

# SEMANTO-PRAGMATIC CLASSIFICATION OF CONDITIONALS

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## 1.1. Introduction

The aim of the paper is to point to some misleading aspects of the generally accepted (within theoretically based grammar and not within purely theoretical approach) classification of the so called conditionals, as well as to present an alternative approach, although very preliminary in character.

It seems that the problem of conditionals has usually been approached in accordance with the following assumptions:

- the meaning of a conditional sentence is non-factual or counter-factual, depending on whether the condition expressed in the *if*- clause can (with various degrees of probability) or cannot be fulfilled;
- although meanings of conditional sentences are varied, they can nevertheless be accounted for in terms of a uniform apparatus. The main criteria of classification are the following: the form of the verb, temporal reference of the sentence and the character of the condition (real or open/and unreal).

It can be observed, then, that the discussion has so far concentrated on the analysis of types of conditionals which have been distinguished on the basis of form rather than meaning.

This approach does not reflect the multiplicity of meanings possibly carried by conditional sentences and does not grasp some meaning regularities not corresponding to the formal division into types, yet more important from the semanto-pragmatic perspective.

In the present paper we shall suggest an approach which takes semantic and pragmatic considerations as the starting point. Our main concern will be the type of meaning relationship between the main clause and the *if*-clause (later to be referred to as consequent and antecedent, respectively). We shall also suggest a change of approach towards the concept of "condition", as we find the existing terminology inadequate and misleading. The problem of verb forms cannot, for obvious reasons, be disregarded, but the use of tenses

will be employed as a supplementary criterion. Finally, we shall consider conditionals in terms of three, and not two, types of meaning, i.e., theoretical, hypothetical, and also factual.

## 1.2. Suggested classification of conditionals

By conditionals we understand complex sentences containing subordinate clauses with the *if* conjunction. To avoid repetition we will refer to the *if*-clause as an antecedent *p* and to the main clause as a consequent *q*.

Although it has been acknowledged that conditional sentences may carry a variety of meanings (logical consequence, promissory obligation, causality, etc.), it may be claimed that there exist two prevailing types of relation between *p* and *q*. They are what we call a consequential and a non-consequential relation.

By a consequential relation we understand the interdependence consisting in the fact that *p* is the cause of *q* (the term 'cause' is understood in its colloquial sense). It means that the situation described by *q* is in the broadest sense the result of the situation described by *p*.

A non-consequential relation differs from the consequential one in two ways. Firstly, the link between the antecedent and the consequent is not causal. Secondly, not only is *q* not conditioned by *p*, but, quite on the contrary, *p* is conditioned by *q* in such a sense that the speaker is able to accept *p* as true if *q* holds true as well.

The two types can be exemplified by the following sentences:

### A. Consequential relation

*If I catch the train, I will come on time*

*p: I catch the train*

*q: I will come on time*

### B. Non-consequential relation

*If Susie is listening at the door, she is breathing quietly*

*p: Susie is listening at the door*

*q: Susie is breathing quietly.*

In (A), *p*, i.e., catching the train, is the cause of *q*, i.e. of coming on time. In other words, I will be able to get to the conference on time provided I catch the train. My coming on time is, thus, the result of my catching the train.

In (B), *p*, i.e. Susie's listening at the door is *not* the cause of *q*, i.e. her breathing quietly. In this example it is not the case that *q* is conditioned by *p* (which was the case in (A)), but just the opposite holds. For the speaker to be able to accept *p*, i.e. Susie's listening at the door, as true it must also be true that *q*, i.e. that she is breathing quietly. In other words, *q* is a sort of speaker-relative truthfulness condition of *p*.

As (A) and (B) show, the distinction drawn by the informal definitions given earlier is strongly confirmed by our intuitions.

The distinction will now be examined in a more detailed way.

### 1.2.1. Consequential cases

1. *If he loves you, he will come*
2. *If I tell him the truth, he'll get angry*
3. *If John hadn't been ill yesterday, he would have passed the exam*
4. *If you step on the brake, the car slows down*
5. *If I knew how it worked, I would tell you what to do*

The division drawn in 1.2. can be argued for in terms of some simple paraphrases which seem to reveal the cause — effect relationship between antecedents and consequents.<sup>1</sup> Let us first consider the situation in which *p* becomes *q* and vice versa.

Intuitively, this should not be possible as the cause — effect relation is unidirectional. Not surprisingly, then, the meaning of sentences such as *If he gets angry, I'll tell him the truth*, or *If the car slows down, you step on the brake* is totally different from that expressed by (2) and (4). There is, however, a possibility of constructing sentences of much the same meaning as (2) and (4), but then the tense in both *p* and *q* must be changed if the same sequence of events is to be preserved. Consider, then, paraphrases such as the following:<sup>2</sup>

1a. *If he comes, then (it means that) he loves you*

2a. *If he gets angry, then (it means that) I have told him the truth*

4a. *If the car slows down, then (it means that) you have stepped on the brake*

Thus, we obtain sentences in which the original sequence of *p* and *q* is shifted and which still preserve the right direction of the same cause — effect relation. At the same time, however, the meaning of the conditional structure has been changed in such a way that the sentences no longer mean: if *p* occurs, then *q* will occur as a result. They can now be interpreted as: if *p* occurs, then it is the result of the former occurrence of *q*.

The paraphrases given above refer only to future and present events and the changes of tense which appeared to be necessary were not too far-going —

<sup>1</sup> The reader should here be warned against treating the examples to be given below as independent sentences. The problem is that many situations can give the same result: someone may not catch the train and still arrive on time. Such interpretations, however, are disregarded here, as we refer only to the situation described in the original sentence.

<sup>2</sup> The phrase "it means that", which will be used in paraphrases throughout the text, suggests that the actual situation described by the *if*-clause is the result of the prior occurrence of the event described in the consequent.

the only problem was establishing some sort of "anteriority" relation. More serious changes are required, however, if consequential sentences express "hypothetical meaning", as in (3) and (5). The "changing places" operation requires regular, non-hypothetical tense forms. Consider the following:

- 3a. *If John didn't pass the exam, then (it means that) he was ill*  
 5a. *If I tell you what to do, then (it means that) I know how it works*

but

- 3a'. *\*If John had passed the exam, then (it means that) he would have been ill*  
 5a'. *\*If I told you what to do, then (it means that) I would know how it works.*

It seems that the reversed order of *p* and *q* does not allow the expression of hypothetical meaning. This problem will be further considered in the sections to follow.

Since, in consequential conditional sentences, *p* is claimed to be the cause of *q*, then if *p* does not occur, *q* should not occur, either (under the assumption that *p* is the only possible cause of *q*). This is exactly the case, which is shown by the following, fully acceptable interpretations of (1)–(5):

- 1b. *If he doesn't love you, he won't come*  
 2b. *If you don't tell him the truth, he won't get angry*  
 3b. *If John wasn't ill yesterday, he passed the exam*  
     *If John had been ill yesterday, he wouldn't have passed the exam*<sup>3</sup>  
 4b. *If you don't step on the brake, the car doesn't slow down*  
 5b. *?If I know how it works, I will tell you what to do*  
     *If I didn't know how it worked, I wouldn't tell you what to do.*

Similarly, if the result does not obtain, then it means that the cause has not occurred, either.

- 1c. *If he doesn't come, then (it means that) he doesn't love you*  
 2c. *If he doesn't get angry, then (it means that) I haven't told him the truth*  
 3c. *If John passed the exam, then (it means that) he wasn't ill*  
 4c. *If the car doesn't slow down, then (it means that) you haven't stepped on the brake*  
 5c. *If I don't tell you what to do, then (it means that) I don't know how it works.*

Finally, if *p* is the cause of *q*, then it is also a necessary and/or sufficient condition for the truth of *q*. Consequently, the placement of *only* before or

<sup>3</sup> Examples (3b) and (5b) contain two different versions, both of which seem to be justified, though for different reasons.

after *if* should be possible, the resulting sentences being acceptable interpretations of (1)–(5). This prediction is confirmed by the following:

- 1d. *Only if he loves you, he will come*  
     *If only he loves you, he will come*  
 2d. *Only if I tell him the truth, he will get angry*  
     *If only I tell him the truth, he will get angry*  
 3d. *Only if John hadn't been ill yesterday, he would have passed the exam*  
     *If only John hadn't been ill yesterday, he would have passed the exam*  
 4d. *Only if you step on the brake, the car slows down*  
     *If only you step on the brake, the car slows down*  
 5d. *Only if I knew how it worked, I would tell you what to do*  
     *If only I knew how it worked, I would tell you what to do.*

#### 1.2.2. Non-consequential cases

6. *If she called yesterday, I was out*  
 7. *If he told you that last night, he was lying*  
 8. *If the earth revolves around the sun, then Copernicus was right*  
 9. *If my son is a genius, I've underestimated him*  
 10. *If I ever read this book, I've forgotten it altogether.*

In non-consequential conditionals *p* is not the cause of *q*<sup>4</sup>, no causal relation holds between the two clauses at all. That is why the reversibility of clauses, possible in type A, is impossible here and does not lead to any explication of the relation holding between *p* and *q*:

- 6a. *\*If I was out yesterday, then she called*  
 7a. *\*If he was lying, then he told you that last night*  
 8a. *? If Copernicus was right, then the earth revolves around the sun*  
 9a. *\*If I've underestimated my son, then he is a genius*  
 10a. *\*If I've forgotten this book altogether, then I ever read it.*

Examples (6a), (7a), (9a), and (10a) are in no way related to (6), (7), (9), and (10) and — if analysed from the point of view of providing any insight into the meaning of (6), (7), (9), and (10) — senseless. The situation with (8a) is slightly different, which follows from the second property of non-consequential conditionals, i.e. from the claim that *q* must be accepted by the speaker as true if *p* is to be accepted as true. To accept that the earth revolves around the sun means to accept that Copernicus was right. But to accept that Copernicus was right means to accept that the earth revolves. So in order to accept *p* as true the speaker must accept *q* as true, but to accept *q* as true, he must accept *p*

<sup>4</sup> It does not mean, however, that it cannot be the reason for *q*.

as true for pragmatic reasons independent of the meaning of the conditional sentence;  $p$  and  $q$  are thus in some sense equivalent and condition each other.

If we compare the remaining sentences with analogous examples of consequential cases, we might observe that reversing the order of  $p$  and  $q$  is here impossible, they are, in a sense, already reversed — i.e. the relation holds in the direction opposite to what is natural in consequential sentences.

The claim that in non-consequential conditionals no causal relation holds between  $p$  and  $q$  is confirmed by the following: if  $p$  were the cause of  $q$  then negating  $p$  should automatically result in the negation of  $q$ . This, however, is not the case, as the sentences below show.

- 6b. \*If she didn't call yesterday, then I wasn't out  
 7b. \*If he didn't tell you that last night, then he wasn't lying  
 8b. ? If the earth doesn't revolve around the sun, then Copernicus wasn't right.  
 9b. \*If my son isn't a genius, then I haven't underestimated him  
 10b. \*If I never read this book, then I haven't forgotten it.

A certain difference in the interpretation of (8b) follows from the reasons already mentioned in connection with the (a) examples — in (6), (7), (9), and (10) the truth of  $p$  is not influencing the truth of  $q$ , even in the pragmatic way already discussed.

The third situation to be examined occurs if  $q$  is not true. If, as claimed,  $q$  must be true for the speaker to accept  $p$  as true, then from the negation of  $q$  the negation of  $p$  should follow. This is what happens in the examples below (each sentence is here accompanied by a paraphrase which will not allow the reader to be misled by potential ambiguities of both conditionals and negations):

- 6c. If I wasn't out, she didn't call yesterday (If it is not the case that I was out, then it can't be true that she called)  
 7c. If he wasn't lying, he didn't tell you that last night (If it is not the case that he was lying, then it can't be true that he told you that)  
 8c. If Copernicus wasn't right, the earth doesn't revolve around the sun (If it is not the case that Copernicus was right, then it can't be true that the earth revolves around the sun)  
 9c. If I haven't underestimated my son, he is not a genius (If it is not the case that I have underestimated my son, then it can't be true that he is a genius)  
 10c. If I haven't forgotten this book, I never read it (If it is not the case that I've forgotten this book, then it can't be true that I read it).

The same situation is possible in the case of consequential conditionals, but the explanation there is quite different. In the case of consequential sentences the negation of the result allows us to deduce that the cause must have not occurred (cf. examples (1c) — (5c)). In the case of non-consequential sentences the negation of the antecedent follows from the negation of the speaker-relative condition for the truth of the antecedent itself.

Finally, since  $p$  is not the cause of  $q$  in non-consequential conditionals it is not the necessary condition for the occurrence of  $q$ . Therefore the placement of *only* before *if* should not be possible. This is confirmed by:

- 6d. \*Only if she called yesterday, I was out  
 7d. \*Only if he told you that last night, he was lying  
 8d. ? Only if the earth revolves around the sun, Copernicus was right  
 9d. ? Only if my son is a genius, I've underestimated him  
 10d. \*Only if I ever read this book, I've forgotten it.

The interpretations which can be postulated here either change the original meaning of the whole sentence (e.g. (9d)) or result from the mutual dependence of  $p$  and  $q$  (8d).

### 1.3. Three types of meaning

Descriptions of modern English grammar often make use of the distinction into three types of meaning: factual, theoretical and hypothetical (after Leech 1971). The distinction seems to be especially well suited to the analysis of conditionals, although it is usually claimed that only theoretical and hypothetical meanings can be expressed by *if*-clauses. It is thus maintained that the condition is either theoretically possible to be fulfilled (in other words "open"), or assumed to be non-fulfillable (i.e. "unreal"). The distinction bases predominantly on the verb forms in *if*-clauses and in main clauses: theoretical (or open) conditionals are expressed by regular, indicative forms, while hypothetical (or unreal) sentences require specific changes in the verb.

A more thorough analysis of language material suggests, however, that this is an oversimplified view. In the sections to follow we shall attempt to revise some of these generally accepted opinions.

#### 1.3.1. Factual meaning

A linguistic form (clause or sentence) having factual meaning expresses the speaker's conviction that the situation described is a fact, i.e. it carries a positive truth-commitment. It thus seemed natural to assume that factual meanings cannot appear in conditionals, in which the occurrence of a certain situation depends on the occurrence of another, which may or may not actually

become a truth-committed reality. On purely logical or semantic grounds this view seems indisputable.

The main problem here seems to lie in the fact that it has so far been assumed that statements concerning factuality can sensibly be made only with regard to the main clauses, i.e. consequents. It must be noted, however, that in some contexts factuality can be found in antecedents, i.e. a certain result may depend on something being a fact, as well as factuality of one statement may condition the factuality of another. Such relationships can, of course, be traced only in these sentences which appear in a pragmatically unambiguous context which allows us to judge whether a certain proposition is treated as factual or not.

Let us discuss non-consequential cases first. Consider the following mini-conversations:

11. A. *Do you know that Spencer sold his car for £300!?*  
B. *The red Porche? If he sold such a car for £300, he is an idiot.*
12. A. *John told me you are getting married.*  
B. *Nonsense! If he told you that, he was lying.*

In both of these conversations the propositions contained in *if*-clauses uttered by B are first given factual meaning in the statements made by A. The content of the main clause comes as a consequence of the antecedent's being factual.

Consequential conditionals can be found in very similar contexts:

13. A. *Let's ask John to translate this letter.*  
B. *But he doesn't know French!*  
A. *Oh, really? Well, if he doesn't know French, it's no use asking him to translate it.*
14. A. *I wonder if they have already arrived home.*  
B. *I think so. They left at nine.*  
A. *Yes, if they left at nine, they have arrived home by now.*

Factual conditionals usually have present or past time reference, as future can never become truth-committed, and thus factual.

### 1.3.2. Theoretical meaning

The main feature of sentences expressing theoretical meaning is that they carry no truth-commitment on the part of the speaker. In conditional sentences this means that the speaker either treats the fulfilment of the condition as truly open or does not possess the necessary knowledge.

Conditional sentences with theoretical meaning fall into two groups: those which refer to the present or the past and those which refer to the future.

In the former group we will often find the same sentences which were quoted as examples of factual meaning, but they will, of course, appear in different contexts. Consider the following:

15. A. *Spencer told me he was going to sell his car to a friend of his for £300.*  
B. *The red Porche? If he sold it for £300, he is an idiot.*
16. A. *I thought about asking John to translate this letter.*  
B. *But what if he doesn't know French well enough!*  
A. *If he doesn't know French well enough, we'll ask someone else.*

In the consequential and non-consequential *if*-clauses given above the speaker expresses his lack of knowledge as to the actual state of affairs. Presumably, then, such sentences can be either factual or theoretical, and the selected interpretation depends exclusively on the context and/or speaker's knowledge.

Other theoretical conditionals refer to the future. We will here find consequential sentences such as: *If I ever see him, I'll tell him the truth; If you get an A in the exam, you'll get an A in the course, etc.*

### 1.3.3. Hypothetical meaning

By hypothetical meaning G. Leech (1971:111) understands the expression of the speaker's assumption that the happening described will not, does not, or did not take place. As he puts it, this negative truth-commitment distinguishes hypothetical meanings from factual and theoretical ones.

This view seems to disregard some important aspects of hypothetical meaning. First of all, negative truth commitment can actually be traced only in sentences referring to the past and to the present:

17. *If you had answered all the questions, you would have got an A.* (but you did not answer all of them)
18. *If I had five children, I would go crazy.* (but I don't have so many children).

It is difficult, however, to speak about the negative truth commitment if the hypothesis refers to the future. While uttering such counter-factual sentences as (17) and (18) the speaker is making use of his knowledge of facts — this, however, is not possible when he is talking about future events.

Hypothetical sentences referring to the future are thus similar to analogous theoretical sentences in that they are not truth-committed:

19. *If she comes tomorrow, I'll propose to her*
20. *If she came tomorrow, I'd propose to her.*

The meaning differences which definitely exist and which are also reflected in the verb forms arise due to the very nature of making a hypothesis. The

speaker is not expressing his lack of knowledge about a certain situation, but he is creating a new situation to be analysed.

It seems, then, that hypothetical meaning is not basically negatively truth-committed and has to be characterized differently. The problem evidently requires separate treatment and no solution will be offered in the present paper. In the simplest way, however, one can say that hypothesizing means that the speaker wants to consider the results of some abstract situation and the possible occurrence or non-occurrence of the situation described is irrelevant or of secondary importance.

Hypothetical conditional sentences have basically two forms. The first type refers unambiguously to the past — the speaker is here making use of his knowledge of past events. Thus sentences such as:

21. *If she had come then, I would have proposed to her*  
 22. *If I had known the answer then, I would have helped you*

carry a negative truth commitment to the effect that the situation opposite to the one described held in the past.

Other hypothetical sentences (containing Past Indicative and *would/should* + Infinitive) are able to refer to the present and to the future. It is often claimed that the ambiguity can be cleared up if appropriate adverbials are used:

23. *If it snowed, children would be happy* (Future or Present)  
 24. *If it snowed tomorrow, children would be happy* (Future)  
 25. *If it snowed now, children would be happy* (Present).

It is worth noting, however, that the ambiguity arises only in some cases and that the time reference often depends on the type and form of the verb. Verbs expressing states and used in the hypothetical meaning without an adverbial tend to refer to the present:

26. *If I knew the answer, I would help you* (but I don't know it)

while verbs expressing events — to the future:

27. *If she came, I would propose to her* (but I don't think she will come).

Sentences such as

28. *If she came now, I would propose to her*

are only apparent counter-examples (if they are acceptable at all) because *now* means "in the immediate future" and not "in this very moment"<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> It must also be noted that some non-past hypotheses reach the level of abstraction at which temporal reference is practically irrelevant. When someone indulging in day-dreaming says

*If I won a lot of money, I would buy you a Rolls Royce*

he does not really mean any specific time period. Of course, the reference is neither past nor present, but this does not automatically mean that it is future.

Hypothetical meanings are most commonly expressed in consequential conditionals:

29. *If he caught the train, he would come on time*  
 30. *If he had caught the train, he would have come on time.*

The nature of the relationship between the antecedent and the consequent does not change: it continues to be a cause-effect relation.

Non-consequential sentences, on the other hand, are used to express hypothetical meanings only exceptionally and the change of forms results in the change of interpretation. Sentences such as:

31. *If Susie  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{had been} \\ \text{were} \end{array} \right\}$  listening at the door, she would  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{be} \\ \text{have been} \end{array} \right\}$  breathing quietly*  
 32. *If my son  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{had been} \\ \text{were} \end{array} \right\}$  a genius, I would  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{have underestimated} \\ \text{underestimate} \end{array} \right\}$  him*  
 33. *If I  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{had read} \\ \text{read} \end{array} \right\}$  this book, I would  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{have forgotten} \\ \text{forget} \end{array} \right\}$  it*

lose their non-consequential character and require a cause-effect interpretation, or else are hardly interpretable at all. It seems that hypothetical meanings eliminate the speaker-relative perspective the non-consequential conditionals must express — which enforces a change of meaning. Besides, it can also be claimed that hypothesizing is possible if the antecedent and the consequent (or the cause and the result) are put in their most natural order — "if *p*, then *q*". As we could see in 1.2.1., a paraphrase such as "if *q*, then it means that *p*" cannot obtain a hypothetical meaning. Interestingly enough, non-consequential sentences have a similarly 'reversed' sense (*q* is the truthfulness condition of *p*, not vice versa). It is also possible to paraphrase them with the use of "it means that" phrase:

34. *If Susie is listening at the door, then it means that she is breathing quietly.*

The above statements are, of course, highly inconclusive and the problem requires further investigation.

The distinction discussed above is also present in Polish. Among other things, the differences among three types of meaning are reflected in the distribution of subordinate conjunctions introducing *if*-clauses in Polish.

Only factual meaning permits the use of *skoro* instead of *jeśli*:

35. *Jeśli podstuchuje pod drzwiami, to cicho oddycha*  
*Skoro podstuchuje pod drzwiami, to cicho oddycha*  
 (If she is listening at the door, she is breathing quietly)  
 36. *Jeśli wyjechali o dziewiątej, to przyjadą przed północą*  
*Skoro wyjechali o dziewiątej, to przyjadą przed północą*  
 (If they left at nine, they will arrive by midnight)

*Skoro* is forbidden in univocally theoretical and in hypothetical meaning:

37. \**Skoro jutro będzie padało, to odwołają mecz*  
(If it rains tomorrow, they'll cancel the match)  
38. \**Skoro znalazłbym odpowiedź, pomogłabym ci*  
(If I knew the answer, I would help you).

Univocal theoretical meaning involves the use of *jeśli*:

39. *Jeśli jutro będzie padało, to odwołają mecz*

and excludes the possibility of the use of *skoro* (see example 37) or *gdyby*.

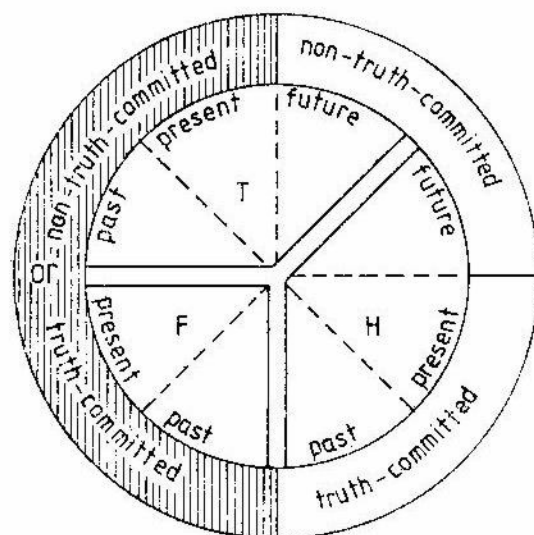
Only hypothetical meanings allow *gdyby* as a subordinate conjunction introducing *if*-clauses.

40. *Gdybym znała odpowiedź, pomogłabym ci*  
(If I knew the answer I would help you).

An attempt to use *gdyby* with factual or theoretical meaning results in ungrammatical strings:

41. \**Gdyby posłuchuje pod drzwiami, to cicho oddycha*  
42. \**Gdyby jutro będzie padało, to odwołają mecz.*

The relations among the three types of meaning (factual, theoretical and hypothetical) can be presented graphically with the help of the following diagram:



Letters F, T and H, marking the three main fields drawn with double lines, stand for "factual", "theoretical" and "hypothetical", respectively. Interrupted lines divide the circle into fields of time reference — present, past, or future. The outer circle shows the distinction into truth-committed and non-truth-committed forms of expression. The shaded area means overlap — the sentences belonging here appear to be factual (truth-committed) or theoretical (non-truth-committed), depending on the context in which they are used.

The facts presented in the diagram can be summed up as follows:

1. Factual conditionals refer to present or past events. They are truth committed. Some factual sentences may also receive a theoretical (non-truth-committed) interpretation. Past factual conditionals have to neighbour past hypothetical conditionals, which are also truth committed and imply factuality in a negative way.

2. Theoretical conditionals are non-truth-committed; they refer to the present or the past (and thus may become factual on pragmatic grounds), or to the future.

3. Hypothetical conditionals are negatively truth-committed if they refer to the present or the past. They are non-truth-committed when they refer to the future and thus bear a strong resemblance to future theoretical sentences.

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