

## Lecture 4: Conditionals: truth or assertability

Dorothy Edgington (2014), 'Indicative Conditionals', in E. Zalta (ed.), *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/conditionals/>

### Weak and strong equivalence

Recall, the correspondence between indicative and material conditional has led some to advance an *Equivalence Thesis (ET)*:

The truth conditions for the indicative conditional (if...,then...) are the truth conditions for the material conditional ( $\rightarrow$ )

This is a comparatively weak thesis. Contrast this with the stronger thesis *ET+*:

The meaning of the indicative conditional (if...,then...) is the meaning of the material conditional ( $\rightarrow$ )

The weaker Equivalence Thesis follows from the stronger *ET+*, given that the meaning of the material conditional is purely truth-conditional. but not vice versa. This shows that even among those that accept *ET* there can be debate about whether the meaning of indicative conditional sentences is purely truth-functional.

### Assertability conditions and truth conditions

The defence of the weak Equivalence Thesis turns on distinguishing between the conditions for the *truth* of a statement and the conditions for its *assertability*. Consider the following line of reasoning:

“Labour will win the next election. Therefore, if there's a big tax-evasion scandal implicating Corbyn and several members of the shadow-cabinet, then Labour will win the next election.”

The inference seems obviously *improper*. However, it conforms to the truth-table of the material conditional. How should we understand our intuitions that the conditional is improper?

If we take them to mean that the indicative conditional is *false*, even though the premise is true, then we have to reject the weak Equivalence Thesis: the indicative conditional does not have the same truth conditions as the material conditional.

But we can also take ‘improper’ to mean that the conditional is not properly *assertable* in this situation. This does not yet entail it is false. A sentence can be not properly assertable because it's false, but it can be not properly assertable also for other reasons. We can use true statements to make improper assertions in many ways (misinformation, insults, etc.).

### Grice, truth, and meaning

A purely truth-conditional definition of meaning is elegant. According to this account, the meaning of a statement is determined exclusively by its truth conditions (it can be reduced to truth-conditions). ‘Snow is white’ means that snow is white. According to a truth-conditional definition of meaning, the assertability conditions of a sentence (where they go beyond truth conditions) are no part of the sentence's meaning.

Grice aims to preserve a purely truth-conditional account of meaning, and so he tries to defend *ET+*. He argues that indicative conditionals, at least at the level of sentence meaning, just have the meaning of the material conditional.

His adherence to a truth-conditional definition of meaning implies that Grice has to explain the unassertability of problem cases in terms of *conversational implicature*. This is because any conventional implicature would be part of the sentence meaning, i.e. they cannot be cancelled:

- i. “I brushed my teeth and ate my dinner, though not in that order.” (Cancelled, conversational)
- ii. “She is English but quite intelligent—not that there's a tension here!” (??, conventional)

## Grice and conversational implicatures

The Gricean defender of ET+ is committed to explaining the inappropriateness of truth-functionally sound indicative conditionals in terms of violations of the Cooperative Principle.

Recall, when we use English sentences in everyday conversation, we are subject to the Cooperative Principle. This means that violations of this principle can render our use of certain statements inappropriate. So when we utter ‘if there’s a big scandal in the Labour party, Labour will win the next election’, we could only be understood as aiming to live up to the Cooperative Principle if the antecedent somehow was relevant as well.

But strictly, the antecedent need not be relevant for the truth of the conditional (at least if the weak Equivalence Thesis is correct), for the consequent can render the conditional true. So in using this statement, we are *con conversationally* implying something. In particular, we are implying that there is some non-truth-functional connection between the antecedent and consequent as well. We’re implying that on learning A, one should expect B to be true. (And not that, on learning A, one should reject the conditional!)

For example, if I tell you “if there’s a big tax-evasion scandal implicating Corbyn and several members of the shadow-cabinet, then Labour will win the next election”, I’m implying that I think the truth of the antecedent makes probable the truth of the consequent, and not that I would reject the conditional if I found out about any big tax-evasion scandal.

## Jackson and conventional implicatures

Jackson does not aim to preserve a purely truth-conditional account of meaning. He rejects ET+, though he accepts the weaker equivalence thesis.

According to Jackson, there is a specific conventional implicature associated with the indicative conditional: that the consequent is ‘robust’ with the antecedent. This means that it is permissible to assert an indicative conditional only if one assigns a high probability to the consequent on the supposition that the antecedent is true.

If I say “if there’s a big tax-evasion scandal, then Labour will win the next election”, then I’m implying that you should believe that Labour will win the next election were you to discover that there’s a big tax-evasion scandal (and not abandon your belief in this conditional).

Just as Grice, Jackson accepts that the truth conditions for the indicative conditional are the truth conditions for the material conditional. But unlike Grice Jackson accepts that the sentence meaning of indicative conditionals cannot be reduced to their truth-conditions.

## Grice or Jackson?

There are at least two reasons to favour Jackson’s view:

- (i) Even Grice should accept that at least conversationally we generally imply the kind of non-truth-functional connection between antecedent and consequent; this makes it at least *seem* conventional, and so Grice needs a good reason to deny that it is.
- (ii) It is hard to make sense of cancelling the specific implicature that Jackson thinks is associated with the indicative conditional:  
“If she is English, then she’s brave—but I’d take that back if I were to discover she’s English” (?)

## The suppositional theory

By steering away from ET+ and a fully truth-conditional analysis of meaning, Jackson’s view invites a different response. Why should we suppose that the truth-conditions of the material conditional are relevant to the meaning of the indicative conditional at all? Why not simply reject the weaker Equivalence Thesis, while still accepting that the meaning of ‘if P then Q’ is determined by the specific assertability condition Jackson describes?

Dorothy Edgington suggests that such a view is ultimately more attractive. Such a theory takes the indicative to express a conditional belief or conditional judgment.

The suppositional view is first suggested by Frank Ramsey:

If two people are arguing ‘If p, then q?’ and are both in doubt as to p, they are adding p hypothetically to their stock of knowledge and arguing on that basis about q; so that in a sense ‘If p, q’ and ‘If p, not-q’ are contradictories. We can say that they are fixing their degree of belief in q given p. (1929, p. 247).