The scalar *if not* construction:
syntactic, semantic and pragmatic conditions of its two readings*

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1.0 Aim

The aim of this chapter is to consider the *A if not B* construction by focussing on its two readings. One is the "concessive" reading and the other is the "metatextual" reading. Kjellmer (1975) and Dancygier (1998) analyze these two readings only at a sentential level without taking a discourse level into consideration. I will expand the domain of analysis at a discourse level to argue that different syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic conditions are imposed on each reading. It will be demonstrated that in a discourse level the notion of "contextual givenness" plays a vital role in explaining the ambiguity of the construction.

1.1 Previous analyses

1.1.1 Concessive and metatextual readings

Kjellmer(1975) and Dancygier(1998) argue that the *A if not B* construction in (1) is ambiguous between two readings.

(1) He spoke ungraciously, if not rudely.　　 (Dancygier 1998:142)

Dancygier (1998:143) observes that (1) can be paraphrased into either a concessive sentence or a metatextual sentence:

(2) a. He spoke ungraciously, even if he didn't speak rudely.

　 b. He spoke ungraciously, perhaps even rudely.

The term "metatextual" describes the speaker's comment on a selected fragment of an utterance (Dancygier 1998:94).[1] The semantic difference of the two readings is obvious, because the former asserts that the person did not speak rudely, while the latter suggests the possibility that the person even spoke rudely. Kjellmer (1975:143) refers to the former and the latter readings as an "exclusive reading" and an

"inclusive reading," respectively.

The difference between these two readings is reflected in syntax, as well. In a metatextual reading the negative *not* is obligatory, while in a concessive reading it is optional (König 1986:239), as shown by the following example:

(3) This is an interesting, <u>if complicated</u> solution. (Dancygier 1998:144)

(3) can be interpreted as "concessive," but not as "metatextual." Therefore, it is when the negative *not* appears in the sentence that it becomes ambiguous.

1.1.2 Descriptive negation and metatextual negation

One of the crucial criteria for distinguishing "concessive" and "metatextual" readings lies in the type of negation. To put it another way, the negation of the former is "descriptive," while the negation of the latter is "metatextual." As Dancygier (1998) observes, descriptive negation creates some expectation by 'not X':

(4) The Queen of England is happy, *if not* ecstatic.

In (4), if someone says that the Queen of England is not ecstatic, the hearer will create an expectation that her response is not positive at all. In other words, the negation may be interpreted as the negation of the applicability of the scale of positive emotions, but contrary to that expectation, the speaker says she is *happy*. Hence, in the environment of "*A if not B*," "not B" and A clash with each other. This backward reading seems to underlie the logic of the concessive reading. In this regard, the "concessive" reading is quite similar to the reading of the disjunction "BUT" (cf. Lakoff 1971, Sweetser 1990).

The metatextual negation, on the other hand, cancels the scalar implicature of "not more" (Levinson 1983, 2000; Hirschberg 1991). Therefore, the negation is not denying the semantic content of the clause. For example, if the speaker says "The queen of England is happy," it is implied that "she is not more than happy." However, the speaker further thinks that perhaps she is more than happy, so he/she cancels the scalar implicature to signal the possibility of going higher up the scale.

We have so far shown that there are two readings in the *A if not B* construction and that the readings are different from each other in the type of negation present. However, previous work analyzes the construction only at sentence level without

taking a discourse level into consideration. The next section will expand the domain of analysis to a discourse level to argue that syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic conditions are imposed on each type. It will be shown that at a discourse level,   the concept of "contextual givenness" plays an important role in explaining the ambiguity of the two readings.

1.2 Syntactic, semantic, and discourse conditions on concessive and
    metatextual readings

1.2.1 Negativity Condition (NC)
    First, I will propose the following condition:
    (5) Negativity Condition (NC): In the environment of "*A if not B*," B
        must be descriptively negated in a "concessive reading," but it must
        not be descriptively negated in a "metatextual reading."
The validity of this condition has been demonstrated in section 2.2. Sentence (6) can be paraphrased into (7a) or (7b):

    (6) He speaks Russian, *if not* Bulgarian.
    (7) a. He speaks Russian, even if he doesn't speak Bulgarian.
        b. He speaks Russian, perhaps even Bulgarian.

The fact that (7b) lacks the negative *not* shows that its reading is metatextual.

1.2.2 Identical Conceptual Domain Condition (ICDC)
  Second, I will propose the following condition:
    (8) Identical Conceptual Domain Condition (ICDC):
        ( )   In the case of a metatextual reading, in the environment of "*A if
              not B*," A and B must be on the same scale and must be in the
              domain of the same concept.
        ( )   In the case of a concessive reading, in the environment of "*A if
              not B*," A and B do not have to be on the same scale, but if they
              are on the same scale, they must be in the domain of the same concept.
The following examples prove that as for a concessive reading, A and B do not have to be on the same scale[2]:

    (9) The salary was good, *if not* up to her expectations. (Dancygier 1998:143)

(10) This is undoubtedly the best, and least-alterd surviving part of the Abbey, an important mediaeval building, *if* *not* in itself particularly monastic. (COBUILD on CD-ROM)

(11) Until the 1950s, this adverb was a negative polarity item in the standard language, if not in some of the southern dialects. (Horn and Kato (eds), 2000, *Negation and Polarity*)

In (9) *up to her expectation* and *good* are not necessarily on the same scale. Similarly, in (10), *an important mediaeval building* and *particularly monastic* are not on the same scale. In (11) *the standard language* and *the southern dialects* are not on the same scale. Kjellmer (1975) explains this phenomenon in terms of the concept of "homodimensional" and "heterodimensional." The former concept indicates that A and B are in the concept of the same scale and the later concept indicates that A and B are not in the same scale.

However, the concept of "scale" is not enough to explain the following examples: it is necessary to introduce the concept of "conceptual domain:"

(12) a. The soup is warm *if not* hot.
　　 b. * The soup is cool *if not* hot.

Lexical items such as *cool, warm, and hot* in the two sentences in (12) are all located on the same "temperature scale." However, (12a) is acceptable but (12b) is unacceptable. Why does this difference in acceptability arise? It can be attributed to the fact that *warm* and *hot* are situated in the "same conceptual domain," but that *cool* is outside of the conceptual domain. In the same conceptual domain, there is an entailment relation among the elements. *Hot* entails *warm*, but *hot'* does not entail *cold* as in:
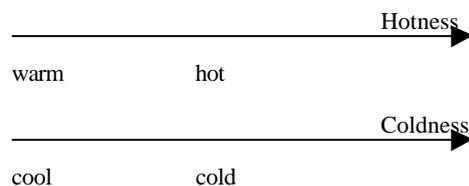
(13)
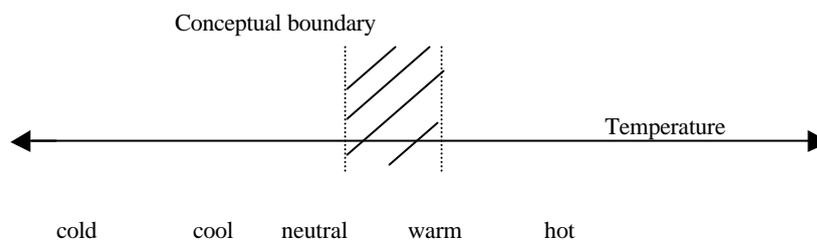
If we consider that *cool* is located on the scale of "coldness" and *warm* and *hot'* are located on the scale of "hotness," we cannot construe the "neutral" temperature, i.e.

the temperature which is neither cool nor warm, as in:

(14)

Therefore, we should consider <cool, warm, hot> as a continuum in the same scale, as in the figure (13). This is why the notion of "conceptual domain" must be introduced to explain the ungrammaticality of (12b) (See Sawada 2002 for a fuller discussion).

1.2.3 Precedence Condition (PC)
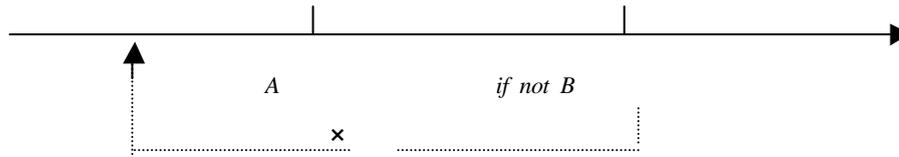
Third, I will propose the following condition:

(15) Precedence Condition (PC): In the environment of *"A if not B,"* "if not B" cannot precede A in a metatextual reading.

Notice that in the following sentence (14), "if not B" precedes A:

(16) Her voice was, *if not* perfect, at least nearly so.   (COBUILD[1])

(16) has only a concessive reading (=Her voice was at least nearly perfect even if it was not perfect), and cannot be a metatextual reading, (=her voice is nearly perfect perhaps it is perfect). Kjellmer (1975:146) also observes this phenomenon, but he offers no explanation for it. There is considerable validity to arguing that this phenomenon is due to a pragmatic mechanism which is inherent in a metatextual type: *if not* in a metatextual type has the function of canceling the scalar implicture "not more," but if "*if not* B" precedes A, it cannot cancel the scalar implicature. In other words, it is not until there is an object to cancel that the canceling can take place. On the other hand, since a concessive type has nothing to do with canceling, the precedence of "if not B" does not matter. The following figure indicates that when the reading is metatextual, "*if not* B" cannot precede A.

(17)

A   if not B

×

1.2.4 Contextual Givenness Condition

Finally, I will propose the following condition. This condition is at the discourse level:

(18) Contextual Givenness Condition (CGC):

In the environment of "*A if not B*," if B is contextually given, the sentence has a concessive reading, and if A is a contextually given, the sentence has a metatextual reading.

This condition is corroborated by the following dialogues:

(19)   A: Does he have <u>four cows</u>?
              B: He has three cows, if not <u>four.</u>

(20)   A: Does he have <u>three cows</u>?
              B: He has <u>three cows</u>, if not four

The reading of the *if not* sentence in (19) is concessive and that of the *if not* sentence in (20) is metatextual. Whether the utterance is concessive or metatextual depends on which of the two elements is contextually given. Let us consider more examples:

(21) A: Why did the manager get so angry? Did the young employee
         speak to him <u>ungraciously</u>?
     B: Yes. He spoke <u>ungraciously</u>, if not rudely.

(22) A: Why did the manager get so angry? Did the young employee
         speak to him <u>rudely</u>?
     B: He spoke ungraciously, if not <u>rudely</u>.

According to the CGC, (21B) is interpreted as metatextual, whereas (22B) is interpreted as concessive.

The difference in information structure reflects the difference in intonation

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structure. The element B in a concessive reading has "contrastive topic" (HLH) intonation, and is thus clearly given information. On the other hand, the element B in a metatextual reading is focal (new information) (de Chene p.c.). Thus, since the two types of the *if not* sentences are disambiguated by intonation, the "ambiguity" exists only on written form.

   1.3 The ambiguity of the *if not* costruction: elliptical or constructional

   This section will argue that the concessive *if not* sentence is an elliptical sentence but the metatextual *if not* sentence is a construction. The decisive difference between an elliptical sentence and an idiomatic construction is that the meaning of an elliptical sentence is equal to the meaning of a full sentence reconstructing the omitted parts, while the meaning of an idiomatic cannot be paraphrased by a fuller sentence. That is to say, the former is what we call "elliptical," but the later is what Construction Grammar calls a "grammatical construction" (Fillmore et al.1988, Goldberg 1995, Kay 1997, Kay and Fillmore 1999).
Goldberg(1995) defines the notion 'construction' as follows:

   (23) C is a CONSTRUCTION iff $_{def}$ C is a form   meaning pair, Fi,Si   such
          that some aspect of Fi or some aspect of Si is not strictly predictable from
          C's component parts or from other previously established constructions.

                                                                (Goldberg 1995:4)

More precisely, a construction is an integration of <form-meaning-function> whose syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic characteristics are not fully predictable from general syntactic rules and componential semantics. Observe the following examples:

   (24) a. I might see you tomorrow. <u>If not</u>, then it'll be Saturday.

                                                                (Swan 1995 :251)
        b. If I don't see you tomorrow, then it'll be Saturday. (=a)

   (25) a. Get out of here at once. <u>If not</u>, I'll phone the police.   (LDCE)
        b. If you don't get out of here at once, I'll phone the police. (=a)

   (26) a. The Queen of England is happy, <u>*if not*</u> ecstatic.
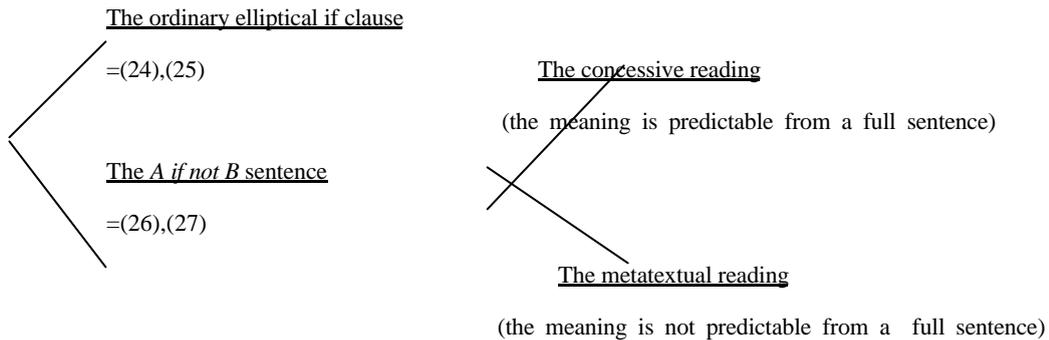   b. The Queen of England is happy, if she is not ecstatic.

   (27) a. She ate many of the cakes, <u>*if not*</u> all.

b. She ate many of the cakes, if she didn't eat all of them.

(Dancygier 1998:142)

In (24)-(25), the meaning of elliptical sentences (24a, 25a) is equal to the meaning of the sentences with full protases (24b, 25b). However, in (26) (27), things become a little complicated because there are two meanings in the *A if not B* sentence, one concessive, and the other metatextual. In the concessive reading, the meaning of the *if not* sentence (26a, 27a) is equal to the full sentences (26b, 27b), while in the "metatextual reading," the meaning of (26a, 27a) cannot be predicted from the full sentences (26b, 27b). In other words, a metatextual reading cannot be predicted from compositional semantics. Hence, we can draw a conclusion that the "concessive type" is an elliptical sentence and the "metatextual type" is a construction. The following diagram shows the difference between an elliptical sentence and a construction:

(28)

The ordinary elliptical if clause

=(24),(25)

The concessive reading

(the meaning is predictable from a full sentence)

The *A if not B* sentence

=(26),(27)

The metatextual reading

(the meaning is not predictable from a full sentence)

1.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have considered two readings of the *A if not B* construction, one concessive and the other metatextual. Kjellmer (1975) and Dancygier (1998) analyze the two readings at a sentential level, but not at a discourse level. I have expanded the domain of analysis into a discourse level to argue that syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic conditions are imposed on each type. I proposed four conditions: ( ) Negativity Condition,( ) Identical Conceptual Domain Condition, ( ) Precedence Condition, and ( ) Contextual Givenness Condition. These conditions play a vital role in explaining the ambiguity of the sentence in a principled and natural way.

However, not all conditions have to apply simultaneously to the *if not* construction. Consider the following sentence:

(29) He was a fair cop who took only clean graft and his rise in the police

department was <u>steady</u> if not <u>spectacular</u>.   (Mario Puzo. *The Godfather*)

In order to analyze the ambiguity of sentence (29), not all the conditions are involved. First, the CGC is not involved to remove the ambiguity because there is no information concerning "steady" or "spectacular" in the context. Second, the PC does not determine its interpretation, either. This is because 'if not B' does not precede A. Third, the ICDC does not play a role in removing the ambiguity, because the two elements *steady* and *spectacular* are on the same conceptual domain. Finally, it is the NC which determines the reading of the sentence: This condition helps to determine whether the narrator is asserting that the cop's rise was "not spectacular"(=descriptive negation) or the narrator is suggesting that it "may even have been spectacular" (=metatextual negation). If the narrator intends the former, the interpretation must be "concessive," whereas if the narrator intends the latter, the interpretation must be "metatextual." In fact, (29) is followed by (30), which explains that the man's rise was "not spectacular."

   (30) …Mark McCluskey was rising from sergeant to lieutenant and
        finally to captain.
(30) suggests that his rise is steady.

Notes:

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Japan on Dec 7th, 2002 at Kansai Foreign Language University and on a paper presented at the 7th conference of PAAL(Pan-Pacific Association of Applied Linguistics on Dec 15th, 2002 in Singapore. I would like to thank people who listened to my presentation and gave me helpful comments.
1. The definition of metatextual is broader than the Horn's notion of
        metalinguistic negation.
2. We should recognize that there are two kinds of scale, "semantic scale" (Horn 1972, 1989) and "pragmatic scale" (Fauconier 1975, Hirschberg1985). (See Chapter 2)

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