

If I had half a brain: Polarity sensitive idioms in conditional clauses

JACK HOEKSEMA
University of Groningen

1 Introduction

Polarity items have distributional limitations which have puzzled linguists ever since Klima (1964) came up with the first formal and explicit account of English *any* and its ilk. A class of environments that has been recognized from the start as relevant to the analysis of polarity items is that of conditional clauses, more precisely the protasis of a conditional. Polarity items may appear there without the support of negation (in spite of the fact that they do fail the tests for downward entailment; cf., e.g., von Stechow 1999). In the following examples, a sequence of conditional clauses provides a home for a variety of polarity items, rendered in boldface for easy detection:

- (1) If it helps **any**, I love you. [Episode of *Love Boat*]
- (2) If I get my car back **any** different than I gave it, Monster Joe's gonna be disposing of two bodies.
[from *Pulp Fiction*, Quentin Tarantino, 1994]
- (3) If **ever** a man could wheedle his way into a wench's affections, it was Edgar. [Michael Jecks, *The Bishop Must Die*]
- (4) You don't comply with the conditions if you **budge** from the office during that time.
[Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*]

The above examples, all involving clauses introduced by *if*, are pragmatically diverse. Example (1), for instance, is a biscuit conditional (cf. Austin 1956; Rawlins 2020), example (2) would count as a threat (cf. Lakoff 1969; Czipak 2014 for discussion of the difference between threats and promises with regard to polarity licensing), and examples (3) and (4) are neither. Counterfactual conditionals may also host polarity items:

- (5) Had he **ever** been in the way of learning, I think he would have drawn very well. [Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*]
- (6) If **anyone** had **ever** replaced the top layer of blotting paper, Solly's gym would have ground to a halt. [Bryce Courtenay, *The Power of One*]

The protasis part need not have the form of a regular conditional clause:

- (7) You **lay a hand on** her **ever** again, and I will take you out. [Episode of *Nash Bridges*]
- (8) You **breathe a word** of this to Buffy and I'll see to it that you end up in the ground. [Episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*]
- (9) What do you expect to gain from seeing Sarah-Jane Beckett, assuming you can **even** find her? [Elizabeth George, *A Traitor to Memory*]

Presumably cases such as (10), with an infinitival subject as host, can be viewed as belonging to the conditional supercategory as well, given their conditional interpretation, as shown by the possibility of paraphrases such as (11), and their dependence on modal elements such as *will* or *may* (compare 12).

- (10) Measuring a particle, or disturbing it **in any way**, will cause the superposition to “decohere” or collapse. [*Washington Post*, October 23, 2019]
- (11) The superposition will “decohere” if you measure or disturb a particle in any way.
- (12) Measuring a particle (*in any way) caused the superposition to “decohere” or collapse.

An interesting and rather problematic case is that of conditional *with/without* (discussed in Reuneker 2016; Hoeksema 2022):

- (13) With **any** luck, we will be on time.
[= If we have any luck, we will be on time.]

(14) Without **some** luck, we won't be on time.

In a corpus search for polarity items licensed by conditional *with*, only the string *with any luck* stood out. Other cases that might seem feasible do not ring true:¹

(15) ? With any booze, we can have a party.

(16) ? With any money, we should buy a car.

(17) ? With any books, we could start reading.

So this looks like a lexically restricted pattern. With non-polarity items, conditional readings are more easily available, both in English and in Dutch. Compare for example:

(18) With some more booze, this party could get a lot wilder.

(19) With your talent, I would have made captain at 25.

2 Polarity items that shun conditionals

Not all polarity items were created equal. Whereas well-known items such as *any* and *ever* are generally accepted in conditional clauses, various others are not. The Dutch modal auxiliary *hoeven* and its German and English counterparts *brauchen* and *need* are not licit in conditional clauses (Zwarts 1981; van der Wouden 2001). The following examples may illustrate this (they are not glossed but all have the same meaning):

- (20) a. * Please let us know if you need eat.
b. * Laat het ons a.u.b. weten als u hoeft eten.
c. * Bitte lassen Sie uns wissen, wenn Sie zu essen brauchen.

Note that the semi-auxiliary *need* (which is followed by *to*) is not polarity-sensitive, and may appear in all sorts of contexts, including conditional clauses, without any licensing elements:

¹ Marcin Morzycki (p.c.) pointed out that the examples in (15) to (17) sound better when *at all* is added. This seems like a case of parasitic licensing (Den Dikken 2006; Hoeksema 2007): In some cases, licensing of a polarity item is made possible by the addition of another polarity item.

- (21) a. We need to eat.
b. Please let us know if you need to eat.

An interesting exception to the ungrammaticality of cases such as (20a) is provided by the fixed expression *if need be*.

Hoeksema (2012) also lists *anymore* as shunning conditionals (in varieties of English which lack positive *anymore*), and the class of temporal expressions exemplified by *in ages*, *in years*, *in decades*, *in weeks* etc. Compare:

- (22) *Let me know if you have seen her in ages.

The gap does not seem to be random. Not only does it hold for the entire set of *in X* expressions, it also applies to their Dutch counterparts:

- (23) *Als je haar in tijden hebt gezien, laat het me weten.
if you her in times have seen let it me know
'If you have seen her in ages, let me know.'

3 Aweridical conditionals

Rullmann (2003:349) mentions *either* as a polarity item that fails to appear in conditional clauses. However, he cites an example by Larry Horn (p.c.) that is fully acceptable:

- (24) I didn't take semantics. I'll be damned if I take pragmatics, **either**.

Horn (1989:348) gives similar examples with *until*. Let's call conditionals such as the above *averidical*. A note on terminology: Aweridical conditionals are to be distinguished from counterfactual conditionals. They are not about what might have happened under different circumstances. In particular, the apodosis is not to be taken literally. Taking or not taking a class in pragmatics is no cause for eternal damnation, as far as I can tell, based on the limited information on this subject in the Bible. Rather, *be damned if* has an additional, idiomatic use in which it expresses a negative intention. In its most typical use, it is first person: *I'll be damned if I do that = I won't do that*. Third person use is possible too, provided the perspective of the third person is taken, for instance in reported speech (*He said he would be damned if he took another semantics class*) or free indirect style. Since this use appears to be connected to the formulation of intentions, it is future-oriented. It may

be in the past tense, but only to express past intentions: *He would be damned if he took another class with Professor Rullmann, the student muttered.* Note that we should not confuse averidical *be damned if* with another frequent idiomatic use: *You will be damned if you do and damned if you don't*, which is reserved for situations in which there is no attractive path forward. Intentions play no role here. The latter use is fine with second person pronouns (generic or otherwise), unlike the former use. After all, it is pretty strange to tell your interlocutor what their intentions are.

Besides negative intentions (by far the most common case), epistemic interpretations may also be involved sometimes with averidical conditionals. The Cambridge online dictionary states for the expression *be hanged if* the following: “used to express your determination not to do something or not to allow someone else to do something.” In addition to this, however, it also lists the idiom *I'll be hanged if I know*, which it describes as being “used to say that you certainly do not know.” The epistemic state of not knowing is presented as a certainty, by using the common assumption that people do not fancy being hanged, and so would only offer that option if they knew it to be vacuous.

Averidical conditionals are idiomatic and cannot be freely formed. E.g., *I will be dead if I know what you mean* or *I will swallow poison if I take semantics* do not strike me as acceptable alternatives to the *damned/hanged* cases. It is also worth pointing out that the order of protasis and apodosis is fixed. The following example, while grammatical, appears to have a literal reading only:

(25) If I take another semantics class, I'll be hanged.

Dutch has a fairly wide variety of idioms that serve in averidical conditionals. Here is a list of cases I have encountered:

- | | | | |
|------|----|-------------------|------------------|
| (26) | a. | mogen doodvallen | ‘may drop dread’ |
| | b. | mogen hangen | ‘may hang’ |
| | c. | een boon zijn | ‘be a bean’ |
| | d. | mijn kop eraf | ‘my head off’ |
| | e. | mogen barsten | ‘may burst’ |
| | f. | mogen sterven | ‘may die’ |
| | g. | mogen doodsmakken | ‘may drop dead’ |
| | h. | zullen liegen | ‘would lie’ |
| | i. | zijn muts opeten | ‘eat one’s cap’ |

Some of these are similar to the English *be damned if/be hanged if*, involving various unsavory ways of dying, whereas others present a ludicrous, impossible state of affairs, such as being a bean or eating one's hat. In this group we may also place expressions of the form *mijn naam is geen X* 'my name is not X', where X is the actual name of the speaker. The following example is of special interest due to the presence of the polarity item *pluis* 'okay, safe':

- (27) Als dat **pluis** is, dacht de man, dan heet ik
if that okay is thought the man then be.called I
geen Japik meer.
no Japik anymore
'If that is in order, the man thought, my name is no longer Japik.'

The appearance of *pluis* is interesting, because this expression has a rather limited distribution. Van der Wouden (1994) treats it as a superstrong NPI, licensed only by regular negation, not even by n-words, but the above example shows it to be licit in averidical conditionals as well.

4 Special idiomatic cases of NPIs in conditionals

Part of Rupert Holmes' Piña Colada Song (1979) goes like this:

- (28) If you're not into yoga
If you have half a brain
[..]
Write to me, and escape.

Such examples beg for an analysis in terms of a hidden 'even' (popular in the NPI literature, cf. Heim 1984, Lee & Horn 1994, Rullmann 1996, Guerzoni 2003, Crnić 2019, among others, for discussion and various proposals). The speaker is not looking for someone with only half a brain, but for someone smart enough to escape. And someone who is not into yoga and has at least half a brain, should realize this. (Apologies to all smart people who are into yoga.) As an NPI, *half a brain* is interesting because it appears only in relative clauses modifying universal quantifiers and negative quantifiers (*anyone with half a brain*, *nobody with half a brain*) and in conditional clauses. Regular negation is out of the question:

- (29) *Fred did not have half a brain.

Most accounts of polarity items, including those of Zwarts (1998), Giannakidou (2011), and Gajewski (2011), have problems with such a distribution, since they all assume that any polarity item, be it weak, strong, or whatever, may be licensed by negation. If we assume, however, that some polarity items may have additional requirements, apart from polarity licensing, perhaps we could treat *half a brain* as such, and would not have to burden the theory of polarity licensing even further. The expression seems to function as a restriction of a set of persons to those individuals that have at least a minimal level of intelligence. In sentences such as (29), *half a brain* does not seem to have this purpose. That we are dealing with a minimal requirement, not a maximal requirement, may be illustrated by pairs such as the following:

- (30) a. This should be obvious to anyone with half a brain.
b. # This will be hard to grasp for anyone with half a brain.
- (31) a. If you have half a brain, you will grab this opportunity.
b. # If you have half a brain, you won't be able to grasp this opportunity.
- (32) a. Nobody with half a brain will feed the polar bears.
b. # Nobody with half a brain will figure out how to feed the cat.

The b-sentences are not ungrammatical but have a literal reading. This reading will not be impacted if we add *at most to half a brain*. The a-sentences, on the other hand, are best understood as implying *at least half a brain*.

A type of expression that appears to be completely restricted to conditional clauses is exemplified by the following sentences:

- (33) If the past month is any guide, it is the more freewheeling films that are likelier to be box-office hits.
[*The Economist*, July 21, 2018, p. 44]
- (34) If history is any guide, the coronavirus's impact on the poor will be felt long after the pandemic is over.
[*The New York Times*, August 3, 2020]
- (35) If his general performance is anything to go by, I'd say he got it wrong.
[*The Guardian*, December 7, 2010]

- (36) If the unpredictable London weather is anything to go by, you might be needing a dose of that right about now.

[*Evening Standard*, May 19, 2023]

For *any* in general, about 5% of all occurrences are in conditional clauses, slightly more if you discount free choice cases. (There is considerable variation between text types, so these figures do not mean much, except that they are fairly low.) Now it is curious to see that *any guide* when used as a predicate nominal, as in (33) and (34), has 100% occurrences in conditional clauses. Much the same is true of *anything to go by*, a virtual synonym of *any guide*. Other contexts feel odd:²

- (37) #I do not believe that history is any guide.

- (38) #Nothing from the past is any guide.

- (39) #No politician is any guide.

- (40) #Very few things are any guide.

- (41) #Was history ever any guide?

- (42) #Little else is any guide.

If you replace *guide* by *good*, all of the above will be just fine. While *be any guide* or *be anything to go by* do not seem to be regular idioms (their interpretation is compositional), they seem to exemplify a general schematic pattern *if X is any guide, then Y*, where Y is some proposition whose validity is based on generalizing from X. The truth of Y is not dependent on that of the protasis, but rather, the protasis seems to be a hedge, warning about the limited validity of Y.

5 Conclusions

In this brief paper we have encountered expressions which should not, but do as a matter of fact, show up in conditional clauses (*with any luck*, *if need be*), items which should, but do not, appear in conditional clauses

² Marcin Morzycki does not fully share my aversion to (37) to (42). Judgments may be tenuous.

(*in years, in ages*), items which appear in averidical conditionals and no other conditionals (*either*).

We took a detour to consider the idioms that make up the core of averidical conditionals and noted some interesting subtypes that could be studied in more detail. One subtype is connected to negative intentions; another has to do with absence of knowledge. In Dutch, the cases involving undesirable ways of dying (*Ik mag doodvallen als ik dat ga doen* ‘I may drop dead if I am going to do that’) mostly involve the former type, whereas predicates ascribing impossible properties to individuals appear to favor statements expressing lack of knowledge or understanding (*Ik ben een boon als ik dat snap* ‘I am a bean if I understand that’). Are there more subtypes, and how are they connected to various averidical conditionals in English? Could this be a topic for crosslinguistic research?

Point of view issues were briefly mentioned. Averidical conditionals as well as ascriptions of knowledge require a point of view. Often, they are first person. If not, they can be third person, requiring us to take the perspective of that person. Second person cases are pragmatically odd, although not strictly speaking impossible. For a somewhat more extensive discussion of the role of perspective in (some cases of) polarity licensing, I refer to Hoeksema (2021).

Half a brain has the curious property of being a polarity item that is restricted to conditional clauses, and relative clauses restricting universal or negative quantifiers. Here too, questions spring up. Are there more expressions like it, and are they polarity sensitive? If there are, and they are not NPIs, then my suggestion that the unusual distribution does not have to be treated in terms of polarity licensing might be on the right track. In any case, we need to think more on such cases and be on the lookout for them.

In addition, we need to think more about *any* in predicate nominals. We discussed *if history is any guide*. Why is it often so bad and only sometimes any good? Think about pairs such as

- (43) A teacher should not hit/*be any student.
- (44) She is not a/*any girl anymore.
- (45) Don’t be a/*any stranger!

But also think about:

- (46) Hotze is not just any professor.
(acceptable, thanks to the *just*)
- (47) Mr. Chairman, the letter bears internal evidence that Mr. Newbold is not any friend of mine. [US Senate committee hearings, 1923]
(*is not any friend of mine* sounds better than *is not any friend*)
- (48) Jones is not anyone's enemy.
(better than *Jones is not any enemy.*)

Sentences such as *history is any guide* only appear in conditional clauses. They are stereotypical but not fully ossified. How best to treat them? And are there more of them?

As a beginning linguist, I sometimes wondered how complex linguistics really is. Some areas are pretty much finished. The phonemic inventory of standard English is not something you would want your students to write a dissertation about. Polarity items ditto, I thought — how hard can they be? Forty years later, I am still trying to solve parts of the puzzle. Dear Hotze, I fear our work may never be done.

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