

Three Patterns of ‘If’ Sentences: How Helpful Is This?

Susan Huntley Maycock
University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria

Most students are traditionally taught that there are three common patterns of ‘if’ sentences. We suggest that, instead of being helpful, this is a setback, as there is a range of possibilities that diverges from this rule especially as regards English for Tourism and Business English.

According to a survey carried out on second year students from the Diplomatura en Turismo de la Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, before embarking on their degrees, the vast majority of pupils have been taught that there are three common patterns of 'if' sentences, known as the 'first', 'second' and 'third' conditionals. In this paper it is suggested that, instead of being helpful for students, this neat package of language is, in fact, a setback, as there is a range of possibilities that diverges from this rule especially as far as English for Tourism and Business English are concerned. One of the main characteristics of the language used in these fields is the degree of politeness which should be transferred through the language if optimum results are to be obtained.

There have been a number of attempts at analysing so-called conditional sentences, all of which prove how complex they in fact are. Conditionals have been the subject of research in a wide range of fields, including syntax, semantics, pragmatics, discourse, language acquisition and language teaching. This is because they have a vast number of different forms and interpretations which are far from the simple explanation offered in most student grammars, namely that there are three types of conditionals. Such explanations, which are

centred around revealing the formal differences between the three types or patterns reduce the analysis of meaning to a minimum and show a total disregard for the many different verb forms which are in fact not only possible but frequently encountered. Some grammarians argue that this approach to teaching is well-justified because it simplifies the learners' task by providing them with a pattern. But in the case of second language learners whose mother tongue is Spanish, this pattern of predictive conditionals is virtually the same as in Spanish and therefore should pose no real problems, apart from the use of the indicative instead of the subjunctive and some problems arising from an incorrect use, in some parts of Spain, of *hubiera* instead of *habría* in the «third» conditional.

Eg. *Si hubiéramos reservado antes, nos hubieran dado una habitación mejor.*

Instead of:

Si hubiéramos reservado antes, nos habrían dado una habitación mejor.

Examples of the three patterns would be:

If you stay at that hotel, it will be expensive. (called in some grammar books a «possible condition»)

If you stayed at that hotel, it would be expensive. (an «improbable condition»)

If you had stayed at that hotel, it would have been expensive. (an «impossible condition» because it took place in the past)

According to Dancygier (1998), there are in fact four different types of conditional sentences, many of which are sub-divided into further groups.

The first, second and third patterns which have just been mentioned would fall into one of those types, the one which she terms «predictive conditionals» i.e. one part of the sentence causes the other. To quote Haegeman (1984):

In such examples the *if-then* relation between the main clause and subordinate *if* clause is one of causation: the occurrence of the event or state in the antecedent determines that of the consequent.

In students' textbooks conditionals often termed 'zero conditionals' are mentioned when something that always happens is discussed, for example:

If prices rise, demand falls.

If you spend too long in the sun, you get sun-burned.

(Dancygier terms these «generic conditionals»)

However, the examples given in student grammars are usually something like:

If you pour oil on water, it floats

As a result, students tend to think that present+present is only used in general truths of this nature and is not of everyday use. Variants of the three patterns using modals are sometimes touched on in passing but little practice is provided and students seldom go beyond the basic three, plus the general truth or zero conditional. In my experience they hardly ever use any of the variants which, as we can see from the following examples, are many. These are but some of them:

If you book the room in advance, you won't have any problems. (standard pattern of 'first type')

If you book the room in advance, ask for Jane.

If the room is booked in advance, there are no problems. (which would in fact be a general truth)

If you require a room overlooking the beach, the rate will be higher. (standard pattern of 'first type')

If you require a room overlooking the beach, the rate is higher. (generic)

If you require a room overlooking the beach, the rate would (could, may or might) be higher.

If the room is booked in advance, there shouldn't be any problems. (plus other variations)

If you have booked in advance, you won't have any problems.

If you can book in advance, it might be better.

If you didn't book in advance, you'll find it difficult to get a room.

If you booked the room in advance, you wouldn't have any problems. (standard pattern of 'second type')

If I didn't think it was a good idea to book in advance, I wouldn't have suggested it.

If you had booked the room in advance, you wouldn't have had these problems. (standard pattern of 'third type')

If you had booked the room in advance, you mightn't have had these problems now.

If you had booked the room in advance, you wouldn't have these problems now.

However, besides all these forms we also have a series of predictive conditionals that express politeness, which is of fundamental importance for students of English for Tourism and Business English because a large part of their future activity will be oral. «Politeness is prototypically exhibited in conversation and other kinds of face-to-face exchange.» (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 41) Besides, language which in some contexts might be thought characteristic of written rather than spoken English, is frequently found in conversation when a certain level of politeness is required. The fact that this communication usually takes place between two parties who do not know one another or do not know one another very well plus the fact that it is the job of the professional to attend to the needs of his/her client, leads to a formal situation in which varying degrees of politeness are required on the part of the professional. The effect this language has on the hearer forms part of the general impression the tourist, or

businessman will take away with him and this may influence the decision as to whether to return in the case of the holidaymaker or business traveller or it may even influence the outcome of a business transaction.

As Deborah Tannen says:

Whether the world seems a pleasant or a hostile place is largely the result of the cumulative impression of seemingly insignificant daily encounters: dealings with shop assistants, bank clerks, bureaucratic officials, cashiers and telephone operators. When these relatively minor exchanges are smooth and pleasant, we feel (without thinking about it) that we are doing things right. But when they are strained, confusing or seemingly rude, our mood can be ruined and our energy drained. (Deborah Tannen, 1986: 11)

One way of achieving politeness is by using language forms that make reality more «distant» to achieve a greater degree of politeness. It is essential that students of Tourism/Business English be aware of such forms and be able to use them when called upon to do so. This goes for all students of English but here we are concerned with the particular needs of our students.

Despite the importance these forms have in English for Tourism, they are scarcely mentioned as such in textbooks. We have found that most of the books aimed at English for Tourism just offer polite expressions used in certain situations without drawing attention to the degree of politeness involved or contrasting them with others (Huntley & Juan González, 2001). In Spanish we have the pronoun *Usted* which by itself lends a formal tone to any utterance. In the absence of such a pronoun in English, we have to convey politeness through our choice of language. We can use the vocatives, sir or madam or we can use certain verb tenses (e.g the use of future continuous or the past), indirect questions instead of direct questions, polite conditionals etc.

In these polite conditionals, modals and semi-auxiliaries such as,

should, will, would, may, might etc. are often encountered in the protasis, especially in the case of polite requests, for example:

If you should decide to book in advance, ask for Jane.

Here the modal is used to suggest distance or a more remote possibility, a lack of imposition on the hearer. It can also be inverted and such constructions are frequently found in formal correspondence :

Should you decide to book our conference facilities, we shall be only too pleased to help you.

The use of modals in the protasis is frequently found in polite requests, for example:

I'll get you a map, if you'd like to wait a minute.

If you will sign here, I'll have the dinner charged to your account.

According to Dancygier these examples are predictive conditionals but the politeness perhaps plays the major role and the prediction a secondary one.

In her opinion, the class of constructions with *will/would?* in their protases has so far escaped a convincing and uniform explanation. They have traditionally been described as involving volition. Fillmore (1990) describes *will* protases as the expressions of the positive interests of the participants. In the two previous examples, the protasis and the apodosis present desirable developments. We see that they are really made up of an instruction which is softened by the use of *if+will* or *if +would* and an offer to do something (get a map or have the dinner put on the account). Although we suppose that the hearer will not reply «no, I won't sign» or «no I won't wait», because it is in his interest to do so, the politeness conditional does somehow allow the hearer a slight chance to say no. If the speaker just used the imperative, the hearer would probably feel inclined to say «I'll sign/wait if I feel like it.»

From the examples we have looked at we can see that these polite

conditionals are mostly linked with suggestions, requests and offers, all of which are typical of English for Tourism and we can also see that the variety of verb forms or auxiliaries used is very broad.

Another type of conditionals Dancygier deals with are the ones she terms «Non-predictive conditionals». These do not show any regular patterns of verb forms and do not require any form of backshift. Within this group we find what Sweetser and Van der Auwera term «speech-act conditionals» and Haegeman calls «utterance conditionals». Many speech acts are primarily concerned with politeness and we could say are more or less ready-made formulae. As Dancygier puts it:

«Rules of cooperative conversation and social interaction are not coined spontaneously, so it is not surprising there should be a ready-made idiomatic repertory of protases expressing standard background assumptions about the interactional structure.» (Dancygier, 1998: 91).

An example of this type of conditional would be:

Put the card in the slot, if I may ask you to.

In this group of polite conditionals, the *if* clauses are really stylistic devices or hedges to ensure that what is being said or asked will be well received by the hearer and will not as Brown and Levinson say be considered an imposition or aggression or cause loss of «Face» which they define as: «the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself» (Brown and Levinson, 1987).

For example, a receptionist may say to a client:

There is an excellent fitness centre in the hotel, if you are interested, sir.

Here the speaker qualifies the main clause to avoid a misinterpretation. If he just said «There is an excellent fitness centre in the hotel,» the guest might think he was hinting that he sorely needed it!

Other examples would be:

Is it alright if I have your luggage sent up to your room?

Do you mind if we give you a room on the top floor?

If I might suggest something, sir, what about going on an excursion to the surrounding countryside/ panoramic tour of the city?

This allows the speaker to show respect for the addressee's self-determination and freedom of action (C. Ford, 1987:70)

In these cases there is no causal link between the two clauses (Haegeman, 1984) in fact the *if* clause could be omitted as it has a peripheral role. However, its function is to make the hearer focus on what is expressed in the main clause. The speaker is making it clear why he/she believes the communication to be appropriate, but admits the possibility for the hearer to decide for himself. The performance of the speech act represented in the apodosis is conditional on the fulfilment of the state described in the protasis (the state in the protasis enables or causes the following speech act.) In other words the protasis makes sure the conditions are acceptable. These conditionals all possess characteristics of polite expressions – tentativeness, leaving options open to the hearer, or declaring willingness on the part of the speaker. (Lakoff, 1973)

Again, we can find many different verb forms in speech-act conditionals including, of course, those used in predictive conditionals. Such forms certainly invoke distance to indicate politeness, but it is not the hypothetical distance expressed in predictive conditionals.

Quite apart from the polite conditionals, of course *will* and *would* can appear in the protasis if the meaning is indicative of irritation and the *will* or *would* is emphasised:

If you will keep eating chocolate, of course you'll get fat.

If you would only stop eating chocolate, you might lose some weight.

We can conclude then from all these examples that the sequence

of tenses in conditional sentences is not absolutely fixed and depends on what you want to say, who you want to say it to and in what circumstances.

We carried out a survey on students in the second year of the Diplomatura en Turismo and asked them what they knew about conditional sentences. Out of 51 students, 43 wrote that there were 3 types of conditionals. Of those 43, thirty one specified the tenses used as being present+future, past+ conditional and past perfect +conditional perfect. Seventeen gave examples but five made mistakes in the forming of the verb tense in the '3rd' type of conditional. The remaining 12 gave the examples correctly. Only two students referred to the functions conditionals could express, mentioning advice and recommendations. This proves that during their secondary education their English teachers were successful in the teaching of the three patterns but is this not a hindrance rather than a help? This learning of patterns totally ignores the context and we all know how difficult it is to change or contradict something which is so well embedded in the mind.

To give an example of what we mean about the variations, in a thesis on conditionals entitled *Estudio de las Expresiones Lingüísticas que Expresan Condicionalidad en Lengua Inglesa* by María Jesús González Márquez from the University of La Laguna, Tenerife, out of the 1,994 'if' conditionals she analysed from the British National Corpus only 24.5% of the 737 neutral predictive conditionals (pattern 1) were actually formed by if + present simple, (then) will + infinitive. However, the present simple in the antecedent, found in 87.3% of the examples of the 737 neutral predictions, combines, in the apodosis, with some semi-auxiliaries and all the modal verbs (48.6%), as well as with non-modals in different tenses (present simple, past simple, present continuous, present perfect, and past continuous) and with the imperative.

There then seems little point in learning that there are three patterns of conditional sentences if:

a) these 3 types are exactly the same as in Spanish (except for use of subjunctive instead of indicative) and provide no major problems except perhaps for the third type whose verb form is more complicated anyway.

b) there are many more patterns, as we have just seen.

c) this way of learning is separating form from meaning and context

d) it makes the learning of the other types more difficult because students have engrained on their minds that there are 3 types with set tenses and that *will* and *would* never go in the «if» clause, which as we have seen, is a great disadvantage for students of tourism or Business English in particular.

In our opinion very little attention is paid to conditionals conveying politeness whether they be predictive or non-predictive, whether it be in students' grammar books or in books on linguistics. As a teacher of English for the Tourism sector they are fundamental and we need to develop ways of introducing them without having to «unlearn» what students have had drummed into them in their secondary education.

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