

Indicative versus subjunctive in future conditionals

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Jonathan Bennett (2003), in his wonderfully clear and persuasive book, *A Philosophical Guide to Conditionals*, continues a debate concerning conditionals about the future. For conditionals about the past there is a clear contrast between so-called indicative and subjunctive conditionals. For most people the contrast is typified by a familiar family of incompatible pairs of sentences such as

If Shakespeare did not write *Hamlet* someone else did

If Shakespeare had not written *Hamlet* someone else would have

The first of these is assertable, given normal beliefs about the world, and the second is not, so the 'did/would have' contrast seems to mark a difference in meaning. I'll call these 'Adams pairs', since the first examples were due to Ernest Adams.¹ I'll assume familiarity with the basic use of Adams pairs to make an indicative/subjunctive distinction. Most people on absorbing the distinction are inclined to classify many future tense conditionals, such as

If Bill won't write the play, someone else will

with subjunctive 'did/would have' past-tense conditionals. Bennett argues against this, urging us to classify 'will/will' and 'is/will' conditionals with indicative 'did/did' ones. Bennett's claim is strong: not only are future tense conditionals usually of the indicative variety, but we cannot use these grammatical forms to express subjunctive conditionals. In this paper I shall contest this latter claim, focusing on paired examples in the familiar family. So the central task is to show that there are Adams pairs set in the future.

We are commissioning a play for the centenary of our town's founding. It is a tricky job, since it has to be bland enough not to offend various antagonistic groups, and interesting enough to bring in an audience. The

¹ For references to earlier stages of the debate, involving Bennett, Dudman, Edgington and others, see Bennett 2003: 13–15, 350–54. For the history of Adams's examples see Bennett: 7–12. I shall count as Adams pairs both pairs of incompatible conditionals (if-1 *p* then *q*, if-2 *p* then *q*), and pairs of compatible conditionals (if-1 *p* then *q*, if-2 *p* then not *q*).

commissioning is delegated to the town manager who assures you, the mayor, that he has signed up the only person capable of doing the job. You are pretty certain he said he had signed up Bill Bard, but it is just possible that he had mentioned Chris Chandler. Rehearsals will have to be soon, and you are worried because you have heard that Bill does not always fulfil his commissions. In reporting the situation to the town council you say that Bill has been commissioned and go on to express your worry, with the words 'It's too late to commission anyone else. If Bill won't write it, no one will.' Later in the discussion, someone wonders whether the town manager really would have given the job to someone as laidback as Bill. You say you are sure that this is what he has done, but add 'If Bill isn't going to write it, Chris will.'

These two conditionals are both consistent with your beliefs, in spite of their appearance of contradiction. They are a future-tense Adams pair. So, sometimes, in a suitable conversational context, the contrast between 'will/will' and 'going to/will' can parallel the contrast between 'did/would' and 'was/is'. In this example instead of saying 'if Bill isn't going to write it' you could have said 'if it isn't Bill who is going to write it', just as in the standard examples one could say 'if it wasn't Shakespeare who wrote *Hamlet*'.

In this example it is hard to use the words 'If Bill won't write it' to communicate what 'if Bill isn't going to write it' does. But in other examples the very same words can be used to communicate both senses. We see in the distance a bomb that – we think – is wired to explode if anyone touches it. That's our working assumption, for which we have loads of evidence, but we know that just occasionally dud bombs are left around. The non-duds are clearly marked with orange paint, though, so our brave agent, Lara, won't be so foolish as to touch it if it is a live one. We see Lara go up to it and in the fading light we can't tell its color. Since we have good reason to believe that the bomb is live we say

If Lara touches it, it will explode

A slightly larger context might be 'If Lara touches it, it'll explode. So of course she'll leave it alone'. A cumbersome way of saying the same is 'It will be the case that if she had touched it, it would have exploded.'

On the other hand since we are sure she wouldn't do anything stupid, and she can see what color it is, we know that her touching it will be a sign that it is a dud, and therefore will not explode. So we can also say

If Lara touches it, it will not explode

A slightly larger context might be 'Lara won't touch a live bomb. So if Lara touches it, it won't explode.' A cumbersome way of saying something similar is 'It will be the case that if she did touch it, it didn't explode.'²

Both of these could be assertable. So they must be used to communicate different thoughts. The present tense in the antecedents of both is used to indicate a future possible event, so here we have an Adams pair where exactly the same words are used to communicate the two thoughts.

It should not be surprising that there are incompatible pairs of conditionals with the same future-directed component sentences, and where the 'if' construction signals an indicative conditional in one and a subjunctive conditional in the other. After all, to deny this would be to come close to denying that we can think subjunctive if-thoughts about the future. But we surely can, and we can express them at least in the clumsy form 'It will have been the case that if p had happened q would have happened.' My claim is that we have a much less cumbersome device for doing this, straightforward conditionals where both antecedent and consequent allude to the future. The examples above seem to show this. One might object that all they show is that there are Adams-like pairs of future conditionals where the pairs of sentences express different thoughts, not that the difference between them is of a piece with the indicative/subjunctive contrast in regular Adams examples.

This worry is a complicated one, since it asks us to say what the indicative/subjunctive distinction really amounts to. A partial answer can be given in terms of Bennett's own criteria for distinguishing indicative and subjunctive. Early in the book Bennett uses a criterion of 'zero-intolerance', that 'nobody has any use for' an indicative conditional when they assign the antecedent a probability of 0 (54–57). This gives the right answers in our cases. Suppose that you are completely absolutely 100 per cent sure that it is Bill who will write the play, then you have no use for 'If it is not Bill who will write it then Chris will', or for that matter for 'If it is not Bill who will write it then no one will'. You don't care which of them is right and you don't see how evidence could sway you either way. And similarly if you are certain that Lara will not touch the bomb, then the conditional 'If Lara touches it, it will not explode' *understood in the second way above*, is a pointless assertion. On the other hand even if you gave no credence to Bill's writing the play or Lara's touching the

² Note the cautious wording. Tense operators and indicative conditionals must be combined with care. At the time of uttering the 'touches/not explode' conditional we may not know whether at a later time we might know that she did not touch it, making the 'didn't touch/didn't explode' conditional collide with the zero-intolerance principle. A better equivalent might be 'if our information does not change then it will be the case that if she didn't touch it, it didn't explode'. The outer conditional here is – I think – subjunctive.

bomb, you could be very interested in which of the subjunctive-seeming conditionals to believe. 'If Bill won't write it no one will' says that we are in a real fix and had better find some substitute for the play. 'If Lara touches it, it will explode' understood the first way, says that the bomb is live, so no one else had better touch it either.

Bennett has another, subtler criterion (336–42). Indicative conditionals are rarely used, he says, as part of an explanation of their antecedents or their consequents. They are much more often used as parts of inferences to the best explanation of facts, often facts about evidence available to us, that are independent of both antecedent and consequent. For example we are likely to use the claim 'If Shakespeare didn't write *Hamlet* someone else did' as part of an explanation of why we have texts of *Hamlet* which certainly seem to be texts of a sixteenth century play written by someone. Subjunctive conditionals, on the other hand, often form parts of explanations of their antecedents or consequences. We might assert 'If Shakespeare hadn't written *Hamlet* no one would have' as part of an inference to the best explanation of Shakespeare's authorship: no one else was up to it. This criterion, too, is friendly to the claim I am defending. A natural use of 'If it isn't Bill who will write it then it is Chris' is to explain or sustain the speaker's confidence that the play has been assigned. And a natural use of 'If Bill won't write it no one will' is to prepare for a later explanation of why the play didn't get written.

A related way of putting the point, though not one Bennett uses, is that indicative conditionals are typically used in repairing systems of belief after buffeting by unwelcome evidence. Saying that if S didn't write H someone else did signals the speaker's intention to hold on to the existence of the play and the general facts about Elizabethan drama in the eventuality that S's authorship is doubted. This too fits the claim. The 'indicative' sense of 'if L touches it, it will not explode' signals the speaker's intention to hold on to L's good sense in the eventuality that she does something unexpected. Subjunctive conditionals on the other hand are typically predictive and explanatory applications of systems of belief. Saying that if S hadn't written H no one else would have, sums up our information about S's uniqueness in a form that could explain the absence of some plays that S did not write but no one else did. The application here is primarily intellectual play or exercise; it becomes more serious when the events are in the future. The 'subjunctive' sense of 'If L touches it, it will explode' prepares us for explaining why it exploded, even though we do not expect that it will.

These differentiae are all rough and exception-ridden. I would take them all as very fallible signs. (I suspect Bennett would take them more seriously, as part of a project to explain the kinds of conditionals in terms of their inferential roles. I would think that what we are doing is more

like explaining the difference between 'spider' and 'insect' than that between 'and' and 'but'. But this is not the issue here.) They do all point in the same direction, though. They point in the same direction that a much more naive criterion would: subjunctives have something to do with causal powers and indicatives have something to do with belief revision. When we say that if L touches it, it will (or will not) explode, we can be talking about the nature of the bomb. That's the subjunctive reading. Or we can be talking about what we would conclude given the information that she has touched it. That's the indicative reading.³ You can't tell them apart just by the words they wear.

The conclusion that there are future-directed Adams pairs shouldn't be very surprising, even if it is awkward for some theories. The conclusion that sometimes the members of such a pair are expressed in the same words is more striking. It is evidence that the link between the words we choose and the conditional thoughts they express is pretty flexible. The considerations I have produced here are much too weak to determine quite how flexible the link is. But they should suggest that there is place for a different rhetoric in the philosophy of conditionals. We can describe what we are doing not as classifying the assertions we make but clarifying and distinguishing the thoughts we express.

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Reference

Bennett, J. 2003. *A Philosophical Guide to Conditionals*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

³ The differentiae only push in this direction if we assume that there is a robust indicative/subjunctive distinction to be extended from past to future conditionals. As Arif Ahmed has persuaded me in very helpful comments on a draft of this paper, these considerations have less force against an 'anti-realist' view which sees subjunctives, whatever their tenses, as a special kind of indicative, directed at a special kind of belief revision. That is why I said that Bennett's differentiae give grounds for a partial answer to the worry. It has force only within the space on which Bennett and I agree.