Should Historical Explanation Follow Syntactic Form or Semantic Function?

Andrew S. Allen
Appalachian State University

Can we study a word in isolation or in its syntactic context without also studying its semantic function in a sentence? Many historical linguists have tried to do this, but with only partial success. Neogrammarians reconstructed words by using methods of comparative linguistics on common nouns and verbs. Syntacticians working with the notions of subject, object, and verb have studied the development of word order with considerable success. But some words, such as *si* 'if,' must be studied in connection with their semantic functions, or varying uses of meanings, to understand their historical development in Latin and Romance.

Much stimulating work on conditions has been collected in a book of articles entitled *On Conditionals* by Traugott et al. The most relevant of these articles is "The Historical Development of SI-Clauses in Romance" by Martin Harris (265-284), who argues that *if*-conditions in Latin and Romance develop in a way that preserves semantic functions even when forms change. In the same collection, "Conditionals: A Typology" by Bernard Comrie (77-99) gives a broad view of conditionals in a number of languages. Finally, in "The Use of Conditionals in Inducements and Deterrents," Samuel Fillenbaum (179-195) shows how *if*-conditions can serve the purpose of offering or threatening, which are semantic functions quite different from a hypothetical condition.

While presenting traditional analyses, Harris (268) criticizes textbook tabulations of Latin potential and unreal conditions like the following:

1. a. Potential nonpast
        Si veniat, me videat. (present subjunctive)
        'If he were to come to me, he would see me.'
    b. Potential past
        Si veniret, me videret. (imperfect subjunctive)
        'If he were to have come, he would have seen me.'
2. a. Unreal nonpast
        Si veniret, me videret. (imperfect subjunctive)
        'If he came, he would see me.'
    b. Unreal past

Si venisset, me vidisset. (pluperfect subjunctive)
'If he had come, he would have seen me.'

As Harris (268) insists, "the situation was much more fluid than this." I tested this claim by examining the first 20 conditional sentences from the speech *Pro Sestio* by Cicero (Gardner), and I found that 9 of the 20 did not fit the schema given. Sometimes the clauses would show mixtures of tenses and moods. For example, the *si*-condition may be in the future perfect or in the perfect subjunctive, while the conclusion can be a jussive subjunctive like *miretur* 'let him wonder' or an indicative of a performative verb like *peto a vobis* 'I beg of you.' It should not surprise us that a skilled orator like Cicero chooses grammatical patterns, just as he selects words, to suit his intention rather than to fit a predetermined format. Consequently, the grammar of Ciceronian conditional sentences is much more flexible than traditional grammar would suggest. It must be noted that traditional grammatical explanations have some validity, since they describe over half the data, but there are more problems that need to be explained.

In examining the development of conditions, difficulties arise from the association of *si* with indefinite pronouns and modal verbs. For example, Cicero says (Gardner 36-37):

Si quis antea, iudices, mirabatur... is hoc tempore miretur...
'If before this, gentlemen of the jury, anyone wondered... at the present time he should rather wonder...'

The pronoun *quis* 'anyone' is the form of *alquis* 'anyone' used after *si* 'if,' and the conclusion *miretur* is in the subjunctive to express jussive or imperative modality. In the following sentences, the gerundive takes a modal meaning (Gardner 76-77):

Eidem consules, si appellandi sunt consules... voce ac sententia sua comprobaverunt.
'And yet those same very consuls—if they are to be called consuls... gave their approval by both word and vote.'

The future passive participial phrase *si appellandi sunt* 'if they are to be called' can also be translated 'if they must be called' or 'if they should be called.' It appears that the meaning of uncertainty in *si* 'if' is linked to the idea of uncertainty in indefinite pronouns and in many verb modalities.

Such interaction continues in Modern French. As Byrne (222) shows,

the conditional *si* 'if' interacts with the indefinite to increase the degree of indefiniteness:

quelqu'un vient 'someone is coming'
si quelqu'un vient 'if anyone comes...'
quelque chose arrive 'something is happening'
si quelque chose arrive 'if anything happens'

In the above examples, the pronouns after *si* 'if' are more indefinite than the same pronouns which are not in a condition. While standard contemporary French does not allow *if*-conditions with the conditional form of the verb, Béchade (304) notes that *si* could appear with the conditional form to express a condition in the seventeenth century:

Je meure si je saurais vous dire... (Malherbe)
'I'd die if I could tell you...'

In such constructions, *si* often took on the meaning 'if it is true that...,' according to Béchade. Thus, the customary context of *si* caused this conjunction to adopt a special meaning with the conditional mood.

Another problem in the history of conditions is that syntactic form may clash with semantic meaning. For example, the imperfect tense indicates the present time in the following Spanish and French sentences:

Spanish: Si tuviera muchos libros, sería feliz.
French: Si j'avais beaucoup de livres, je serais heureux.
English: If I had many books, I would be happy.

In these synonymous examples, Spanish *tuviera* is in the imperfect subjunctive, French *avais* is in the imperfect indicative, and English *had* is in the past tense, but all of these forms refer to the present time in the contrary-to-fact condition. Because of the verbs' contrary-to-fact function, a marked or unexpected form is used to express the present time. Both Romance languages take the conditional form in the conclusion. But the Spanish syntax is closer to Latin, which takes the imperfect subjunctive in both clauses in contrary-to-fact conditions (Wheelock 1963: 157):

Si id faceret, prudens esset.
'If he were doing it, he would be wise.'

Both *faceret* 'were doing' and *esset* 'would be' are in the imperfect subjunctive. However, Harris (273) mentions that the imperfect indicative is

also attested in the conclusion of conditional sentences, so that there is variation on this point in Latin.

Variation in French indicates a continuing instability for nuances of *si*. In French classes, students learn that *si* occurs with the conditional form only in indirect questions where the conjunction may be translated as 'whether.' Although *si* with the conditional in other contexts is considered incorrect, it is attested in non-literary speech and in child language. For instance, an inn-keeper is portrayed as saying (Béchade 304):

> Si je me serais douté. (J. Anouilh)
> 'If I had suspected.'

And a young girl says (Béchade 304):

> Et elle [ma maman] aurait pu se marier dix fois si elle aurait voulu. (F. Mallet-Joris)
> 'And she [my mom] could have gotten married ten times if she had wanted.'

Since these examples show *si*-conditions with the conditional form of the verb, they confirm earlier historical evidence from seventeenth-century French. That is, there are varieties of French that allow *si* with the conditional form to express an hypothesis. This structure is morphologically related to the standard *si* plus the imperfect, because the conditional form consists of the future stem plus imperfect endings:

Future	Imperfect	Conditional
serai 'I will be'	étais 'I was'	serais 'I would be'
aurai 'I will have'	avais 'I had'	aurais 'I could have'

There are also semantic reasons for the spread of the conditional form to the *if*-clause, since the conditional expresses an idea of uncertainty and hypotheticality. In addition, there are syntactic motives for the extension of the conditional form to the protasis or *if*-clause, because this change would make the clauses parallel with conditional forms for both verbs. The fact that semantic factors combine with syntactic and morphological influences strengthens the argument that semantic function must play a role in historical explanation.

In conclusion, it has been shown that traditional grammatical explanations of conditional sentences are incomplete, although useful. Such explanations fail to explain the variety of forms and semantic functions of conditions in a writer like Cicero. For example, *si*-conditions interact in

various ways with indefinite pronouns, tenses, and moods. Such linking of linguistic factors can be seen even in the incipient but unsuccessful changes like the spread of the conditional form to *si*-conditions in some varieties of French. Consequently, valid historical explanation must include discussion of semantic function.

● WORKS CITED

Béchade, Hervé-D. *Syntaxe de français moderne et contemporain.* 2ᵉ édition. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1989.

Byrne, L. S. R., and E. L. Churchill. *A Comprehensive French Grammar.* Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986.

Gardner, R. *Cicero: The Speeches Pro Sestio and In Vatinium.* Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1958.

Harris, Martin B. "The Historical Development of SI-Clauses in Romance." In Elizabeth Closs Traugott et al., *On Conditionals.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986: 265-284.

Traugott, Elizabeth Closs, Alice ter Meulen, Judy Snitzer Reilly, and Charles A. Ferguson, eds. *On Conditionals.* Cambridge University Press, 1986.

Wheelock, Frederic M. *Latin: An Introductory Course Based on Ancient Authors.* 3rd edition. New York: Harper and Row, 1963.