



UNREALITY IN ENGLISH CONDITIONAL CLAUSES: FORM AND MEANING

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ABSTRACT

Unreality constitutes a central semantic and functional category in English grammar, and conditional clauses represent one of its most systematic and theoretically rich realizations. Conditional constructions allow speakers to conceptualize hypothetical, potential, and counterfactual situations by establishing logical relations between conditions and consequences that do not correspond directly to factual reality. This article provides a comprehensive, Scopus-ready analysis of unreality in English conditional clauses with a focus on the interaction between grammatical form and semantic interpretation. The study utilizes corpus-based examples from COCA and BNC, incorporates cross-linguistic comparison with Uzbek and Russian conditional clauses, and applies descriptive, functional, and cognitive frameworks. Particular attention is given to tense–aspect selection, modal auxiliaries, clause structure, and pragmatic factors involved in hypothetical, counterfactual, and mixed conditionals. The article demonstrates that unreality in English conditionals is primarily encoded through modal remoteness and complex syntactic patterns. The findings reveal a coherent system that reflects graded distance from reality and provides practical insights for translation studies, language teaching, and applied linguistic research.

Conditional clauses occupy a central position in English grammar because they allow speakers to reason about non-actual situations, evaluate alternative possibilities, and construct hypothetical scenarios. Unlike simple declarative sentences, which describe events as factual, conditional constructions frequently encode situations that are uncertain, imagined, unlikely, or contrary to fact. Therefore, conditional clauses are a crucial site for expressing unreality in English.

Unreality in language serves multiple cognitive and communicative purposes. Speakers use unreal constructions to hypothesize, speculate, plan, express regret, or evaluate alternative outcomes. In academic, scientific, and argumentative discourse, conditional clauses are essential for reasoning and abstract thought. Their importance is reinforced by their capacity to convey nuanced meanings in social, educational, and professional contexts.

Despite their significance, English conditional clauses present challenges for linguistic analysis and language learning. One key difficulty lies in the non-temporal use of past tense forms to indicate modal remoteness. Learners often misinterpret past tense as temporal rather than unreal, and linguists have debated the theoretical implications of these tense shifts.

The present study provides an in-depth analysis of unreality in English conditional clauses. It addresses how grammatical form and semantic meaning interact, the mechanisms signaling varying degrees of distance from reality, and the practical implications for translation, corpus-based research, and language teaching.

The expression of unreality in conditional clauses is closely linked to the broader linguistic category of **irrealis**, which encompasses situations that are not presented as factual at the moment of speaking. Irrealis meanings include hypotheticality, futurity, obligation, counterfactuality, and evaluative judgment. Conditional clauses are prototypical environments for irrealis meaning, as they inherently involve propositions whose realization is uncertain or non-actualized. [1; 268] By encoding unreal situations, conditional clauses allow speakers to explore alternative possibilities, engage in hypothetical reasoning, and express evaluative or attitudinal nuances.

In English, the expression of unreality is **periphrastic rather than morphological**, since the language lacks a distinct irreal is mood. Instead, unreality emerges from the interaction of **tense, aspect, modality, and clause structure**. For instance, past tense forms in present unreal conditionals (e.g., *If I were rich, I would travel the world*) signal modal remoteness rather than temporal reference. Similarly, the past perfect in counterfactual conditionals (e.g., *If the experiment had been conducted properly, the results would have been more reliable*) encodes a hypothetical past that contradicts actual events. This distributed encoding supports the functionalist view that meaning arises from the **systematic interplay of multiple grammatical elements**, rather than from a single morpheme or syntactic feature [2; 98]

Functionalist approaches complement cognitive accounts by emphasizing the communicative purposes of unreal conditionals. In discourse, such constructions are used to **express possibility, probability, necessity, or regret**, and to manage interpersonal stance. Modal auxiliaries (*would, could, might, should*) operate in combination with clause structure to encode both the likelihood of the proposition and the speaker's attitude toward it. This interaction of form and meaning is a key principle in understanding the **syntax-semantics interface** in English conditionals.

Cross-linguistic studies further enrich theoretical understanding by comparing English unreal conditionals with analogous constructions in other languages. For example, in Uzbek, unreality is frequently marked through mood and specific verb morphology, while in Russian, past tense forms combined with modal verbs perform a similar function. Comparative analysis demonstrates that while languages vary in surface expression, the cognitive and functional principles underlying the expression of unreality are **largely universal**. Such insights are particularly valuable for translation studies, contrastive linguistics, and second-language acquisition research.

In summary, the theoretical framework for analyzing unreality in English conditional clauses integrates insights from **functional linguistics, cognitive grammar, modality theory, and cross-linguistic comparison**. This multi-dimensional approach enables a comprehensive understanding of how unreal meaning is systematically encoded and interpreted, providing a solid foundation for the subsequent analysis of specific conditional constructions in English.

Hypothetical conditionals, traditionally referred to as second conditionals, are constructions that encode situations considered unlikely, imaginary, or contrary to present reality. Unlike real (first) conditionals, which describe situations perceived as possible or probable, hypothetical conditionals enable speakers to reason about non-actualized scenarios in the present or future. The canonical structure consists of a past-tense verb in the conditional clause and a modal auxiliary, typically *would*, in the main clause.

For example: *If the methodology were improved, the results would be more reliable.*

In this sentence, the past-tense form *were* does not refer to past time; instead, it signals modal remoteness, indicating that the condition is conceptually distant from reality. The main clause, introduced by *would*, expresses the hypothetical consequence contingent upon the non-actualized condition. This periphrastic system allows English to encode unreal meaning without a dedicated irrealis mood, distinguishing it from many other languages where mood morphology serves this purpose.

Corpus-based studies, such as those using the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) and the British National Corpus (BNC), reveal that second conditionals occur frequently in academic discourse, media texts, and spoken English. They are often employed to:

1. Propose hypothetical solutions (*If the data were accurate, we would be able to draw stronger conclusions*),
2. Explore speculative reasoning (*If climate change were reversed, global ecosystems could recover*),
3. Express advice or suggestions in formal contexts (*If you were to review the report carefully, errors would be minimized*).

The use of modal auxiliaries in second conditionals extends beyond *would*. *Could* and *might* introduce nuances of potentiality or tentative evaluation. For example:

If the student were more diligent, they could achieve higher grades.

If the experiment were replicated, it might yield different results.

These variations allow speakers to convey subtle differences in likelihood, possibility, and evaluative stance, demonstrating the flexibility of English syntax in encoding hypotheticality.

From a cognitive-linguistic perspective, hypothetical conditionals function as tools for constructing alternative mental spaces, enabling reasoning about situations that do not correspond to current reality [3; 174]. Such mental simulation facilitates planning, problem-solving, and predictive reasoning, particularly in academic and professional contexts.

Cross-linguistic comparisons further illuminate the nature of hypothetical conditionals. In Uzbek, hypotheticality is often encoded using specific mood markers or verb forms,

whereas in Russian, past-tense verbs combined with modal constructions serve a similar function:

1. English: *If I were the project manager, I would implement stricter protocols.*
2. Uzbek: *Agar men loyiha boshlig'i bo'lganimda, qat'iyroq protseduralarni joriy qilgan bo'lardim.*
3. Russian: *Если бы я был руководителем проекта, я бы внедрил более строгие протоколы.*

These parallels show that while languages differ in surface encoding, the functional principle of signaling unreal present or future conditions is largely universal.

In summary, hypothetical conditionals in English serve multiple functions:

1. Expressing non-actual possibilities in present or future contexts,
2. Allowing evaluation, speculation, or advice,
3. Providing graded expressions of modality through tense and auxiliary interaction.

The systematic use of past-tense forms, modal auxiliaries, and clause structure makes hypothetical conditionals a robust grammatical mechanism for expressing unreal meaning and reasoning about alternative realities.

Mixed conditionals represent a **hybrid type of conditional clause** in English that combines elements from **second (hypothetical) and third (counterfactual) conditionals**. They are used to express **complex unreal scenarios** where the temporal reference of the condition and the consequence differs, often linking an unreal past event with a present or future outcome. Mixed conditionals are particularly useful for **reasoning across time**, allowing speakers to indicate the ongoing impact of past events on present or future situations.

The canonical structure typically involves:

Past perfect in the conditional clause to indicate a past unreal event, and

Present tense with modal auxiliary in the main clause to indicate a current hypothetical consequence.

For example: *If the company had invested in training last year, employees would be more productive now.*

Here, *had invested* signals that the investment did **not occur in the past**, while *would be more productive* expresses a **present unreal result** contingent on that past non-event. Mixed conditionals therefore allow English speakers to convey **causal relations that span temporal domains**, capturing the dynamic interplay between past unreal events and their current or future hypothetical consequences.

Corpus analysis (COCA, BNC) indicates that mixed conditionals frequently appear in:

1. **Business and management discourse**, discussing past decisions and current outcomes,
2. **Scientific and technical writing**, evaluating past experimental conditions in relation to present results,
3. **Media and opinion writing**, highlighting the consequences of historical actions on contemporary issues.

Modal auxiliaries play an important role in mixed conditionals. *Would, could, and might* help express varying degrees of hypotheticality, potentiality, or uncertainty:

If the project team had met the deadline, the company could benefit from higher revenues now.

If she had taken the scholarship, she might be pursuing her PhD today.

From a **cognitive-linguistic perspective**, mixed conditionals allow speakers to construct **multiple mental spaces**: one for the past unreal event and one for the present or future hypothetical scenario. According to **mental space theory** [4; 311], such constructions facilitate reasoning about **causal chains and alternative realities**, supporting predictive, evaluative, and reflective thinking. Cross-linguistic comparisons reveal interesting patterns. In **Uzbek**, mixed conditionals are often marked by combining past unreal forms with modal constructions in the present:

Agar kompaniya o'tgan yili xodimlarni tayyorlashga sarmoya qilganida, ular hozir ko'proq samarali bo'lardi.

In **Russian**, past-tense verbs in the conditional clause paired with present-tense modals in the main clause convey similar meanings:

Если бы компания инвестировала в обучение сотрудников в прошлом году, они бы сейчас были более продуктивными.

Functional linguists argue that conditional clauses are **discourse-driven**, with their form–meaning mapping shaped by the communicative needs of speakers. Modality, tense, and aspect are not arbitrary; they systematically signal the **speaker's evaluation of possibility, probability, or desirability** [5; 153]. Corpus evidence (COCA, BNC) shows that such constructions are highly frequent in **academic writing, editorial commentary, and professional discourse**, indicating their utility in reasoning, persuasion, and argumentation.

Cognitive approaches also highlight the role of **modal auxiliaries, tense, and aspect** as linguistic cues for mental distance. Past tense forms in second conditionals and past perfect in third conditionals signal **non-actuality**, helping the hearer distinguish hypothetical or counterfactual scenarios from factual statements. Modal auxiliaries (*would, could, might, should*) further refine these simulations by indicating **likelihood, potentiality, or normative evaluation**.

The interplay between functional and cognitive perspectives provides a holistic understanding of unreal conditionals. Functionally, conditionals serve communicative purposes such as persuasion, evaluation, and instruction. Cognitively, they facilitate reasoning about non-actual events, allowing speakers to construct and manipulate alternative scenarios. This integration explains the high frequency and versatility of conditional clauses in academic, professional, and literary discourse.

Cross-linguistic comparisons reinforce these insights. In Uzbek and Russian, conditional constructions also serve both functional and cognitive roles, though their encoding mechanisms differ. Morphological mood markers in Uzbek and the particle *бы* in Russian guide the creation of alternative mental spaces, similar to how English relies on tense–modal combinations. This demonstrates that while the surface forms differ, the underlying cognitive and communicative functions of unreal conditionals are universal.

In conclusion English conditional clauses provide a **rich, systematic, and cognitively motivated mechanism** for expressing unreality. By integrating grammatical form, modal auxiliaries, cognitive simulation, and pragmatic function, these constructions enable speakers to reason about alternative realities, evaluate past and present scenarios, and communicate nuanced meaning effectively. Cross-linguistic comparisons further enhance our understanding, demonstrating both diversity in encoding strategies and universality in conceptual functions. This comprehensive perspective contributes to theoretical linguistics, applied linguistics, translation studies, and language pedagogy, positioning English conditional clauses as a critical domain for understanding the interplay between grammar, meaning, and cognition. This article has provided a comprehensive analysis of unreality in English conditional clauses. It examined hypothetical, counterfactual, and mixed conditionals, highlighting their grammatical mechanisms and semantic effects. Modal remoteness, tense-aspect forms, and auxiliaries work together to encode varying degrees of unreality. The study offers theoretical and practical insights, contributing to syntactic theory, contrastive linguistics, corpus-based research, and applied language studies..

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