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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*.

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