

Commentary on Lycan's "Conditional-Assertion Theories of Conditionals"*

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The overall strategy of Lycan's paper is to distinguish three kinds of conditional assertion theories, and then to show, in order, how they are variously afflicted by a set of problems. The three kinds of theory were the Quine-Rhinelander theory (or the Simple Illocutionary theory), The Semanticized Quine-Rhinelander, and the No Truth Value theory (or NTV). This strategy offers considerable clarity, but it comes at a cost, for what I take to be the best version of a conditional assertion theory contains core parts of all three theories. In what follows, I will suggest that many of the objections offered by Lycan can be dealt when all the pieces are taken into consideration at the same time. But I will also suggest that a refined version of what Lycan called the Immediate Implausibility objection does show us that the conditional assertion theory is false.

Conditional Speech Acts

Before we can say how a conditional assertion theory can deal with Lycan's objections, we need to know what a conditional speech act is or could be. This is especially pressing since Lycan *seems* to think that there are no conditional speech acts, or at least doubts that the conditionality of conditional questions,

* This paper was originally presented as a commentary to Bill Lycan's Keynote address at the "What 'If?' Perspectives on Conditionals" at University of Connecticut, Storrs, 2006. Lycan's paper "Conditional-Assertion Theories of Conditionals" has since been published in J.J. Thomson (ed.), *Content and Modality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

commands, requests, bets, and so forth is of the kind that is needed for a conditional assertion theory of declarative conditionals.

The kind of speech act conditionality that Lycan explicitly acknowledges is the kind where the locutionary content of the main clause of a conditional is defective unless the antecedent is true.

- (1) If Sheila owns a heavy overcoat, please borrow it for me.

You obviously cannot borrow something that doesn't exist, so the main clause of (1) cannot express a request unless the antecedent is true. But such explanations are available in only a few of the cases that are intuitively understood as conditional speech acts. Consider the case of a mother's order, from Edgington:

- (2) If you go out, wear your coat.

The child can presumably wear his coat even if he doesn't go out: the request clearly isn't cancelled in *that* way.

In Edgington's story, the child cannot find his coat and stays indoors not to disobey the order that would be effected if he were to go out. Lycan responds that he cannot see the difference between not disobeying and obeying: the child is simply obeying the order. It is easy to sympathize with that reaction, and it is clear enough why one wants to say that the boy did obey his mother. He has intentionally refrained from acting in a way that would be disobedient. But this doesn't carry over to the next example:

- (3) If Janet is coming to the party, please keep Ted away from the wine.

For all we know, the addressee might very well be able to keep Janet from the party. But the speaker has expressed no preference that can be satisfied by keeping Janet from the party: that was not the communicative purpose of the request. The communicative purpose, it seems, only concerns the case in which Janet is actually coming to the party.

I believe that this is the key to understanding conditional speech acts. What we intuitively take to be a conditional speech act is a sincere utterance of a sentence that

- (A) has a communicative purpose that can only be achieved given some condition, P, such that

- (B) the utterance doesn't presuppose that P holds.

The normal communicative success of ordinary *unconditional* speech acts always relies on a number of conditions, but these conditions are all

presupposed when we make these speech acts. Not so for conditional speech acts: here, the antecedent condition is not presupposed.

I have used imperative conditionals for illustration here. The conventional communicative purpose of imperatives, of course, is to bring the addressee to perform the indicated action. In the cases of imperative conditionals just mentioned, the performance of the indicated action depends on the antecedent, but the antecedent isn't presupposed. The same notion of a conditional speech act can be told about money bets, the conventional communicative purpose of which is that the pot is distributed among the people who bet on the winning proposition. It can also be applied to at least *some* conditional interrogatives, as in (4), for example:

- (4) Before I know what to say to him, I need to know the following.
Did John drop the vase? And if he dropped it, does he have insurance?

The defining communicative purpose of a question is to get an answer, and it certainly isn't obvious that the speaker has expressed any interest in learning whether John has insurance in case he didn't drop the vase. However, our use of conditional interrogatives is not in general restricted like this. Take:

- (5) If I miss the five o'clock, will the ticket be good for the next departure?

Uttering (5), a speaker presumably wants his question answered whether the antecedent turns out to be true or not. My feeling is that most conditional interrogatives are like this. What, then, about conditional declaratives?

The Conditional Assertion Theory of Declarative Conditionals

Let us call the hypothesis that *declarative conditionals are conventional means of making conditional assertions* the "conditional assertion theory of declarative conditionals", or "CA" for short. According to CA, the conventional communicative purpose of declarative conditionals would be that the addressee accepts the consequent *given* that the antecedent is true. The purpose can be fulfilled only if the antecedent is true, but the antecedent is not presupposed when declarative conditionals are used to make conditional statements.

Caveat: Stephen Barker ("Towards a Pragmatic Theory of 'If'", *Philosophical Studies* 79 1995, pp. 185-211) says interesting things about how to accommodate non-conditional conditionals in a conditional assertion theory, in effect generalizing the account to conditions that are unnecessary

for satisfying the assertive purpose, but necessary for producing a felicitous speech-act: “I bought some cookies if you will be hungry later”, “He dealt with it, if you know what I mean”. I will ignore those here, concentrating on cases where the consequent doesn’t seem to be straightforwardly asserted.

Here are some fairly straightforward consequences of CA:

Conventional Truth-Conditions: If a declarative conditional is used to make a conditional assertion, then something true has been asserted just when antecedent and consequent are both true and something false has been asserted just when the antecedent is true but the consequent false. If CA were correct, declarative conditionals would be conventionally used to make conditional assertions, and it would thus make sense to talk about this as giving conventional truth-conditions of declarative conditionals.

Focus on assessment conditions rather than truth-conditions: Most interesting cases where we assess whether to accept a declarative indicative conditional are cases where we do not know whether its antecedent is true or not. Consequently, what we assess when we assess indicative conditionals in order to decide whether to accept them or not, is not whether their conventional truth-conditions hold or not, but whether the doxastic or epistemic prerequisites for asserting them are satisfied. A corollary of this is that our intuitions concerning the logic of conditionals are similarly tuned to assertability rather than truth. Depending on how much weight we put on this condition, we might downplay conventional truth-conditions and market CA as NTV. But I won’t say more about that.

Conditions of relevance: If declarative conditionals are conventional means for making conditional assertions, they will bring a conventional assumption of relevance. There is no point in making a *conditional* assertion rather than a straightforward one unless the antecedent cannot be taken for granted and, for example, (a) one’s confidence in the consequent depends on one’s confidence in the antecedent (call these cases of “positive” relevance) or (b) someone thinks, or could think that the antecedent would undermine confidence in the consequent (call these cases of “negative” relevance).

Expressions of Conditional Belief: If declarative conditionals are conventionally used to make conditional assertions, then they will conventionally express conditional belief just as ordinary categorical declaratives express categorical beliefs. The reason for this is simply

that conditional belief is the minimal doxastic prerequisite for making or accepting a conditional assertion.

In the last part of my commentary, I will look at how this combination of features fares with Lycan's objections. I will suggest that most of the objections that Lycan list look rather weak when directed at this combined view, but that one family is substantially strengthened.

Responding to Objections

Begin with the *TT objection*, which states that, contrary to Jeffrey's and Belnap's accounts, not any two truths, P and Q can be combined to yield an acceptable conditional if P, Q. Take:

- (6) If Manhattan is an island, many people in this room will have breakfast tomorrow.

It seems unacceptable, even though both antecedent and consequent surely is. This objection loses all or most of its force once we take into account that conditional assertions will come with a conventionalized presupposition of relevance. Now, Lycan acknowledges the possibility of this kind of explanation and rejects it. But he gives no argument as far as I can tell.

The same reply goes for the objection that being in a state of conditional belief is insufficient for accepting the corresponding conditional. According to CA, conditional belief is the doxastic prerequisite for making a certain conditional assertion. But to find it acceptable to encode this belief in a declarative conditional, we must also see how conventionalized conditions of relevance can be satisfied. CA can thus explain the fact that I am unwilling to accept (6) even though I believe that many people in this room will have breakfast tomorrow conditional on Manhattan's being an Island (believing both *simpliciter*).

Next, consider the objection from *contraposition*. The problem that Lycan reminds us of is that neither semanticized accounts nor NTV validates contraposition. But this doesn't look very serious once we take into account that contraposition doesn't seem generally plausible for declarative conditionals. For example, contraposition doesn't work for:

- (7) If it rains, the game will (still) not be cancelled.

hence

- (8) If the game will be cancelled, it doesn't rain.

Nor does it work for:

- (9) I bought some biscuits if you're hungry.

hence

- (10) If you're not hungry, I didn't buy any biscuits.

But it works for:

- (11) If it is raining, the game will be cancelled.

hence

- (12) If the game isn't cancelled, it isn't raining.

The cases in which it works are cases in which the truth of the antecedent would be a sure sign of the truth of the consequent. In such cases, whatever makes it the case that the truth of the antecedent would be a sure sign of the truth of the consequent also typically makes it the case that the negation of the consequent is a sure sign of the negation of the antecedent. And CA has no problem explaining why declarative conditionals are acceptable when the antecedent would be a sure sign of the consequent. So the Contraposition objection seems to be deflected rather easily. In fact, I think that the restrictions on contraposition strengthen CA, rather than the other way around.

The *disjunction* objection can be treated in almost exactly the same way. Not all declarative conditionals seem to be synonymous to disjunctions, but those who do are cases where the negation of one disjunct is a sure sign of the truth of the other. And for the same reason, the *Entailment* objection carries little weight. Having grounds for accepting a true universal generalization guarantees having grounds for accepting a corresponding conditional, even if the conditional doesn't follow *logically* from the generalization.

I will skip the Subjunctive Parallel objection, because I am unable to say much of value in a few minutes, and because I believe that Dorothy Edgington will have better things to say about that issue tomorrow, anyway. That leaves the objection from *Immediate Implausibility* and trouble with conditionals embedded in antecedents of other conditionals, or in disjunctions, or as the propositional objects of actions or attitudes.

Lycan's objection from Immediate Implausibility departs from the fact that many, if not all, cases of declarative conditionals clearly do seem to assert something, even when it isn't clear that the antecedent is true. For example, if I am telling someone that the vase they are holding will break if it is dropped, it certainly *seems* that I have asserted something, and similarly if I tell someone that he will have to buy the vase if he breaks it. That might seem like a strong objection indeed to a conditional assertion theory, for it goes straight to its heart.

The hope for the defense of CA is to explain away the *appearance* of assertion, and that might well be possible. For example, it might be

suggested that whether or not the antecedent of a declarative conditional turns out to be true, communication using conditional assertions will depend on the communication of conditional belief. In order for the hearer to be ready to accept what is asserted by a declarative conditional if the antecedent turns out to be true, she has to form the relevant conditional belief – there are no “ifs” about that. That could explain the impression of unconditionality.

Of course, the same is true about the case of conditional commands. In order to be prepared to obey a conditional command, I need to form a conditional intention. However, in this case, the further step to actually performing the action should the antecedent turn out to be true is phenomenologically salient. In the case of conditional assertions, by contrast, the move from forming the conditional belief to forming an unconditional belief in the consequent is considerably more subtle: the transformation from conditional belief to belief *simpliciter*. For that reason, we might simply *fail to notice the conditionality* of the further communicative purpose of conditional assertions. It thus seems that CA has a response to the objection from Immediate Implausibility.

The Independent Point Objection

However, using our notion of a conditional speech act, we can sketch a stronger, although perhaps less immediate argument. The problem with the conditional assertion theory is that it simply isn't true that the conventional communicative point of uttering a declarative conditional is that the hearer should accept the consequent if the antecedent holds. Rather than being *the* communicative point of declarative conditionals, that is just one of many possible communicative points all of which relies on the unconditional communicative purpose of making the addressee accept the conditional.

What I take to be the crucial aspect of the cases that make CA immediately implausible is that the general conventional communicative point is *independent* of whether the antecedent is true or not. Call this the Independent Point objection. Telling someone that the vase will break if dropped is to tell him something that we think can be used for a variety of purposes: not only to infer that it is broken from the fact it has been dropped, but also that it hasn't been dropped when it isn't broken, or to make someone else break it, or to prevent it from being broken, or to make someone who is familiar with it think that it has been broken by making her think that it has been dropped. And so on. Similarly, telling someone that the vase doesn't break even if it is dropped, tells us something that can be used for a variety of purposes, not just or even primarily for the purpose of coming to think that

the vase isn't broken. If this is true, CA is false: declarative conditionals are not, conventionally, means of making conditional assertions. And if the corollaries to CA – conventional truth-conditions; focus on assessment conditions rather than truth-conditions; conditions of relevance; and expressions of conditional belief – are nevertheless true, they are not true because of CA.