

THE 'DRAMA-QUEEN' AND OTHER CONDITIONALS IN REAL DISCOURSE

NADINA CEHAN*

Independent researcher, Iași, Romania

Abstract

The formal approach to conditionals, treating them in a decontextualized manner, has been the most developed. The present paper shows how problematic this approach can be when conditionals are studied in context. One large class of conditionals could be termed 'interactional', and includes formulaic *if*-clauses of politeness, conditionals which soften the message, speech-act conditionals emphasizing the relevance of some information given beforehand, and paratactic conditionals making promises or issuing threats. It is to this eclectic class that the 'drama queen' conditional is added. Recently discovered, this conditional does not deal with either truth or hypotheticality, but with the human emotions of the people who face their reality and compare it with their own past. Not unlike the conditionals that relay the message "It's absurd!", the 'drama queen' conditionals convey the message "It's unimaginable!".

Keywords: *conditionals; 'interactional' conditionals; conditionals in context; corpus linguistics*

This paper discusses a type of English conditional which seems to have escaped the researchers' gaze so far. It can be classified as an 'interactional conditional', a term that designates those conditionals which are easily identified as belonging to naturally occurring or reported speech. When presented in isolation, such an interactional conditional is recognizably decontextualized and makes little sense in the absence of actants as it loses its function. I will proceed by first commenting and analysing conditionals in context. I will then cover the conditionals that frequently appear in the literature to which the label 'interactional' can be applied, so as to better explicate the category. It should be noted that Declerck and Reed's (319-66) chapter entitled 'Rhetorical conditionals' largely covers the same territory.

* cehan_nadina@yahoo.co.uk

The last part of this paper presents the newly unearthed conditional, provides examples, and proposes a description of its pattern and function.

Of the vast literature on conditional constructions, the overwhelming part has focused on a very small number of decontextualised types and evinced innumerable attempts to develop highly formal models so as to capture the conditionals' meaning, i.e. their truth values, degree of hypotheticality or the kind of relation extant between protasis and apodosis. By far the greatest concern has been the development of internally coherent models, which work well with only a selected few sentences. The systematic study of naturally occurring *ifs*, on the other hand, has for the most part been neglected (nevertheless, see Declerck and Reed). To give some examples, Veltman's article entitled *Data semantics and the pragmatics of indicative conditionals* contains a special and brief 'Odd conditionals' section where most of the types of sentences presented below are lumped together. The body of Veltman's article is concerned with the development and articulation of an information model. Somewhat similarly, Dancygier and Sweetser are far more concerned with advancing the Mental Spaces Theory framework by fitting conditionals into it. Although they use actual data, they admittedly proceed by selection, rather than by a qualitative analysis of large amounts of data.

In contrast, studies based on real data analysis tend to arrive at conclusions which clash with those based on theory-first approaches. For instance, Akatsuka contradicts Haiman in the sense that conditionals are shown not to be givens, as they are able to open a conversation and therefore provide new information. Furthermore, looking at conditionals in discourse leads to interesting observations, such as that the protasis needs not be immediately adjacent to the apodosis (cf. Taylor, Clancy and McCarthy). Moreover, in real conversation the two clausal elements of the conditionals need not be produced by one and the same speaker. This may seem trivial, but for proposals for evaluating conditionals such as Stalnaker's it begs the question: who is evaluating the conditional and when? With whose beliefs is the conditional consistent if it is a collaboration? Can in such cases an independent observer, someone outside the context and conversation, evaluate the conditional?

Careful study of naturally occurring conditionals can reveal the somewhat uncomfortable fact that *if* may not be followed by the protasis, but by the apodosis, leading to the conclusion that the reasoning process can start from the result, or consequence, rather than from the premise. For instance, the following examples can be abstracted to the formula *If the result of X would have been Y, then X*:

- (1) She could have had my right arm *if it would have given her any pleasure*. (BNC FAP W_fict_prose)
- (2) She kept getting bones in her mouth and each time she took one out O'Hara appeared to be looking in her direction. *If it would have caught Meredith's attention* she wouldn't have minded a bone lodging in her gullet, but then there was always the risk he might think she was merely coughing -- she could choke for nothing. (BNC FNU W_fict_prose)
- (3) So the poor girl grew paler and paler, her head dropped to the ground, and she died. Then the king's son was so sorry for what he had done that he would willingly have died too, *if it would have brought her back to life*. (BNC FUB W_fict_prose)

In strictly logical terms, how would one identify the antecedent and the consequent in (1) to (3)? By applying formal criteria, one gets contradictory results: *if* is followed by a verbal phrase which normally belongs in the consequent. When resorting to meaning, the premise is the consequent of the consequent. This appears to be an inescapable conundrum. One may very well expect, then, that the study of conditionals in context and conversation may prove the inadequacy of certain kinds of formal approaches to the study of language.

Turning to interactional conditionals now, this class covers, among others, those formulaic *if*-clauses and sentences whose function involves expressing politeness. Frequently, polite conditionals evince a core modal in the *if*-clause, as in examples (4) to (6):

- (4) (SP:PS1M7) It can go in a box file.
(SP:PS1M6) I've got a box file.
(SP:PS1MA) Ah.
(SP:PS1M7) Can we have the box file, *if you could* bring that in? (BNC F7G S_meeting)
- (5) (SP:PS1BT) Now *if you'll* excuse me a moment. I'll just watch the last few laps. (BNC KCH S_conv)
- (6) So *if I may*, I would like to negotiate to one or the other if you will agree er to that, to try and get us a dance group, we've been trying to get a dance group for years. (BNC FXR S_meeting)
- (7) (SP:PS19M) Two grand's not everything Jane, you know that and I know that
(SP:PS19L) (unclear)
(SP:PS19M) what, what I propose to do anyway *if it's agreeable* to you
(SP:PS19L) Hand it in and see what happens. (BNC KCG S_conv)

The above is the kind of conditionals which largely fall under Declerck and Reed's (357-8) 'hedging-P conditionals' whose role is to soften the unpleasantness, harshness or abruptness of the content. Example (4) is

commonly termed a polite directive, while (7) shows deference towards the interlocutor.

A much-noticed type of conditional is the ‘speech-act’, ‘pragmatic’ or ‘relevance’ conditional (terminology varies; cf. for instance Athanasiadou and Dirven, Werth, Wierzbicka, Declerck and Reed):

- (8) I just think it’s interesting for you to see how the things link up because, those of you that have contact with the Community Development Team will know that over at Latton Bush there is a Community Resource Centre, er that you can use, well that’s linked in with us, and we provide information for us, so it’s important that you know that if you go there, you also can have a connection with the Local Government Unit as well, as a whole like the Policy Team if you, *if you want information or anything*. (BNC D95 S_meeting)
- (9) I mean I can tell you that there’s water in the pipe *if you’re thirsty...* (BNC HDD S_meeting)

In this kind of conditional, the speaker gives out a roundabout signal or piece of information, offering a solution to a possible issue. In other words, the content of the apodosis becomes relevant to the hearer only in the context posited by an *if*-clause.

Conditionals can also be used to make promises or issue threats (or to induce or deter, in Dancygier and Sweetser’s terms). In this case, it is the paratactic (or coordinate) conditionals which predominantly get this interpretation:

- (10) (SP:JJ7PSUNK) I think coercing probably (unclear)
 (SP:PS446) Yeah, in a fairly sort of that’s a bit of a (unclear) coercing, isn’t it, maybe in to er, dirty tricks department.
 (SP:JJ7PSUNK) Mm.
 (SP:PS446) But it’s moving towards that end, where, *do it or else*.
 (BNC JJ7 S_unclassified)

Finally, one must note the various contributions that a conditional can make to the flow, i.e. the cohesiveness and coherence of discourse, be it spoken or written. From this standpoint, it is not only the case that conditionals are used for face-to-face interaction, but also for in-text interaction; in other words, these functions can be identified in both spoken and written language. Thus, conditionals can be used to echo a formerly stated assumption, to introduce a contrast to a prior assumption, to express particular cases, or to explore options (cf. Ford and Thompson). In addition, singular, independent *if*-clauses can qualify the surrounding discourse (under ‘commenting-P conditionals’ in Declerck and Reed, 340-57), in the sense, as

in (11) below, of recognizing possible difficulties which may impede something coming to fruition:

- (11) Erm, what you need to do is, *if you can*, save up all the changes, for one batch and then do them all together. (BNC HDX S_speech_unscripted)

Other conditional patterns can be used to make comparisons (cf. Declerck and Reed 330-38).

In this wide berth of interactional conditionals, which do not primarily deal with truth or hypotheticality, the following pattern may also be met:

- (12) What a shock! *If anybody had told me this time last year* that we'd find another pyramid at Giza, I'd have said they were crazy. (BNC CKU W_pop_lore)
- (13) *If someone had told me a month before* that my life was going to be changed so dramatically, I would not have believed them. (BNC CHE W_biography)
- (14) *If you had asked my mum and dad* whether I had it in me to be an actress or singer, they would have laughed you out of town.' (BNC ADR W_biography)
- (15) *If Dressler had said that to me the first time* I'd been hauled up to his Bel Air estate for a command appearance, I'd have dropped to my knees and begged for a painless death. (COCA 2013 FIC Bk:FameThiefJunior)

The conditional sentences in (12) to (15) are so-called 'type three', or past counterfactual conditionals, which have a pluperfect verb form in the protasis and a conditional perfect verb form in the apodosis, and refer to a past contrary-to-fact situation. Yet there are other common discernible formal-semantic features which these conditionals share, although there is great variety within the general framework. Often, as in (12) and (13), within the protasis the subject is expressed by a generic pronoun (such as *someone*, *anybody* or *you*; *you* can be interpreted as having either a generic or a clearly determined reference at the same time, as in (14); the main verbs indicate verbal communication, as for instance *tell*, *ask* or *say*; and there is usually an adverbial phrase expressing a definite past, anterior moment, such as *this time last year*, *a month before*, *the first time*.... In addition, the apodosis expresses shock, disbelief, some sort of dramatic feeling or reaction and, as in (15), an extreme gesture. In jocular terms, this conditional acts like a drama-queen. The function of this type of conditional is fundamentally a rhetorical one, as it qualifies a formerly or contextually established situation as inconceivable, and it typically contributes to the dramatics as a life story unfolds. This interpretation is sustained by the fact that the conditional can be rendered in the form of a question, the interlocutor being invited to

contribute the apodosis, or to the apodosis, and confirm the shockingly high degree of unlikelihood of the situation discussed:

- (16) ... Fifteen years ago, if somebody had come up to you in the projects and said, you know, you're going to be rich and I don't mean rich, I mean rich.
 JAY-Z: Right.
 SIMON: And you're going to be famous and you're going to be a superstar, *if somebody had said that to you 15 years ago, what would you have said?*
 JAY-Z: How?
 SIMON: You were surviving, right?
 JAY-Z: Yes. Like, I had no aspirations, no plans, no goals, no backup goals. Just like, how is that going to happen? Doing what? (COCA 2002 SPOK CBS_SixtyII)
- (17) CHADWICK: Right. But *if I had said to you 30 years ago --* you were writing about The Stones then -- You're going to be writing about The Stones on tour when you are 60, would you have thought that a likely thing?
 Mr-CHRISTGAU: Probably not, but more cause of The Stones than cause of me. (COCA 2002 SPOK NPR_TalkNation)

The degree of emotional involvement apparent in these conditionals seems to be on a par with that present in 'indicative counterfactuals' such as:

- (18) If you're the policeman, I'm the King of China. (*from Akatsuka 333*)
 (19) If you are Santa Claus, I am the Easter Bunny. (*from Ippolito 2*)

As Akatsuka explains: "[i]ndicative counterfactuals always require a preceding context. This is because such conditionals are always in emphatic disagreement with somebody, conveying the message, 'That's absurd!'" (334). Similarly, drama-queen conditionals convey the message: 'It's unimaginable!'

Finally, it must be said that the drama-queen conditional pattern is so common that it can also be found with nonstandard verb phrases in the protasis. For instance, in American English one can notice the replacement of the standard pluperfect form with *would + have + past participle* in the *if*-clause:

- (20) If you *would have asked* me that 25 years ago, I would have said no, that I couldn't imagine that he would. (COCA 2007 SPOK Fox_Susteren)
 (21) If someone *would have told* me 20 years ago that I would be (writing in), I would have laughed hysterically. (COCA 1998 NEWS Chicago)

- (22) If you *would have said* five years ago that they would be divorced, I would have said you're out of your mind. (COCA 1995 NEWS SanFranChron)

In the light of the above, one cannot but conclude, as Akatsuka did, that “[c]onditionals are discourse-bound because they do not make sense without their discourse contexts” (349). Within discourse, conditionals may serve very different functions, from expressing politeness to drama, from initiating a conversation to qualifying what was said before. As I hope to have sufficiently illustrated here, this flexibility in patterns of form and function has evolved from and within real discourse and contexts. Consequently, any discussion of conditionals relying on decontextualized instances will inevitably lead to a highly skewed view of this formal-semantic class.

Corpora

British National Corpus (BNC), <http://corpus.byu.edu/bnc/>

Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), <http://corpus.byu.edu/coca/>

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