement of *The Traditional Theory of ‘Might’* excludes popular contextualist theories, like those of DeRose [1991] and Hacking [1967]. It also excludes interesting non-relativist invariantist theories that have many of the advantages of contextualism, like those of Bach [2011] and Braun [2012].
Someone who is committed to all three of these assumptions is committed to *The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’*. And, if *The Traditional Theory of ‘Might’, Asserting is Checking*, and *The Assertive Assumption* have true instances involving a simple and a corresponding conditional ‘might’-sentence at a context, then *The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’* is true for those substitution instances. In section 6 we saw that this is enough to generate a problem if it is appropriate to utter the conditional sentence and not the simple one in that context.

Should someone who accepts *The Traditional Theory of ‘Might’* take on the other two theses, at least for some context, ‘might’-sentence pairs? *The Assertive Assumption* is attractive because we think that there is some link between the semantic content of a ‘might’-sentence and what is conveyed by an utterance of that sentence. After all, the linguistic data that we use as evidence for a semantic theory is data from conversations. And, it seems that in some context, an assertion of the semantic content will be *the only speech act that is performed* in uttering a sentence. If these pretty weak assumptions are right, then *The Assertive Assumption* holds for some context, ‘might’-sentence pair.

There is also good reason to accept that *Asserting is Checking* is true for some contexts – in particular, contexts where the relevant information is the set of propositions that is common ground between the conversational participants. Suppose, for reductio, that *Asserting is Checking* is false for all contexts – that, for every context, asserting that a proposition is consistent with the information of the context is not equivalent to checking if that proposition is consistent with the information of the context. Consider a conversation in which the information of the context is what is common ground between the conversational participants. Then asserting that p is consistent with what is common ground either rules out less possibilities than checking whether p is consistent with what is common ground or it rules out more. It only rules out less in a case where p is inconsistent with what is common ground (so checking whether p is consistent returns
the defective body of information), but it is consistent with what is common ground that p is consistent with what is common ground (so asserting that p is consistent with what is common ground leaves some open possibility). It only rules out more in a case where p is consistent with what is common ground (so checking whether p is consistent returns the same set of information), but it is consistent with what is common ground that p is not consistent with what is common ground (so asserting that it is consistent with what is common ground rules out some possibility).

What this means is that it must be consistent with what is common ground that the common ground is different than what it actually is. But it is reasonable to think that this can’t be so. This is because it is plausible that when a group gains a piece of information, both this information and the information that the group has gained this information becomes common ground. If this is right, then our supposition must be false for that context – and, so, Asserting is Checking must be true for that context.23

Many theorists hold The Traditional Theory of ‘Might’. If they also hold that The Assertive Assumption and Asserting is Checking are true for the right contexts and pairs of sentences, then they face the problem I’ve generated. I should be clear that I don’t intend these results to undermine The Traditional Theory of ‘Might’. I actually subscribe to that theory (though I haven’t argued for it here). Rather, I think The Assertive Assumption is wrong in almost all cases.24

In this section we took a natural view about the flaw of The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’ – that it fails to take into account how likely particular possibilities are. And we saw some theories which, without further pragmatic assumptions, would lead to The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’. In the next section I’ll develop a family of views to put in place of The Consistency

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23 In this sort of case, Asserting is Checking follows from the context set having the property of Well-Behavedness. See note 15.

24 In von Fintel and Gillies [2011], they also accept The Traditional Theory of ‘Might’ and have a framework on which it is natural to reject many instances of The Assertive Assumption.
Checking Theory of ‘Might’ – each of which are sensitive to how likely particular possibilities are.

8. Taking ‘Might’-Communication Seriously

We’ve decided to reject The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’. The question, now, is what to put in its place. In this section I present an outline of an alternative theory of how ‘might’-communication works. I offer a simple insight, show how it avoids the problem of The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’, and list a number of ways to develop this insight into a systematic theory of ‘might’-communication.

Let’s leave the classic story about ‘might’ that we inherit from modal logic to the side for now and focus, instead, on why we use conditional ‘might’-sentences. Why do we utter (1) when we do? The main reason is not to perform a check on the information of the context to see whether the proposition that Angelica is the thief is consistent with it. Rather, the main reason to utter (1) is to present Angelica’s being the thief as a serious option in reasoning and deliberation about the question at hand. So the typical purpose of uttering a ‘might’-sentence is to present its prejacent

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25 This is inspired by and analogous to the strategy pursued by Björnsson and Finlay [2010] for deontic modals.

26 This important insight is gaining popularity and is a major part of some of the new accounts of epistemic modals. Braun’s [2012] account incorporates the idea that uses of ‘might’-sentences are importantly linked to agents’ taking propositions seriously. And Willer [2013, 50] says, “might-statements are designed to change possibilities that are merely compatible with the agent’s evidence into ‘live possibilities’ – possibilities that are compatible with the agent’s evidence and that the agent takes seriously in inquiry.” The insight is also affirmed in Bach [2011, 57]: “When you use a bare EP sentence [simple ‘might’-sentence] assertively, ordinarily you do not assert a mere idle possibility. If it is worth mentioning, presumably you take it to be a more serious possibility than that and intend it to be taken as such” and in von Fintel and Gillies [2008, 83]; “the speaker [of a ‘might’-sentence] is highlighting that possibility as one that should not be ignored.” And Stephenson [2007, 316] suggests something similar: “pragmatic factors typically require there to be some reason for bringing up a particular epistemic possibility, for example if there is reason to believe that it’s fairly likely.” I believe this sort of idea was first developed in the recent literature in Swanson [2006, section 2.3.2]. The most extensive historical discussion of this insight is found in Toulmin [1958]:

[I]n dealing with any sort of problem, there will be an initial stage at which we have to admit that a number of different suggestions are entitled to be considered. They must all, at this first stage be admitted as candidates for the title of ‘solution’, and to mark this we say of each of them, ‘It may (or might) be the case that . . .’. At this stage, the term ‘possibility’ is properly at home, along with its associated verbs, adjective and adverb: to speak of a particular suggestion as a possibility is to concede that it has the right to be considered. [18]

And:

In order for a suggestion to be a ‘possibility’ in any context, therefore, it must ‘have what it takes’ in
as a serious option in reasoning and deliberation:

*The Serious Option Theory of ‘Might’*: Suppose p is the content of S in a context. Then an assertive utterance of ‘It might be that S’ at that context typically conveys that p is a serious option in reasoning and deliberation.

*The Serious Option Theory of ‘Might’* is a theory about what is typically conveyed – not one about what is conveyed by every assertive use of the sentence. I’ll fully discuss this issue later in the section, so I ask the reader to put aside worries about the generality of *The Serious Option Theory of ‘Might’* until then.

*The Serious Option Theory of ‘Might’* tells us about conditional ‘might’-sentences as well as simple ones. It, together with *Conditional ‘Might’-Sentences*, makes much better sense of what the antecedent of the conditional is doing. It is giving the condition on which that possibility should be taken seriously.27 We use (2) for the primary purpose of presenting Angelica’s being the thief as a serious option in reasoning and deliberation on the supposition that she has crumbs in her pocket.

What exactly is it to be a serious option in reasoning and deliberation? I’ll leave the issue of communication to the side for the next couple of paragraphs and say a bit about what it is that is communicated. The idea is this. When we reason and deliberate, we don’t consider every open possibility and look to rule out each one. Given our cognitive limitations we can’t do this. Rather, we take some possibilities as privileged, or serious, in our reasoning. These are the ones

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27 Thanks to Jonathan Dancy for drawing my attention to Toulmin’s work.

It may look like we are dealing with a relevance or biscuit conditional. However, (2) fails the standard tests for biscuit conditionals. It allows for the word ‘then’ to occur before the consequent. And it can be embedded under non-speech act verbs, like ‘believes’. See Bhattacharya and Pancheva [2006]. (2) also fails the joke test of DeRose and Grandy [1999]. It does not sound like a bad joke to ask, “And what if Angelica doesn’t have crumbs in her pocket?”
that we investigate further. For example, in deliberating about who stole the cookies, Tommy and Chuckie may take it as a serious option that Susie is the thief. But they don’t take it as a serious option that George W. Bush is the thief even if they know they can’t rule out the possibility that he is. In general, on this sort of picture, it matters how likely a possibility is. There is a distinction between bare possibilities and serious possibilities. However, a possibility can go from bare to serious given some more information. It is possible that supposing some other proposition moves George W. Bush’s being the thief from a mere possibility to a serious option for Tommy and Chuckie. This is both a natural characterization of how possibilities feature in reasoning and deliberation and exactly the sort of account we need to avoid the problem raised in the previous sections.

Here are two obvious candidate analyses of serious options. First, we could take a proposition to be a serious option just in case it has probability over some non-zero threshold.28 A proposition may be below the threshold given some information, but it may rise above the threshold on some further supposition. The other sort of treatment uses a resource from Kratzer’s [1981, 1991] framework for giving the meaning of modals – the ordering source. This allows Kratzer to rank possibilities according to how serious they are. We could say that a proposition is a serious option just in case it is true in one of the worlds that is most highly ranked according to the ordering source. It could be that a proposition is false in all of the closest worlds, but that it is true in one of the closest worlds after taking on some supposition (in virtue of all of the worlds that were previously closest being inconsistent with the supposition). I won’t decide between these views (or others) here, but it is interesting that the theorists who are closest to Kratzer – von Fintel and Gillies [2007, 2008, 2011], Dowell [2011], Schaffer [2011], and

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28 Swanson [forthcoming] suggests tying ‘might’-sentences to having credences over some non-zero threshold (though he doesn’t explicitly discuss serious options in that paper).

Let’s leave a complete answer to the questions of what, exactly, a serious possibility is and how best to model it for another time and get back to issues of communication. *The Serious Option Theory of ‘Might’* helps to block the false prediction of *The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’*. It explains why there are some contexts in which it is appropriate to utter a conditional ‘might’-sentence, like (2), but not the corresponding simple sentence, like (1). The conversational scenarios in which it is appropriate to utter (2) and not (1) are of the following sort: they are scenarios in which it is not a serious option that Angelica is the thief – so an utterance of (1) is not appropriate – but it is a serious option that Angelica is the thief on the supposition that she has crumbs in her pocket – so an utterance of (2) is appropriate. In such a scenario, a speaker is not in the proper epistemic position to utter (1) but is in the proper epistemic position to utter (2). It is important to note that this is the same type of explanation that we gave for why we can sometimes utter non-modal conditionals, like (4), and not their consequents, like (3). That we can give such an explanation is a major benefit of *The Serious Option Theory of ‘Might’*.

Here are a few ways we could choose to flesh out this picture of ‘might’-communication. There are a number of different ways that a use of (1) could convey that it is a serious option that

29 Both Yalcin [2011] and Willer [2013] present fruitful formal models for treating possibilities in a fine-grained manner. The precise nature of these models need not concern us here. What is important is that as long as these models satisfy a demand that Yalcin and Willer set out, they cannot also model a natural conception of serious options. This is because they use the fine-grainedness to distinguish between propositions that an agent believes might be the case and those that are merely consistent with an agent’s information. And, an agent can believe that a proposition might be the case without taking it as a serious option. For instance, I can believe that Paul Ryan *might* be the next president without taking it as a serious option that he is the next president. Since their models won’t allow this, their models can’t do both the work they require of them and represent serious options (See also Willer [note 10] for some other reasons against treating serious possibilities in Yalcin’s manner). I want to be clear that this is *not* an argument against Yalcin’s view, since he doesn’t explicitly talk of serious options or say that he is trying to capture that notion. And Willer, though he is concerned with serious options, suggests an alternative way of treating believing that something might be the case, and on this alternative, we can make all of the desired distinctions.
Angelica is the thief. First, an utterance of (1) might be an assertion that it is a serious option that Angelica is the thief. Second, an utterance of (1) might offer a recommendation – one to take seriously the possibility that Angelica is the thief. Third, an utterance of (1) might be an expression of some mental state of taking it as a serious option that Angelica is the thief. And there are natural conditional versions of each of these accounts to make sense of uses of sentences like (2). These proposals are subtly different – they have different advantages and disadvantages. But what is important here is what they share – that the main communicative upshot of uttering (1) has to do with treating Angelica’s being the thief as a serious option in reasoning and deliberation.

All of these proposals for fleshing out The Serious Option Theory of ‘Might’ are, in principle, compatible with the idea that one function – perhaps the one encoded in the semantics – of uttering a ‘might’-sentence is to perform a consistency check on the information of the context. The Serious Option Theory of ‘Might’ is an account of one communicative impact of the utterance. It is possible that an utterance of a ‘might’-sentence both performs a consistency check and conveys that the prejacent is a serious option. Indeed, there is a plausible explanation, given Grice’s Maxim of Relation [1989], of how these speech acts would fit together. Suppose a consistency

Montminy [2012] gives a fruitful theory on which a speaker who utters a ‘might’-sentence typically weakly suggests the prejacent as an indirect speech act. I think this theory is compatible with The Serious Option Theory of ‘Might’ (as well as the cases, discussed below, where a speaker does not convey that the prejacent is a serious option). Also, a first approximation of the view developed Swanson [forthcoming] is that in assertively uttering a ‘might’-sentence (indeed, for Swanson, any sentence), a speaker advises her addressee to be in a credal state that meets certain constraints (Swanson goes on to refine the view in ways that need not concern us here).

Some are better positioned to avoid other popular puzzles about ‘might’-communication – in particular the disagreement puzzle developed in Egan, Hawthorne, and Weatherson [2005] and the supposition puzzle in Yalcin [2007]. These puzzles challenge contextualist theories of ‘might’. If our theory of how we convey serious options is contextualist in the sense that speakers who use ‘might’-sentences assert that some proposition is a serious option for some contextually determined individual or group, it will face these puzzles. Some have defended contextualism from these puzzles – see, in particular, Dowell [2011] for the first and Barnett [2009] for the second. Others may prefer to reject a contextualist account of how we convey serious options. They could say that we assert a relativist proposition – one that is true if and only if the proposition is a serious option for the assessor. Or they could take the recommendation or expression options that I sketched above.
check is semantically encoded by ‘might’-sentences. But, given that our purposes and cognitive capacities often require highlighting certain options for the correct answer to our question, simply performing a consistency check is not very relevant (after all there are many, many propositions that will pass such a check). What is relevant is noting which possibilities we think are plausible. Because of this, hearers can realize when a speaker, in a particular situation, is using a ‘might’-sentence to present a serious option. In these situations the most important function of uses of ‘might’-sentences is given by *The Serious Option Theory of ‘Might’*.

As I mentioned after introducing *The Serious Option Theory of ‘Might’*, there are uses of ‘might’ that don’t convey that the prejacent is a serious option in reasoning (in a way that is compatible with the Gricean-style explanation just given). One type of non-typical – according to *The Serious Option Theory of ‘Might’* – use is when ‘might’ is stressed and said in a higher register. Consider (I use *italics* to show the stress):

(Fast Trip)  
Drew: I don’t think it was Angelica. She’s abroad in Paris.

Didi: You mean you can completely rule out that Angelica flew over on the Concorde, sped here from the airport, stole the cookies, and then sped back to France so that she could Skype us just now from the Eiffel Tower?

Drew: Well, no. She *might* be the thief.

It looks like Drew is merely conveying that it is consistent with his information that Angelica is the thief, not that he takes it as a serious option that she is the thief.

The other sort of use that does not convey that the prejacent is a serious option is what is sometimes called an exo-centric use. This is a use where what is conveyed seems to have to do with an epistemic position that the speaker is not in. For example, consider the following case (which is modeled closely after von Fintel and Gillies’s [2007, 2008, 2011] Mastermind case).
Suppose that Phil and Lil are playing battleship and that Lil, in fact, has a PT boat, not a battleship, on C4 and knows she does:

(Battleship)  Phil: There might be a battleship on C4.

Lil: Yeah. There might be.

Lil seems to be making a comment about Phil’s epistemic position here, not conveying that it is a serious option that there is a battleship on C4.32

These focused and exo-centric cases aren’t a problem for The Serious Option Theory of ‘Might’, as the theory is restricted to what assertive utterances of ‘might’-sentences typically convey. More importantly, we don’t encounter a recurrence of our central problem in either case. Consider, first, the stressed uses of ‘might’. I contend that we simply don’t use stressed ‘might’-sentences in the consequents of conditionals. Using these sentences is always inappropriate (Consider an anomalous utterance of “If Angelica has crumbs in her pocket, then she might be the thief”). So, we do, in these stressed cases, get the prediction that I’ve been discussing throughout the paper – that it is at least as appropriate to utter a simple ‘might’-sentence as the corresponding conditional. But we don’t have a problem because the prediction about these cases is true.

The appropriate exo-centric uses of conditional ‘might’-sentences involve a mixing of epistemic positions. For instance, Lil can say (as an aside to someone else), “If he hasn’t figured out yet that it’s a PT boat, then, yeah, there might be a battleship on C4.” But here, the antecedent is supposed relative to Lil’s information and the consequent is relative to Phil’s. Because different bodies of information are at issue (unlike in standard cases like (If Cookies)), our assumptions won’t generate the false prediction.

32 For another, different sort of exo-centric example see the bus/surprise party case in Egan, Hawthorne, and Weatherson [2005].
Thus, these non-typical uses of ‘might’, while taking away from the generality of The Serious Option Theory of ‘Might’, are not problematic. I have assumed that there are exactly two sorts of non-typical uses. If there are other uses that don’t convey that the prejacent is a serious option, I incur the debt of explaining why we don’t encounter the problem of the false prediction in these cases. But, I know of no reason to think that there are other uses of this sort. So it is reasonable to conclude that The Serious Option Theory of ‘Might’ explains all the cases in which it is appropriate to utter a conditional ‘might’-sentence but not the corresponding simple one.

In this section I suggested that we typically use ‘might’-sentences to convey that the prejacent is a serious option in reasoning and deliberation. And we use conditional ‘might’-sentences to convey that the prejacent is a serious option under some supposition. We’ve seen that this view allows us to avoid the problem that The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’ leads to. I’ve also suggested a few different ways to implement The Serious Option Theory of ‘Might’, as a first step toward giving a complete theory of ‘might’-communication. I think exploring this framework will show that it makes good sense of our talk about uncertainty, though there is not space to carry out that exploration here.

33 It is often thought to be a desideratum of accounts of ‘might’ and conditionals that “If S, then it might be that T” and “It might be that S and T” (where the modal takes wide scope) are true in exactly the same scenarios. See, for example, Gillies [2010]. But, according to The Serious Option Theory of ‘Might’, a typical use of latter conveys something stronger than a typical use of the former. This is because, where p is the content of S and q is the content of T, a use of “It might be that S and T” typically conveys p and q (and presumably each proposition by itself) as a serious option while a use of “If S, then it might be that T” typically conveys only that p is an open possibility (however distant) and q is a serious option, on the supposition of p. While Gillies’s equivalence may be true of the semantics of ‘might’ and conditionals, the pragmatic predictions of The Serious Option Theory of ‘Might’ are, indeed, correct. Consider the following adaptation of (If Cookies):

(If Cookies∗∗) Tommy: Susie and Stu are serious suspects. But, given our information, we shouldn’t now consider Angelica a serious suspect.
Chuckie: # Yes, but Angelica might be the thief and have crumbs in her pocket.
(If Cookies∗∗) is no more appropriate than (If Cookies∗) – adding another conjunct under the scope of the modal does nothing to increase appropriateness. So, (If Cookies) and (If Cookies∗) stand in the same relationship that (If Cookies) and (If Cookies∗) do. That is, (If Cookies) and (If Cookies∗) constitute a pair of conversations which show that the pragmatic prediction of The Serious Option Theory of ‘Might’ is correct.
9. Conclusion

In this paper, I showed that *The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’* and *Conditional ‘Might’-Sentences* predict that it is always at least as appropriate to utter a simple ‘might’-sentence as the corresponding conditional. But, this prediction is false. I suggested that the root of the problem is *The Consistency Checking Theory of ‘Might’*. I closed by sketching an alternative view about what assertive uses of ‘might’-sentences typically do – one that avoids making the false prediction. These uses typically present the prejacent as a serious option in reasoning and deliberation. In the end, I conclude that this view might be the right view of ‘might’-communication. It is, very much, a serious option.\(^{34}\)

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