

# Towards a pragmatic category of conditionals

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## Abstract

In this paper, we present the benefits of regarding conditionality as a pragmatic phenomenon as compared with approaches based on the syntactic category of a conditional sentence. We propose a pragmatic category of conditionality and justify it using theoretical arguments supported with examples from our database collected from the International Corpus of English-GB. Next, we demonstrate how conditional utterances that pertain to a variety of syntactic constructions can be represented in Default Semantics, a contextualist, truth-conditional approach to utterance meaning. We identify six types of such constructions, using the dimensions of (i) primary vs. secondary meaning (PM/SM index) and (ii) meaning conveyed through sentence structure vs. meaning conveyed at the level of merger representation (WS/ $\Sigma$  index). It is concluded that in view of the diversity of constructions through which conditional thoughts are expressed, conditionality is best regarded as a pragmatic (and as such conceptual) category. Finally, we comment on the status of this claim as a potential semantic/pragmatic universal. © 2016 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

**Keywords:** Conditionals; Pragmatic category; Radical contextualism; Default Semantics

## 1. Rationale and objectives

In the history of semantics and pragmatics, the label 'conditional' has been used for a variety of constructions and phenomena and has been delimited in a number of ways. In this paper we focus on what we call a 'pragmatic category of conditionals'. We propose to tie the notion of 'conditionality' to the property of expressed thoughts and at the same time explain conditionality so understood using a version of post-Gricean truth-conditional contextualist semantics. So, our primary interest is how speakers express conditional meanings in discourse and how the diversity of forms that can be used to express such conditional meanings can be accounted for in a theory of discourse meaning. One of the strengths of our approach lies in its methodology. We start with extensive empirical data and use the rather uncontroversial assumptions that (i) we will find examples of conditional sentences – sentences of the form 'if  $p$ ,  $q$ ' – that express conditional or non-conditional thoughts, and equally that (ii) there will be conditional thoughts that are expressed by other, non-conditional sentence forms. In other words, our pragmatic category of conditionality will not be constrained by the sentence form, and yet our analysis will yield itself to a truth-conditional treatment, and as such, to a contextualist semantic representation. While it has been observed in the literature that there are conditionals which are expressed through non-conditional sentence forms, to our knowledge there has been no fully developed semantic/pragmatic unified account of conditionality that would incorporate them. As will be evident throughout the paper, our approach will be founded on accepting the assumption of a relaxed approach to compositionality called 'interactive compositionality'; that is,

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compositionality predicated of acts of communication rather than sentence structures – the topic to which we turn in section 4. The advantage of our analysis lies in offering a treatment of this pragmatically construed category in a formal framework that enjoys predictive power and normativity.

The structure of the paper is as follows. In section 2, we attend to the distinction between conditional sentences, utterances and thoughts, and motivate our pragmatic stance. In section 3, we attend to the mismatches between forms and meanings in expressing conditionality in more detail, and to their theoretical consequences. In section 4, we justify adopting Default Semantics (Jaszczolt, 2005, 2010, 2016), a radical contextualist approach to representing meaning, demonstrating how representation of conditionality across a broad spectrum of structures can be achieved in this framework. Section 5 concludes and indicates remaining questions and possible further directions.

## 2. Conditional sentences, conditional utterances, and conditional thoughts

The meanings of conditionals have given rise to many discussions and controversies in formal semantics, cognitive semantics and post-Gricean pragmatics. In formal semantics, pragmatic considerations have often been appealed to in order to demonstrate that conditional sentences in natural language do, or do not, essentially stem out of material conditionals on the level of their logical form. On the other hand, various classifications of conditional sentences have emphasised a battery of criteria by means of which, allegedly, one ought to distinguish qualitatively different categories of what superficially appears to be merely an instance of ‘if  $p$ ,  $q$ ’. Our objective in this paper is a little different from just adding a voice to these disputes, and is, we think, more positive in its outlook. We attempt to offer an argument for a unified pragmatic category of conditionals that is *not* based on the syntactic form of the expression, the presence of a relevant connective, or even a conditional meaning as it is understood in minimalist semantic accounts. In other words, the object of study is *not* how uttered sentences map onto their underlying logical forms, but rather *the main intended meanings that speakers use these utterances to convey*. For that purpose, we show that by adopting Default Semantics, a radical contextualist approach to natural language meaning, one can bring together various uses of conditional sentences on the one hand, and various (overt and covert) means of expressing conditional thought in natural language on the other.

To repeat, the resultant object of study is what we term a ‘pragmatic category of conditionals’; we appeal to pragmatic processes to recover (i) conditional meanings that may be expressed either overtly or covertly, and (ii) utterances whose conditionality constitutes either the primary intended meaning of the speaker as it is understood in Default Semantics, or some secondary meaning – that is, the meaning that does not pertain to the main intended speech act. In other words, we are left with a cognitively plausible pragmatic category which at the same time yields itself to a truth-conditional treatment.

It is an interesting albeit unsurprising fact about the English language that there is no bi-unique relation between the form of a conditional sentence and conditional meaning. ‘Unsurprising’ in that the lack of such bi-uniqueness is also pervasive in other domains, such as those of other sentential vis-à-vis logical connectives, temporal reference (where we find tense-time mismatches), or of illocutionary forces and their realisations by illocutionary verbs. With reference to conditionals, on the one hand, (i) conditional sentences are not the only way to express conditional thoughts, as (1) and (2) demonstrate, and on the other, (ii) conditional sentences can be put to a variety of uses other than expressing conditional thoughts, as shown in (3) and (4).<sup>1,2</sup> Approximations at the main intended meaning are given in (1a)–(4a), respectively.

- (1) Touch her iPad and she’ll scream.
- (1a) If you touch her iPad, she’ll scream.
- (2) Your money or your life.
- (2a) If you don’t give me your money, I will take your life.
- (3) If you wouldn’t mind, could you close the door?
- (3a) Please close the door.
- (4) If that’s a real diamond I’ll eat my hat!
- (4a) That is definitely not a real diamond.

This discrepancy in the primary intended meanings of conditional sentences provides the first warning sign for delimiting an object of study for a pragmatic, and on our contextualist account also semantic, analysis. Perhaps, to make use of Kratzer’s (1991/2012:106) famous dictum, “[t]he history of the conditional is the story of a syntactic mistake”,<sup>3</sup> but, what is

<sup>1</sup> It has to be pointed out that the conditional meaning associated with the conjunction in (1) intuitively appears stronger than that associated with the disjunction in (2). However, this does not affect our argument. We thank Louis de Saussure for drawing our attention to this point.

<sup>2</sup> This is not to say that in (3) and (4) conditionality is absent altogether on the conceptual level. We return to this point in sections 3.2 and 4.

<sup>3</sup> It has to be remembered that our object of study as well as the research questions are tangential to the concerns of a formal semantic account of a particular sentence structure.

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