

# Semantics, pragmatics and conditionals

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# What is a conditional?

## Conditional sentences in English

'If  $p$ , (then)  $q$ '

## Example

(1) If you drop the vase, it will break

# Conditional sentences in English discourse

In addition to the standard 'conditional' use, conditional sentences have many other uses in English discourse

## Example

- (2) I would be grateful if you could open the window
- (3) If possible, I'd like these done by Wednesday
- (4) I want to buy her something really special, if you know what I mean

# Conditional utterances in English discourse

In addition to the standard 'if  $p$ ,  $q$ ' sentence form, conditionals can also be expressed in other ways

## Example

- (5) Take one more step and I'll shoot
- (6) Your money or your life
- (7) Are you hungry? Have some food

# Summary so far

- The sentence form 'if  $p$ ,  $q$ ' can express **conditional** or **non-conditional** meanings
- The sentence form 'if  $p$ ,  $q$ ' is not the only way to express conditional meanings, but in a **variety of ways**

# Big questions

- ★ What is the relation between a conditional sentence and the meanings it can express?
- ★ What do conditional utterances have in common to make them 'conditional'?
- ★ How can we account for all of these forms and meanings of conditionals in semantics?

# Outline of today's talk

- ▶ Some theories of conditionals
- ▶ Semantics and pragmatics
- ▶ Looking at 'primary meanings': Conditionals in Default Semantics
- ▶ What counts as a conditional?
- ▶ Towards a **semantic** theory of a **pragmatic** category of conditionals

# Conditionals in logic

## Truth table of material implication

$p$	$q$	$p \rightarrow q$
T	T	T
T	F	F
F	T	T
F	F	T



If you drop the vase, it will break **T** ✓

If you drop the vase, it will break **F** ✓

If you drop the vase, <sup>?</sup>it will break **T** ?

If you drop the vase, you are a dog **T** ???



## Lewis (1973), Stalnaker (1975)

- Imagine the world as it is but where  $p$  is true
  - Is  $q$  true in that world?
- 
- ▶ Only looks at first two lines of the truth table
  - ▶ Gives more intuitive truth conditions: what happens when  $p$  is false is not considered

## Example

(8) There are biscuits on the counter if you want some

...but what if I don't want any biscuits?

## Example

A: Do you want to go to a party tonight?

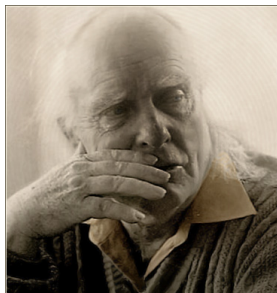
B: I have an exam tomorrow.

- The goal of semantics is to study **sentence meaning**
- The goal of pragmatics is to study **speaker meaning**

## B's meanings

**Sentence meaning:** The speaker has an exam tomorrow

**Speaker meaning:** The speaker does not want to go to the party



- Two-tiered picture of meaning:  
*what is said* + *what is implicated*
- *What is said* is **semantic**,  
**truth-conditional** meaning

## Example

A: Do you want to go to a party tonight?

B: I have an exam tomorrow.

## B's meanings

**Sentence meaning:**

The speaker has an exam tomorrow  
**(what is said)**

**Speaker meaning:**

The speaker does not want to go to the party  
**(what is implicated)**

## Example

(9) I haven't had breakfast

(9') I haven't had breakfast **today**

- If I ate breakfast yesterday but *not* today, did I say something **true** or **false**?
- In semantic contextualism, contextual information is allowed to determine truth conditions (e.g. Recanati 2010)
- This kind of theory looks at truth conditions of **utterances** (not sentences)
- Moving away from a strict, two-level picture of semantics and pragmatics
- ▶ How much context should we allow in semantics?

# Conditional examples

## Example

Conditional sentences, non-conditional meanings

(2) I would be grateful if you could open the window

(2') Please open the window

## Example

Non-conditional sentences, conditional meanings

(5) Take one more step and I'll shoot

(5') If you take one more step I'll shoot

- ▶ How to account for this range of meanings in a semantic theory of conditionals?

## Default Semantics (Jaszczolt 2005, 2010)

- A radical version of semantic contextualism in which the logical form of the utterance may be enriched **or even overridden** to give speaker's intended meaning.
- Truth-conditional unit pertains to the **primary, intended content** of the utterance.

# Sources of information in DS

DS identifies 5 sources of information that interact to generate the PM:

- Word meaning and sentence structure (WS)
  - Situation of discourse (SD)
  - World knowledge (WK)
  - Stereotypes about society and culture (SC)
  - Properties of the human inferential system (IS)
- ▶ Word meaning and sentence structure are not given any priority in determining *what is said*
- ▶ In different contexts of utterance, different sources may take precedence over others

## Example

(1) If you drop the vase, it will break

- ▶ Conditional sentence
- ▶ Conditional primary meaning

(2) I would be grateful if you could open the window

- ▶ Conditional sentence
- ▶ Non-conditional primary meaning
- ▶ Conditional *secondary meaning*

(5) Take one more step and I'll shoot

- ▶ Non-conditional sentence
- ▶ Conditional primary meaning



# Primary and secondary meanings

- In traditional Gricean pragmatics, there are two layers of meaning: *what is said* + *what is implicated*
- This corresponds to 'literal' explicit content, versus 'non-literal' implicit content
- In Default Semantics, the primary / secondary meaning divide **cuts across** the explicit / implicit divide
- Primary meanings take on the status of *what is said* which is the semantic, truth-conditional content of the utterance
- Secondary meanings roughly correspond to what is implicated ('implicatures')

## Conditionals in Default Semantics

The explicit content of an *if*-conditional can take the role of a **secondary meaning**, while its **primary meaning** is non-conditional

# Consequences for a theory of conditionals

- The primary meaning of 'if  $p$ ,  $q$ ' may or may not correspond to the 'if  $p$ ,  $q$ ' sentence form
- So in what sense is a sentence of the form 'if  $p$ ,  $q$ ' **conditional**, if it does not have a conditional primary meaning?
- ▶ **In other words, how can we define the class of conditional utterances?**

# What *is* a conditional?

- Require criteria that will capture **conditional thought** at all levels of communication
  - Conditional sentences with conditional primary meanings
  - Conditional sentences with conditional secondary meanings
  - Non-conditional sentences with conditional primary meanings

# Classifying conditionals: I

## Lewis (1973), Stalnaker (1975)

- Imagine the world as it is but where  $p$  is true
  - Is  $q$  true in that world?
- 
- These truth conditions do not apply to the primary meanings of all conditional sentences
  - But these truth conditions aim to follow the pattern of our conditional thought
  - We can apply these truth conditions to **conditional thoughts**
  - $p$  and  $q$  arise at a conceptual level, not (necessarily) at the level of the sentence
  - They *restrict* our consideration of  $q$  to those situations where  $p$  holds
  - ▶ All conditionals, whether they are syntactically realised as conditional sentences, or as conditional thoughts via non-conditional sentences, impose a **restriction**

# Classifying conditionals: I

## Criterion I

- ★  $p$  is a supposition
- ★  $q$  is restricted to those situations that  $p$  describes

## Classifying conditionals: II

- When we use the word 'if', we usually show that we don't know whether  $p$  is certainly true or not
- Because we used the word 'if', it implies that we weren't in the position to use 'since', which shows that we know that  $p$  is true
- In other words, 'if' indicates that  $p$  is somehow **remote** from reality
- But remember that it is not only 'if' that can express a conditional
- ▶ We want to extend this rationale to other conditional utterances that do not use 'if'

## Criterion II

- ★  $p$  expresses remoteness from reality
- ★ In a conditional, the speaker is not committed to the truth of  $p$

## Example

(2) I would be grateful if you could open the window

- Primary meaning: do  $p$
- $p$  is a **polite request** for the hearer to do something described in  $p$
- $p$  fulfils the two criteria for conditionality:
  - The speaker does not assume that the hearer is able to do  $p$  (remoteness)
  - The speaker's gratitude is conditional on the performance of  $p$  (supposition)
- This is a conventional use of 'if' used to indicate  $p$  is not assumed to be true in order to politely request  $p$
- This use of 'if' does not always require  $q$  to be uttered



### Example

(3) If possible, I'd like these done by Wednesday

- Primary meaning: 'do  $q$ '
- Here,  $p$  **hedges** the speaker's request for the hearer to perform the (indirect) request described in  $q$
- $p$  fulfils the two criteria for conditionality:
  - $p$  indicates that the speaker is not sure that  $q$  is possible
  - The request in  $q$  is restricted to the case where  $q$  is possible
- 'If' softens the force of the speaker's request/order

### Example

(7) Are you hungry? Have some food

- Primary meaning: 'if  $p$ ,  $q$ '
- This is a non-conditional sentence form expressing the conditional meaning: 'if you're hungry have some food'
- $p$  fulfils the two criteria for conditionality:
  - $p$  is a polar (yes/no) question, so invokes the possibility of alternatives (does not assume that  $p$  is true)
  - The assertion  $q$  is made on the assumption that  $p$  is true
- A non-conditional sentence satisfies the criteria for expressing a conditional utterance, and hence conditional thought

# Summary: I

- There is no one-to-one correspondence between conditional sentences using 'if' and conditional thoughts
- A conditional thought can be expressed either using a **conditional or other sentence form**
- When we look at conditional thoughts, the category of conditionals cannot be restricted to sentences using 'if'
- Using these pragmatic criteria for defining conditional **utterances**, we can see how conditionals using 'if' fit into broader semantic category

## Summary: II

- We can call it a **semantic category** because the truth-conditional (semantic) unit does not have to map onto the syntactic form of the sentence
- Suppositions can either be **primary** or **secondary meanings**
- In other words, conditionality does not have to be tied to truth-conditional content

### Conclusion

★ When we think of the semantic unit of conditionals in this broad way, we can account for...

- (i) the diversity of uses to which conditional 'if' can be put and
- (ii) the variety of ways of expressing conditional meanings

...in one semantic theory

# Thank you!

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