

'If' brings us into the realm of possibilities

How many dimensions do we live in? The physicist Edward Witten proposed a kind of string theory ("M-theory," where M might as well stand for "magic," as Professor Witten suggested) in which there are 11 dimensions.

But as ordinary people, we probably think we live in a three-dimensional world, and then we might remember Albert Einstein and the space-time continuum, and settle for four dimensions.

I'll let you in on a secret: There is a fifth dimension reflected in our languages: the realm of possibility.

When we say, "If Kim were here now, she would enjoy this dinner," we take a trip to a world where Kim is here now. And once whisked away to such a world, we say that Kim is enjoying this dinner along with us.

Thinking and talking about possibilities is essential to the way we humans



IN A WORD
BY KAI VON FINTEL

navigate our lives. *Conditionals* such as the one about Kim and her dinner are the vehicles for exploring what might have been and what could be. They express our thinking about causality, prediction, planning, wishes, and regrets.

The word we use to construct conditional sentences, *if*, is the most obvious vehicle for moving into the dimension of possibility. No wonder Dolly Parton called it "the biggest little word" in her song "If Only."

Still, there are many ways to express conditional meanings even without using *if*. Consider "Without you, I will not solve this puzzle," which conjures up the possibility that I'm working on the puzzle without you.

Or, imagine that we simply say, "Kim would enjoy this dinner," which can mean the same thing as our original, wordier, conditional. And perhaps most puzzlingly, think about sentences

like, "Go any closer and you might get burned," in which the conjunction doesn't seem to do its usual job of committing us to both of the clauses it connects.

My hunch is that conditional thinking is so pervasive that language only needs to provide the barest hints and we'll find a way to parse an utterance into a scenario and a consequence.

A particular language may not have a word for *if*, but the human desire to express a conditional fifth dimension seems to be universal.

So, we can let the physicists count their many dimensions, most of which are infinitesimally small anyway, in the full knowledge that we have five, full-fledged dimensions to explore.

I wonder how long it will take for Apple to provide us with 5D glasses?

■ Guest columnist Kai von Fintel is a professor of linguistics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Melissa Mohr is on vacation.