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| If-conditionals and modality: A corpus-based investigation |

A number of studies on modality and/or conditionals have presented the claim that conditionals are intimately connected to modality (Comrie, 1986: 89; Dancygier, 1998: 72; Huddleston & Pullum, 2002: 741; Nuyts, 2001: 352; Palmer, 1986: 189; Sweetser, 1990: 141); however, the nature of that connection has not been investigated empirically. This paper reports on parts of a larger study which empirically tested the above claim – namely the corpus-based approach and metrics developed in the study, as well as some significant findings.

More specifically, the paper examines whether, and to what extent, this relationship ...  

a. holds for all conditionals, irrespective of their subordinator (e.g. if, in case, unless);  
b. extends to concessive-conditionals (e.g. even if);  
c. is limited to conditionals (and concessive-conditionals), or extends to other constructions sharing subordinators with conditionals (e.g. indirect interrogatives with if).  
d. holds for either of the two parts of bi-partite constructions (e.g. protasis and apodosis in conditionals; Fillmore, 1986).

In the case of if-conditionals, the paper also examines the extent to which this relationship applies to their two basic types, direct and indirect (Quirk et al., 1985: 1088-1097).

The methodology combines a corpus-based, quantitative approach with close analysis of the data for the purposes of the annotation of modal marking in all corpus samples, and the classification of if-conditionals. The study uses eleven random samples from the written BNC, containing the following:

a. All types of constructions, providing an indication of the average frequency of modal marking in written British English –which was used as the baseline;  
b. Non-conditional constructions, taken collectively;  
c. Conditional constructions (e.g. assuming, if, unless);  
d. Conditional-concessive constructions with even if and whether;  
e. Indirect interrogative (non-conditional) constructions with if and whether;  
f. Constructions with when and whenever (used as conjunctions), as they have been presented as synonymous with unmodalised if-conditionals in some studies (e.g. Athanasiadou & Dirven, 1996: 617, 1997: 62; Palmer, 1990: 174-175).

The analysis revealed that the modal load (i.e. the extent of modal marking) in conditionals as a construction family, and if-conditionals in particular, is significantly higher than the baseline and non-conditional constructions (taken collectively), as well as most, but not all, non-conditional constructions. More importantly, if-conditionals showed a distinctly higher modal load than other conditional constructions. Overall, constructions of the same family tend to have similar modal load; however, this is not consistently the case with individual constructions within a family. Also, constructions across and within bi-partite families show different ratios of modal load in their two
parts. More importantly, the protases of if-conditionals have a modal load at least equal to that of the baseline, and, in some cases, significantly higher – despite protases being already modally marked by if.

References


