

Conditionals: Pragmatics and Cognition
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Session 1: Pragmatics of conditionals: Motivations

There is no bi-unique mapping between forms and meanings in expressing conditionality. In English, if-constructions are not the only way to express conditional thoughts, while if-constructions can be put to a variety of uses other than to express conditional thoughts, including for relevance, politeness, or hedging. Some languages lack a lexical item for 'if', expressing conditionality in a variety of other ways, such as through epistemic modality and sentence ordering. In this first session, we will discuss the challenges of accounting for these empirical facts in a truth-conditional model of meaning, looking at seminal pragmatic accounts of conditionals from Stalnaker and Grice, before motivating taking a more holistic approach to the study of conditionality at large that includes 'conditional sentences expressing conditional thoughts' as just one part.

Session 2. Biscuit conditionals, speech-act conditionals and conditional speech acts

Truth-conditional differences in conditionals have led to various proposed taxonomies of conditional sentences in the literature. In this session we will focus on a standard distinction between hypotheticals and biscuit conditionals that uses the relation between the antecedent (p) and consequent (q) as the criterion for classification. We will look at properties of biscuit conditionals that have been proposed in the literature, the role of biscuit conditionals in discourse, as well as the relationship between biscuit conditionals, speech-act conditionals and conditional speech acts. We will examine how far distinguishing hypotheticals from biscuit conditionals corresponds to (i) the intended purpose of the conditionals in discourse, and (ii) their intuitive truth conditions, and whether such a distinction makes sense at the level of speech acts and communicative intentions.

Session 3. Taxonomies of conditionals

This session will move away from truth-conditional differences between conditionals, and delve more deeply into the relationship between conditional sentences and the speech acts they are used to perform in context. We will look at various taxonomies of that have been proposed in the literature that focus on speakers' reasoning patterns, examining the linguistic and contextual constraints on the kinds of speech acts to which different conditional sentences can in fact be put. This includes distinguishing resultative from inferential conditionals, as well as looking more closely at different types of 'biscuit conditional' based on their pragmatic function, including incomplete conditionals as directives, and different politeness and hedging roles that conditional sentences can play. Students will be encouraged to find conditional constructions in their own languages and examine how existing taxonomies fare in adequately categorising them.

Session 4. Defining a pragmatic category of conditionals

As discussed in the first session, the word 'if' provides a simple function to express conditional thought, but the class of expressions using 'if' are not wholly representative of conditionals at the level of conceptualisation. This session moves to address the question: what is a conditional? Intuitively, 'pragmatic' uses of 'if' differ in the extent to which they conform to 'standard', semantic, truth-conditional accounts of conditionals, so we might be tempted to discard these 'non-conditional thoughts' from the category of conditionals altogether. However, there is also an intuition that while conditional sentences can be used with some other intention than to communicate a conditional thought, there is still a sense in which they are 'conditional'. In this session, we will discuss the relationship between truth conditions and conditionality as a conceptual notion, and what kind of pragmatic criteria would delimit such a broad, pragmatic category of conditionals.

Session 5. Radical pragmatics and conditional in interaction

In the final session We will think about how such diversity in conditional sentences and conditional thoughts can be accounted for in a theoretical model of communication. One option that will be introduced is the radical contextualist framework of Default Semantics/Interactive Semantics (Jaszczolt 2010) and demonstrate how the diversity of ways of expressing conditional meaning, as well as the diversity of uses to which conditional if can be put, can be modelled in this framework. We will then move to think more holistically about meaning in interaction, using examples of incomplete conditionals as partial structures, as well as fully-fledged conditional sentences, to exemplify how speakers can co-construct meanings over the course of an interaction, and how insights from interactional pragmatics can help account for such cases.