Real Conditionals

By William G. Lycan

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Mental spaces in grammar: Conditional constructions

By Barbara Dancygier and Eve Sweetser

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Overview

This review discusses two very different books on English conditional constructions. Lycan approaches the subject from a linguistically-informed but essentially philosophical perspective, whilst Dancygier and Sweetser (henceforth D&S) approach the subject from the perspective of cognitive linguistics, specifically using the framework of Mental Space theory (Fauconnier 1994). I will attempt to summarise some of the main concerns of each book, focusing on areas which are common to both and which therefore invite direct comparison.

D&S focus on conditional meaning as it is expressed in various constructions in English. This means that they not only discuss constructions involving *if*-clauses (including *even if, only if, except if*), but also clauses with *since, because* and *unless*, and coordinate constructions (*Come one step closer and I fire; Stay right where you are or I'll fire*). They also discuss the effect of clause order on conditional meaning (*If P, Q* versus *Q if P*). Their basic claim is that these constructions set up various kinds of background mental space against which the contents of other clauses can be understood. For example, "an *if*-clause sets up a Mental Space which is the background for the construal of the *then*-clause" (11). This helps to explain why an *if*-clause or a *then*-clause can be syntactically free standing when the rest of the 'space structure' is contextually accessible:

  (1)   (Trainer discussing dog:) "Maybe tomorrow he'll lie down on his own."
        (Owner:) "You think so?"
        (Trainer:) "If you practice. If you don't give in. If you don't go all softhearted."
        (D&S p. 264)

With an *iff* ('if and only if') interpretation of an *if P, Q* utterance, hearers construct not just a space involving P and Q but also an alternative (that is, incompatible) mental space involving not-P and not-Q. Variation in the interpretation of different kinds of conditional constructions is explained in terms of differences between the mental spaces that are set up by the different constructions.

The data in D&S are almost all gathered from electronic corpus searches, close reading of hard-copy texts, and conversations (almost all in English). This allows them to consider examples in their wider context, whereas most of the literature on conditionals is based on isolated examples. If only isolated examples are considered, it appears that 'distanced' conditional clauses (that is, conditional clauses with tense shifting, such as *If I had seen/*saw the machete, I'd have handled it differently*) almost always receive a counterfactual interpretation; this interpretation is then treated as basic, with other interpretations requiring special explanations. But when naturally occurring, contextualised data are considered, other interpretations arise as naturally as counterfactual interpretations in certain contexts. This allows D&S to consider an alternative explanation of distanced conditional clauses which treats counterfactual interpretations not as basic but as the interpretations requiring the least amount of context building, since "without context to guide the mental-space set-up, it is enough to assume that the event described in P is a past, known fact and to negate it" (77).

William Lycan's *Real conditionals* is written from a philosopher's perspective, but with a keen interest in the semantics of natural language. The first chapter concerns the syntax of conditional sentences in English and concludes that *if*-clauses are relative clause constructions, similar to *when*- and *where*-clauses. This is due to the possibility of replacing 'if' with 'in the event that' or 'in the circumstance in which' (11). Of the remaining seven chapters, the first three concern truth conditions, and the final two concern specific philosophical 'puzzles'; these are of primarily philosophical rather than linguistic interest and will not be discussed here. Chapters 5 and 6 concern the semantics of *even if*, which is a construction which D&S also discuss; we will look at these different accounts below. Finally, Lycan discusses what he calls nonconditional conditionals (termed speech act conditionals in D&S) in an appendix (a reprint of Geis and Lycan 1993) and postscript.

Genuine conditionals and nonconditional conditionals

Lycan (2001:185-86) notes that genuine conditionals in English, such as (2a), have a number of distinguishing features, such as expressing that the protasis (that is, the antecedent, or P-clause) is a condition of the apodosis (the consequence, or Q-clause), taking the resumptive pronoun *then* (2b), modification by *only* (2c), contraposition (2d) in which the protasis (the *if*-clause) and the apodosis are reversed and negated without a change in truth conditions, equivalence to disjunction (2e), and having a close if not identical meaning to a corresponding subjunctive conditional (2f).

   (2a) If she goes, I go.
   (2b) If she goes, then I go.
   (2c) Only if she goes do I go.
   (2d) If I don't go, she doesn't go.
   (2e) Either she doesn't go or I go.
   (2f) If she were to go, I would go.

However, not all English sentences containing two clauses related by *if* are genuine conditionals; some express nonconditional relationships between their component clauses. Lycan classifies these nonconditional conditionals (NCCs) as follows: speech-act, or so-called 'biscuit' conditionals (3), nondeclarative conditionals (4), qualified assertions (5), and factive concessives (6), in all of which the protasis is not genuinely conditional; qualified denials (7) in which the protasis is presupposed not to be true; pseudo-factive concessives (8) in which the protasis is presupposed to be true and the apodosis contains a pronoun which is coreferential with the protasis (*it* in the example); and what Davis (1983) calls 'weak' conditionals (9a) which cannot be contraposed and which change their meaning if *then* is added ((9a) means that opening the refrigerator will not cause it to explode, whereas (9b) means that opening the refrigerator will prevent it from exploding):

(3)   There are biscuits on the sideboard if you want them. (Austin 1961:158; cited in Lycan 2001:184)
(4)   If Peter asks you, I did receive his letter. (Lycan 2001:191)
(5)   If memory serves, the capital of Honduras is Tegucigalpa. (ibid. 199)
(6)   James' theory was plausible, if elaborate. (ibid. 197)
(7)   If Ronald Reagan stole money, I've never heard of it. (ibid. 198)
(8)   If I survived the summer, it was no thanks to you. (ibid. 198)
(9a) If you open it, the refrigerator won't explode.
(9b) If you open it, then the refrigerator won't explode. (ibid. 200)

Geis and Lycan (1993) answered the question of the function of NCC antecedents (the protasis in NCCs) through the following generalisation (repeated in Lycan 2001:193):

An NCC's consequent is itself alone used to perform the main speech act, while the antecedent either picks out and articulates some illocutionary or linguistic felicity condition on the performance of the main speech act, or helps to redress or mitigate a face-threat associated with the main speech act.

They also raised, but failed to answer, a number of other questions: Why are NCCs not interpreted as genuine conditionals? Why does *if* occur in NCCs? Why, if NCCs are supposed to constitute a 'natural kind', do some appear more genuine than others? In the postscript, Lycan suggests answers to these questions by developing the idea that rather than the antecedents of NCCs being conditions of their consequents, they are metalinguistic; that is, "NCC antecedents...make reference, explicit or tacit, to the *speaker's utterance* of the consequence" (210). This argument is similar to Noh's relevance theory proposal that the antecedent of a 'given' or 'speech-act conditional' is "a metarepresentation of an attributed utterance or thought" (Noh 2000:208). As to the consequents of NCCs, Lycan proposes that whether a consequent is understood as an assertion is a matter of degree, and that this is true of all conditionals and not just NCCs. Therefore NCCs only constitute a natural kind in illocutionary terms, and not in semantic terms.

D&S note that speech act conditionals (citing the first of the NCCs listed above) do not set up alternative mental spaces, and hence do not receive an *iff* interpretation (40). Since they do not set up alternative mental spaces, they are also not predictive, and hence do not generally allow distanced (tense shifted) verb forms (117). The fact that NCCs are sometimes infelicitous

(although grammatical) with *then* in the apodosis (compare (9a) and (9b) above) also follows from this analysis. The use of *then* focuses the hearer's attention on the previous *if*-clause, but since in NCCs the *if*-clause is mentioned merely as background to the main assertion (it does not set up an *alternative* mental space), such emphasis is not appropriate.

These accounts, each couched in a different framework, nonetheless all share the assumption that the function of the *if*-clause is to 'mention' its content, and so the *if*-clause does not establish a condition for the apodosis.

Even if

Consider example (10) with *even if*:

   (10) Even if he commits a crime, they will vote for him.

According to D&S, the effect of an *even if* P, Q conditional is to communicate that there is no condition under which not-Q would hold; this is the opposite of an *iff* interpretation. Lycan (101-102) expresses the unique nature of *even if* conditionals as follows:

The oddity is that, although 'Q even if P' has the superficial aspect of a conditional and although it seems grammatically to be simply the result of applying 'even' to an ordinary conditional, it does not seem intuitively to be conditional in meaning. A speaker who asserts 'Q even if P' is typically felt to have asserted that Q – unconditionally.

Lycan proposes that "a theory of 'even if' should fall out of a plausible general theory of the semantics of 'even' " (93), which is also the approach which D&S adopt (although, apparently, it was not the approach taken in most of the previous philosophical literature). D&S follow Kay (1990) in assuming that *even* is scalar, and paraphrase *even if P, Q* as saying, "the most extreme case of the range of alternative values under consideration for P is still not extreme enough to set up an alternative scenario to Q" (156). Conditional constructions involving *even if* do not receive an *iff* interpretation on this account because "the scalar construal added by *even* functions precisely by rejecting a standard predictive alternative-space reading; the adversative space might have been expected to contrast with other possibilities, but it does not" (210).

Lycan considers but rejects the scalar analysis of *even* based on examples such as the following (from Berckmans 1993:601, cited in Lycan 2001:122):

   (11) A vouvray, an Australian chardonnay or even a good vintage champagne would go well with scallops in a creamy leek sauce.

Example (11) does not imply that any wine or any of a particular narrower class of wines would go with scallops. Rather than saying that *even* means 'every...including...' Lycan suggests the paraphrase 'every...plus...' (127). Thus, example (10) would be paraphrased as 'People will vote for him under every condition in which people would normally be expected to vote for him, *plus* if he commits a crime.' Although D&S's account of *even if* conditionals is based in naturally

occurring data and forms part of a coherent account of conditional meaning in general, Lycan's analysis seems to do justice to the semantics of *even* in a way that D&S's analysis does not.

Interestingly, although Lycan is generally well acquainted with the linguistic literature on conditionals, noting for example grammatical similarities between *even* and *only* (which "is overlooked by philosophers everywhere" (110)), he does not refer to Dancygier and Sweetser (1997), which presents essentially the same account of *even if* as in D&S (2005).

Assessment

It is instructive to see how two books on the same subject (English conditional constructions) can be so different. This, of course, reflects the disciplines within which the authors operate (and hence their intended audiences), but it is disappointing that there is so little overlap in the bibliographies. This is undoubtedly due in part to the large number of publications dealing with English conditional constructions and conditionals more generally, but must also reflect the compartmentalisation of academic disciplines. Lycan is commendable for his acquaintance with much of the linguistic literature, but his account of nonconditional conditionals could probably have been sharpened had he been aware of approaches such as relevance theory (Noh 2000) and mental spaces (Dancygier and Sweetser 1997). Equally, D&S's account of *even if* could have benefited from Lycan's arguments against the assumption that *even* is necessarily scalar. These quibbles aside, both books are readable and provide novel analyses of familiar issues.

Anyone dealing with languages other than English will realise that there are a variety of ways in which languages express conditional meaning, and therefore analyses of English conditional constructions do not necessarily transfer easily to other languages. The books under review show that the analysis of English conditional constructions has reached a high level, and the challenge now is to produce a comprehensive cross-linguistic account of conditional constructions, which provides a comparable level of detail with regard to conditional constructions in languages other than English.

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