The Interpretation of English Conditional Sentences by Arabic Native Speakers

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to investigate Arabic native speakers interpretation of English conditional sentences and to find out the reasons behind that. Conditional sentences are considered one of the most difficult issues for nonnative speakers of English. They form an obstacle for both learners and teachers. The complexity of conditional sentences comes from the fact that they contain two clauses to express complex meaning using complex structure. Moreover, generally, the students spend their time learning the three main types of conditional sentences, i.e. if she comes, I will leave; if she came, I would leave; if she had come, I would have left. Consequently, they are not aware of many other variations within conditional sentences. One hundred subjects enrolled in the test. All were third year students majoring in English. Ten conditional sentences were given to them and they were asked to decide whether these sentences are grammatical or not and to correct the ungrammatical ones. It turns out that the students are not aware of such variations in conditional sentences.

Keywords: conditionals, tense, mood, Arabic, wish, if-clause.

INTRODUCTION

Conditionals have been widely noted as a weighty topic in language acquisition; however, there is a small body of research, which has addressed the question of why the conditionals make L2 learners confused so much. A pronounced paradox is raised when expressing conditionals. The numbers of formal patterns of conditionals are limited but their applications involving interaction with speakers’ intention become multitudinous. On one hand, learning the three main types of conditionals is supposed to be an easy job, but the subtle distinctions with regard to semantics and pragmatics bring in great difficulties, on the other hand. Though there is a call for drawing attention to these complicately structured sentences, research into studying conditionals recently has been mainly concentrated on logic or philosophy (Crouch, 1993; among many others) but scarcely conducted in terms of linguistics.

Conditionals are used to express the cause-and-effect or temporal sequences of two events. The typical surface structure of conditionals is a bi-clause consisted of an antecedent clause and a consequent clause, that is, the protasis and apodosis, as they were termed technically. They often undertake the logical meaning -- 'if p, then q' and perform various functions such as reasoning, making inferences and imaging correlations…etc. (Traugott et al., 1986).

This is complicated by the fact that verb forms in conditional sentences often do not retain their normal references to time. Gordon (1985:85) states that "the past is used to represent improbability in the present or future, and the past perfect is used to refer to impossible events that didn't happen in the past." In addition, the present is used to refer to the future in the 'if' clause of future predictive conditionals.

Review of Literature

Conditionals in English have been approached from different perspectives. For instance, Dik, (1990) and Cuvalay (1996) approach them linguistically from a functional grammar point of view. Beck (1997) and Fintel (1997) apply semantic and pragmatic analysis, etc. Moreover, In the traditional school grammar approach, 'conditionals' are approached within the mood system together with 'indicative' and 'imperative' under...
'subjunctive'. Sometimes, conditionals are analyzed within the scope of tenses, sometimes under modals.

Not much literature has been written about conditional sentences from a linguistic point of view. Moreover, the problems which non-native speakers encounter when dealing with conditional could be seen as a neglected field although conditional sentences could be treated as one of the most difficult issues for non-native speakers of English. In his survey of the most serious teaching problems encountered by ESL teachers in the Los Angeles area, Covitt (1976) found that conditional sentences ranked fifth. Nayef and Hajjaj (1997) suggest that the difficulty of conditionals is due to that "the forms of the two verbs in the two clauses depend on each other" (p.137). They add that three main things must be emphasized in teaching conditionals: "forms of the verbs, the time reference of the verbs, and the meaning of the condition in each of the patterns" (p.140).

Although if is the most explicit conditional marker in English, it is not easy for children to acquire it. Conditional sentences are difficult even in the process of acquiring language. Many scholars report this difficulty in language acquisition. Bloom et al. (1980) and O’Grady (1997) investigate the acquisition of ‘if-clauses’ and point out to lateness of acquisition of the ‘if’ morpheme. Amidon (1976) points to the same issue and states that later than 5 years of age can children understand ‘if’ sentences. Reilly (1982) reports that children cannot acquire the conditional system until age eight. However, since the acquisition of conditionals is difficult for the native speaker, it is expected to be complicated for the non-native speakers.

Applying “Marked-ness Differential Hypothesis” (MDH) which provides the comparability of two linguistic structures so that different conditional types could be examined (see Eckman, 1996), Berent (1985) investigates the production and comprehension of conditionals by ESL learners. Berent’s results show an inconsistent pattern that the difficulty sequence in the production task was opposite to that in the comprehension task. Accordingly, he concludes that form and function can be acquired at different times and that functions represented by one particular form may not be fully acquired by advanced learners.

According to Mellow et al. (2001: 56) the reasons of the formal and functional complexities to “a greater quantity of required morphological or syntactic forms” and “complex semantic content that is a combination of semantic features or poly functionality of meaning”.

Covitt’s (1976, cited in Norries, 2003) study shows that the serious problems pertaining conditionals include four aspects: oversimplified explanations, form, meaning, and time-tense relationship. Since the difficulty of conditionals lies in the interaction of forms (verb form) and meanings (temporality and hypotheticality) as have been discussed, it is necessary to investigate their relations. That is, the past form of the verb (had) in a sentence like ‘if I had a car, I would help you’ is not used to express past tense, it is used to express unreal situation in present. Schwenter (1998) summarizes results of past studies and comments that not only the conditional markers but also verbal.

If tense is used to refer to when the events occur, why is there an asymmetric time-tense relationship? Since it is a notorious fact that past tense does not behave like past tense in counterfactuals, the tense can’t simply be a primitive element that refers to the past. There must be something more, that is, the concept of ‘hypotheticality’. The relationship between verb form and tense in conditional sentences or what is called ‘back-shifting’ plays its role in complicating the situation. Comrie (1986:94) defines ‘back-shifting’ of tense as “the use of a morphologically past tense with present (or future) time reference and of pluperfect with past time reference”. He adds that only greater hypotheticality involves back-shifting of tense while less hypotheticality does not, so back-shifting is used particularly when denoting unreality (James, 1982). Salsbury (2000) uses the expression ‘modal distance’ or ‘expression of unreality’ to describe ‘back-shifting’, it expresses ‘distance from present reality’. Palmer (1986: 189) says that modality is uniquely reflected in conditionals with double marking. So he termed back-shifting with a past time reference as ‘past-past’. He adds that there is both past time and unreality, and the past tense, therefore, needs to be marked twice. It explains why the past perfect tense is used in the past unreal conditionals.

According to the previous studies, the complexity of conditional sentences can be attributed to the integration between tense, verb form, mood and semantics. The integration of all these aspects makes it difficult to find a systematic way to understand conditionals by non-native speakers of English.

The traditional grammar oversimplified conditionals into merely three types. Mastering the three main types of conditional which are generally part of school
curriculum, doesn’t mean mastering conditionals in general since conditional sentences are not restricted to these three types. Investigating all variations of conditional sentences is really neglected. A survey conducted by Hill (1960, cited in Norris, 2003) reveals that there are nearly 324 distinct tense-modal sequences of conditionals. It shows the considerable varieties of conditional expressions. Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) note that ESL textbooks and grammars often introduce the same three forms, which do not cover the complexity and variety of English conditional forms and meanings. The traditional (type 1, 2, and 3) conditionals noted by Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999:545) are:

1. Future Conditional: If + pres., will
   If I have the money, I will take a vacation.

2. Present Conditional: If + past, would
   If I had the money, I would take a vacation.

3. Past Conditional: If + had + -en, would have + -en
   If I had had the money, I would have taken a vacation.

Fulcher's (1991:166) study shows that the traditional types 1, 2, and 3 accounted for 61 (or 20.4%) of the 299 occurrences of 'if' forms. Maule (1988) believes the simplistic approach of introducing only type 1, 2, and 3 conditionals does more harm than good. If students are taught only a few simplified forms, they will be unequipped to encounter or express the variety of forms that exist in the English language. Their ability to process and produce the majority of acceptable conditional forms will be hindered.

### Subjects and Methodology

One hundred subjects participated in this study. All of them are Arabic native speakers, university students in the second and third years, majoring in English. They had taken at least three grammar courses in addition to at least one of the general English courses (E99, E101, E102). Conditional sentences are part of these grammar courses and general English courses. But we have to admit that they don’t receive much attention. They were given 10 conditional sentences and asked to decide whether these sentences were grammatical or not. Most if not all of these sentences are mentioned in their textbooks. To avoid random answers, the subjects were asked to correct the ungrammatical ones. The ten sentences are:

1. If I should see him, I will leave.
2. If she comes, he left.
3. If he studies hard, he will pass.
4. If you were honest, you would not have hit him.
5. If I had killed him, I would be in prison now
6. If I were a student, I would be happy.
7. If she has been studying, I will help her.
8. If I had seen him, I would have given him the book
9. If you won't come, I won't see you.
10. If she comes, he ought to leave.

As can be noted, the sentences in (3, 6 & 8) are the three main types of conditional sentences. The ten sentences were arranged randomly to avoid any guessing. These sentences are found in their text books but generally they don’t receive any or much attention by the students or teachers. The idea here is to find out how the students deal with these sentences.

### Results and Discussion

Except the three main conditionals (3, 6 and 8), the subjects faced problems in analyzing the above sentences. All the above sentences are grammatical (see Palmer, 1987; Quirk, et al. 1985), but they are less taught to the students. Generally, whether at school or university, teachers and text books emphasize the three main types of conditional sentences, although, according to Fulcher's (1991:166) study of a corpus of conditional sentences, these three types form 20.4% of conditional sentences.

The first sentence was problematic for the subjects. Most of the subjects (96) mentioned that the first sentence 'if I should see him, I will leave' is ungrammatical. The correction of the sentence goes like this:

a- 59 out of 96 deleted 'should'  (if I see him, I will leave)
b-28 out of 96 used 'would' in the main clause (if I should see him, I would leave)
c- The rest (9 subjects) did not give any correction.

It is clear that most of the subjects checked the grammaticality of this sentence via type 1 or 2. So, the presence of 'will' in the 'main clause' means the usage of 'simple present' in the 'if clause'. It seems that the usage of 'should' is misleading for most of the subjects. They assumed that 'should' is the past form of 'shall', which means one of two things; most of them deleted it since modals (will, shall, would, etc.) are used in the main clause not in if-clause so they deleted it to change the sentence into type 1. The second assumption is that ‘should’ is in the past which means that the sentence should by type 2 and we should use 'would' instead of...
'will'. As can be noted, the subjects in their correction of the sentence either change it into type 1 or type 2.

The second sentence (If she comes, he left) is incorrect for all the subjects. They corrected it in different ways:

- 93 subjects used 'will leave' instead of 'left' (If she comes, he will leave).
- 9 subjects used 'would come' (If she would come, he left).
- 6 subjects used 'came' (If she came, he left).
- 2 subjects 'will' in the main clause (If she comes, he will leave).

We have to admit that this sentence is problematic for both teachers and students. The occurrence of the past form in the main clause means that the sentence lacks sequence of tenses. None of the subjects was aware of the modal usage of 'left'. It is used here to express factual occurrence of the situation. That is, if the first situation (her coming) occurs, the second situation (his leaving) must have occurred (see Palmer, 1987:150). Accordingly, most of the subjects (83%) assumed that this past form must be replaced by 'will leave' in order to put the sentence in type 1. Some subjects assumed that it should be type 2, so they shift the 'if clause' into the past by using either 'would come' or 'came'. It seems that the subjects follow certain clues to refer the sentence to type 1 or type 2. So either they were mislead by the present form 'comes' to change the sentence into type 1, or by the past form 'left' to change the sentence into type 2.

The third sentence (If he studies hard, he will pass) was treated as a correct sentence by 98 subjects. It is clear that the subjects are familiar with this sentence since it is type one of conditionals. The other 2 subjects stated that it is incorrect sentence. One of them deleted 'hard' (If he studies, he will pass), whereas the other one added 'be' (If he studies hard, he will be pass).

76 subjects said that the sentence in 4 (If you were honest, you would not have hit him) is incorrect. They corrected it in different ways:

- 54 subjects deleted 'have' (If you were honest, you would not hit him).
- 13 subjects used 'had' (If you had honest, you would not have hit him).
- 6 subjects used 'had been' (If you had been honest, you would not have hit him).
- 2 subjects used 'had had' (If you had had honest, you would not have hit him).
- one subject used 'hitted' (If you were honest, you hitted him).

This type of conditional sentences is called 'mixed conditional'. In which, we know a present situation from the occurrence or nonoccurrence of a past situation. The mixture of type 2 with type 1 is a source of confusion for the subjects. In most cases, conditional is taught according to the idea of 'sequence of tenses'. Mixed conditionals violate this principle, accordingly the subjects tried to retain the sequence of tenses in this sentence. This could be the reason why many subjects modified the main clause to be type 2 to suit the if-clause, or visa versa, or they changed the if-clause to be past perfect to put the sentence into type 3.

The sentence in 5 (If I had killed him, I would be in prison now) is also problematic for most of the subjects. 94 subjects mentioned that it is ungrammatical sentence. The usage of the past perfect (had killed) means conditional sentence type 3 or type 2 since 'would be' is used in the main clause. This is why they generally change it either to type 2 or type 3.

- 58 subjects deleted 'had' from the 'if-clause' to change the sentence into type 2: (If I killed him, I would be in prison now).
- 31 subjects added 'have' to the main clause and replaced 'be' by 'been' to change the sentence into type 3: (If I had killed him, I would have been in prison (now)). 22 subjects out of the 31 deleted 'now', whereas the others did not.
- 5 subjects added have without changing anything in the sentence: (If I had killed him, I would have be in prison now).

The sentence (5) is almost similar to the one in (4) 'mixed conditional'. However, unlike the one in (4), in this sentence, we know the nonoccurrence of a situation in the past from what is going on in present. Again, sequence of tenses is violated here and the subjects tried to retain it.

The sentence in 6 (If I were a student, I would be happy) is one of the easiest for the subjects. As mentioned above, it is the second type of conditional sentences. 97 subjects stated that it is grammatical. Two subjects changed 'were' to 'was'. The other subject deleted 'be' from the main clause.

68 subjects mentioned that the sentence in (7) (If she has been studying, I will help her) is grammatical. 68% is considered a high percentage in comparison with the performance of the subjects in other sentences except the ones in (3 & 6). The other subjects (32) mentioned that it is ungrammatical and corrected it as follow:
a-17 subjects changed the present perfect progressive into present progressive, (If she is studying, I will help her).

b-12 subjects changed the present perfect progressive into simple present, (If she studies, I will help her).

c- 3 subjects added 'have' to the main clause (If she has been studying, I will have helped her).

It is clear that the subjects here associate between this sentence and type 1. The presence of 'will + help' gives them the impression that the simple present must be used in the 'if-clause'. The usage of the present perfect progressive in this context is strange.

The sentence in (8) (If I had seen him, I would have given him the book) is grammatical for 91 subjects. This sentence is type three of the main conditional sentences. It is ungrammatical for the other subjects (9). They corrected it in the following ways:

a- 4 subjects added 'had' to the 'if clause' (If I had had seen him, I would have given him the book).

b- 5 subjects changed 'have' into 'had' (If I had seen him, I would had given him the book).

c- 9 subjects deleted 'won't' in the main clause (If you won't come, I won't see you).

All the subjects stated that the sentence in (9) (If you won't come, I won't see you)

is ungrammatical. It seems that the usage of 'won't' in the 'if clause' caused the problem. They corrected the sentence in the following ways:

a- 57 subjects deleted 'won't' (If you come, I won't see you).

b- 34 subjects used 'don't' instead of 'won't' (If you don't come, I won't see you).

c- 9 subjects deleted 'won't' in the main clause (If you won't come, I see you).

Two principles may have affected the subjects' decision of the ungrammaticality of this sentence, the first one is that 'will' is not used in adverbial clauses (i.e. when, after, before, as soon as, etc.) when they have future reference, the second is that 'will' is not used in 'if-clause'. Accordingly, generally, they deleted 'will' in the 'if-clause'. In his discussion of such sentences, Palmer (1987:157) states that "there is a particular problem of will/shall.....(since they) are not used in simple predicative (causal) future conditional". 'will' which appears in the 'if-clause' (if John will come, Mary will leave) is volitional 'will'. So, the above sentence can be interpreted as 'if John is willing to come,.....'. The difference between 'if you don't come, I won't see you' and 'if you won't come, I won't see you' is that in the former we are talking about possibility (he hasn't come yet), whereas the second means the occurrence of the situation.

The sentence in (10) (If she comes, he ought to leave) was a problematic one for the subjects. 92 subjects mentioned that it is ungrammatical.

67 subjects out of 92 replaced 'ought to' by 'will' (If she comes, he will leave). 22 subjects used the simple past 'came' instead of 'comes' (If she came, he ought to leave). The other 2 subjects used 'has to' instead of 'ought to' (If she comes, he has to leave).

'Ought to' is considered by most of the subjects as a past form, this is why most of them changed the sentence into type 2.

To understand the usage of the above sentences, the students should be given a soled back ground about the usage of tenses and modals in general. Hinkel (1997) suggests that in teaching English tenses teachers have to explain English time attributes thoroughly rather than assuming the nonnative speakers of English will understand them as long as they have given the rules. Students should distinguish between real and unreal tenses. They should distinguish between past form and past tense. For instance, 'could, should, would, etc.' not necessarily used to express past tense they can be treated as past forms, for instance, we can say 'could I see you tomorrow?'. When teaching conditionals, teachers should be sure that the students understand the non temporal usages of the verbs in type 2 and 3 before talking about details and usages of other types of conditionals. Swan (1995) suggests that the difference between the use of present and past tense in conditionals is not a difference of time, as both tenses can be used to refer to the present or future. Past tense is used for situations which are less probable, or more remote.

The above suggestion was proved to be a good starting point for the teaching of conditionals to Chinese learners who are facing difficulties in differentiating the different types of conditionals (Chang,1987). Instead teaching the pedagogical grammar materials directly as most teachers do, teachers can start teaching conditionals by showing the differences between the two most basic patterns (the 'ordinary tense' and 'special tense'). Then teachers should ensure that learners are familiar with the fact that 'ordinary tense' is used to refer to situations which are not imaginary. The next step is to explain the concept of imaginary situations to learners. This step is particularly important because imaginary situations are not expressed explicitly by tense in many languages as
Arabic. For instance, in Arabic, the usage of the particle 'law' means unreal situation. 'law + present form' means unreal situation in present or the possibility of the occurrence of the situation in the future. Whereas, 'law+ past form' means unreal situation in the past. For instance,

a- Law yadrus sayanjah.
   If present-study-he future-pass-he
   If he studies he will pass.

b- law darasa lanajaha
   if-study-he past-pass-he
   if he had studied, he would have passed.

That is, there is a sort of association between the tense of the verb and the temporal reference of the situation. Care should also be taken to make sure that learners have a firm understanding of how to use the proper tenses to indicate the different types of unreal situations. A review of tenses should be done if necessary. The differences between the two broad types of conditionals should be explained clearly. It is because due to the influence of their native language, a lot of Arabic native speakers have the concept that past tense is used to refer to the past, present tense to the present, future tense to the future.

The sentences in bold (3, 6 & 8), as mentioned above, are the three well known sentences in conditional sentences. It is clear that the subjects' performance on these sentences was excellent. However, they faced serious problems in analyzing the other sentences.

The following table summarizes the results of the study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The sentences</th>
<th>Said grammatical</th>
<th>Said ungrammatical</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-If I should see him, I will leave.</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-If she comes, he left.</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-If he studies hard, he will pass.</td>
<td>98%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-If you were honest, you would not have hit him.</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5- If I had killed him, I would be in prison now.</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-If I were a student, I would be happy.</td>
<td>97%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7-If she has been studying, I will help her.</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8- If I had seen him, I would have given him the book.</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9-If you won't come, I won't see you.</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-If she comes, he ought to leave.</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>91%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**CONCLUSION**

The above results reveal that the subjects are familiar with the three main types of conditional sentences. Although all the above sentences are grammatical, as stated above, they were generally unable to predict that. In most cases, they tend to find a way to change the sentence into the closest type. For instance, if there is a past form in the 'if-clause', they change the sentence into type 2, and so on. It seems that grammar books whether at schools or those used at universities focus on these three types and ignore other variations within conditional sentences. Moreover, it seems that the modal usage of tenses or verb form is a neglected issue.

**Limitations of the study and suggestions for further research**

This paper is limited in its scope and subjects. Other grammatical factors and the effect of Second Language Acquisition are ignored. Interviewing the subjects could be necessary in this respect to decide the reasons behind the results. This issue could be better investigated with native and non native subjects to compare the results. In this case, we could arrive at a better conclusion and comprehensive treatment of conditionals.

One suggestion for future research would be to pilot the sample items with native and non-native speakers alike. This may help avoid the problem of distractors such as removing “hard” in the “he studies hard” example which was not relevant to the task at hand.
REFERENCES


تفسير الجمل الشرطية الإنجليزية من قبل متحدثي اللغة العربية

محمد الخوالدة

ملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة للتحقق من الطريقة التي يتبعها الطلاب الناطقين باللغة العربية لفهم الجمل الشرطية في اللغة الإنجليزية وإيجاد الأسباب المؤدية لذلك. تعتبر الجمل الشرطية واحدة من أصعب المواضيع للغة ناطقين باللغة الإنجليزية، وتشكل عقبة أمام الطلبة والمدرسين على حد سواء. وتتأثر صعوبة الجمل الشرطية من أنها تحتوي على جزئين للتعبير عن معنى معقد. باستخدام تركيب معقد، أضاف إلى ذلك أن الطلبة يضرون معظم الوقت بتعلم الأنواع الرئيسية الثلاثة: الأول، وثانيه وثالثه. وبذلك، لا يدرك وتعلم في الفعل الماضي والثاني، وثانيه وتعلم في الماضي البعيد. وبذلك، لا يدرك وتعلم في الفعل الماضي والثاني، وثانيه وتعلم في الماضي البعيد. وثانيه وتعلم في الماضي البعيد.

في هذه الدراسة، شارك مائة طالب في جامعة بحث متخصص في اللغة الإنجليزية. ثم أعطتهم عشرة جمل مختلفة، وطلب منهم أن يقرروا إذا كانت الجمل صحيحة أم لا وان يقوموا بتصحيح الجمل غير الصحيحة. وتين من خلال الدراسة أن الطلبة لا يدركون هذه الأنواع من الجمل الشرطية.

الكلمات الدالة: الشرطية، الفعل، العربية.