On the Disambiguation of Predictive Conditionals

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ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to demonstrate that a primarily semantically-based taxonomy of conditional sentences, in contrast to the conventional structure-based taxonomy, enables the disambiguation of structurally identical, but semantically different, predictive conditional sentences.

Keywords:　assumptive, causative, conditional, implicative, predictive, realis

INTRODUCTION

In a previous paper[1], I suggested that the conventional two-way classification of English conditional sentences into predictive vs. non-predictive was inadequate to convey often highly significant differences between ostensibly similar sentences, positing instead a more refined three-way classification into causative, implicative and assumptive, which takes account not only of obvious structural differences between sentences but also of subtle differences in the semantic interpretation of the subordinator 'if', tentatively proposing in a subsequent paper[2] a possible means of objectively evaluating the preferability of that three-way classification from the viewpoint of the learner.

In the present paper, I would like to consider specifically how, even within the conventional category of predictive conditionals, the method of subcategorization most commonly subscribed to in what might, for want of a better term, be described as the Anglophone TEFL world[*1] does the learner to some extent a disservice by failing to distinguish in any systematic way between structurally identical, but semantically very different, sentences.

I shall commence with a brief survey of the most typical (English-language) English grammar and usage guides available online in terms of the information contained on predictive conditional sentences, and proceed to investigate a number of cases in which the conventional taxonomy fails to disambiguate structurally identical sentences.

SURVEY

Even the most cursory glance at online English grammar and usage guides is sufficient to reveal that by far the most commonly adopted classification is that into the following four types:

1. zero conditionals
2. 1st conditionals
3. 2nd conditionals
4. 3rd conditionals

which are presented as consisting of the following combinations of structures:

1. (if-clause) **simple present** + (main clause) **simple present**
E.g. *If you boil water, it turns to steam.*

2. (if-clause) **simple present** + (main clause) **simple future**
E.g. *If it rains tomorrow, we'll cancel the picnic.*

3. (if-clause) **simple past** + (main clause) **conditional present**
E.g. *If I won the lottery, I would buy a sports car.*

4. (if-clause) **past perfect** + (main clause) **conditional perfect**
E.g. *If you had set your alarm clock, you wouldn't have overslept.*

Indeed, this basic system is so widespread as to be considered, to all practical intents and purposes, universal, and is essentially subscribed to by, among

numerous others, all of the following popular English-teaching websites: EF[3], EnglishClub[4], English Grammar Online[5], Learn English[6], englisch-hilfen.de[7], English 4U[8], UAZone.org[9], FluentsU[10], Eurocentres[11], Grammar Monster[12], Grammarly Blog[13], My English Pages[14].

It is, however, interesting to note that not all authorities share the same level of confidence as to the wisdom of an entirely, or primarily, structure-based classification. Jed Webb[15], for instance, while citing 10 example sentences that notionally fit the generally accepted description of a first conditional, namely, one in which

"the future [non-]occurrence or [non-]existence of an action or state is a consequence of some r e a l l y possible prior action or state"

notes – somewhat worryingly – that only one,

If you do not pass the test, you will fail the course.

conforms structurally to what he terms the 'traditional view' of first conditionals, namely by realizing the construction

[IF + Present Simple, WILL + Infinitive (Future)]

It is to certain other cases in which the inadequacies of the conventional structure-oriented taxonomy are revealed that we shall turn our attention in the following section.

SYSTEMIC COMPARISON

I intend here to compare, with respect to four particular cases and in terms of ability to distinguish fundamentally different meanings conveyed in each case by ostensibly the same predictive conditional sentence, the conventional structure-only categorization system as outlined above with the combined semantic-structural categorization system as initially proposed in my paper of 2014[1] and as subsequently both refined and terminologically simplified in my paper of 2017[2], to both of which the reader is kindly requested to refer for details. In each case cited below,
(1) = example sentence

(2) = possible meanings (in order of plausibility)
(3) = conventional structure-only categorization
(4) = proposed combined semantic-structural categorization

CASE 1
(1) *If we get to the station on time, we take the 4:03 train.*
(2) ① We may or may not get to the station on time at a certain point in the future, but in the event that we do, we are supposed/expected to take the 4:03 train.
② Whenever we get to the station on time, we (always) take the 4:03 train.
(3) Zero conditional
(4) ①Type A2 (atemporal causative realis conditional: "if" does not allow the meaning "whenever/every time (that)")
②Type A1 (temporal causative conditional: "if" allows the meaning "whenever/every time (that)")

CASE 2
(1) *If x equals 3 and y equals 6, xy = 18.*
(2) ① On condition that the propositions "x equals 3" and "y equals 6" are true, the proposition "xy = 18" is also true.
② Every time x equals 3 and y equals 6, xy equals 18. [*2]
(3) Zero conditional
(4) ①Type B1 (intrinsic implicative conditional: "if" allows the meaning "on condition it is true that")
②Type A1 (temporal causative conditional: "if" does not allow the meaning "on condition it is true that")

CASE 3
(1) *If you' re busy, I' ll call back later.*
(2) ① On the provisional assumption that you are busy at present, I will call back later.
② You may or may not be busy at a certain future time, but, in the event that you are, I will call back after that.
(3) 1st conditional
(4) ①Type C (assumptive conditional: "if" allows the meaning "on the provisional assumption that")
②Type A2 (atemporal causative realis conditional: "if" does not allow the meaning "on

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the provisional assumption that")

CASE 4
(1) *If it rained, we would stay indoors.*
(2)① I do not think that it will rain at a certain future time, but if that were to happen, we would stay indoors.

② Whenever it rained during a certain past period, we (always) stayed indoors.
(3) 2nd conditional
(4)①Type A3 (atemporal causative improbable-counterfactual irrealis conditional: "if" does not allow the meaning "whenever/every time (that)")

②Type A1 (temporal causative conditional: "if" allows the meaning "whenever/every time (that)")

CONCLUSION

Although only a small number of cases are examined here, they are, in the opinion of the present writer, sufficient to indicate that the proposed classification of (so-called) predictive conditionals serves to make clearer to the learner in a systematic way certain, often subtle, semantic distinctions between sentence-types than does the conventional, exclusively structure-based, taxonomy. Naturally, the question as to whether, or to what extent, the explicit teaching of grammar is necessary or indeed beneficial to the learner is one that will no doubt continue to be a point of contention among both linguists and language teachers for some time to come, and to attempt to render any final or definitive judgment thereon would go well beyond the scope of the present paper.

Nonetheless, it hardly seems unreasonable to infer, from the very existence of popular, widely accessed English-teaching websites largely or exclusively devoted to the explicit teaching of grammar, the existence of, at the very least, a perception among learners – and, perhaps, even among teachers – as to the need for clear, systematic analyses of linguistic phenomena, if only to complement or reinforce other more practical or empirical aspects of the language acquisition process.

FOOTNOTES

[1] That is to say, I refer here specifically to English as it is taught – predominantly by trained native-speakers – in language schools in countries whose official, or first, language is English and as is generally reflected in the kinds of native-authored English grammar website cited in the present article.

[2] Somewhat absurd, though not impossible. ① differs from ② in that the apodosis of the former, rather than denoting an event that invariably results from some prior cause, consists simply in a reformulation of the information contained in the protasis: it is true by dint of natural mathematical laws which apply regardless of known incidents of occurrence in the real world. For a fuller discussion of this distinction, see my 2014 paper [1], p.26-27.

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予測的条件文の曖昧さの解消について

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　本論考の目的は、構造的に同一でありながら意味論的に異なる予測的条件文の曖昧さを従来の構造に基づく分類ではなく、主として意味論に基づく条件文の分類を通じて解消しうることを証明することである。