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
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
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
### Truth table of material implication

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>$p$</th>
<th>$q$</th>
<th>$p \rightarrow q$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>T</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>T</td>
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<td>T</td>
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<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>T</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If you drop the vase, it will break $\mathbf{T}$ ✓
If you drop the vase, it will break $\mathbf{F}$ ✓
If you drop the vase, ? it will break $\mathbf{T}$ ?
If you drop the vase, you are a dog $\mathbf{T}$ ???
Possible-worlds semantics and conditionals

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
Paul Grice (1975; 1978)

- 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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>B’s meanings</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sentence meaning:</strong></td>
<td>The speaker has an exam tomorrow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(what is said)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Speaker meaning:</strong></td>
<td>The speaker does not want to go to the party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(what is implicated)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Post-Gricean pragmatics: Contextualism

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: 1

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’.
Classifying conditionals: II

Criterion II

★ $p$ expresses remoteness from reality
★ In a conditional, the speaker is not committed to the truth of $p$
Example 1/3

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
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.
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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