

HOW NOT TO GET ALL MIXED UP ABOUT “MIXED” CONDITIONALS

1. Introductory remarks

Traditional textbooks describing English grammar (e.g. Onions 1904; Eckersley and Eckersley 1960; Thomson and Martinet 1982; Graver 1979; Murphy 1994) concentrate generally on three main types of conditional sentences based on verb forms used in order to mark time reference and to stress the reality versus the unreality relation in conditionals. They are classified as open (a condition capable of being fulfilled; future time reference) [1], hypothetical (contrary to the assumption or expectation; present or future time reference) [2] and unreal (contrary to the fact; past time reference) [3]:

- [1] If it rains, I will stay at home.
- [2] If it rained, I would stay at home.
- [3] If it had rained, I would have stayed at home.

Most frequently one more class, usually called “the zero conditional”, is added with an explanation that it is used “to talk about situations which are always true” (Norris 2001: 214), such as everyday situations [4], scientific facts [5] or instructions [6]:

- [4] My eyes hurt if I spend too long on the computer.
 - [5] If you mix blue and yellow, you get green.
 - [6] If you don't know the answer, make an intelligent guess.
- (examples 4–6 after Norris op. cit.)

The examples employ the simple present tense in both clauses of the conditional sentence and they have unspecified time reference. Rarely do the course-books provide other examples of generic constructions that do not follow the rule quoted above. But the reality is not that simple.

Firstly, the “situation” may not always be true. On the contrary, it may always be false:

[7] If she is beautiful, I am Miss Universe.

Secondly, the time reference does not have to be present, it may be past (which is occasionally mentioned in some books – cf. Vince 1994: 41):

[8] If he spent his holidays with his parents, he was always bored.

Surprisingly, no book offers a simple explanation of how to use these constructions, which should emphasise the fact that in both clauses the same tense is applied and that the simple present tense refers to a repeated action in a moment unspecified in time (past, present and future reference) and that the past tense refers to the past. Yet, it should be noted that the future reference for a repeated action does not result in generic constructions with future tenses applied in both clauses. (It is usually reflected by the application of the subordinator *whenever* and present + future tenses combination, e.g. *Whenever you read this, you'll think of me*).

The problem becomes complicated when it comes to the so-called “mixed conditionals”. At FC level authors try to make the matter as simple as possible, which sometimes leads to such surprising statements as: “Mixed conditionals are a combination of a second and a third conditional. They can express an imaginary past event and a possible or probable present result” (Norris op. cit.) or “It is possible to mix conditionals Type 2 and 3, particularly when a past event had an effect in the present” (Bell and Gower 2003: 202). Advanced level coursebooks offer more sophisticated explanations, such as: “the conditional types (...) can be combined in several ways” (O’Connell 1999: 138). She adds that the most common are the combinations of unreal conditions in the past with unreal present or future results and of an unreal condition in the present with an unreal past result; no other possibilities are mentioned. A more detailed analysis of the matter can be found in a proficiency level coursebook written by Newbrook and Wilson (Newbrook, Wilson 2000: 98). They distinguish mixed types of both hypothetical and open conditionals and provide several examples; however, they classify generic structures as mixed conditionals. Another good description of mixed conditionals may be found in Pilch (1999), who also gives Polish versions of such sentences. None of the books, however, offers a full and comprehensive analysis of all types of mixed conditionals, including mixing hypothetical with non-hypothetical elements.

I feel there is a need of a more extensive presentation of mixed conditional sentences and an attempt at their classification may be a small step forward. I believe this may help students (especially advanced ones) to better understand the possibilities of mixing conditionals as well as teachers to find some useful examples to refer to.

2. Varieties of mixed conditionals

Generally speaking, mixed conditionals are those in which the time of the condition described in the conditional clause is not the same as the time of the result presented in the main clause. Practically, any combination is acceptable if it produces a sensible result. Let us try to systematise the possibilities.

2.1. Mixed conditionals: open

A typical open conditional sentence refers to the future (i.e. both the condition and the result have the future time reference) and is neutral with respect to the fulfilment of the condition (which means that the speaker/writer assumes that the condition is possible to be fulfilled). The condition is expressed in the present tense, whereas the result in the future tense (cf. [1]). There are many examples, however, that do not follow this rule. Firstly, the condition may not refer to the future and is not expressed in the present tense (e.g. [9]–[24]). Secondly, the result may not refer to the future and is not expressed in the future tense (e.g. [9]–[12], [14]–[16], [19]–[22], [24], [25]). Thirdly, the speaker's/writer's attitude is not necessarily neutral (cf. [25] with its possible classic counterpart: *If he doesn't arrive before nine, we will have the meal without him*). Here are some examples of atypical open conditional sentences:

- a) condition: past reference (simple past) + result: present reference (simple present/present continuous/present modal)

[9] If she left at six, she is probably at home already. (Pilch 1999: 50)

[10] If he lied then, he is lying now.

[11] If he did it then, he can do it now.

- b) condition: past reference (past continuous) + result: present reference (simple future)

[12] If she was sleeping all day, she will feel better now.
(She was sleeping all day, so she feels better now.)

- c) condition: past reference (simple past) + result: future reference (simple future)

[13] If he cheated then, he'll cheat in the future.

- d) condition: past reference (simple past) + result: present/future reference (present/past modal)

[14] If you lost your wallet yesterday, I may/might/could lend you some money.

- e) condition: past/present reference (perfective aspect: present perfect/present perfect continuous) + result: unspecified time (simple present, *must* + infinitive)

[15] If she's already been waiting ten years for him to propose, she is/must be really naive.

- f) condition: past/present reference (perfective aspect: present perfect/present perfect continuous) + result: past/present reference (perfective aspect: present perfect/present perfect continuous)

[16] If she's already been learning the violin for five years, she's been learning in vain.

- g) condition: past/present reference (perfective aspect: present perfect/present perfect continuous) + result: future reference (simple future)

[17] If you've washed your hands, I'll bring you your sandwich.

[18] If he's really been waiting for you for more than two hours, he'll be mad with you.

- h) condition: past/present reference (perfective aspect: present perfect/present perfect continuous) + result: present/future reference (present modal + infinitive)

[19] If you've run out of wine, I can bring some.

[20] If you have been doing it for two hours already, I can help you.

- i) condition: present reference (present simple) + result: past reference (present modal + past infinitive)

[21] If there are no strawberry yoghurts in the fridge, Susie must have eaten them all.

- j) condition: present reference (present simple) + result: up to the moment of speaking (present perfect):

[22] It consisted in a particular birdlike turn, a sort of liquid warble, produced by touching the tongue to the roof of thy mouth at short intervals in the midst of the music – the reader probably remembers

how to do it, if he has ever been a boy.

(Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*)

- k) condition: present reference (present continuous) + result: future reference (simple future/future continuous)

[23] If she is watching her favourite talk show, she won't be answering /answer phone calls for some time.

- l) condition: present reference (present simple) + result: future reference (simple present)

[24] The Commission reserves the right to suspend or cancel project financing if corrupt practices of any kind are discovered at any stage of the award process. (PHARE Project. Instruction to Tenderers)

- m) condition: future reference (simple future) + result: present reference (simple present)

[25] If he won't arrive before nine, there is no point in ordering for him. (Dancygier 1998: 34)

2.2. Mixed conditionals: hypothetical

Hypothetical conditional sentences express the speaker's/writer's disbelief in the possibility of the condition fulfilment, which means that the consequences of the actions described in the main clause are unlikely or impossible to happen. The hypothetical forms are commonly classified as „weak” and „strong”. The „weak” ones refer either to the present or to the future (the condition expressed in the past tense or subjunctive and the result by means of a past modal followed by an infinitive or by *be+verb+ing*). They show negative expectations of the speaker/writer. The „strong” ones have past time reference and employ the past perfect tense (simple or continuous) to describe the condition and a past modal followed by perfect infinitive to describe the result. They are used for imaginary situations contrary to facts in the past.

The examples below illustrate the possibilities of mixing hypothetical conditionals:

- a) condition: past reference (past perfect) + result: present reference (*would* + infinitive/ *be* + verb + *ing*)

[26] If I had bought shares in the company I would be rich now.

[27] If he hadn't had a car accident last week, he would be performing in the concert now.

- b) condition: past reference (past perfect) + result: future reference (*would* + infinitive/ *be* + verb + ing)

[28] If she hadn't failed her exam yesterday, she would be going to France with us next month.

[29] If he hadn't broken his leg last week, he would be skiing in the Alps during the winter holidays in February.

- c) condition: present reference (simple past/subjunctive) + result: past reference (*would* + past infinitive)

[30] If I were rich I would have bought that diamond necklace we saw yesterday.

- d) condition: present reference (simple past/subjunctive) + result: future reference (*would* + infinitive/ *be* + verb + ing)

[31] If I had a car, I'd drive around Europe next summer.

[32] If she weren't helpful, she wouldn't be helping you with your maths tonight.

- e) condition: future reference (past continuous) + result: past reference (*would* + past infinitive)

[33] If my parents weren't coming over this weekend, I would have gone on a trip to Florida.

- f) condition: future reference (simple past/past continuous) + result: present reference (*would* + infinitive)

[34] If I were going to her birthday party tonight, I'd be very excited.

[35] If she didn't come with us tomorrow, everybody would be disappointed. (But everybody believes she'll come, so everybody's happy).

It is worth noticing that examples [31] and [35] would not be recognised by the majority of coursebooks as mixed conditionals since they follow the "standard" verb pattern of conditional type 2. What makes them mixed is their time reference only.

2.3. Mixed conditionals: open with hypothetical

Conditionals can be mixed between open and hypothetical, although some linguists question this fact. Dancygier (1985: 66) claims that "it is generally true for

English that the so-called mixed conditionals are never mixed between hypothetical and non-hypothetical clauses”. There are some examples, however, that challenge that claim (though we don’t actually know what Dancygier means by “generally”). It seems possible that in certain contexts (especially in existential or philosophical speculations) it is acceptable for English to mix a non-hypothetical condition with a hypothetical result and vice versa if we don’t question the possibility of the fulfilment of the non-hypothetical condition or the possibility of the occurrence of the non-hypothetical result. This means that in such structures what is certain is expressed in open clauses and what is uncertain in hypothetical ones.

There are many possible variations:

- a) condition: hypothetical – present/future time reference (simple past) + result: open – unspecified/present time reference (simple present)

[36] If the Sun refused to shine
 I don’t mind, no baby, I don’t mind
 If the mountains fell in the sea
 It ain’t me, you know you’ve got to be free

I got my own world to live through
 And I ain’t gonna copy you

Now if six turned out to be nine
 I don’t mind, no baby, I don’t mind,
 If all the hippies cut off their hair,
 I don’t care, no baby, I don’t care

Because I, I’ve got my own world to live through
 And I ain’t gonna copy you. (...)

(lyrics of Jimi Hendrix’s song *If Six Was Nine*)

In this case, however, the choice of the verb form may be a case of poetic licence to fit the meter of the verse rather than a conscious change of grammar.

- b) condition: hypothetical – present time reference (simple past) + result: open – future time reference (simple future)

[37] If I lived with an illusion as to what is between us, I will have no firm resting place on which to build myself.

(Nancy Friday, *My Mother, My Self*)

c) condition: hypothetical – past time reference (simple past) + result: open – past time reference (modal + past infinitive)

[38] You ought to have been more careful if you didn't mean to get him to make you his wife. (Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*)
(You weren't careful enough, and it's a pity since I assume you really didn't mean to get him to make you his wife.)

d) condition: open – unspecified time reference (simple present) + result: hypothetical – present/future time reference (*would*/past modal + infinitive)

[39] If such a collapse can take place, a gas giant planet could form.
(Morris Podolak¹)

[40] ... if we conceive of an intelligence which at a given instant comprehends all the relations of the entities of the universe, it could state the respective positions, motions, and general affects of all these entities at any time in the past or future.

(Pierre Simon Laplace²)

Such structures are not very frequent and mostly found in American English, particularly in sentences dealing with existential or philosophical speculations.

e) condition: open – unspecified time reference (simple present) + result: hypothetical – past time reference (past modal + perfect infinitive)

[41] If the disease is as contagious as you say, we should all have been dead by now. (cf. Pilch, 1999: 94)

[42] If he ain't dead, he would have stood up by now.
(Margaret Mitchell, *Gone with the Wind*)

f) condition: open – present/past time reference (perfective aspect – present perfect continuous) + result: hypothetical – past time reference (past modal + perfect infinitive):

[43] If you've been getting those headaches, you should have tried taking an aspirin.

¹ This sentence is taken from a lecture entitled "The Origin of the Solar System" delivered by Prof. Morris Podolak from Tel-Aviv University in November 2002 in the Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences in Kraków and published later in *Proceedings of the Commission for Astrophysics*.

² Pierre Simon Laplace, *Oeuvres complete de Laplace*, vol. 8: 144, Imprimerie Royale, Paris 1843, English translation: Princeton University Press 1997.

g) condition: open – past time reference (simple past) + result: hypothetical (past modal + perfect infinitive):

- [44] If such a collapse did take place, a gas giant planet would/might /could have formed.
 (It's quite possible that such a collapse took place, and if it did this would/might/could have been the result; a variation of [39])

It is quite likely that there are also some other possible variants; however I have not encountered such examples in my data.

3. Conclusions

Conditional sentences represent a great variety of structures and interpretations. Usually they pose some problems to learners, even to those who are quite advanced. The diversity of mixed conditionals proves that it is not enough to teach the rules how to create typical conditional structures; it is necessary to make the learner understand the meaning of the verb form used. This means to make him/her aware of the time reference in a given clause and of the possibility of the condition fulfilment. Mixed conditional sentences provide an excellent opportunity not only for teaching language awareness but logical thinking as well. They are worth practising since they quite commonly appear both in literary texts and in everyday speech. Moreover, they are very useful: like all conditional sentences they can describe everything: reality and unreality, certainty, probability and impossibility.

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