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0521844681 - Mental Spaces in Grammar: Conditional Constructions

Barbara Dancygier and Eve Sweetser

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MENTAL SPACES IN GRAMMAR

Conditional constructions have long fascinated linguists, grammarians, and philosophers. In this pioneering new study, Barbara Dancygier and Eve Sweetser offer a new descriptive framework for the study of conditionality, broadening the range of richly described conditional constructions. They explore theoretical issues such as the compositionality of constructional meaning, describing both the mental-space-building processes underlying conditional thinking, and the form–meaning relationship involved in expressing conditionality. Using a broad range of attested English conditional constructions, the book examines inter-constructional relationships. Within the framework of Mental Spaces Theory, shared parameters of meaning are shown to be relevant to conditional constructions generally, as well as to related temporal and causal constructions. This significant contribution to the field will be welcomed by a wide range of researchers in theoretical and cognitive linguistics.

BARBARA DANCYGIER is Assistant Professor in the Department of English, University of British Columbia. She has previously published *Conditionals and Prediction: Time, Knowledge and Causation in Conditional Constructions* (1998). She has also contributed articles to a wide range of journals and post-conference volumes.

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MENTAL SPACES IN GRAMMAR

CONDITIONAL CONSTRUCTIONS

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and

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Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521844680

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First published 2005

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Dancygier, Barbara

Mental spaces in grammar : conditional constructions / Barbara Dancygier, Eve Sweetser.

p. cm. – (Cambridge studies in linguistics)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-521-84468-1

1. Grammar, Comparative and general – conditionals.

2. Cognitive grammar. 3. Semantics. I. Sweetser, Eve. II. Title. III. Series.

P292.5. D36 2005

415 – dc22 2004054649

ISBN-13 978-0-521-84468-0 hardback

ISBN-10 0-521-84468-1 hardback

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To the memory of our fathers,
who taught us about books, words, and other things that matter.

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Acknowledgments

This book is like all books – it could not have happened by the authors' efforts alone. Many people and institutions have offered help, inspiration and support throughout the years it took for this project to materialize.

Our work probably owes the most to Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner. The intellectual stimulation they offered through their own work and through discussions and comments on the earlier versions of our manuscript was very important to us – almost as important as their unfailing support and encouragement.

Another major source of inspiration has been Charles Fillmore. His work on construction grammar and epistemic stance has been important to us both and in many ways we have continued building on what he taught us. We also owe a great deal to the community of Construction Grammar researchers. Our debt to Paul Kay's work on scalarity will be evident; he also provided some favorite examples. And Adele Goldberg's valuable book on constructions has been helpful in clarifying our own position. The work of the late Suzanne Fleischman was crucial to the development of our framework, but we will also remember her with deep affection and respect as a friend and colleague whose professional standards we can only try to approach. Elizabeth Closs Traugott has been both a scholarly inspiration and a supportive colleague throughout. Peter Harder generously read a late draft while in Berkeley in Fall 2003, and offered very helpful comments. And Michael Israel's thorough reading of an earlier draft yielded, as usual, most pertinent insights.

Our home departments should be thanked too. The Linguistics Department at Berkeley first gave us an opportunity to get to know each other and then work together. George Lakoff, Rich Rhodes, and Dan Slobin have been following our progress with interest and warmth; and Eve's numerous trips to Vancouver were made possible by collegial solidarity in Berkeley. The English Department at the University of British Columbia was also most supportive and expressed more than the usual share of interest in the project. We want to thank Laurel Brinton, Leslie Arnovick, and Jessica de Villiers for their help.

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At the final stage of the project we received extremely useful comments and suggestions from the students in Eve's graduate seminar on conditionality; as a result of the seminar, Johnno Bryant and Eva Mok, of the International Computer Science Institute, are now working on a computational formalism for representing conditional space-building. Shweta Narayan's thoughts on Mental Spaces have kept us reminded of the need to see them as dynamic. We owe a special debt to Karen Sullivan for insightful comments, help with web-searches, and finally for proofreading and editing the final version of the book.

On the home front, we thank Barbara's son Szymek, as well as the rest of our families, for a great deal of patience and forbearance.

Books are not just written these days – they are created with the help of rather demanding machines. Many strong-willed computers participated in the creation of this book, and they could only be made to cooperate smoothly by the expertise and patience of our husbands, Alex and Jacek, who agreed to act as our personal system administrators.

Finally, we owe our thanks to the marvellous writers whose ingenuity gave us examples that we've so much enjoyed analysing. Special thanks go to Dorothy L. Sayers, for her exceptional epistemic and counterfactual conditionals; to Anne Tyler, for her subtle embedded mental spaces, including the one with *even if* and *then*; to Sara Paretsky, for great colloquial usage and the award-winning metaspatial conditional; and to Neal Stephenson, for fictional and virtual present forms which produce truly fantastic conditionals.

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Preface

This book has grown out of many years of both authors' fascination with conditionals and conditional meaning. Each of us independently embarked on her own *if*-project in the early 1980s; we met for the first time at the 1984 meeting of the LSA (Linguistic Society of America), and from that moment we were bouncing ideas off each other and finding more and more in common. Eve's work reached a larger audience in 1990, with the book version of her Ph.D. thesis, while Barbara's book came out in 1998, following a long series of articles. Both books contribute in crucial ways to what we now understand conditionals to be about. Eve's idea of cognitive domains and Barbara's concept of predictive versus non-predictive conditionality are still basic to the framework we present to the reader now.

By the time our individual projects were completed we were both very much aware of the questions which, in our shared understanding of a descriptively and theoretically satisfying framework, remained unanswered. We knew that more attention needed to be paid to the analysis of conditional meaning and usage which could transcend the boundaries of formally explicit categories such as *if*-sentences. At the same time we were convinced by our experience of the data that the goal could be achieved only by focusing consistently on the systematic correlations between form and meaning, rather than just on morphology or on semantics and pragmatics. We found the necessary theoretical tools for constructing such a framework in two theories developed within cognitive linguistics: *Mental Spaces Theory* and *Construction Grammar*.

The present analysis is essentially distinct from our earlier independent projects, although building on them in important ways (hence the need to summarize briefly some of the major claims from our 1990 and 1998 books). The scope of this analysis reflects our decision to work on conditionality in all its forms, rather than on conditionals as such. At the same time, we wanted to rely entirely on attested data and, as it turned out, that decision alone brought some unexpected challenges and thrills. On the one hand, it was very rewarding to see the data fulfill our expectation, but on the other hand, it was infinitely

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more rewarding to run into what seemed to be counterexamples to our claims, only to discover that such “exceptions” in fact support the theory even more convincingly than what we thought was the rule.

The book is also an attempt to use the Theory of Mental Spaces as the primary tool in building a coherent account of a very broad and complex area of linguistic usage. In the process, we test the theory’s power in clearly distinguishing very subtle differences in meaning – and in accounting for complex textual data in context. We hope to have shown that the theory does all we needed it to do (plus much more), and that it is an approach which allows one to work on grammar at a new level of specificity and coherence. And finally, we wanted to flesh out our concept of constructional compositionality, as an instance of frame metonymy in grammar. The passage from *The Wind in the Willows* which opens the book perfectly exemplifies the elusive and context-dependent character of frame-metonymic relations, and yet their apparent inevitability (once they are evoked); these are characteristics which hold equally well for grammatical cases of such relations.

English conditional constructions provide an exceptional laboratory of inter-related constructions, of varying degrees of compositionality, and inheriting varying aspects of conventional form–meaning mappings from each other. We are convinced that the material we have gathered justifies the usefulness of this kind of overlapping understanding of constructional compositionality in analyzing broad areas of usage, and puts the concept in the grammarian’s toolbox.

The reader looking through the index or the table of contents will find a number of terms and topics which we have talked about in our earlier work on conditionals. But the reader who browses through the text itself will soon realize that the book covers a much larger array of topics and a fuller range of data, defines many of the terms afresh, and offers a new, unified insight into the relationships between conditionality, mental spaces, and grammar.

Note on abbreviated citations

Most of the text examples cited throughout the book come from different published works of fiction and from periodicals. To avoid lengthy and repetitive referencing we shall be using abbreviated citations throughout the text. References to books will consist of the author's initials, the acronym for the title, and the page number. For example, the citation NS.SC.50 refers to page 50 of Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash*. Full references for all works so cited will be found in the "Texts" section in the list of references. Examples taken from periodicals will be accompanied by full references. A number of our cited text examples are taken from a publicly accessible portion of the Modern English Collection of the University of Virginia Electronic Text Center. These references will consist of the author's name, the title of the work, followed by "U-Va Electronic Text Center". For example, Mark Twain, *Innocents Abroad*, U-Va Electronic Text Center. Publication history, page citations, and other information can be found on the Text Center's database.