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Conditional Sentences

More on Conditional Sentences

Taking off from page 376 . . .

To delve deeper into conditional sentences, let's begin by taking a second look at the *if* clause in the real future conditional sentence. If you recall, I said that we normally use the simple present in that clause, but I added that there were a couple of exceptions to the rule. That's what we'll focus on here to start things off. These common exceptions rarely appear in student grammar books—and they definitely should.

Check out the following dialogue and see if you can figure out why the speakers haven't adhered to our basic rule of using the simple present in the *if* clause:

A: Good afternoon. DeMarco, Taylor, and Gross. May I help you?

B: Yes, please. May I speak to Mr. DeMarco?

A: Certainly. Your name, please?

B: Tell him Ms. Pizarro is calling.

A: **If you'll hold** the line . . .

C: Hello, Ms. Pizarro! How are you?

B: Just fine, thank you. I'm calling to see if we can set up a date to finalize those contracts.

C: Of course. Let's see . . . **If it will fit in** with your schedule, can we do it the morning of the 18th?

B: Yes, that'll be fine. Shall we say at ten?

C: Perfect.

Hmm . . . Very curious, wouldn't you say? Just off the top of your head, do you have any idea why the phrases in bold seem okay, and do you detect any difference at all between each of our phrases in bold and counterparts in the simple present? If you do, write down your thoughts.

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Before I let you know if you're on the right track, let's compare the first phrase in bold from our dialogue with its counterpart and discover if there's any difference between them:

<p style="text-align:center">If you<u>'ll hold</u> the line, I'll put you through.</p>

<p style="text-align:center">If you <u>hold</u> the line, I'll put you through.</p>

Now check the boxes that work for you:

1. The two phrases mean the same thing: ☐ agree   ☐ disagree
2. There's no difference in register: ☐ agree   ☐ disagree

Very tricky, isn't it? It so happens that there really isn't any important difference in the meaning of the two phrases as used in our dialogue, so for **Number 1** I'd check **agree**. As far as register (formality) is concerned, many native speakers do detect a slight difference with "If you'll hold the line" being more formal. So for **Number 2** I'd check **disagree**.

The reason that "If you'll hold the line" sounds more formal to many speakers is that it shows a little bit of deference to the other person. Believe it or not, in this phrase **will represents a desire or wish to do something**, harking back to the original meaning of this modal auxiliary when it was still a verb in Old English, so we can paraphrase this by saying "If you wish to hold the line" or "If you want to hold the line." By realizing that Speaker B is 'willing' to be patient, Speaker A is demonstrating a sort of deference to the person, making the phrase more formal sounding and a little more polite.

"If you hold the line" seems to many speakers to be a straightforward phrase that contains none of this deference. Realizing this difference makes it more understandable when you hear people use this typical response to the following inquiry:

<p style="text-align:center">A: Shall I make some coffee for our guests?</p>

<p style="text-align:center">B: Yes, if you <u>will</u>.</p>

In this response, Person B could just as easily say *if you'd like to*, *if you care to*, *if you want to*, and so forth. The important thing to keep in mind is that this *if* clause with *will* doesn't focus on the time at all; it focuses on the <u>willingness</u> of the other person to do something.

By the way, there's an alternate word we can use instead of *will* in Person B's response. Can you think of it? Write down the word you think can replace *will*.

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The optional word we can use in place of *will* is **would**. And what do you think the difference is between using *will* and using *would* in this way in the *if* clause?

<p style="text-align:center">☐ *would* is more deferential   ☐ *would* is less deferential</p>

Interestingly enough, many native speakers feel that *would* is **more deferential** than *will* in a response like *If you would*.

In other cases, *would* can show less optimism than *will* on the speaker's part as far as some other person agreeing to do something. Just compare these two mini-dialogues:

<div align="center">

Dialogue 1

A: If you'**ll** listen to reason, I'm sure we can find a solution to this problem.

B: Fine. I'm willing to hear you out.

</div>

<div align="center">

Dialogue 2

C: If you'**d** listen to reason, I'm sure we could find a solution to this problem.

D: Fine. Go ahead. I'm listening.

</div>

I'd never say that there's a major difference between what Person A says in Dialogue 1 and what Person C says in Dialogue 2, but there *is* a slight change. In Dialogue 1 Person A probably feels that Person B will be a little more open-minded to any suggestions. In Dialogue 2, however, it sounds like Person C is a bit more exasperated because he doesn't really think Person D will be open to suggestions.

Of course, emotion and body language can greatly influence how Persons A and C feel as they make their pitches, but as far as language is concerned, there is this slight difference between *will* and *would*.

One last point is that it's important to state again that *will* and *would*, as they appear in these if clauses, don't deal with time but with somebody's willingness to do something.

Now what about that other phrase in bold from the dialogue at the start of this section? Let's take another look at this phrase together with its counterpart and check off the boxes as we did before:
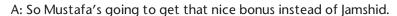
<div align="center">

If it <u>will fit in</u> with your schedule . . .
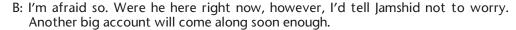
If it <u>fits in</u> with your schedule . . .

</div>

1. The two phrases mean the same thing: ☐ agree   ☐ disagree
2. There's no difference in register: ☐ agree   ☐ disagree
3. There's no difference in the time focus: ☐ agree   ☐ disagree

Well, do the two phrases basically mean the same thing? I'd have to say they do, so for **Number 1**, I'd check **agree**. Now then, is there a difference in register? This time we have to say that most people don't discern any significant difference in formality because it has nothing to do with willingness, so for **Number 2**, I also have to check **agree**. And is there any difference in the time focus? There really is because "If it will fit in" focuses exclusively on some time in the future, whereas "If it fits in" can deal with either right now, general time, or the future, depending on context. So for **Number 3**, I have to check **disagree**.

Nuances with Unreal Present and Future Conditionals

A: Gee, Mr. Buzurg, it's too bad about Jamshid breaking his leg on that skiing trip.

B: Yes, it's a real shame, Miss Khan.

A: If he **were to get back** to the office really soon, could he still give that presentation to Bokhara Textiles?

B: It's too late. Mustafa's already given them the presentation, and they've decided to sign with us.

A: So Mustafa's going to get that nice bonus instead of Jamshid.

B: I'm afraid so. Were he here right now, however, I'd tell Jamshid not to worry. Another big account will come along soon enough.

Once again we find the speakers using shadings in meaning. The shadings to be found in these two phrases aren't of paramount importance for students, so teachers need not focus too much on them when they teach unreal conditional sentences. This doesn't mean, however, that your more advanced students shouldn't be able to recognize what the phrases mean when they hear them or see them in writing—and, of course, it would be wonderful if they learned to use them in writing and in speaking as well.

In our dialogue, Miss Khan could have said *If he go*t back . . . instead of "If he were to get back . . . ," and Mr. Buzurg could have said "If he were here ..." instead of "Were he here . . . ," but they didn't. The question is, do we have the same phenomenon taking place in these two instances as we saw previously?

First let's talk about *were to*. Do you perceive a difference between saying "If he got back ..." and "If he were to get back . . . ?"

☐ yes   ☐ no

If you do perceive a difference, how can you explain what that difference is? Work it out and write it down in your notes if you've got an idea.

. . . .

I have to say that I do indeed feel **there's a difference** between the two phrases. I also have to say that the difference does seem to mirror what we've found, namely, **the degree of likelihood as perceived by the speaker** that the event mentioned can actually take place. Many native speakers would say that even though both sentences are in the unreal conditional form, saying "**If he got back . . .** " **seems to be more likely to occur** in the speaker's mind than "If he were to get back . . . " does. When inserted within the *if* clause, this phrase can also sound **more polite** or **deferential**. Compare the thinking of Speaker A in these three mini-dialogues to see what I mean:

Dialogue 1

A: If I **ask** you to let my great aunt Sophie come live with us, what **will** you say?

B: What do you think I'll say?

Dialogue 2

> A: If I **asked** you to let my great aunt Sophie come
>   live with us, what **would** you say?
>
> B: What do you think I'd say?

Dialogue 3

> A: If I **were to ask** you to let my great aunt Sophie
>   come live with us, what **might** you say?
>
> B: Hmm. That might depend on how long you're
>   thinking of.

Can you see the difference in effect that one form may have from the others? One interpretation is that Speaker A is showing relative optimism in Dialogue 1, but the optimism turns to slight pessimism in Dialogue 2 and a great deal of pessimism in Dialogue 3. It's interesting to note that in the most deferential request (Dialogue 3), Speaker A chose to use *might* instead of *would*. If you remember, in Chapter 8 we discuss this use of *might* for ultra-polite requests, and *might* does seem more appropriate than *would* in this deferential approach.

Before leaving the phrase "If **he were** to get back . . . ," I should talk about the alternate form we have: "**Were he** to get back . . ." How is this form created? Look at the two phrases closely. Do you see any connection between how this first phrase "evolves" into the other and what happened to *should* on pages 365-367 in the book? I'm sure you will see a connection. In fact, the same phenomenon is taking place here. So, how would you explain the way we end up with "Were he to get back . . . ?"

....

Once more we have to go through two steps to reach our target word order. The basic clause is "If he were to get back . . . " Step 1 is to eliminate the word *if*:

<u>If</u> he were to get back . . .

Step 2 is to move *were* to where *if* used to be:

I̶f̶ he were to get back . . .

he were to get back . . .

So we go from *he were* to *were he*. Now I need to ask you if you feel any difference between saying "If he were to get back ..." and "Were he to get back ..."

☐ yes   ☐ no

If you do perceive a difference, what is it? Write down your thoughts.

....

Again, I have to say that I feel **there is a difference** between the two phrases, albeit a minor one. The difference has to do with the level of **register**. Many native speakers tend to feel that saying "**Were he to get**

back . . . " is more formal sounding than saying "If he were to get back . . ." And that's about the size of it.

Now let's talk about Mr. Buzurg saying "*Were* he here right now . . ." By this time you should be an expert on how to form this construction. So, how would you explain the way we end up with "Were he here right now . . . "?

....

....

Once more we have to go through those two steps to reach our target word order. The basic clause is "If he were here right now . . ." **Step 1 is to eliminate the word *if*; Step 2 is to move *were* into the spot where *if* used to be.** Making this change means we go from *he were* to *were he*.

And once more, I have to say that **there's another minor difference** between the two phrases in their **register**. Many native speakers tend to feel that saying **"Were he here right now . . ." is more formal sounding than saying "If he were here right now . . ."**

Before leaving these oddities of unreal present and future conditional sentences, we should take a look at that alternative form of *be* in the present subjunctive that many people use in these sentences, namely, *was*. I've already mentioned that many people say things like "If she <u>was</u> here . . ." instead of "If she <u>were</u> here ..." and that the big difference is that, to many native speakers, the former sounds less educated and/ or less formal than the latter. The question is, are *was* and *were* interchangeable in the two phrases I've been discussing, namely, "If he were to get back . . ." and "Were he to get back . . . ?" What do *you* think?

☐ yes　　　　☐ no　　　　☐ yes and no

In case you haven't already done it, let's try out both forms of the verb in the two phrases and see what we get:

If he <u>were</u> to get back to the office really soon, . . .

If he <u>was</u> to get back to the office really soon, . . .

Well, even though it might hurt the ears of some native speakers to hear *was* used instead of *were* in this clause, I have to say that it is indeed a possible alternative simply because so many native speakers use it. Now let's see if the same thing happens with the other phrase:

<u>Were</u> he here right now , . . .

<u>Was</u> he here right now , . . .

Oops! Sorry. It won't work this time. The answer to my opening question is **yes and no**. Any guesses as to why *was* just doesn't work in the second construction, but it does work in the first one we tried out?

....

There are three reasons. One has to do with **register** again, that level of formality that can at times be so important in language. The first phrase we tried out was not created to make the idea more formal sounding, so it's irrelevant whether we use *were* or *was*. The next phrase, however, is a construction specifically used for more formal-sounding language, and since *was* is considered less formal to begin with by so many native speakers, it would be a totally inappropriate choice to use in this formal construction; in fact, it would actually defeat the purpose. That's the first reason you'll never hear a native speaker say "Was he here right now , . . . "!

The second reason is that "Was he here right now , . . ." sounds like a yes/no question.

The third reason is that in the sentence "If he were here right now , . . ." there are two clues to the "*if*-ness" of the meaning (the words *if* and *were*). Removing the *if* shifts the meaning of *if* onto the word *were* to give the *if*-meaning, which *was* cannot carry. Thus, the sentences must read "*Were* he here right now,..."

Nuances of Unreal Past Conditional Sentences

It's time for you to do some more linguistic sleuthing. Remember those phrases we covered earlier in this chapter that create various shadings within conditional sentences such as "if you happen to" and "if they should"? Well, here they are again! What I'd like you to do is think about each one in the following list and decide if it can be used in an unreal *past* conditional sentence the way it can be used in a real present or future conditional sentence. You'll have to do some detective work on each one before you check the boxes you agree with. To solve this little linguistic mystery, think up an unreal past conditional sentence and transfer each of our phrases into the past to see if it works before you check off any boxes.

Remember, the question is, can each of these phrases be used in an unreal past conditional sentence?

1. If _____ happen to . . .   ☐ it can   ☐ it can't
2. If _____ should . . .   ☐ it can   ☐ it can't
3. Should _____ . . .   ☐ it can   ☐ it can't
4. If _____ by (any) chance . . .   ☐ it can   ☐ it can't
5. If _____ were to . . .   ☐ it can   ☐ it can't
6. Were _____ to . . .   ☐ it can   ☐ it can't

What this task required was some careful thought by creating examples in the past and seeing if my phrases could be plugged into them. Without further ado, here are my answers for you to compare to yours:

1. If you happen to: **it can**   "If you had happened to see her, you would not have believed the color she'd dyed her hair!" Note: Keep in mind that this phrase is the only one in this group that can be used in the negative as well: "She could have gotten into a lot of trouble if you hadn't happened to warn her in time."

2. If you should: **it can't**   "If you should have seen her . . . "? (No way!)

3. Should you: **it can't**   "Should you have seen her . . . "? (Forget it!)

4. If you by any chance: **it can**   "If you by any chance had seen her . . ."

5. If you were to: **it can't**   "If you had been to see her . . . "? (Impossible here because the meaning changes!)

6. Were you to: **it can't**   "Had you been to see her . . . "? (I don't think so since the meaning changes here, too!)

And what about the expression "If it weren't for," its formal counterpart "were it not for," and the reduced form "if not for"? Can these be used in an unreal past conditional sentence?

☐ they can   ☐ they can't

The answer is that they certainly **can**:

<p style="text-align:center">
<u>If it hadn't been for</u> wanton killing, the dodo wouldn't have become extinct.
</p>
<p style="text-align:center">
<u>Had it not been for</u> wanton killing, the dodo wouldn't have become extinct.
</p>
<p style="text-align:center">
<u>If not for</u> wanton killing, the dodo wouldn't have become extinct.
</p>