Note

A Semantically-based Taxonomy of Conditional Sentences: A Means of Evaluation

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Abstract

The present paper seeks to present a method for ascertaining the degree of superiority as a learning tool of a semantically-based, to the traditional, classification of conditional sentences.

Key words: *assumptive, causative, conditional, counterfactual, implicative, irrealis*

1. Introduction

In an earlier paper1) (to which the reader is kindly requested to refer for detailed descriptions and examples), a novel classification of if-clauses, focusing particularly on the conditional kind, was propounded, based principally on the widely varying meanings that the subordinator 'if' can be considered to possess in the various cases under consideration.

As regards conditional clauses, the following 7 main kinds were identified, whose corresponding sentence-types will, for simplicity and ease of reference, be labelled alphabetically:

1. Temporal causative conditionals: TYPE A1
2. Atemporal causative realis conditionals*1 : TYPE A2
3. Atemporal causative improbable-counterfactual irrealis conditionals: TYPE A3
4. Atemporal causative exclusively counterfactual irrealis conditionals: TYPE A4
5. Intrinsic implicative conditionals: TYPE B1
6. Extrinsic implicative conditionals: TYPE B2
7. Assumptive conditionals: TYPE C

In terms of traditional classifications, some broad correspondences can be posited:

A1 = (predictive*2) zero conditionals*3
A2 = (predictive) 1st conditionals*4
A3 = (predictive) 2nd conditionals
A4 = (predictive) 3rd conditionals
C = non-predictive conditionals

One point that will strike the reader is the fundamental shift away from a basically two-way division (predictive vs. non-predictive) to a basically three-way division: causative (types A1~A4), implicative (types B1&B2) and assumptive (type C), the reasons for which are laid out in the previous paper1) (see esp. p28).

A further point that will probably not escape anyone involved in TEFL is the almost complete absence from the generally available English grammar courses/study materials of any kind of systematic treatment of non-predictive conditionals, sentences such as

If they were smoking, it will only have been because they were nervous about the upcoming test.

in which, far from considering hypothetical consequences, the speaker is speculating retrospectively as to the cause of a possible past event, in structural terms the diametric opposite, one might argue, of a simple, "forward-looking" predictive such as

If they were smoking, we'd be able to smell it from here.

in which there is no reference to the past at all, but rather a hypothetical present event is implicitly being denied.

It is the present writer's contention that the traditional two-way division is simply insufficient to deal with the sheer variety of conditional sentence-types that the English language is capable of generating, and that only a three-way

division of the kind here advocated can adequately bring out certain very fundamental differences, to ignore which would likely leave the learner feeling ill-informed and confused.

With that in mind, the following is presented as a possible means of assessing the efficacy of the proposed, versus the traditional, analysis, to wit: (a) test materials that could serve to assess change in EFL students' ability to comprehend conditional sentences, (b) suggestions as to a way in which those materials might be utilized.

AIM AND SUGGESTED METHOD OF INVESTIGATION

Aim: To conduct a preliminary investigation into the efficacy of the proposed three-way classificatory system, primarily in terms of improvement in learners' ability to interpret various conditional sentences that might be encountered in the course of almost any everyday English linguistic interaction.

Suggested Method: Subjects*5 are presented with test 1 (see below), consisting of a set of conditional sentences, to each of which are appended one or more yes-no questions, these being designed to assess the subject's ability to comprehend clearly certain key aspects of the sentence, such as its time reference or degree of hypotheticality. With no special information or instruction being offered at this stage, the subjects are asked simply to answer on the basis of their current grammatical knowledge. The same subjects are subsequently offered basic tuition in the proposed three-way classificatory system, after which test 2 is administered (containing sentences structurally identical to those of test 1 but disguised in terms of lexis and order of presentation), and they are once again asked to answer in the light of their current knowledge. The proportion of correct answers achieved on test 1 is then compared with that achieved on test 2, thereby enabling the investigator to ascertain to what extent, if any, the subjects' ability to interpret the different sentence-types has improved. *6

TESTS (& ANSWER KEYS)

Test 1

Read the sentences that follow and then select an answer to each of the questions based upon them by circling the appropriate letter.

(1) If you boil water, it turns to steam.
Does this sentence imply that someone actually has boiled water at some time in the past?

　　　　A. Yes　　B. No

(2) If x equals 3 and y equals 4, xy equals 12.
Does this sentence imply that x actually has equaled 3 at some time in the past?

　　　　A. Yes　　B. No

(3) If you're busy at present, I'll call back later.
① Might this sentence imply that I accept that you are busy at present?

　　　　A. Yes　　B. No

② Might this sentence imply that I am offering to call back later?

　　　　A. Yes　　B. No

(4) If I won the lottery, I would go on a cruise.
Does this sentence imply that that I won the lottery at some time in the past?

　　　　A. Yes　　B. No

(5) If you weren't busy, why didn't you take in the washing?
① Does this sentence imply that you probably were not busy at some time in the (recent) past?

　　　　A. Yes　　B. No

② Does this sentence imply that you did not take in the washing?

　　　　A. Yes　　B. No

(6) If you're beautiful, I'm a Martian!
① Does this sentence imply that I truly believe you to be beautiful?

　　　　A. Yes　　B. No

② Does this sentence imply that I truly believe myself to be a Martian?

　　　　A. Yes　　B. No

(7) If the weather had been good, we would have gone for a walk.
① Does this sentence imply that the weather was not good?

　　　　A. Yes　　B. No

② Does this sentence imply that we did not go for a walk?

　　　　A. Yes　　B. No

(8) If I hadn' t finished my chores by the time my mother got back, she got angry.
① Does this sentence imply that my mother sometimes got back before I finished my chores?
           A. Yes   B. No
② Does this sentence imply that my mother sometimes got angry?
           A. Yes   B. No

(9) If the letter demanding immediate payment came this morning, we' ll have to go to the bank today.
Does this sentence imply that a letter may have arrived this morning?
           A. Yes   B. No

(10) If I don' t do my homework, I' ll be punished.
Does this sentence imply that I usually do not do my homework?
           A. Yes   B. No

(11) If you were earning money at the moment, we would be thinking about buying a new car.
① Does this sentence imply that you are not earning money at the moment?
           A. Yes   B. No
② Does this sentence imply that we are thinking about buying a new car?
           A. Yes   B. No

(12) If only we' d gone there tomorrow rather than today, this problem would never have occurred.
① Does this sentence imply that we went there today?
           A. Yes   B. No
② Does this sentence imply that we are planning to go there tomorrow?
           A. Yes   B. No
③ Does this sentence imply that a problem has occurred?
           A. Yes   B. No

Test 1 Answer Key
※[ ] = classification of sentence based on proposed taxonomy.
    (1)   A [A1]
    (2)   B [B1]
    (3) ①A ②A [C]
    (4)   B [A3]
    (5) ①A ②A [C]
    (6) ①B ②B [C]
    (7) ①A ②A [A4]
    (8) ①A ②A [A1]
    (9)   A [B2]
    (10)   B [A2]
    (11) ①A ②B [A3]
    (12) ①A ②B ③A [A4]

Test 2
Read the sentences that follow and then select an answer to each of the questions based upon them by circling the appropriate letter.
(1) If George is away at present, I' ll phone again next week.
① Might this sentence imply that I accept that George is away at present?
           A. Yes   B. No
② Might this sentence imply that I am offering to phone again next week?
           A. Yes   B. No

(2) If the sun had been shining, we would have played tennis.
① Does this sentence imply that the sun was not shining?
           A. Yes   B. No
② Does this sentence imply that we did not play tennis?
           A. Yes   B. No

(3) If you help a friend, you feel good.
Does this sentence imply that someone actually has helped a friend at some time in the past?
           A. Yes   B. No

(4) If she hadn' t finished cooking dinner by the time her husband came home, he shouted at her.
① Does this sentence imply that her husband sometimes came home before she finished cooking dinner?
           A. Yes   B. No
② Does this sentence imply that her husband sometimes shouted at her?
           A. Yes   B. No

(5) If only he'd gone on holiday next month rather than this month, we wouldn't be short of staff.

① Does this sentence imply that he went on holiday this month?

        A. Yes   B. No

② Does this sentence imply that he is planning to go on holiday next month?

        A. Yes   B. No

③ Does this sentence imply we are short of staff?

        A. Yes   B. No

(6) If he's a genius, I'm Julius Caesar!

① Does this sentence imply that I truly believe him to be a genius?

        A. Yes   B. No

② Does this sentence imply that I truly believe myself to be Julius Caesar?

        A. Yes   B. No

(7) If a equals 12 and b equals 3, a/b is 4.

Does this sentence imply that a actually has equaled 12 at some time in the past?

        A. Yes   B. No

(8) If I became famous, I would live in Hollywood.

Does this sentence imply that that I became famous at some time in the past?

        A. Yes   B. No

(9) If your mother is coming to stay, we'll have to start getting her room ready.

Does this sentence imply that your mother may be coming to stay?

        A. Yes   B. No

(10) If I don't pay the gas bill, they'll cut off our supply.

Does this sentence imply that I usually do not pay the gas bill?

        A. Yes   B. No

(11) If you were doing your best, I wouldn't need to help you.

① Does this sentence imply that you are not doing your best?

        A. Yes   B. No

② Does this sentence imply that I need to help you?

        A. Yes   B. No

(12) If you had a free day, why didn't you paint the roof?

① Does this sentence imply that you probably had a free day at some time in the (recent) past?

        A. Yes   B. No

② Does this sentence imply that you did not paint the roof?

        A. Yes   B. No

Test 2 Answer Key

    (1) ①A ②A [C]
    (2) ①A ②A [A4]
    (3)   A [A1]
    (4) ①A ②A [A1]
    (5) ①A ②B ③A [A4]
    (6) ①B ②B [C]
    (7)   B [B1]
    (8)   B [A3]
    (9)   A [B2]
    (10) B [A2]
    (11) ①A ②A [A3]
    (12) ①A ②A [C]

CONCLUSION

It is tentatively hoped that the use of a series of tests such as the above would offer, if not definitive proof, at least some preliminary indication of the efficacy of the proposed, as compared with that of the traditional, classification of conditional sentences, and that some similar approach, or improved version of it, might then form the basis of further investigation.

FOOTNOTES

*1 Some previously-introduced terminology has been slightly modified so as to better highlight taxonomic affinities.

*2 As if to confuse matters even further, linguists are not entirely uniform in their use of the term 'predictive conditional'. Although most tend to employ it as an umbrella term embracing all causatives from zero to 3rd conditionals, some reserve it for zero and 1st conditionals, on the one hand excluding 2nd and 3rd conditionals (preferring other terms for these such as 'speculative') whilst, on the other, including sentences herein classified as extrinsic implicatives. See, for example Wikipedia's entry on this subject2).

*3 One might additionally be tempted, on the basis of structural similarity, to group B1 with A1, but this would be to ignore the fact that implicative conditionals, particularly the intrinsic kind, do not necessarily make "predictions" in any real sense, and thus to label them 'predictive' might be considered somewhat misleading (see also the previous paper1), p.26).

*4 Similarly, as regards the apparent possibility of grouping B2 along with A2, although the difference between the two types, exemplified respectively by the following,

[1] If the inspector arrived this morning, then the inspection will begin today.

(e.g. because the rules happen to stipulate that an inspection must begin on the day of an inspector's arrival - the actual basis of the inference being immaterial, the point being simply that it is made in accordance with some specific data/set of rules etc. known to the speaker)

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

may again seem slight, the issue in [2] is no more than a simple, and essentially theoretical, cause-and-effect sequence, whereas in [1] we are dealing with a protasis which in actuality (not merely in theory) may or may not be true. The reality of the difference can be verified by replacing 'if' with 'if it is true that', yielding sensible and semantically unchanged

[1a] If it is true that the inspector arrived this morning, then the inspection will begin today.

as opposed to nonsensical (and even ungrammatical)

[2a] *If it is true that it rains tomorrow, the picnic will be cancelled.

*5 Ideally, a group of intermediate-level English-learners, who may therefore be expected to have a reasonably sound basic grasp of conditional sentence-patterns.

*6 In order to avoid any skewing of results, until test 2 has been completed, subjects should naturally (a) not be informed of the correct answers to test 1, and (b) be asked not to discuss test 1 among themselves.

REFERENCES
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条件文の意味論的分類—評価方法

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本稿の目的は、条件文の伝統的な分類法に対し、意味論に基づく条件文の分類法が学習ツールとして優れている度合いを調べるための方法を提示することである。