

Conditionals
Loewer and Stanley
Seminar I: Types of Conditionals

Indicative/Subjunctive Distinction

- (1) If Oswald didn't kill Kennedy, someone else did.
- (2) If Oswald had not killed Kennedy, someone else would have.

The first is true, and the second is arguably false. The first is in *indicative* mood, the second is in *subjunctive* mood.

So: There is a truth-conditional difference between (1) and (2). The difference seems to correspond to a difference in grammatical mood, detectable most clearly in the consequents of (1) and (2) (“did” vs. “would”). This has led philosophers to speculate that there are two kinds of conditionals, *indicative* conditionals and *subjunctive*. Many philosophers (though not all) have also thought that the two conditionals correspond to two different two-place sentence operators, so that the distinction between (1) and (2) is represented as:

- (1') C(Oswald didn't kill Kennedy, someone else killed Kennedy)
- (2') C'(Oswald didn't kill Kennedy, someone else killed Kennedy)

This is *prima facie* weird from a compositional semantic point of view. Ideally, one would want the interpretation of (2) to emerge from a meaning assignment to “would” and a meaning assignment to “if”. But the idea is rather than “would” is some kind of meaningless signal that tells us that a different connective is being expressed by the construction. We will encounter this kind of objection later, in Stalnaker's reply to Lewis's objections to Stalnaker's theory, from what Lewis calls “might” counterfactuals. Stalnaker will object to Lewis's claim that conditionals with “might” in their consequents are a special kind of conditionals, essentially on compositionality grounds. The same kind of worry arises with the relation between (2) and (2').

Another term commonly used for sentences such as (2) is “counterfactual”, as in “counterfactual conditional”. David Lewis (Lewis, 1973, p. 4) prefers the term “counterfactual” because he thinks that there are conditionals that are expressed with subjunctive mood in English that nevertheless have the truth-conditions of indicative conditionals. Lewis's example is:

- (3) If our ground troops entered Laos next year, there would be trouble.

Presumably, Lewis's thought is that (3) has the truth-conditions of (4):

- (4) If our ground troops enter Laos next year, there will be trouble.

His assumption is that (4) is an indicative conditional. But Victor Dudman has argued that “will” in fact expresses something with a subjunctive meaning. Dudman asks us to consider:

(5) If Oswald does not kill Kennedy, someone else will.

It seems that (5) groups with (2) rather than (1) (that is, arguably false at the time of utterance rather than obviously true). If so, that is, if “will” is something like a modal, then Lewis’s reason for thinking that (3) is indicative (because equivalent to a “will” conditional) is unpersuasive.

Frank Jackson (in “Classifying Conditionals I”) argues that Dudman’s argument is wrong, and that despite appearances, (5) should be grouped with (1) rather than (2). He initially points out is that there is a lacuna in the argument that (5) should be grouped with (2). According to the argument, we react in the same way to (5) and (2), because we consider both of them false. But we consider (5) false when we evaluate it at a time *before* Kennedy is killed. But we judge (1) and (2) to have the truth-values they do (true and false, respectively) from a standpoint *after* Kennedy is killed. So we do not in fact “react” to (5) in the very same way as we react to (2). Jackson also gives an argument in favor classifying (5) with (1) rather than (2). But I don’t want to go into that here. I just want to draw attention to the fact that there is a debate about whether (5) counts as (1)-like or (2)-like.

Sabine Iatridou (“The Grammatical Ingredients of Counterfactuality”, *Linguistic Inquiry* 31.2, 2000) calls the Lewis-type conditionals “Future Less Vivid Conditionals”. Another example of this same type is:

(6) If you left there tomorrow, you would get there next week.

It is worth mentioning that some linguists (see citations in Iatridou, p. 233) think of “will” as a modal, like “would”; some argue that “would” is the past form of “will”, as in the discourse (from Iatridou):

(7) Mary “It will rain.”

(8) John: Mary said that it would rain.

This I suppose supports Dudman’s position that (5) should be classifying with (2).

What about other uses of “if”? Sentence (9) is a so-called *biscuit conditional*:

(9) There are biscuits on the sideboard if you want them. (Austin)

It is not clear whether to classify (9) as an indicative conditional or as a subjunctive conditional. Some have argued that indicative conditionals involve connection between the antecedent and the consequent. As Peter Strawson (Introduction to Logical Theory, p. 83) puts the point:

The standard or primary use of an ‘if...then’ sentence...we saw to be in circumstances where, not knowing whether some statement which could be made by the use of a sentence corresponding in a certain way to the first clause of the hypothetical is true or not, or believing it to be false, we nevertheless consider that a step in reasoning from that statement to a statement related in a similar way to the second clause would be a sound or reasonable step; the second statement being also one of whose truth we are in doubt, or which we believe to be false. Even in such circumstances we may be hesitant to apply the word “true” to hypothetical statements..., preferring to call them reasonable or well-founded; but if we apply the word ‘true’ to them at all, it will be in such circumstances as these.

Biscuit conditionals certainly do not fit the “standard or primary use” of “if...then” sentences (a fact concerning which Strawson was well-aware).

There are also uses of “if” where the treatment of “if” as a two-place sentential connective is hopeless. Some of these uses have been emphasized in a 1979 paper by Gilbert Harman (“If and Modus Ponens”, *Theory and Decision*, 11:1), in which he argues that “if” is not a sentential operator, but rather a name-forming operator, an operator which (like, according to Harman, “that”), takes a sentence and yields a name of a proposition. Here are some such uses (from Harman’s paper):

- (10) Albert wondered if Mabel loved John.
- (11) Mabel asked if John was going to the party.
- (12) John does not know if Mabel loves him.

Harman argues that “if” is a complementizer like “that”. In normal indicative conditionals constructions, there is a hidden unexpressed element with the meaning of “implies”. Whether Harman is right about this or not, extant theories of conditionals are not plausibly extendable to constructions such as (10)-(12).

In sum, many philosophers (though certainly not all, and maybe not even most) think there are two conditional connectives, one expressing the indicative conditional connective and the other expressing the counterfactual conditional connective. There are some constructions (e.g. those involving ‘will’) that are difficult to classify. There are some uses of conditionals (e.g. biscuit conditionals) for which either model seems most unhappy. Finally, there are some uses of “if” which clearly are not uses of a sentential connective, as in Harman’s examples. The *total unity hypothesis* (advocated apparently by Harman, and perhaps only by Harman among philosophers) is that there is just one “if”. The *partial unity hypothesis*, advocated (as we shall see) by philosophers such as Lycan and Stalnaker, is that the same sort of thing is going on with indicatives and subjunctives (certainly, “if” does not function differently in these constructions). We shall also look at views that don’t take “if” as contributing much of anything at all.