A great deal of research on conditionals has already shown that some conditional constructions do not express a causal relation between the events expressed in the two clauses, but involve relationships at the speech act levels (Austin, 1961; Van Der Awera, 1986; Sweetser, 1990; Dancygier 1998).

Such constructions, often called speech-act conditionals, set up a context as the background to a speech act which the main clause carries out. Examples discussed in literature usually have directive speech acts, such as questions, in the apodosis. In the example below, the speaker asks a question which is contingent on the hypothesis that the addressee “buys a house”:

(1) If you buy a house, will you redecorate it yourself? (Dancygier, 1998:89)

Interestingly enough, there are some interrogative speech-act conditionals that are not really meant to get an answer from the addressee. It seems that these constructions require an analysis based on inferential structure; more specifically, meaning cannot be adequately explained without reference to presupposition. The point is that although the speaker is just conditionally asking a question, the interpretation may include the inference that some kind of disbelief takes place:

(2) If you were hungry, why haven’t you eaten the cookies?  
   (Inference: “You were not in fact hungry”).

(3) If he really doesn’t want to go to Italy, why is he studying Italian?  
   (Inference: “He does want to go to Italy”)

Examples like (2) and (3) are not specific to English, but can be also found in other languages. In the appropriate context, for example, the translation of example (2) to Brazilian Portuguese can also prompt the inference that “the addressee wasn’t in fact hungry”:

(4) Se você estava com fome,
    If you be:Pl-p:2s with hunger,
This paper, then, proposes to investigate meaning construction in Brazilian Portuguese interrogative speech-act conditionals. The analysis is based on data from the electronic corpus “Corpus do Português” (http://www.corpusdoportugues.org), which consists of 45 million words compiled from a wide variety of spoken and written genres.

Given that work on presupposition projection has already shown that presuppositions of embedded clauses may float up to the next higher space (Fauconnier, 1994, 1997), the paper's main argument is that the point of many interrogative speech-act conditionals is to highlight the “pragmatic incompatibility” between presupposition propagated to the protasis upper space, and information already available in it. The analysis relies on the notions of presupposition projection, “frame” (Fillmore, 1982, 1985) and “Idealized Cognitive Model” (Lakoff, 1987), in order to shed light on pragmatic inferences that arise from discrepancies between coexisting information in the higher space (after presupposition projection) and shared knowledge available in frames and ICMS.

Bibliography


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