Translating ἐὰν μὴ (*unless/if... not*) conditionals

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Introduction

The Greek conditional constuction ἐὰν μὴ[1] consists of the conditional conjunction ἐὰν 'if' and the negative adverb μὴ 'not'. Compared to other Greek conditional constructions, the ἐὰν μὴ construction has a few peculiarities:

- In regular, affirmative conditional constructions, the protasis (the conditional clause, P) usually precedes the apodosis (the main clause, Q). For example, in the gospels, the reverse order Q, P occurs only 14 times out of a total of 244 affirmative conditional sentences; that is just 5.7%. In contrast, the order Q, P occurs in over half of all ἐὰν μὴ sentences: 17 out of 31 occurrences (55%) in the gospels, and 30 out of 55 occurrences (55%) in the whole New Testament.

- In the ἐὰν μὴ construction, not only is P negative (because of the negative adverb μὴ), but Q is usually negative as well. Out of the 55 ἐὰν μὴ conditionals in the New Testament, Q is explicitly negative in 28 of these, and in an additional 6 cases it consists of a rhetorical question that expects a negative response. Therefore Q is negative or expects a negative response in 62% of ἐὰν μὴ conditionals.

- The way ἐὰν μὴ constructions are translated in English is also different from other conditional constructions. Rather than *if not*, the usual English translation of ἐὰν μὴ is *unless* (40 out of 55 times in the NASB, 38 times in the ESV, and 30 times in the NIV); *unless* is a 'portmanteau' expression, that is, it combines two meanings: conditional and negative.[2]

The unusual order, with P often occurring after Q, plus the fact that both P and Q are often negated, mean that sentences containing the ἐὰν μὴ construction can be challenging to translate clearly and naturally in many languages. Before suggesting some ways in which the ἐὰν μὴ construction can be translated, we will look at its meaning in more detail.

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1   I include some cases of εἰ μὴ (Jhn 19:11, 1Co 15:3), εἰ μήτι (2Co 13:5), and ἐκτὸς εἰ μὴ (1Co 14:5) but only when these do not clearly express the idea of 'except' or counterfactuality. I also exclude the idiomatic expressions εἰ μή γε, εἰ δὲ μή, and εἰ δὲ μή γε meaning (roughly) 'otherwise'.

2   The same is not necessarily true of other European languages, even if there is an expression with a similar meaning to *unless*. For example, French translations (Nouvelle Version Segond révisée, Traduction Oecuménique de la Bible, La Bible en Français Courant) almost always translate ἐὰν μή using the negative conditional *si... ne* 'if... not', and occasionally *sans* 'without'; they hardly ever use *à moins que* 'unless'.

One characteristic that ἐὰν μὴ conditionals and *unless* conditionals share is that, very often, Q describes something that is expected or that is asserted as the default case. As Dancygier & Sweetser (2005: 187) put it, "*unless* states Q as a basic default situation and then adds the *If P, ~Q*[3] scenario as an exceptional alternative."[4] A helpful way to illustrate this is to consider a sentence where *if... not* is perfectly acceptable but *unless* is not appropriate. Imagine a situation in which you buy a shirt from a store. The expected or default case is that the shirt will fit (after all, you know what size of shirt usually fits you, and the shirts in the store are all labelled), and you therefore expect to keep it. Taking the shirt back to the store to get a refund or a replacement is the exception rather than the default. For this reason using *unless* instead of *if... not* sounds pragmatically odd (indicated by the ! symbol at the start of the example):

(1)   a.   You can take it back to the store if it does not fit.

       b.   ! You can take it back to the store unless it fits.[5]

Another characteristic that ἐὰν μὴ conditionals and *unless* conditionals share is that, very often, P describes the *only* situation or fact that would cause the opposite of Q (i.e. the unexpected or non-default ~Q) to be true.[6] As a result, 'Q, unless P' and 'Q, ἐὰν μὴ P' can often be rephrased as '~Q, only

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3   ~Q means NOT-Q.

4   Dancygier & Sweetser (2005: 184) note that often *unless* is used in situations where Q is asserted and *unless* introduces an afterthought or reservation; this is very rarely the case with ἐὰν μή constructions in the New Testament. An afterthought use does occur in Luk 9:13b: But he said to them, "You give them something to eat." They said, "We have no more than five loaves and two fish—unless we are to go and buy food for all these people." However, the Greek expression here is εἰ μήτι rather than ἐὰν μὴ.

5   This does not affect the logical, or truth-conditional, meaning encoded by *unless*; Fretheim (2006: 62) notes: "Truth-conditionally, *unless* is exactly like *if not*. ... Whenever an 'unless'-conditional is felt to be bad and the corresponding conditional with *if not* is pragmatically in order, the unacceptability of the former is due to a pragmatic mismatch between the truth-conditional meaning of the negative protasis and the special non-truth-conditional meaning encoded by the connective *unless*."

6   Note that I state that this is "very often" the case. This is because describing the *only* thing that would cause ~Q to be true is a pragmatic feature of many uses of ἐὰν μή, not part of the semantics of the construction. (See also Declerck & Reed 2000, Declerck & Reed 2001: 449-50, and Dancygier & Sweetser 2005: 184; 187 for similar pragmatic analyses of *unless*.)

if P'[7] without distorting the intended meaning of the original.[8] Remember that Q is negative in most ἐὰν μὴ conditional sentences, and so ~Q will be an affirmative clause in these cases. The '~Q, only if P' paraphrase can be useful when translating ἐὰν μὴ conditionals into languages where the combination of an inverted (Q, P) conditional sentence with multiple negatives is unnatural or confusing.

Strategies for translating ἐὰν μὴ conditional sentences

Examples where 'Q, ἐὰν μὴ P' (Q, *unless* P) can be rephrased as '~Q, *only if* P'
It is not always the case that 'Q, ἐὰν μὴ P' can be rephrased as '~Q, only if P', and we will look at some exceptions later, but many cases can be rephrased in this way. Here are some examples from the New Testament (the 'original' versions are based on the ESV translation). I have underlined the negative elements in the original Q clauses and *only* in the rephrased versions, and I have highlighted *unless* and *if* in bold. In cases where P precedes Q in the original, I have followed this clause order and rephrased 'ἐὰν μὴ P, Q' ('*unless* P, Q') as 'only if P, ~Q'.

Jhn 3:2b
Original:
"for <u>no one</u> can do these signs that you do **unless** God is with him."

Rephrased:
(a) "for a person can do these signs that you do <u>only</u> **if** God is with him."
(b) "for a person can <u>only</u> do these signs that you do **if** God is with him."

Note that in English, when the order is Q, P, *only* can be placed immediately before P, as in (a), or it can be placed before the main verb in Q, as in (b). When it occurs before the main verb in Q, it has scope

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7   Dancygier (1985, 1987, 1998: 167-177) proposed 'Q; [only] if P, ~Q' as a semantic analyses of *unless* (that is, Q is asserted, with the reservation that in the case of P, it will not hold). In Dancygier & Sweetser (2005: 184) this was revised to 'Q; ~Q if P' (dropping *only* and reflecting the usual Q, P order). My paraphrase differs in that it is not a semantic analysis of ἐὰν μή or *unless*, but rather a paraphrase that expresses the intended meaning of ἐὰν μή conditionals in many contexts.

8   A central part of this meaning, for ἐὰν μή and for *unless*, is that the hearer is asked to consider the consequences of P being true. "*Unless* instructs the hearer to engage in a parallel processing of the conditional, in which attention is to be paid not only to the explicit negative protasis ~P but also to pragmatic consequences of an alternative context in which the contradictory counterpart of P is true." (Fretheim 2006: 84)

over the whole conditional construction, including P. There is usually very little difference in meaning, but putting *only* within Q can help to avoid unintended emphasis on P. However, for the sake of consistency, *only* has been placed immediately before P in the rephrased examples below.

Jhn 6:44 (and 6:55)
Original:
"No one can come to me **unless** the Father who sent me draws him."

Rephrased:
"A person can come to me only **if** the Father who sent me draws him."

Mat 5:20 (see also Mat 18:3; Jhn 3:3, 5)
Original:
"For I tell you, **unless** your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never[9] enter the kingdom of heaven.

Rephrased:
"For I tell you, only **if** you are more righteous than the scribes and Pharisees, will you enter[10] the kingdom of heaven.

Acts 27:31
Paul said to the centurion and to the soldiers, "**Unless** these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved."

Rephrased"
"Only **if** these men stay in the ship can you be saved."
Or: "You can be saved only **if** these men stay in the ship."

1Co 15:36

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9   Greek οὐ μὴ (lit: 'not not'); this is an emphatic negative, often translated as 'certainly not', 'never', or 'not at all'.

10   A feature of English grammar is that when the order of clauses is P, Q and P contains *only if*, Q must have the structure: auxiliary + subject + verb. For example, 2Ti 2:5 *An athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules* can be rephrased as *Only if an athlete competes according to the rules is he crowned*. If there is not already an auxiliary in Q, an appropriate form of *do* is used: *Only if an athlete competes according to the rules does he win the prize.* This is simply a feature of English grammar, and should not be copied when translating into most other languages.

Original:

You foolish person! What you sow does <u>not</u> come to life **unless** it dies.

Rephrased:

You foolish person! What you sow <u>only</u> comes to life **if** it dies.

More complicated examples

<u>Mrk 3:27a and Mat 12:29a</u>

Mrk 3:27a Original:

"But <u>no one</u> can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property, **unless** he first binds the strong man."[11]

Rephrased:

"A person can <u>only</u> enter a strong man's house and plunder his property **if** he first binds the strong man."

Note that the parallel verse in Mat 12:29a uses a rhetorical question that expects a negative answer:

"Or how can someone enter a strong man's house and carry off his property, **unless** he first binds the strong man?"

This verse can be rephrased in the same way as Mrk 3:27a to avoid the use of a rhetorical question:

"A person can <u>only</u> enter the strong man's house and carry off his property **if** he first binds the strong man."

The NLT keeps the rhetorical question in Q but rephrases the *unless* clause as a statement:

"For who is powerful enough to enter the house of a strong man and plunder his goods? Only someone even stronger – someone who could tie him up and then plunder his house."

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11 Some English translations (e.g. NIV, NRSV) use *without* + gerund instead of *unless*: "no one can enter a strong man's house **without** first **tying** him up." (NIV)

<u>Mrk 7:3-4a</u>

Original:

"For the Pharisees and all the Jews <u>do not</u> eat **unless** they wash their hands properly, holding to the tradition of the elders, and when they come from the marketplace, they <u>do not</u> eat **unless** they wash." [Greek v.4a: **unless** they wash (themselves), they <u>do not</u> eat.]

Rephrased:

"For the Pharisees and all the Jews <u>only</u> eat **if** they carefully wash their hands, thus observing the traditions of the elders. And when they come from the market place, they <u>only</u> eat **if** they wash themselves."

In these verses, it is clear that the washing happens before the eating, and so the French translation *Parole de Vie* has rephrased these verses using *avant de* 'before' to express the order of the events and *toujours* 'always' to indicate that they eat only after washing. This translation also puts the reason for this practice at the start of v.3, rather than between v.3 and v.4:

« En effet, les Pharisiens et tous les autres Juifs obéissent à la tradition de leurs ancêtres : <u>avant de</u> manger, ils se lavent **toujours** les mains avec soin. Quand ils reviennent de la place publique, ils se lavent **toujours** <u>avant de</u> manger. »

English translation:

"Now the Pharisees and all the other Jews follow the traditions of their ancestors: <u>before</u> eating, they **always** wash their hands carefully. When they return from the market place, they **always** wash <u>before</u> eating."

<u>Jhn 7:51</u>

Original:

"Our Law does <u>not</u> judge a man **unless** it first hears from him and knows what he is doing, does it?" (NASB)

This example is complicated by the fact that the whole sentence expresses a rhetorical question that expects the answer "No!" NASB, NRSV and NET do this with a question tag "does it?" Both clauses are negated in Greek (our law does <u>not</u> judge a man if it does <u>not</u> first hear from him...). To avoid

multiple negatives, Q can be expressed as an affirmative, as in the ESV and NIV, which both replace 'unless' with 'without':

"Does our law judge a man **without** first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?" (ESV)

If necessary, the answer to the question can be supplied:
"Does our law judge a man if it does not first hear him and know what he does? Of course not."

Note also that the Greek literally says that the law judges and hears. If this is unnatural or confusing, here is an alternative:
"According to our law, can we judge a man before we have listened to him and learned what he has done? No (we can't)."

Jhn 19:11a
Original:
Jesus answered [Pilate], "You would have <u>no</u> authority over me <u>at all</u> (Gk: οὐδεμίαν 'not any') **unless** it had been given you from above."

Rephrased:
Jesus answered, "You <u>only</u> have authority over me **because** it has been given to you from above."

Jesus is responding to Pilate's question in v.10 "Do you not know that I have authority to release you, and I have authority to crucify you?" It is a fact that Pilate has authority over Jesus, and for this reason it may be better to use *because* rather than *if*. If a conditional can be used in your language to express something that is assumed to be true, the following rephrasing may work well:

Jesus answered, "If you have <u>any</u> authority over me <u>at all</u>, it is <u>only</u> **because** it has been given to you from above."

Other ways to translate the ἐὰν μὴ conditional construction
There are various reasons why it may ***not*** be good to rephrase 'Q, ἐὰν μὴ P' ('Q, *unless* P') as '~Q, *only if* P'. Here are some examples.

Where Q is affirmative and the usual P, Q order is used, ἐὰν μὴ can be translated as 'if... not'

Luk 13:3, 5

ESV: "No, I tell you; but **unless** you repent, you will all likewise perish."

Rephrased: "No, I tell you; but **if** you **do not** repent, you will all likewise perish."

Jhn 8:24b

ESV: "… **unless** you believe that I am he you will die in your sins."

Rephrased: "… **if** you **do not** believe that I am he, you will die in your sins."

Other verses: Jhn 12:24, 15:6; Rom 11:23; 1Co 14:11, 14:28; Jas 2:17; Rev 3:3

Where the main clause functions as a warning

Another reason why it is not appropriate to rephrase Luk 13:3, 5 and Jhn 8:24b above as 'only if P, ~Q' is that in these verses Q expresses a warning ("you will all likewise perish", "you will die in your sins"). When Q in 'Q, *unless* P' functions to give a warning (e.g. "I will put you in prison, unless you pay back what you owe,") the force would be lost if it were rephrased as '~Q, only if P' ("I will not put you in prison, only if you pay back what you owe"). We see this in Mat 18:35:

"So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, **if** you **do not** forgive your brother from your heart." (ESV)

Most English translations use *if you do not forgive* or *if each of you does not forgive*; NIV uses *unless you forgive.*

Other verses: Rev 2:5; 2:22. (Note that in each of these verses, Q is affirmative.)

Difficult clauses to negate

In Jhn 3:27 the negative component of the Q clause is οὐδὲ ἓν 'not one'. This is translated in various ways in English:

John answered, "A person <u>cannot</u> receive <u>even one thing</u> **unless** it is given him from heaven." (ESV)

John answered and said, "A man can receive <u>nothing</u> **unless** it has been given him from heaven." (NASB)

John answered, "<u>No one</u> can receive <u>anything</u> **except** what has been given from heaven." (NRSV)

John replied, "<u>No one</u> can receive <u>anything</u> **unless** it has been given to him from heaven. (NET)

Rephrasing *nothing* or *not... anything* as an affirmative would result in "A person can receive something..." This puts unnecessary emphasis on what it is that a person receives, and therefore misses the point of the verse. Because of this, the NIV (1984) rephrased this verse avoiding the use of a conditional altogether:

To this John replied, "A man can receive <u>only</u> what is given him from heaven."

Other ways to rephrase this include:

"Everything that a man receives is given him from heaven."

"Whatever a man receives is given him from heaven."

A similar situation occurs in Jhn 5:19a:

Therefore Jesus answered and was saying to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do <u>nothing</u> of Himself, **unless** *it is* something He sees the Father doing…" (NASB)

The Greek phrase ἀφ᾽ ἑαυτοῦ οὐδὲν, which is translated "nothing of Himself" (NASB), "nothing of his own accord" (ESV), "nothing by himself" (NIV, NLT), and "nothing on his own" (NRSV); this is difficult to express this as an affirmative. However, in this verse, ἐὰν μή 'unless' expresses the idea of 'except', and so very few English translations use 'unless'. ESV, NRSV and NET use "but only":

"… the Son can do <u>nothing</u> on his own, **but only** what he sees the Father doing." (NRSV)

NIV and NLT create two separate sentences:

"… the Son can do <u>nothing</u> by himself. **He does only** what he sees the Father doing." (NLT)

Where an ἐὰν μὴ conditional 'echoes' a previous expression

In Jhn 13:8 Peter states, Οὐ μὴ νίψῃς μου τοὺς πόδας "Never will you wash my feet..." to which Jesus replies, Ἐὰν μὴ νίψω σε "Unless I wash you..." This echoes Peter's statement, and changing Jesus' words into an affirmative statement would therefore not be appropriate.

Where an ἐὰν μὴ conditional forms a contrastive pair with an affirmative conditional

There are two conditional constructions in Jhn 16:7, a negative one and then its affirmative counterpart:

"Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for [**if** I **do not** go away, the Helper will <u>not</u> come to you]. But [if I go, I will send him to you].

Because of this, the first negative conditional should be kept. If this is really not possible or natural, it can be made affirmative with *only* and the second conditional "if I go" can be replaced with an affirmation: "only if I go away will the Helper come to you; yes, I will send him to you."

Other verses: 1Co 8:8; 9:16b

Conclusion

Sentences containing the Greek conditional constuction ἐὰν μὴ 'unless' can often be challenging to translate for a combination of reasons: 1) in the majority of cases, the usual order of protasis (P) and apodosis (Q) is reversed; 2) P is inherently negative and in the majority of cases Q is also negative (or is a rhetorical question expecting a negative response); 3) at the pragmatic level, Q describes something that is expected or that is asserted as the default case, and very often P describes the *only* situation or fact that would cause the opposite of Q.

When translating ἐὰν μὴ conditionals into languages where the combination of an inverted conditional sentence with multiple negatives is unnatural or confusing, I suggested that 'Q, ἐὰν μὴ P' can be rephrased as '~Q, only if P'. I showed how this can be applied to a number of verses, and also discussed a number of verses where '~Q, only if P' is not an appropriate paraphrase of 'Q, ἐὰν μὴ P'.

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