Special Types of Conditional Sentences

Carmen Diaconescu
"Valahia" University of Târgovişte

Abstract :
The paper presents the special types of conditional sentences in English. There are particular aspects of this type of conditionals that connect time to real and unreal aspects.
This paper is also part of a larger study that analyses the different categories of conditional sentences and their related meanings that express hypotheses and counterfacts in situations controlled by mental verbs and by communication verbs.

Key words: condition, if, whether, alternative, implied, alternative patterns, subjunctive.

We have tried to present an approach of the conditional clauses from what is to be found in grammar books and make it as clear and simple as possible.

The types of conditional clauses have been categorised according to their use mainly in spoken English.

This paper is meant to help the students make sure that the rules and the examples given offer a real picture of the present-day English language, and they will communicate successfully if they make their English reasonably correct.

A conditional sentence typically consists of an *if*-clause (which presents a condition) and a result clause.

If it rains, the streets get wet.

(*If*-clauses are also called *adverbial clauses of condition* and present possible conditions. In the example above, the main clause expresses a result -*the streets get wet*- and the subordinate clause expresses a possible condition –*it rains*).

A number of words that introduce the adverbial clauses of condition can be mentioned: *if, whether, even if, in case, in the event that, unless, if only, on condition (that), provided that, providing that, suppose that, supposing that, as/so long as.*

Overview of the basic verbal forms used in conditional sentences:

I. In the case of **real or open condition**, the simple present (not the simple future) is used after an *if*. In the result clause the verb may be in the present, past or future indicative or the imperative. In the conditional clause, the present tense is used to express simultaneousness and the present perfect or the past tense to express anteriority. Examples:

1. *If I don't eat lunch, I always get hungry very quickly.*
(the simple present is used to express a habitual activity or situation).
2. *If I don't eat lunch tomorrow at noon, I'll get hungry quickly.*
(the simple future is used to express a particular activity or situation in the future).
3. *If it rains, we should take an umbrella.*
If it rains, we might decide to take an umbrella.
If it rains, we are going to / can take an umbrella.
(modal verbs and phrasal modal verbs)
4. *If anyone calls, please take a message.*
(an imperative verb).

II. Untrue (contrary to fact) in the present or future. In conditional sentences that express tentative, hypothetical and unreal conditions, the past tense of the subjunctive mood is used in the conditional clause and the present conditional is used in the main clause.

If she were here, she would help us. (but she is not here)
If I were you, I would go for it. (but I am not you)

"In such cases, *were* is used for both singular and plural subjects, whereas *was* used with *I, he, she, it* is sometimes used in informal speech" (Schampfer, 1999, p. 415) :

If I was you, I'd go for it

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If we compare two situations like:

a) *If I had enough money, I would buy a book.*
b) *If I had enough money, I could buy a book.*

In situation a), the speaker wants a book, but he doesn't have enough money, *would* expresses desirable or predictable results. In situation b), the speaker expresses one possible result.

III. Untrue (contrary to fact) in the past. In hypothetical and contrary to past fact conditional sentences, the past perfect of the subjunctive mood, indicating past unreality, is used in the conditional clause and the past conditional in the main clause.

If you had told me about that, I would have helped you. (but you did not tell me about it)

The auxiliary verbs can be contracted in speech: *If you'd told me, I would've helped you.*

If we compare two situations like:

a) *If I had had enough money, I would have bought a car.*
b) If I had had enough money, I could have bought a car.

In situation a), *would* expressed a desirable or predictable result. In situation b), *could* expresses a possible option (could have bought – would have been able to buy).

There are practically no restrictions in connection with the use of modal verbs in the main clause of a conditional sentence.

Special types of conditional sentences:

IV. Using progressive verbal forms in conditional sentences:

"Even in conditional sentences, progressive verb forms are used in progressive situations" (Schampfer, 1999, p. 423).

True situation: *It is raining right now, so I will not go for a walk.*
Conditional sentence: *If it were not raining right now, I would go for a walk.*
True situation: *I am not living in Spain. I am not working at a bank.*
Conditional sentence: *If I were living in Spain, I would be working at a bank.*
True situation: *It was raining yesterday afternoon, so I did not go for a walk.*
Conditional sentence: *If it had not been raining, I would have gone for a walk.*
True situation: *I was not living in Spain last year. I was not working at a bank.*
Conditional sentence: *If I had been living in Spain last year, I would have been working at a bank.*

V. Type 0 conditional sentences: cause and effect:

If you heat ice, it melts.
If she makes a promise, she keeps it.

"These sentences are statements of universal truth or general validity, and in this type of sentence, *if* corresponds closely in meaning to *when(ever)*" (Graver, 1996, p.89). Such statements appear commonly in factual discussions or particularly scientific and technical material. The tenses in both the conditional and the main clause are the same. The second example may be written in the past tense with a similar correspondence between the verbal forms in the two clauses:

If she made a promise, she kept it.

VI. Using "mixed tense" in conditional sentences:

Frequently, the time in the conditional clause and the time in the result clause are different: one clause may be in the present and the other one in the past. Past and present times are mixed in such sentences, in the sense that one of the verbal forms may express a real action and the other a hypothetical action.

If I had eaten breakfast this morning, I would not be hungry now.
If he were a good student, he would have studied for the test yesterday.

VII. Omitting *if*:

The conditional conjunction *if* is sometimes "omitted and the subject and verb are inverted. This happens very often in literary inversion structures"(Schampfer, 1999, p. 424).

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Were I you, I wouldn't go there.
Had I known, I would have let you known.
Should anyone call, please take a message.
If is sometimes left out in conversational style:
You tell me that again, I'll get angry.
Sometimes two sentences can be joined with *and*:
Take my advice and your troubles will be over. (If you take my advice…)

VIII. Extra negative:

"In an informal style, an extra *not* is sometimes put into an *if*-clause after expressions suggesting doubt or uncertainty. This *not* does not give a negative meaning" (Swan, 1993, p. 307) :

I wonder if we shouldn't ask the doctor to look at you. (I wonder if we should ask…)
I wouldn't be surprised, if she didn't get married soon. (…-if she got married…)

IX. *If so* and *If not:*

"After *if*, we can use *so* and *not* instead of repeating or negating a clause that has come before" (Swan, 1997, p. 251).

Have you got a free evening next week? If so, let's go out for a movie. (If you have got…)
I might see her tomorrow. If not, then it'll be Saturday. (If I don't see you tomorrow…)

X. *If only:*

If only is used with a past (to refer to the present) or a past perfect tense (to refer to the past) to suggest a strong wish or regret.

If only I had more money! I could buy that TV set.
If only you hadn't told Mike what I said! Things would have been all right.
Would can be used with *if only* to refer to the future or it may have the modal connotation of willingness, intention.
If only it would stop raining, we could go out.
If only she wouldn't come so late, she'd be a fine girl.
Exclamations begin with *if only* very often:
If only summer would come!

XI. Other words and phrases having the same meaning – *if*:

Some words and expressions can be used with a meaning similar to *if: provided that, providing that, suppose that, supposing that, as/so long as, on condition that, unless, even if,* etc.

Supposing that you lost your keys, what would you do?
You can borrow this book, provided/providing that you bring it back.
I'll give you that dictionary, on condition that you bring it back next week.
Unless is an adverbial of negative condition.
Unless the strike has been called off, there will be no trains tomorrow.
This example has the same meaning as *If the strike has not been called off…*; there is, however, a slight difference between an *unless*-clause and a negative *if*-clause, in that *unless* has the more exclusive meaning of *only if …not* or *except on condition that.* It is, more precisely, the opposite of the compound conjunction *provided/providing that* which means *if and only if.*
Provided that no objection is raised, we shall hold the meeting here.

XII. Implied conditions:

Often the *if*-clause is implied, not stated. Conditional verbs are used in the result clause.

I would have gone with him, but I had to study. (the implied condition: *if I hadn't had to study).*

She never would have succeeded without our help. (the implied condition: if we hadn't helped her).

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Conditional verbs are frequently used following *otherwise*

He ran; otherwise he would have missed the train. (the implied *if*-clause: *if he had not run*).

XIII. *If* - meaning *(al)though*:

If can be used with a similar meaning to *(al)though* in a rather formal style of English. "This is common in the structure *if+adjective* (with no verb)" (Swan, 1997, p. 252). In this case, *if* does not give so much importance as *(al)though* to the contrast, exception or concession that is referred to.

His style, if mannered, is pleasant to read.

The profits, if a little lower than last year's, are still high.

XIV. *If…should; if…happen to*

Sometimes we can suggest that something is unlikely, or not particularly probable, by using *should* (not *would*) in the *if*-clause. *If…happen to* has the same meaning.

If you should run into John, tell him to ring me up.

If you happen to pass a drugstore, perhaps you could get an aspirin.

Should and *happen to* can be used together.

If you should happen to finish early, give me a ring.

In these structures, *would* is not normally used in the main clause.

If he should be late, we'll have to start without him.

XV. Clauses of condition and concession - overlap of condition and concession:

Between these two types of adverbial clauses there is considerable overlap; whereas conditional clauses state the dependence of one circumstance or set of circumstances on another (*If you treat her like this, she'll leave you*), concessive clauses imply a contrast between two circumstances; i.e. in the light of the circumstance in the dependent clause, the content in the main clause is surprising:

Although he hadn't eaten for days, he looked strong.

From this example, we see that *although* as a subordinator is the approximate equivalent of *but* as a coordinator:

He hadn't eaten for days, but he looked strong.

The overlap between conditional and concessive clauses comes with such subordinators as *even if*, which expresses both the contingent dependence of one circumstance upon another and the nature of this dependence (Quirk, 1976, p. 750).

Even if he went down on bended knees, I wouldn't forgive him.

In the superordinate clause, both conditional and concessive clauses tend to assume initial position. [A coordinate relationship may have more than two members, while only two clauses enter into the relationship of subordination; they may be called the subordinate clause and the superordinate clause, the former being a constituent part (subject, object, adverbial) of the latter (Quirk, 1976, p. 720)]

Conditional *if*-clauses have to be distinguished from interrogative *if*-clauses (*Do you know if/whether the banks are open?*) which are nominal rather than adverbial. Sometimes, a merger of the two functions is found in a sentence like:

I wouldn't object if you took a rest (If you took a rest, I wouldn't object to your taking a rest).

XIV. Alternative conditions: *whether…or, whatever,* etc:

Condition is sometimes combined with the meaning of *either…or* in the parallel conjunction *whether…or*, which specifies two contrasting conditions:

Whether we win or lose, the match will be enjoyable. (If we win or even if we lose…)

The meaning of *contrary to expectation* is also present here, as the example shows. A similar meaning is present in the *wh*-words *whatever, whoever, wherever*, etc.

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I'll buy those shoes, whatever the cost.

Wherever he goes, he makes friends.

The meaning is that the meaning in the main clause is true on any of the conditions covered by the subordinate clause. Contrasting meaning is present, in that *I'll buy those shoes…*implies, for example, *I'll buy them even if they cost a fortune.* The same meaning can be expressed by an adverbial clause beginning with *no matter wh-:*

I'll buy them, no matter what they cost.

Two usual adverbials with type of meaning are *anyway* and *in any case* (whatever the circumstances): *I don't know how much they cost, but I'll buy those shoes anyway/in any case.*

XV. *If* with *will, would* and *should*

When these auxiliaries appear in the conditional clause, they are not auxiliary verbs helping the formation of the future and the conditional, but they are modal auxiliaries that express wishing or willingness in the case of *will, would,* and high improbability or future chance in the case of *should*.

If you will come this way, the manager will see you now.

Put it over there, if you wouldn't mind.

If you should meet him, tell him to call me.

In indirect speech (when *if* has almost the same meaning as *whether*), it ca be followed by *will* or *would.*

I'd like to know if you will be using the car tomorrow.

Can you tell me if it would be cheaper to travel by bus or by car?

"When the *if*-clause refers to a *result* of the action of the main clause, *will* can be used" (Swan, 1993, p. 307). Normally, the condition in the *if*-clause comes before. Compare:

If you pay me (first), I'll lose some weight.

If it will make you happier (as a result), I'll lose some weight.

XVI. Parallel structures: *'d have…'d have, would…would*

When an *if*-clause refers to the past, sometimes a construction with *`d have* is used in informal spoken English. "This is frequently considered incorrect, but happens quite often in educated people's speech. It is not normally written" (Swan, 1997, p. 251).

If I'd have told you, you'd have gone there.

Sometimes full forms are used for emphasis or in the negative, instead of the contracted *`d* . In this case, both *had* and *would* occur.

I didn't see. But if I had seen…

If she wouldn't have asked, we'd never have seen what was going on.

In both clauses of an *if*-sentence, a conditional *would* can sometimes be used. It is not normally written and it is very informal. It is common in spoken American English.

It would be better if he would tell the truth.

How would you feel if this would happen to you?

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