

SOME PRAGMATIC CONSIDERATIONS IN THE POSITIONING OF
IF-CLAUSE IN CONDITIONAL SENTENCES

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on an investigation of the pragmatic factors influencing the position of *if*-clauses in conditional sentences. More than (900) nine hundred instances, extracted from such sources as novels, textbooks, and spontaneous speech were examined for this purpose. Topic continuity, parallelism, qualification, as well as a number of other factors were found to be determining principles of *if*-clause position.

1. Introduction

One of the confusing issues for a language learner is the fact that a single idea can be conveyed in a number of different ways. These different ways may sound very similar but, in most cases, are not interchangeable. That is, although there can be a variety of avenues that a speaker can take, only one will do the task with utmost linguistic and social appropriateness. This fact is sometimes ignored in grammar books, and particularly ESL/EFL texts, which, in most cases, present a number of different forms that can function as acceptable linguistic behavior in a certain situation, but without explaining the subtle differences that distinguish them from one another. Students feel confused, and numerous questions arise in their minds such as, "if I can use X to convey this message why should I learn Y," or, "if I can express this notion by means of Y, what is the use of having X'?" etc. The TEFL experience of this author, as well as that of many others, indicates that students often wonder whether it makes any difference whether to front or delay conditional clauses as in (1a) and (1b).

- 1) a. If I were rich, I would buy a mansion.
b. I would buy a mansion if I were rich.

In most cases, students have to live with this confusion, for most EFL texts and grammar books do not help answer these questions. Indeed, the illustrative examples most of these sources use tend to be contextless, which leads students to believe, erroneously, that the choice between either fronting or delaying the conditional clause is rather arbitrary. Bolinger, cited in Prince (1978: 883) maintains: "There are situations where the speaker is constrained by a grammatical rule, and there are situations where he chooses according to his meaning ...; but there are no situations in the system where 'it makes no difference' which way to go..."

Even those studies that have attempted to explore conditionals do not provide a sound account of their positions. Haiman (1978) is a case in point. He claims that conditionals are topics; a clear oversimplification of the issue. He presents the following examples to support his stance, claiming that:

if-clauses are the topics of the sentences in which they occur:

- a. If Max comes, we'll play poker.
- b. If Max had come, we'd have played poker.
- c. If ice is left in the sun, it melts.
- d. Even if it rains, the game will continue.
- e. If you are so smart, why aren't you rich?
- f. If you are so smart, fix it yourself.
- g. There's food in the fridge if you are hungry.
- h. If I was a bad carpenter, I was a worse tailor.
- i. She's over 40 if she's a day.

(Haiman 1978: 564)

Although this paper does not concern itself much with Haiman's generalizations, it can be observed that the examples he bases his generalizations on are contextless. If these examples are put into certain contexts, the function of the *if*-clause will definitely change.

This paper will attempt to highlight the salient determining factors that condition the position of *if*-clauses in conditional sentences, in light of context.

2. Methodology

In this study, more than nine hundred instances, extracted from a number of sources, such as novels, newspapers, textbooks were examined. A large number of these examples were extracted from the e-text editions of the novels: *O'Pioneer* and *The Time Machine*. The fact that these two novels are on-line made it easy to extract nearly all the occurrences of *if*-clauses and to scrutinize the use of each instance within its context. After analyzing the data, the author checked his judgments with native speakers.

3. Discussion

The analysis of the data shows that the position of *if*-clause depends, to a large extent, on the interlocutor's purpose. In most cases, the choice between fronting or delaying the *if*-clause is based on pragmatic considerations. In what follows, the author will attempt to highlight the pragmatic elements that tend to govern the position of *if*-clauses in conditional sentences. For comparison purposes, most of the conditional sentences in the illustrative examples have two versions: (a) and (b) with versions (a) being the original continuations of these examples.

3.1. Topic continuity

The first element that context reveals as determinant of *if*-clause position is the *continuity* factor. Indeed, this is so prominent a factor that nearly all the principles governing *if*-clause positions discussed in this paper relate to it. Discussion of *continuity* as a governing element of the position of *if*-clause will be approached in light of the information status of the *if*-clause i.e., as a carrier of new information (*focus*) or as a carrier of old information (*topic*). Consider the following example:

- 2) a. [Discussing the different steps of revising] In the 'diagnosing the problem' stage, some writers simply say to themselves 'that does not work' and they leap in and begin to rewrite. [2a] Leaping can work well, if you have a new discovery to add or need to experiment with language, or if you feel something is missing.

(Flower 1989: 218)

- b. ...If you have a new discovery to add or need to experiment with language, or if you feel something is missing, leaping can work well.

As can be seen (2a) seems more befitting as a continuation to (2). The main topic in (2) is 'leaping'. So once the reader reaches the end of this sentence, he or she expects some more information about this "leaping issue", i.e., explanation, pros and cons of leaping. This, indeed, can be found in both choices, (2a) and (2b). However, the proximity factor which (2a) manifests appears to make a difference; it makes it the better choice. That is to say, the last idea or concept that is buzzing in the reader's mind, once he or she finishes processing sentence (2), is this 'leaping notion'. Putting it in the topic position in the sentence that follows is the ideal thing, since it is now old information, i.e., the topic of what follows. The focus, then, is what comes after *if*, which means that the *if*-clause in this case is the focus. In short, in (2a) the front position is devoted to old information, whereas the final position is saved for the new information, thus relating what is old to what is new (see Saeed (2002), Prince (1991) and (1981)

and Bardovi-Harlig (1983) for discussions of the concepts of old vs. new information).

Example (3) illustrates the preceding point further.

- 3) a. Nelse Jenson Signa's gloomy suitor, had his word. "Lou, he says he wouldn't have no silo on his place if you would give it to him. He says the feed outen it gives the stock the bloat. He heard of somebody lost four head of horses, feedin' 'em that stuff."

Alexandra looked down the table from one to another. "Well, the only way we can find out is to try. [3a] Lou and I have different notions about feeding stock, and that's a good thing. It's bad if all the members of a family think alike. They never get anywhere.

(Cather 1992: 29)

- b. ...Lou and I have different notions about feeding stock, and that's a good thing. It's bad if all the members of a family think alike. They never get anywhere.

Example (3) shows that promoting or putting the main clause, "it is bad", adjacent to the focus of the previous sentence, "that's a good thing", signals a very sharp contrast which makes the context more continuous. Also the idea of thinking alike, which is contained in the *if*-clause, gets more focus. If the conditional clause in this example is fronted, the contrast created by the adjacency of the two entities "a good thing" and "It's bad", which strengthens the continuity property here, will not be as strong, or as effective, since these two entities will be a little bit more distant from each other. To put it another way, the proximity – which in this case results in this effective contrast – tends to make the flow smoother.

Note that the *if*-clauses in examples (2) and (3) are in the focus position, for they carry the most important information. This contradicts Haiman's generalization that conditionals are topics.

In the following two examples, the *if*-clause is fronted (i.e., placed in the topic position) while the main clause is placed in the focus position.

- 4) a. [Mary] was incapable of being lukewarm about anything that pleased her. She simply did not know how to give a half-hearted response. When she was delighted, she was as likely as not to stand on her tip-toes and clap her hands. [4a] If people laughed at her, she laughed with them. (Cather 1992: 27)

- b. She laughed with people if they laughed at her.

- 5) a. They drove westward toward Norway Greek, and toward a big white house that stood on a hill, several miles across the fields... South of the hill, in a low, sheltered swale, surrounded by a mulberry hedge, was the orchard, its fruit trees knee-deep in timothy grass. Any one thereabouts would have told you that this was one of the richest farms on the Divide and that the farmer was a woman, Alexandra Bergson. [5a] If you go up the hill and enter Alexandra's big house you will find that it is curiously unfinished and uneven in comfort. One room ...

(Cather 1992: 27)

- b. ?You will find that Alexandra's house is curiously unfurnished and uneven in comfort, if you go up the hill and enter it. One room is...

Choices (4a) and (5a) continue their respective contexts felicitously. When the reader has finished decoding (4), he or she becomes familiar with Mary's behavior, and perhaps starts constituting his or her own attitude towards it. Continuation (4a) starts with a similar kind of information (attitude of people around her), followed by her reaction, an appropriate sequence indeed, for the focus here is on her behavior.

In example (5), choosing (5b) as a continuation does not result in an easily understandable context. It sounds odd. Part of this oddity stems from the fact that events are not chronologically ordered. Chronology is important in this particular instance, for the narration here is a description of how to get to some place i.e., to Alexandra's house. To put it another way, the notion of series – driving toward the hill, reaching the top of the hill, and seeing the house and then entering it – is highlighted. This order makes it easy for the reader to follow the narration. Besides this, it places the house at the end, which means that it receives more attention.

In the following instance, example (6), reversing the order of the conditional sentence results in meaning change.

- 6) a. "Boys", said the father wearily, "I want you to keep the land together and to be guided by your sister. I have talked to her since I have been sick, and she knows all my wishes. I want no quarrels among my children, and so long as there is one house there must be one head. Alexandra is the oldest, and she knows my wishes. She will do the best she can. [6a] If she makes mistakes, she will not make so many as I have made.

(Cather 1992: 14)

- b. ?...She will not make so many mistakes as I have made, if she makes any.

The father in this paragraph is endeavoring to convince his children that the family should have only one head if he dies, and that Alexandra is the best one. He supports this choice by listing a number of merits that she possesses. As a way of reinforcing his argument he points out that although she may commit some mistakes, they will not be very many. In other words, his words might be interpreted as. "I know that some of you think that she will make some mistakes. You are right; she might make some mistakes, but I'm sure that they will not be so many. They'll probably be less than the ones I have made." This fact – that she will not make so many mistakes – is placed in the final position, a proper place for this important piece of information. However, when reversing the order of the conditional sentence, fronting the main clause, and suspending the conditional clause as (6b) shows, there will be a semantic shift; the focal point will be "Alexandra may not make mistakes", which is not what the father is saying.

Example (7) shows that if the order of the conditional sentence is reversed, the main information will not receive the necessary attention, and needless to say, it would be hard to understand the conveyed message.

7) [About a love affair between Terry and Alima] "He [Terry] was madly in love with Alima. He wanted to take her by storm, and nearly lost her forever.

You see, if a man loves a girl who is in the first place young, and inexperienced; and who, in the second place is educated with a background of cave-man tradition, a middle-ground of poetry and romance, and a foreground of unspoken hope and interest worthy of the name – *why*, it is a comparatively easy matter to sweep her off her feet with a dashing attack. Terry was a past master in this process. ... (Wells 1991: 90)

In example (7), the first part, dependent clauses preceded by *if*, serves to build interest in the reader. It serves to sharpen the reader's interest, and make him or her look forward to arriving at the final destination, which is hoped to bring the awaited information. This most wanted information (in the example) is reached in a moment when the reader's interest has reached the climax. Surely, then, this piece of information will receive the utmost degree of attention. Note also that the word *why* in the example marks the start of the important information; it serves as a focus marker, that alerts the reader of the nearness of the piece of information that is searched for.

The above-mentioned representative examples show that *topic continuity* is a salient discourse principle that determines the position of the *if*-clause in conditional sentences.

3.2. Parallelism

Another feature that affects the fronting/delaying process of the conditional clause is *parallelism*. Example (8) exhibits the feature of parallelism very clearly.

8) Nonsense! We have decided that. It might take months – we have not got the provisions. No sir – we have got to take our chances. If we get back safe – all right. If we don't, *why*, we're not the first explorers to get lost in the shuffle. There are plenty to come after us. (Wells 1991: 10)

As can be seen from the example, there are two conditional sentences, both of which start with a dependent clause, "If we get back safe", and "If we don't...". The most important piece of information is the one that comes after the conditional clause, "If we don't". After the addressees have listened to the sentence, "If we get back safe – all right", they themselves can muse, "How about if we don't?", which is exactly what comes next. Thus, this parallel structure creates a very smooth flow. If we attempt to reverse the order of the second conditional sentence, the whole thing will sound awkward; it will be like jumping back and forth, as can be seen in (9):

9) ??Nonsense! We have decided that. It might take months – we have not got the provisions. No sir – we have got to take our chances. If we get back safe – all right. *Why* we're not the first explorers to get lost in the shuffle, if we don't.

What increases the oddity of this paragraph is the position of the focus marker *why*. It seems to sound appropriate only when it comes between the dependent and the main clause, as in example (8). Nevertheless if this focus marker is omitted, the paragraph will still be hard to understand. Most readers will need to read it more than one time. However, with the parallel structure, the paragraph sounds very clear.

The following is another example that illustrates the importance of this factor further:

10) a. If you want to state a definition, linking verbs are often very powerful. [10a] If, however, you are discussing an action, whether hypothetical, mental, or metaphoric, linking verbs can weaken your sentence.

(Flower 1989: 233)

b. ... However, linking verbs can weaken your sentence if you are discussing an action, whether it is physical, or mental, or metaphoric.

Examining the two choices, (10a) sounds better than (10b) to continue (10) smoothly. It is true that (10b) starts with old information, like (7) above, yet in this instance there exists another factor that makes the transition smoother; namely, the parallelism factor: "if you ...; if, however, you ...".

3.3. Qualification

The third factor that context reveals as determinant of *if*-clause position is *qualification*. Consider the following example.

- 11) [Carl is trying to save a cat, who climbed onto a pole and could not come down.] "Catch me if I fall, Emil", he called back as he began his ascent. Alexandra watched him anxiously; the cold was bitter enough on the ground. The kitten would not budge an inch. Carl had to go to the very top of the pole, and then had some difficulty in tearing her from her hold. When he reached the ground, he handed the cat to her tearful little master.
(Cather 1992: 3)

As can be seen from the example, the *if*-clause is delayed. This delay is very natural. The utterance sounds odd with the conditional clause in the front. The question then is this: is the *if*-clause in this example the focal point? The answer is 'no'. In the example, the most important thing for Carl, given the noticeable danger he is about to go through, is to be caught if he falls down. Thus he can be imagined saying, "catch me – I mean if I fall", while starting the climbing and turning to Emil. Thus "if I fall" here is a qualifying statement. Carl could have just said "catch me", with a certain facial expression, or gesture. Thus the topic/focus issue is not really applicable here, since the main thing in the example is "catch me", with the conditional clause acting as a qualifier.

3.4. Other factors

The preceding discussion has attempted to highlight the factors or principles that tend to govern the position of the *if*-clause in the light of the contextual environment in which it occurs. From the discussion, it is clear that the factors that have been considered so far are mostly pragmatic. That is to say, the writer or the articulator could base his choice of whether to front or delay the conditional clause on pragmatic purposes. There are, however, situations where the user has no choice of where or how to use the form. Some examples are given below:

- 12) Of marriage as a ceremony they knew nothing. Jeff was for bringing them to our country for the religious and the civil ceremony, but neither Celis nor the others would consent. "We can't expect them to want to go with us –

yet," said Terry sagely. "Wait a bit, boys. We've got to take'em on their own terms – if at all."
(Wells 1991: 90)

In (12), the "contracted" conditional clause is uttered as an afterthought. It cannot be fronted. Fronting it may sound possible, though not very felicitous given this context, if it is not elliptical. Horn (1972) (cited in Ward 1990: 759) calls such conditional clauses as *if at all*, *if anyone* "suspender *if*-clauses".

There are also cases where the suspension of the conditional clauses results in an ill-formed pattern, as the example (13) illustrates:

- 13) If you believe in an idea and want to stand up for it – but still be serious and formal, you can do it in an active direct language. (Flower 1989: 23)
- 14) ?You can do it in an active, direct language, if you believe in an idea and want to stand up for it – but still be serious and formal.

When reading or listening to sentence (14) the reader or hearer will stop on the word *it* and ask, "do what?" If, however, the order of the sentence is reversed as in (15):

- 15) You can do an idea that you believe in and want to stand up for it – but still be serious and formal, in active, direct language.

then the conditionality of the sentence is lost. The sentence becomes a normal statement, with a different shade of meaning.

The following example, (16), is similar to (14), but it does not sound awkward when reversed, as (17) shows:

- 16) Every one of us here in this room has had great luck-we are teachers, writers, academicians; our own gifts could not have been enough, for we all know women whose gifts are buried or aborted. Our struggles can have meaning and our privileges – however precarious under patriarchy – can be justified only if they can help to change the lives of women, whose gifts – and whose very being – continued to be thwarted and silenced.
(Rich 1992: 78)

- 17) Every one of us here in this room has had great luck-we are teachers, writers, academicians; our own gifts could not have been enough, for we all know women whose gifts are buried or aborted. Only if they can help to change the lives of women whose gifts – and whose very being – continued to be thwarted and silenced, can our struggles have meaning and can our privileges – however precarious under patriarchy – be justified.

Note that the adverb *only* contributes here to the acceptability of sentence (17). The reordering here seems to draw more attention to the focus of the statement, "meaningful struggles, and justified privileges". However, if the adverb *only* is not part of the sentence, re-ordering it will result in an ambiguous output. Consider:

18) ...If they can help to change the lives of women, our struggles can have meaning and our privileges can be justified.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has attempted to use context to highlight the common principles that seem to govern the positioning of the *if*-clause. The contextualized illustrations are extracted from a number of sources such as novels, texts and spontaneous speech. More than nine hundred instances were examined. Analysis of the data showed that context is extremely significant in legitimizing the fronting or delaying of *if*-clauses. It also showed that, contrary to what Haiman (1978) suggests, when the *if*-clause is not in the topic position, it is not necessarily a topic. Factors such as topic continuity (topic / focus), parallelism, qualification, as well as some other factors were found to be common determining principles of *if*-clause position, with the principle of topic continuity as the most salient factor that governs the position of the *if*-clause in conditional sentences. Although each of the inferred principles is discussed separately, in certain contexts more than one factor can be inferred as determinant.

Finally, the author is well aware of the fact that this discussion is far from being comprehensive; scrutinizing a larger number of contextualized instances taken from different sources might reveal other important determining principles. However, it is hoped that this study has emphasized further the importance of using context as an effective technique in EFL/ESL teaching, particularly in teaching grammatical structures.

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