

# Incomplete conditionals

## A pragmatic analysis

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## Conditional sentence in English

A two-clause sentence of the form 'if  $p$ ,  $q$ '

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A two-clause sentence of the form 'if  $p$ ,  $q$ '

## Incomplete conditional

An *if*-clause with no uttered main clause

## Example

(1) If you'd like to put on your helmet.

= 'polite directive'

[Examples drawn from the International Corpus of English-GB]

# Objectives

- To show that ‘polite directives’ can be issued by incomplete or complete conditionals with no semantic difference
- To demonstrate that an incomplete conditional does not require any completion to express a meaningful proposition
- To identify the sources of information that allow the recovery of the intended meaning of a polite directive in the framework of Default Semantics

# Outline of the talk

- Syntactic versus semantic incompleteness
- Conventionalisation versus standardisation
- Direct versus indirect conditionals
- Role of  $q$  in a polite directive
- Incomplete conditionals in Default Semantics

# What kind of incompleteness?

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## Syntactic incompleteness

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## Semantic incompleteness

Abbreviated syntactic structure encodes complete meaning



# Syntactically incomplete conditionals

## Example

- (2) A: It's obligatory is it to have something in a company report?  
B: If you've got more than a hundred in the workforce

Recovery of  $q$  is 'copy-pasted' from previous co-text

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- There may not be an intention of a consequent
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- **A case of semantic incompleteness**



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## Standardisation

Performative verbs retain 'literal' truth-evaluable meaning, but meaning is 'standardised' ('can you pass the salt?')

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- This use of 'if' has become conventionalised/grammaticalised: a subordinate clause takes on the role of a main clause
- **A case of conventionalisation?**

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...but...

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- There is an uttered consequent
- $p$  appears to have the illocutionary force of a polite directive
- But there is no causal relation between  $p$  and  $q$ , and  $q$  is not (ostensibly) a positive outcome of  $p$

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- Is *q* responsible for generating the directive meaning? Probably not...

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# Focussing on the role of $p$

- Polite directives don't really fall on the cline between direct/indirect conditionals
- Sometimes they are direct, sometimes they are not, sometimes we can't tell
- Rather than the relationship between  $p$  and  $q$ , it is more useful to look at the communicative role of  $p$
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- Want to account for the directive component regardless of the 'conditionality' of the sentence
- **How to handle all these cases in semantics?**

## Default Semantics (Jaszczolt 2005, 2010)

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.

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[PM: My fingers are predominantly red.]
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# Complete versus incomplete conditionals

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- But there does not seem to be a difference in the PM between cases with an uttered main clause and those without
- How do we know whether  $p$  is used as a polite directive between these cases?
- Using the principles of DS, the addition of the main clause is an additional source of information contributing to the recovery of the PM

# Sources of information in DS

DS identifies 5 sources of information that may 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)

In different context of utterance, different sources may take precedence over others

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- Prosodically complete with terminal intonation contour (Stirling 1999) (WS)
- Contingency relation between  $p$  and  $q$  (WK/SC)
- Positive value of  $q$  leads to inference that hearer should do  $p$  (IS)

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- The strength of the directive element is made manifest by these other features of the consequent

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- If there is no contingency relation between  $p$  and  $q$ , it's as if two separate speech acts have been made
- Both  $p$  and  $q$  express independent propositions
- Hence one *sentence* may be used to express two PMs of the forms  $p$  and  $q$  respectively



# Utilising context

## Example

John's teacher is always nagging him to wear a helmet when he cycles home from school. One day he falls off his bike. When his teacher sees him the next day, she utters:

(1) If you'd like to put on your helmet.

(1'') PM: You should wear your helmet (in general). / I told you so.

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## Example

John and Bill are going out cycling. They never wear helmets, although they know they should. As they set off, John says to Bill:

- (1) If you'd like to put on your helmet.
- (1''') PM: Be careful.

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- (7) A: I wish you wouldn't feel my stubble!  
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- Recovery of intended meaning may come from different sources
- In (7), speaker B provides the condition upon which they will honour speaker A's desire; *p* is not presented as a 'conventionalised' directive, but as a hypothetical situation



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- If not, other clues (intonation, situation of discourse) indicate it is used in this 'conventionalised' way; an overt main clause provides an additional source of information to recover the intended meaning
- By taking on board a truth-conditional unit which pertains to the PM, the conventionalisation/standardisation distinction is not that useful: truth-conditional content is not linked to syntactic form

# Conclusions

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- The PM of an utterance can be recovered via an interaction of different sources
- In a polite directive, an uttered main clause constitutes one source of information contributing to the PM

# Conclusions

- Polite directives are a case of semantic incompleteness: a syntactically incomplete form gives rise to a complete proposition without any syntactic enrichment
- The PM of an utterance can be recovered via an interaction of different sources
- In a polite directive, an uttered main clause constitutes one source of information contributing to the PM
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- In a polite directive, an uttered main clause constitutes one source of information contributing to the PM
- An syntactically incomplete conditional *sentence* can be used to express a meaningful proposition
- The case of incomplete conditionals provides support to the thesis that the unit of semantic investigation should go beyond the sentence form to account for intended meanings

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# Thank you

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