A Functional Approach to Translating Greek Conditionals

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Abstract

This paper proposes a paradigm shift in how the conditional clauses of the Greek New Testament are treated in Bible translation and Bible translation resources. The current resources do not provide enough information on the pragmatics of conditional constructions for translation teams to find the appropriate rendering in the receptor language. In order to translate these constructions in a clear, accurate, and natural way, translators should investigate the functional elements of each New Testament conditional, such as the illocutionary force, presented probability, and topicality.

1. Introduction[1]

The New Testament (NT) contains more than 600 instances of the logically and linguistically complex phenomenon called *conditional constructions*[2] that present a formidable challenge to those working to translate the Bible into the many languages of the world. Conditional constructions in these receptor languages can differ quite significantly in both form and function from Greek and English. Therefore, in order to render the passages containing Greek conditional constructions into the receptor language (RL) in a way that is clear, accurate, and natural, the translation team must first identify the detailed functions of the Greek construction and then investigate how that function can be captured in the RL. But identifying the functions of conditionals in Scripture is difficult and no guide yet exists for this task.

This paper is not intended to propose a new—or even modified—classification of the forms of Greek conditionals. Rather, this paper documents a variety of pragmatic functions of the conditionals in the NT. So this analysis is not in competition with the Greek exegetes but is a complement to current exegetical resources and is intended for Bible translators working in the field. The existing literature and resources for translators do not sufficiently acknowledge the diversity of functions of conditionals in the languages of the world. In order for translators to render Greek conditional constructions into the RL in a clear, accurate, and natural way, they need to understand the pragmatic and contextual meaning of each construction in the NT.

The task of understanding conditionals in any language is difficult due to the variety of relationships between the two clauses of the construction and between the proposed situation and reality. Another complicating factor is that conditionals are notoriously hard to define. The linguist Anna Wierzbicka (1997:15) proposes that it is better not to try to define them at all because the concept of 'if' is both a lexical universal and a conceptual primitive that cannot be broken down into simpler parts. All languages have the ability to form conditional constructions in one way or another, but they can only be understood by looking at actual examples and their functions.

[1] This article is part of a research project dedicated to developing materials to aid Bible translators in translating conditional sentences in the New Testament, with funding from the Canada Institute of Linguistics. I would also like to thank the project supervisor and head researcher, Dr. Steve Nicolle, and my fellow researcher K. Quickert for their contributions to the project upon which this article is built and their feedback on this paper. All remaining errors are my own.

[2] An exact, objective count of conditionals is impossible as there are so many marginal examples. Deciding whether or not a sentence is a true conditional is a highly subjective task. But Boyer claims a total of 629. See Boyer 1982b fn 1.

1.1. What are conditionals?

In layman's terms, conditionals in English are *if… then* sentences. Prototypical conditional constructions contain two clauses that relate to each other in such a way that the validity of one clause depends on the validity of the other. The *if* clause of the construction is called the *protasis* and lays out the parameters that must be met in order for the other part to be valid. The *then* clause is called the *apodosis* and contains the proposition that is valid in the situation that the condition of the protasis is met. By convention, the protasis is often marked with a *p* while the apodosis is marked with a *q*. Here are a few examples of conditionals in English:[3]

(1) [If there is no God and no laws,]p [then all you have is Natural Law.]q

(2) [If the child is helped to a standing position,]p [she will eventually learn to stand.]q

The term *validity* describes the relation between the clauses better than *truth* because many conditional constructions contain elements that do not have a truth value. Take for instance:

(3) If we have leftover pie, take a piece to Mrs. Jones.

In this instance, *take a piece to Mrs. Jones* cannot be described as true or untrue. The speaker is giving a command that is dependent on the condition of the protasis being met. If there is no pie left over, the condition is not met and the speaker's command does not stand. The validity of the apodosis is contingent upon the condition expressed in the protasis. Loos (1999:195) states succinctly that "the essential factor in a conditional is that the status of the protasis must be ascertained in order to determine the status of the content of the apodosis." If the validity status of both parts of a cause-effect sequence are given, it is not a conditional.

1.2. Diversity of Conditionals

This very bare-bones explanation of conditional constructions is intentionally broad because of the great variety of forms and functions of conditionals in any given language. Even in English, conditional meaning can be expressed without the word *if*, as in (4), and non-conditional meanings can be expressed in ways that include the word *if*, as in (5):

(4) Do that again and you'll regret it!

(5) Do you know *if* it's supposed to rain today?

So even within English, one form can serve different functions and one function can be expressed through different forms. Therefore it is no surprise that when looking at all the world's languages conditionals can take on a variety of forms, including mere syntactic juxtaposition of clauses with no conditional morpheme (Loos 1999; Comrie 1986). Adding to this complexity, speakers use conditionals for various purposes. English speakers use conditionals to command as in 3), to warn as in 4), to request, to rebuke, and for a great many other purposes. Therefore, in order to translate conditionals from one language to another, one needs to understand not only the forms that conditionals take but also the functions that they may fulfill in each language.

In Gumuz [guk],[4] a Nilo-Saharan language of Ethiopia, conditional constructions lack many of the functions that they have in English. For example, in English we often use what are called *reality conditionals*,[5] which describe past, present, or generic situations and therefore the condition expressed in the protasis is often known to be true or is at least presented as being true:

(6) If you've finished middle school, you'll know that you cannot divide by zero.

(7) If today is Wednesday, then it must have been Monday that I bought the milk.

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[3] These two examples come from the Corpus of Contemporary American English, which is a database of about 1 billion words drawn from TV scripts, newspapers, fiction, web pages, and more. See www.english-corpora.org/coca/.

[4] After each language is mentioned for the first time, its ISO code is provided in square brackets with the exception of English and the biblical languages.

[5] See section 3.2 for further description of reality conditionals and unreality conditionals.

But in Gumuz, reality conditionals cannot be encoded with a conditional construction (Williamson & Larson 2017:72). While the conditional morpheme [k-] is affixed to a verb to form the protasis of a conditional that is unknown as in (8) or contrary to fact as in (9), a conditional construction is not used to refer to a situation that is known to be true as in 10).[6]

(8) [**k-**aa-bas' a-dama maca]p
COND-3SG.NFUT-leave.behind NOM-rain rain.INF

[ça-da ala-m e-p-aaŋgo]q
seed-thing GEN-1SG.POSS FUT-sprout-3SG.NEG

'If it does not rain, my seeds will not sprout.'

(9) [**k-**aa-wot ahwa ala-ça na-oka]p
COND-3SG.NFUT-be clothes GEN-2PL.POSS LOC-sun

[d-ek-aa-ca-ts]q
AFF-HYP-3SG.NFUT-rain-CL:body

'If your (pl) clothes had been in the sun, it would have rained on them.'

Example (10) occurs in the context of a folk story in which a hyena says that he is starving to death. The following is the reply of a trickster.

(10) **nagw**-aa-k'aŋ ama a-k'ob'a ziyaala masha-da na-Sudaana
TEMP-3.SG.NFUT-bite 2.SG.PRO NOM-hunger now dead-things LOC-Sudan

cannaka d-aa-wot a-paŋ ma-tsa
many AFF-3SG.NFUT-be 3SG.NFUT-want go.INF

'Since you are hungry, right now there are lots of dead things in Sudan, do you want to go?'

In (10), the morpheme [k-] is not present and this utterance is not expressed as a conditional construction. Rather, the last clause is expressed as the logical consequence of the first clause and not dependent on it. The validity status of both clauses is given. In English it would be more natural to say "*If* you're hungry, do you want to go to Sudan?"[7] rather than *since*. But in Gumuz, real situations are not encoded as conditionals. This small demonstration that Gumuz does not use conditionals to express real situations known to be true shows that conditionals vary cross-linguistically not only in form but also in function. Therefore, in order to produce a quality translation, a study must be made into the functions of conditional constructions in both the source text and the RL.

Longtau (2016) demonstrates the need for a closer look at the functions of conditional clauses before embarking on a Bible translation project. Longtau was part of the Tarok [yer] translation team for over a decade. In his article,[8] he reflects on how the translation team used a relatively form-based rendering of conditional constructions in the NT without sufficient investigation into the functions of conditionals in Tarok. While Longtau's article mostly focuses on the need for investigation into the RL functions of conditionals, it is evident that the level of determination—the way that Greek conditionals have historically been categorized—is not what is encoded in Tarok conditionals and therefore is not the type of information that is most helpful in translating them. Longtau suggests several revisions to Tarok NT passages so that they use a greater variety of strategies to mark conditional constructions. He suggests zero marking, clause combining, and adverbs as better methods of rendering the Greek conditional in some cases, rather than the conditional particles originally used by the translation team (2016:14–19). In order to determine which of the many strategies of encoding a conceptual conditional in Tarok is most appropriate, the translator must

[6] Examples are taken from Williamson & Larson (2017) pages 74, 76, and 73, respectively.
[7] Or possibly "if you're hungry, there's lots of dead things in Sudan." But that rendering probably does not capture the meaning of this conditional.
[8] In the nearly 30 years between the publication of the Tarok NT and the writing of his article, Longtau completed more education in linguistics, gained significant experience in translation consulting, and published prolifically. It is with this experience that he looks back at his decisions as a mother tongue translator in the first decade of his career.

understand the context and pragmatics of the conditional construction in the original language. While there has been extensive writing on how to categorize the various forms of Greek conditionals, there is much less study on the range of functions of Greek conditional constructions.

2. Review of the Literature

Grammarians have been writing and arguing about the analysis of Greek conditionals for many decades and have proposed various schemes of fitting the diverse conditional constructions into a small set of categories.[9] The system of categorization that has come to dominate the study of Koine Greek was popularized about a hundred years ago by A. T. Robertson in his book *The Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (1919). This work brought the four-class system of the Classical grammarian Gildersleeve into the realm of NT Greek (Elliott 1981:49), categorizing the conditionals into four different kinds of determination based on the conditional particle used and the mood of the verb in the protasis. Robertson labeled the four classes as *determined as fulfilled, determined as unfulfilled, undetermined but with the prospect of determination,* and *remote prospect of determination* (1919:1004–1022). While many critiques and subtle variations of this system exist, it remains the accepted standard in Biblical studies.

2.1. Traditional Approach of Koine Grammarians

Daniel Wallace's *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (1996) is the standard seminary textbook of NT Greek exegesis. In it, he articulates what may be the closest thing to a current scholarly consensus on the four classes of Greek conditionals. The first—and most debated—class is structurally marked by the Greek conditional particle εἰ together with an indicative-mood verb of any tense, marking the protasis as being *assumed true for the sake of argument*.[10] He argues that the εἰ in this conditional should never be translated as *since*, because the protasis is rarely obviously true, and even in the situation where it obviously true, *since* should be avoided for stylistic reasons (690). The class 2 conditional is constructed with the particle εἰ and an indicative verb in a past tense, with the apodosis often marked with ἄν, but not always.[11] This construction presents the protasis as *contrary to fact*. All of the instances of class 2 constructions in the NT show that the speaker "apparently embraces the untruth of the protasis" (Wallace 1996:695). Class 3 conditionals are the easiest to spot since they employ the particle ἐάν with a verb in the subjunctive mood. Wallace admits that this class "encompasses a broad semantic range" but defines it as "a conditional of *uncertain fulfillment, but still likely*" (696 emphasis original). He suggests that class 3 has two subclasses: a *probable future conditional*, and the *present general conditional* (697).[12] Class 4 conditionals exist in classical Greek and are briefly explained in Wallace, but no complete construction of this class exists in the NT and so they are beyond the scope of this paper.[13]

James Boyer conducted what is still considered a definitive investigation into the Greek conditionals, published in four separate articles,[14] which are extensively cited by both Wallace's grammar and BDAG's treatment of the conditional particles. In his first article, Boyer refutes the position that the class one conditional—labeled by Robertson as *determined as fulfilled*—is actually being presented as true. He demonstrates that only 37% of the time is the proposition in the protasis obviously true (1981:76–80). Instead, he argues that the first class conditional is a mere "logical connection" or "simple conditional" with no reference to truth or reality (81). Boyer cites Jesus's Gethsemane prayer in Matthew 26:39 "My Father, if it

[9] A full explanation of the historical development of conditional analysis is well beyond the scope of this article. For a quality overview of the history of analyzing the conditionals of Classical and Koine Greek, see Elliott (1981) chapter 1.
[10] In all these classes, the type of determination reflects how the speaker is presenting the utterance, not its objective relationship with reality.
[11] Therefore, it is sometimes subjective whether a construction is class 1 or class 2 because class 1 can be any tense and class 2 can only be aorist or imperfect. So if the verb is in a past tense, it could be analyzed either way and there are scholarly disagreements in some instances like Mark 3:26.
[12] The *present general conditional* is also called the *simple conditional* or the *class 5 conditional*.
[13] For an introduction to class 4 elements in the NT see Wallace 1996:699–700 and Boyer 1982b. For a more complete discussion, see Elliott 1981:169–191.
[14] See Boyer 1981, 1982a, 1982b, 1983 in References. He claims that there are 305 class 1 constructions, 47 class 2 constructions, and 277 class 3 constructions in the NT. See Boyer 1982b footnote 1.

be possible, let this cup pass from me" (ESV) [15] as evidence that the first class cannot have an *assumed true for sake of argument* meaning. While Boyer makes a good point that the descriptor of *assumed true for sake of argument* does not work well outside of argumentative texts, Wallace mentions this verse in his grammar and admits that "there is no argument in these words, just agony" (Wallace 1996:708). But Wallace also claims that the first class contributes more meaning than a mere logical connector and that in examples like this, the context guides the nuance of the meaning. Therefore, the Gospel writer chose to capture Jesus's agony with a class 1 conditional because it more vividly captures the reality of the temptation to bypass the cross by presenting it as a genuine possibility (711).

In their dispute about class 1 conditionals, Boyer and Wallace are each following slightly different schools of thought in Classic Greek grammar. In this matter Boyer follows W. W. Goodwin while Wallace follows B. L. Gildersleeve, as did A. T. Robertson (Boyer 1981:81–82; Wallace 1996:690–692). But Wallace adds the nuance that class 1 is sometimes presented as true for the sake of an argument even if the speaker would not actually affirm it as true.[16] This system developed by Gildersleeve and expounded by Robertson and Wallace seems to be the majority view both in Classical and NT Greek studies (Elliott 1981:32).

2.2. The Shortcomings of the Traditional Approach

The reality is that clauses with the same form will often function in different ways, and clauses of different forms will often share the same function. A single form with distinct functions is seen by comparing Mark 8:23 with 9:22.[17] Both of these examples use the construction εἴ τι followed by an indicative verb. Mark 8:23 is a great example of a non-conditional usage of the particle εἰ.[18] It occurs in a quotation of Jesus that is only a single clause, "Εἴ τι βλέπεις;"[19] There is no possible two-clause relationship. There is no possible implied second clause that could allow for a conditional analysis and make sense syntactically. Here εἴ τι simply means "anything" with no conditional sense, as is found BDAG's definition 7 of εἰ (Bauer 2000:279). But in Mark 9:22, the father's plea begins with a nearly identical construction "εἴ τι δύνῃ"[20] but carries on with another clause. Here the εἰ is functioning as a conditional, linking the two clauses in a relationship where the main clause depends on the validity of the subordinate clause. Formally, this is a class 1 conditional but contrary to the claims of Elliott and Wallace, this father does not seem to be presenting this possibility as either real or true. Evans (2001:52) comments that the boy's "problem is so severe that the father is not at all confident that Jesus, despite his remarkable reputation, can do anything to help." Lane (1974:333), France (2002:367), Cole (1989:220), and Wessel & Strauss (2010:845) all agree that the father's words are an expression of his doubt in Jesus's ability. This much is made clear in the next verse when Jesus rebukes the father's doubt. Both Mark 8:23 and Mark 9:22 are instances of εἰ followed by an indicative verb, which fits the description of class 1, but in neither of them does the speaker present a protasis as true, or even as assumed to be true or the sake of argument.

A single function expressed by several different forms can be seen in Mark 8:34 and 13:21. In these two similar verses, Jesus is delivering a discourse to His followers about committed discipleship. In both, he uses conditional constructions to exhort his audience to steadfast faithfulness. In both, the protasis lays out a condition that Jesus is presenting as being highly probable. Yet the two passages use two different forms. In Mark 8:34, Jesus states that "If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me" (NASB).[21] Although this is a clear class 1 conditional cited by both Boyer (1981:86) and Elliott (1981:206), the condition seems to be likely but is not presented as certainly true. Boyer (1981:86) is

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[15] Πάτερ μου, εἰ δυνατόν ἐστιν, παρελθάτω ἀπ᾽ ἐμοῦ τὸ ποτήριον τοῦτο. All Greek quotations come from *The Greek New Testament* fifth revised edition (UBS 5).

[16] Wallace argues that Gildersleeve and Robertson always intended this nuance to be understood in their classification but that it is often forgotten. Regardless, Wallace brings out more clearly than his predecessors the possibility of the speaker presenting something as true for argumentation without believing it.

[17] See Mark 11:25 for another true conditional usage of εἴ τι. See Matthew 18:28 and 1 Timothy 1:10 for non-conditional uses.

[18] It is also a good demonstration that it is not the particle itself that establishes the meaning but the whole construction and the context that together carry the meaning.

[19] "Do you see anything?" (ESV).

[20] "if you can do anything" (ESV).

[21] Εἴ τις θέλει ὀπίσω μου ἀκολουθεῖν, ἀπαρνησάσθω ἑαυτὸν καὶ ἀράτω τὸν σταυρὸν αὐτοῦ καὶ ἀκολουθείτω μοι.

right to claim that the condition in this passage is not 100% certain, considering that there is nothing in the passage that guarantees that people did want to become Jesus's disciples and that this passage comes immediately after Jesus harshly rebukes his own disciple. Yet, since the beginning of the chapter records the feeding of the 4,000 and the beginning of this verse describes Jesus calling the crowds to him, it is quite likely that there were some listening who desired to become a follower. Bratcher & Nida (1993:265) warn against any reading that introduces "an element of doubt or contingency not found in the Greek." So Jesus is presenting a highly probable class 1 conditional that gives a command to His hearers. Later, in Mark 13:21, Jesus gives a very similar command to His disciples: "If anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Messiah!' or, 'Look, there he is!' do not believe it" (NIV).[22] This class 3 conditional cited by Elliott (1981:220) is highly probable as can be seen from the passages just before and just after it. Jesus warns in 13:6 that many false christs will come and succeed in deceiving. Again 13:22 states that many people will falsely acclaim these imposters. While Jesus does not flatly state that the disciples will face them, he warns against this highly probable situation. These verses demonstrate two different conditional forms—a class 1 and a class 3—that carry the same meaning.

In the first page of his grammar, Wallace (1996:1) states that his "goal at all times is to see the value of *grammar* for the interpretation of the text of scripture" (emphasis added). While syntactic study is crucial to the exegetical process, it has long been an axiomatic principle of applied linguistics that form and function do not have perfectly consistent or one-to-one correlation. Wallace states that he "did not write [his] work for linguists" nor for translators (xviii). And so this paper aims to provide some functions of NT conditionals that are important to investigate when translating, especially into non-European languages. Wallace—like nearly all Greek grammarians—explores conditionals from a structural approach. Yet he states in his introduction to conditionals that they can be examined with semantic, pragmatic, or structural approaches. He explains in a footnote that by *semantic* he means *logical* and then proceeds to give a brief analysis of how logicians treat conditionals. He acknowledges that the study of the pragmatics of conditionals is valid but asserts that "the pragmatic approach is too far removed from form for us to get an easy handle on it" (681). Yet a pragmatic approach is exactly what is needed to help field workers render the function of the Greek conditionals with the appropriate form in each receptor language.

2.3. Other Approaches

Richard Young (1989) analyzes conditionals on the basis of contextual function. He uses Speech Act Theory to examine and categorize the conditionals of the NT based on their *illocutionary force*, that is, what the speaker was trying to accomplish by uttering them. The NT writers use conditional constructions to express lament, rebuke, mockery, and requests, among many other functions. Much of Young's critique of the traditional method of analyzing the form is quite apt, while his approach is very helpful and yields fruitful results. Yet he too oversimplifies the diverse functions of the Greek conditional in an effort to create a finite number of categories that cover the entire functional range. Young makes the very bold and overarching claim that "When viewed through the speech act model, all conditionals are seen as implicit performatives" (39). By *performative*, he means an action that can be accomplished by words, for example, promising, apologizing, inquiring, and requesting. *If you could go buy some pasta, that would be helpful* is an implicit performative with the illocutionary force of a request.

While Young's contribution is very helpful in advancing the study of NT conditionals, more nuance is needed. Many conditionals are clearly not performative. What performative is operative in 1 Timothy 3:1, "If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task" (ESV)? Paul is not affirming or commending Timothy, as Timothy is not the one aspiring to be an overseer since he is already the leader of the church. This verse does not fit Young's categories of performatives accomplished by NT conditionals. If the threshold for performative is lowered to include *teach* and *inform* so that this verse fits, then the entirety of Scripture would then be one type of implicit performative or another.

Rocky Fong's (2014) dissertation presents a truly eclectic survey of analyses of the conditionals in the NT. He employs Porter's nuanced version of the 4-class system but augments it by looking at the social and

[22] ἐάν τις ὑμῖν εἴπῃ, Ἴδε ὧδε ὁ Χριστός, Ἴδε ἐκεῖ, μὴ πιστεύετε.

rhetorical functions of the conditionals in the Gospel of John. Fong states that "Conditionals are also rhetorical devices for argument and persuasion. People use conditionals to influence personal beliefs and actions through logic and hypotheses, and the audience is expected to make inferences, draw conclusions, or act in particular ways" (13). Limiting the scope of his analysis to John 3–11, Fong uses Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)[23] to demonstrate that "Johannine conditionals are used polemically and didactically to persuade the readers of John to put their faith in Jesus" (6).

2.4. Comprehensive Lists of Conditionals

Only two authors have compiled what is supposed to be a comprehensive list of the conditionals of the NT. The first corpus is in the appendices of Elliot's dissertation (1981). The other is spread between Boyer's four articles on the conditionals of the NT (1981, 1982a, 1982b, 1983). However, each of these lists has problems. First, they do not match each other. While both list roughly the same total number of conditionals in the NT,[24] they each include a very different set of conditional constructions. For example, Boyer (1982b:168) lists Mark 4:22 as a class 3 conditional while Elliott does not mention it at all, while Elliott (1981:222) lists Mark 6:23 as a class 3 conditional that Boyer does not mention at all.

Elliott's list has the strength of being easily searchable. However, accuracy is a serious weakness of Elliott's corpus. There are formatting issues and typographical errors in Elliott's lists that make the list very hard to use. But more importantly, Elliott seems quite inconsistent in what examples he includes. Mark 6:22 and 6:23 both use ἐὰν in very similar conditional constructions. Yet, Elliott lists Mark 6:23 while not mentioning 6:22 (222). Elliot lists several verses that are clearly not true conditionals, such as Mark 3:22 and 1 Timothy 1:10. He also omits many verses that are obviously conditional such as Mark 3:25 and Mark 14:31. Elliott's methodology for building this corpus is lacking in academic rigor. He used the *Englishman's Greek Concordance* to gather all instances of the conditional particles and then used the NASB to supply missing or implied parts of the conditional construction (73). It is not clear how he weeded out the many non-conditional uses of those particles.

Boyer's articles are much stronger in the area of reliable accuracy. It is clear that he has exegeted every verse that he includes in his corpus and he often includes detailed notes on unique aspects of each conditional. Boyer's articles are much more trustworthy and provide more exegetical detail but, spaced out over four articles and with many of the citations given in footnotes, they are harder to search. And despite his rigor and claims to a comprehensive study, he fails to list many of the class 3 conditionals.

3. Conditional Analysis

If the form of the conditional construction and its analysis according to Greek grammarians' four categories do not give the information needed to translate conditionals into other languages, where can translators acquire that information? What elements of the conditional constructions are relevant to finding a clear, accurate, and natural translation? The time reference, the relationship between the protasis and the apodosis, the illocutionary force, the probability, and the topicality are all relevant elements to investigate. According to a study of all conditionals in Mark and 1 Timothy, the last three of these elements have proven to be the most helpful and insightful.[25]

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[23] SFL is a functionalist school of linguistics that brings together the various aspects of linguistics (morphosyntax, discourse analysis, pragmatics, sociolinguistics, etc.) to offer a holistic description of language in context. SFL proposes three main functions of language: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. Fong mainly draws on M. A. K. Halliday's formulation of SFL.

[24] Elliott (1981) lists a total of 663 examples in his appendices while Boyer (1982b:163) claims in a footnote that there are 629 conditionals in the NT. This makes Elliott's list about 5.4% longer than Boyer's.

[25] Mark and 1 Timothy were selected as the corpus for the pilot study of this research project due to their manageable length and variety of genres and styles. A complete study of the NT is in progress and will be published upon completion. See section 3.4 for more details.

3.1. Illocutionary Force

Young (1989:39) claims that "there are two elements involved in understanding an utterance: (1) the propositional meaning, or what was said, and (2) the intent of the speaker, or why it was said (the illocutionary force)." While Biblical scholars and linguists have written volumes on conditionals in terms of the first element, understanding the second element is at least as crucial to translating a conditional. Any given sentence can have several different functions—and therefore different meanings—based on the context in which it is uttered.[26] Identifying the function of the sentence is important because a given function may be encoded very differently from one language to another. Hervey (1998) describes how each language uses a complex variety of strategies such as syntax and intonation to convey the speaker's intent for the utterance and what he or she expects from the hearer. These strategies do not directly transfer between languages. Rather, in translation, a strategy in the RL must be sought that conveys the same illocutionary force as in the SL. The first step in that process of investigation is to determine what the functions of the construction in the SL are. The NT writers use conditional constructions to argue, command, exhort, promise, rebuke, request, warn, and more. A few of these uses will be illustrated.[27]

3.1.1 To Argue

In 1 Timothy 1:8, Paul asserts "We know that the law is good if one uses it properly" (NIV).[28] This is an example of an inverted conditional, where the protasis comes after the apodosis. This construction is classified as class 3 by Elliott (1981:216), and this classification fits its propositional meaning well since Paul is expressing a hypothetical condition in the protasis "if one uses it properly." But identifying it as uncertain misses the firmness of the apodosis, that "the law is good." Paul is not here stating that the law is only good sometimes or in a certain hypothetical instance. Rather, he is using this qualified assertion to argue against the false teachers. Knight (1992:80) states that Paul's declaration of the goodness of the law represents "the recognized Christian understanding of the subject, one that is commonly known, believed, and accepted." Therefore, on the foundation of that shared conviction, he launches a barely veiled attack against false teachers in the protasis, accusing them of mishandling the law. This leads him into the content of his argument in verses 9–11. If the polemic nature of the conditional in verse 8 were missed and 1:8a were translated in a way that made it seem an uncertain and hypothetical truth, the point of the whole section could become lost.

3.1.2 To Warn

In Mark 8:38, Jesus sternly warns that "If anyone is ashamed of me [...], the Son of Man will be ashamed of them" (NIV).[29] This is more than a statement of cause and effect. This statement comes at the end of a section marked by intense and seemingly confrontational language from Jesus. He has just called Peter "Satan" and called His disciples to lay down their lives and take up a cross instead. This warning finishes off the section by stating that if a supposed disciple will not honor Jesus by displaying this high level of commitment, then neither will Jesus recognize this disciple. It is a solemn warning that the suffering they will face for turning from Jesus is worse than whatever they may suffer for Him now. If a translation team were to focus on properly capturing the determination level of this class 3 conditional but fail to capture the striking warning it conveys, the clarity and accuracy of this passage would be severely impacted. However, it is still important

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[26] The sentence "Can I help you?" can have very different functions depending on whether it is said by:
1) a mother to a young child struggling to tie his shoes;
2) a kind woman with a $20 bill in her hand to a woman who just realized she does not have enough money to buy her groceries;
3) a store clerk to a shopper 10 minutes before the store is supposed to close;
4) a store clerk to a shopper 10 minutes after the store is supposed to close.
In the first case, the mother may be informing the child that she is going to take over and tie his shoes for him. The second case could be an offer of a gift but could also be seen as a polite and indirect command to take the money. In the third case, the clerk could be asking what the shopper is failing to find. In the last case, the clerk is probably politely commanding the shopper to leave the store or at least requesting an explanation for the shopper's failure to depart.

[27] For more detailed discussion of the possible illocutionary functions of Greek conditionals, see Young 1989.

[28] Οἴδαμεν δὲ ὅτι καλὸς ὁ νόμος, ἐάν τις αὐτῷ νομίμως χρῆται.

[29] ὃς γὰρ ἐὰν ἐπαισχυνθῇ με [...] καὶ ἁμαρτωλῷ, καὶ ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἐπαισχυνθήσεται αὐτόν.

to make sure that RL does not encode a wrong time reference or probability level. This verse is a hypothetical gnomic that applies to all people through time. If the warning aspect were preserved but the RL audience perceived it to be a warning only to the original hearers or if they perceived it as an inevitable fate that they were all doomed to, that would also result in a serious misunderstanding of the passage.

3.2. Probability

Logicians often investigate conditionals and use carefully crafted constructions as logic experiments. Yet these conditionals rarely resemble natural speech and are specifically designed to be easily verifiable as true or false. But in natural speech, the truth value of each clause—or more importantly how the speaker *presents* the truth value—is not easily discernible. Speakers of some languages use conditional constructions to express doubt, uncertainty, set aside doubt to continue the conversation, and talk about impossible scenarios, among other uses. But languages that use conditionals to express these different levels of certainty will often encode them in different ways, each one splitting up the spectrum of probability differently. Therefore, several linguists have developed classifications of conditionals based on their relationship to reality. Thompson, Longacre, & Hwang's (2007:256) classification is one of the most well-known.[30] They use the term *reality conditionals* for those conditions that refer to real situations, whether in past or present time or generically applicable, and label conditionals that refer to situations that are not (yet) real as *unreality conditionals.* These include predictive conditionals that describe a future situation, hypothetical conditionals that describe a situation that might imaginably happen, and counterfactuals that describe a situation that has not, cannot, or will not come to pass.

While this categorization provides helpful vocabulary to talk about conditionals in general terms, it does not take the place of determining the presented probability of a conditional. Each language draws its own lines, grouping the categories together and dividing up a single category according to its own criteria. For example, Chagga [old], Haya [hay], and Ndendeule [dne]—all closely related Bantu languages of Tanzania—differ in their categorization of predictive conditionals. Chagga marks predictives in the same way as hypothetical and counterfactual conditionals, lumping all unreality conditionals together. Haya on the other hand, marks predictives in the same way as reality conditionals but in a different way than hypotheticals and counterfactuals. Haya therefore divides unreality conditionals into two groups, with the dividing line being somewhere between uncertain and high probability. Ndendeule divides predictives into two categories: highly probable ones pattern with reality conditionals while predictives and hypotheticals of a moderate probability pattern together, leaving counterfactuals and unlikely hypotheticals as a third category of unreal conditionals (Nicolle 2017:6).

Since every language divides the spectrum of probability differently, a standardized manner of ranking the presented probability of the conditional can be helpful for translators.[31] Keith Allan (2012:231) provides a helpful tool in this regard with his "credibility metric."[32] This chart is a reference guide to ranking on a scale from 0 to 1 the probability that the condition laid out in the protasis is fulfilled. A value of 0 would mean that it is presented as if there is no possibility that the protasis is valid and therefore the conditional is a counterfactual. A value of 1 means that it is presented as certainly valid and that it may be a real or predictive conditional. Almost all categories of conditional can have values of 0.1 to 0.9, which express varying levels of (un)certainty.

By investigating the context of a given passage and weighing the opinions of commentaries, it is usually possible to determine how likely the condition—as presented by the speaker—is to be fulfilled, and to

[30] This classification is adapted from Schachter (1971). It is not the intent of this paper to present this particular categorization as an authoritative description, but rather to provide helpful vocabulary in discussing types of conditional constructions. For a full description of this classification scheme and several others, see Nicolle 2017, accessible at https://journals.flvc.org/sal/article/view/107239.

[31] In evaluating the probability of a conditional, it is always the protasis that is under evaluation. The protasis lays out a condition that must be fulfilled for the apodosis to be valid.

[32] This metric was not developed specifically for conditional constructions but has been helpfully applied to conditionals. See Fish, Roderick. 2020. *Swahili Conditional Constructions in Embodied Frames of Reference: Modeling Semantics, Pragmatics, and Context-sensitivity in UML Mental Spaces*. Langley, BC: Trinity Western University thesis. Accessible at www.canil.ca/academics/completed-theses.

quantify its probability with a level on Allan's metric. Mark 5:28 states "If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed" (NIV).[33] This verse is clearly a class 3 conditional and is cited as such by Elliott (1981:222). This conditional is a statement of the great faith of the woman. She is sure that even the lightest and briefest contact with Jesus's robe will heal her. Since she is in a crowd that is pressing against Him, she knows that she will most likely get such an opportunity (Cole 1989:163). Thus her condition of "If I just touch his clothes" is presented as highly probable, a 0.9 on Allan's metric. It would be important to translate this conditional with the appropriate form that reflects this probability, or the meaning could become confused.

Mark 8:3 is also a class 3 conditional cited by Boyer (1982b:168,173) and Elliott (1981:84). In this verse just before feeding the 4,000, Jesus states "If I send them home hungry, they will collapse on the way" (NIV).[34] It is clear from the context of verses 1–2 that Jesus was already planning on feeding these people and that he used this conditional to build an argument that he must not send them away but rather feed them. Thus the proposition expressed in the protasis "If I send them home hungry" is being presented as highly improbable, a 0.1 on the credibility metric. While some might say that it ought to be a 0.0 because Jesus is omniscient and so knew He would not send them away, or because the story proceeds to show that He does not send them away, this would be trying to determine the absolute truth of the conditional and not the *presented* probability. We humans are not omniscient and so our language does not encode absolutes, but merely how we perceive and present the world at one point in time. Jesus does not flatly say "I will not send them away but feed them." Rather, he suggests the option of feeding them more indirectly, only bringing up the problem and allowing the disciples to suggest a solution. Rather than suggesting the solution, they protest it as impossible, despite having already witnessed the feeding of the 5,000 (Mark 6:35–44). These two examples from Mark are both class 3 conditionals that predict the outcome of a certain situation. Yet they clearly differ in presented probability, which is an important factor when translating into many of the world's languages.

3.3. Conditionals as Topics

The term *topic* in linguistics is another word that is hard to define. While some linguists argue that the *topic* of a sentence is the old or given information in a sentence and the accompanying *comment* is the new information, Reinhart (1981:60) argues that this definition is unsatisfactory and is primarily an attempt to bring objectivity to a phenomenon that is inherently subjective. Instead, she argues that a topic is simply what a given bit of language is *about*. Investigating what is old information or new information in a sentence will help an analyst determine what the sentence is about but does not reliably coincide with the topic. While both of these competing definitions coexist in linguistic literature to this day, Dooley & Levinsohn (2000:32) follow Reinhart's definition, which seems to be the majority and more robust definition.

John Haiman's prominent and insightful article "Conditionals Are Topics" (1978) favors the definition of *topic* that is based primarily on new vs. old information. Haiman demonstrates with data from a few languages that the protasis is always the topic of the sentence while the apodosis comments on that topic. He argues that this neatly explains the cross-linguistic tendency that the protasis comes before the apodosis. In natural speech, topics are often fronted due to the motivation of giving old information before new information and to establish what is being commented on before making the comment (Haiman 1978:572; Dooley & Levinsohn 2000:32). Ebert et al. (2014) claim that in prototypical conditionals the protasis serves as the *aboutness* topic. This means that the *if*-clause "establishes the entity the sentence is about" (364).[35] They

[33] Ἐὰν ἅψωμαι κἂν τῶν ἱματίων αὐτοῦ σωθήσομαι.
[34] καὶ ἐὰν ἀπολύσω αὐτοὺς νήστεις εἰς οἶκον αὐτῶν, ἐκλυθήσονται ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ.
[35] This is actually only half of the thesis presented by Ebert et al. They deal independently with two categories of conditionals. The first kind of conditional they call *normal conditionals* (NC), which are characterized by a true bi-clausal dependency relationship as described in section 1.1 and are the primary subject of this paper. I have occasionally used the term "prototypical conditional" in my description to acknowledge that more marginal types of conditionals exist which may not follow the patterns described. One of these marginal categories of conditionals is called *biscuit conditionals* (BC) by Ebert et al. This is due to the famous example by John Austin: "There are biscuits on the sideboard if you want them." Other authors sometimes refer to them as *speech act conditionals.* But this label is not very helpful considering that normal conditionals are also used for speech acts and that there are so many speech acts that can be performed with a conditional (see section 3.1). In this paper, we will use *speech act* to mean the illocutionary force of a conditional. The contention of Ebert et al. is that the NC protasis functions as the *aboutness* topic whereas a BC protasis is a *relevance* topic. This means that the if-clause merely establishes a context in which the comment is relevant, thereby

further argue that conditionals are used for the "speech act of *topic establishment*" (368). While Haiman and Ebert et al. only provide data for these claims from a handful of languages and are far from proving that these characteristics are linguistic universals, they are helpful insights for understanding the function of conditional constructions in the Greek NT.

While most linguistic discussions about topics refer to sentence topics, both Reinhart and Dooley & Levinsohn assert that a sentence topic can also be the discourse topic. Reinhart (1981:54) argues that discourse topics are different from sentence topics not only in that they relate to larger sections, but also that discourse topics are often more complex and abstract than sentence topics. Dooley (2007) describes a kind of discourse topic that usually marks the topic of the micro-level units, rather than a whole macro-level discourse unit. This micro-level topic he calls a *space builder* because it alerts the hearer that a new conceptual space has been set up and it identifies what that space is.[36] Dooley then states that "in argumentation or hortatory discourse, common space builders are conditionals" (2007:38). In these instances, the semantic value of the construction—joining two clauses in a contingency relationship—seems to pale in comparison with the pragmatic function—establishing a new discourse subtopic. If this is indeed the function of some of the conditional constructions in the NT, the translation may be much clearer if it uses an appropriate discourse marker rather than a formal conditional construction.

In a study of the 45 true conditional constructions in Mark and 1 Timothy, the clearest examples of conditional constructions functioning to establish a new discourse sub-topic were in the instructional sections of 1 Timothy. Chapter 2 of this book addresses worship and how to worship rightly. But then chapter 3 begins with a definite topic change as Paul turns to address his instructions in the next seven verses to overseers.[37] He accomplishes this change in 3:1 with the sentence "If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task" (ESV).[38] While this is a true conditional and is rightly classified as a class 1 by Boyer (1981:108) and Elliott (1981:200), determining the validity status of the protasis does not seem very important to understanding its meaning. Since Paul opens up the condition to *anyone* desiring the office, it is likely that at least someone in Timothy's church did desire that office. But whether they did or not has almost no impact on the meaning. The semantic characteristics of the conditional are backgrounded here and this construction is used to establish the discourse topic of *overseers* that will continue until the end of verse 7. The first comment on this topic comes in what is formally the apodosis.

Another set of examples come in 1 Timothy chapter 5. The first half of the chapter is on the topic of caring for widows and the elderly. But three times within this unit—verses 4, 8, and 16—Paul uses a conditional construction to establish a new sub-topic in the discourse unit and give instructions about a more specific demographic. After giving instructions to care for widows in need, Paul turns in 5:4 to state, "But if a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show godliness to their own household and to make some return to their parents" (ESV).[39] Interestingly, here there is an unmarked change in subject between the protasis and the apodosis. The subject of 5:4b is the descendants of these widows but it pertains to the topic of how such widows ought to be cared for. Just as in 3:1, the validity or probability of the protasis is not very relevant here. Instead, the form of a conditional construction is used to introduce a new subtopic and then make a few comments on that topic. Mounce (2000:279) points out that the three conditional clauses in verses 4, 8, and 16 all convey the same message. While the majority of 5:3–16 is about caring for widows in the church, these three verses shift focus and assert that Christians must prioritize caring for the needy in their

guiding the interpretation of the comment (2014:357). There do seem to be a few examples of BC's in NT Greek, but they are beyond the scope of this paper.

[36] Dooley (2007) distinguishes between topics and space builders, claiming that space builders only fulfill some of the functions of topics. But in order to use accessible terminology in the realm of applied linguistics and avoid journeying deep into the realm of cognitive linguistics, this paper refers to these space-building conditionals as *topics.* The terms *space builder, point of departure,* and *marked topic* seem to be used with some overlap in Dooley (2007) and Dooley & Levinsohn (2000). Dooley & Levinsohn (2000:39) state that a marked topic signals "a change in subtopics within an already-established referential field," which sounds quite similar to Dooley's definition of a space builder.

[37] While most examples of this phenomenon mark a lower-level discourse topic, this example starts off a whole new unit. It seems to be the starkest example of discontinuity in the corpus of Mark and 1 Timothy.

[38] Εἴ τις ἐπισκοπῆς ὀρέγεται, καλοῦ ἔργου ἐπιθυμεῖ.

[39] εἰ δέ τις χήρα τέκνα ἢ ἔκγονα ἔχει, μανθανέτωσαν πρῶτον τὸν ἴδιον οἶκον εὐσεβεῖν καὶ ἀμοιβὰς ἀποδιδόναι τοῖς προγόνοις.

own family. Clearly these conditional constructions do not primarily function to introduce a hypothetical situation but rather serve a discourse function of establishing a new subtopic that needs attention.

One last example of this function in an instructional text comes from Mark. In Mark 12:19 and its synoptic parallels,[40] the Pharisees loosely quote Deuteronomy 25:5 to Jesus in the form of a conditional construction: "If a man's brother dies and leaves a wife but no children, the man must marry the widow and raise up offspring for his brother" (NIV).[41] Again, the likelihood of the protasis being true does not matter here. This is a legal or instructional text that brings up a certain topic and gives comments and advice on that topic. Here the protasis is establishing the discourse topic as *a man who dies leaving behind a wife with no children*. While it is a rather complex and abstract topic, discourse topics often are. In the context of Mark, the entirety of the Pharisees' speech in 12:19–23 relates to this topic. While their intent was to trap Jesus with these words, the chosen topic for their trap is levirate marriage. Other examples of conditional constructions serving the function of introducing new subtopics in an instructional discourse are Jesus's teachings in Mark 8:34 and 9:43–47.[42]

3.4. Further Research

Illocutionary force, probability, and topic establishment are just a few of the multiple pragmatic features relevant to the translation of conditionals in the New Testament. Since the translation of these constructions is so dependent on the large amount of contextual information present in each biblical text, it would be a laborious task for a field translation team to investigate each one to the extent needed to make sure it is rendered with the optimal strategy in the RL. Therefore, a research team ought to analyze the conditional constructions of the NT in order to develop materials to guide translation teams. This project is currently being undertaken by a team of researchers, led by Dr. Steve Nicolle, at the Canada Institute of Linguistics. Their aim is to compile a list of the conditional constructions in the NT and turn it into a searchable database. This database will contain brief remarks on each of the contextual factors known to influence how Greek conditionals may be rendered in the world's languages. The database will be designed for translation consultants, translation specialists, and possibly for mother tongue translators who speak a majority language. While this paper has referenced some conditional functions observed in Mark and 1 Timothy, many other conditionals in the New Testament are not yet examined, some of which—such as those in those in Galatians—are famously complex. This database would be a great aid in Bible translation.

Another area for further research is the discourse-pragmatic function of Greek conditionals being used to establish topics. It is not yet clear what genres of discourse they appear in. This paper has only discussed examples found in instructional texts, and these may be Hebraisms carried over from Septuagint renderings of the Torah's legal passages. It is also not clear how prevalent this usage of conditional structures is in other languages of the world.

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[40] Matthew 22:24 and Luke 20:28. All three parallel passages use nearly identical conditional constructions, but this description will focus only on Mark.

[41] ἐάν τινος ἀδελφὸς ἀποθάνῃ καὶ καταλίπῃ γυναῖκα καὶ μὴ ἀφῇ τέκνον, ἵνα λάβῃ ὁ ἀδελφὸς αὐτοῦ τὴν γυναῖκα καὶ ἐξαναστήσῃ σπέρμα τῷ ἀδελφῷ αὐτοῦ.

[42] While it is not clear if conditional constructions in extra-biblical Greek have this function, these passages in the NT seem to mirror the Hebraic way of introducing subtopics in legal passages. Deuteronomy 25:5 introduces this law of levirate marriage (quoted in Mark 12:19) with the particle כִּי *ki*. While this particle can be used to form conditional constructions in Hebrew, it more commonly has other syntactic and discourse functions. But then in 25:7, Moses introduces a certain possibility within this subtopic with the particle אִם *'im*. This marks a true conditional within the topic. This pattern of כִּי introducing a unit and אִם marking a conditional that deals with a possible complication of that topic is clearly seen in Exodus 21:2–6,18–21. BDB supports this in their definition of כִּי. Sense 2 of this word they gloss as 'when' and definition 2b includes this description: "often in laws, [...] to state a principle broadly, after which special cases are introduced by אִם" (Brown et al. 1977: 473). Both of these particles are translated with ἐὰν in the Septuagint and it seems that the writers of the Greek NT follow this structure and introduce topics or subtopics in instructional texts with conditional particle functioning as כִּי does in the Torah. This use may be a Hebraism unique to NT Greek, but is certainly prevalent in the NT.

4. Conclusion

This paper has shown that the formal classification of Greek conditionals commonly used in biblical studies does not provide sufficient information about the contextual meaning and function of the construction to allow Bible translators to find the appropriate RL construction. Rather, NT conditionals serve a great many functions that do not consistently correlate with their form. This paper has demonstrated the importance of several of those factors and introduced a discourse function of conditional constructions that is not found in extant literature about Greek conditionals. May this contribution and whatever future resources that follow it be a blessing to the Bible translation community and bring praise and glory to God.

Abbreviations

1	first person	NEG	negative
2	second person	NFUT	non-future
3	third person	NIV	*New International Version* (2011)
AFF	affirmative	NOM	nominative
BC	biscuit conditional	NT	New Testament
COND	condition	p	protasis
CL:	classifier	PL	plural
ESV	*English Standard Version* (2016)	POSS	possessive
FUT	future	PRO	pronoun
GEN	genitive	q	apodosis
HYP	hypothetical	RL	receptor language
INF	infinitive	SFL	Systemic Functional Linguistics
LOC	locative	SG	singular
NASB	*New American Standard Bible* (1995)	SL	source language
NC	normal conditional	TEMP	temporal

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