



A LOGICAL APPROACH TO ENGLISH CONDITIONAL SENTENCES

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<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7498205>

ARTICLE INFO

Received: 21th December 2022

Accepted: 29th December 2022

Online: 31th December 2022

KEY WORDS

Conditional types, verb forms, remoteness, Romanian, Hungarian

ABSTRACT

*The present article describes theoretical issues of the English conditional sentences, including definitions and types, leading to concerns regarding teaching them. We argue that the concept of remoteness developed by Michael Lewis (1986) is much more suitable to describe conditionals or less frequent verb forms (e.g. continuous). A possible way to understand conditionals may start from a non-native speaker perspective, in our case Romanian or Hungarian, making students aware of the challenges represented by the English conditionals. We also offer a popular option to make students discover *Řreal-lifeř* conditionals with the help of the entertainment bindustry, while the references contain major English, Romanian and Hungarian sources in the field.*

INTRODUCTION

Conditional sentences may constitute a considerable problem for non-native speakers, depending on the mother tongue they approach the English conditionals. It is our belief that a thorough re-evaluation of teaching conditional sentences is necessary if we aim at proficient user-experience.

Although conditionals are amply described in all descriptive grammars, their presentation is mostly problematic. One of the reasons is that conditionals –interact extensively with other domains, such as causals, temporals and modals, while the other one is that the semantics of conditionals is more important than their morphosyntactic structure; thus the meaning of the verb phrase is central and less emphasis should be placed on the full

conditional sentence containing both the main clause and the subordinate conditional clause.

In case the syntactic structure is highlighted, the entire category of conditionals is unclear: –the question of what constitutes a conditional construction in a given language has as yet no adequate theoretical answer, as the form does not serve as a clear guide for several reasons:

1. not all sentences containing a formally conditional connector have conditional meaning;

If Shrek accomplished his mission, then he is on his way back.

2. While the form may not contain a conditional connector, the meaning may still be conditional (cf. reduced and implied _conditionals’):



One more word, Donkey, and you'll end up dead.

Stop talking rubbish! (Or I'll lock you out, Donkey.)

3. The logical relation between propositions may be misleading, —because users of natural languages tend to reject the validity of false antecedent implying true consequent and often assume some kind of causal connection between the propositions to put it simply, knowingly false conditions may be considered as potentially true (cf. rhetorical conditionals):

If Fiona is happy, then I'll be damned.

4. A further problem is caused by grammar books by using confusing terminology; in this case, the subjunctive mood is used to refer to both conditional and hypothetical structures, but also as —the past tense being used for unreality, especially in conditional sentences||, or —simple, uninflected, form of the verb in subordinate clauses, resulting in unnecessarily puzzling examples with both I. and II. verb forms, instead of first discussing them separately;

5. Certain grammar constructions, such as reported speech (discussed in syntax) seem to have little effect upon the condition, as changing the tenses (verb phrases) is based on logic and not compulsory (thus tend to remain), leading to the conclusion that neither conditionals nor reported speech is a special case', but —part of the general patterns

If Shrek weren't angry, he wouldn't be mumbling to himself.

They knew that if Shrek weren't angry, he wouldn't be mumbling to himself.

After presenting a few introductory remarks, it is worth presenting various definitions of conditionals, which is an

important topic in philosophy, linguistics and logic (mathematics) as well.

Definitions of Condition(al)

A standard definition of conditional sentences derives from logic: $_if\ p\ then\ q\ '1$, which leads us to a syntactic (linguistic) approach: there is a main clause (called apodosis) and a subordinate clause (called protasis, the if-clause), introduced by one of the conditional connectors, without particular restrictions upon the clause order. Thus the logical properties of conditionals —depend on the relation between antecedent and consequent, and that in turn depends on beliefs and —even where the antecedent specifies completely the state of affairs in which the consequent is to be evaluated, the relation may be an entailment|| or a —mutual entailment.

If Shrek is an expert in swamps, he knows how to survive there.

If Fiona has a husband, then she is married.

While speakers usually formulate true conditions, this is not always the case:

I'll be damned if I understand this.

Fiona, if you are a princess, then I'm the Pope / a Dutchman.

The two sentences are in fact rhetorical conditionals and both propositions are to be understood as false, which is further aggravated' by the fact that there is no causal relationship between the main and the subordinate clause; the speaker of the first sentence is sure that (s)he does not understand it, so (s)he is not worried about the self-imposed curse, while the second case is similar: the speaker is sure about the falsity of both parts. And it has been correctly observed that due to the present time reference, it is difficult to distinguish $_hypothetical'$ from conditional.

Definitions of condition in linguistics are listed below:



1. –a situation that must exist before something else is possible or permitted
2. –an arrangement that must exist before something else can happen
3. –a premise upon which the fulfillment of an agreement depends or –something essential to the appearance or occurrence of something else||, but also –a restricting or modifying factor
4. –the prototypical meaning of “if” is the speaker’s uncertainty/uncontrollability of p is meant to be an elucidation, and not a denial, of the intuitive insight of the popular characterization of conditionals as hypothetical’||, even if –conditionals are not necessarily hypothetical.
5. the meaning of conditionals is –the ability to envisage states of affairs that may or may not correspond to reality;
6. –A condition is something that has to be fulfilled before something else can happen. If, normally meaning ‘provided that’, is sometimes followed by then. If then is not stated, it is implied

These definitions clearly show that conditionals are connected to time (cf. philosophy) and hypothesis (cf. logic), but they contain new elements as well: for instance, the truth value and causality is not highlighted and conditions may be implied, reaching the following summary: [conditionals] reflect the characteristically human ability to reason about alternative situations, to make inferences based on incomplete information, to imagine possible correlations between situations, and to understand how the world would change if certain correlations were different.

Understanding the conceptual and behavioural organization of this ability to construct and interpret conditionals provides basic insights into the cognitive

processes, linguistic competence, and inferential strategies of human beings.

Consequently, we can understand why it has been so problematic for –philosophers, logicians, and linguists to find the common denominator that links future predictives to counterfactuals or generic conditionals, and we do not claim that it is easier after having presented possible definitions. Yet, we tend to think that the semantics of verb phrases will offer valuable insights into the logic of conditionals, even if this will result in more than three types of conditionals, which are typically mentioned in the majority of grammar books. In the following we will discuss various types of conditional sentences taught for non-native speakers.

Types of Conditionals

We have seen that the concept of conditional is connected to two propositions, one of them introduced by a logical connector (if or one of its synonyms), while we suppose a necessary and sufficient condition between them (causality), although this may be true or false. However, grammar books introduce new concepts, such as possibility or imaginary, and tend to focus on only three possible conditional constructions:

... the contrasting system of actual states, real possibilities and hypothetical states is all relative to the status of the discourse. Hence, the same tripartite division of conditionals applies equally to factual or fictional discourse. There are even conditionals that bridge the gap from the fictional to the real. This gap may be the previously mentioned continuum, as conditionals express

–modal, non-factual contexts or hypothetical situations in which we can differentiate degrees’ regarding the



—probability of realization, especially the protasis. This is manifested through the verb forms (tenses) used in these constructions. At morphological level we talk about conditional tenses, referring to the:

1. present: would, should followed by I. verb form or past: would, should followed by

have + III. verb form:

Fiona would enjoy a rest. Fiona would have enjoyed a rest.

However, these constructions are often completed with another structure introduced by if, and the combination is referred to as a conditional sentence. Specialized literature discusses either if-clauses or conditional sentences, focusing on the three types mentioned before, although further structures may be added easily (cf. zero conditional or mixed types). However, the terms are not satisfactory, which we are going to discuss in the following sections. It has been also mentioned that the conditional clause tends to start the sentence, but this is not a strict rule, as there is no change in meaning only a slight change in emphasis. Language learners are most likely to meet three common structures, referred to as conditional sentences Type I, II and III, but it is important to note from the outset that there are many more possibilities than those frequently presented in language teaching textbooks. This may be one of the reasons why conditionals are introduced to language learners at a relatively late stage, although they are highly important in effective communication.

To avoid the complexity of terminology, we will introduce them as Type I, II and III (most rooted terms in grammar books), anticipating that we will suggest

abbreviations as these terms are not satisfactory either.

TYPE I

Conditional sentence type I is relatively simple, as it combines Present Simple in the if-clause and Future Simple in the main clause; however, the present form in the if-clause does not express present time, but a real, probable or possible condition or situation, so it can refer to possibilities:

If Shrek buys flowers for Fiona, she will be happy.

This type is also termed as future real, simple future predictive or casual conditional, as the situation is true (cf. type I refers to actual states, or may become true). It signals that chances to become true are anywhere between 50 – 100% (quite probable, reflected by the choice of tenses; will expresses that the speaker takes it as psychologically immediate and inevitable at the moment of speaking.

It is also important to note that the subordinate clause may be translated into other languages with future time, but English takes no future tense in subordinate clauses; however, will may appear in the conditional clause, which also signals that will is a modal verb and not the auxiliary for future. Although temporal and conditional clauses may overlap, they may considerably differ (if tends to be baleful combined with the verb meaning):

If Shrek survives the mission to rescue Fiona, he will return to his beloved swamp.

(He might not survive it.)

If / After Shrek returns home, he will take a nap.

A further difference is that temporal clauses should turn true with the passing of time (the truth value is but a matter of time), while this is not the case with



conditionals. Certainty is only associated with type III conditionals.

Any change in the verb phrases of conditional type I (either clauses) will result in different meanings, leading to further sections:

✓ will may not be present in the main clause, known as the zero conditional;

✓ will may be present in the subordinate conditional clause;

✓ should may be used in type I, leading to a sense a doubt, and –the inverted forms are the more literary:

If you should see Shrek, try to avoid him.

Should you see Shrek, try to avoid him.

Although will (or shall) is often associated with future time, it is also connected to an (often implicit) conditionality, resulting in an expectation of fulfilment the fact that other modals may also be used in the main clause, makes it necessary to discuss them separately.

TYPE II

We can distinguish real and unreal conditions; while type I mainly expresses real ones (or open), type II is associated with unreal, hypothetical, imaginary, not true, contrary to fact or remote conditions, expressing doubt about the truth of the proposition of the if-clause or inviting us –to consider, not the actual ... but a hypothetical alternative. These hypothetical conditions have been further labelled as closed', rejected', nonfactual', counterfactual', and marked conditions, as they convey –the speaker's belief that the condition will not be fulfilled (for future conditions), is not fulfilled (for present conditions), or was not fulfilled, because hypothetical means –true in certain circumstances, not those currently prevailing.

Grammar books refer to this type as expressing improbable, unlikely conditions, but even –real possibilities or –future unreal, although –unreality and its relation to conditionality is a difficult problem.

The standard form of type II typically requires the II. verb form in the if-clause, although its meaning is conditional' present or future, and non-native speakers struggle hard to understand that the II. verb form combined with if does not refer to the past, as up to this stage whenever a II. verb form was used it expressed past time.

Conclusions

We have seen that conditionals are very diversified, making use of a multitude of verb forms, tenses, modal verbs, with rich and overlapping names. Hence we conclude that the mainstream conditional theory is hard to accept, as it is rather limited and not functional.

Instead of focusing on types, meaning should be highlighted, disregarding explanations with the help of the English tenses and highlighting verb forms (I, II, III). Yet, non-native speakers should dedicate enough time to discover the continuum of hypothetical meanings along the line of possible to impossible, which is a challenging task for various reasons:

✓ conditionals prove that previous forms (e.g. II. verb form) combined with if gain a completely different meaning with various shades, due to the lack of conjugation in English;

✓ conditionals imply the use of modal verbs, whose meanings is yet to discuss, so at this stage only a partial discussion is possible;

✓ non-native speakers may end up completely puzzled, discovering the immense richness of conditionals ranging



from 'zero' conditional to conditionals that even lack if or any of its convenient alternatives (cf. implied ones); nevertheless, they only need to understand them, without learning their grammatical names; the ultimate list of the conditional 'mix' contains almost any verb form and tense as

well as modal verbs, so a solid foundation of verb and tense meanings, completed with modal ones takes us further in effectively using conditionals than trying to remember their names and types, although the initial stage starts from identifying them based on forms and types.

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