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Accounting for Semantic Micro-Variation in the Interpretation of the Conditional in Spanish and Catalan

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Abstract Sentences with the simple conditional in Spanish (Sp. *cantaría*) and Catalan (Cat. *cantaria*) share functions but differ significantly: Spanish can express conjecture about past situations, while most Catalan varieties do not allow this (Sp.: *Serían las tres*. Cat.: **Serien les tres*). This paper explains the contrast through micro-parametric variation, proposing that Spanish and Catalan share a common core meaning but differ in additional micro-parameters that determine the location of eventualities. This approach provides a principled and coherent explanation for the observed semantic contrasts.

Keywords Conditional. Spanish. Catalan. Procedural meaning. Micro-parameters.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Background. – 3 Accounting for Semantic Micro-Variation. – 4 Extensions. – 5 Conclusions.

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1 Introduction

As is well known, Spanish and Catalan conditionals (Sp. *cantaría*, Cat. *cantaria*, 'I would sing') share many uses, such as future-in-the-past, hypothetical, attenuative/polite and reportative readings (see §2.1). However, a key difference is that Spanish can express the speaker's conjecture about a past situation, whilst this is ungrammatical in (most varieties of) Catalan. This contrast is illustrated in (1) and (2), intended as responses to the question "What time was it when those things happened?".

(1) *Serían las tres.* (Sp.)

(2) **Serien les tres*. (Cat.)
'It was probably three o'clock.'

This intriguing fact highlights that, although Spanish and Catalan are closely related languages with similar morphosyntactic features in their conditional forms (§2), the conjectural reading appears only in Spanish. This raises questions about why this variation exists; specifically, how different interpretations relate to Tense semantics and whether the range of variation can be systematically constrained. These issues are examined through the lens of micro-parametric variation in the framework of Tense semantics (Escandell-Vidal 2010; 2014; 2022; 2024). The main hypothesis is that the divergence arises from differences in the dimensions in which eventualities can be located.

The paper is organised as follows: Section 2 offers the descriptive and theoretical background. Section 3 presents the proposed analysis and provides supporting evidence. Section 4 briefly discusses some implications. Finally, Section 5 summarises the main conclusions.

2 Background

2.1 Facts

Conditionals are an innovation in Romance verbal systems.[1] In Spanish, Catalan, French and Portuguese, they derive from the enclisis of the ancient forms of the imperfective past tense of the auxiliary HABERE ('have') to the infinitive: CANTARE HABEBAM > *cantar + hía* > *cantaría*.[2,3] Etymologically, the conditional relates to both the future (formed from the periphrasis of the present of HABERE plus the infinitive: CANTARE HABEO > *cantar + he* > *cantaré*) and the imperfective past, a relative tense requiring an anchor in a past situation.

The interpretations of the conditional in Spanish and Catalan are usually grouped into two main categories: temporal and modal readings.[4]

According to RAE/ASALE (2009; 2025, §§23.15.j-23.15.l), the Spanish conditional of conjecture (also called the 'conditional of probability' or 'epistemic conditional') expresses a speculative judgment about a past eventuality (*Tendría entonces treinta años*, 'He would have been thirty years old at that time'). It situates non-actual situations within a past-oriented frame, often made explicit by subordinating verbs (*Supongo que tendría unos cuarenta y cinco años a la sazón*, 'I suppose he would have been about forty-five years old at the time'). The use and syntactic distribution of the conditional of conjecture parallel those of the future of conjecture, differing only in temporal orientation.

1 The classification of the conditional as either a tense of the indicative or a different mood remains debated. The main reference grammars of Spanish (RAE/ASALE 2009, §23.15) and Catalan (IEC 2016, §24.4.8) favour the consideration as a form of the indicative based on its occurrence in environments requiring the indicative (e.g., *Prometió que iría, 'S*/he promised s/he would go'), not the subjunctive (e.g., *Deseamos que {*^{OK}*fueran*/**irían}*, 'We wished that they would go'). This supports the indicative status, though it only proves that it is not a subjunctive form. However, like the future tense, it cannot appear in the protasis of hypothetical constructions due to its prospective nature. While both grammars indicate that it is related to hypothetical situations, they also note it is not the only tense that can have modal values along with temporal ones. Italian grammars, by contrast (Bertinetto 1991), favour the modal option. Here I leave this question aside.

2 Pérez Saldanya 2003; Squartini 2004; Company 2006; RAE/ASALE 2009; 2025; Vatrican 2016; IEC 2016; Rivero, Arregui 2018; Rasico 2020; Bouzouita, Sentí 2022.

3 The Italian conditional, by contrast, comes from the perfective past tense: CANTARE HABUI > *cantare + ei* > *canterei*, which has important consequences for the availability of interpretations. See Rivero, Arregui 2018. I will not pursue this issue here.

4 RAE/ASALE 2009, 2025, §23.15; IEC 2016, §24.4.8; Vatrican 2016; Wheeler et al. 1999, §17.1.5; Pérez Saldanya 2002; Rivero, Arregui 2018; Lara Bermejo 2021.

Historically, normative grammars of Catalan rejected conjectural readings as Spanish borrowings (Wheeler et al. 1999, 354). GBU (2019, §27.5) banned their use in formal registers: "In formal registers, the simple conditional for probability or concession in the past is not acceptable. Modal verbs *deure*, 'must' and *poder*, 'can' or adverbs of probability or possibility are used instead". Recent updates (GBU online 2025, §27.5) make this a recommendation. This change is marked as an official modification.

2.2 Brief Literature Review

Various proposals exist in the literature regarding the features that define the semantics of conditionals.

For RAE/ASALE (2009; 2025, §23.15o), the most distinctive feature of the conditional is its capacity to denote a state of affairs explicitly or implicitly linked to non-actual situations. These include past scenarios, such as in *Me dijo que vendría* ('He told me he would come') and desires, as in *Me encantaría viajar a la Patagonia* ('I would love to travel to Patagonia'). Similarly, sentences like *Se lo preguntaría, pero no me atrevo* ('I would ask him/her, but I don't dare') express unrealised intentions constrained by external or internal factors. Finally, conditional clauses, such as *Te lo daría si lo tuviera* ('I would give it to you if I had it'), emphasise their dependence on hypothetical premises.

Along similar lines, Vatrican (2016, 10) identifies two features of the conditional: possibility and dependence. The conditional both implies the potential realisation of an action (i.e., the described event is not entirely hypothetical or impossible) and indicates that the realisation of the action is explicitly dependent on another action or situation.

Azzopardi (2016) identifies two temporal features: [+posteriority] and [+past]. The [+posteriority] feature is shared with the future tense, and places the event described as occurring after a reference point. The [+past] feature relates the eventuality to a prior temporal context, even when referring to hypothetical or non-actual scenarios. In addition, two aspectual features are included: [+tension], which presents the event 'in accomplishment' and [±incidence], allowing for either a partial or global perspective.

The proposal in Rivero and Arregui (2018) is compositional, involving three components: PAST (encoding a past topic situation), FUT (a universal future operator with epistemic or temporal 'flavour'), and IMPF (a universal imperfective operator). The authors focus on cross-linguistic variation in the Romance family, though they do not consider Catalan. They note that differences relate to either the morphological composition of the tense (imperfective in Spanish, French and Portuguese; perfective in Italian) or variation in

the categories FUT and IMPF. In Spanish, conjectural readings result from the interaction of PAST (a referential pronoun encoding a past topic situation), FUT (an epistemic modal quantifying over situations compatible with what is known) and IMPF (an imperfective operator with flavours like ongoing or event-inertia).[5]

As for Catalan, the conditional is primarily described in modal terms in Wheeler et al. (1999, §17.1.5): it appears in the consequence clause when the verb in the 'if' clause is not in the present tense. Temporal uses (future-in-the-past) and probability from a past perspective are further extensions of that value.

Pérez Saldanya (2002, §22.5.9), by contrast, favours a characterisation in temporal terms, indicating that the situation expressed by the verb is posterior to a point of reference in the past (see also IEC 2016, §24.4.8; Rigau, Pérez Saldanya 2020). Modal values are stylistic variations, as those occurring in the apodosis of conditional *irrealis* or in implicit conditions related to the present. Nevertheless, these modal uses (counterfactual, surprise, rejection, epistemic, concessive) are more frequent than the temporal value (see also Sentí 2022).

In the comparison between Spanish and French – a language, like Catalan, lacking conjectural readings –, Rivero and Arregui (2018) provide only a descriptive answer: the French future operator (FUT) does not standardly allow an epistemic (i.e., conjectural) reading, hence the conditional does not allow for it either: "Given that inferential readings of conditionals combine a FUT with an epistemic accessibility relation and IMPF, such readings are expected to be absent in French, where epistemic accessibility is not standardly available to FUT" (Rivero, Arregui 2018, 326). However, they do not explain why this occurs.

3 Accounting for Semantic Micro-Variation

The literature identifies two semantic properties defining the conditional: past and posteriority, and explores how context influences interpretation choices. Yet the key issue remains: why are conjectural

5 This is the explanation they provide for the example *Elena estaría contenta* in its inferential interpretation with an ongoing flavour (Rivero, Arregui 2018, 325)
Elena estaría contenta (ayer).
[past$_i$ [FUT$_{EP}$ [IMPF$_{ongoing}$ [Elena V$_{estar}$ contenta]]]]
The sentence is true iff
∀s': s' is an epistemic alternative to s$_i$,
∃s": s$_i$ ≤$_m$ s" & s" ≤ s' &
∀s'": s'"< s", Elena is happy in s'",
defined only if s$_i$ temporally precedes the speech situation in c.

interpretations possible in Spanish but not in all Catalan varieties? This is the gap I want to address. My main questions are: i) How do different interpretations relate to tense semantics? and ii) Can the range of variation be systematically constrained?

3.1 A Framework for Tense Semantics

The idea that Tense expresses the relation between eventualities and specific points and intervals along the timeline is widespread in popular thinking and has also played a central role in most grammatical approaches. Though appealing, this view raises concerns about conflating a functional category with a conceptual one.

Following Blakemore (1987), Escandell-Vidal, Leonetti (2011), de Saussure (2011) and Hinzen (2015), I assume that Tense morphemes do not convey concepts; rather, they provide abstract procedural instructions that constrain inferential processes of interpretation. Hinzen, Martin, Wiltschko (2024) argue that grammatical categories, such as Person and Tense, are unique to language and lack non-grammatical analogues. The grammatical categories of Past, Present and Future, as expressed morphologically in a language, do not correspond to the folk concepts of PAST, PRESENT and FUTURE. "Tense is a specific grammatically mediated way of referring to events. Both forms of reference [Person and Tense] are deictic in nature, reflecting grammatical anchoring of information in context" (Hinzen, Martin, Wiltschko 2024, 1033). Tense is a deictic category (rooted in the speaker's coordinates) that anchors eventualities to the Here and Now of the speech event (Hinzen 2015).

This study adopts the model from Escandell-Vidal (2010; 2014; 2022; 2024), which details the semantic structure of verbal tenses and their interpretations. The model relies on three principles: compositionality, monosemy, and underspecification. Compositionality states that the meaning of an inflected verb results from combining the semantic contributions of its morphological parts, each providing a stable instruction (Escandell-Vidal 2010; 2024; Rivero, Arregui 2018). Monosemy posits that each feature offers a single, context-independent instruction, excluding polysemy. Underspecification indicates that grammatical meaning offers abstract constraints rather than fully specified meanings, allowing for pragmatic interpretation (Frisson 2009; Egg 2010).

3.2 Layers of Meaning

Under this view, verbal tenses encode abstract interpretive instructions – conditions that every interpretation must satisfy.

These instructions are invariant and cannot be overridden, and they must be anchored to a reference frame. Interpretive variation arises precisely at this point, not from ambiguity in the encoded meaning, but from the different domains in which the same instruction can be anchored and satisfied.

An adequate semantic account requires distinguishing two complementary layers:

- Core meaning, which contains the semantic features associated with the morphological structure of the tense. The ontology of this layer consists of three types of situations and two binary relations.
- Semantic micro-parameters, which impose additional constraints on the domains in which the encoded instruction can be realised. These domains are defined within a structured three-dimensional space.

At the core layer, the semantics of verbal tenses is modelled as a set of binary relations among three situations, drawing on situation-based approaches developed in the literature on evidentiality (Nikolaeva 1999; Speas 2008; Kalsang et al. 2013). This relational framework goes beyond purely temporal accounts and captures the conditions under which tense morphology constrains access to information.

The three situations and their associated relationships are as follows:

i. Situation of Evaluation (SE): The situation of which the proposition (*p*) is true.
ii. Situation of Information (SI): The situation in which the speaker came to know that the proposition (*p*) holds.
iii. Situation of Discourse (SD): The speech event itself, which includes the time and context of the utterance.

The relations defined over these situations are precedence (ordering between situations) and inclusion or coincidence (if one situation is contained in, or overlaps with, another).

Semantic micro-parameters restrict the domains where relations hold. These domains form a three-dimensional space, crucial when considering the limits of classical tense models. In the Reichenbachian framework, Tense involves relations among E (event), R (reference), and S (speech) along a single temporal axis. Though this captures basic temporal structure, it cannot account for modal and evidential distinctions. Adding modality introduces a second dimension, representing possible worlds as parallel timelines linked to the actual world via accessibility relations (Kaufmann et al. 2006). Explaining evidential and perspectival effects requires a further extension, incorporating the speaker's perceptual coordinates as an additional dimension. The Speaker Perceptual Field (SPF) (Faller

2004) includes locations and situations accessible to the speaker at a specific time. From this view, the 'real world' is a structured set comprising the perceptual fields of different individuals. This predicts that eventualities outside a speaker's perceptual field belong to a separate domain, similar to other times or worlds.

The resulting 3D model – temporal, modal, and spatial/perceptual – allows accessibility relations to be defined not only between times and worlds, but also between the perceptual spaces of different individuals. This provides the structural basis for evidential and conjectural interpretations within a unified semantic framework.

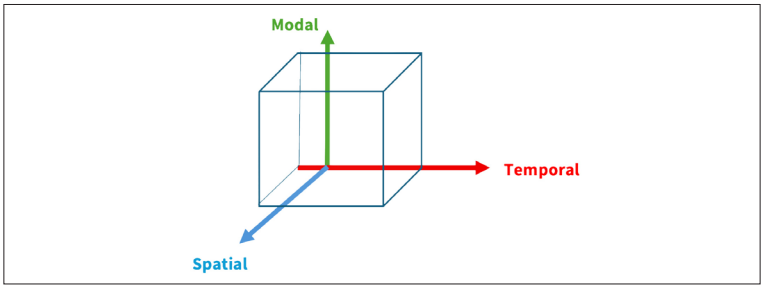


Figure 1 A 3D space for situations

Within this architecture, core meaning consists of a stable set of shared semantic features that account for cross-linguistic similarities in tense interpretation. Semantic micro-parameters introduce a controlled layer of flexibility: they do not alter the core instruction but regulate how that instruction can be satisfied. Their function is to impose additional constraints on the dimensions along which a situation may be legitimately located. A language may, for instance, restrict the interpretation of a given tense to the temporal axis, thereby licensing only temporal readings; other languages may block access to the spatial dimension, allowing temporal and modal uses only and excluding inferential or conjectural interpretations.

This approach foregrounds the link between morphological form and encoded features, underscoring the grammatical and rule-governed nature of Tense. It is compatible with a procedural view of functional categories, in which morphology provides a toolkit for building interpretations through compositional and context-sensitive processes. A relatively simple architecture thus accounts for cross-linguistic diversity while sharply constraining the space of possible interpretations.

3.3 The Semantics of the Conditional

The conditional in Spanish and Catalan, as well as in French and Portuguese, combines properties of the imperfective past and the future, in line with previous accounts (§2; Escandell-Vidal 2010; 2014; 2022; 2024). Its core temporal semantics[6] can therefore be stated as follows:

(3) The conditional. Core semantics

a. SI < SD (Past feature)

b. SI ∩ SE = Ø (SI⊄SE & SE⊄SI) (Anti-experientiality feature)

Clause (a) encodes the past feature inherited from the imperfect, imposing an anteriority relation between the situation of information acquisition (SI) and the discourse situation (SD). The speaker's knowledge of the eventuality is thus anchored in a time prior to the utterance, within the speaker's perceptual trace. Clause (b) encodes anti-experientiality, a feature shared with the future: the eventuality situation (SE) does not overlap with SI and is therefore inaccessible to the speaker's direct experience.

Within the three-dimensional space introduced above, there are exactly three ways of satisfying this disjunction requirement:

1. Temporal disjunction: SE does not overlap with SI because it is in a different temporal interval, typically posterior to SI, which makes SE inaccessible from SI. The formula imposes no further constraint on the relation between SE and SD: although SE is future with respect to SI, it may be anterior, simultaneous or posterior to SD.
2. Modal disjunction: SE does not overlap with SI because it is in a possible world distinct from the speaker's actual world. As a result, it cannot intersect with the SI anchored in the speaker's perceptual space. This configuration underlies conditional, counterfactual and speculative interpretations.
3. Spatial disjunction: SE does not overlap with SI because it is in a perceptual space external to that of the speaker. Inaccessibility arises from lack of perceptual access: SE occurs outside the speaker's field, giving rise to inferential or conjectural interpretations.

6 In Spanish and Catalan (like in French and Portuguese), the conditional also contains an aspectual feature of imperfectivity, focusing on the ongoing or unbounded nature of the eventuality. Since this feature is not directly relevant to the contrast examined in this paper, I will not consider it here.

The core semantics of the conditional imposes, therefore, two invariant requirements: SI must precede SD, and SE must be disjoint from SI. These constraints are shared across Romance languages. The three-dimensional space provides the domain in which these requirements are satisfied: while SI is necessarily anchored in the temporal dimension, SE may be in any of the three dimensions. Cross-linguistic variation arises from further constraints on which dimensions are licensed for localising SE in each language.

3.4 Conjectural Readings

As noted, Spanish and Catalan differ significantly in the availability of conjectural readings (Sp. *Serían las tres*. Cat. **Serien les tres*, 'It was probably three o'clock.'). Within the present framework, conjectural readings arise when the anti-experientiality requirement (SI∩SE=Ø) is satisfied along the spatial dimension. The relevant eventuality lies outside the speaker's perceptual field, which both prevents direct experiential access and triggers inferential processes based on indirect evidence, general world knowledge and contextual cues. In these cases, the information source is the speaker, and the mode of access is abductive inference, oriented towards identifying the most plausible explanation for an unobserved situation.

The contrast between Spanish and Catalan exists at the level of semantic micro-parameters, which regulate the dimensions along which the semantic instructions of the conditional can be satisfied. Both share the core meaning of the conditional, but they differ in the domains they allow for its validation. Spanish (and Portuguese) licenses the spatial dimension as a valid domain for satisfying the anti-experientiality requirement, enabling speakers to locate the eventuality outside their perceptual field and rely on indirect, inferential access. This makes conjectural readings grammatical and structurally grounded.

Catalan (like French), by contrast, does not license the spatial dimension for this verbal form. Thus, the anti-experientiality requirement can only be satisfied along the temporal or modal axes, systematically blocking conjectural interpretations. The lack of conjectural readings is not accidental but results from a grammatical constraint on the available domains.

Crucially, this contrast is about the structural options for satisfying the conditional's instructions, not its semantic content. Micro-parameters do not change core semantics but determine where instructions can be satisfied. Only languages recognising the spatial dimension as a valid domain can produce conjectural readings.

Importantly, micro-parameters are not immutable. Varieties like Valencian Catalan, allowing conjectural conditional uses,

show that diachronic change and contact-induced reconfiguration can expand the set of licensed dimensions. These shifts reflect systematic grammatical change rather than marginal variation: the spatial dimension becomes a legitimate domain for satisfying the disjunction requirement between SI and SE. Such micro-parametric reconfigurations lead to systematic grammar changes, yielding controlled evolution within the verbal system.

This variation maintains the core semantic structure of the conditional, with stable requirements across Romance languages despite surface differences. The semantic content remains constant; what varies is the interpretive domains each grammar licenses. The model explains cross-linguistic stability and controlled variation, showing how a shared semantic core results in diversity through parametric choices in licensing domains. This clarifies patterns of variation in conditional interpretation.

4 Extensions

4.1 The Conjectural Readings of the Future

The absence of conjectural readings of the conditional in some Catalan varieties sheds light on the parallel absence of such readings in the simple future. Both the future tense and the conditional share a core semantic requirement of anti-experientiality, which enforces a disjunction between SI and SE. This constraint ensures that SE is not directly accessible in the speaker's perceptual field, thereby excluding interpretations based on direct experience.

In varieties where the spatial dimension is not a legitimate interpretive domain, conjectural readings are systematically blocked. Consequently, the anti-experientiality requirement restricts possible interpretations. Catalan appears to further constrain modal readings of the future tense (see Escandell-Vidal 2024). By contrast, languages like Spanish (and Portuguese), which license the spatial dimension, allow speakers to invoke others' perceptual fields, enabling conjectural readings of both the conditional and the future tense.

Thus, the absence of conjectural interpretations in Catalan varieties can be directly traced to micro-parametric settings that exclude the spatial dimension from the set of legitimate interpretive options.

4.2 A Simpler Architecture

The model presented here offers a simpler, more principled, and better-motivated account of tense semantics than alternative proposals,

such as Rivero and Arregui (2018). While Rivero and Arregui rely on notions of 'flavour' to distinguish readings – e.g., epistemic, temporal, conditional and imperfective –, the concept remains underdefined. The idea of 'flavour' is sometimes equated with accessibility, but no proper characterisation is provided. As it stands, the proposal seems to rely heavily on a *post hoc* categorisation of the data, rather than emerging from a systematic understanding of the underlying phenomena. There is no clear explanation for how many 'flavours' there are, why they exist, or how they relate to each other. This makes the model harder to apply and raises potential concerns about its predictive power.

By contrast, my proposal relies on a simpler architecture of core relations and semantic micro-parameters that are cross-linguistically valid. The three dimensions – temporal, modal, and spatial – are not arbitrary constructs: they are rooted in well-established and independently motivated principles of cognition. This provides a more coherent, unified framework that captures all relevant data within a language, while also explaining cross-linguistic variation in a more transparent and predictable manner.

The model integrates with existing linguistic theories, particularly those focusing on the grammar-pragmatics interface. The approach can be easily extended to the analysis of other languages and to the explanation of diachronic change. It also presents an explicit proposal about the range of possible variation in the instructions encoded by grammatical categories across human languages, highlighting how micro-parametric settings shape interpretive possibilities without altering the invariant core semantics.

5 Conclusions

The approach to the semantics of the conditional presented here provides a principled explanation for why Spanish, but not most varieties of Catalan, allows conjectural readings. In Spanish, the spatial dimension is licensed as a valid domain for satisfying the anti-experientiality requirement, enabling speakers to locate eventualities outside their perceptual field and to rely on indirect, inferential access. In contrast, Catalan excludes the spatial dimension, systematically blocking conjectural interpretations.

The core meaning of the conditional, grounded in its morphological configuration, encodes past anti-experientiality. This core meaning is shared across Romance languages that exhibit the same morphological components, capturing their fundamental linguistic similarities. A layer of semantic micro-parameters further constrains how the core instruction can be fulfilled in each language, specifying the legitimate dimensions available in a given variety. Interpretation

occurs within a 3D space – temporal, modal, and spatial – which provides the structural space in which the anti-experientiality requirement is satisfied. This mechanism explains both synchronic differences – such as the presence or absence of conjectural readings – and diachronic shifts, as in varieties like Valencian where spatial interpretations have become licensed over time.

This proposal offers a simple semantic architecture with strong predictive power, capable of accounting for both general aspects of meaning and language-specific differences. The presence or absence of conjectural readings across languages is systematically explained using a single, well-motivated set of categories, ensuring theoretical consistency. The approach offers a monosemic approach that supports compositionality. The stability of the core meaning across languages is complemented by the flexibility of micro-parameters, which account for variation and provide a coherent explanation for diachronic change. The proposal provides a restrictive framework for cross-linguistic comparison and clarifies the interface between grammatical encoding, pragmatic enrichment, and cognitive constraints.

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