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Translating ἐὰν μή ‘unless’ Conditionals

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Abstract: The Greek conditional construction ἐὰν μή is usually translated into English using *unless*, which is a portmanteau combining the ideas of a conditional *if* and a negative *not*. Sentences containing ἐὰν μή ‘unless’ can often be challenging to translate for a combination of reasons: 1) in the majority of cases, the usual order of protasis (conditional clause) and apodosis (consequence clause) is reversed; 2) typically, both clauses are negative (or the protasis is negative and the apodosis is a rhetorical question expecting a negative response); 3) at the pragmatic level, the protasis usually describes the only situation or fact that would invalidate the apodosis. In this paper I will show that in many cases conditional sentences with ἐὰν μή ‘unless’ can be rephrased by removing the negative elements in both clauses and making explicit the pragmatic idea of exclusivity. However, this type of rephrasing is not always appropriate, and I discuss a number of situations in which it should potentially be avoided.

1 Introduction

The Greek conditional construction ἐὰν μή[1] consists of the conditional conjunction ἐὰν ‘if’ and the negative adverb μή ‘not’. Compared to other Greek

[1] This construction is rarely dealt with in standard scholarly Greek grammars; it is not discussed in any detail in Goodwin (1892), Perschbacher (1995), Porter (1994), Runge (2010), or Wallace (1996). I include some cases of εἰ μή (Jn 19:11, 1 Cor 15:3), εἰ μήτι (2 Cor 13:5), and ἐκτὸς εἰ μή (1 Cor 14:5), but only when these have a clearly conditional interpretation. Conversely, I exclude some cases of ἐὰν μή, such as Mk 10:30 and Gal 2:16, that are not semantically conditional, but rather express the idea of counterfactuality and are typically translated in English as “except” or “but.” I also exclude the idiomatic

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conditional constructions (see Nicolle 2022 for an overview), the ἐὰν μή construction has a few peculiarities:

- In regular affirmative conditional constructions, the PROTASIS (the conditional clause, *p*) usually precedes the APODOSIS (the main clause, *q*). For example, in the gospels, the reverse order *q*, *p* occurs only 14 times out of a total of 244 affirmative conditional sentences; that is just 5.7 percent. In contrast, the order *q*, *p* occurs in over half of all ἐὰν μή sentences: 17 out of 31 occurrences (55 percent) in the gospels, and 30 out of 55 occurrences (55 percent) in the whole New Testament.
- In the ἐὰν μή construction, not only is *p* negative (because of the negative adverb μή), but *q* is usually negative as well. Out of the 55 ἐὰν μή conditionals in the New Testament, *q* is explicitly negative in 28 of these, and in an additional 6 cases it consists of a rhetorical question that expects a negative response. Therefore, *q* is negative or expects a negative response in 62 percent of ἐὰν μή conditionals.
- The way ἐὰν μή constructions are translated into English is also different from other conditional constructions. Rather than ‘if not’, the usual English translation of ἐὰν μή is ‘unless’ (40 out of 55 times in the New American Standard Bible [NASB], 38 times in the English Standard Version [ESV], and 30 times in the New International Version [NIV]. *Unless* is a portmanteau, that is, it combines two meanings: conditional and negative).[2]

The unusual order, with *p* typically occurring after *q*, plus the fact that both *p* and *q* are often negated, means that sentences containing the ἐὰν μή conditional construction can be challenging to translate clearly and naturally in many languages. Before suggesting some ways in which the ἐὰν μή construction can be translated, we will look at its meaning in more detail.

One characteristic shared by ἐὰν μή conditionals in Greek and *unless* conditionals in English is that, very often, *q* describes something that is expected or that is asserted as the default case. This can be seen in John 3:2, where Nicodemus says to Jesus, “No one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.” Nicodemus recognizes that the things that Jesus was doing were

expression εἰ δὲ μή γε meaning (roughly) ‘otherwise’. (See Nicolle 2022 §3.4 and §3.5 for discussion of these expressions.)

[2] The same is not necessarily true of other European languages, even if there is an expression with a similar meaning to *unless*. For example, French translations (*Nouvelle Version Segond révisée*, *Traduction œcuménique de la Bible*, and *La Bible en Français courant*) almost always translate ἐὰν μή using the negative conditional *si… ne* “if… not,” and occasionally *sans* “without”; they hardly ever use *à moins que* “unless.”

exceptional, and so *q*, "No one can do these signs that you do," expresses a normal, expected state of affairs. As Dancygier and Sweetser (2005:187) put it, "*unless* states *q* as a basic default situation and then adds the *If p, ~q* [3] scenario as an exceptional alternative."[4]

A helpful way to illustrate this is to consider a sentence where *if... not* is perfectly acceptable but *unless* is not appropriate. Imagine a situation in which you buy a shirt from a store. The default expectation is that the shirt will fit and you will keep it; this is expected because you know what size shirt usually fits you, and the shirts in the store are all labeled. Taking a shirt back to the store to exchange or to get a refund is the exception rather than the default scenario. For this reason, using *unless* instead of *if... not* sounds pragmatically odd (indicated by the ! symbol at the start of the example):

(a) You can take it back to the store if it does not fit.
(b) ! You can take it back to the store unless it fits.[5]

Another characteristic that ἐὰν μή conditionals and *unless* conditionals share is that very often *p* describes the only situation or fact that would cause the opposite of *q* (i.e., the unexpected or non-default *~q*) to be true.[6] Again, John 3:2 illustrates this: after Nicodemus has asserted *q*, "No one can do these signs that you do," he qualifies this assertion with *p*, "unless God is with him." The *p* clause describes the only situation that would make "No one can do these signs that you do" false, namely, God being with that person.

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[3] *~q* means NOT-*q*.

[4] Dancygier and Sweetser (2005:184) note that often *unless* is used in situations where *q* is asserted and *unless* introduces an afterthought or reservation. This is very rarely the case with ἐὰν μή constructions in the New Testament. An afterthought use does occur in Lk 9:13b: "But he said to them, 'You give them something to eat.' They said, 'We have no more than five loaves and two fish—unless we are to go and buy food for all these people.'" However, the Greek expression here is εἰ μήτι, rather than ἐὰν μή.

[5] This does not affect the logical, or truth-conditional, meaning encoded by *unless*. Fretheim (2006:62) notes: "Truth-conditionally, *unless* is exactly like *if not*... Whenever an *unless*-conditional is felt to be bad and the corresponding conditional with *if not* is pragmatically in order, the unacceptability of the former is due to a pragmatic mismatch between the truth-conditional meaning of the negative protasis and the special non-truth-conditional meaning encoded by the connective *unless*."

[6] Note that I state that this is very often the case. This is because describing the only thing that would cause *~q* to be true is a pragmatic feature of many uses of ἐὰν μή, not part of the semantics of the construction. (See also Declerck and Reed 2000, Declerck and Reed 2001:449–450, and Dancygier and Sweetser 2005:184, 187 for similar pragmatic analyses of *unless*.)

Because *p* often describes the only situation or fact that would negate *q*, when this is the case, “*q*, unless *p*” and “*q*, ἐὰν μή *p*” can be rephrased as “~*q*, only if *p*”[7] without distorting the intended meaning.[8] (Note that *q* is negative in most ἐὰν μή conditional sentences, and so ~*q* will be an affirmative clause in these cases.) The “~*q*, only if *p*” paraphrase can be useful when translating ἐὰν μή conditionals into languages where the combination of an inverted (*q*, *p*) conditional sentence with multiple negatives is unnatural or confusing.

2 Strategies for translating ἐὰν μή conditional sentences

In this section I will show how “*q*, ἐὰν μή *p*” can be rephrased as ~*q*, only if *p* in a number of verses, as well as discussing cases where such a rephrasing is not appropriate.

2.1 Examples where “*q*, ἐὰν μή *p*” can be rephrased as “~*q*, only if *p*”

It is not always the case that “*q*, ἐὰν μή *p*” can be rephrased as “~*q*, only if *p*”, and we will look at some exceptions later, but many cases can be rephrased in this way. Below are some examples from the New Testament, presented using the ESV unless otherwise stated. I have underlined the negative elements in the original *q* clauses and *only* in the rephrased versions, and I have highlighted *unless* and *if* in bold. In cases where *p* precedes *q* in the Greek, I have followed this clause order and rephrased “ἐὰν μή *p*, *q*” (“unless *p*, *q*”) as “only if *p*, ~ *q*”.

John 3:2b

“no one can do these signs that you do **unless** God is with him.”

Remember that *q*, “No one can do these signs that you do,” describes the expected or default state of affairs, and *p*, “unless God is with him,” describes the

[7] Dancygier (1985, 1987, 1998:167–177) proposed “*q*; [only] if *p*, ~*q*” as a semantic analysis of *unless* (that is, *q* is asserted, with the reservation that in the case of *p*, it will not hold). In Dancygier and Sweetser (2005:184), this was revised to “*q*; ~*q* if *p*” (dropping *only* and reflecting the usual *q*, *p* order). My paraphrase of “~*q* only if *p*” differs in that it is not a semantic analysis of ἐὰν μή ‘unless’, but rather a paraphrase that expresses the intended meaning of ἐὰν μή conditionals in many contexts.

[8] A central part of this meaning, for ἐὰν μή and for *unless*, is that the hearer is asked to consider the consequences of *p* being true. “*Unless* instructs the hearer to engage in a parallel processing of the conditional, in which attention is to be paid not only to the explicit negative protasis ~*p* but also to pragmatic consequences of an alternative context in which the contradictory counterpart of *p* is true.” (Fretheim 2006:84)

only situation that would cause *q* not to be true. John 3:2 can therefore be rephrased using *only* in the following ways:

(a) "A person can do these signs that you do only **if** God is with him."
(b) "A person can only do these signs that you do **if** God is with him."
(c) "Only **if** God is with him can a person do[9] these signs that you do."

Note that in English, when the order is *q*, *p*, *only* can be placed immediately before *p*, as in (a), or it can be placed before the main verb in *q*, as in (b). When it occurs before the main verb in *q*, it has scope over the whole conditional construction, including *p*. There is usually very little difference in meaning, but putting *only* within *q* can help to avoid unintended emphasis on *p*. However, for the sake of consistency, *only* has been placed immediately before *p* in the rephrased examples below. It is also possible to reorder the clauses so that *p* precedes *q* (the usual order for conditional sentences) as in (c). This reordering of *p* and *q* is possible in all the rephrased examples below (with appropriate adjustments) and may be more natural or even required[10] in some languages.

John 6:44 (and **6:65**)

"No one can come to me **unless** the Father who sent me draws him."

"No one can come to me" describes the default situation and "unless the Father who sent me draws him" describes the only exception to this. The whole sentence can be rephrased as follows:

"A person can come to me only if the Father who sent me draws him."

Matthew 5:20 (see also Matthew 18:3; John 3:3, 5)

"For I tell you, **unless** your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never[11] enter the kingdom of heaven."

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[9] A feature of English grammar is that when the order of clauses is *p*, *q*, and *p* contains *only if*, *q* must have the structure: auxiliary + subject + verb (e.g., "can a person do"). For example, 2 Tim 2:5, "An athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules," can be rephrased as "Only if an athlete competes according to the rules is he crowned." If there is not already an auxiliary in *q*, an appropriate form of *do* is used: "Only if an athlete competes according to the rules does he win the prize." This is simply a feature of English grammar and should not be copied when translating into most other languages.

[10] Stephen Levinsohn (personal communication 2 Nov 2021) notes that in many verb-final languages, *q* cannot occur before *p* in conditional sentences.

[11] Greek οὐ μή (lit., 'not not'); this is an emphatic negative, often translated as "certainly not," "never," or "not at all."

Rephrased:

> “For I tell you, only **if** you are more righteous than the scribes and Pharisees, will you enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Acts 27:31

> Paul said to the centurion and to the soldiers, “**Unless** these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved.”

Rephrased:

> “Only **if** these men stay in the ship can you be saved.”

Or:

> “You can be saved only **if** these men stay in the ship.”

An alternative, used in the translation of this verse into Inga ([inb], Quechuan, Colombia), is to describe this situation using *leave*, which is an antonym of *stay*: “If these men leave the ship, you will not save yourselves from death.” (Stephen Levinsohn, personal communication 2 Nov 2021.)

1 Corinthians 15:36

> “You foolish person! What you sow does not come to life **unless** it dies.”

Rephrased:

> “You foolish person! What you sow only comes to life **if** it dies.”

2.2 More complicated examples

Mark 3:27a and **Matthew 12:29a**

> “But no one can enter a strong man’s house and plunder his property, **unless** he first binds the strong man.”[12]

Rephrased:

> “A person can enter a strong man’s house and plunder his property only **if** he first binds the strong man.”

In Inga, *p* must precede *q*. In the Inga translation, the information in this verse was presented in the same order as in Greek but was rephrased with the first clause as *p* and the second as *q*: “If a person enters the house of a strong man and wishes to take what he has, he first has to bind him.” (Stephen Levinsohn, personal communication 2 Nov 2021.)

[12] Some English translations (e.g., NIV, NRSV) use *without* + gerund instead of *unless*: “No one can enter a strong man’s house **without** first **tying** him up.” (NIV)

Note that the parallel verse in **Matthew 12:29a** uses a rhetorical question that expects a negative answer:

> "Or how can someone enter a strong man's house and carry off his property, **unless** he first binds the strong man?"

In some languages (including Inga), a rhetorical question would not be appropriate here, so this verse can be rephrased in the same way as Mark 3:27a to avoid the use of a rhetorical question. However, in other languages it may be better to keep the rhetorical question in *q* but rephrase *p* (the *unless* clause) as a statement, as the NLT does: "For who is powerful enough to enter the house of a strong man and plunder his goods? Only someone even stronger—someone who could tie him up and then plunder his house." (NLT)

Mark 7:3-4a

> [3]For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat **unless** they wash their hands properly, holding to the tradition of the elders, [4]and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat **unless** they wash.

Greek has the order *p*, *q*: **unless** they wash (their hands/themselves), they do not eat. Most English translations use the order *q*, *p*.

Rephrased:

> [3]For the Pharisees and all the Jews only eat **if** they carefully wash their hands, thus observing the traditions of the elders. [4]And when they come from the marketplace, they only eat **if** they wash themselves.

In these verses, we understand that the washing happens before the eating, and so the French translation *Parole de Vie* has rephrased these verses using *avant de* 'before' to express the order of the events and *toujours* 'always' to indicate that they eat only after washing. This translation also puts the reason for this practice at the start of v.3, rather than between v.3 and v.4:

> En effet, les Pharisiens et tous les autres Juifs obéissent à la tradition de leurs ancêtres : avant de manger, ils se lavent **toujours** les mains avec soin. Quand ils reviennent de la place publique, ils se lavent **toujours** avant de manger.

English translation:

> "Now the Pharisees and all the other Jews follow the traditions of their ancestors: before eating, they **always** wash their hands carefully. When they return from the marketplace, they **always** wash before eating."

John 7:51

> "Our Law does not judge a man **unless** it first hears from him and knows what he is doing, does it?" (NASB)

This example is complicated by the fact that the whole sentence expresses a rhetorical question. In Greek, both clauses are negated: “Our law does not judge a man **if** it does not first hear from him…” This indicates that the expected answer is “No!” NASB, NRSV, and NET express this with a question tag “does it?” In translation, the answer to the question can be supplied if necessary:

> “Does our law judge a man if it does not first hear him and know what he does? Of course not!”

Rather than using *if… not* or *unless* followed by finite verbs (*hears* and *knows*) the ESV, NRSV, and NIV all use *without* followed by non-finite verbs:

- “Does our law judge a man **without** first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?” (ESV)
- “Our law does not judge people **without** first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?” (NRSV)
- “Does our law condemn a man **without** first hearing him to find out what he has been doing?” (NIV)

Note also that the Greek speaks of the law judging and hearing. If this is unnatural or confusing, an alternative may be:

> “According to our law, can we judge a man before we have listened to him and learned what he has done? No (we can’t)!”

John 19:11a

> Jesus answered [Pilate], “You would have no authority over me at all [οὐδεμίαν ‘not any’] unless it had been given you from above.”

Rephrased:

> Jesus answered, “You only have authority over me **because** it has been given to you from above.”

Jesus is responding to Pilate’s question in **v.10**, “Do you not know that I have authority to release you, and I have authority to crucify you?” It is a fact that Pilate has authority over Jesus, and for this reason it may be better to use a causal connective like *because* rather than a conditional like *if*.

If a conditional can be used in the target language to express something that is assumed to be true, the translator may be able to use both a conditional clause and a causal connective:

> Jesus answered, “If you have any authority over me at all, it is only **because** it has been given to you from above.”

2.3 Other ways to translate the ἐὰν μή conditional construction

There are various reasons why it may not be good to rephrase "*q*, ἐὰν μή *p*" ("*q*, unless *p*") as "~*q*, only if *p*". Here are some examples.

2.3.1 Where q *is affirmative and the usual* p, q *order is used,* ἐὰν μή *can be translated as "if... not"*

Luke 13:3, 5

"No, I tell you; but **unless** you repent, you will all likewise perish." (ESV)

Rephrased:

"No, I tell you; but **if** you **do not** repent, you will all likewise perish."

John 8:24b

"... **unless** you believe that I am he you will die in your sins." (ESV)

Rephrased:

"... **if** you **do not** believe that I am he, you will die in your sins."

Other verses: John 12:24, 15:6; Romans 11:23; 1 Corinthians 14:11, 14:28; James 2:17; Revelation 3:3.

2.3.2 Where the main clause functions as a warning

Another reason why it may not be appropriate to rephrase Luke 13:3, 5 and John 8:24b above as "only if *p*, ~*q*" is that in these verses *q* expresses a warning: "You will all likewise perish," "you will die in your sins". When *q* in "*q*, unless *p*" functions to give a warning, e.g., "I will put you in prison, unless you pay back what you owe," the force would be lost if it were rephrased as "~*q*, only if *p*" "I will not put you in prison, only if you pay back what you owe".

We see this in **Matthew 18:35**, where most English translations use "if you do not forgive" or "if each of you does not forgive"; NIV, however, uses "unless you forgive":

> "So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, **if** you **do not** forgive your brother from your heart." (ESV)

Other verses: Revelation 2:5; 2:22. (Note: in each of these verses, q is affirmative.)

An additional reason why it may not be desirable to reformulate John 8:24b using the "only if *p*, ~*q*" construction is that *q* has been explicitly stated in **John 8:24a**:

> 24a "I told you that you would die in your sins,
> 24b for unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins."

Negating *q* would lead to a contradiction between 24a and 24b:

24a “I told you that you would die in your sins,
24b for **only if** you believe that I am he will you **not** die in your sins.”

For these reasons, paraphrasing John 8:24 using the “only if *p*, ~*q*” construction may be ill-advised.

2.3.3 Difficult clauses to negate

In **John 3:27**, the negative component of the *q* clause is οὐδὲ ἓν ‘not one’. This is translated in various ways in English:

- John answered, “A person cannot receive even one thing **unless** it is given him from heaven.” (ESV)
- John answered and said, “A man can receive nothing **unless** it has been given him from heaven.” (NASB)
- John answered, “No one can receive anything **except** what has been given from heaven.” (NRSV)
- John replied, “No one can receive anything **unless** it has been given to him from heaven.” (NET)

Rephrasing *nothing* or *not... anything* as an affirmative would result in, “A person can receive something....” This puts unnecessary emphasis on what it is that a person receives, and therefore misses the point of the verse. Because of this, the NIV (1984) rephrased this verse avoiding the use of a conditional altogether:

> To this John replied, “A man can receive only what is given him from heaven.”

Other ways to rephrase this include:

- “Everything that a man receives is given him from heaven.”
- “Whatever a man receives is given him from heaven.”

A similar situation occurs in **John 5:19a**:

> Therefore Jesus answered and was saying to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, **unless** *it is* something He sees the Father doing...” (NASB)

The phrase ἀφ᾽ ἑαυτοῦ οὐδὲν is translated variously as “nothing of Himself” (NASB), “nothing of his own accord” (ESV), “nothing by himself” (NIV, NLT), and “nothing on his own” (NRSV); this is difficult to express as an

affirmative. However, in this verse, ἐὰν μή expresses the idea of 'except', and so very few English translations use *unless*. ESV, NRSV, and NET use "but only":

> "the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing." (NRSV)

NIV and NLT create two separate sentences:

> "the Son can do nothing by himself. **He does only** what he sees the Father doing." (NLT)

2.3.4 Where an ἐὰν μή *conditional echoes a previous expression*

In **John 13:8** Peter states, Οὐ μὴ νίψῃς μου τοὺς πόδας "Never will you wash my feet..." to which Jesus replies, Ἐὰν μὴ νίψω σε "Unless I wash you..." This echoes Peter's statement, and changing Jesus' words into an affirmative statement would therefore not be appropriate.

2.3.5 Where an ἐὰν μή *conditional forms a contrastive pair with an affirmative conditional*

There are two conditional constructions in **John 16:7**, a negative one and then its affirmative counterpart:

> "Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for [**if I do not** go away, the Helper will not come to you]. But [**if I go**, I will send him to you]."

Because of this, the first negative conditional should ideally be kept negative in translation. If this is not possible or natural, it can be made affirmative with *only*, and the second conditional "if I go" can be replaced with an affirmation: "only if I go away will the Helper come to you; yes, I will send him to you."

1 Corinthians 8:8 is similar:

> "Food will not commend us to God. [We are no worse off **if we do not eat**,] and [no better off **if we do**.]"

1 Corinthians 9:16 also contains a contrastive pair of conditional sentences, but in this case the affirmative sentence precedes the negative one:

> "For [**if I preach** the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting.] For necessity is laid upon me. [Woe to me **if I do not preach** the gospel!]"

3 Conclusion

As we have seen, sentences containing the Greek conditional construction ἐὰν μή ‘unless’ can often be challenging to translate for a combination of reasons: 1) in the majority of cases, the usual order of protasis (*p*) and apodosis (*q*) is reversed; 2) *p* is inherently negative and in the majority of cases *q* is also negative (or is a rhetorical question expecting a negative response), resulting in a sentence with multiple negative elements; 3) at the pragmatic level, *q* describes something that is expected or that is asserted as the default case, and very often *p* describes the *only* situation or fact that would cause the opposite of *q*.

When translating ἐὰν μή conditionals into languages where an inverted conditional sentence with multiple negatives is unnatural or confusing, I suggest that “*q*, ἐὰν μή *p*” may be rephrased as “~*q*, only if *p*” or “only if *p*, ~*q*.” I showed how this can be applied to various verses, but also discussed a number of cases where “~*q*, only if *p*” may not be a suitable paraphrase of “*q*, ἐὰν μή *p*.”

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