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If we could just suggest: a response to Graham Burton

Christian Jones and Daniel Waller Graham Burton's recent publication on conditionals (Burton 2021) was a thought-provoking and welcome review of this area. His article drew upon and revisited an article we published ten years ago (Jones and Waller 2011), where we suggested that the descriptions of conditionals in many English language teaching materials did not reflect the reality of actual use, as evidenced in a corpus. In this short response, we would like to outline what we see as some implications from Burton's research, some points of disagreement and some suggestions regarding where we think such analysis needs to go next.

Implications

Buton's article is necessary because conditionals are one pattern we now commonly expect to see taught at various levels. As such, they are an example of what Timmis (2018: 79) playfully terms the 'big beasts' of grammar teaching, alongside areas such as relative clauses, modal verbs, determiners and other mainstays of structural aspects of a syllabus. Their importance is therefore not in question and a search of the Spoken BNC2014 (Love, Hardie, Brezina and McEnery 2017) confirms that 'if' is certainly frequent, as it occurs in the top fifty most frequent word forms in this eleven million word corpus of British spoken English (see URL in references for access).

What Burton highlights is that despite this frequency, descriptions of conditionals are still often based on patterns which have become established over time and are commonly described as zero, first, second and third conditionals', fixed categories which oversimplify and in fact misdescribe actual usage. His tracing of the historical process by which these conditional became established is welcome and provides some useful answers in regard to why these descriptions are as they often appear. Much discussion in ELT is stubbornly ahistorical and we applaud his efforts to place things in a proper context.

His suggestion that analysis and teaching should focus on the 'if' clause, rather than the main clause which follows it, is also welcome and is, we believe, a useful suggestion. Burton (2021:4) states that in the main 'tense choice functions just as it does in other contexts' so that in an example such as ' If

you wanted to know the answer, you had to keep zapping from channel to channel’ (from Jones and Waller 2011: 27) the difficult area to focus upon is the use of ‘wanted’ in the ‘if’ clause and how it functions here. As Burton states, this kind of analysis could potentially reduce the learning load and move description and understanding away from an obsession with learning patterns such as ‘If + present simple, will’, the so-called first conditionals.

Finally, we of course welcome Burton’s use of corpus data to re-examine conditionals, including the open-access English Grammar Profile (ERG) (O’Keeffe and Mark 2017). As we mentioned in 2011, descriptions of language which ignore data from actual language in use are liable to be partial and inaccurate and in 2021, it is odd that a textbook could be produced without reference to a corpus, something which has been standard in dictionary production for many years.

Points of disagreement

While we respect Burton’s point regarding categorisation, we were not convinced by the attempt to reclassify conditionals into types A-D. For us, the distinction which seems most useful remains a functional one: is the conditional being used to describe something real or unreal and does it refer to the past, present or future? That is why we suggested in 2011 (following Maule 1988) that we categorise more broadly as in Table 1. The examples in this table are taken from Spoken BNC2014 (Love et al.2017) and text numbers are given after each sample. Each example was examined in its context in order to determine its categorisation.

Table 1. Real and unreal conditional forms

	Past	Non-past
Real	If I went out jogging I 'd put a T-shirt over the top (Text SN64 136)	It’s probably quite good if you’re in a bit of rush (Text S23A 1114)
Unreal	If I had known that he had a standing order I would have done something about it (Text S7SU 2146)	If there was something quick that I could use like that to not cook I could easily fall into that (Text S23A 1290)

This categorisation, alongside a focus on the ‘if’ clause when teaching or analysing these patterns, seems to allow for a variety of forms to be explored and also to view categorisation through the learners’ eyes. We agree that labels such as ‘first conditional’ are so far removed from language function that they are probably meaningless to many learners but also feel that labels such as ‘Conditional A’ are similarly abstract. . Functional labelling, as we have suggested, will support learners in considering meaning over a pre-occupations with form and typology.

In relation to the actual teaching of these forms, we would argue as we did in 2011 that the best two options are to either develop language awareness via discussion and comparison with L1, or to encourage language production linked to specific functions. Language awareness can be developed by discussing language from texts which are first processed for meaning. Learners can be asked to categorise examples regarding whether they are real or unreal and refer to the past, present or future. Such an approach need not be, as Burton suggests, reserved for advanced learners and in monolingual groups, of course the discussion can be in the learners’ L1. Such work, we would argue, can foster noticing habits. There is a body of research evidence which shows that such conscious registration of form (s) is useful in terms of acquisition (e.g. Bergsleithner, Frota. and Yoshioka 2013). In some cases, exposure to and noticing of conditional patterns may be all that is required and this will of course depend on the teaching context, amount of class time, learner needs and so on. Where production is needed, we would again argue that they are taught functionally and their status as conditionals is underplayed. Here, we can take the type of language functions described since the early days of communicative language teaching (e.g. Jones 1977) and use corpus data to inform the language we feature as exponents. For example, if describing habits, there is no reason we cannot include real conditionals referring to the present alongside other present simple forms. A description to contextualise the language needed to describe eating habits might then be something like the sample text, which includes an example from the Spoken BNC2014 (underlined).

I tend to cook for myself but not very well. I normally make simple dishes like beans on toast, cheese on toast and that sort of thing. And I use the same thing with it all the time, like tomato ketchup. I have like tomato ketchup emergencies if I run out of tomato ketchup.

Future directions

As mentioned, one clear implication of Burton's article is that it demonstrates the need for materials to examine corpora and use corpus data in language descriptions given to learners. One simple way that this could happen is to include frequency data. It is clear from the analysis by Burton and in our 2011 paper, that real uses of conditionals referring to the present or future are by far the most frequent and thus what learners are most likely to hear, read and need to use. It is simple to add such information to materials and to simply make learners aware of which forms are more frequent than others. Refreshingly, this is beginning to happen (e.g. McCarthy, McCarten and Sandiford 2014) but in our view it should be an established part of English language learning materials.

Finally, in many analyses of conditionals, there is a tendency to ignore distinctions between how these forms are realised in written and spoken texts. This can give a misleading impression that learners can expect to encounter conditionals in their full form in any given spoken turn, when this is certainly not always the case. When we examine conditionals in a corpus such as the Spoken BNC2014, for example, one feature that stands out is that an if clause and a main clause may be separated across several conversational turns. The examples below shows this, with the 'if 'clause underlined and the main cluse in italics.

S0094: >>yeah but I mean if they 're that observant neighbours

S0032: >>that was observant

S0094: *they would recognise our van or they would recognise us* because

S0021: mm

Text S23A 569

S0021: >>but like on a day to day basis you do change like what you need like and like other days yo u just you know

S0032: >>yeah true but *a lot of people just eat the same thing every day anyway or s- just eat Mcdona ld 's or just eat whatever so I mean*

S0021: >>that 's true

S0094: >>mm

S0021: >>yeah

S0094: Mac yeah yeah

S0032: >>if you 're if you 're having not much anyway

Text S23A 1160

This phenomenon, whereby subordinate clauses can act as complete turns is something attested to in spoken corpus research (e.g. Tao and McCarthy 2001) and it is one which teachers and materials writers need to at least make learners aware of. To not do so, suggests to learners that they will always hear a full form in any given turn and that the language of conversations is simply a written form which is spoken, something we know is misleading (e.g. Carter and McCarthy 2006).

Conclusion

To reiterate, we welcome Burton's insightful and thought-provoking article. We feel that such work can offer a valuable contribution to our understanding of language, particularly those forms which are often taught but where description is sometimes based on tradition and intuition rather than evidence from use. We feel that better language description should be central to the profession as we all have much to gain from this.

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