

Clarifying the limits of conditionality using semantic map analysis

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In order to fruitfully discuss “the various ways in which natural languages worldwide express conditionality”¹ it is important to establish what is meant by “conditionality”. There is general agreement that conditional constructions describe “hypothetical scenarios”² in that “they do not express either the truth or the falsity of p or q ” (Comrie 1986: 80), but this covers a range of cases, including counterfactual conditionals, in which p is assumed to be false (although in English this is an implicature, as shown by the possibility of Arsenic conditionals) and “reality conditionals” (Longacre & Hwang 2007), in which p is assumed to be true, say, for the sake of argument (‘If all men are mortal, and Socrates is a man, then Socrates is mortal’), or when p describes a habitual or generic situation (‘If you step on the brake, the car slows down’). These are both situations in which conditional constructions *are used* to express situations in which p is known to be true or false, but which do not *encode* the truth or falsity of p or q . However, in the case of ‘concessive conditionals’, q is asserted, but the label ‘conditional’ has been used nevertheless owing to the fact that, in many languages, the subordinate clause in such constructions has the form of a conditional clause modified by a scalar additive, such as English *even if* (Haspelmath & König 1998).

I will show that ‘conditional’ is neither a cross-linguistic generic category such as aspect, tense, number, or person (Boye 2010), nor a language-specific descriptive category such as Russian Perfective aspect, or French Feminine noun; rather, I will argue that it is a cross-linguistic comparative concept in the sense of Haspelmath (2010, 2012, 2018; see also Beck 2016). That is, ‘conditional’ is not a natural kind or pre-determined category, but a theoretical concept that allows linguists to compare how different languages express a particular range of meaning. As such, no definition of conditionality is right or wrong, only “more or less well suited to the task of permitting crosslinguistic comparison” (Haspelmath 2010: 665).

Conditionality is typically conceived as an abstraction from the range of meanings expressed by ‘conditional constructions’ in European languages, but I will suggest that semantic maps (Croft 2003; de Haan 2010; Haspelmath 2003; van der Auwera & Plungian 1998) provide a more principled way to define conditional as a comparative concept. Furthermore, semantic maps can reveal related comparative concepts that might be better suited to describing and comparing certain languages, particularly a number spoken outside of Europe. Building on the semantic map of conditionality proposed by Mao (2013), I will look at what such concepts might look like if based on the descriptive categories that best describe various non-European languages.

¹ Sharma, 2025. Call for papers, *Conditional Constructs Across World Languages*, <https://conawl-2025.sciencesconf.org/>

² Sharma, 2025.

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