

Topics as Speech Acts – An Analysis of Conditionals

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(1) illustrates two types of conditionals, namely indicative conditionals (IC, 1a) and biscuit conditionals (BC, 1b). Two decisive characteristics of BCs are the following: (1) unlike ICs, the *truth* of the consequent is independent of the truth of the antecedent. (2) the antecedent states under which conditions the consequent is *relevant*. [3] and [9] propose to analyze BCs as *conditional assertions* and existential quantification over *potential literal acts*, respectively. However, these proposals are too weak: after the utterance of a BC, the speech act pertaining to the consequent has been performed, irrespective of the truth of the antecedent (cf. 2). That there is a close connection of conditionals and the information structural notion of topicality has been noted at various places (see e.g. [1] and [6]). [5] discusses two particular instances of these two forms of topicality in German, namely German left dislocation (GLD, 3a) and Hanging Topic left dislocation (HTLD, 3b). GLD is a mark for *aboutness topicality*, establishing the entity the sentence is about, whereas HTLD is an instance of *frame setting*, establishing a frame of interpretation for which the following material is relevant, just like more general frame setting constructions as (4). The content of the matrix clause is implied to be relevant w.r.t. (questions regarding) the pastor. [5] notes that the following syntactic characteristics set apart GLD and HTLD: (1) GLD requires the presence of a resumptive weak *d*-pronoun, and (2) GLD, but not HTLD, allows for binding into the dislocated phrase from within the clause. We find the same characteristics w.r.t. the distinction of ICs and BCs: (1) ICs are similar to correlative constructions, where a free relative clause is adjoined to the matrix clause that contains a coindexed proform (*then* has been argued to be such a proform, cf. [1], [2], [10]). (2) Binding into the *if*-clause is possible for ICs, but not for BCs (5) This shows that ICs with *then* pattern with aboutness topic constructions and BCs with frame setting constructions.

[4] argues that topics must be interpreted in a separate speech act of *topic establishment*, resembling an act of *referring* (cf. [8]). This act crucially must be performed *before* the speech act of the original utterance. For instance, an assertion (3a) would come out as (6). The act of topic establishment REF introduces a discourse referent *d* for the topic marked constituent (here: the pastor) and is conjoined (via speech act conjunction &) to the original speech act. Crucially, the weak *d*-pronoun *den* is interpreted as the topic discourse referent. Hence the case of aboutness topicality corresponds to a simple relation of *predication*, where the comment can be regarded as a predicate of the topic. We propose to extend this mechanism to handle cases of frame setting as well. The matrix clause in (3b) contains the pronoun *him*, interpreted by a free variable *z* (and possibly resolved to *d*) in (7). Hence the case of frame setting does not correspond to a predicative relation of comment and topic, but to a discursive relation of the act of topic establishment and the assertion. This is even clearer with (4). At this point the issue of relevance comes in: on standard Gricean assumptions an assertion is only felicitous if it is relevant to the preceding discourse. In (8) the immediately preceding discourse developed by establishing the pastor as topic. The following assertion is felicitous only if it is relevant for (questions regarding) the pastor. In case of aboutness topicality this relevance condition is trivially fulfilled, because a predication is obviously relevant to its argument.

To account for ICs and BCs we adopt the approach of [7], who analyzes *if*-clauses as definite descriptions over possible worlds, such that the first clause of (1a) is interpreted as the (unique) possible world which is most similar to the actual world among all worlds where *Peter went shopping* is true. The entire conditional is then considered true if this world is among the worlds where the consequent is true. Above we noted that ICs parallel GLD/aboutness topic constructions. An analysis of (1a) analogous to (6) yields (9). The act of topic establishment introduces a discourse referent for the topic marked constituent (here: the selected world mentioned above) and is conjoined to the original speech act. Crucially, *then* is interpreted as a world pronoun, namely the topic discourse referent. Again, this is a case of predication and hence the relevance requirement is trivially fulfilled. In contrast, our analysis of (1b) yields (10). As the matrix clause does not contain any proform relating to the topical component, the content of the comment assertion is evaluated in the actual world of utterance per default. Hence the assertion is about the existence of *pizza* in the fridge in the actual world. Note that this act is performed unconditionally, which is exactly what we observed for BCs. Secondly,

the relevance requirement comes down to the requirement that the assertion of there pizza being in the fridge is relevant to the act of establishing the situations where the listener is hungry as conversation topic. Again, this is exactly the observed relevance implicature for BCs.

Data.

- (1) a. *If Peter went shopping, then there is pizza in the fridge.*
b. *If you are hungry, there is pizza in the fridge.*
- (2) a. *If you don't want to watch the movie, the gardener is the killer.*
b. *If the congregation is ready, I hereby declare you man and wife.*
- (3) a. Den Pfarrer, den kann keiner leiden. b. Der Pfarrer, keiner kann ihn leiden.
the-ACC pastor, RP can nobody like the-NOM pastor, nobody can him like
'The pastor nobody likes.' 'The pastor, nobody likes him.'
- (RP = resumptive pronoun)
- (4) *As for the pastor, the marriage sermon was wonderful.*
- (5) (IC) *If John took good care of it_i, then every_i vase is valuable.*
(BC) **If you want to know something about it_i, every_i vase is valuable.*
- (6) $\text{REF}_d(\iota x[\text{pastor}(x)]) \ \& \ \text{ASSERT}(\neg \exists y[\text{like}(y, d)])$
(Here, topic interpretation has no truth-conditional effect, but when the topical constituent is an indefinite and the comment contains scope operators, (exceptional) wide scope readings are derived (cf. [4])
- (7) $\text{REF}_d(\iota x[\text{pastor}(x)]) \ \& \ \text{ASSERT}(\neg \exists y[\text{like}(y, z)])$
- (8) $\text{REF}_d(\iota x[\text{pastor}(x)]) \ \& \ \text{ASSERT}(\text{wonderful}(\text{marriage_sermon}))$
- (9) $\text{REF}_d(\iota_{w_0} w[\text{shop}(\text{peter}, w)]) \ \& \ \text{ASSERT}(\text{pizza_in_fridge}(d))$
(The subscript at the ι indicates the world of evaluation w.r.t. which 'similarity' is measured. We ignore the issue of plurality necessary for cases of quantification over possible worlds here. Again, topic interpretation has no truth-conditional effect.)
- (10) $\text{REF}_d(\iota_{w_0} w[\text{hungry}(\text{listener}, w)]) \ \& \ \text{ASSERT}(\text{pizza_in_fridge}(w_0))$

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