



On the distinction between inferential and meta-inferential conditionals in Dutch

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ABSTRACT

Inferential conditional sentences represent a blueprint of someone's reasoning process from premise to conclusion. The central aim of this paper is to argue for a distinction between inferential conditional clauses (CCs) and a new category of META-INFERENTIAL CCs, related to the meta-linguistic and meta-metaphorical CCs in Dancygier and Sweetser (2005). With the inferential CCs, an inferential speech act is encoded: a conclusion is being drawn on the basis of evidence in the antecedent. E.g. *If the lights are on, they are home*. The meta-inferential CCs, by contrast, comment upon that inferential process on a meta-level, and hence represent an assertive rather than an inferential speech act. E.g. *If I see that the lights are on, I conclude that they are home*. We first chart the different lexicalisation strategies for the concept of inference. The inventory distinguishes between the lexical marking of the inferential status of the CCs, only occurring in the consequent, and that of their meta-inferential status, surfacing in antecedent and/or consequent. We furthermore investigate the degree of clause integration for the different types of inferential and meta-inferential CCs in order to underpin and refine the semantic-pragmatic typology by means of formal syntactic criteria, such as proportionality and clefting.

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1. Introduction

In this introductory section we first draw a distinction between two major types of conditional clauses (CC), namely content and inferential CCs, and the types of speech acts they realize (Section 1.1). Secondly, we introduce a new category of meta-inferential CCs (Section 1.2), which shares properties with both the content and the inferential CCs, and which is related to those of meta-linguistic and meta-metaphorical CCs in Dancygier and Sweetser (2005). Thirdly, we discuss the formal differences between the content, inferential and meta-inferential CCs in terms of degrees of clause integration (Section 1.3).

1.1. The distinction between content and inferential CCs

Since the influential work of Sweetser (1990) the linguistic literature on conditional clauses has come to agree that the conditional relation between the antecedent in the subclause and the consequent in the main clause can hold on (at least)

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three different levels or domains, namely the content domain, the inferential or epistemic domain and the speech act domain, as illustrated in the examples in (1):

- (1) a. If you press the button, the bell rings.
- b. If the curtains are closed, the neighbours are on holiday.
- c. If it is not rude to ask, what made you decide to leave IBM?

The content CC in (1a) expresses the connection between the actualisation of different situations or events in reality: pressing the button causes the bell to ring. This is not the case with the inferential CC in (1b) since the state of the curtains cannot be considered to be the cause of the neighbours' absence. The inferential clause expresses a reasoning process from premise to conclusion. As Sweetser remarks in (2a), this process also concerns a causal connection, but in the domain of reasoning and argumentation:

- (2) a. "It is not enough to recognize that the conditionality is between epistemic states rather than between propositions, it is further necessary to assume some connection between knowledge and conclusion. The causal link involved [...] is certainly not at the content level, but is easy to see at the epistemic level: the knowledge causes the conclusion" (Sweetser, 1990:117).
- b. "A conditional is an inferential if it expresses an inference from one proposition to another. The latter proposition thus expresses an epistemically possible or necessary conclusion" (Declerck and Reed, 2001:42).

Although the typology of Declerck and Reed (2001) often uses a different terminology (such as 'actualisation' for the content domain) and proposes a very detailed further subcategorisation, (2b) illustrates that their analysis basically runs parallel to that of Sweetser (1990) as far as the inferential CCs are concerned.

With the speech act CC in (1c), the fact that the question is not rude is not the cause of it being asked. In other words, with content and inferential CCs there is a causal connection between antecedent and consequent, albeit on distinct levels, which is absent from the speech act CCs. Speech act CCs and content CCs do resemble one another, however, as far as the hypotheticality of their antecedent is concerned. In both cases the antecedent is not given: you needn't press the button in (1a) and the question may be rude indeed in (1c). In the latter case the hearer is entitled to ignore the question and refuse to answer. With the inferential CC in (1b), by contrast, the antecedent is often presented as being observed or known to be the case by the speaker.

It is important to observe, however, that in spite of the 'speech act' label for the third level in (1c), where the interrogative in the consequent belongs to the directive speech acts, the distinction between the three levels is largely independent of the speech act performed by the CC. Nevertheless, the three levels differ from one another as far as the scope of the illocutionary force operator is concerned. On the content level in (1a), the antecedent and the consequent together express one assertive speech act.¹ On the inferential and speech act level in (1b–c), the consequent by itself counts as an independent speech act. More in particular, the consequent in (1b) realizes a specific kind of speech act which we will label inferential speech act, i.e. the act of drawing a conclusion from available evidence. In terms of the original typology of Austin (1962), this type can be classified as a combination of 'verdictive' ('delivering a finding'; Sadock, 2004:64) and 'expositive' ('fitting an utterance into the course of an argument or conversation'; Huang, 2007:106). In their extensive overview of illocutionary verbs, Searle and Vanderveken (1987:179–216) do not discuss verbs such as *conclude*, *infer* or *deduce*. They do include related verbs such as *conjecture* or *hypothesize* in their class of assertives (1987:188) and verbs such as *assure*, *guarantee*, or *warrant* in that of commissives (1987:196–7). In connection with the latter they even explicitly refer to complex speech acts being both assertive and commissive. In her dictionary of speech act verbs, by contrast, Wierzbicka (1987:274–286) does introduce a separate group of *conclude*-verbs, which apart from the verb *conclude* itself contains *deduce*, *infer*, *gather*, *reckon*, *estimate*, *calculate*, *count*, *prove* and *compare*. In addition, verbs expressing a weaker form of conclusion are brought together in the group around the verb *guess*, including *bet*, *presume*, *suspect*, *suppose*, *wonder*, *speculate*, *conjecture*, *predict*, *forecast*, and *prophecy* (1987:255–270). In this paper, we focus on the distinction between the overall category of assertive speech acts and the particular subcategory of inferential speech acts.

1.2. From meta-linguistic to meta-inferential CCs

In addition to the three basic domains or levels introduced in the previous section, Dancygier (1998) and Dancygier and Sweetser (2005:126–136) distinguish the class of meta-linguistic CCs in (3c–d), which is inspired by the notion of meta-linguistic negation in the work of Horn (1995, 2001:362–444), as in the examples in (3a–b):

- (3) a. Around here, we don't like coffee, we love it. (Dancygier, 1998:97)
- b. He didn't call the [pólis], he called the [polís]. (Horn, 2001:371)

¹ In other words, someone who asserts (1a) merely describes the functioning of the button and does not assert that the bell rings.

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