

Negative conditional constructions in English: A usage-based perspective

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Negative conditional constructions are constructions in which the absence of one state of affairs is a condition for the interpretation or realisation of another. In English, the two main ways of expressing a negative conditional clause are by an *unless*-clause or a negated *if*-clause. For example, in (1), not being mistaken is an epistemic condition for interpreting the statement about who 'this' belongs to, and in (2), not raining is a content condition for heading to the beach (see e.g. Sweetser 1990; Dancygier & Sweetser 2005).

- (1) Unless I'm mistaken, this belonged to Lee.
- (2) If it doesn't rain tomorrow, I will head to the beach.

In this presentation, English negative conditional clauses are examined from a usage-based constructional perspective (e.g. Diessel 2019; Goldberg 2019). The focus will be on examining the extent to which negative conditionals form a network of conventionalised constructions, as well as the ways in which these constructions are used across genres. The latter perspective will shed light on the discourse functions of negative conditionals.

Previous research has argued that negative conditionals stand apart from other conditionals in a number of respects. In many languages, there is a separate marker for negative conditionality, such as *unless* (see also Montolio 2000). *Unless*-conditionals have been claimed to predominantly appear after their main clause, unlike *if*-conditionals (Dancygier & Sweetser 2005). Semantically, at least some *unless*-clauses are more like exceptives than conditionals (Geis 1973; von Stechow 1992; Declerck & Reed 2000). Furthermore, *unless* only rarely allows counterfactual readings. However, the corpus evidence for such claims is either scant or unsystematic. Furthermore, corpus studies of other types of conditionals have had very different results, presumably on the basis of genre: for example, the proportion of initial *if*-clauses has varied from 53 (Diessel 2001: 444) to 82 per cent (Ford & Thompson 1986: 362), and the predominant semantic domain of conditional clauses can be anything from content to speech act in a given register (Athanasidou & Dirven 1997).

To place the study of negative conditionals on a firmer empirical footing, this presentation will examine *unless*-clauses and negated *if*-clauses from the perspective of genre variation. To do this, the study will investigate the use of negative conditionals in the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), a multi-genre reference corpus of present-day American English. Attention will be paid to the position of the negative conditional clause with regard to its main clause, the type of conditional relation, the tense of the conditional clause, its reality status, and the givenness of its content.

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