

On the Emergence of Anticonditional Meaning

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It has been known since Geis (1973) that *unless* is not equivalent with *if... not*. The latter licenses negative polarity items such as *at all*, whereas the former does not:

- (1) a. If you do not like cabbage at all, you do not need to eat it.
 b. *Unless you like cabbage at all, you do not need to eat it.

The possible formalization of *unless* has caused much debate; Traugott (1997:145f) lists a number of suggestions, and also Dancygier (1998ff) as well as Declerck & Reed (2000, 2001:chapter 13) discuss *unless* extensively. Clearly, neither native speaker intuitions nor corpora studies have so far led to any final answer concerning the formal meaning of *unless*. In this talk, I will take an alternative approach.

First, by scrutinizing the semantic origins of grams with the meaning ‘unless’, I will derive the formal meaning of grams meaning ‘unless’ from their respective source constructions (cf. Bybee *et al* 1994, who introduce the concepts of source determination and meaning retention). I will concentrate on Old Swedish *utan* (cf. Rosenkvist 2004:chapter 4) and Old English *butan* (Varnhagen 1876, Mitchell 1985, Traugott 1997), but also the German *ausser* (*wenn*) will be discussed. My proposal is that the source constructions of all of these grams can be formalized as $(p \wedge \neg q)$, which matches the meanings of ‘without’ and ‘except’. This formal meaning is synonymous with one of the possible formalizations of ‘unless’, namely: $\neg (p \rightarrow q)$ (when the latter type of meaning appears in natural language I will call it anticonditional). Considering that these formalizations are formally synonymous, I will suggest that the interpretation of grams such as Old English *butan* or Old Swedish *utan* (both meaning ‘without’, ‘except’ or ‘unless’) accordingly was influenced by the syntactic environment in which the grams appeared. If a clause headed by *butan/utan* was understood as an adverbial modification of another (matrix) clause, then an anticonditional interpretation emerged, while the meanings ‘without’ and ‘except’ appeared in other cases. The adversative meaning is a later development, I will argue.

Second, it will be shown that the meanings ‘except’ and ‘unless’ in many languages are lexicalized by the same gram. E.g. Latin *nisi*, Hebrew *’hutz*, Arabic *’illa* all express these meanings; furthermore, *’hutz* is also related to a locative meaning (‘outside’), just as *butan*, *utan* and *ausser*. This is a synchronic indication that these meanings are related to each other. To conclude, the formal meaning of *unless* has yet to be established. Previous research have mainly turned to native speaker intuitions and corpora studies in the search for the meaning of *unless*. By taking a diachronic approach I demonstrate that there is a semantic correlation between ‘without’, ‘except’ and ‘unless’. The fact that these meanings are lexicalized by the same gram in several languages also points to this conclusion, and I argue that the relation between these meanings is of a formal semantic nature.

Literature

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