

# Incomplete conditionals

A pragmatic analysis

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LAGB Annual Meeting

5 September 2014

# Incomplete conditionals

## Conditional sentence in English

A two-clause sentence of the form 'if  $p$ ,  $q$ '

## Incomplete conditional

An *if*-clause with no uttered main clause

## Example

(1) If you'd like to put on your helmet.

= 'polite directive'

[Examples drawn from the International Corpus of English-GB]

# Objectives

- To show that ‘polite directives’ can be issued by incomplete or complete conditionals with no semantic difference
- To demonstrate that an incomplete conditional does not require any completion to express a meaningful proposition
- To identify the sources of information that allow the recovery of the intended meaning of a polite directive in the framework of Default Semantics

# Outline of the talk

- Syntactic versus semantic incompleteness
- Conventionalisation versus standardisation
- Direct versus indirect conditionals
- Role of  $q$  in a polite directive
- Incomplete conditionals in Default Semantics

# What kind of incompleteness?

2 (main) options (Stainton 2005):

## Syntactic incompleteness

Recovery of syntactic constituents essential for meaning recovery

## Semantic incompleteness

Abbreviated syntactic structure encodes complete meaning

# Syntactically incomplete conditionals

## Example

- (2) A: It's obligatory is it to have something in a company report?  
B: If you've got more than a hundred in the workforce

Recovery of  $q$  is 'copy-pasted' from previous co-text

# Semantically incomplete conditionals

## Example

(1) If you'd like to put on your helmet.

...that'd be great  
...you'll be safer  
...you won't get caught

(1') Please put on your helmet.

- There need not be one single consequent recoverable from the context
- There may not be an intention of a consequent
- No 'completion' is required for meaning recovery
- **A case of semantic incompleteness**

# How to recover the intended meaning?

2 (main) options (Bach 1995):

## Conventionalisation

The pragmatic effect is only recognised through mutual understanding of that effect ('take a seat')

## Standardisation

Performative verbs retain 'literal' truth-evaluable meaning, but meaning is 'standardised' ('can you pass the salt?')



# Conventionalisation?

- The primary intended meaning of a polite directive can be recovered 'automatically' in virtue of the fact that this is how directives have come to be issued in English (and other languages; see Evans 2007)
- This use of 'if' has become conventionalised/grammaticalised: a subordinate clause takes on the role of a main clause
- **A case of conventionalisation?**

# Standardisation?

- Sometimes a consequent is overtly uttered, with the same pragmatic effect

## Examples

(3) If you'd like to come next door, we'll just examine you.

- Alternative hypothesis: it is in virtue of the conditional sentence form that the directive meaning is recovered
- The conditional clause attends to the hearer's negative face: 'if' invokes alternatives, so gives the hearer an 'out' (Brown & Levinson 1987; Ford 1997)
- Evans (2007): Any recoverable consequent (if there is one) must express 'positive evaluation'
- **A case of standardisation**

# So we're done.

An utterance of 'if  $p$ ' is understood as a polite directive because:

- The hearer has an implicit understanding of a consequent  $q$  ( $q$  need not have a determinate logical form)
- There is an implied causal relation between  $p$  and  $q$
- $q$  is a positive consequence of  $p$
- The conditional clause provides the 'politeness' element, giving the hearer an 'out'

...but...

## To complicate matters...

So-called 'indirect conditionals' do not adhere to this recipe (truth of  $q$  is not contingent on the truth of  $p$ )

### Example

(4) Now if you'd come round here, we have the Ottomans.

- There is an uttered consequent
- $p$  appears to have the illocutionary force of a polite directive
- But there is no causal relation between  $p$  and  $q$ , and  $q$  is not (ostensibly) a positive outcome of  $p$

# From indirect to direct conditionals

- Under contextualist assumptions, can enrich consequent of an indirect conditional to give a conditional relationship
- Indirect conditional at level of LF may be pragmatically interpreted as a direct conditional

## Example

- (4) Now if you'd come round here, we have the Ottomans.
- (4<sup>+</sup>) ?If you come round here **you'll see that** we have the Ottomans.
- (4') Please come here. These are the Ottomans.

- Is *q* responsible for generating the directive meaning? Probably not...

# From indirect to direct conditionals?

DIRECT

If you rang her now, she'd say yes.

If you'd like to come next door, we'll just examine you.

DIRECTIVE

?DIRECT

If you go back 2000 years, you will find evidence there.

If you look at my fingers, they're predominantly red.

?DIRECTIVE

INDIRECT

If you think about it, could you have anything more stupid.

If you come round here, we have the Ottomans.

DIRECTIVE

?INDIRECT

If you'd like to put on your helmet.

DIRECTIVE

# Focussing on the role of $p$

- Polite directives don't really fall on the cline between direct/indirect conditionals
- Sometimes they are direct, sometimes they are not, sometimes we can't tell
- Rather than the relationship between  $p$  and  $q$ , it is more useful to look at the communicative role of  $p$
- Want to account for the directive component regardless of the 'conditionality' of the sentence
- **How to handle all these cases in semantics?**

## 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.



# Identifying the primary meaning

- 1 If you rang her she'd say yes.  
[PM: You should ring her.]
- 2 **If you'd like to come next door**, we'll just examine you.  
[PM: Please come next door.]
- 3 If you go back 2000 years, you will find evidence there.  
[PM: There is evidence from 2000 years ago.]
- 4 If you look at my fingers, they're predominantly red.  
[PM: My fingers are predominantly red.]
- 5 **If you come round here**, we have the Ottomans.\*\*\*  
[PM: Please come here. These are the Ottomans.]
- 6 If you think about it, could you have anything more stupid.  
[PM: You couldn't have anything more stupid.]
- 7 **If you'd like to put on your helmet**.  
[PM: Please put on your helmet.]

# Complete versus incomplete conditionals

- Stirling (1999): a ‘polite directive’ with an uttered main clause retains the assertion that there is a causal relation between  $p$  and  $q$ ; these are different from isolated *if*-clauses which require no such relation for the performance of the speech act
- But there does not seem to be a difference in the PM between cases with an uttered main clause and those without
- How do we know whether  $p$  is used as a polite directive between these cases?
- Using the principles of DS, the addition of the main clause is an additional source of information contributing to the recovery of the PM

# Sources of information in DS

DS identifies 5 sources of information that may 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)

In different context of utterance, different sources may take precedence over others

# Features of polite directives

- *If + pronoun + verb* (usually with a modal verb, but not necessarily), often no main clause (WS)
- Prosodically complete with terminal intonation contour (Stirling 1999) (WS)
- Contingency relation between  $p$  and  $q$  (WK)
- Positive value of  $q$  leads to inference that hearer should do  $p$  (IS)

# Role of $q$ ?

- It doesn't really matter if there is an uttered consequent to infer the intended meaning of a polite directive
- If there is an uttered consequent, the source WK tells you whether there is a contingency relation between  $p$  and  $q$
- If  $q$  is positively valued, and a consequence of taking the action described in  $p$ , there is further support that  $p$  is intended as a directive
- The strength of the directive element is made manifest by these other features of the consequent

## Directive – indirect conditionals

(Jaszczolt 2010: 207)

“Default and inferential interpretations have to be construed as operating on a unit that is adequate for the case at hand, ranging from a morpheme to the entire discourse.”

### Example

(4) Now if you'd come round here, we have the Ottomans.

(4') (Please) come here. These are the Ottomans...

- If there is no contingency relation between  $p$  and  $q$ , it's as if two separate speech acts have been made
- Both  $p$  and  $q$  express independent propositions
- Hence one *sentence* may be used to express two PMs of the forms  $p$  and  $q$  respectively

# Utilising context

## Example

John's mother is always nagging him to wear a helmet when he goes cycling. One day he falls off his bike. When his mother sees his injuries, she utters:

(1) If you'd like to put on your helmet.

(1'') PM: You should wear your helmet (in general). / I told you so.

## Example

John and Bill are going out cycling. They never wear helmets, although they know they should. As they set off, John says to Bill:

(1) If you'd like to put on your helmet.

(1''') PM: Be careful.

# A note on other incomplete conditionals

- Not all incomplete conditionals are used as polite directives

## Examples

- (5) If only he could have made that catch.
- (6) If looks could kill!
- (7) A: I wish you wouldn't feel my stubble!  
B: If you didn't put your feet up on me...

- Recovery of intended meaning may come from different sources
- In (7), speaker B provides the condition upon which they will honour speaker A's desire; *p* is not presented as a 'conventionalised' directive, but as a hypothetical situation



# Discussion

- The two-clause conditional structure may, or may not mirror the propositional content of the utterance
- Doesn't really matter whether 'if  $p$ ' is considered to be 'incomplete' or not, or whether it is grammaticalised
- The PM is recoverable through a variety of sources of information
- If 'if  $p$ ' as a polite directive is grammaticalised, then the source WS is responsible for giving the meaning
- If not, other clues (intonation, situation of discourse) indicate it is used in this 'conventionalised' way; an overt main clause provides an additional source of information to recover the intended meaning
- By taking on board a truth-conditional unit which pertains to the PM, the conventionalisation/standardisation distinction is not that useful: truth-conditional content is not linked to syntactic form

# Conclusions

- Polite directives are a case of semantic incompleteness: a syntactically incomplete form gives rise to a complete proposition without any syntactic enrichment
- The PM of an utterance can be recovered via an interaction of different sources
- In a polite directive, an uttered main clause constitutes one source of information contributing to the PM
- An syntactically incomplete conditional *sentence* can be used to express a meaningful proposition
- The case of incomplete conditionals provides support to the thesis that the unit of semantic investigation should go beyond the sentence form to account for intended meanings

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# Thank you

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