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0521844681 - Mental Spaces in Grammar: Conditional Constructions

Barbara Dancygier and Eve Sweetser

Excerpt

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The door-scraper in the Wild Wood: an informal lesson in frame metonymy

(From Chapter 3, *The Wind in the Willows*, 1908, by Kenneth Grahame)

[The Rat and the Mole are lost in the Wild Wood on a snowy night. As they are slogging through the snow, the Mole cuts his leg. The Rat, intrigued, tries to find the object that hurt the Mole]

Suddenly, the Rat cried “Hooray!” and then “Hooray-oo-ray-oo-ray-oo-ray!” and fell to executing a feeble jig in the snow.

“What *have* you found, Ratty?” asked the Mole, still nursing his leg.

“Come and see!” said the delighted Rat, as he jiggled on.

The Mole hobbled up to the spot and had a good look.

“Well,” he said at last, slowly, “I *see* it right enough. Seen the same sort of thing before, lots of times. Familiar object, I call it. A door-scraper! Well, what of it? Why dance jigs round a door-scraper?”

“But don’t you see what it *means*, you – you dull-witted animal?” cried the Rat impatiently.

“Of course I see what it means,” replied the Mole. “It simply means that some *very* careless and forgetful person has left his door-scraper lying about in the middle of the Wild Wood, *just* where it’s *sure* to trip *everybody* up. Very thoughtless of him, I call it. When I get home I shall go and complain about it to – to somebody or other, see if I don’t!”

“O dear! O dear!” cried the Rat, in despair at his obtuseness. “Here, stop arguing and come and scrape!” And he set to work again and made the snow fly in all directions around him.

After some further toil his efforts were rewarded, and a very shabby doormat lay exposed to view.

“There, what did I tell you?” exclaimed the Rat, in great triumph.

“Absolutely nothing whatever,” replied the Mole, with perfect truthfulness. “Well now,” he went on, “you seem to have found another piece of domestic litter, done for and thrown away, and I suppose you’re perfectly happy. Better go ahead, and dance your jig round that if you’ve got to, and get it over, and

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then perhaps we can go on and not waste any more time over rubbish heaps. Can we *eat* a doormat? Or sleep under a doormat? Or sit on a doormat and sledge home over the snow on it, you exasperating rodent?"

"Do-you-mean-to-say," cried the excited Rat, "that this doormat doesn't *tell* you anything?"

"Really, Rat," said the Mole quite pettishly, "I think we've had enough of this folly. Who ever heard of a doormat *telling* anyone anything? They simply don't do it. They are not that sort at all. Doormats know their place."

"Now look here, you – you thick-headed beast," replied the Rat, really angry, "this must stop. Not another word, but scrape – scrape and scratch and dig and hunt round, especially on the sides of the hummocks, if you want to sleep dry and warm tonight, for it's our last chance!"

The Rat attacked a snow-bank beside them with ardour, probing with his cudgel everywhere and then digging with fury; and the Mole scraped busily too, more to oblige the Rat than for any other reason, for his opinion was that his friend was getting light-headed.

Some ten minutes' hard work, and the point of the Rat's cudgel struck something that sounded hollow. He worked till he could get a paw through and feel; then called the Mole to come and help him. Hard at it went the two animals, till at last the result of their labours stood full in view of the astonished and hitherto incredulous Mole.

In the side of what seemed to be a snow-bank stood a solid-looking little door, painted a dark green. An iron bell-pull hung by the side, and below it, on a small brass plate, neatly engraved in square capital letters, they could read by the aid of moonlight:

MR BADGER

The Mole fell backwards on the snow from sheer surprise and delight. "Rat!" he cried in penitence, "you're a wonder! A real wonder, that's what you are. I see it all now! You argued it out, step by step, in that wise head of yours, from the very moment I fell and cut my shin, and you looked at the cut, and at once your majestic mind said to itself, 'Door-scraper!' And you turned to and found the very door-scraper that done it! Did you stop there? No. Some people would have been satisfied; but not you. Your intellect went on working. 'Let me only just find a doormat,' says you to yourself, 'and my theory is proved!' And of course you found your doormat. You're so clever, I believe you could find anything you liked. 'Now,' says you, 'that door exists, as plain as if I saw it. There's nothing else remains to be done but to find it!' Well, I've read about that sort of thing in books, but I've never come across it before in real life. You

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ought to go where you'll be properly appreciated. You're simply wasted here, among us fellows. If I only had your head, Ratty –"

"But as you haven't," interrupted the Rat rather unkindly, "I suppose you're going to sit on the snow all night and *talk*? Get up at once and hang on that bell-pull you see there, and ring hard, as hard as you can, while I hammer!"

While the Rat attacked the door with his stick, the Mole sprang up at the bell-pull, clutched it and swung there, both his feet well off the ground, and from quite a long way off they could hear a deep-toned bell respond.

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1 *Conditional constructions, mental spaces, and semantic compositionality*

“It makes me feel like I’m going to cry,” she said. “I can just imagine if it was my daughter.” (*Vancouver Sun*, Oct. 4, 2000)

[A woman comments on a reported case where a man assaulted a sleeping girl.]

Readers of the *Vancouver Sun* did not sit back and wonder what the speaker thought would have happened “if” her daughter had been the victim of such an assault. She did not have to present a *then* clause and describe the consequences explicitly. Not only were her actual hearers, and the eventual readers of the paper, able to build up the intended counterfactual situation (marked by the verb *was*); they were also presumably able to envision the likely emotional results on a victim’s family. Furthermore, they surely recognized that the woman was not primarily expressing specific fear about her own daughter’s safety, but empathy with the real-world victim and her mother. How did they do all this, prompted apparently only by the set-up of a situation where the speaker’s daughter was imagined to be an assault victim?

1.1 **Conditionals and conditional reasoning**

There is something about *if* which engages the curiosity of the analyst. And rightly so: not only is the kind of reasoning manifested in a form such as *imagine if it was my daughter* an important aspect of human thought, but it also seems *uniquely* human to imagine in such detail scenarios which may be unreal and perhaps impossible (the speaker need not necessarily have a daughter in actuality), and to reason from them. In this example, the speaker seems to go further than conventional inference and “reasoning”; she presumably “feels like she’s going to cry” because in imagining the effects on her life if she had a daughter who was assaulted in this way, she vividly feels and lives the emotions of this tragic counterfactual world.

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Philosophers have long focused on conditional constructions as manifestations of human logical reasoning. Examples such as this show how far conditional usage goes beyond logical inference. Psychologists, philosophers, and anyone who studies human reasoning should be interested in the unique and pervasive cognitive patterns displayed in conditionals.

Simultaneously, everyday usages such as the above quotation present puzzles for linguists and grammarians. Are we to assume that the *if*-clause, *if it was my daughter*, is to be understood as having an unexpressed consequent as part of its interpretation, something on the order of *I can just imagine how I would feel if it was my daughter*? If so, what relation does this structure bear to grammatically conventional constructions where an *if* clause occurs independent of any syntactic consequent (“then”) clause – for example, *What if it was my daughter*? What contribution to the conditional meaning is made by the choice of the verb form *was*, a “past” form which is being used here not to refer to past tense, but to the imaginary nature of the situation described? These problems exemplify the complex ways in which linguistic markers such as verb form, conjunction choice, and syntactic constructions such as the *what-if* construction, combine to prompt the cognitive construction of complex mental spaces.

Because English has a rich and varied set of options for marking causal and conditional relations, more and less explicitly, our expression of conditionality is of special interest also as a test case for examining formal and functional relations between constructions: for example, in what ways do *what-if* constructions resemble the broader class of conditionals, and in what ways are they distinct? More broadly, this investigation can become a laboratory for the examination of what it means for a larger construction, as opposed to a word or morpheme, to be meaningful, and how *compositional* such meaning is: i.e., how much of the semantics of *what-if* constructions is entirely predictable from their formal structure and the meanings of the components, and how much needs to be specified as particular to this construction.

Linguists, approaching the grammatical forms involved in encoding conditional reasoning, have generally found plenty of formal complexity to occupy them in *if-then* constructions and their crosslinguistic analogues; semanticists in particular have seen these forms as a central case in any theory of logical semantics which maps logical structures onto linguistic forms. In the last twenty-five years, speech-act theorists and pragmatics scholars have uncovered the uses of conditional forms in presenting speech acts, thus setting up a tradition which parallels the logical one and presents problems for it. (*If you don't mind, please pass the salt* does not seem to be about a relationship between truth values.) And some typologists have noted connections between conditional and

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topic markers, and have suggested that *if*-clauses are functionally more topics than premises in many cases (see Haiman 1978, Traugott 1985, Jacobsen 1992, Schiffrin 1992a).

A truly satisfactory theory of conditional forms should bring together all these insights. Indeed, the human ability to reason in a contingent way is crucial to the uses of these linguistic constructions. How can this observation be integrated with the findings of speech-act analysts and typologists about less logical uses of conditionals? Or can it?

Linguists have even more reason than other scholars to await the answer to this question with interest. We presumably want to know about human reasoning, and about speech-act structure; but we also want to know how linguistic forms function in general. When we find that certain diverse functions are attached to a single formal construction (such as the English *if-then* construction), and that parallel diversity of function is common crosslinguistically, then such a class of constructions raises questions for linguistic theory in general. A constructional form may be simply homonymous; that is, the same form may have multiple unrelated functions (consider the synchronic relationship of the English definite article *the* with the homonymous, though historically related, form occurring in *The more, the merrier*). If a construction is in fact polysemous, we then need to investigate the motivation for the polysemy relationship – as, for example, Haiman (1978) has done in examining the link between the functions of conditional protases and topics. A great deal of recent research suggests that it is normal for larger constructions, as well as words and morphemes, to be polysemous (Bolinger 1977; Brugman 1984; 1988; Lakoff 1987; Langacker 1987, 1991a, b; Pederson 1991; Kemmer 1993; Hopper and Traugott 1993; Fillmore 1997 [1971]).¹ The polyfunctional status of conditional forms is thus a valuable laboratory for investigation of constructional polysemy in general.

The voluminous extant literature on conditionality and conditional constructions indicates the importance of these meanings and forms to a broad range of researchers, including linguists, philosophers, and grammarians. But this extensive corpus might make readers question the need for a new book on such an apparently over-documented subject. In fact, conditionality is far from fully documented: as with many subjects of strong interest to a scholarly community, certain examples and problems have been addressed in detail, while others – equally interesting, and perhaps helpful in illuminating the problems focused on – have been neglected or ignored. Even those analyses which attempt to look

¹ Further, it is via such polysemy that semantic change and grammaticalization occur; see Bybee and Pagliuca 1985, Hopper and Traugott 1993, among many others.

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at expressions of conditionality in a broader range of forms (not just *if-then* sentences) fail to offer an explanation of the connections among those formally divergent constructions. This book will address whole classes of conditional uses which are ignored or marginalized in the standard literature, and describe this fuller range of conditional constructions within a uniform framework.

The linguistic literature has generally focused on a narrow range of conditional forms. The *If P, (then) Q* conditional in particular has largely eclipsed its neighbors in English, such as the use of *unless* and *since* in ways which are very close to carrying the same message as *If P, (then) Q* sentences – or even apparently coordinate constructions such as *Take another step and I'll shoot*. Formal differences among *if-(then)* constructions, such as the use or absence of *then*, comma intonation or continuous intonation, and even clause order, have also tended to remain unexamined. Descriptive grammarians have focused on the contrasting possibilities for the use of different verb forms, again often neglecting other issues. A recent comprehensive study of conditionals (Declerck and Reed 2001) offers the broadest description to date, documenting a variety of conditional uses (mainly with *if*, but also in other structures), but the classification offered relies primarily on semantic criteria, without attempting to link the meanings identified to the formal features of the constructions.² There has therefore been little attempt to examine correlations between these different parameters: how does the choice of a verb form correlate, for example, with the use of *then* or with the choice of comma intonation? Are there any formal features of paratactic constructions that explain their link with conditionality? We will argue that putting conditionals in the context of a range of related constructions allows such correlations to emerge and ultimately allows us to attribute particular aspects of the communicated message more precisely to particular aspects of the linguistic form. We also argue that a broader definition of conditionality can emerge only from the study of such correlations.

The philosophical literature and pragmatics literature, on the other hand, have focused on function, rather than defining conditionality in terms of form-classes. Both definitions have their problems. If a conditional is defined as an English *If P, (then) Q* construction, we have a definition which does not extend to semantically related constructions in English, and also leaves us with little chance of generalizing crosslinguistically. On the other hand, the widely

² Declerck and Reed's analysis relies entirely on corpus data and is thus a valuable resource for analysts interested in the variety of conditional usage. Its goals, however, are qualitatively different from ours, as no attempt is made to seek form-function correlations or to define the nature of conditionality as such. For a more detailed discussion of Declerck and Reed's book, see Dancygier's (2003) review article.

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varying functions of the single formal construction may leave us wondering *which* functional definition to use in our circumscription of a “conditional” class of uses or meanings. So it is perhaps not surprising that philosophers have differing views about what constitutes “conditionality”: can we define it in terms of a relationship between the truths of P and Q (the “conditional” clause and the main clause) and the truth of “If P, Q”? To what extent should we take causal relationships into account (many *If P, (then) Q* utterances seem to invoke such relationships between P and Q)? Is the truth of P and Q the central question, or should we rather be talking about some more pragmatic factor, such as whether it is appropriate (or relevant, or felicitous) to *assert* P or Q?

Implicit assumptions about the relations between form and meaning underlie both the linguistic and philosophical literature. Certain forms are considered more central representatives of conditional functions; others are implicitly seen as less central. Linguists with narrower formal categories of conditionality nonetheless do still see crosslinguistic parallels between functionally similar constructions as “conditionals,” suggesting that they are including tacit functional criteria in their understanding.

We would like to explicitly address the issue of the form–meaning relationship. We will try to identify the precise aspects of any particular “conditional” construction which convey specific parts of the complex message carried by the use of that construction. Some aspects of the meaning may in fact be carried only by a particular *grouping* of formal elements, rather than by one element in itself. We will view the nebulous class of “conditionals” as part of a broad spectrum of other constructions which share certain of their formal and functional characteristics. For example, conditionals often manifest more general regularities about choice of verb forms, clause order, or intonational patterns. If we can attribute componential meaning contributions to particular formal parameters, we may be able to give a more motivated explanation of the functional similarities and differences between different conditional constructions. But in order to do so, we must examine a broad range of phenomena, rather than focusing on a few constructions in isolation. To explain how rather similar messages can be conveyed by *If you mow the lawn, I’ll give you ten dollars* and by *Mow the lawn and I’ll give you ten dollars*, or by *If you’re too cold, I’ll close the window* and *Since you’re too cold, I’ll close the window*, we need to examine a range of functionally and formally overlapping constructions, identifying co-varying aspects of form and function.

On the functional side, things are even more difficult. We are offered minimalist logical definitions of conditionality; but these do not seem helpful in examining natural language. Speakers are unlikely to accept, for example, that *If Paris is in France, the sky is blue* is logically “true” because its two constituents

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are true. Other suggested functional definitions, such as the identification with topicality, seem too general; English subject noun phrases have been said to be topical, but subjects should not be functionally confused with conditionals. Perhaps the biggest problem is that analysts have focused on defining the boundaries of conditionality, without generally examining the category itself or its ties to related meanings. As a result, it is no exaggeration to claim that we simply lack a linguistically useful definition of conditionality.

We will present an analysis of conditional *meaning* which allows us to pick out aspects of that meaning and identify them as shared between constructions which may differ in other meaning parameters. Rather than trying to delimit rigid sets of conditionals and non-conditionals, we will examine the relationships among the various classes of meanings which have been called conditional, and between those meanings and others (e.g., causal, sequential, and concessive) which are linked to them and sometimes share formal means of expression with them. We will also try to map out the areas of predictability and compositionality in the uses of complex forms; does a particular verb form, or a chosen order of clauses, make the same contribution to meaning in, for example, related causal and conditional constructions?

Crucially, we maintain that it is easier to achieve an elegant formal and semantic analysis of conditional constructions when form and function are considered together, and in the context of the kinds of human reasoning in which speakers are engaged. Too narrow a delimitation of the cognitive processes involved (e.g., limiting them to logical truth-conditional meaning relations) will in fact prevent us from being able to make generalizations about the linguistic data. Luckily, available texts and overheard examples provide a wealth of small masterpieces of contextualized conditional reasoning, paired with speakers' and writers' formal choices in those contexts. We hope that our analyses of such examples will prove as relevant to readers primarily interested in language itself as to those whose main interests are in the cognitive processes involved. For the former, this book will put forward some descriptive generalizations not previously noted in grammatical descriptions of English, as well as some broader ones which may have possible crosslinguistic validity. As to the latter, we hope to convince them that close analysis of these rich linguistic data open new windows on the cognitive structures which underlie them.

1.2 Constructional meaning and compositionality

We take what is essentially a very old position, that linguistic form is linguistic because of a form-function mapping. We follow recent work in Cognitive Grammar and Construction Grammar in claiming that not only morphemes and

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words but also grammatical constructions at the syntactic level are conventionally tied to semantic and pragmatic aspects of meaning. Functional grammarians, as well as cognitive ones, have a long tradition of setting out pragmatic as well as semantic correlates of particular grammatical constructions (topic constructions, for example). Non-truth-conditional aspects of meaning which are conventionally associated with form are treated in the same way as any other linguistically conventional form–meaning mapping. A topic marker’s conventional meaning is to indicate topicality, rather than to add some “truth-conditional meaning” to the utterance; its semantics, in this broader sense, is its pragmatic function.³

Questions arise naturally in this framework which could not be posed in a more modular theory of language. Thus one can ask *how much* of the meaning of a construction is compositional, and how much needs to be attributed to the construction as a whole. Pragmatics, as well as semantics, can have varying degrees of compositionality – furthermore, if semantics and pragmatics have no tidy modular separation from each other, then the aspects of *meaning* which have been traditionally labeled pragmatic⁴ will be treated as having the same possibilities for compositionality as the “semantic” aspects of meaning (see Sweetser 1999). We shall treat separately those aspects of interpretation which derive from a specific context rather than from linguistic convention. This is not because they are necessarily different in cognitive status from aspects of interpretation which are directly and conventionally prompted by linguistic form; on the contrary, there is good evidence that hearers and understanders do not differentiate well between aspects of meaning which are more directly linked to the speaker’s form choices, and those which are less so. What we mean here is that in deciding whether something is part of the conventional meaning of a form, we will be assuming that such conventional meaning must not depend on some particular interactional context. However, the meaning conveyed *via* that conventional meaning will very probably depend on context to a considerable degree.⁵

³ See Fillmore 1988, Fillmore, Kay, and O’Connor 1988, Goldberg 1995, Fillmore and Kay 1999, for exposition of the Construction Grammar framework; see also Croft 2001 on Radical Construction Grammar, and Talmy (2000) for related semantic work. Work in Cognitive Grammar, following Langacker (1987, 1991a, b), shares with Construction Grammar a number of basic assumptions: for example, that form–meaning mappings need to be described at all levels of the grammar, from the morpheme to lexically unspecified syntactic constructions. Functional work such as that of Prince (1978, 1985) has made parallel points about functions of constructions as well as of lexical-level forms.

⁴ For background work on pragmatics, see Levinson 1983, Davis 1991.

⁵ For the classic laying out of this kind of relation between context and interpretation, see Grice 1975, 1978; Coulson (2001) investigates some on-line reinterpretation processes of such framings.