Against the so-called ‘biscuit conditional’

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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
What is a conditional?

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‘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 can be put to many other uses in English discourse.

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(2) I would be grateful if you could open the window. [request]
(3) If possible, I’d like these done by Wednesday. [hedge request]
(4) I want to buy her something really special, if you know what I mean. [hedge assertion]
(5) There are biscuits on the sideboard if you want some. [specify relevance = biscuit conditional]
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Today’s questions

★ What is the relation between a conditional sentence and the meanings it can express?

★ How can we account for all of these uses of conditional sentences in semantics?
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★ How can we account for all of these uses of conditional sentences in semantics?
Objectives

★ To demonstrate that the notion of the ‘biscuit conditional’ does not reflect our intuitions about truth conditions

★ To present a classification of if-conditionals that can account for the relation between a conditional sentence of the form ‘if $p$, $q$’ and the range of meanings it can be used to express in discourse

★ To show that a radical contextualist account can handle all these uses of if-conditionals
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Truth-conditional accounts of conditionals

- Material implication (e.g. Grice (1975))
- Stalnakerian possible worlds (Stalnaker 1975)
  - ‘if \( p \) then \( q \)’ is true if, in the closest possible world to the actual world where \( p \) is true, \( q \) is true

Standard ‘direct’ conditionals

Eventuality of \( q \) is contingent on that of \( p \)

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Biscuit ‘indirect’ conditionals

Eventuality of $q$ is not contingent on that of $p$

$\rightarrow q$ is true whether or not $p$ is true
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2 classes of *if*-conditional?

‘Relevance’ conditionals

"the *if*-clause [...] specifies the circumstances in which the consequent is discourse-relevant, not the circumstances in which it is true" (Bhatt & Pancheva 2006: 671)

- Austin (1961): Biscuit conditionals are not conditional
- Predelli (2009): Antecedent of a biscuit conditional is ‘truth-conditionally irrelevant’
- Sweetser (1990): ‘speech-act conditionals’
- Dancygier (1999): also distinguishes ‘metatextual conditionals’ (*p* is a metalinguistic comment on *q*)
- Declerck & Reed (2001): distinguish 20 classes of ‘rhetorical conditionals’
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From indirect to direct conditionals

Example

(5) There are biscuits on the sideboard if you want some.

- 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

(5+) ?There are biscuits on the sideboard which you may have if you want some.

(5′) Please help yourself to a biscuit.

▶ A conditional sentence is used to express a non-conditional meaning
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Indirect conditionals are not limited to non-conditional meanings

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(6) If they ask you how old you are, you’re four. (from Siegel 2006: 171)

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Conditionals with no consequent

Example

(7) If you’d like to put on your helmet.

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

(7’) Please put on your helmet.
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Completing the conditional

- Sometimes a consequent is overtly uttered, with the same pragmatic effect as an ‘incomplete’ polite directive

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

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There are indirect conditionals with the same (directive) communicative intention

Example

(9) Now if you’d come round here, we have the Ottomans.
(9+) ?If you come round here you’ll see that we have the Ottomans.
(9’) Please come here. These are the Ottomans.

- p expresses a polite directive
- But q also expresses a proposition
- One sentence may be used to express two independent propositions
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Separating *if*-conditionals by ‘standard’ and ‘biscuit’ varieties does not always give us the truth conditions we want

- e.g. A ‘polite directive’ can be issued by a direct conditional, an indirect conditional, or even an incomplete conditional without an uttered consequent
  - Whether $p$ is used as a directive or not cuts across the direct/indirect conditional divide

- By dividing conditional sentences by a conditional relation between $p$ and $q$, we fail to bring together uses of these sentences with analogous meanings

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Classifying *if*-conditionals by the role of $p$

- Require a classification criterion that (better) reflects the main intended meaning of the conditional utterance
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- 300 spoken conversations, 2000 words per conversation
- Lexical search for ‘if’ gives 2068 results
- 6 classes of if-conditional were identified based on the communicative role of $p$
- 1702 of these were analysed as ‘conditional’ and annotated according to the 6 classes
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- \( p \) describes the situation where \( q \) may occur: it is a ‘real-world’ eventuality

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

- Often associated with direct conditionals, but indirect conditionals may fall under this type

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(10) I’ll buy you a Cherry B if you are a good boy. [conditional promise]

(10’) Be a good boy.

(11) If you hit me with it once more I’ll kill you. [conditional threat]

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(11) If you hit me with it once more I’ll kill you. [conditional threat]

(11′) Don’t hit me again.
2. Inferentials

- *p* provides the epistemic grounds for the assertion of *q*
- *p* may be taken for granted in the discourse as a true premise

**Example**

(12) If (as you say) the post office is closed, it must be past 5 o’clock.

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(13) If you’re looking for your keys, they’re on the table.

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- \( p \) specifies the topic of \( q \)

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(14) If you look at boroughs, the boroughs of London are suffering from charge-capping and spending limits.

- Often used with conceptual verbs, e.g. ‘look’, ‘think’, ‘remember’

- \( p \) may or may not contribute new informational content

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(15) If you go back 2000 years, you will find evidence of settlement there.

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- Commonly used *if*-clauses include ‘if I remember rightly’, ‘if you like’, ‘if X is to be believed’, ‘if I had to guess’

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(16) If I remember rightly, you had jaundice, didn’t you?

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(18) Later, if you’re awake, you can come round for a drink.

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**Example**

(20) It is still peanuts if you’ll pardon the expression.

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- *p* is used to direct the hearer (or speaker) to a specific course of action
- May or may not be used with an uttered consequent

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(7) If you’d like to put on your helmet.
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- The role of $p$ constrains the possible meanings an *if*-conditional can express.
- Some roles of $p$ correspond more readily to a speech-act type than others.
  - Resultatives are most likely to express the ‘standard’ conditional meaning, but may also express other meanings.
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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
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(1) If you drop the vase, it will break
   - (Direct) conditional sentence
   - Conditional primary meaning

(5) There are biscuits on the sideboard if you want some.
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Primary and secondary meanings

- 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’).

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The explicit content of an if-conditional can take the role of a secondary meaning, while its primary meaning is non-conditional.
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We cannot rely on the form of an *if*-conditional alone to understand its meaning.

An uttered *if*-conditional interacts with the context of utterance to generate the primary intended meaning.

The case of *if*-conditionals shows that sentence meaning and minimal enrichment is not enough to get us to the main intended meaning: we need to take on board a host of other sources of information.

Looking at attested examples, we can see an interaction between the role of *p* and the main intended meaning of an *if*-conditional.

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Thank you

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