Incomplete conditionals and the syntax–pragmatics interface

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ABSTRACT

This paper is concerned with conditional thoughts that are expressed via 'incomplete conditionals' in which an *if*-clause is uttered with no corresponding main clause, and yet still succeeds at communicating a fully-fledged conditional proposition. Incomplete conditionals pose a puzzle for the semantics and pragmatics of conditionals as in one respect, a condition is expressed explicitly using the canonical form 'if p', yet in another, the target of the condition is left unexpressed, requiring recourse to other linguistic or extra-linguistic information for its recovery. Taking observations from attested corpora, we explore the various ways in which the consequent of an incomplete conditional can be recovered, demonstrating that cases of incompleteness range from simple cases of ellipsis which are susceptible to a syntactic solution at one end of the continuum, to pragmatically recoverable cases at the other. This involves considering aspects of meaning arising out of the co-text, including cross-sentential anaphoric dependencies and considerations of coherence, as well as extra-linguistic context such as shared sociocultural information and world knowledge.

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1. Introduction

It is well reported that conditionals of the form 'if p, q' can give rise to a range of non-conditional 'pragmatic' readings. For example, they can be used to highlight the relevance of q as in (1), as politeness markers as in (2), or to hedge the content of q as in (3).

(1) If you're looking for your keys, they're on the table.
(2) If you wouldn't mind, could you close the door?
(3) If I remember rightly, it's Tuesday today.

While in canonical cases p is expected to describe a condition for the truth of q (hence, 'conditional'), non-conditional meanings such as those in (1) to (3) typically arise when p functions not as a condition for the truth of q, but as a condition for the felicity of q as performing a successful speech act. The dominant view on the semantics of conditional sentences that express non-conditional thoughts makes use of Gricean reasoning: since the main meaning expressed diverges from the explicit content of what is said, the speaker must have had independent contextual reasons for using a conditional form that

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licenses the non-conditional reading (see Grice, 1967 on the mismatch between natural language conditionals and the material conditional; see e.g. Franke, 2009 on the conditional relationship between *p* and *q*).

This paper is not about conditional sentences expressing non-conditional meanings. Rather, this paper is concerned with a species of conditional thought whose primary meaning is not recoverable by looking at the relationship between *p* and *q*, precisely because at the level of the uttered sentence, there is no explicit relationship to be recovered in the first place. That is, this paper is concerned with what we call 'incomplete conditionals': conditional thoughts that are expressed via a *conditional sentence fragment* of the form 'if *p*', as in the clause marked in bold in (4) (example from the Great British International Corpus of English).

(4)   (Casual conversation about common friends)
        A: And Karen and Ian want to buy her half of the mortgage out, so they'll have too much mortgage.
        B: Yeah… It really is…
        A: I know. With Ian only a tennis coach.
        B: Well even now. I mean, **if he has good rates, good bank rates, and he's got a steady job…**
        A: That's true.

                                                                                                    (ICE-GB, S1A-036: 035)

The defining feature of incomplete conditionals is that an *if*-clause is uttered with no corresponding main clause, and yet the *if*-clause still succeeds at communicating a fully-fledged conditional proposition.

Incomplete conditionals pose a puzzle for the semantics and pragmatics of conditionals as in one respect, a condition is expressed explicitly using the canonical form 'if *p*', yet in another, the target of the condition is left unexpressed, requiring recourse to other linguistic or extra-linguistic information for its recovery. To put it another way, in one respect we have a very direct relationship between the sentence form used and the intended meaning in that the use of an *if*-clause gives rise to a conditional reading, while in another, the gap between form and meaning couldn't be further apart as the intended meaning is left unarticulated and requires recourse to other resources to fill in that gap. So pragmatic inferencing is not required to recover a *non*-conditional pragmatic reading as in (1) to (3), but rather, pragmatic inferencing is required to fill in the missing content of the *directly expressed conditional form* in order to render a fully propositional conditional.

The phenomenon of meaningful incomplete sentential utterances in general is perhaps the most obvious manifestation of the mismatch between form and meaning that is attested in language. Assuming that the goal of a theory of communication is to reflect the ways in which people use and understand language in ordinary discourse, we view it the task of such an explanatorily adequate theory to account for this absence of a one-to-one mapping between structures and meanings. This leaves open the debate of the appropriate division of labour between semantics and pragmatics, and one of the most crucial questions that therefore has to be asked is whether the sentence is, as traditionally seen in formal semantic and syntactic approaches to language, appropriate as the basic unit of semantic, truth-conditional analysis, or whether this assumption is too restrictive in that it leaves aspects of meaning only observable at the level of discourse to be pushed to the 'pragmatics wastebasket'. If we start with the sentence, an incomplete conditional will likely be viewed as simply that: incomplete; hence, such instantiations in natural language would remain outside the remit of semantic theory. The arguments in favour of utterance-based approaches to the study of truth-conditional semantics[1] are well attested (e.g. Carston, 2002; Recanati, 2010; Jaszczolt, 2016 among many others), and this paper takes the case of incomplete conditionals as evidence in favour of the contextualist view that utterance-based semantics fares better at generating intuitive truth conditions than sentence-based semantics. Indeed, we demonstrate that intuitively truth-conditional content can be recoverable from an implicitly communicated consequent on the basis of pragmatic considerations, even in the absence of any explicitly uttered linguistic material. We thus take the case of incomplete conditionals as a fruitful case study in showing that syntactically-driven accounts of meaning are too restrictive to do justice to the empirical facts.

At this point, a disclaimer is in order. We rely on the intuition that speakers are able to — and do — assign truth values to natural language conditionals as they are used in context, and hence that conditionals are amenable to a truth-conditional treatment. On this intuitive basis, we resist the view that truth conditions are a 'philosophers' fiction', and instead aim to provide an explanatorily adequate view of the truth conditions of natural language conditionals as they are used and understood in ordinary discourse.[2] For the sake of argument, we follow Ramsey's (1929) intuition that people make judgements about *q* assuming *p* as given, and as such assume a Stalnakerian view on the truth conditions of conditional utterances, where an uttered sentence of the form 'if *p*, *q*' is true if and only if in the closest possible world where *p* is true, *q* is also true (Stalnaker, 1975). But note that the goal of this paper is not to comment on the truth conditions of conditional *propositions*, but rather to show that interlocutors rely on much more than the syntactic structure to recover the missing content of incomplete conditionals such that the relevant truth conditions can be applied at the propositional level.

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[1] Or 'truth-conditional pragmatics', as labelled by Recanati (e.g. 2010), but this is a matter of terminological preference as opposed to theoretical commitment.

[2] As we are working within the framework of truth-conditional semantics, probabilistic approaches to conditionals are not discussed here, but the interested reader is directed to seminal works such as Adams (1975) and Edgington (1986).