

Conditionality and Temporality: A Comparative Study of Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese

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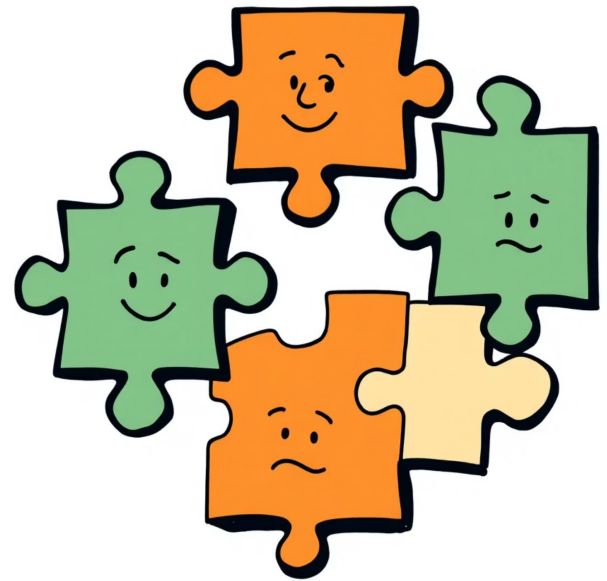
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Conditional Constructs Across World Languages

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The Conditional Puzzle

Why do languages encode the same logical relationship (conditionality) through such radically different morphosyntactic strategies?



Traditional conditional types

Type	Example	Reality Status
Generic/Habitual Factual/Real/Indicative	<i>If water freezes, it expands. If it rains, the grass gets wet.</i>	Timeless truth, regular pattern
Hypothetical/Predictive	<i>If it rains tomorrow, the match will be canceled.</i>	Possible
Epistemic	<i>If the lights are on, she's home.</i>	Reasoning (P grounds for concluding Q)
Speech-act Relevance (Biscuit)	<i>If you need help, call me. If you're hungry, there are biscuits on the table.</i>	Pragmatic (advice, offer, promise) Irrelevant to truth
Counterfactual/Irrealis	<i>If it had rained, we would have stayed home.</i>	Unreal, contrary to fact

(cf. Austin 1956, Lewis 1973, Lyons 1977, Comrie 1986, Sweetser 1990, Iatridou 2000, Dancygier & Sweetser 2005, a.o.)

Motivation for the present study

- Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese offer an ideal testing ground for these questions.
 - Japanese and Korean express conditional relations through verbal suffixes and/or connective morphology that encode temporal, modal, and discourse relations.
 - Vietnamese, in contrast, is analytic, relying on conditional particles and word order to signal dependency relations, with no inflectional morphology for mood or tense.
- By comparing how these three languages encode conditionals, the present study examines whether:
 1. The standard semantic typology (factual, hypothetical, counterfactual, epistemic, ...etc) is morphosyntactically supported in these languages.
 2. Some conditional constructions in these languages do not fit neatly into existing categories, suggesting the need for typological refinements (e.g. topic-marked conditionals, pragmatic conditionals).

Conditional systems in Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese

Vietnamese conditional system: Compositional-lexical strategy

Basic structure:

particle + Protasis + (*thì/là* 'then') + Apodosis

Marker	Primary use
<i>nếu</i>	General hypothetical
<i>khi</i>	Temporal generic
<i>cứ</i>	Multifunctional
<i>hễ</i>	Habitual/factual
<i>Mỗi khi</i>	Iterative/habitual

Vietnamese examples

- (1) **Nếu** trời mưa thì trận đấu sẽ bị huỷ
 COND sky rain then match FUT PASS cancel
 'If it rains, the match will be canceled.' [Hypothetical]
- (2) **Nếu** nhà ga ở gần thì tôi đã không phải dậy sớm
 COND station be.at near then 1.SG PST NEG must get.up early
 'If the station were nearby, I wouldn't have had to get up early.' [Counterfactual]
- (3) a. **Khi/*Nếu** mùa xuân về thì thời tiết sẽ dịu hơn
 COND spring return then weather FUT mild more
 'If/When spring arrives, the weather gets warmer.'
- b. **Mỗi khi/cứ khi/hễ** mùa xuân về thì thời tiết sẽ dịu hơn
 COND spring return then weather FUT mild more
 'Whenever spring comes, the weather gets warmer.' [Generic/Habitual]
- (4) **Hễ** rẽ phải thì sẽ thấy nhà băng.
 COND turn right then FUT see bank
 'If/As soon as you turn right, you will see a bank.' [Immediate]

Vietnamese examples: **Cứ** multifunctionality

- (5) Sufficient condition (*P alone sufficient for Q*)

Cứ/*Nếu có tiền thì mua gì cũng được.
COND have money then buy what also possible
'If you just have money, you can buy anything.'

- (6) Instruction

Anh **cứ** rẽ phải thì sẽ thấy nhà băng.
2.SG COND turn right then FUT see bank
'If you just turn right and you will see a bank.'

- (7) Procedural/mechanical

Anh **cứ** bấm nút này thì/là nước sẽ chảy ra
2.SG COND press button this then water FUT flow out
'If you just press this button, water will flow.'

- (8) Warning

Anh **cứ** ở đây thì/là sẽ bị mắng đấy.
2.SG COND stay there then FUT suffer scold PART
'If you stay there, you will be scolded.'

Vietnamese conditional system: Compositional-lexical strategy

Key Characteristics

No Verbal Inflection

- All tense marking through free particles
- Aspectual layering rather than morphological inflection.
- Verbs remain morphologically invariant across contexts

Conditional structures rely on:

- Sentence-initial particles (*nếu, khi, cứ, hễ*)
- Linking particles (*thì/là*)
- Temporal/aspectual markers

Aspectual distinctions through particles

- *khi*: neutral temporal
- *hễ*: punctual/immediate consequence
- *cứ*: persistent/sufficient condition
- *mỗi khi*: iterative/habitual

Compositional Flexibility

- Particles combine: *nếu...thì..., khi...thì...*
- Optional temporal markers: *sẽ* (FUT), *đã* (PAST)

Japanese conditional system: 4-way suffixation

Basic structure:

Protasis-**COND** + Apodosis

-to

Co-occurrence & Factual Relations

Indicates co-occurrence between protasis and apodosis: *when P happens, Q also happens*. The apodosis expresses a factual or generic consequence.

- Used in factual and generic conditionals
- No volition, command, or intention allowed in apodosis
- Signals automatic or invariant relation

-ba

Hypothetical & Potential Conditions

Marks the protasis as hypothetical (a virtual or potential condition whose realization remains uncertain).

- Expresses logical, causal, or potential relations
- Compatible with volitional or evaluative apodoses
- Typical of reasoning conditionals

-nara

Presupposed & Discourse-Given Conditions

Expresses a contextually given or presupposed condition that must be satisfied for the apodosis to hold. Excluded from generic use.

- Used when P is discourse-given or assumed
- Often combined with *n(o) → n(o)-nara*
- Marks contextual relevance or speaker stance

-tara

Irrealis & Maximum Flexibility

Opens an irrealis or hypothetical space, disconnecting the situation from reality. Most flexible among all conditional types.

- Used for temporal, hypothetical, and counterfactual meanings
- Protasis often nominalized with *n(o)-dat(tara)* in speech-act conditionals
- Signals temporal succession or unrealized result

Japanese examples

- (9) *Haru-ni naru-to/naru-ba atatakaku naru*
spring-NOM come-COND warm become.NON.PST
'When/If spring comes, the weather gets warm.'
- (10) *Ame-ga fure-ba/fut-tara shiai-wa chûshi ni naru.*
rain-NOM fall-COND match-top cancellation DAT become.NON.PST
'If it rains, the match will be canceled.'
- (11) *Samui-(n)-nara mado-o sime-yô-ka?*
cold-NOM-COND window-ACC close-VOL-Q
'If (as I observe) you are cold, shall I close the window?'
- (12) *Kane-sae are-ba/aru-nara, nan demo dekiru.*
money-only exist-COND whatever can do
'If/As long as you just have money, you can do anything.'

Japanese examples: *-nara* Presuppositional

- *-nara* may be used to create a presupposed (back)ground for the apodosis.

(13) Responding to the interlocutor's statement

A: *I'm going to Japan.*

B: *Nihon-ni iku-n-nara tomodachi-o shôkai-shi-yô.*
Japan-DAT go-NOM-COND friend-ACC introduce-MOD.VOL
'If (as you say) you are going to Japan, I will introduce a friend.'

(14) Based on direct observation

Samui-(n)-nara mado-o shime-yô-ka?
cold-NOM-COND window-ACC close-VOL-Q
'If (as I observe) you are cold, shall I close the window?'

(15) Established or presupposed fact

ame-ga furu-nara, shiai-wa chôshi ni naru.
rain-NOM fall-COND match-TOP cancellation DAT become.NON.PST
'If (given that) it rains, matches are canceled.' (known rule)

Korean conditional system: Binary semantic split [$\pm$ Hypothetical]

Basic structure:

Protasis-**COND** + Apodosis

Marker	Feature	Distribution
-(u)myen	[$\pm$ hypothetical]	All contexts
-tamyen	[+hypothetical]	Restricted

Key structural feature:

- Binary system (unlike Vietnamese 5+ markers or Japanese 4 markers)
- Distributional asymmetry between two markers

Korean examples

I. Both *-(u)myen* and *-tamyen* allowed.

- (16) *Pi-ka o-myen/n-tamyen kyengki-ka chwisotoy-lkesi-ta.*
rain-NOM fall-COND/PRES-COND match-NOM cancel-FUT-DEC
'If it rains, the match will be canceled.' [Hypothetical]
- (17) *Yek-i kakawu-ess-umyen/tamyenphyenha-ss-lkesi-ta.*
station-NOM close-PST-COND convenient-PST-FUT-DEC
'If the station had been close, it would have been convenient.' [Counterfactual]
- (18) *Ton-man iss-umyen/tamyen mwuesitun ha-lswuiss-ta.*
money-only have-COND whatever do-can-DEC
'If you just have money, you can do anything.' [Sufficient condition]

Korean examples

II. Only *-(u)myen* allowed.

- (19) *Pom-i o-myen/n-*tamyen nalssi-ka ttattushay-ci-n/ulkesi-ta.*
spring-NOM come-COND/PRES-COND weather-NOM warm-INCHO-PRES/FUT-DEC
'When/If spring comes, the weather gets warm.' [Generic]
- (20) *Olunccok-ulo tol-myen/n-*tamyen unhayng-i iss-ta.*
right-DIR turn-COND/PRES-COND bank-NOM be-DEC
'If you turn right, there is a bank.' [Instruction]
- (21) *I pwupwun-ul nwulu-myen/n-*tamyen mwul-i nao-n/lkesi-ta.*
this part-ACC press-COND/PRES-COND water-NOM come.out-PRES/FUT-DEC
'If you press this part, water comes out.' [Procedural]
- (22) *Keki-ey iss-umyen/*tamyen honna-n/lkesi-ta.*
there-LOC be-COND/ scolded-PRES/FUT-DEC
'If you stay there, you'll be scolded.' [Warning]

Distribution pattern in Korean:

Context type	-(u)myen	-tamyen
Eventuality	✓	✓
Counterfactual	✓	✓
Generic causality	✓	X
Instruction	✓	X
Procedural/mechanical	✓	X

-tamyen is blocked when $P \rightarrow Q$ describes:

- Natural regularities (e.g. spring $\rightarrow$ warmth)
- Spatial facts (e.g. turn right $\rightarrow$ bank is there)
- Mechanical procedures (e.g. press button $\rightarrow$ water flows)

All three contexts share: non-hypothetical, regular, stable relations

Conditional types across three languages

Conditional Type	Vietnamese	Japanese	Korean
Eventuality	✓ <i>nếu</i>	✓ BA, TARA	✓ both forms
Sufficient condition	✓ <i>chỉ cần, cứ</i>	✓ BA, NARA, TARA	✓ both + <i>-man</i>
Instruction	✓ <i>cứ, hễ</i>	✓ BA, TO, TARA	✓ only -(u)myen
Generic/Habitual	✓ <i>khi, mỗi khi</i>	✓ BA, TO, TARA	✓ only -(u)myen
Presuppositional	∅ not marked	✓ NARA, TARA	∅ not marked

Hybrid conditional types/subtypes at semantic-pragmatic interfaces

Conditional type	Core semantics	Cannot be reduced to	Reason
Sufficient condition	If P (alone), then Q is guaranteed	Generic/factual Hypothetical	- Requires scalar semantics (minimality). Speaker evaluates P as “enough” - Describes actual sufficient relations, not potential scenarios
Procedural/mechanical	If you do P, mechanism Q results	Generic	- Describes system mechanics, not natural regularities
Instructional/spatial	If you do P, You will find/reach Q	Epistemic Predictive	- Q is not inferred but pre-existing. Directive force combined with prediction - Q already exists, not future outcome
Warning	If you do P, (bad) Q will happen	Predictive Speech-act	- Not a neutral prediction. Deontic speech act combined with causal prediction - Consequence is factual/causal, not merely pragmatic condition (not neutral advice)
Presuppositional	Given that P (known/observed), then Q	Epistemic Speech-act	- Goes beyond reasoning. Condition already established as background - Not just pragmatic. P's truth is presupposed, not asserted

Temporal marking in counterfactuals in three languages

Vietnamese counterfactuals: Past particle đã

Basic Structure:

Nếu + Protasis + **thì** + **đã** + Apodosis

The past marker **đã** typically appears in the consequence clause (apodosis).

(23) **Nếu** *nhà ga* *ở* *gần* *thì* *tôi* **đã** *không* *phải* *dậy* *sớm*
COND station be.at near then 1.SG **PST** NEG must get.up early
'If the station were nearby, I wouldn't have had to get up early.'

(24) **Nếu** *chúng ta* *dùng* *dây xích chống trượt* *thì* *xe* **đã** *không* *bị* *trượt*
COND 1.SG.PL use chain anti-slip then car **PST** NEG suffer slip
'If we had used snow chains, the car wouldn't have slipped.'

Free Particle Status
Past marker **đã** is a free particle, not bound to the verb through inflection.

Unmarked Protasis
The protasis verb remains unmarked—no tense morphology in the condition clause.

Apodosis Placement
Appears primarily in the apodosis (consequence clause), signaling unrealized outcomes.

Counterfactual Signal
Đã explicitly signals that the consequence is unrealized and contrary to fact.

Real vs. Counterfactual Contrast in Vietnamese

Real Future Conditional

Nếu nhà ga ở gần thì **sẽ** rất tiện
COND station LOC near then **FUT** very convenient
'If the station is nearby, it will be very convenient.'

- Uses future marker *sẽ* in apodosis
- Describes a possible, open scenario
- The condition may or may not be fulfilled
- No implication of contrary-to-fact status

Counterfactual Conditional

Nếu nhà ga ở gần thì tôi **đã** không phải dậy sớm
COND station LOC near then 1.SG **PST** NEG must get.up early
'If the station were nearby, I wouldn't have to get up early.'

- Uses past marker *đã* in apodosis
- Describes an impossible, contrary-to-fact scenario
- The condition was definitely not fulfilled
- Strong implication: reality contradicts the condition

❏ The choice between *sẽ* (future) and *đã* (past) in the apodosis determines whether the conditional expresses an open possibility or a counterfactual scenario.

Japanese counterfactuals: with *-noni*

Basic Structure:

Protasis-**ASP**-COND + Apodosis-**PAST** + *noni*

Past suffix *-ta* appears in both clauses, with the counterfactual particle *noni* marking that the contrary is true.

- (25) *Chēn-o* *tuke.te.ire.BA,* *subera-nakat-ta-noni*
chain-ACC attach-RESUL-COND slip-NEG-PST-NONI
'If we had put on snow chains, (the car) wouldn't have slipped.'
- (26) *Chēn-o* *tuke.re.BA,* *subera-nakat-ta-noni*
chain-ACC attach-COND slip-NEG-PST-NONI
'If you put on snow chains, it wouldn't have slipped.'
- (27) *Chēn-o* *tuke.re.BA,* *subera-nai-noni*
chain-ACC attach-COND slip-NEG-NONI
'If you put on snow chains, it wouldn't slip (but you're not doing it).'

Counterfactual marking

Particle *noni* explicitly marks counterfactual or contrary-to-expectation meaning.

Conditional suffixes

Works with *-TO*, *-BA* and *-TARA* conditional suffixes for structural flexibility. The scope of '*noni*' may be different (only on the apodosis in (25), on the sentence in (26)). *-NARA* may be used if the clause in the protasis is marked by *-ta*(PST). Counterfactual sentence without *-ta*(PST) is not common/usual.

Real vs. Counterfactual Contrast in Japanese

Generic Conditional

Eki-ga *chikakat-TARA* *benri-da*
station-NOM near-COND convenient-COP
'If the station is nearby, it is convenient.'

Uses copula *da* without counterfactual marking. This describes a generic causal chain. The fact that the station is nearby entails that it is convenient. Therefore, *-to* and *-ba* are also acceptable. As discussed earlier, *-nara* is used only when the context allows the speaker to think that the protasis would be taken for granted.

Counterfactual Conditional

Eki-ga *chikakat-TARA* *benri-na-noni*
station-NOM near-COND convenient-COP-NONI
'If the station were nearby, it would be convenient.'

Uses *noni* to mark counterfactuality. This signals that the station is NOT close in reality, making this a contrary-to-fact conditional expressing an unrealized state.

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- ❏ The particle *noni* is the critical marker that transforms a real conditional into a counterfactual one, signaling that the proposition runs counter to actual circumstances.

Korean counterfactuals: obligatory –ess in both clauses

Basic Structure:

Protasis-**PAST**-COND + Apodosis-**PAST-FUT**

Past marker –ess is obligatory in both clauses

- (28) *Sunowu cheyin-ul cangchakha-ess-umyen/tamyen cha-ka an mikkuleci-ess-lkesi-ta*
snow chain-ACC put.on-**PST**-COND car-nom NEG slip-**PST-FUT**-DEC
'If we had put on snow chains, the car wouldn't have slipped.'

- (29) *Yek-i kakawu-ess-umyen/tamyen phyenha-ess-lkesi-ta*
station-NOM near-PST-COND convenient-PST-FUT-DEC
'If the station had been close, it would have been convenient.'

Conditional Flexibility

Works with both *-(u)myen* and *-tamyen* conditional suffixes without semantic difference.

Present Counterfactuals

Aspectual particles like *-ltheyntey* can mark counterfactuals with regret or wish:

Sunowu cheyin-ul cangchakha-ess-umyen cha-ka an mikkuleci-ess-ultheyntey.
'If we had put on snow chains, the car wouldn't have slipped (but you didn't do that, I regret it).'

Real vs. Counterfactual Contrast in Korean

Real Future Conditional

No Past Marking

Yek-i kakawu-myen phyenha-lkesi-ta
station-NOM near-COND convenient-FUT-DEC
'If the station is nearby, it will be convenient.'

- Conditional suffix *-myen* without past *-ess-*
- Future suffix *-lkesi-* in apodosis
- Describes an open, possible scenario
- No implication about current reality

Counterfactual Conditional

Obligatory Past in Both Clauses

Yek-i kakawu-ess-umyen phyenha-ess-lkesi-ta
station-NOM near-PST-COND convenient-PST-FUT-DEC
'If the station were nearby, it would be convenient.'

- Past *-ess-* obligatory in protasis
- Past *-ess-* + future *-lkesi-* in apodosis
- Describes a contrary-to-fact scenario
- Strong implication: station is NOT close

📖 **Morphological Explicitness:** The presence or absence of *-ess-* in both clauses categorically distinguishes real from counterfactual conditionals. This obligatory dual-clause marking makes Korean counterfactuals the least ambiguous system cross-linguistically.

Summary for counterfactual conditionals

Language	Past Marking	Location	Obligatoriness
Vietnamese	<i>đã</i> (particle)	Apodosis only	Required
Japanese	<i>-ta</i> (suffix) + <i>noni</i>	Both clauses + particle	Not mandatory
Korean	<i>-ess</i> (suffix)	Both clauses	Obligatory

- Vietnamese and Korean use **PAST morphology** for counterfactuals, with past signaling **exclusion from present reality** (cf. Iatridou (2000)), while Japanese uses the modal particle *-noni*, which allows a temporal marking in the sentence: present vs. past event.

Conclusion and Remaining puzzle

Standard typology recognizable but incomplete

- The standard conditional categories (factual, hypothetical, counterfactual, epistemic, ...etc) are recognizable across Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese.
- However, our data also reveals intermediate or hybrid uses:
 - Sufficient condition, procedural/mechanical, warning/instruction, and presuppositional readings.
- These patterns do not call for revising the existing typology, but they invite consideration of more nuanced or refined subtypes, particularly where conditional meaning interacts with discourse context and aspect.

The counterfactual marking puzzle

Three languages, three strategies for marking counterfactuals:

Language	Counterfactual strategy
Vietnamese	Past marker <i>đã</i> in apodosis only
Japanese	Specific counterfactual particle <i>-noni</i> (past <i>-ta</i> not obligatory)
Korean	Past <i>-ess</i> in both clauses + future <i>-lkesi</i> in apodosis

- *Why is counterfactuality expressed through **different combinations of temporal markers**?*

Why does Vietnamese restrict counterfactual marking to the apodosis only?

*Why does Japanese require a dedicated particle (*noni*) instead of tense alone?*

Why does Korean require both PAST+FUTURE?