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Grammaticalization of Syntactic Incompleteness: Free Conditionals in Italian and Other Languages

Abstract

Many subordinate clauses introduced by *se* ('if') in spoken Italian are not actually embedded in any (overt) main clause. Instead, the "missing" main clauses assume a number of semantic values that have become conventionally associated with the *se* clauses under examination. It is argued that such clauses should no longer be described as unembedded, and hence incomplete, conditional clauses. Rather, they should be viewed as a new construction typical of spoken language, constituted by an independent clause introduced by *se* and having its own, almost codified meanings. The absence of the main clause has taken on a precise grammatical function, allowing the unembedded conditional to become a new kind of sentence.

Having clear pragmatic grounds, these phenomena probably occur in similar ways in other languages. This hypothesis is briefly checked on evidence from other languages, both Indoeuropean and non-Indoeuropean.

1. Unembedded conditional clauses

Spoken Italian shows the presence of a construction that may be regarded as belonging to the "periphery" rather than the "center" of grammar, and is completely absent in writing. Many subordinate clauses introduced by *se* (the subordinating conjunction for conditionals and indirect interrogatives, 'if') are not actually embedded in any (overt) main clause. The majority of them can only be interpreted as conditional clauses. In all these cases the utterance shows a certain degree of semantic incompleteness, because the addressee is obliged to imagine the content of the main clause which is not actually produced. This is the case of the examples in (1):¹

¹ All examples are taken from the important spoken Italian corpus *LIP*.

- (1a) LIP, Rd9:
 ... se non lo volete fondo beige non so volete con fondo rosso ce l'abbiamo col
 fondo rosso c'e' qui a terra per esempio **se si puo' brevemente inquadrare un
 tappeto** sempre in questa stessa qualita' eccolo col fondo rosso
(if you can show a carpet briefly....)
- (1b) LIP, Fa13:
 se poi tu 'n l'hai finito ma **se il concetto c'e' tutto_#**
(if the concept is all there...)
- (1c) LIP, Rb7:
 A: ho capito e_ o so d' altra parte va be' **se te sei scordato**
 B: mah v ...
(if you have forgotten...)
- (1d) LIP, Fa4:
 F: ecco **se vedete che avete bisogno di altro eh?**
(if you see that you need something else...)

We will now present an overview of different kinds of unembedded conditionals. We will propose a possible semantic/pragmatic classification for the uses of this construction, and a functional hypothesis on its occurrence.

2. Types of missing main clauses

2.1 “No problem, everything’s fine”

The “unexpressed meaning” suggested by the conditional clause and by its context can be a *reassurance of the addressee*, something like “why worry? everything’s OK (at least as far as I’m concerned), there is no problem.” This meaning can also be expressed overtly, as happens in (2), by linguistic material so loosely linked syntactically to the conditional clause as to be hardly considered the main clause:

- (2a) LIP, Mb30:
 A: guarda io mi sono informato oggi m'hanno detto m'hanno dato dei prezzi
 veramente da sballo
 B: no tu fai cosi' eh XYZ vedi se riesci se a rimanere fino praticamente a venerdi'
 o se trovi un altro appoggio
 A: si' si' si'
 B: poi voglio dire **se stiamo insieme quindici giorni**

A: certo certo
 B: capito? non c'e' problema da venerdì' questa casa ce l'ho
 A: va bene
 B: di conseguenza si tratta capito di tirare avanti questi
 A: certo certo
 B: cinque giorni
(if we spend fifteen days together... there is no problem)

But more often the reassuring content must be inferred from the context:

(2b) LIP, Fa13:

... se tu non ce la fai a finillo # per lo meno pero' fin do tu arrivi che tu l'abbia fatto bene ecco # se poi tu 'n l'hai finito ma **se il concetto c'e' tutto_#** 'un l'ho portata fino in fondo dico 'n ti succedera' mica sempre di rimanere al mezzo...
(if the concept is all there...)

(2c) LIP, Rb7:

A: che a scuola gli avevano non so chi gli ha dato un biglietto pe anda' a vede' Costanzo Show Anto' me ci accompagni? dice si' si' cosi' se ne so' andati tutti e due lui e Federica a vede' chissa' se li hanno fatti entra' non li hanno fatti entra' bo'
 B: ah be' perche' no se ci hai **_se ci hai l'invito**
 A: ci aveva il biglietto per due persone
 B: ah infatti
(if you have the invitation...)

(2e) LIP, Mb4:

B: per cui_ c'e' un po' di_ [RIDE] macello pero' insomma va be' **se facciamo finta di nulla**
(if we pretend nothing has happened...)

2.2 “It’s out of our hands”

Another form of content typically attributable to the “missing” main clauses is something like “there’s nothing we can do, let it be, it’s a disaster, it’s worse than we ever imagined,” and similar. It is, actually, the negative, pessimistic version of the preceding type, with which it shares the nuclear meaning: “there is nothing we need/can do, because, things being as described by the conditional clause, there is no need to change them or no way of changing them”:

(3a) LIP, Fb19:

B: ma insomma allora te vorresti dire che la legge fosse fatta e poi chi ne usufruisce eh ne usufruisce

A: ne usufruisce la stragrande maggioranza **se poi ci sono quei_ quelle sacche di disonesti come sempre ci saranno** che speculano su questo e quest'altro ma scusa la

B: ecco

A: legge faccio un esempio sugli asili nido mi sembra sia una cosa per tante mamme eccetera poi ogni tanto sorte

B: certo eh senz' altro

A: fuori l'asilo nido che i bambini li tratta male che non gli da' da mangiare che li pigliano a calci nel sedere eccetera quelli vanno messi in galera una volta scoperti ma non non fare gli asili nido perche' si pensa che qualcuno debba...

(if then there are those_ those groups of dishonest people...)

(3b) LIP, Fb35:

A: ecco benissimo allora eh un Lorenzo omonimo eh che studia e uno che in questo momento sta cercando di di recuperare il pranzo perso

B: ho capito

A: perche' ho un tecnico che mi sta mangiando sotto gli occhi e ora **se questo e' il sistema di fare radio** alla RAI non lo farebbero io mi chiedo ma alla RAI mangiano?

(if this is the way to do radio...)

(3c) LIP, Rb7:

B: e niente m<e> me so' dimenticato poi la mattina successiva quando so' annato a compra' della roba la eh ho visto che avevo questo biglietto del cinema che poi e' peccato che s'e' sprecato

A: certo certo

B: perche' era solo per il mese di_ d'ottobre

A: ho capito e_ o so d' altra parte va be' **se te sei scordato**

B: mah va be'

A: embe' certo

(if you have forgotten...)

(3d) LIP, Re11:

ah se all'improvviso_ me ne vado io chi chi chi sti macelli chi li leva mo' mo' li sto a fa' io poi chi i fa i fanno i mi fii e lui e mo' provvedero' mo' provvedero' mo' provvedero' passano i mesi passano l' anni e questo non provvede mai **se sto a da' retta a lui_** sempre silenzioso io me ne vado se ne vanno i mi fii la' ce rimane a moglie e_ il proprietario so' io

(if I pay attention to him...)

2.3 Generic question of the kind: “What is going to happen?”:

In assertive utterances like the ones seen so far, unembedded conditionals can have conclusive intonational contour, but also a suspended intonation as they would have if “regularly” followed by the main clause. The illocutionary value of the utterance is nevertheless easily interpreted as assertive. The case of interrogative illocution is different. Here, utterances must be distinguished from assertive ones by means of intonation, and therefore a suspended contour is not sufficient.

In fact, in this case unembedded conditionals are not suspended, and have interrogative intonation, as if they were complete sentences. This fact can be regarded as an important clue, not always available in assertive utterances, as to how we should consider the absence of the main clause. If the main clause were simply absent because of dialogical interruption or shift in discourse planning, the subordinate clause would end with a suspended, incomplete contour. Instead, the subordinate conditional actually assumes the interrogative intonation of the utterance, and consequently its interrogative illocution, thus showing that the absence of the main clause is structurally planned, from the beginning of the utterance production. In other words, the subordinate conditional clause, although regarded as incomplete from the point of view of traditional, prescriptive syntax, is not incomplete at all from a pragmatic point of view. The absence of the main clause is not due to occasional execution, rather it is a construction that belongs to the competence of the speaker. In any case, the interrogation that arises from interrogative intonation is not entrusted to an unexpressed interrogative main clause: it is entrusted to the subordinate clause itself which, under the syntactic appearance of a suspended dependent clause, has the pragmatic function of a full utterance.

From a semantic point of view, the question contained in interrogative conditionals has extremely generic meaning, which varies very little according to the different propositional contents expressed explicitly. It is almost always a question such as: “what will happen? What should we expect?” This can be seen in examples (4):

(4a) LIP, Md1:

A: quindi risulta che le righe sono sette # va bene?

C: sì

A: uno due tre quattro cinque sei sette e che per ogni riga ci sono sette?

C: sette pasticcini

A: allora attenti

[VOCI_SOVRAPPOSTE]

A: adesso se la domanda e' attenti **se la domanda e' quanti sono in tutto i pasticcini?**

C: quattordici

A: ma figurati ti sembra possibile che siano quattor<dici> che tutti questi pasticcini che abbiamo disegnato

sono quattordici?

(If the question is how many little cakes are there in all?)

(4b) LIP, Na11:

E: se io vado da Nello in tipografia e poi gli <?> delle_

[parole_incomprensibili]

A: <??> ho gli esami ah

D: o o va <?> oppure vado adesso

E: Elio Elio solo alle due e venti puo' andare_

D: ma_ **se questo e' preliminare al pacco?** no naturalmente sono due cose separate

E: no no si'

D: io posso andarci adesso se e' tutto pronto

(if this is preliminary to the parcel?)

(4c) LIP, Mb36:

A: sara' andata a scopa' sara' andata a scopare con qualchedun altro che ti frega?

B: benissimo non me ne frega assolutamente niente mi dici vado da Monica Giuseppe [interruzione] Antonia quello che ti pare pero' mi dici dove vai oppure tu mi dici esco chiuso non mi dici la balla

A: mh

B: vado in campagna e mi lasci come un pirla che chiamo tutto il giorno in campagna e_ non ci sei mai poi chiamo la macchina la macchina e' libera e lei non risponde quelle cose oh? ma dico diamo i numeri?

B: e **se dice vado a scopare?**

A: va benissimo vai a scopare se_ eh

B: e poi e poi lei la corcavi di botte

A: ma neanche per idea se mi diceva vado a scopare benissimo vai a scopare se ti piace vai a scopare

B: mh

(if she says I'm going to fuck?)

In some cases the main clause may be present, but syntactically separate, so that when the conditional clause appears it remains syntactically suspended all the same. Also in this case it is produced under an interrogative contour:

(4d) LIP, Fa12:

... e quindi e' un problema che riguarda la direzione ma **se il ministero ci viene a domandare** e le linee gran turismo_ eh regionali provinciali con che cosa le fate? che gli si risponde le facciamo con le biciclette?
(if the ministry comes out asking us...)

2.4 Exclamatory and adversative conditionals: “(But) it is not true!”

In some cases the conditional clause is (more or less explicitly) adversative or exclamatory. The meaning that arises from this is: “what has just been said is wrong, not appropriate, not pertinent,” and the like. Cf. examples (5):

(5a) LIP, Mb1:

B: <??> sai che tutte le volte che lo vedo mi fa dei discorsi_ adesso sta passando prima_ al limite scherzava diceva delle cose_ <?> adesso sta passando sul psicologico mi chiede ma come si fa a conquistare una donna?

C: e' pazzesco # ma quel pazzo che adesso e' diventato secchione_

B: ma si' **ma se non ha dato esami da_**

C: ma ne ha dati due adesso

B: ah si'?

C: si'_ due_ va be' due piccolini pero' li ha dati

(but if he hasn't done any exams since...)

(5b) LIP, Na2:

B: poi a dirti la verita' io mica lo so se lui conosce veramente l'italiano

A: scusa se **lui ha parlato durante una conferenza in italiano**

(if he spoke Italian during a conference...)

(5c) LIP, Re11:

D: signor giudice io ci ho sessantasei anni so' piu' vecchio pure de lui

E: **se ci hai un anno piu' de me**

(if you are one year older than me...)

2.5 Offer and request

The semantic value most often assumed by unembedded conditional clauses in dialogic contexts is that of an offer or request. This happens typically but not exclusively with verbs like *volere* (“want”) and *potere* (“can”). While appearing to express a hypothetical condition, the pragmatic function of the conditional clause is actually that of inviting the addressee to fulfil that condition. In (6a), for instance, the first participant makes the hypothesis that the other may give him some piece of information, but what

really happens is that he invites him to do so; and the other actually complies with the unexpressed request:

(6a) LIP, Na13:

H: non mi ricordo comunque posso vederlo perche' c'ho il giornale qua

C: ahah vediamo un momento questi due Valpolicella e Soave perche' _

H: **se mi dice la pagina_ se mi dice la pagina**

C: la pagina allora trentatre'

(if you tell me the page...)

From the point of view of traditional syntax, this utterance may be seen as lacking a main clause such as "it would be good," "I would be grateful to you"; but we can also see it as a false conditional that is actually an exhortative utterance whose sense is not "if A," but "please, A." As pointed out by Stirling (1998: 281), the result can be an effect of particular politeness. The utterance leaves the addressee completely free to choose what to do, in that "use of the *if*-clause construction allows the communication of the possibility of not-A."

In the following examples the same invitation to do something is activated, although the addressee does not necessarily comply straight away:

(6b) LIP, Ma18:

P: senta io avrei bisogno urgentemente di questa cosa qua se no mi tocca partire a militare sono andato su come e' meglio?

Q: no dico vai nel golfo poi vai nel golfo

P: eh ah si' appunto eh **se me lo fa avere**

Q: allora tutti gli esami sostenuti con dichiarazione che ha presentato domandina <???

(if you can get it for me...)

(6c) LIP, Ra3:

E: **se lo_ fai fare presto** perche' questo e' su di House <?> e allora me lo vorrei leggere chiaramente pero' **se lo fai fare_**

A: lo faccio fare_ lo faccio fare mercoledi'

E: ah va bene

(if you can get it done quickly...)

A typical case is when the conditional clause formulates the hypothesis that the addressee can or would like to do something: the resulting invitation is precisely to do that thing. It may be either an offer or a request:

(7a) LIP, Nb13:

B: io poi invece e' dalle quattro che so' sveglio

A: poveraccio # **se vuoi passare**

B: no_ ti ringrazio ma eh poi sta<vo> o<ggi> oggi pomeriggio ...

(if you want to drop in...)

(7b) LIP, Nb8:

... domani sono in ufficio piu' o meno tra in tarda mattinata e tutto il pomeriggio **se mi puoi fare un colpo di telefono** cosi' ne parliamo un attimo se poi c'hai un attimo di tempo puoi anche venirmi a trovare ciao

(if you can give me a call...)

(7c) LIP, Ne11:

... perche' si sa finche' magari una e' bella e snello viene anche guardata dal marito quando invece si comincia ad avere qualche chilo in piu'_ e allora che cosa succede? ahah succede purtroppo che_ eh il marito comincia a guardarsi un attimino # in giro e che cosa succede quando si guarda un attimino in giro? che di belle ragazze ce ne sono veramente molte **se vuoi allargare ancora un pochino l'immagine** non ci sono problemi e allora che cosa succede? succede che eh dai oggi dai domani e si comincia a guardare intorno e di belle ragazze come ripeto ce ne sono veramente molte

(if you would like to enlarge the image a little bit more...)

(7d) LIP, Rb38:

A: eh XYZ buongiorno sono XYZ della XYZ Italia ho gia' parlato con l'ingegner Leo_ per avere un contatto con lei per un lavoro_ diciamolo extra XYZ eh mi serviva_ un preventivo da lei ed eventualmente **se magari possiamo eh risentirci** mi puo' telefonare fino alle quattro e mezza qui in XYZ e lei ce l'ha il numero ZZZ ZZZ ZZZ e dopo le otto # eh sicuramente a casa ZZZ ZZZ ZZZ la ringrazio ecco **se si puo'_ far sentire** mi farebbe una vera cortesia grazie

(if we can speak again.. ... if you can call me...)

(7e) LIP, Rd9:

... se non lo volete fondo beige non so volete con fondo rosso ce l'abbiamo col fondo rosso c'e' qui a terra per esempio **se si puo' brevemente inquadrare un tappeto** sempre in questa stessa qualita' eccolo col fondo rosso ecco e' stato improvviso telecamera adesso e' questo questo qua eccolo qua guardate questo centro celeste e fondo rosso

(if we can show a carpet briefly...)

Besides the invitation/request to do something, the function of an unembedded conditional may be that the speaker, in a similar way, offers to do something him/herself. By expressing the hypothesis that the

addressee may have some requirement, the speaker pragmatically declares his/her willingness to meet it:

(8a) LIP, Mb79:

A: be? speriamo bene ad ogni modo **se vuoi anche il <?> di questi <??>**

B: quelli li' dovro' cambiarli in franchi svizzeri

A: ecco meglio meglio

(if you also want the <?> of these...)

(8b) LIP, Fa4:

F: ecco **se vedete che avete bisogno di altro** eh?

(if you see that you need something else...)

(8c) LIP, Fb33:

... s'e' trovata bene infatti e' molto migliorata

A: ho capito

B: ah e se lui **ha bisogno** se insom<ma> se e' una ragazza questa e' francese eh?

A: ho capito

B: ah ci ha vent'anni ventidue ventitre anni inso<mma> pero' insomma_ ci sa fare abbastanza

(if he needs...)

2.6 Idiomatizations

The frequency of unembedded conditionals with the meanings examined is turning a number of them into idiomatized expressions in spoken Italian, regularly associated with certain lexical entries and carrying a fixed semantic value. This is true, at least in part, for unembedded conditionals containing the complex verb *se hai/avete bisogno* ("if you need"), as seen in the previous section. And it is certainly the case of *se sapessi* ("if you knew") or *se ci pensi* ("if you think of it"), whose possible main clauses are hardly imaginable, but which regularly express an exclamatory surprise about what has just been said:

(9a) LIP, Re11:

D: e ci ho un anno un anno e mezzo piu' de te e un anno e mezzo quanto conta **se sapessi**

(If only you knew...)

A suspended conditional such as *se pensi che X* (“if you think that X”) always signals that there is some evident relation between X and some just expressed content:

(9b) LIP, Ra3:

C: no io gia' l'ho fatta pero' eh [voci_sovrapposte]

A: perche' io <??> poi abbiamo fino adesso parlato tremendamente con tristezza della politica de golfo della politica del PCI

C: ah dio

D: <??> delle mie tesine

A: delle delusioni che ci abbiamo quotidiane del fatto che non incontriamo persone che ci riesca che si riesce a comunicare caro Ugo stiamo freschi questi sono i veri guai

C: perche'

D: si' embe' certo

C: perche' <??> riferimenti <??>

A: **se pensi che siamo quasi soli al mondo**

(if you think that we are almost alone in this world...)

2.7 The connecting link? Shifts in discourse planning

We will now try to answer the question: how can the rise and consolidation of this construction in spoken language be explained?

Of course such an “incomplete” structure can work because the meanings it leaves unexpressed are always generic enough as to be easily recoverable from the context.² A question such as “what will happen?” can be left unexpressed with much higher probabilities of communicative success than one like “which museum will your father visit when he is in Florence next spring?”

But there are also many conditional clauses that remain suspended in discourse, although it is not possible to guess what the sense of the missing main clause ought to be, because the omission of the latter does not take place within a construction which is, from the outset, specifically designed to compensate for its absence by making its sense evident in some other way. Rather, the main clause happens to be omitted in a way unexpected to the speaker him/herself, because of a shift in discourse planning, or simply because the speaker loses the thread of what s/he is saying. In such cases,

² Stirling (1998: 189), in an article about free *if*-clauses in Australian English, also notices that “the meaning we would have to assume to be supplied is of the most general kind.”

the intonation of the conditional clause is perceivably suspended, although then the planning shift doesn't allow the contour to conclude "regularly."

This type of context probably represents the link between the "complete" conditional construction and the form in question. With the former, they share the original planning and the fact that the conditional clause, when it is produced, does in fact expect a main clause. With the latter, they share the fact that the main clause is actually absent. The presence, and even the high frequency, of conditional clauses that remain syntactically suspended because of shifts in discourse planning may be responsible for the development and establishment, in spoken Italian, of the construction we are examining; namely, unembedded conditionals that are only apparently suspended, but actually self-sufficient.

The following examples contain some shifts in discourse planning that leave the conditional clause suspended:

(10a) LIP, Ra9:

le ho detto le mie impressioni sulla classe che tutto sommato a parte il la vivacita' che a volte disturba di alcuni # sono_ eh simili cioe' secondo me ci sono dei buoni elementi in questa classe delle buone_ ecco io personalmente come mio metodo di insegnamento tendo un po' a_ eh incoraggiarli perche' secondo me e' eh magari un voto_ pero' ecco **se in italiano invece sono stati_** mentre su storia e geografia magari e' piu' facile che dia un sette cosi' su italiano perche' mi rendo conto che molti hanno poverta' lessicale_ sia allo scritto che soprattutto nell'orale_ ci sono ancora degli errori di ortografia retaggi della scuola media eccetera e questo e' un po' _# pero' ecco tutto sommato io di Dario sono abbastanza contenta soltanto
(if on the contrary in Italian they have been_ while in history and geography it may be easier...)

(10b) LIP, Re2:

... dice quale e' la garanzia quando io lo prendo e lo stacco dal televisore ci si accorge amici che non riceviamo piu' questa e' sua chi lo vuole portare a casa anziche' di trentottomila lire provato collaudato munito di garanzia stasera lo pagate solo diecimila lire quindi chi ne ha capito l'importanza chi si e' reso conto come questo_ anche gli altri vengono provati prego questo e' il suo quindi **se avete un televisore o grande o piccolo [tossisce] o a colori o in bianco e nero** non ha importanza la marca non ha importanza la grandezza perche' l'apparecchio lo adopereremo in citta' in paese in montagna in roulotte in campeggio senza avere piu' l'obbligo di avere cavi cordone e prolunga perche' la prerogativa di quest'antenna e' che puo' ricevere un segnale che va dai quaranta ai novecento megahertz quindi o abitiamo sotto lo scantinato o abitiamo al primo piano o siamo praticamente vedete ad una zona dove il segnale e' saturo e zeppo di nevischio con l'apparecchio non avremo problemi perche' l'accessorio riceve un segnale

praticamente a maniera dire poco talvolta migliore di quello che puo' dare l'ante<nna>...

(if you have a television, big or small, color or b/w the make the size don't matter...)

(10c) LIP, Md7:

208. ... andremo a verniciare anche i caloriferi lavoro noiosissimo laddove impieghereste giornate intere grazie guardate a questo tampone che entra da tutte le parti vernicia nell'ambo dei lati guardate **voi se volete disegnare qualche piccola greca sulla vostra parete** sulla vostra finestra ma attenzione un altro brevetto incredibile guardate lo stampo e' distanziato in modo tale che sulla moquette sul pavimento anche se lo appoggiate non cadra' la minima goccia guardate voi lo zoccolino noiosissimo ci vorrebbe una pazienza certossina no solamente una passata e grazie al fatto che il distanziatore distanzia appunto il tampone dalla moquette non sporcheremo...

(if you want to paint a frieze on your wall on your window but pay attention another incredible patent...)

(10d) LIP, Fb19:

... ma non non fare gli asili nido perche' si pensa che qualcuno debba

B: si' ho capito ma questo

A: speculare allora **se c'e'**

B: senz' altro codesto va bene codesto non discuto

A: **un generale che poi truffa eh** la cosa oppure si puo' arrivare in base al al modello settecento e quaranta dice lei guadagna dieci milioni al mese la sua signora no la sua

B: ah ecco

A: signora faccia quello che vole atta a casa o atta a villa

B: ecco ecco era quello che

A: e' la stessa ma -quest- ma questa

(if there is ... a general who is cheating...)

(10e) LIP, Me6:

questo e' quello che non e' entrato ancora nella testa agli imprenditori il sindacato nei luoghi di lavoro e' un momento di modernizzazione e puo' essere un momento propositivo di partecipazione rispetto agli obiettivi io vi dico che **se dovesse servire mi auguro il delegato di cantiere perche' muoia meno gente** magari con qualche_ eh fastidio in piu' per l'imprenditore ma muore meno gente credo che sia un aspetto di civilta' che va perseguito in un grande fermento
(if it can be of any use I hope the site delegate so that fewer people die...)

Conditional subordinate clauses that remain suspended because of a shift in discourse planning can be seen as “lacking a main clause” more than those presented in the previous sections that were planned to be unembedded and to express the content of the “missing” main clause in some other way. Still, it can be observed that even when there is a discourse planning shift, the absence of the main clause does not create any relevant damage to communication. This is due to the fact that when the conditional clause is formulated the content of the prospective main clause is largely (or at least partly) inferable from the context. This can actually be observed in examples (10). It is precisely because of this that the speaker can afford, and consequently in some cases chooses, to change his/her intentions and leave the main clause unexpressed.

2.7.1 Dialogic interruption

The lack of a main clause is more evident in those conditional clauses that remain suspended at the last minute because of an interruption by another speaker, after which the main clause is no longer produced. In fact, in this case the participant who has produced the conditional clause does not give up the main clause because s/he feels it is not indispensable; rather, although s/he may judge it useful, the other participant's intervention prevents him/her from producing it:

(11a) LIP, Ra2:

B: invece l'argilla

C: <?> purifica? no e' [voci_sovrapposte] sali minerali cos'e'?

B: questi sali li' <?> la composizione ah ce stanno pure i sali minerali [ride] che sei matta

C: no infatti <?> le le particelle oligo-minerali a volte **se uno ci ha** che ne so **problemi**

B: fa schifo fa schifo e' pure bruttissima da vedere madonna mia

D: com'è che si chiama?
 B: non ce niente da fa'
 D: argilla?
 B: argilla verde superventilata #
(if someone has who knows problems...)

(11b) LIP, Rb20:

A: XYZ # a che ora?
 B: quando vuole tanto io sono casalinga **se sono fuori perche' sono andata a fa' spesa**
 A: si' in ogni caso non questa sera domani in mattinata o domani pomeriggio o anche forse meglio all'ora di pranzo
 B: va bene va bene okay
(if I'm out 'cause I've gone do the shopping...)

To be fair, as can be seen from examples (11a–b), here also the interruption may not be completely unforeseen, and may not really truncate an utterance whose intention is of continuing at any cost up to the complete production of the main clause. Sometimes one feels that the speaker is interrupted precisely because the conditional clause s/he is producing presents itself as possibly self-sufficient, and consequently, so to say, “invites” the turn transition: the other participant(s) has good reason to presume that the main clause may not come or, at least, is not indispensable for the comprehension of the dialogic turn. This is more evident in cases like the following, where the conditional clause that happens to be interrupted is already interpretable as a generic question “what will happen?”, like those seen in section 2.3:

(11c) LIP, Re11:

E: ah matto guarda che t'ho detto me sa che moro prima io che te
 D: ma lascia perde
 E: ma lascia perde tu lascia perde che i contratti l'ho fatti sem<pre>
 C: **se dovesse morire** facendo le corna
 D: si' _ ma io avevo detto n' altra cosa <??> ci ho due figli
 C: dovrebbe litigare con i suoi figli allora
(if he were to die...)

(11d) LIP, Mb86:

A: comunque_ oramai di sopra ci sono pantofole tutte le mattine devi andare a tre metri di altezza?
 B: be' anch'io mi metto i paletot ma i paletot poi li lascio fuori me lo cambio te te li cambi tutti i giorni i paletot?
 A: no infatti io dico be' ma **se facciamo un attaccapanni li'**_

B: appunto voi fate un attaccapanni li' e ci lasciate quelli che vi mett<ete> e che fate tutte le sere noi non abbiamo neanche l'attaccapanni li [interruzione]
(if we put a coat-stand there...)

3. Conclusions on Italian free conditionals

We started this paper with the “traditional” idea that unembedded conditional clauses in spoken Italian imply a main clause that for some reason is actually not expressed. This is true for those utterances where the speaker has the intention of producing a complete complex sentence, but s/he does actually not produce the main clause because of some interruption by another participant. It is already less true for those conditional clauses that remain “suspended” because of a shift in discourse planning or a loss of the thread of the conversation. In such cases, indeed, one can observe that often the intention of actually producing a main clause may be absent as well, and the “suspended” conditional clause can express a complete pragmatical meaning perfectly. We have even noticed that many cases of dialogic interruption can be attributed to the awareness (coming from the person who interrupts), that the sense of the utterance has already been expressed before the appearance of a possible (and precisely for this reason largely superfluous) main clause.³

However, there is a large number of cases where, although the conditional clause can be said to be incomplete from the point of view of normative grammar, we cannot say that a main clause is missing according to the spoken language system, because the unembedded conditional clause represents a pragmatically, semantically and intonationally complete and self-sufficient construction whose meaning belongs to the very restricted number of possibilities we have discussed in sections 2.1 through 2.5., namely: (1) the exclusion of further action, either positive or negative, such as: “everything’s fine” or “there’s nothing we can do”; (2) generic questions like “what is it going to happen?”; (3) the adversative and in some way exclamatory challenging of the truth or relevancy of what has just been said; (4) the invitation (offer or request) to the addressee, that s/he

³ One may try, but we do not do it here, to build a scale or a continuum of ellipsis, such as that by Quirk et al. (1985), which is usefully applied to English free *if*-clauses by Stirling (1998: 289).

should act as suggested by the conditional clause and the context, or the offer, on the part of the speaker, to act him/herself.⁴

The recurrence of these semantic-pragmatic values makes them highly predictable, regularly associable to the unembedded conditional construction, and easily recognizable in all appropriate contexts. Thanks to this, “suspended conditionals” work perfectly in spoken Italian as a specific kind of independent clause, with their specific non-conditional value, no differently from other kinds of sentences that fit better into grammatical descriptions (such as adversative, causal, temporal constructions, etc.). For this reason, it seems inappropriate to me to speak of conditional constructions lacking a main clause. Rather, we should speak of a construction typical of spoken language,⁵ constituted by a simple clause introduced by *se*, formally identical to a dependent conditional clause but having different and quite specific meanings that the context allows the participants to choose.

The frequency and regularity of this construction suggest that we propose it as one of the distinctive features of dialogic spoken Italian. Further research appears necessary to find out if it is regularly present also in other situational varieties of the spoken language.

⁴ Italian has also a type of free “subordinate” clauses with optative function, quite similar to those described by Quirk et al. (1985: 11.38, 11.41) and Stirling (1998: 285–288) (ex.: *If only Kitty had not done everything without her!*). Interestingly, if introduced by *se*, such clauses are completely absent from the *LIP* corpus of spoken Italian, exactly as their English counterpart could not be found by Stirling in her corpus of spoken Australian English (cf. Stirling 1988: 275, 285–286 for details). In both cases, they seem to be preferred in the written version of the language. Still, spoken Italian has some similar independent optative clauses, with the past subjunctive, not introduced by *se*, such as the following:

LIP\FiMiNaRo\RA4:
 cioe' **ci fosse una volta che offre il caffè' lei**
(if (only) she offered the coffee once...)

The problem will be treated in more detail in Lombardi Vallauri (to appear).

⁵ As noticed also by Stirling (1998: 285), Ford and Thompson (1986: 365) describe a similar situation for English, where “the polite directive type of *if*-clauses did not occur at all in a written language database,” although it is occasionally to be found in very informal written usages (Stirling quotes the example of a circular milkman message).

From an evolutionary point of view, it would be interesting to inquire whether the diffusion of this construction is recent or not. Of course it is a difficult task, since spoken language of the past is usually not available.

In any case, the origin of the construction can be seen in effort economy. In conditional constructions, the main clause most frequently follows the subordinate clause. For this reason, once the conditional clause is expressed, its content and the context may often make the main clause semantically superfluous. Typically, if you receive some people in your living room, you may say something like: *if you would like to take a seat ...* and at this point there is really no need to add something like: *please do*, or: *I'll be pleased*, etc. This actually causes the main clause to remain unexpressed in many communicative situations, especially in those semantic cases we have mentioned. The conditional clause is thus entrusted with the whole semantic meaning and pragmatic function of the utterance, and this results in the least coding effort.⁶

Since this happens very frequently, it can no longer be regarded as an occasional violation of the norm on the grounds of least effort, rather, unembedded conditionals are increasingly characterized as a specific kind of sentence available to speakers. From the *Parole* the feature has entered the *Langue*. The economic behaviour has been grammaticalized, and spoken Italian now has independent conditionals.

In some sense, since they show a subordinate structure that becomes free, our data may be regarded as violating the supposed unidirectionality implied in definitions of grammaticalization like the following: "A grammaticalization is a diachronic change by which the parts of a constructional schema come to have stronger internal dependencies" (Haspelmath 2004: 26). It is not clear whether such a strict definition of grammaticalization is the most useful for linguistic analysis, and an examination of this question is obviously beyond the scope of the present paper. But as concerns our topic, we can say that the same process may be regarded from another point of view. It is true that the relation of dependency between the main and the subordinate clause disappears, but not in the same way it would if the result were a coordinate structure, i.e. one of weaker dependency. In our case the semantic and pragmatic/illocutionary function of the abolished main clause is actually incorporated into the free conditional. This means that the two original contents of the complex construction end up being cumulated in a single

⁶ A similar process is described (in four steps) by Stirling (1998: 292).

clause. In this sense, the process we have described does not violate the “standard” expectations on the unidirectionality of grammaticalization phenomena.

A side-effect (and testing evidence) of the situation we have described is the fact that in some contexts the main clause is actually present, but quite significantly it is introduced by a coordinating conjunction. This happens because the conditional clause is felt to be complete and independent even on a strictly syntactic level:⁷

(12a) LIP, Ma28:

A: no il controllo dei dati e' gia' stato fatto non sarebbe possibile farlo adesso

B: mh

A: perche' siamo in pellicola

B: certo

A: **se su noi abbiam gia' visto la prima e la seconda bozza di questa roba qua**

B: mh

A: **quindi** vuol dire che i dati sono gia' stati controllati se ci fosse un errore # si puo' ancora_ # cambiare

B: mh

A: non dovrebbe esserci pero' se ci fosse si puo' ancora cambiarlo vuol dire dar rifare la pellicola

B: ho capito

(if we have already seen the first and the second draft of this stuff here... therefore it means that...)

(12b) LIP, Nb8:

... ma che sto dicendo domani e' giovedi' eh no no oggi no no e' mercoledi' quindi domani sono in ufficio piu' o meno tra in tarda mattinata e tutto il pomeriggio **se mi puoi fare un colpo di telefono cosi'** ne parliamo un attimo se poi c'hai un attimo di tempo puoi anche venirmi a trovare ciao

(if you can call me on the phone so we can speak a little...)

(12c) LIP, Fb19:

B: ma quella dovra' essere scusa dovra' essere una legge che -al- guarda sempre alla busta del marito per quanto riguarda la casalinga [incomprensibile]

A: no se no Daniela se una donna **se una donna fa la carriera quindi** sulla carta d' identita' ci gli sara' riconosciuta una professione ma

B: si' ma ok ok ma aspetta

⁷ Letizia Vezzosi (personal communication) points out that conditional constructions where the main clause is introduced by a coordinating conjunction are to be found in ancient texts of Germanic languages. The possible presence of the same pattern in ancient texts may confirm the vitality of the construction in the past also in Italian.

A: ma allora non sara' casalinga
(if a woman has a career consequently...)

We have spoken of grammaticalization, but the most appropriate term may be “pragmaticalization,”⁸ because the common feature of Italian independent conditionals seems to exist on a pragmatic level at least as much as on a strictly semantic one. The mechanism is quite clear: when a conditional clause can do without the main clause, the reason is that (with a little help from the context) it makes clear that the missing content is of an extremely generic and recurring type (“it is a good thing,” “please do,” “there’s nothing we can/must do,” “this is false,” etc.). The consequence of such “denotational lightness” is that the main function of the inferred and non-expressed part of the utterance is not to share its semantic content, but to endow the whole utterance with a conventional pragmatic value (offer/request, inhibition of action, reassurance, challenging/protest).

Some intonational and pragmatic equivalents of the semantic types we have discussed result from Emanuela Cresti’s studies on the pragmatics-intonation interface in spoken Italian.⁹ Conditionals meaning “there’s nothing we can/must do” usually belong to the intonational pattern that Cresti calls “espressione di ovvietà” (expression of obviousness); those with the meaning of a generic question “what is going to happen?” belong to Cresti’s intonational type “interrogative generiche” (generic interrogatives); our exclamatory/adversative type take the intonative pattern of the pragmatic type “protesta” (protest); conditionals expressing offer/request typically belong to the pragmatic/intonational linguistic act that Cresti calls “invito/offerta” (invitation/offer). These pragmatic and intonational patterns are obviously not restricted to unembedded conditionals, and concern many syntactic constructions. What we have shown here is that Italian unembedded conditionals have a tendency to fulfil these pragmatic functions more than others.

⁸ An anonymous referee of *SKY Journal of Linguistics* points out to me that this term was first introduced by Erman and Kotsinas (1993) to describe the development of discourse markers in Swedish and English.

⁹ Cf. Cresti (2000), Firenzuoli (2003).

4. A quasi typological exploration and a hypothesis on the versatility of conditionals

Italian is not the only language using this construction. For example, German free conditionals behave in a similar way.¹⁰ Interestingly, they typically occur in association with the adverb *doch* ‘nevertheless,’ which is much less frequent in embedded conditionals. A *Google* search on the web for *wenn* and *doch* gives many free conditionals but virtually none followed by a main clause. Here are some examples obtained with this procedure:

(13a) Wenn doch Italien nur ein Stückchen etwas von der deutschen Effizienz hätte!

(13b) Wenn doch alle praktischen Dinge so einfach wären.

(13c) Hätte ich doch auch so eine tolle Figur wie meine Freundin! Wie schön wär’s, wenn ich auch so ein Motorrad hätte wie mein Nachbar!

(13d) Und er sprach zu mir von Treue und von Liebe; Ach, wenn’s immer doch so bliebe! ... Doch wenn wir vom Traum erwachen, Dann bleibt die Welt nicht stehn.
...

As can be seen, German free conditionals with *doch* have a desiderative meaning, different from those found in our Italian corpus.¹¹

Apart from the German “*wenn doch*” -clauses, the need to express the pragmatic functions exposed in the previous sections is probably universal. Indeed, it would be interesting to find out if, in other languages as well (especially if typologically different), this is done by means of “incomplete” constructions, and if among them there is a preference or at least a place for free conditional clauses. This would need to be the topic of another paper, but here we can make some very short, provisional remarks about some other languages.¹²

Lindström (to appear) signals that Swedish makes wide use of free conditionals whose pragmatic and semantic functions are similar to those

¹⁰ I owe this observation to Christian Lehmann.

¹¹ This may be partly explained by the fact that, in spoken Italian, desiderative clauses in the subjunctive mode are usually not introduced by *se*. For example: *avessi 100 milioni!* ‘had I 100 million!’

¹² I wish to thank Jan Lindström, Urpo Nikanne, Shingo Suzuki and Richard Valovics for their advice on the matter.

we have found in Italian. For example, they can be used for generic questions, as in (14), and for requests, as in (15):

- (14) A: *om ni inte får[jobb]?*
 If you not get job
 'If you don't get [a job]?'

B: *så då tänker ja fortsätta å studera*
 So then think I continue to study
 'So then I'll continue to study.'

- (15) *Om ni har nån stugkatalog eller nåt*
 if you have some cottage-catalogue or something
 if you've got a catalogue of cottages or something...

Lindström also points out that Swedish has desiderative conditionals similar to those we have observed for German:

- (16) *Om Arthur hade varit där, eller jag!*
 If Arthur had been there or I
 'Oh, if Arthur or I had been there!'

Finnish¹³ also uses free conditionals to express suggestion or request. In these cases, the conditional conjunction *jos* "if" is combined with the emphatic clitic *pA* (*pa* or *pä*, according to vowel harmony). The following examples have been found by Urpo Nikanne on the Internet by means of a *Google* search. They express a suggestion (offer or request, to someone else or to the speaker him/herself):

- (17) *Jospa pelastaisimme leipomotalon*
 if-pA save-COND-1PL bakery.building-ACC
 'Let's save the bakery.'

- (18) *Jospa sovittaisiin vaihteeksi*
 if-pA make.peace-COND-PASS for.change
 'Why don't we make peace, for a change.'
 [In colloquial Finnish the passive is used for 1PL.]

¹³ I wish to thank Urpo Nikanne for his advice on the matter. The Finnish patterns and examples I describe here are his, mainly taken from the Internet.

- (19) *Jospa pilkistäisin hiukan ylös, sanoi pieni muurahainen.*
 if-pA take.a.look-COND-1SG a.bit up, said small ant
 '“Why don't I take a little look up”, said little ant.'

One of the functions of Finnish *jospA* free conditionals is to express desire, similarly to the German and Swedish examples we have discussed above:

- (20) *Jospa sinä tuntisit Hänet, joka ansaitsee kaiken kunnian,*
 if-pA you know-COND-2SG Him/Her, who deserves all glory,
mutta sai osakseen meidän häpeämme.
 but got part.POSS.SUFF(3PERS) our shame-POSS.SUFF(1PL)
 'I wish you knew him who deserves all glory but has received our shame.'

- (21) *Jospa ihmisellä ois joulu ainainen*
 if-pA human.being-ADESSIVE be-COND Christmas eternal
 'I wish people would have Christmas for ever.' [from a Christmas song]

Finnish also has “generic question” free conditionals, where *jos* is usually preceded by the marker *entä*. This happens with the indicative mode, as in (22)–(24):

- (22) *Entä, jos äidin sijaan tuleva isä on HIV-positiivinen?*
 ENTÄ, if mother-GEN instead-of come father is HIV-positive?
 'What (will happen) if the father-to-be and not the mother is HIV-positive?'

- (23) *Projekti ”Entä joselänkin satavuotiaaksi” on alkanut*
 Project ”ENTÄ if live-1SG 100-years-old” is start-PAST.PART
tammikuussa 2003.
 january 2003.
 'The project "What if I live for 100 years" has started in January 2003.'

- (24) *ENTÄ JOS SINUN LAPSESI KÄYTTÄÄ ...*
 ENTÄ if your child uses...
 'What if your child is using...?' [from an advertising headline]

and with the conditional mode as in (25)–(27):

- (25) *Entä jos samaa logiikkaa laajennettaisiin muihinkin*
 ENTÄ if same-PART logic-PART extend-COND other
perheenjäseniin?
 family-members

'What if the same logic was extended to other family members, too?'

- (26) *Entä jos lehmätösais lentää?*
 ENTÄ if cows can-COND fly?
 'What if cows could fly?'

- (27) *Entä jos ryhtyisi yrittäjäksi?*
 ENTÄ if start business-owner-TRANSLATIVE?
 'What if you started your own business?' [from an advertisement headline]

Free conditionals are used for similar tasks also in Japanese, another language typologically very different from Italian. As in Italian, expressing offer or request is probably their most frequent function. But, unlike Italian, in this case Japanese prefers to give the unembedded conditional an interrogative intonation:

- (28) A: *suwareba?* B: *suwattara?*
 sit-COND sit-PAST-COND
 'If you sit...' (= please, sit)

Japanese interrogative conditionals can imply the question: "what will happen?" exactly as the Italian ones do:

- (29) *(moshi) hayaku tsuki sugitara?*
 (if) early arrive exaggerate-COND
 'And if I arrive too early?'

- (30) *(moshi) umaku deki nakereba?*
 (if) clever-ly can do become-COND
 'And if I am not able to do it properly?'

The meaning "there's nothing we can/must do" can be expressed by free conditionals, but they often imply further nuances, associated to the speaker's attitude, such as reassurance, promise and even threat:

- (31) *(moshi) kimi-ga zembu ato-katazuke-o shite kureta nara...*
 (if) you totally clear the table doing give-PAST-COND
 'If you have completely cleared the table...'

- (32) (*moshi*) *boku-ni hanasasete kurenakereba...*
 (if) to-me speak-CAUS give-NEG-COND
 'If you don't let me speak...'

Japanese has many different conditional markers that agglutinate to the verb, thus making the use of *moshi* "if" optional. Interestingly, one of these markers, *nara*, which is used for instance in (31), is excluded when the pragmatic function is that of offer/request already seen in (28):

- (28') **suwaru nara?*

Moreover, this pragmatic type cannot accept the presence of *moshi*. Should we conclude from these restrictions that, being the most frequent type, it has already gone farther than the others in its process of grammaticalization?

The fact that many (and very different) languages have recourse to the same formal strategy (free conditionals) to achieve a wide set of (quite different) pragmatic functions may not be casual. Rather, it suggests that conditionals may (universally, or at least widely across languages) be associated with some features that make them particularly versatile when compared to other kinds of subordinate clauses. These features enable them to be used without a main clause, still effectively communicating a meaning selected by the context.

It must be observed that the same functions cannot be entrusted to postposed subordinate clauses, which, even if they lack a main clause, are not suspended and cannot suggest an "open meaning" to be supplied by the addressee based on the context. A typical function of postposed free subordinate clauses is that of being metadiscursive, depending on an unexpressed performative, as happens in (33):

- (33) *Are you coming to the theatre tomorrow? Because I must reserve the places.*
 (= *I ask* because...)

On the contrary, preposed subordinate clauses that remain suspended can suggest that there may be a continuation. We have seen the kinds of semantic and pragmatic continuations that can be expressed by suspended conditionals in Italian, and partially in some other languages. Whether or not the same functions can be obtained by languages through different kinds of preposed and suspended subordinate clauses such as, say, causal, temporal, or purpose clauses, is a question which lies beyond the limits of

this paper. At first glance, it seems that suspended temporal clauses may well express offer or request (see ex. 34 and 35), and suspended causal clauses may express, for instance, our “there’s nothing we can/must do” meaning (see ex. 36 and 37).

(34) When you need my help... (*tell me, and I’ll come*)

(35) When you receive that extra copy of your book... (*please give it to me*)

(36) Since the shop is already closed... (*we cannot buy anything*)

(37) Since you have already paid... (*we need not do it*)

But it seems probable that no other kind of suspended subordinate clause is able to endorse so many functions as conditionals do. This may be due to the fact that conditionals build an especially generic semantic relation between the states/events coded by the main and the subordinate clauses. *When-* and other preposed temporal clauses specify that the two events are in a given relation of time, thus limiting the sense of a possible unexpressed continuation to something to which the time relation is relevant; *since-* and other suspended causal clauses build a cause-effect relation between the expressed and the unexpressed event, thus significantly restricting the semantic potentialities of the unexpressed continuation. The same holds for purpose clauses, concessives and so on.

On the contrary, conditionals limit their role to signaling the simple concomitance of two states/events. They do not specify what kind of relation there might be between them. They say that the coming into being of the second is compatible with the first and allowed by it, and nothing more. Of course, as shown for instance by Rudolph (1981), they ultimately express a relation belonging to the “kausaler Bereich,” but “looser” and more generic than that of cause, purpose or concession. This leaves the way open to different kinds of possible semantic and pragmatic, context-determined, continuations and completions after a free, suspended conditional clause.

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