

Conditionals: Meaning and Applications

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When someone says, “if you don’t leave now, you’ll miss your train” or “if you had listened to me earlier, you would have caught your train”, what have they communicated? What did they really say?

Such conditionals play a central role in language and reasoning. They express a fundamental capacity of the mind: to go beyond our current circumstances and into a realm of hypothetical possibilities. Conditionals have also been invoked in the analysis of a wide range of concepts, including causation (that for C to cause E, it must hold that if C hadn’t occurred, E wouldn’t have either), permission (that something is permitted just in case the rules would be met if it were the case), and desire (that to desire something is to believe that you would be in a better state if you had it). This makes conditionals central to linguistics, philosophy, and psychology.

This course will survey the semantics and pragmatics of conditionals, and examine some concepts which have been analysed in terms of them. We will compare theories of what it means for a conditional to be true, comparing indicative (present tense) and subjunctive (past tense) conditionals. Among the theories we consider are approaches based on a similarity order (e.g. Stalnaker and Lewis), premise semantics (Kratzer), truthmaker semantics (Fine) and aboutness (McHugh). We will study how conditionals have been applied in the analysis of causation, permission, decision theory, and desire.