

Assessing classification reliability of conditionals in discourse (regular paper)

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Conditional constructions enable us to express our thoughts about possible states of the world, and they form an important ingredient for our reasoning and argumentative capabilities. As is known from the linguistic literature on conditionals, however, defining what exactly constitutes a conditional is “extremely difficult” (Declerck & Reed 2001, p. 8) or “impossible” (Wierzbicka 1997, p. 16). Even without a definition, different types and argumentative uses of conditionals have been distinguished (for an overview, see Reuneker 2022). Dancygier and Sweetser (2005), for instance, argue for a distinction between *predictive conditionals*, in which antecedents and consequents are causally related, as in (1), and *non-predictive conditionals*, such as *inferential* and *speech-act conditionals*, in which the clauses present an inference chain from argument to conclusion, or a contextualisation and a speech-act, as in (2) and (3) respectively.

- (1) *If you mow the lawn*, I'll give you ten dollars.
- (2) *If he typed her thesis*, he loves her.
- (3) *If you need help*, my name is Ann.

Athanasiadou and Dirven (1997), on the other hand, distinguish between *course-of-event*, *hypothetical* and *pragmatic conditionals*, as in (4) to (6).

- (4) *If there is a drought like this year*, the eggs remain dormant.
- (5) *If the weather is fine*, we'll go for a swim.
- (6) *If you are thirsty*, there's beer in the fridge.

Whereas some types are identical in various accounts, such as (3) and (6), it remains unclear how other types are related.

Three issues are identified in this paper. First, different accounts produce incompatible results when applied to language data. The second issue is that of a discrepancy between theory and data – discourse studies sometimes discard existing classifications for being “too detached” from actual discourse (e.g. Carter-Thomas & Rowley-Jolivet 2008). Finally, while language users construct various cognitive relations between the clauses of conditionals, they do so without being able to rely on overt linguistic features, which poses problems for the annotation of conditionals in argumentation and discourse.

This paper addresses these three issues by means of comparing theoretical types and actual uses of conditionals, and by inspecting the dispersion of types in natural-language corpora. Furthermore, an experiment was conducted in which classifications of conditionals were assessed in terms of inter-rater reliability. Based on the results, the implications for the study of conditionals are discussed.

References

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