

On the Taxonomy of If-Clauses

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ABSTRACT

The present paper seeks to present a comprehensive taxonomy of clauses introduced by the subordinator 'if', most particularly with a view to refining the classification of conditional clauses.

KEYWORDS

assumptive, causative, counterfactual, implicative, irrealis, realis

INTRODUCTION

The subordinating conjunction 'if' has received the attentions of many academics over the years, principally on account of its seminal role in the construction of conditional clauses, a matter of interest as much to philosophers and logicians as to pure linguists.

Many classificatory systems for such conditional clauses have been propounded. Barbara Dancygier¹⁾, for instance, classifies conditionals primarily according to time-reference and modality; Angelika Kratzer²⁾ divides them up into probability conditionals and epistemic conditionals, whereas Jonathan Bennet³⁾ favors a more straightforward classification into 'indicative' versus 'subjunctive' (whilst expressing due reservations as to the literal applicability of those terms). Randolph Quirk et al.⁴⁾, on the other hand, invoke a three-way distinction, consisting of 'direct' (subtypes: 'open' and 'hypothetical'), 'indirect' and 'rhetorical', a system shared, to some extent at least, by Sidney Greenbaum⁵⁾, while Rodney Huddleston et al.⁶⁾ opt for a simpler categorization into 'open' versus 'remote' conditionals.

Each of these systems is indubitably valid for some specific analytical purpose, and it is not my intention here to argue either for or against the correctness of any single one of them. However, while considerable effort has been expended on the labeling of entire sentence-types, particularly in terms of such aspects as truth-value, it is the view of the present author, as a linguist, that rather too little attention has perhaps been paid to the variety of *meanings* that the word 'if' actually possesses in the

various cases under consideration.

It is with this thought in mind that I intend here to propose a classification of if-clauses that focuses primarily on semantic distinctions implicit in the conjunction itself rather than on syntactic or other conceptual sub-categorizations. Since the use of 'if' to form conditional sentences is by far the more complex and polemical of the two most basic uses identified, it is inevitably to discussions of the latter that the majority of that which follows will be devoted.

TAXONOMY

It is possible to classify if-clauses according as the word 'if' functions:

1. As an **ALTERNATIVE** subordinator

SEMANTIC EQUIVALENCE OF "if": "whether"

- 1.1. Introducing nominal clauses, e.g.

[1] *I don't know if she's coming.*

- 1.2. Introducing adverbial clauses, e.g.

[2] *I wonder if she's coming.*1*

2. As a **CONDITIONAL** (adverbial) subordinator

- 2.1 Introducing **causative** [a.k.a. predictive*2] conditionals, this category consisting of:

- 2.1.1. **Temporal** causative conditionals [a.k.a. zero conditionals]

SEMANTIC EQUIVALENCE OF "if": "provided that..., under circumstances in which..., every time..."

CHARACTERISTIC(S): The protasis (henceforth labeled 'P') specifies a cause of - or set of circumstances permitting, or conducive to*3 - the eventuation of the apodosis (henceforth, 'A').

PROBABILITY LEVEL of P*4: 100% (i.e. P is, or has been, known to occur/apply)

E.g.

[3] *If you boil water, it turns to steam.*

(present reference)

[4] *If someone had leprosy in those days, (s)he was obliged to carry a bell.*

(past reference)

2.1.2. **Atemporal** causative conditionals

SEMANTIC EQUIVALENCE OF “if”: “provided that..., under circumstances in which...” (but *not* “every time...”)

CHARACTERISTIC(S): As 2.1.1.

PROBABILITY LEVEL of P: 0~c.50% (i.e. ranges from denial, to acceptance of potential eventuation, of P)

this category consisting of:

2.1.2.1. **Realis** atemporal causative conditionals [a.k.a. 1st conditionals], e.g.

[5] *If it rains tomorrow, the picnic will be cancelled.*

(future reference: P is represented as not improbable*⁵)

2.1.2.2. **Irrealis** atemporal causative conditionals, this category consisting of:

2.1.2.2.1. **Improbable-counterfactual***⁶ irrealis atemporal causative conditionals [a.k.a. 2nd conditionals]

E.g.

[6] *If it rained tomorrow, the picnic would be cancelled.*

(future reference: P is represented as improbable)

[7] *If it were raining now, we would be thinking about canceling the picnic.*

(present reference: P is denied)

2.1.2.2.2. **Exclusively counterfactual** irrealis atemporal causative conditionals [a.k.a. 3rd conditionals]

E.g.

[8] *If it had rained yesterday, the picnic would have been cancelled.*

(past reference: P is denied)

[9] *If only it had rained tomorrow instead of today, the picnic would not have been cancelled.*

(future reference*7: P is denied)

2.2. Introducing **implicative** conditionals

SEMANTIC EQUIVALENCE OF “if”: “on condition it is true that..., in any case where it is true that...”

CHARACTERISTIC(S): P specifies a set of conditions necessary to establish the truth of A*8.

PROBABILITY LEVEL of P: 0~c.99% (i.e. entirely non-committal as to actual truth-value), this category consisting of:

2.2.1. **Intrinsic** implicative conditionals

CHARACTERISTIC(S): A follows *automatically* from P (i.e. by virtue of semantic entailment, natural mathematical properties, etc.).

E.g.

[10] *If x equals 2 and y equals 3, xy has a value of 6.*

(A amounts to little more than a restatement/reformulation of P. Note, in clear contrast to structurally similar temporal causative conditionals (2.1.1.), the complete absence of any implication of *known prior eventuation* of P. Unlike e.g. [3], which implies that someone actually has boiled water

on at least one occasion in the past, there is no suggestion whatever in [10] that x has ever equaled 2, or y, 3: the matter is entirely theoretical.)

2.2.2. **Extrinsic** implicative conditionals

CHARACTERISTIC(S): A follows *non-automatically* from P (i.e. by virtue of a reasoning process based on data known to the speaker).

E.g.

[11] *If the inspector arrived this morning, then the inspection will begin today.* *9

(e.g. because the rules happen to stipulate that an inspection will always commence on the day of an inspector's arrival.)

2.3. Introducing **assumptive** [a.k.a. non-predictive] conditionals

SEMANTIC EQUIVALENCE OF "if": "on the assumption that..."

CHARACTERISTIC(S): P specifies a set of circumstances *provisionally* accepted as true.

PROBABILITY LEVEL of P: c. 51~99% (i.e. more likely true than untrue)

E.g. someone telephoning John and being told that he is busy might well respond as follows:

[12] *OK, if he's busy, I'll call back later.*

The apodosis is manifestly not a prediction of any kind, but simply an *offer* based on a situation temporarily accepted, for want of evidence to the contrary, as true.

[13] *If you're such an expert, why don't you do it yourself?*

The speaker in [13] does not, in all probability, believe the addressee *in reality* to be an expert at all, but his/her status as such is sardonically granted provisional acceptance!

A similarly sardonic spirit pervades such "indirect denials" as

[14] *If you're an expert, I'm a Dutchman!*

where it is taken as read that A, and thus, by process of logical inference, P also, is *not* the case.*¹⁰

CONCLUSION

It is the present writer's hope that a semantically-based taxonomy of if-clauses such as that propounded here, classifying the conditional type into the three main sub-types of causative, implicative and assumptive, may serve, to some extent at least, to 'de-mystify', most particularly for the non-native learner, one of the most potentially difficult and confusing aspects of English grammar.

FOOTNOTES

*1 Adverbial, despite superficial functional similarity to [1], since we say not

**I wonder this/that.*

but

*I wonder **about** this/that.*

*2 I avoid using the terms 'predictive/non-predictive', simply because they naturally tend to be interpreted as denoting exhaustive complementary types, into either one or the other of which any conditional must necessarily fall. Implicative conditionals, however, discussed in 2.2., lie conceptually midway between the two. Intrinsic implicatives, in particular, cannot be said to make a "prediction" of any sort, since the truth of A is *inherent* in that of P – it does not ensue at some later time. On the other hand, to term them 'non-predictive' would be equally misleading, since, as stated in 2.2.1., there is no implicit provisional acceptance of the truth of P, this remaining entirely within the realms of hypotheticality.

*3 The distinction, while apparently hair-splitting, can be at least philosophically significant, since, in the case of a negative apodosis, e.g.

If Hitler had not been defeated, Europe today would be a very different place.

it seems intuitively absurd to cite something non-existent (Hitler's not having been defeated) as the direct "cause" of anything. Nonetheless, as a convenient generic label, 'causative' seems not inappropriate.

*4 I.e. the (approximate) degree of probability attaching *in the speaker's mind* to the eventuation of P (see also

footnote 7 below).

*5 “Improbable” here means specifically “having a probability of *less than 50%*”.

*6 Although it is tempting to fall into the trap of believing that improbable future reference is always distinguishable from counterfactual present on the basis of verbal dynamicity (with dynamic verbs invariably realizing the former and stative verbs, the latter), in reality there is no such absolute correspondence. Compare, for instance, the two uses of subjunctive ‘were’ in

If I were a bird, I would fly.

(counterfactual present)

and in

If he really were able to win the race tomorrow, we would all be delighted.

(improbable future)

The issue is, needless to say, further complicated by the taxonomic ambiguity of certain verbs, e.g. ‘live’, whose construal either as stative, as in

I live in London.

(a currently extant state)

or as dynamic, as in

I live in Barbados for about six months every year.

(an habitually recurrent action)

tends to be entirely dependent on accompanying adverbials that are subject to omission depending on the extent of shared knowledge between speaker and collocutor. For such reasons, improbable and counterfactual conditionals with past subjunctive P predicators must be treated as a formally homogenous category.

*7 Hence I respectfully disagree with Bennett³⁾, p.14, para. 2, example (3). Most speakers would, I contend, prefer “were here” in this sentence-position, since reference is simply to a situation presented as contrary to fact at the time of utterance (i.e. Antoinette is, in reality, not here *now*). This contrasts sharply with what, I would submit, is the only fully acceptable use of a past perfect subjunctive in relation to a counterfactual non-past event, namely

when that event meets two very specific criteria, to wit (a) it is *future* relative to the time of utterance (*not* present, for which, as already intimated, a simple past subjunctive will always suffice), and (b) its occurrence at the future time in question is (in the speaker's view – see below) necessarily precluded by its already having occurred at some other time, e.g.

It's a pity that we did not have sufficient time to prepare for the annual inspection this morning, for if it had been carried out tomorrow instead, we would certainly have passed!

Clearly, substituting 'were' for the underlined portion here would be unacceptable, since a past subjunctive in reference to a future time can at best indicate no more than an improbable, but nevertheless still *possible*, future event, as in

If an inspection were held tomorrow, we would pass.

In this latter example, in stark contrast to the first (where there is, to all practical intents and purposes, no possibility whatever of an annual inspection already held being held again the following day), the possibility of an inspection's occurring the following day, however unlikely, is admitted. For this reason, such counterfactual future conditionals could be termed *motive*, since they imply the conceptual moving of a singular event from one temporal locus, in which its eventuation is considered a reality, to another, in which it is not, whilst the actual content of the event is unaffected. Compare the *substitutive* nature of other more typical counterfactuals (e.g. [8]), where a set of imaginary/hypothetical consequences is simply substituted for a set known, or believed, to be real, whilst the temporal locus itself remains unaffected.

Concerning [9], despite the fact that rainfall on one day does not, of course, either logically or scientifically, preclude its occurrence on another, the locution here is rendered acceptable by virtue of the fact that the speaker, in employing the modifier 'instead of today', is, for reasons best known to him-/herself, electing to represent the absence of rain the following day as a certainty (i.e. tantamount to the confident – however baseless – assertion: "in my view, since it has rained today, it will not rain again tomorrow."). As is invariably the case, it is, no matter how unorthodox or idiosyncratic, the world-view *espoused by the speaker*, rather than any generally agreed or objectively verifiable version of reality, that determines the appropriateness of any given linguistic construction.

*8 Thus, in clear contrast to causative conditionals, in which the issue is the occurrence of an event or the coming into being of a state, in the case of implicative conditionals we are dealing simply with the truth or falsity of a *proposition*.

*9 It is, of course, not known at the time of utterance whether the inspector actually arrived. Compare this use of the (indicative) preterit with that of the generally homomorphic past subjunctive in an improbable-counterfactual causative such as

If the inspector arrived today, we would really be in trouble.

in which the inspector's arrival, at the time of utterance, is viewed simply as a remote future possibility.

*10 Put another way, the accepted convention concerning utterances of this type is that they are made *only* where the identification effected by A is patently or demonstrably false. Compare a serious (i.e. non-humorous) denial of a protasis, couched in the considerably more mundane terms of an improbable-counterfactual irrealis atemporal causative (see 2.1.2.2.1.), e.g.

!If you were an expert, I would be a Dutchman.

where the addressee is seriously – and thus absurdly – invited to accept as logically connected two propositions that are, in reality, entirely unrelated.

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(和文要旨)

If 節の分類について

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本稿の目的は、とりわけ条件節の分類を改良するという視点のもと従属接続詞 if により導入される文節の包括的な分類することである。