Journal of Translation 18:2 (2022): 31–51
https://doi.org/10.54395/JOT-6YD3X
ISSN 1558-7282
journaloftranslation.org

Jesus and Illocutionary Forces
Common Functions of Conditionals in the Gospels

K. QUICKERT
Canada Institute of Linguistics
Researcher

STEVE NICOLLE
SIL International / Canada Institute of Linguistics
Senior Linguistics Consultant / Associate Professor Linguistics
steve_nicolle@sil.org

Abstract: In this paper we look at the various functions of conditionals in Jesus' speech as recorded in the gospels. We will show how Jesus often uses conditionals to describe hypothetical situations, frequently as illustrations to support a teaching point. We will also look at the way in which Jesus uses conditionals to argue from a known fact to a novel proposition, often using a familiar concrete situation to illustrate a novel spiritual truth. Differences between the ways that the gospel writers use the Greek conditional constructions are also noted.

1 Introduction

In the gospels, Jesus uses conditional constructions[1] for a variety of communicative purposes. The majority of these conditionals occur in his

[1] For descriptions of Koine Greek conditional constructions, see Wallace (1996:690–697), Porter (1992:254–267), or Nicolle (2022a). Briefly, first class conditionals consist of the conjunction εἰ plus indicative mood in the protasis (conditional clause), and usually present situations as true for the sake of argument. Second class conditionals are formed with εἰ plus an indicative imperfect or aorist verb form, and usually present situations as untrue (contrary to fact) for the sake of argument. Third class conditionals consist of the conjunction ἐάν plus subjunctive mood in the protasis, and usually present situations as hypothetical, likely, etc., depending on the context. However, context also needs to be

© SIL International, 2022

interactions with his disciples, that is, with people who were actively following him or who were at least sympathetic to his message; the rest feature in Jesus' interactions with Jewish religious leaders who were opposed to him.[2] The nature of the discourse between Jesus and his disciples and between Jesus and his opponents naturally influences the functions of these conditionals: the conditional sentences that occur in Jesus' interactions with his disciples tend to be used to teach, command, exhort, and promise, whereas the conditional sentences that occur in Jesus' interactions with his opponents tend to be used to argue, rebuke, and warn.

It has long been recognized that the surface structure of a sentence does not always determine the illocutionary force of the utterance in which it occurs, that is, the function which an utterance plays in the social interaction between interlocutors (Austin 1962; Searle 1969). Consider John 8:46b (below). This sentence consists of two clauses: 1) a conditional clause (PROTASIS) and 2) a main clause (APODOSIS)[3] which in this case is interrogative.

John 8:46b[4]
["If I tell the truth,]*p* [why do you not believe me?"]*q*

Jesus has stated in the preceding verse that his hearers do not believe him because he tells the truth, and so the situation mentioned in *p* is factual rather than hypothetical. The situation in *p* provides the context within which the question in *q* is meant to be answered. The question in *q* is rhetorical, and through it Jesus implies that there is no good reason not to believe him (Fong 2014:213). In fact, he goes on to answer his own rhetorical question in the following verse, stating that they do not believe him because they are not of God. The overall illocutionary force of this sentence, therefore, is not to assert a cause-consequence relationship between events, nor to request information in response to a question. Rather, Jesus uses this sentence to rebuke his audience for their lack of belief. Rebuking is a face-threatening act, and according to Young (1989:37), "[it] is probable that speakers of Koine Greek used conditional

considered as these grammatical forms do not fully determine the meaning of conditional sentences (see for example Jn 14:3, discussed in §6).

[2] Fong (2014:275–276) counts 34 conditionals in John's gospel and 38 conditionals in Matthew's gospel (making a total of 72) where Jesus is interacting primarily with his disciples, compared to 31 conditionals in John's gospel and 7 conditionals in Matthew's gospel (making a total of 38) where Jesus is interacting primarily with "the Jews".

[3] In the discussion and examples throughout this paper, *p* will be used to designate the protasis, and *q* will be used to designate the apodosis.

[4] Unless otherwise stated, Scripture quotations are taken from the *English Standard Version* (2016, Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles).

sentences to tone down the force of certain acts such as rebuke or request."[5] It is this type of higher-level function of conditionals that we shall be addressing in this paper.

There is no definitive or objective list of illocutionary forces. In fact, because utterances are used to perform social functions which may vary between different cultures, a categorization of illocutionary forces that is heuristically appropriate for one cultural group may be unhelpful for another. Young (1989:39–46) classifies conditionals according to eight illocutionary forces: rebuke, lament, argue, request, assert, manipulate, exhort, and mock; our list of illocutionary forces differs slightly. Restricting ourselves to illocutionary forces that occur in Jesus' speech, we have distinguished the following categories (the numbers in parentheses indicate the number of occurrences throughout all four gospels, but note that these numbers are not definitive, as determining the primary illocutionary force of an utterance is a somewhat subjective process):

- **assert** (53): the speaker states a proposition which he believes to be true; unlike arguing, *p* is not assumed to be true just for the sake of argument, but is actually asserted along with *q*, and *p* and *q* do not need to be logically related;
- **argue** (51): the speaker attempts to convince the hearer to accept his opinion through argumentation or debate in which *p* and *q* are logically related;
- **warn** (37): the speaker indicates a danger or negative consequence that would result from a certain action or behavior, thereby discouraging the hearer from engaging in that action or behavior; usually *p* describes the action or behavior and *q* describes the negative consequence;
- **rebuke** (24): the speaker communicates disapproval of the hearer's actions, attitudes, or beliefs; with rebuking the focus is on past or current negative behaviors whereas with warning the focus is on future negative behaviors;
- **command** (20): the speaker has authority over the hearer and can legitimately expect that the hearer will do as requested; the content of *p* varies but *q* always expresses an instruction to be obeyed, often using an imperative verb form;
- **promise** (16): the speaker conveys an assurance to the hearer that a certain action will be done; in some promises, the action described in *q*

[5] While the extant gospels are in Koine Greek, the actual utterance that is represented in Jn 8:46 is likely to have been spoken in Aramaic. The question of whether the conditional sentences recorded in the gospels reflect original Aramaic conditional sentences or some other construction is beyond the scope of this paper.

is dependent on the fulfillment of the situation described in *p*, but in other promises *p* describes a situation that is known to be true and so the action described in *q* is guaranteed;

- **exhort** (12): the speaker urges the hearer to behave in a certain way; the exhortation is usually found in *q*, as in John 14:15 [if you love me]*p* [you will keep my commandments]*q*, but can occur in *p*, in which case *p* typically follows *q* and the exhortation is indirect, as in John 13:35 where Jesus exhorts the disciples to love one another: [by this all people will know you are my disciples]*q* [if you have love for one another]*p*);
- **encourage** (5): the speaker inspires the hearers, or gives them courage in times of fear or doubt;
- **request** (2): for a discussion of Jesus' request in the garden of Gethsemane, "if it be possible, let this cup pass from me" (Matthew 26:39) or "if you are willing, remove this cup from me" (Luke 22:42), see Young (1989:43).

When translating, it is important to determine 1) what illocutionary force(s) are being conveyed, and 2) whether the construction that is used in the source text—such as a rhetorical question or a conditional sentence—can be used to express the same illocutionary force in the receptor language. The focus in this paper will be on the first issue: identifying the illocutionary forces expressed using conditionals in the words of Jesus.[6]

2 General hypothetical, instructive conditionals

The majority of the conditionals used by Jesus in the gospels are hypothetical conditionals which introduce a future or timeless (gnomic) situation that may or may not come about. This includes conditionals that are used in figurative contexts or parables. Jesus typically uses conditionals of this type to instruct his hearers in some way (i.e., to give a command, exhortation, or warning, or to imply an action to be taken). These conditional sentences usually describe situations that are vague in their relation to reality, that is, neither factual nor non-factual, and often neither likely nor unlikely, but merely uncertain (though not all are so vague). However, some of Jesus' hypothetical conditionals do describe a situation that is either likely or unlikely. Translators should note that

[6] We recognize that it would be advantageous to conduct a thorough analysis of one or more examples of each illocutionary force using Speech Act Theory (Searle 1969), Rhetorical Criticism (Kennedy 1980, 1984), or the Relevance Theory notion of higher-level explicature (Sperber and Wilson 1995). However, the scope of the current paper is restricted to identifying the illocutionary forces and common patterns of usage of conditionals in the words of Jesus.

in certain languages, such as many of the Bantu languages, different conditional forms are used depending on whether the situation described in the protasis is probable (see for example Guérois 2017, Mwamzandi 2017, and Ngonyani 2017).

Three conditionals of this type occur in Luke 17:3–4, all of which are third class conditional constructions with ἐάν and subjunctive verbs.

Luke 17:3–4
["If your brother sins,]p_1 [rebuke him,]q_1 and [if he repents,]p_2 [forgive him,]q_2 and [if he sins against you seven times in a day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,']p_3 [you must forgive him."]q_3

The first conditional in v.3 addresses a situation which is likely to occur, since sin is common in the human experience. Jesus is not referring to a specific event but is describing a type of situation that can (and likely will) occur any number of times. Giving a command in *q1*, Jesus instructs his disciples on how to respond to the situation. The second conditional in v.3 describes a possible consequence of the first conditional, namely the brother repenting in *p2*, without any indication of how likely this is to occur. Again, Jesus provides instruction on how to respond in *q2*. Finally, in v.4 Jesus describes a situation—a brother sinning and repenting seven times in one day—that is objectively a lot less likely to occur than either of the situations described in v.3. However, this is also presented simply as a hypothetical situation in *p3*, along with an instruction on how to respond to it in *q3*.

Another use of a hypothetical conditional in relation to teaching on forgiveness occurs in Matthew 18:35. This conditional follows the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matthew 18:21–34) and conveys a warning to those who do not practice forgiveness. This is an example of a conditional with ἐὰν μὴ 'unless', 'if... not' (see Nicolle 2022b) in which *q* precedes *p*, but there is no indication of how likely or unlikely Jesus thinks his hearers are to forgive.

Matthew 18:35
["So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you,]*q* [if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."]*p*

Other examples (all of these are third class conditionals with ἐὰν *in Greek, except for those that are underlined, which are first class conditionals with* εἰ *and indicative verbs): Matthew 5:23–24, 46; 18:15, 16, 17, 19; 21:3; 24:23, 26; Mark 8:3; 10:12; 11:25; 13:21; (16:18); Luke 6:32–34; 10:6; 12:38; 13:3, 5; 16:11, 12; 17:3b, 4; 19:31, 40; 22:67b, 68; John 3:12b (embedded—see §5 below); 5:43; 6:44, 53, 62; 8:24, 31, 36, 55; 11:25; 12:47; 13:8, 17b, 35; 14:15; 15:10, 14, 18; 21:22–23.*

2.1 Subtype: "If anyone"

The use of the indefinite pronoun τις 'anyone' as a subject together with εἴ or ἐὰν 'if' is usually translated in English as "if anyone" or "if someone". John's gospel exclusively uses ἐὰν τις with no occurrences of εἴ τις. (John also has no examples of ὃς ἐὰν 'whoever', but instead uses ὁ 'he, the one' followed by a participle verb.) In the synoptic gospels, εἴ τις conditionals are typically used in sentences that begin a section of speech and/or introduce a new discourse topic. For example, in Matthew 16:24 / Mark 8:34 / Luke 9:23 Jesus begins his speech with "If anyone would come after me..." This introduces the topic of discipleship, and Jesus expounds this topic in the rest of the paragraph (Matthew 16:24–28 / Mark 8:34–9:1 / Luke 9:23–27). Similarly, Luke 14:26 begins "If anyone comes to me..." and introduces a discourse on the cost of discipleship that is continued in Luke 14:26–33.

At other times, εἰ / ἐάν τις simply introduces a conditional in which the identity of the subject is either unknown or not important. In Mark 11:3, Jesus instructs his disciples should someone question them about why they are untying a colt that does not belong to them. Mark records that some bystanders did in fact ask the two disciples why they were untying the colt, but in the parallel passage in Luke it is the owners of the colt who asked this question. This suggests that the identity of the people asking the question is less important than the question itself and the corresponding answer.

> **Mark 11:3** (also **Matthew 21:3**; **Luke 19:31**)
> ["If (ἐάν) anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?']*p* [say, 'The Lord has need of it and will send it back here immediately.' "]*q*

Other examples (all of these are third class conditionals with ἐὰν in Greek, except for those that are underlined, which have εἰ): Matthew 24:23; Mark 4:23, 9:35; 11:3; 13:21; Luke 16:30–31; John 3:3, 5; 6:51; 7:17, 37; 8:51–52; 10:9; 12:26, 47; 14:23; 15:6.

2.2 Subtype: Comparison of situations

Jesus sometimes also uses hypothetical conditionals (third class conditionals with ἐάν) to contrast two opposing situations. While these conditionals are always hypothetical, there is usually an indication of which situation is the more desirable based on the juxtaposition of positive and negative consequences.[7] In Luke 10:6, two possible situations are contrasted. It is clear that meeting a "son of peace" is preferable, but Jesus does not indicate whether or not this is more

[7] This pattern of use is found in other books of the NT (e.g., 1 Cor 3:14–15; Rom 8:9b–11).

likely to occur. He presents the two alternative situations without indicating the likelihood of either occurring.

> **Luke 10:6**
> ["If a son of peace is there,]$p1$ [your peace will rest on him.]$q1$
> [If not[8] (i.e., if there is not a son of peace there),]$p2$ [your peace will return to you."]$q2$

The parallel passage in Matthew 10:13 uses imperative forms ("let your peace come upon it... let your peace return to you"), suggesting that *q1* and *q2* in Luke 10:6 can be read as implied commands.

Other examples: *Matthew 6:14–15, 22–23a; Luke 13:9; John 11:9–10; 12:24; 14:11 (the first clause here is imperative)*; *15:6–7.*

2.3 Subtype: Illustrations and parables

Jesus also uses hypothetical conditionals in illustrations and parables. In many of these, he uses everyday examples—such as patches and wineskins in Mark 2:21–22, and a grain of wheat in John 12:24—to illustrate spiritual truths. In Mark 2:21–22, two similar illustrations are provided to reinforce the point.

> **Mark 2:21–22**
> "No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. [If he does,]$p1$ [the patch tears away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made.]$q1$
>
> And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. [If he does,]$p2$ [the wine will burst the skins—and the wine is destroyed, and so are the skins.]$q2$ But new wine is for fresh wineskins."

In *p1* in Mark 2:21 and *p2* in Mark 2:22, the verb is elided[9] (ESV supplies *he does* and NASB, NIV, NRSV, and NET have *otherwise*). Groff and Nealey (2008) explain that this phrase introduces a hypothetical situation in which someone does what is described in the previous clause.

John 12:24 also contains two conditional sentences, but in this case rather than using two similar illustrations to make the same point, Jesus describes the

[8] The Greek expression used here is εἰ δὲ μή γε; this also occurs in the second conditional sentences in Lk 13:9 and Jn 14:11. See Nicolle 2022a §3.5 for a description of this construction.

[9] The Greek expression used here is εἰ δὲ μή; see Nicolle 2022a §3.5 for a description of this construction.

two possible outcomes of a grain of wheat falling into the earth in order to contrast these two hypothetical situations.

John 12:24
"Truly, truly, I say to you, [unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies,]p_1 [it remains alone;]q_1 but [if it dies,]p_2 [it bears much fruit."]q_2

Other examples (all of these are third class conditionals with ἐὰν *in Greek, except for those that are underlined, which have* εἰ*): Matthew 5:13, 29–30; 9:17;*[10] *12:11, 29; 15:14; 17:20; 18:8–9, 12–13; 21:21; 24:43, 48–51; Mark 3:27; 9:42*[11]*, 43, 45, 47, 50; Luke 5:36–37; 12:39, 45–46; 14:34; 15:8; 17:2, 6; John 15:4.*

3 Conditionals used to argue, assert, command, and exhort

Jesus often uses conditionals when arguing against the Jewish leaders and when teaching his disciples and the crowds. These conditionals fall into two broad categories: factual conditionals in which he presents a known situation in *p* as the basis for an assertion, command, or exhortation in *q*, and non-factual conditionals in which either *p* or *q* is known to be false. We will look at examples of each of these in turn.

3.1 Subtype: Factual conditionals

In this conditional usage, *p* presents information that is either shared cultural knowledge for both Jesus and his audience or a fact that has been established in the preceding discourse. Jesus does not intend to cast doubt on the reality of the truth he is presenting in these conditionals; if anything, he is further emphasizing the truth by drawing the hearers' attention to it. If they agree and acknowledge the truth in *p*, then some response is required, which Jesus makes clear in *q* (a command to be followed, warning to be heeded, information to be understood, etc.). This use of conditionals is especially characteristic of John's gospel and is typically expressed using first class conditionals with the conjunction εἰ and an indicative verb form.

In John 7:23, Jesus begins with an acknowledgement in *p* of a generally known truth: circumcision may occur on the Sabbath. Jesus uses the fact that circumcision is indeed allowed on the Sabbath to rebuke the crowd for persecuting him for having healed a man on the Sabbath (most likely referring to the event described in John 5:1–16.

[10] The Greek expression used here is εἰ δὲ μή γε; also in Lk 5:36–37. See Nicolle 2022a §3.5 for a description of this construction.
[11] The Greek here uses ὃς ἂν 'whoever'.

John 7:23
["If on the Sabbath a man receives circumcision, so that the law of Moses may not be broken,]*p* [are you angry with me because on the Sabbath I made a man's whole body well?"]*q*

The point of this conditional sentence is not to compare Jesus' single act of healing on the Sabbath with the Jews' habitual breaking of the Sabbath by circumcising boys on the eighth day, even if this is a Sabbath (as suggested by Beasley-Murray 1999). Instead, Carson (1991) argues that Jesus is appealing to the notion of a "hierarchy of precedence": the Jews already accepted that the requirement for every Jewish male to be circumcised took precedence over the requirement not to work on the Sabbath. Jesus' use of a conditional clause to express this idea presents it as a shared assumption rather than a hypothetical situation. In *q*, Jesus then implies that his act of mercy in healing the man's body should also (and in fact with even more justification) take precedence over the Sabbath regulations.

In Matthew 19:16, a young man asks Jesus what he must do in order to have eternal life. In v.17b, Jesus responds with a conditional sentence, acknowledging in *p* what this man has just expressed, and answering the man's question in *q*.

Matthew 19:17b
["If you would enter life,]*p* [keep the commandments."]*q*

In Matthew 19:21, Jesus concludes this conversation by answering the man's question, "What do I still lack?" (v.20) with a second conditional following the same pattern of affirming in *p* what the young man has said (where "perfect" is to be understood in the sense of "complete" rather than "without sin") and answering his question in *q*.

Matthew 19:21
Jesus said to him, ["If you would be perfect,]*p* [go, sell what you possess and give to the poor,]*q* and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me."

In languages in which conditionals cannot be used to express known facts, such as Simbiti (Mészáros 2022), these types of conditionals can be expressed as statements with a connective like *since* modifying *p* or *therefore* introducing *q*:

"Since you want to enter life, keep the commandments."
"You want to enter life, therefore (you should) keep the commandments."

Other examples (all of these are first class conditionals with εἰ *in Greek, except for those that are underlined, which have* ἐὰν*): Matthew 19:10 (Jesus' disciples speaking); 19:21; John 3:12a; 8:14, 16,*[12] *46; 10:35–36; 13:14, 17a, 32; 14:3; 18:8.*

A similar pattern of conditional use occurs when Jesus presents two parallel situations together in order to argue the truth of one based on the truth of the other. As with the previous examples, the known proposition is presented in *p* and the proposition which Jesus wishes to establish is presented in *q*. However, in these conditionals, *q* does not depend on *p* as a matter of cause and effect or reason and conclusion. Rather, by placing the two situations side by side, Jesus shows that just as the one (more familiar) situation is true, so also the other (less familiar or easier to doubt) situation is also true.

In Matthew 7:9–10, Jesus has just used rhetorical questions to affirm that his audience would indeed not give bad gifts to their children.[13] In v.11 he then restates this fact as a factual, first class condition in *p* in order to assert in *q* how much more likely it is that God will give good things to his children.

Matthew 7:11 (also see **Luke 11:13)**
["If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children,]*p*
[how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!"]*q*

In John 15:18–25, Jesus uses six conditional sentences as he expounds on the world's hatred of him and his disciples; we will focus on the conditionals in v.20. In v.18–19, Jesus has warned his disciples—using first a factual, first class conditional in v.18, then a non-factual, second class conditional in v.19—that the world will hate them, just as the world has hated him. He uses a factual, first class conditional in v.20b to emphasize that the way others have treated him (which is known) indicates the way that others will treat the disciples (which the disciples have not yet experienced). Because the disciples know that Jesus has been persecuted, NLT introduces *p* with *since* rather than *if*.

[12] John uses κἂν in 8:14 and καὶ ἐὰν in 8:16; these are concessive conditionals in which *q* is asserted as true regardless of *p* (see Nicolle 2022 §3.1 for a discussion). Concessive conditionals can also be expressed using εἴ and καὶ (in either order), but John only uses the forms κἂν and καὶ ἐὰν.

[13] There is no conditional marker in the Greek of Mt 7:9–10, but the sense is clearly conditional. Jesus is asking his hearers to consider a hypothetical but commonplace scenario (a child asking for food) and an almost unthinkable response (a father giving the child something inedible and dangerous). Almost all English translations translate these verses as conditional sentences.

John 15:20b

["If they persecuted me,]*p* [they will also persecute you."]*q* (ESV)

["Since they persecuted me,]*p* [naturally they will persecute you."]*q* (NLT)

In translating into languages that do not use conditionals for statements of fact, *p* and *q* could be expressed as two statements, introduced by an expression like *just as* or *since* and linked by a comparative expression. Alternatively, such conditionals could be re-expressed using two statements joined with an inferential connective such as *therefore* or *so*:

"{Just as/Since} they persecuted me, {likewise/in the same way} they will persecute you also."

"They persecuted me, {therefore/so (you can be sure that)} they will persecute you also."

John 15:20c could be another factual conditional, stating that those people who have accepted Jesus' teaching will also accept the disciples' teaching. On this interpretation, favored by Carson (1991), the third person plural subject refers to a different group of people than in v.20b (or to a sub-group within the general group referred to as "the world").[14] An alternative interpretation, noted by Carson (1991) and Beasley-Murray (1999), treats the conditional in v.20c as non-factual and therefore complementary to rather than in contrast with v.20b. This interpretation accords with the overall theme of John 15:18–25, which is that the people of the world hate Jesus and will therefore also hate the disciples. The NLT follows this interpretation and uses a past perfect verb form in *p*, and *would* rather than *will* in *q*, to indicate that this is a non-factual conditional, thereby implying that the people of the world will not listen to his disciples either.

John 15:20c

["If they kept my word,]*p* [they will also keep yours"] *q* (ESV) [implies that at least some did keep Jesus' word, and will keep the disciples' word also].

["if they had listened to me,]*p* [they would listen to you"]*q* (NLT) [implies that at least some did not listen to Jesus, and will not listen to the disciples either].

[14] Stephen Levinsohn (personal communication 15 Aug 2022) notes that this view is supported by the fact that v.20c exactly parallels the form of v.20b (which is first class and factual), including lacking the counterfactual connective ἂν in *q* (in contrast to v.19, which has ἂν in *q*, indicating unambiguously that this is a non-factual conditional). However, although most non-factual, second class conditionals have ἂν in *q*, not all do.

Other examples (all of these are first class conditionals with εἰ *in Greek, except for John 15:4 which is a third class conditional with* ἐὰν*): Matthew 6:30; Luke 12:26, 28; 23:31; John 15:4, 18.*

3.2 Subtype: Non-factual conditionals

In this use of conditionals, *p* or *q* or both *p* and *q* are known to be false, either because of shared cultural knowledge or because this has been established in the immediately preceding context. (Most of these are second class conditionals, with εἰ in *p* and—in most cases—the counterfactual connective ἂν in *q*.) Jesus uses this type of conditional to argue for the truth of an alternative which may, but need not, be stated explicitly afterwards. In some cases, there is a cause-effect relation between *p* and *q*, and Jesus uses the fact that *p* is known to be false to argue for the opposite of *q*. For example, in John 9:41 Jesus provisionally accepts the Pharisees' claim that they are not (spiritually) blind and presents the opposite of this in *p* (for the sake of argument) together with the consequence in *q*. He then makes the conclusion of this argument explicit in the following (non-conditional) clause:

> **John 9:41**
> ["If you were blind,]*p* [you would have no guilt]*q* but now that you say, 'We see,' your guilt remains."

In some cases, *q* is known to be false, and Jesus uses this to argue that the opposite of *p* is true. There are two examples of this in John 8:39 and 8:42. In John 8:37, Jesus has stated that the people he is talking to are trying to kill him, and in 8:39a they say, "Abraham is our father." Jesus responds as follows:

> **John 8:39b**
> ["If you were Abraham's children,]*p* [you would be doing the works Abraham did."[15]]*q*

Commenting on textual variation in this verse, the NET Bible has the following note: "Although most manuscripts have the imperfect ἦτε (ēte, 'you were') here, making this sentence a proper second class condition, the harder reading, ἐστε (este, 'you are'), is found in the better witnesses." English translations that follow the "harder" reading (e.g., NASB, NET) use the present "If you are..."; those that follow the imperfect (e.g., ESV, NRSV, NIV, NLT) use the past subjunctive "If you were...". The former treat this as a factual condition in which Jesus is echoing "Abraham is our father", not in order to agree with this statement but to present it for the sake of argument. The latter treat this as a

[15] There is a variant reading of *q* "do the deeds of Abraham", that is followed by NASB.

non-factual condition in which Jesus is expressing his own belief that the people he is addressing are not Abraham's children. Most translations treat *q* as a statement "you would be doing" (e.g., ESV, NRSV, NET) or "you would do" (NIV), but NASB treats *q* as a command, "do the deeds of Abraham." Whichever reading is taken, Jesus' point is that though his audience may indeed be Abraham's biological descendants, they were not in fact his spiritual descendants, based on their actions. This is only comprehensible if we accept that Jesus' audience were not doing what Abraham did. In v.40 Jesus repeats that his audience are trying to kill him, and states, "This is not what Abraham did." This makes it clear that *q* is false, and so the logical conclusion is that *p* is also false; that is, they are not Abraham's children. This suggests that the overall illocutionary force of this conditional is to rebuke.

After this exchange, the people claim that God is their father; Jesus repeats this claim in the form of a conditional. As it is clear that the audience do not love Jesus, it follows that Jesus must be implying that God is not their father. That is, the falsity of *q* allows the audience to infer that *p* is also false.

John 8:42
["If God were your father,]*p* [you would love me,]*q* for I have come here from God."

Other examples of p *known to be false*: *John 8:19, 54;*[16] *14:2; 15:22, 24; 18:36.*
Other examples of q known to be false: Matthew 12:26 (discussed in Young 1989:41–42); Mark 13:20; John 5:31; 15:19; 19:11.
Example of p *and* q *known to be false*: *John 18:36.*

4 Pairs of conditionals used for comparison

A number of Jesus' conditional sentences occur in pairs, expressing contrasting situations.

4.1 False/true comparison

In this use of the conditional, Jesus presents two conditional sentences for comparison, one false and the other true. These conditionals are similar to the factual and non-factual conditionals used in arguments and assertions discussed in §3 above, and all use the connective εἰ (except for John 16:7b discussed below). However, they do not necessarily emphasize a truth that is explicitly asserted in

[16] John 8:54 and 5:31 have ἐὰν, possibly indicating that Jesus is presenting these conditions as possible, even though he has no intention of glorifying himself or testifying about himself (Stephen Levinsohn, personal communication 15 Aug 2022).

the context; rather, presenting two incompatible situations together forces the hearer to choose which they will believe. The purpose is to encourage a change of belief.

In Matthew 12:27a, Jesus presents his opponents' claim in *p1* and uses a rhetorical question in *q1* in order to point out the difficulties with believing *p1*. Then in v.28, Jesus presents an alternative claim in *p2* which he knows to be true and wishes his audience to believe; he then presents the consequences of this in *q2*, which make it clear that a change of belief is the appropriate response.

Matthew 12:27–28 (see also **Luke 11:19–20**)
"And [if I cast out demons by Beelzebul,]$p1$ [by whom do your sons cast them out?]$q1$ ... But [if it is by the Spirit of God I cast out demons,]$p2$ [then the kingdom of God has come upon you."]$q2$

Another example is found in John 16:7b. In v.5 Jesus states that he will indeed go away, then in v.7b he presents two conditional sentences: one in which he describes the consequence if he does not go away (which the audience knows to be false) and one in which he describes the consequence if he does go away (which the audience knows to be true). Jesus' purpose is to encourage the disciples to change how they feel about him going away. He shows that this is a good thing because only then will the Holy Spirit come.

John 16:7b
"for [if I do not go away,]$p1$ [the Helper will not come to you.]$q1$
But [if I go,]$p2$ [I will send him to you."]$q2$

Other examples of this use of the conditional: John 5:46–47; 10:37–38; 18:23.

4.2 Two types of people

Another type of comparison involves two types of people. Different constructions are used by the different gospel writers in these comparative sentences, and these are arguably borderline conditionals grammatically. All but one of the occurrences in Matthew use the phrase ὃς ἐὰν to introduce the first type of person and ὃς ἂν to introduce the second (typically in the construction ὃς δ' ἂν 'but whoever', where δὲ 'but' causes ἐὰν to be shortened to ἂν); both ὃς ἐὰν and ὃς ἂν are usually translated as "whoever" in English. All the parallel passages in Mark and some of those in Luke use ὃς ἂν in both sentences (except Mark 8:35, which has ὃς ἐὰν in the first sentence). This construction is not used in John's gospel.

When Jesus compares two types of people, he is not necessarily implying that his audience fits the particular examples; he is often simply presenting types of actions that people could take and stating the consequences of those actions.

In Matthew 16:25, Jesus compares two types of people with different attitudes toward life:

> **Matthew 16:25** (see also **Mark 8:35**, **Luke 9:24**)
> "For [whoever would save his life]$p1$ [will lose it,]$q1$
> but [whoever loses his life for my sake]$p2$ [will find it."]$q2$[17]

There is some figurative language at work here, since this refers to not only living vs. death, but to those who are bent on living for themselves as opposed to those willing to dedicate their life to Christ (either in lifelong service or by death). The consequences of each person's attitude are also figurative as they refer particularly to spiritual life. This results in not only a juxtaposition of two attitudes, but also of two ways of understanding "life" and therefore two different eternal fates.

Other examples: *Matthew 5:19, 32; 12:32; 18:5–6; 20:26–27; Mark 9:37; Luke 8:18; 9:48; 17:33.*

5 Conditionals used to warn and rebuke

Some conditionals are used by Jesus to warn and rebuke, sometimes strongly and other times more gently. All the conditionals listed in this section are used as part of warnings and rebukes in their overall function, but they sometimes overlap with one of the other uses of conditionals discussed above. These conditionals also often incorporate rhetorical questions. When translating these conditionals into another language, it is important to consider whether a conditional is an appropriate form for a rebuke, as well as whether a rhetorical question can have this function.

In Matthew 11:21 and Luke 10:13, Jesus uses a non-factual, second class conditional that describes events that did not happen in the past to rebuke[18] his audience for their lack of repentance, and to warn them indirectly that their fate

[17] Alternatively: "for [if anyone wants to save his life]$p1$ [he will lose it,]$q1$ but [if anyone loses his life for my sake]$p2$ [he will find it."]$q2$

[18] Young (1989:41) classifies Mt 11:21 as a lament on the basis that p is non-factual and that the conditional sentence as a whole refers to a (non-fulfilled) past event that was not in the best interest of the speaker or his audience, and that grieves the speaker. In this case, however, Jesus is not primarily grieved by the fact that the people of Tyre and Sidon did not experience the mighty works that were done in Chorazin and Bethsaida and therefore did not repent. Rather, his focus is on the fact that the people of Chorazin and Bethsaida had failed to repent. It is possible that Jesus is simultaneously lamenting and rebuking: by using this conditional, he both expresses his sorrow (a necessary condition for lament) and also reprimands his hearers (an essential condition for rebuke).

will be the same as that of Tyre and Sidon if they fail to repent. Jesus shames the audience with his comparison of them to cities that were infamous for their lack of repentance and God's subsequent judgment of them. Garland (2012) notes that the idea that the people of Tyre and Sidon would have repented would have seemed quite improbable to Jesus' audience, and so the implication is that Chorazin and Bethsaida are worse than those cities.

Luke 10:13 (Matthew 11:21)
"Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For [if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon,]*p* [they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes."]*q*

John 3:12 expresses a rebuke and interestingly contains a second embedded conditional within the apodosis of the main conditional sentence.[19]

John 3:12a
["If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe,]p_1
[{how can you believe}q_2 {if I tell you heavenly things?"}p_2]q_1

In *p1* (using a first class conditional with εἰ), Jesus highlights Nicodemus' failure to believe earthly things, and in *p2* (using a third class conditional with ἐάν) he implies that Nicodemus is therefore unlikely to believe even more difficult and important heavenly things. The two distinct conditionals address first what Jesus has already said in *p1* and second what Jesus is about to say in *p2*, both of which Nicodemus has had or will have difficulty believing. This reinforces the message that Nicodemus "simply does not possess the capacity to understand or to believe what Jesus says" (Fong 2014:93) that is indicated by Jesus' use of a rhetorical question in *q1*.[20] If this complex construction is not natural in translation, it could be rephrased using two statements:

"I have told you earthly things and you do not believe. So you will certainly not believe if/when I tell you heavenly things."

[19] Other examples of embedded conditionals include Mt 26:42, Lk 16:31, and Jn 10:38; 13:17.
[20] Trail (2013) discusses various options for what Jesus might be implying by his rhetorical question in *q1*. Jesus could be saying that it is useless for him to teach about heavenly things, or that Nicodemus certainly will not believe in heavenly things; these options would make the probability of *p2* unlikely. On the other hand, Jesus could be intending to discuss heavenly things with Nicodemus (which would make the probability of *p2* likely), but predicts that Nicodemus will nevertheless fail to understand. This second option seems more likely.

Other examples: Matthew 5:47; 11:23; 12:7; Matthew 26:24 / Mark 14:21; Mark 8:38; John 3:12; 4:10, 48; 7:23; 8:39b, 42, 46; 9:41; 10:35–36; 11:40; 14:7, 28; 19:11; 21:22 (repeated in 21:23).

6 Conditionals used to promise

As with warnings and rebukes, this is an overall function of conditional sentences that may also overlap with various other types of conditional. Promises are an assurance of a future reality. Some of them are genuinely and logically conditional promises in which the event described in *q* may or may not occur based entirely on the (non-)occurrence of the event described in *p*. An example is **John 8:51**, in which the promise of eternal life in *q* only applies to those who obey Jesus' word:

> ["If anyone obeys my word,]*p* [he will never see death" (Greek: 'death never he will see forever').]*q*

With the usual *p*, *q* order of clauses, it is typically the case that *q* is being presented as more important than the condition in *p*. Additionally, here in John 8:51, Fong (2014:185) notes that fronting of the object θάνατον 'death' and the double negative οὐ μὴ 'never' (which is reinforced by εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα 'into the age,' i.e., 'forever') indicate even more strongly that the emphasis here is on the promise in *q* rather than on the condition in *p*.

Other conditionals express unconditional promises, in that *p* also contains a promise as sure as the promise in *q*. In John 14:3, both *p* and *q* express promises that Jesus is making to the disciples. In the preceding context, Jesus has stated that he will go to prepare a place, thus although John uses a third class conditional (with the connective ἐάν and subjunctive verbs in *p*), this is clearly a factual condition. Jesus then goes on to say that having done that, he promises to also return to take the disciples with him.

> **John 14:3**
> ["And if I go and prepare a place for you,]*p* [I will come again and take you to myself, that where I am you may be also."]*q*

A less obvious example is found in John 14:7, which can be interpreted either as a non-factual conditional in which Jesus is rebuking his disciples (or at least obliquely rebuking Thomas, who had questioned Jesus in John 14:5) for their lack of understanding of him, or as a factual conditional in which Jesus presumes that the disciples do in fact know him, and then promises that they will also know his father:

John 14:7
["If you had known me,]*p* [you would have known my Father also."]*q* (ESV, NASB)
["If you know me,]*p* [you will know my Father also."]*q* (NRSV)

ESV, NASB, and NLT present *p* and *q* as non-factual (expressed in English by a past perfect verb form in *p* and *would* in *q*), whereas NRSV and NIV present *p* and *q* as factual, or at least possibly true (expressed in English using a non-past verb form in *p* and *will* in *q*). Some Greek manuscripts have a pluperfect verb in both *p* and *q* and the counterfactual connective ἄν in *q*, which supports the non-factual reading. However, the *UBS Greek New Testament* (5th edition) prefers the reading with a perfect verb in *p* and a future verb and no ἄν in *q*, which supports the factual reading. Omanson and Metzger (2006:200) suggest that the non-factual reading may have arisen "either because copyists remembered Jesus' reproach against unbelieving Jews in 8:19 or because Philip's question (v.8) and Jesus' reply (v.9) suggested to them that the disciples knew neither Jesus nor the Father."

Jesus' point either way is that he and the Father are one; knowledge of him is the same thing as knowledge of the Father, so the disciples can indeed know the Father. What is at issue is whether Jesus is rebuking the disciples for not really knowing him, or promising them that because they know him, they will also know his father.

Other examples: *Matthew 18:19a; Mark 16:18; John 8:36; 51 (quoted in 52); 10:9; 12:32; 13:32; 14:23; 15:7; 16:7a.*

7 Summary

Jesus often uses conditionals when he makes direct appeals to his audience. Conditionals drive home the importance of his teaching, frame examples that illustrate important principles, constitute arguments that demonstrate the validity of his claims, and present the audience with choices. In this paper we have seen specifically how Jesus often uses conditionals when he instructs his disciples, for example by framing his instructions in terms of hypothetical situations or contrasting two possible situations expressed through conditional sentences. We have also seen how Jesus sometimes uses conditionals when confronting his opponents, to argue, warn, and rebuke. Rather than presenting hypothetical situations, these conditionals typically present known information in *p* (whether known to be true or known to be false), and a conclusion or command in *q*. Conversely, where *q* is known to be false, the audience can infer that *p* (which is at issue) must also be false. At other times, Jesus uses pairs of

conditional sentences to convey spiritual truths, the first describing a familiar situation, and the second describing a novel but parallel situation.

The emphasis throughout this paper has been on describing the functions of conditional sentences. This has been done by considering the form of each Greek conditional construction and associated contextual information. In future research, it may be beneficial to evaluate polysemous conditional sentences using approaches such as Speech Act Theory or Relevance Theory.

Conditional constructions in the world's languages do not necessarily function in the same way as they do in Greek. Translators aiming to enable their audience to understand what Jesus intended to communicate should pay careful attention to identifying the probable illocutionary force of his speech. From time to time, it may be desirable to modify source language conditional constructions, or replace them with non-conditional constructions, to communicate the intended illocutionary force of Jesus' words.

References

Austin, J. L. 1962. *How to do things with words*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

Beasley-Murray, George R. 1999. *John*. Word Biblical Commentary 36, second edition. Dallas, TX: Word Incorporated.

Carson, D. A. 1991. *The Gospel according to John*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary. Leicester, England, and Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press and Wm. B. Eerdmans.

Fong, Rocky H. 2014. *Toward a functional description of New Testament Greek conditionals with special reference to the Gospel of John*. PhD dissertation. Hamilton, ON: McMaster Divinity School.

Garland, David E. 2012. *Luke*. Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Groff, Randy, and Linda Neeley, eds. 2008. *Translator's notes on Mark*. Dallas, TX: SIL International.

Guérois, Rozenn. 2017. Conditional constructions in Cuwabo. *Studies in African Linguistics* 46:193–212. https://doi.org/10.32473/sal.v46i1.107250.

Kennedy, George A. 1980. *Classical rhetoric and its Christian and secular tradition from ancient to modern times*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/1770910.

Kennedy, George A. 1984. *New Testament interpretation through rhetorical criticism*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press. https://doi.org/10.5149/9781469616254_Kennedy.

Mészároš, Rebekah. 2022. Translation strategies for conditionals in Kabwa and Simbiti. *Journal of Translation* 18(2):115–134. https://doi.org/10.54395/JOT-62EHH.

Mwamzandi, Mohamed. 2017. A corpus study of Swahili conditionals. *Studies in African Linguistics* 46:157–173. https://doi.org/10.32473/sal.v46i1.107248.

Ngonyani, Deo. 2017. Conditionals in Ndendeule. *Studies in African Linguistics* 46:175–192. https://doi.org/10.32473/sal.v46i1.107249.

Nicolle, Steve. 2022a. Conditionals in the New Testament: Interpretation and translation. *Journal of Translation* 18(2):1–30. https://doi.org/10.54395/JOT-6CPW9.

Nicolle, Steve. 2022b. Translating ἐὰν μή 'unless' conditionals. *Journal of Translation* 18(2):53–65. https://doi.org/10.54395/JOT-YT9KD.

Omanson, Roger L., and Bruce Manning Metzger. 2006. *A textual guide to the Greek New Testament: An adaptation of Bruce M. Metzger's textual commentary for the needs of translators*. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft.

Porter, Stanley E. 1992. *Idioms of the Greek New Testament*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.

Searle, John R. 1969. *Speech acts: An essay in the philosophy of language*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139173438.

Sperber, Dan, and Dierdre Wilson. 1995. *Relevance: Communication and cognition*, 2nd edition. Oxford: Blackwell.

Trail, Ronald. 2013. *An exegetical summary of John 1–9*. Dallas, TX: SIL International.

Wallace, Daniel B. 1996. *Greek grammar beyond the basics: An exegetical syntax of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Young, Richard A. 1989. A classification of conditional sentences based on Speech Act Theory. *Grace Theological Journal* 10(1):29–49.