Future time reference in the conditional protasis in English and French: a corpus-based approach

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FUTURE TIME REFERENCE IN THE CONDITIONAL PROTASIS IN ENGLISH AND FRENCH: a corpus-based approach

1. Introduction

Future time reference in the protasis is problematic both in French and in English. English grammarians first adopted the rule that 'the present tense is […] used in *if*-clauses with the main verb in the future […] But *if … will* implies volition'[1], until Close (1980) put forward a fruitful distinction between 'assumed predictability' and 'assumed future actuality', non-volitional *will* being ruled out only in the latter case. In French, neither the future tense nor the conditional can occur in conditional *si*-clauses even if 'assumed predictability' is at stake. This discrepancy suggests that the neutralisation of future time reference in conditional *if*-clauses and in *si*-clauses might be governed by different factors. This paper attempts to give an enunciative account of this difference using data extracted from both a translation corpus[2] and from English and French source texts.

2. T-based conditional clauses

Following Wyld's analysis of subordination (2001), a distinction may be drawn between T-based protases, which are concerned with the existential location of the apodosis in spatio-temporal terms, and S-based protases, which modalise the apodosis from a subjective point of view. This distinction impinges on the link between the protasis (henceforth p) and the apodosis (henceforth q) and on temporal reference within each clause. Turning first to T-based protases, it is well-known that English and French both disallow future time reference :

(1) "**Si tout va bien**, dit Franck, nous pourrions être en ville vers dix heures et avoir déjà pas mal de temps avant le déjeuner." (A. Robbe-Grillet, *La jalousie*, Intersect)[3]
'**If all goes well**,' Franck says, 'we'll be in town by ten and have an hour or two before lunch'.
(2) "Quand même, dit Franck, **si le moteur est neuf**, le conducteur n'aura pas à y toucher." (*La jalousie*, Intersect)
'All the same,' Franck says, '**if the motor is new**, the driver will not have to fool with it.'

In (1) and (2), the protasis constructs a fictitious locator for the apodosis. Therefore p has to be disconnected from the situation of utterance and the verb tense of the protasis resists referring to future time. This function is carried out by the apodosis, both in French and in English. However, the reasons for this common restriction are quite distinct. Neither the future tense nor the conditional can be employed in T-based *si*-clauses because *si* implies a possibility of choice between two pathways[4]. In (1), *si tout va bien* cannot eliminate the alternative value, i.e. *if something went wrong*. This possibility of choice is in contradiction with the future tense which implies the selection of a single value. In English, the modal auxiliary *should* plays a specific role in conditional clauses, unlike *will*, *would* and *shall* :

(3) **If I should die** from the attack of brigands, the negligence of a rural physician, or the venom of a viper, you shall be the cause, Mademoiselle Evelina ... (J. Barnes, *Cross Channel*, "Melon")
Si je devais mourir victime d'une attaque de brigands, de la négligence d'un médecin de campagne ou du venin d'une vipère, ce serait de votre faute, Mademoiselle Evelina…(J.-P. Aoustin, Outre-Manche, "Melon")

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[1] Jespersen (1932 : 2.5(4)). This rule is still taken for granted by most French learners of English even at an advanced level.
[2] For lack of space, only a selection of these examples is cited in this paper.
[3] Some examples are taken from the Intersect Corpus (University of Brighton). I am most grateful to R. Salkie for giving me access to these files.
[4] See Culioli (1999 : 95).

(4) - Et moi, dit Andrew Stuart, qui était, comme toujours, très nerveux, **je le verrais** je n'y croirais pas. (J. Verne, *Le Tour du Monde en 80 jours*)

'Why,' said Andrew Stuart nervously, '**if I should see him**, I should not believe it was he.' (*Around the World in 80 Days*)

In (3) and (4), *should* is not replaceable by *would*. This difference is explained by Bybee (1995 : 512-513) as follows :

"[…] *Should* appears frequently in *if*-clauses with only hypothetical meaning, while *would* appears rarely in *if*-clauses and then only with volitional meaning. Thus *should* has come to signal pure conditional or hypothetical in conditional sentences, while *would* maintains some of its volitional content in first person and *if*-clauses."

I agree with Bybee that *should* is devoid of root values in conditional clauses, but in my view this is not sufficient to regard should as a 'pure conditional', because the shift towards epistemic modality blocks any kind of enunciative neutrality. In (3) and (4), *should* constructs a fictitious event that is contrary to the speaker's norm[5]. In (3), the speaker seeks to avoid dying or being killed. In (4), the fictitious event is unlikely. In other words, the realisation of p is not aimed at by the speaker because it goes against his subjective norm[6]. Only the apodosis is vouched for by the speaker in the event of p. By contrast, non-volitional *will* and non-deontic *shall* cannot occur in T-based protases because they involve the speaker's commitment to the realisation of the future event. A protasis cannot provide a stable existential locator for the apodosis and at the same time evince the speaker's commitment to the realisation of p. The use of *should* in the protasis complies with this principle, since the protasis containing *should* conflicts with the speaker's norm.

Moving on to French, both the future tense and the conditional tense are able to construct an existential locator in a subordinate clause. In this respect, they differ from their equivalents in English. The most striking difference between the two languages appears in temporal clauses, future time reference being treated as a hypothesis in English :

(5) **Quand Bachir sera là demain**, il lui servira d'interprète. (A. Gide, *L'immoraliste*, Intersect)

When Bachir comes tomorrow, he will be able to interpret. (D. Bussy)

(6) The major objectives of the work will only be achieved **when and if industry itself exploits** commercially and profitably the results. (*Esprit*, Intersect)

Les principaux objectifs des travaux ne seront atteints que **lorsque l'industrie pourra** elle-même en exploiter les résultats de façon rentable.

In English, *when*-clauses cannot contain a verb form denoting future time reference and may be viewed as functioning in a similar way to T-based *if*-clauses, which allows for *when* and *if* to be coordinated in (6). A distinction may be drawn between these clauses and temporal clauses with past reference, which require past tenses to refer to the past. In French, whatever the temporal reference of a temporal clause may be, it is denoted by appropriate tenses. The future tense thus denotes future time in (5) and (6) and as such, temporal clauses with future time reference function in a similar way to any other temporal clauses. They involve temporal verb forms, unlike temporal clauses with future time reference in English, in which verb forms may only take on an aspectual value (see Wyld 2001 : 94). The present tense in the temporal clauses in (5) and (6) does not refer to future time. It serves to disconnect the T-based locator from the situation of utterance. As shown by Wyld, future time reference is thus transferred to the main clause, which in turn draws on the *when*-clause to denote future time reference.

3. S-based conditional clauses
3.1. Echo phenomenon[7] vs. assertion

Will / *would* occurring in conditional clauses should not always be taken as volitional. As shown by Close (1980), a further distinction has to be drawn between 'assumed predictability' and 'assumed future actuality' :

(7) **If the slick will come as far as Stavanger**, then of course I must take precautions on a massive scale (Close : 1980)

(8) **If it may be raining**, you should take your umbrella (Lyons 1977: 805)

(9) a. **If the price comes down in a few months**, I'll buy one. [sc. *Then*]

b. **If the price will come down in a few months**, I won't buy one [sc. *Now*] (Huddleston 1995 : 427)

As pointed out by Close, the speaker is "assuming predictability" in (7). He is not "making a prediction to assumed future actuality." This distinction concurs with that which is made by Huddleston (1995) concerning (9). In (9 a), the conditional clause constructs a fictitious locator disconnected from the situation of utterance

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[5] See Gauthier (1981: 342).

[6] See Wyld (2001: 169-170).

[7] This concept is borrowed from Huddleston (1984 : 376-377) and Bouscaren & al. (1992: 70).

which conditions the future actualisation of q (*then*). In (9 b), the conditional clause serves to evaluate a preconstructed relation at the time of utterance (*now*). The speaker thus assumes "present predictability". The status of the protasis directly relates to this distinction. In (7), (8) and (9b), the protasis is a preconstructed utterance that expresses what Lyons calls objective epistemic modality. Objective epistemic modality results from back-reference, epistemic modality originating from another subjective origo, be it another speaker or the addressee. The evaluating process at work here may be glossed by "if it is true that" (Close : 1980) or "as you say" (Decleck & Depraetere 1995 : 296). The conditional clause is temporally independent and does not condition the validation of the apodosis. Any verb form referring to the future may occur in the conditional clause as long as modality is preconstructed because the speaker's point of view is not involved in this 'echo utterance'. Epistemic modality in S-based conditional clauses is simply reported by the speaker, which has a consequence on the relation obtaining between p and q :

(10) **If you will be using your car more than fifteen days**, which isn't all unlikely, the daily rates <u>drop</u> quite sharply to 86 a day for the Fiat 500 and to an infinitesimal 30 a day for the Fiat 2100 Station Wagon. With six in the group, the cost <u>comes</u> to just a nickel a day per person on the daily fee. (Corpus Brown)

(11) They walked a little farther, then he said, 'We'd better turn back **if we're going to have that drink**. And you'll be getting cold.' (LOB)

In (10), the underlined verb forms in the present tense refer to properties which are valid independently of p. The speaker constructs a series of possible situations with which the target customer may identify. It should be stressed here that in English, the difference between S-based and T-based conditional clauses is crucial to epistemic modality and future time reference. However, this difference is not relevant to the use of the future tense in French. Whatever the status of the protasis, *si* precludes future time reference and the future tense cannot be used in (10) and (11). Only specific verbs in the present tense may render back-reference into French : *si vous vous apprêtez (if you are about to) à utiliser votre voiture plus de quinze jours / si nous voulons (if we want to) prendre un verre*. Unlike *will* and *be going to* in *if*-clauses, the future tense in *si*-clauses cannot echo another speaker's utterance. The reason for this deep difference between French and English is that the future tense in French remains temporally located relative to the time of utterance, which prevents the conditional clause from referring back to a subjective origo other than the speaker himself. Turning now to our translation corpus, it is worth pointing out that the status of the conditional clause may change in the translation :

(12) There is so much desperation and people are under so much pressure that they feel that, this time, this is it. It's either us or them. And **if they're going to bomb us and level us to the ground**, then so be it. (*Le Monde Diplomatique*, novembre 2000)

Il y a tellement de désespoir et les gens subissent de telles pressions qu'ils pensent que le moment est venu : ou eux ou nous. Et **s'ils nous bombardent et nous réduisent en cendres**, advienne que pourra. (French Edition)

In English, the speaker appropriates p as a result of the evaluation of p and thereby accepts the realisation of p in q. This evaluating process may be glossed by "if it is true that they are going to bomb us and level us to the ground, then so be it." Subjective evaluation is not maintained in the French translation, the conditional clause shifting to a T-based function : "if it is the case that p, then q will happen."

In French, the future may only occur in *assertive* subordinate clauses. Causal clauses such as "Puisqu'ils (*since*) nous bombarderont" or "comme (*as*) ils nous bombarderont" allow back-reference and evaluation as shown by this gloss : "since / as it is true that they are going to bomb us…" Unlike *si*, *puisque* and *comme* introduce a real assertion whose validity is vouched for by the speaker. However, the future tense cannot appear in a fictitious assertion in French. According to Grévisse (§1098), the future may occur in assumptions which postulate an underlying predicate such as "if it is true that". Evidence from our corpus shows that this claim needs qualifying. Example (12) does meet this condition, which is not sufficient to allow the future tense. As noted by Riegel, Pellat and Rioul (1994 : 509), the future tense cannot be used in *si*-clauses unless contrast is involved. This claim is confirmed by our corpus, the future tense being encountered in concessive *si*-clauses especially in journalese :

(13) But if the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians deteriorates seriously, as it very well may after Ariel Sharon's election as prime minister on 6 February, the Bush administration will have no choice but to engage - at least for purposes of crisis management - **even if longer-range policy objectives will not be formulated until the end of this year**. (*Le Monde Diplomatique* Février 2001)

Mais si le conflit entre Israël et les Palestiniens se détériore sérieusement, et cela pourrait se produire au lendemain de l'élection du premier ministre israélien, le 6 février, l'administration Bush n'aura pas le choix. Elle devra gérer la crise, **même si elle ne formulera ses objectifs à long terme que d'ici à la fin de l'année**.

(14) Mais ce que les socialistes ne voient pas […] c'est ce qui se profile réellement au bout de la route. En premier lieu, une déferlante électorale si forte (**même si elle sera très fortement amplifiée par le mécanisme du mode de scrutin majoritaire**, à savoir environ 40 % des voix, 80 % des sièges pour l'UPF,

en l'état actuel des intentions de vote), qu'elle conduise à une élection présidentielle, rapprochée ou non, victorieuse pour la droite, c'est-à-dire pour M. Chirac. (*Le Monde*, Intersect)

But the Socialists fail to see what is really shaping up at the end of the line. First, that such a massive tidal wave in the elections, highly amplified by the majority voting system, with about 40 per cent of the votes and 80 per cent of the seats for the opposition as a whole, is leading to a victory for a rightwing president, that is Jacques Chirac, at an early date or in 1995 when the residential election falls due. (*Guardian Weekly*, Intersect)

In these utterances, q is first asserted, then qualified by p which occurs sentence-finally. Although the notional orientation of p is contrary to that of q, q is not called into question. The existential status of p is preconstructed and its stability is not jeopardised by *même si* (*even if*). This stability results from the relation obtaining between p and q. P and q are both assertive utterances, the speaker committing himself as to the validity of both p and q, even though *même si* indicates that p is deviative. In this respect, concessive utterances differ from the 'echo utterances' examined in (7) to (11), where the English protases reflect the point of view of a subjective origo different from the speaker's. In French, the future tense may only evince the speaker's point of view in an assertive utterance. This also accounts for the historical use of the future in conditional clauses :

(15) **S'il** [Maupassant] **ne la dépassera pas** [la nouvelle "Boule de Suif"], c'est qu'on ne dépasse pas la perfection. (Thibaudet, cited in M. Grévisse §1068)

If Maupassant was not to surpass this short-story is testimony to the perfection that he had attained therein. (Transl. by Henry Wyld, University of Cergy-Pontoise)

The existential status of the *si*-clause is preconstructed, as highlighted by the gloss "Indeed he never surpassed this short-story". Subjective involvement thus allows for the cause of p to be evaluated in q.

3.2. Justification of a speech act

The causal relation obtaining between p and q may be exploited pragmatically both in French and in English, more specifically in protases occurring sentence-finally. In this way the speaker is seen to specify reflexively the motivation of his own speech-act (see Wyld 2001 : 209-219) :

(16) 'I'll read it to you, shall I, **if I won't be intruding** ?' (R. Rendell, *A Judgement in Stone*)

Je vais vous la lire **si je ne suis pas indiscrète** ? (M.-L. Navarro, *L'analphabète*)

(17) I wondered whether you were not, **if you will excuse the word**, an angel come to show me the way. (J.M. Coetzee, *Age of Iron*)

Je me suis demandé si vous n'étiez pas – **passez-moi le mot** – un ange, venu me montrer la voie. (S. Mayoux, *L'âge de fer*)

In (16) and (17), the motivation of the speech-act is justified by p. In (17), the speaker predicates a property of the grammatical subject ("you - be an angel"), and at the same time attempts to justify the lexical choice of the word "angel" by appealing to the hearer. In (16), the speaker justifies her offer to read the letter by trying to persuade the hearer that she is not intruding. *Will + be-ing* allows back-reference to the speech-act in q, and the offer may thus be taken to be "not intruding". In French, the future tense cannot occur in such a fictitious appeal to the hearer in an attempt to justify q as a speech-act.

4. Conclusion

In French, the future tense implies subjective involvement on the part of the speaker and appears in assertive utterances. Therefore, it may be found in the protasis with either historical or concessive meaning. Corpus data shows that this should not be considered as an exception to the 'rule' and it would be interesting to explore the extension of this use in journalese from a diachronic point of view. In English, future time reference and modality within the protasis depend on the relation obtaining between p and q. Future time reference is impossible in T-based protases. However, this rule does not apply to S-based protases because they imply that modality is indexed to an origo other than the speaker. Future time reference in S-based protases makes up 5% of the whole corpus, and may thus be deemed marginal. However, frequency depends on the type of text investigated. Future time reference in S-based protases is found mainly in dialogue and in journalese, which are more often than not disregarded by traditional grammars. Nonetheless, these texts do reflect actual use and can thus contribute to improving our understanding and teaching of this topic.

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KEY-WORDS

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