

'If you see what I mean':
Metalinguistic markers as biscuit conditionals

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Metalinguistic conditionals

- p is truth-conditionally independent from q
 - p provides a metalinguistic comment on some aspect of q
- = 'rhetorical conditionals' (Declerck & Reed 2001)
- = 'metatextual conditionals' (Dancygier 1999)

Example

- (1) It is still peanuts if you'll pardon the expression
- (2) Very short skirt on if you don't mind me saying

Example

(3) There are biscuits on the sideboard if you want them

Two standard tests for identifying biscuithood

Question test

? And what if I don't want any?

Contraposition test

? If there are no biscuits on the sideboard, you don't want any

- Metalinguistic conditionals pass the tests for biscuithood:

? What if I won't pardon the expression? (Is it still peanuts?)

?? If it's not a very short skirt, you (do) mind me saying

- ▶ It is not possible to retract the content of q ; if p is denied by the hearer, the speaker can only retract the acceptability of making the assertion, not the content of the assertion itself

'If you like'

- If-clauses such as 'if you like' and 'if you will' share a discourse function with metalinguistic conditionals

Example

(4) So I went in with a bone of complaint, if you like

- They pass the tests for biscuithood:

? What if I don't like? (I didn't go in with a bone of complaint?)

?? If I didn't go in with a bone of complaint, you don't like (it)

- They can also take a standard, hypothetical reading:

Example

(5) We can have a competition if you like later on

- 'If you like' is typically viewed as simply a discourse marker in linguistic analyses, without conditional import

“...the status of discourse markers remains uncertain...There is little consensus on whether they are syntactic or a pragmatic category, on which types of expressions the category includes, *on the relationship of discourse markers to other posited categories such as connectives...*”

(Lewis 2011: 419-20)

- ▶ The primary function of 'if you like' is to hedge some aspect of q

- ★ To what extent do we want to / should we classify metalinguistic 'if you like' as 'conditional'?
- ★ More generally, what, if any, is the relationship between if-clauses that give rise to strong, automatic default metalinguistic readings, and their conditional counterparts?

- ▶ To uphold the view that 'if you like' retains the status of 'conditional'
- ▶ To uphold the view that 'if you like' gets its metalinguistic reading by default (and not through, e.g. pragmatic processing)
- ▶ To overcome this mismatch by offering a view of *conditionality* that is disassociated from truth-conditional content
- ▶ To show how by taking a radical contextualist outlook, we can account for both metalinguistic and hypothetical readings in our semantics

- ★ General thoughts/observations on 'if you like' as a conditional
- ★ Conditionality as a pragmatic category (and how 'if you like' fits in)
- ★ Representing metalinguistic conditionals in Default Semantics

- Metalinguistic 'if you like' can be used with:
 - metaphors
 - figures of speech
 - searching for 'correct' formulations of a word/phrase
 - qualifying foreign/'fancy' words
 - indicating a speaker is not familiar/comfortable with a word/phrase

Example

- (6) And that is the 'prosodic effect', if you like, of the liquids in these words
- (7) More and more people are being, if you like, 'forced' into the private sector

- Chen (1996): metalinguistic uses of 'if you like' were 'de-conditionalized'—there is no q that is conditional on p
- Brinton (2008): 'if you will' elliptical for 'if you are willing to do so', which stemmed from 'bridging uses' with verbs of 'calling'/'saying'

Example

(8) Call me an old romantic if you will

- Declerck & Reed (2001): 'if you like' shares the same pragmatic function as other 'fully-fledged' metalinguistic conditionals ('if you see what I mean', etc)
- ▶ If we dismiss 'if you like' on the basis of p being independent from q , we should also dismiss the entire category of biscuit conditionals from the class of conditionals

So what I'm proposing to attempt in this talk is, if you like, an *investigation* into why anyone who makes any kind of, if you like, *comment* on anything these days has to stress so many of the words as if they were in a foreign language, and then put 'if you like' in front of them. I suspect that it's intended to suggest some kind of...

- Hold on a moment. If I like? (Frayne 2014: 201)

- That a linguistic item has the potential to be exploited for ambiguous linguistic properties can be taken as evidence of the tacit knowledge that speakers have in their linguistic arsenal (cf. Aarons 2012)

- In what sense is a sentence of the form ‘if p , q ’ **conditional**, if it not used to communicate a conditional meaning, and does not have ‘conditional’ truth conditions?
- Require criteria that will capture **conditional thought** at all levels of communication (Elder 2014; Elder & Jaszczolt 2016)
 - Conditional sentences with conditional primary meanings
 - ▶ The standard, hypothetical cases
 - Conditional sentences with non-conditional primary meanings
 - ▶ e.g. metalinguistic conditionals
 - Non-conditional sentences with conditional primary meanings
 - ▶ e.g. Do that one more time and I’ll kill you

Criterion I

★ p restricts the situations where q holds

- Can be satisfied by p restricting the situations where q is true
- Or p can restrict the field of discourse such that q is felicitously uttered (cf. 'Relevance conditionals')

Criterion II

★ p expresses remoteness from reality

- Can be satisfied in virtue of p being false
- Or the speaker can be unsure of his commitment to p
- Or the speaker can simply *present* p as hypothetical (cf. Andersen cases)

Example

(9) If you could open the window, that'd be great

- Primary meaning: do p
- p is a polite request for the hearer to do something described in p
- p fulfils the two criteria for conditionality:
 - The speaker does not assume that the hearer is able to do p (remoteness)
 - The speaker's gratitude is conditional on the performance of p (supposition)
- This is a conventional use of 'if' used to indicate p is not assumed to be true in order to politely request p
- This use of 'if' does not always require q to be uttered

Example

(10) If possible, I'd like these done by Wednesday

- Primary meaning: 'do q '
- p hedges the (indirect) request made in q
- p fulfils the two criteria for conditionality:
 - p indicates that the speaker is not sure that q is possible
 - The request in q is restricted to the case where q is possible
- p softens the force of the speaker's speech act

Example

(11) Are you hungry? Have a biscuit

- Primary meaning: 'if p , q '
- A non-conditional sentence form expressing a conditional meaning
- p fulfils the two criteria for conditionality:
 - p is a polar (yes/no) question, so invokes the possibility of alternatives (does not assume that p is true)
 - The suggestion q is made on the assumption that p is true
- A non-conditional sentence satisfies the criteria for expressing a conditional utterance, and hence conditional thought

- (Traugott & Dasher 2002):
content > content/procedural / procedural meanings
- Procedural meanings do not contribute to truth-conditional content, but provide a *procedural constraint* on how to interpret the utterance
- 'If you like' indicates that the speaker's commitment to the assertability/acceptability of q is in question
- ▶ 'If you like' constrains the hearer's interpretation of q

- Other metalinguistic discourse markers:
so to speak, as it were, to quote X, as X says, like
- 'If you like' differs to these discourse markers in the degree to which the speaker takes responsibility for the target expression
- e.g. 'Like' / 'as it were' signal the speaker's distance from the expression
- Explicitly invoking 'you' acknowledges the acceptability of the target expression may be up for dispute

- Traugott & Dasher (2002):
non-subjective > subjective > intersubjective meanings
- Subjective meanings “encode and regulate attitudes and beliefs”
- Intersubjective meanings encode “meanings centered on the addressee”
- Intersubjective meanings encode a function of politeness, appreciating and recognising the hearer’s social status
- Intersubjective meanings also have a metadiscursive function of eliciting a response from a hearer, e.g. with turn-taking devices and question tags

- 'If you like' allows a speaker to felicitously make reference to the audience's uptake:

Example

"We all know the feeling of walking round thinking something's missing. Sometimes it's our trousers, that's rectifiable. But sometimes it is, if you will, the trousers of meaning. Well, I accept some of you won't." (BBC Radio 4 2016)

- Capitalizes on 'if you' to show target expression departs from convention, and that the audience may not accept it
- ▶ 'Remoteness' is satisfied through the positive politeness strategy of not assuming the hearer will accept q

(i) Non-conditional meaning is derived pragmatically

q is independent from p , so the speaker must have independent contextual reasons for asserting the conditional (e.g. Franke (2009); Francez (2015); Lauer (2014))

(ii) Biscuit conditionals are semantically independent

Biscuit conditionals are not really 'conditionals' at all, and have a separate semantics from hypothetical conditionals (e.g. McCready (2015): BCs should be analysed as hedges)

- These are the options if one subscribes to the view that truth conditions are borne out of the logical form of the sentence alone
- Benefit of (i): respects the view that 'if p , q ' form is equated with conditionality
- Benefit of (ii): respects intuitive truth conditions

- 'If you like' has an automatic, default interpretation—it is psychologically untenable to uphold the metalinguistic reading as a pragmatic inference
 - But (e.g.) reanalysing as hedges removes the possibility of that the explicit content of metalinguistic if-clauses can be commented on by interlocutors
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- ▶ Conditional meaning is available due to 'if *p*' sentence form
 - ▶ 'If you like' is a discourse marker: the metalinguistic meaning is also explicit (and also more automatic)

A case of standardisation?

“the hearer can reason directly, thanks to standardization, from the utterance to the indirect force, but the direct statement (in indicative cases) is always recoverable.” (Bach 1995: 682)

- The standardized metalinguistic meaning is the default, automatic meaning that is likely to be recovered
- The equally explicit, but conversationally dispreferred, interpretation is still recoverable

- A radical version of semantic contextualism in which the logical form of the utterance may be enriched **or even overridden** to give speaker's intended meaning.
- Truth-conditional unit pertains to the **primary, intended content** of the utterance

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*
- ▶ In different contexts of utterance, different sources may take precedence over others

Example

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

- ▶ Conditional sentence
- ▶ Conditional primary meaning

(9) If you could open the window, that'd be great

- ▶ Conditional sentence
- ▶ Non-conditional primary meaning
- ▶ Conditional *secondary meaning*

(11) Are you hungry? Have a biscuit

- ▶ Non-conditional sentence
- ▶ Conditional primary meaning

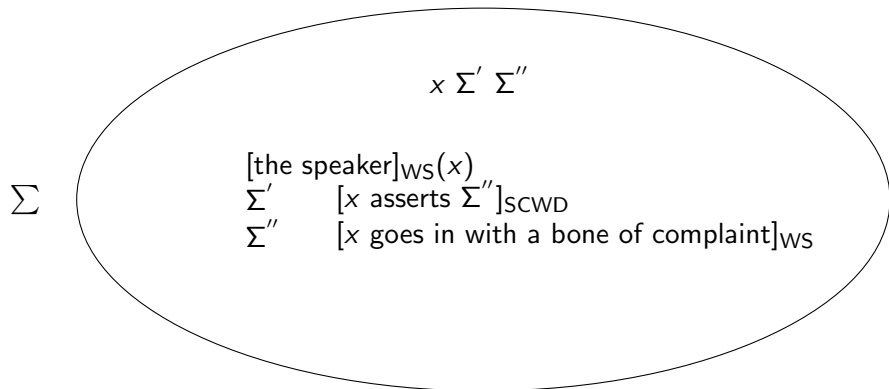
- In traditional Gricean pragmatics, there are two layers of meaning: *what is said* + *what is implicated*
- This corresponds to 'literal' explicit content, versus 'non-literal' implicit content
- In Default Semantics, the primary / secondary meaning divide **cuts across** the explicit / implicit divide
- 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')

Conditionals in Default Semantics

The explicit content of a conditional sentence can take the role of a **secondary meaning**, while its **primary meaning** is non-conditional

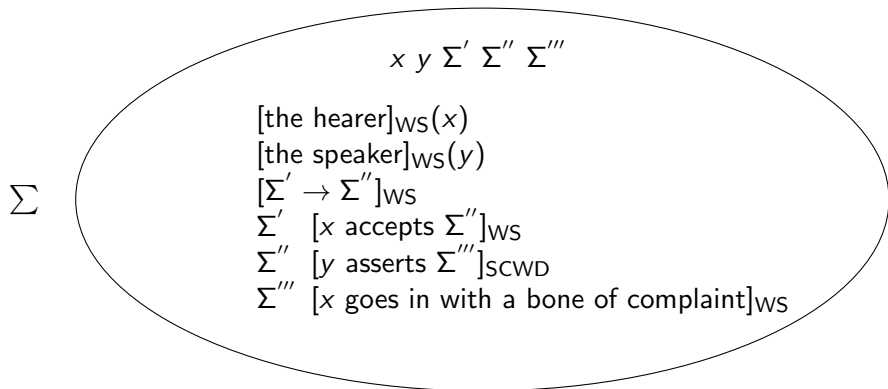
(4) So I went in with a bone of complaint, if you like

PM: I went in with a bone of complaint



(4) So I went in with a bone of complaint, if you like

SM: If you accept it, I assert 'I went in with a bone of complaint'



- The primary meaning of 'if p , q ' may or may not correspond to the 'if p , q ' sentence form
- In Default Semantics, the truth-conditional (semantic) unit does not have to map onto the syntactic form of the sentence, as propositions are generated through an interaction of the LF with extra-linguistic sources
- Locating conditionality at the level thought allows conditional meanings to be either be **primary** or **secondary meanings**
- So, it also allows that the non-conditional metalinguistic meaning can be primary, while a conditional reading may be a secondary meaning obtained via pragmatic processing
- ▶ 'If you like' can retain its status as a discourse marker, while making available conditionality as a potential linguistic resource to be drawn on in interaction

There isn't a hard distinction between hypothetical conditionals and biscuit conditionals

- 'If you like' need not hedge the speech act of asserting q , but can hedge the (propositional) content of q

Example

(13) So if you like, that is the definitive statement for the time being (ICE-GB S1B-007 205)

- What if I don't like? It is not definitive statement
- If it is not the definitive statement, you don't like (it)

Example

(14) If I remember rightly you had jaundice, didn't you

- What if I don't remember rightly? (You didn't have jaundice)
- If you didn't have jaundice, I don't remember rightly

Example

(15) I'm just going to top up my tea if you don't mind

- What if I do mind? (I won't top up my tea)
- If I don't top up my tea, you (do) mind

...and many more examples!

- Both hypothetical and biscuit conditionals can be used to communicate speech acts other than straightforward assertion
- A radical contextualist account allows that the explicit meaning can be overridden altogether to obtain the desired primary meaning (and hence truth conditions)
- This is only possible if we depart from the view that conditional meanings are equated with conditional sentences

★ By disassociating 'conditionality' from truth-conditional content, we can target the primary speech act as semantic content

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