

TOWARDS AN EXPLANATORY ACCOUNT OF CONDITIONAL PERFECTION

Prerna Nadathur, *Stanford University Department of Linguistics*

Geis & Zwicky (1971) propose a class of “invited inferences” bearing a “quasi-regular association” to the logical form of the sentences prompting them. Best known is *conditional perfection*: (1)a invites inference (1)b, which gives the “perfected” biconditional (1)c when utterance and inference are combined.

- (1) a. If you mow the lawn, I’ll give you five dollars.
- b. If you don’t mow the lawn, I won’t give you five dollars.
- c. If and only if you mow the lawn, I will give you five dollars.

Conditional perfection is widely observed, and an extensive literature (see van der Auwera 1997) points to a generalized conversational implicature classification (GCI; Levinson 2000). Perfection satisfies a number of diagnostics for “default” inferences, arising automatically in certain contexts (typically associated with illocutionary force). Conditional promises and threats are almost universally perfected, but logical or biscuit conditionals rarely are (Fillenbaum 1976, Dancygier 1998).

A formal account of perfection is complicated by the fact that the inference sits between Levinson’s Q- and I-implicatures (associated with Grice’s (1975) Quantity maxims; “make your contribution as informative as required”, “don’t communicate unnecessary information”). I-based accounts (Atlas & Levison 1981, Levinson 2000) hold that biconditionality is the “most informative” available reading for a conditional, whereas Q-accounts (Horn 2000, von Stechow 2001) claim perfection arises from implied negation of the stronger element on the Horn scale $\langle \text{IF } p, q \ll q \text{ NO MATTER WHAT} \rangle$. Neither account is fully explanatory: the former fails to address how biconditionality becomes an available interpretation for conditionals, while the latter derives the inference “not unconditionally q ”, rather than the full biconditional.

Based on reviewing the literature on illocutionary uses of perfected conditionals, I suggest the following empirical generalization: biconditionality arises when a conditional is interpreted as a response to a polar question on its consequent. If the unqualified conditional (1)a is provided in response to “Will the addressee get five dollars?” (as a *question under discussion*; Roberts 1996), it typically communicates that the answer is *yes* if the addressee mows the lawn, but *no* otherwise: that is, the money is biconditionally dependent on lawn-mowing.

As a direct consequence of the need for a *yes/no* response, biconditionality can be formally derived by *exhaustive interpretation* (Groenendijk & Stokhof 1984). This resolves the theoretical Q-I split by balancing the two pressures: a simple *yes/no* is insufficiently informative, so the speaker provides a conditional to convey the additional information, but the need to state full biconditionality (where applicable) is obviated since exhaustivity automatically provides this in context.

The account from exhaustivity unifies perfection with several scalar implicatures (van Rooij & Schulz 2004) and offers a view of GCIs as inferences arising from “common sense” reasoning patterns (cf. *predicate circumscription*, McCarthy 1980). This opens an interesting avenue for GCI theory: it maintains the centrality of “defaultness” for these implicatures, but aims at representing the often conflicting heuristics of cooperative communication as generalizations over reasoning strategies operating at the level of discourse and information structure.