

DISCOURSE FUNCTIONS OF CONDITIONALS
IN MULTILINGUAL INSTRUCTIONS:
A CORPUS STUDY ON ORDERING VARIANTS

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1. Introduction

The study of conditionals has been of central concern in different disciplines such as linguistics, psychology and philosophy (see Traugott et al. 1986). However, despite differences in approach, most studies have often used constructed or experimental data. Some linguistic studies, however, have used actual discourse as data and analysed different discourse genres in different languages (Lavandera 1986, Marchese 1987, Ford and Thompson 1986, Schiffrin 1992, Dancygier 1993, Mazzoleni 1994).

This paper uses a multilingual corpus of administrative forms written in English, German and Italian for the analysis of the functional contexts of initial and final conditionals to determine their discourse functions. The motivation for this study is both descriptive and computational. From the descriptive point of view, the paper attempts to contribute to the adequate description of conditionals as they occur in naturally occurring texts in three different languages. From the computational point of view, the study was carried out within the context of a European project which developed a multilingual generation system for the automatic production of administrative forms in three different languages: English, German and Italian.¹ Given the high frequency of conditional expressions which appeared in administrative forms, it was necessary to provide both their discorsal and lexicogrammatical characteristics for the purposes of automated generation.

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Using as groundwork the excellent study carried out by Ford and Thompson (1986) on spoken and written English discourse, an extensive empirical analysis was performed on the multilingual corpus to determine: a) the grammatical realizations of conditional expressions in the three languages and their probability of occurrence, b) the distribution of initial and final variants, and c) their contexts of use in the three languages.

The different sections of the paper are dedicated to explore these issues: the section on materials and method presents the corpus and the analysis methodology used for this study; the results section reports on the main findings of the empirical analysis, and the discussion and conclusion section discusses and summarises the analysis of the results.

2. Materials and method

The corpus used for this study contains 61,248 words and consists of 22 administrative forms dealing with pension benefits and other kinds of allowances. It includes eight English, twelve bilingual (Italian/German), and two bilingual (Italian/English) administrative forms. The English forms were originally designed at the DDU (Document Design Unit) of the University of Leeds, while the others were issued in Italian by the INPS (Italian National Security Service) and translated into German by translators at APB (Autonome Province of Bolzano). The analysis involved addresses the following issues:

1. Determining and counting the range of grammatical forms commonly used by technical writers when expressing conditions in the three languages, and the probability of occurrence of each type.
2. Counting the occurrences of initial and final conditional clauses, and comparing their frequencies to determine their degree of markedness in the three languages. Chi-square test was used to compare frequencies.
3. Identifying the functional contexts for each of the two positional variants (initial or final) and their distribution to determine their discourse functions in the three languages.

The results of the corpus analysis are presented in the next section.

3. Results

As explained above, technical writers routinely employ a wide range of grammatical forms to express conditions in administrative forms. In English, conditions are basically expressed by "if-clauses". In Italian and German, however, other realizations were identified in the corpus. We begin with the English forms.

3.1. Realizations in English

The English forms present only one type of grammatical realization, "if-clauses", which may precede or follow their main clause. According to the analysis of the re-

sults, the total number of if-clauses in initial position (223) accounts for 66.5 per cent of the occurrences, whereas the total number in final position (112) accounts for only 33.4 per cent of all the occurrences. The distribution of these occurrences is illustrated in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Distribution of conditionals in English.

TEXT	<i>Initial</i>	<i>Final</i>
It-Australiana	19	13
It-Britannica	28	—
BR1	36	15
CSA1	7	7
CSA3	15	9
BR19	7	7
CH2CP	12	16
DLA1	33	15
DLA 2	23	12
DLANotes	24	12
FC2	5	3
FCS500	14	3
TOTAL	223	112
% (n = 335)	66.5	33.4

The difference in the frequencies shown in Table 1 above is statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). These results provide further empirical evidence for the claim that initial position for conditional clauses in English is the unmarked option (Ford and Thompson 1986).

3.2. Realizations in Italian

Conditions in Italian are expressed by two main types of grammatical forms in the corpus: a) a conditional clause introduced by *se*, *nel caso in cui* or *qualora*; b) a prepositional group introduced by *in caso*, or *in caso di*, when followed by a noun. The first type of realization is the most common type in the corpus, accounting for 64 per cent of the occurrences. The second type of realization accounts for 36.3 per cent of the total. As with the English forms, the conditional clauses were tabulated according to position to determine their distribution. The results of the analysis are shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Distribution of conditionals in Italian.

TEXT	<i>Initial</i>	<i>Final</i>
COM	5	1
INPS2	4	1
INPS3	3	2
INPS4	–	4
INPS7	3	–
INPS9	8	2
It-Australiana	9	11
It-Britannica	15	1
It-Austriaca	1	–
INPS13	1	–
TOTAL	49	22
% (n=71)	69	31

As illustrated above, initial conditionals (69 per cent) outnumber final conditionals (32 per cent) in Italian. The difference in these frequencies is statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), which indicates that in Italian, as in English, the initial variant is the unmarked option.

3.3. Realizations in German

Conditions in German are expressed by means of different grammatical forms in the corpus. The most common realization pattern is the conditional clause, introduced by *wenn*, *sofern*, *falls*, or by subordinate clauses with subject-verb inversion, a common construction in German. These together account for 61 per cent of the total occurrences, with clauses introduced by a conjunction covering 45.4 per cent, and subject-verb inversion clauses covering 16.6 per cent. Examples (1) and (2) below illustrate these realizations: example (1) is a clause introduced by *wenn*; example (2) illustrates the realization by means of a subordinate clause with subject-verb inversion. The conditional is underlined.

(1) Wenn das Formblatt nicht abgegeben wird. [INPS 9]

(2) Gehörte der Geburtsort früher zu Italien, kann er auch mit dem italienischen Namen (z.B. POLA, ZARA, usw.) angeben. [COM 1]

Another common realization found in our corpus is by means of prepositional groups introduced by *bei*, *im Falle*, or *falls*. This realization accounts for 38.8 per cent of all occurrences. Examples (3) and (4) illustrate this type of realization:

(3) Bei Rentnern, die vom Ehepartner verlassen wurden, ist das X im Kästchen GERICHTLICH GETRENNT einzusetzen. [INPS 9]

(4) Im Falle von nachträglichem Antrag auf Familienleistungen für die genannten Personen verpflichtet sich der Unterfertigte, vom Ehepartner unverzüglich eine entsprechende Mitteilung an die zuständige NISF-Stelle machen zu lassen. [INPS 4]

The analysis of conditional clauses yielded similar results to the ones obtained for English and Italian: initial conditionals outnumber final ones by a ratio of about two to one. The results are displayed in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Distribution of conditionals in German

TEXT	<i>Initial</i>	<i>Final</i>
COM	4	1
INPS2	3	3
INPS3	5	4
INPS4	–	4
INPS7	2	–
INPS9	8	2
It-Australiana	–	–
It-Britannica	–	–
It-Austriaca	8	–
INPS13	1	–
TOTAL	31	14
% (n=45)	69	31

As shown in Table 3 above, initial conditionals account for 69 per cent while final conditionals account for 31 per cent of all occurrences. This difference in frequencies is statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), as it happened in English and Italian.

3.4. Summary of realizations in the three languages

In spite of the difference realizations by means of which conditions are expressed in English, Italian and German, initial conditional clauses outnumber final conditional clauses by a ratio of about two to one in the three languages. This result confirms the claim presented in several linguistic studies according to which the preponderance of initial versus final conditional clauses is a language universal (Ford and Thompson 1986, Marchese 1976, Greenberg 1963).

Let us now turn to the presentation of the functional contexts identified for these two textual variants (initial or final) in the three languages under study. Initial conditionals will be considered first.

4. Functional contexts for initial conditionals

Haiman suggests that all initial conditionals contain information shared by the speaker and the listener, and, as such, constitute the framework or 'topic' for the following discourse (Haiman 1978: 583). Several discourse-based studies have confirmed this hypothesis by identifying several discourse functions of conditionals related to their topic function (Lavandera 1986, Ford and Thompson 1986, Marchese 1987). Using Schiffrin's typology of topics for the identification of the discourse functions of initial conditionals, several functional contexts have been identified in the multilingual corpus used for this study. In the following, these functions will be discussed and exemplified.

An initial conditional may function as a *text-topic*, i.e., as a general framework which underlies an entire text, as illustrated in examples (5), (6) and (7) below. Note that in example (5) the topicality of the conditional is further indicated by the writer with the use of the bold type. This context covers 3.5 per cent of the English, 8.1 per cent of the Italian, and 6.4 per cent of all German initial conditionals, respectively, and may be represented with the following formula:

X (topic), then Y

- (5) **If you are widowed or divorced.**
Your late or former spouse's National Insurance can sometimes be used to help you get a better pension. [BR19]
- (6) Se vengono indicati dati inesatti. [INPS 9]
- (7) Wenn die daten nicht richtig angegeben werden. [INPS 9]

An initial conditional may also function as a *propositional topic*, that is, as shared information framework for the following discourse. In the multilingual corpus, several contexts, previously found in other English genres (Ford and Thompson 1986: 356-358) were identified for this function. These contexts are:

1. When the initial conditional repeats an earlier claim, as exemplified in (8), (9) and (10) below. This context accounts for 24.2 per cent of the English, 24.4 per cent of

the Italian, and 32.2 per cent of the German initial conditionals, respectively. Following Ford and Thompson (1986), this type will be formulated as follows:

X. Assuming X, then Y

- (8) Do you (and/or your spouse) have any money in banks?
If yes, please give details. (ITALO-AUSTRALIA)
- (9) Gli orfani hanno un reddito proprio? Si – No.
In caso affermativo: di che specie? (ITALO-AUSTRALIA)
- (10) Haben die Waisen eigenes Einkommen? Ja – Nein.
Wenn ja, welcher Art und wie hoch ist das Einkommen?
(ITALO-AUSTRALIA)

2. When the conditional provides a contrast to something which has gone before. This function accounts for 24.6 per cent of the English, 26.5 per cent of the Italian, and 29 per cent of the German initial conditionals. The formula for this type, exemplified below, is:

X. (But) if not X, then Y

- (11) Tell us the exact date if you can. But if you cannot remember, you must roughly tell us when this was. [DLA 2]
- (12) Take your time to fill in the forms...[] But if you find it difficult to fill in section 2 look under Help and advice on page 6 of these notes to see what help you can get filling in the form. [DLA 2]

3. When the initial conditional provides an exemplification or an illustration of a more general statement. This functional context has only been found in the the English forms, accounting for 4.9 per cent of all English initial conditionals. The schematic formula for this function is:

Generalization. (For example) if X, then Y.

Two examples for this function are:

- (13) What happens if the wrong amount of money is paid into the account
If not enough money is paid into the account, we will add the money we owe onto the next payment, or make a special payment.
If too much money is paid into the account you will have to pay the extra money back if the reason you are paid too much is the way that the credit transfer system works. [BR 1]
- (14) Tell us as much as you can about the help you need coping with your toilet needs [...] For example, if you are a woman you may need help coping with your periods. [DLA 2]

In example (13), the general situation presented in the preceding discourse (*the wrong amount of money is paid into the account*) is further instantiated in the initial conditionals in the following discourse (italics in the text). In example (14), the exemplification is further marked by the use of the particle “for example”.

4. When the conditional explores options relevant to the situation expressed in the preceding context, thus opening up new possibilities for the development of the information. This functional context accounts for 26 per cent of the English, 24.4 per cent of the Italian, and 25.8 per cent of the German initial conditionals. A formula for this function can be represented as follows:

X. If option Y, then Y

- (15) 1. Payment by credit transfer – direct into an account
If you choose this way, you can decide if you want your money paid every four weeks or every thirteen weeks.
If you choose to be paid every 4 weeks, your first payment might cover a period of 2 to 5 weeks, but after this all other payments will be at 4 weekly intervals.
If you choose to be paid every 13 weeks, your first payment might cover a period of 2 to 14 weeks, but after this all other payments will be at 13 weekly intervals. [BR 1]

In example (15), the information contained in the two initial conditionals (*If you choose to be paid every 4 weeks, if you choose to be paid every 13 weeks*) expresses two options immediately relevant to the preceding context and elaborates the information presented in that context. A similar example, taken from a bilingual Italian-English form, is illustrated in (16) below:

- (16) Italian: Qualora il presente formulario venga compilato in data uguale o precedente a quella indicata al precedente punto 8, si prega di precisare se la S.V. intende avere una occupazione retribuita successivamente alla data di ritiro dal lavoro? Si o No
Qualora il presente formulario venga compilato successivamente alla data indicata al precedente punto 8, si prega di precisare...
 English: If you are completing this form on or before the date given in reply to Quotation 8 above, do you intend to have any gainful occupation after the retirement date? (Yes or No)
If you are completing this form after the date given in reply to Question 8 above. [ITALO-BRITANNICA]

Another function of initial conditionals in the multilingual corpus is that of expressing the high-level goal of an action schema in a mental plan. Mental plans are representations of the hierarchy of actions to be performed to achieve a goal, where

the action at the top of the hierarchy is a general description of what has to be accomplished, and the level below describes each of the major component steps involved. According to the hierarchical plan model (Dixon 1987), directions are easier to understand when the high-level information precedes the low-level information, that is, reading time is shorter when information at the top of the plan hierarchy comes first in the sentence. Therefore, the information contained in the conditional clause captures the goal to be achieved by the reader, whereas the main clause indicates the step(s) to be performed to achieve that goal. This context accounts for 7.6 of the English, 14.2 of the Italian and 6.4 of the German initial conditionals of the corpus. A schematic formula for this function is exemplified below:

If your goal is X, do Y (Goal-Step/s)

- (17) If you want to claim an Australian pension:
 – Contact your local INPS or Patronati office;
 – read the back of this page. [ITALO-AUSTRALIA]
- (18) ISTRUZIONI PER LA COMPILAZIONE DELLA “RICHIESTA DI RETTIFICA DEI DATI ANAGRAFICI”
 1. – Se chiede la rettifica dei dati anagrafici, La preghiamo di compilare le caselle relative ai dati da variare.[COM]
- (19) HINWEISE ZUM AUSFÜLLEN DER “BERICHTIGUNG DER ANGABEN ZUR PERSON”
 1. – Wenn Sie um Berichtigung der Angaben zur Person ersuchen, bitten wir Sie, die Felder der zu ändern den Angaben auszufüllen. [COM]

In English and Italian, a small percentage of initial conditionals (1.7 and 2.04, respectively) also function as a polite form of directives. The writer uses forms such as *if you prefer* to hedge the effect of a plain directive, as a way of expressing the speaker’s respect for, or deference to, the authority of the interlocutor. Example (20) – from a bilingual English-Italian form – and example (21) illustrate this function:

- (20) English: If you prefer, the pension can be paid quarterly in arrears by means of crossed drafts which you can pay into a bank account. [ITALO-BRITANNICA]
 Italian: Qualora Ella lo preferisca, la pensione potrà esserLe pagata trimestralmente e posticipatamente a mezzo di assegni sbarrati che la S.V. potrà versare su conto bancario. [ITALO-BRITANNICA]
- (21) Sie werden sofort Antwort erhalten; falls notwendig, kann auch sofort ein Termin mit einem Beamten der Landesstelle vereinbart werden, um alle Fragen zu klären. [INPS 2]

In the English forms, some initial conditionals have been found in contexts not found in Italian or in German. These contexts are the following:

1. When the initial conditional is part of a clause complex which is embedded into another clause. This context accounts for 4.4 per cent of all English initial conditionals. This context can be represented schematically as follows:

X that, if Y, (then) Z

(22) I declare that, if I have said that I want my Retirement Pension paid direct into an account, I have read and understood the notes about being paid in this way [BR1]

2. When the initial conditional is followed by a long, "heavy" main clause. In this context the conditional tends to be fronted, following the maxim of End-weight. The schematic formula for this context will be represented as follows:

X, then Y (End-weight)

<p>(23) If you are a woman, you can claim your RP pension</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - when you are 60, or - any time between your 60th and 65th birthday, or - when you are 65. 	<p>If you are a man, you can claim your RP pension</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - when you are 60, or - any time between your 60th and 65th birthday, or - when you are 70. [BR1]
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In example (23), the initial conditional is the "light" constituent which precedes the "heavy" material presented in the main clause and the following dependent on it.

Tables 4, 5 and 6 below summarize the functional contexts of initial conditionals in each of the three languages under study, and the frequency of appearance of each context: Table 4 illustrates the contexts of initial conditionals in English, Table 5 in Italian, and Table 6 in German.

Table 4. Functional contexts for initial conditionals in English.

TEXT	Goal-Step	Contrast	Assuming	Exemplify	Embedded	Topic	End-weight	Options	Polite directive
It-Aust.	2	3	7	-	-	1	-	6	-
It-Brit.	2	5	14	-	-	3	-	3	1
Br1	3	3	5	7	4	-	3	9	2
CSA1	1	2	1	-	-	-	1	2	-
CSA3	1	5	4	-	-	-	1	4	-
BR19	2	-	1	-	1	1	-	2	-
CH2CP	-	1	5	2	2	1	1	-	-
DLA1	4	11	8	1	2	2	-	4	1
DLA 2	-	8	2	1	1	-	-	11	-
DLAN.	2	11	1	-	-	-	-	10	-
FC2	-	1	1	-	-	-	-	3	-
FCS500	-	5	5	-	-	-	-	4	-
TOTAL	17	55	54	11	10	8	6	58	4
% (n=223)	7.6	24.6	24.2	4.9	4.4	3.5	2.6	26	1.7

Table 5. Functional contexts for initial conditionals in Italian.

TEXT	Goal-step	Contrast	Assuming	Topic	Options	Polite directive
COM	2	2	1	-	-	-
INPS2	-	1	3	-	-	-
INPS3	-	2	-	-	1	-
INPS4	-	-	-	-	-	-
INPS7	1	2	-	-	-	-
INPS9	-	1	1	2	4	-
It.-Australiana	2	2	2	-	3	-
It.-Britannica	2	3	4	2	3	1
It.-Austriaca	-	-	-	-	1	-
INPS13	-	-	1	-	-	-
TOTAL	7	13	12	4	12	1
% (n=49)	14.2	26.5	24.4	8.1	24.4	2.04

Table 6. Functional contexts for initial conditionals in German.

TEXT	Goal-step	Contrast	Assuming	Topic	Option
COM	2	1	1	-	-
INPS2	-	1	1	-	-
INPS3	-	4	-	-	1
INPS4	-	-	-	-	-
INPS7	-	2	-	-	-
INPS9	-	1	-	2	4
It.-Austriaca	-	-	7	-	1
INPS13	-	-	1	-	2
TOTAL	2	9	10	2	8
% (n=31)	6.4	29	32.2	6.4	25.8

As the tables show, initial conditionals in English, Italian and German share similar contexts of use with slight differences in the percentages of one functional context over another. The most frequent function of initial conditionals in the three languages is that of serving as *propositional topic*, i.e., as shared information framework for the following discourse. Several contexts have been identified for this function: when repeating an earlier claim, specifying a contrast, exemplifying an earlier statement or exploring options relevant for the information in the preceding context. All these contexts, except the one where the conditional exemplifies an earlier statement, which appears only in English, have been identified for the three languages. Other functional contexts are not shared by three languages, such as the expression of a polite directive (only found in English and Italian), or when the main clause is long and heavy (only found in English).

5. Functional contexts for conditionals in final position

It was pointed out above that initial position for conditional clauses appears to be the unmarked position in the presentation of conditional information in clause complexes in the three languages of the multilingual corpus: initial conditional clauses outnumbered final conditional clauses by a ratio of about two to one. However, the fact that conditionals can also occur in final position suggests that there are patterns which account for a majority of final conditional clauses in the three languages. These are discussed below.

A high percentage of final conditionals in English (48.2), and a smaller one in Italian (31.8) and German (7.1), was used to express optional information related to conditions imposed by several circumstances. These are listed below, followed by illustrative examples. The optional information may be related to:

– the form-filler's knowledge:

(20) National Insurance (NI) number if you know it. [CSA 1]

– the form-filler's possible lack of easy access to the requested information:

(21) But make sure you sign the form yourself if you can. [DLA]

– the possible redundancy of the requested information:

(22) Date of birth - if you have not already told us on this form. [CH 2(CP)]

(23) Indicare qui appresso il proprio numero di iscrizione all'assicurazione nazionale britannica (se non indicato altrove). [ITALO-BRITANNICA]

– the availability or applicability of a situation to the form-filler or to somebody related to him/her:

(24) Please tick these statements if they apply to you. [DLA]

(25) Wir bitten Sie, die enthaltenen Angaben aufmerksam zu prüfen, ob die Beiträge richtig aufscheinen, durch einen Anruf bei der Grünen Nummer mit uns Kontakt aufzunehmen, wenn Sie Bemerkungen zum Versicherungsauszug zu machen haben. Der Anruf ist kostenlos. [INPS 2]

Another factor which seems to warrant a conditional's tendency to migrate to final position is its length. Following the maxim of End-Weight, explained above, a heavy and long conditional, normally consisting of a sequence of coordinated clauses, will tend to appear in final position to move heavy constituents to the right of the structure. A schematic formula for this subtype, exemplified below, is:

X, if W, Y, Z, etc. ... (End-weight)

(26) Have you already put off getting your RP for a year or more than a year?
Tick Yes if you are a woman aged 61 or over
or if you are a man aged 66 or over. [BR1]

(27) Risponda affermativamente a tale domanda nel caso in cui la sua abitazione:

- Sia situata su un lotto di terreno considerevolmente più ampio rispetto a uno di grandezza normale della zona.
- oppure sia situata su un lotto di grandezza superiore ai 2 ettari (5 acri)
- oppure disponga di alloggio autonomo che viene affittato
- oppure sia situata su un podere, o fattoria su terreno boschivo di sua proprietà
- oppure faccia parte di locali d'azienda. [ITALO-AUSTRALIA]

This principle seems to be characteristically at work when the conditional clause depends on an infinitive in the main clause, as illustrated by example (28), or when it depends on a negative imperative, as illustrated by example (29):

(28) Da compilare se il richiedente è un adetto ai servizi domestici e familiare.
Auszufüllen, wenn Antragsteller Haus-oder Familienangestellter ist
[INPS4]

(29) Do not return this form to us if you have signed and returned the declaration slip from the enclosed letter. [CSA1]

In the English forms, a context where conditionals appear in final position is when the information contained in the conditional clause refers locally to only one of the elements of the main clause. This causes the movement of the conditional clause to final position to make sure that the reader can pick up the right referent. This subtype can be schematically represented as follows:

X, if Y (local)

- (30) Roughly how many nights a week do you need help [...]
- getting the bedcovers back on the bed if they come off?
 - getting into the right position for sleeping, if you need to sleep in a particular position? [DLA]

In example (30) the two conditionals refer locally only to part of the information contained in the main clause, and appear in final position to ensure faster reference resolution.

The final context of appearance of final conditionals is when the main clause contains *only*, *solo* or *nur* depending on the language, as modifier of the conditional information. The formula for this type, exemplified in (31), (32) and (33) below is:

X only if Y

(31) You only need to answer this question if you are a woman. [BR19]

(32) Quando nello stesso anno esistono più registrazioni, il numero dei contributi si somma solo se i periodi assicurativi non coincidono. [INPS 2]

(33)

Fallen mehrere Eintragungen auf dasselbe Jahr, werden die Beiträge nur dann zusammengezählt, wenn sich die versicherungszeiten nicht überschneiden. [INPS 2]

Tables 7, 8 and 9 below summarize the functional contexts of final conditionals in each of the three languages under study, and the frequency of appearance of each context: Table 7 illustrates the contexts of final conditionals in English, Table 8 in Italian, and Table 9 in German.

Table 7. Functional contexts for final conditionals in English.

TEXT	Optional	End-Weight	Local	Only
It.-Australiana	8	5	-	-
BR1	5	7	3	-
CSA1	6	1	-	-
CSA3	5	4	-	-
BR19	1	2	2	2
CH2-CP	11	3	-	2
DLA1	10	4	-	1
DLA2	5	4	1	2
DLANotes	1	9	-	2
FC2	1	2	-	-
FCS500	1	2	-	-
TOTAL	54	43	6	9
% (n=112)	48.2	38.3	5.3	8

Table 8. Functional contexts for final conditionals in Italian.

TEXT	Optional	End-weight	Only
COM	-	1	-
INPS2	-	-	1
INPS3	-	2	-
INPS4	-	4	-
INPS9	-	2	-
It.-Australiana	6	5	-
It.-Britannica	1	-	-
TOTAL	7	14	1
% (n=22)	31.8	63.6	4.5

Table 9. Functional contexts for final conditionals in German.

TEXT	Optional	End-weight	Only
COM	1	1	-
INPS2	-	-	1
INPS3	-	5	-
INPS4	-	6	-
INPS9	-	2	-
TOTAL	1	12	1
% (n=14)	7.1	85.7	7.1

6. Discussion and concluding remarks

The analysis of the conditional expressions undertaken in this paper has yielded interesting results for the study of conditionals in discourse in different languages. In the first place, it was found that, even though technical writers employ different realization patterns to express conditions in administrative forms, conditional clauses are the preferred option in the three languages studied by a ratio of about two to one. In this sense, the high percentage of Prepositional Groups in Italian and German followed by a nominalized action to express a condition is the consequence of the characteristic impersonal style of the Italian/German forms where expressions with no agent abound.

Second, it was found that initial conditional clauses outnumber final conditional clauses by a ratio of about two to one in the three languages, which provides further empirical evidence for the claim that this preponderance is a language universal (Greenberg 1963).

Third, the analysis of the functional contexts in which initial and final conditionals occur in the three languages has shown that these two textual variants perform different discourse functions in the three languages. On the one hand, and confirming previous discourse evidence on English (Ford and Thompson 1986), initial conditionals in the corpus have proved to function basically as propositional topics, repeating an earlier claim, contrasting, or exploring options. However, other functions have also been identified, some of them common to the three languages, such as to present a text topic, or express the goal in a mental plan, others only appearing in some languages, such as the expression of a polite directive.

On the other hand, final conditionals seem to occur in different functional contexts from the ones where initial conditionals predominate. One of the most frequent contexts of occurrence of final conditionals in the multilingual corpus is when containing information which is considered optional (not obligatory) for the adequate processing of a request. This can be considered a genre-specific function of final conditionals, which may not apply in other genres. Another frequent context of use is when the conditional clause is considerably longer than the main clause. This factor precludes the appearance of the final conditional in initial position in the three languages. Finally, a small percentage of final conditionals are used when the information contained in the conditional clause refers locally to only one of the elements of the main clause, which pushes the conditional clause to final position to make sure that the reader can pick up the right referent, or when the conditional is preceded by *only* in English, *solo* in Italian.

These findings have interesting implications for cross-linguistic discourse studies. As summarized above, the three languages studied, English, German and Italian differ in the grammatical realization of conditional relations but behave rather similarly in their discourse functions, with slight differences in the preference for one function over another across the three languages. It remains to be determined, however, whether these similarities are genre-specific or apply equally across different genres. Further contrastive research will hopefully provide the answer.

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