

Diamond of Irrealis: From (Un)Conditionals to Disjunction

World's languages follow a predictable path with regards to recycling certain functional items, (embedded) polar question markers usually come from disjunction particles (Walkden et al. 2025). A very similar phenomenon could be seen with conditional complementizers, which are usually developed from polar question particles. However, the classical semantics of polar questions and conditionals don't have much in common to explain this lexical overlap. Previous theories that tries to explain this polysemy came from Bhatt & Pancheva (2006), Starr (2014) and Williamson (2019). All of which assume a more complex structure for conditionals than polar questions, analyzing the conditional form as being built from the polar question. This is analyzed as a free relativization from polar questions, similar to how other wh-elements can be either embedded question complementizer or serve as a restrictor for a clause.

(1)	Mary asked [when John arrived].	Complementizer
	[When John arrived], Mary was happy.	Restrictor
(2)	Mary asked [If John arrived].	Complementizer
	[If John arrives], Mary will be happy.	Restrictor

One crucial observation comes from Cremers (2024) regarding the triangle disjunction, polar questions and conditionals make, based on the preliminary study, Cremers notes that in no language the form of conditional and disjunction markers are identical to the exclusion of polar questions, seemingly creating a hierarchy/containment pattern.

As a part of the project in RTG 2636: Form-meaning mismatches, I am analyzing this pattern to see if Conditional-Polar Question-Disjunction form a *ABA pattern, which would further imply containment/hierarchy similar to Bobaljik (2012)'s idea for comparatives. The current research is aiming to cover 40 different language families about the distribution of disjunction, (embedded) polar question and (un)conditional markers. 25 of which already analyzed and conform to *ABA pattern.

In the talk, previous accounts will be briefly discussed, followed by their shortcomings and the collected data for *ABA pattern along with possible analyses will be discussed.

References

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