

The *If You Be* Construction as a Case of Syntax/Semantics Mismatch*
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1. Introduction

This paper deals with an idiomatic and colloquial conditional construction in English, exemplified by sentences like the following:

- (1) a. If you be nice, Father will buy you a toy.
b. If you be a good girl, I'll give you a piece of candy.

(Konno (2003))

Following Konno (2003), I will call sentences of this type *if you be* constructions. The aim of the present paper is to make clear the syntactic and semantic relations between the protasis and apodosis of the *if you be* construction. Specifically, I will argue that the protasis is semantically superordinate to the apodosis despite the former's syntactic subordination to the latter, and that the construction counts as a significant case of syntax/semantics mismatch.

2. Konno (2003)

Konno (2003) offers a detailed description of the nature of the *if you be* construction. It is worthwhile reviewing some of its properties that are relevant to our discussion before entering into the investigation of the relation between the protasis and apodosis.

The *if you be* construction as a whole functions as a speech act construction in the sense of Lakoff (1984, 1987) and has the following communicative function:

- (2) The *if you be* construction is conventionally used to request the hearer to bring about the state of affairs expressed in the protasis in exchange for a reward described by the apodosis. (Konno (2003))

This function has the following three grammatical reflexes. First, the protasis is compatible with preverbal *please*:

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- (3) a. If you please be quiet, I'll give you a big kiss.
 b. If you please be a good girl, I'll buy you whatever you want.

(Konno (2003))

As argued by Sadock (1974:104) among others, preverbal *please* is compatible just with constructions which conventionally, not conversationally, convey a request in the sense of Grice (1975). Hence the acceptability of *Will you please close the door?* (Sadock (1974:104)) and the unacceptability of **When will you please close the door?* (Sadock (1974:104)) Thus, its occurrence in (3) means that the protasis of the *if you be* construction conventionally conveys what is requested by the speaker.

Secondly, the apodosis cannot be in the imperative mood:

- (4) a. *If you be good, sit down.
 b. *If you be a good boy, go to bed now.

(Konno (2003))

Konno argues: "This, ..., means that the speaker of the *if you be* construction offers to the hearer what the apodosis describes as a reward. A reward is supposed to be what (the giver, i.e. the speaker for our purposes, assumes) is desirable to the receiver, i.e. the hearer. The imperative construction generally conveys what is requested by the speaker and its content is what is desirable to the speaker, but not necessarily to the hearer. The imperative construction is therefore not considered to be a description of a reward, which is incompatible with the function of the apodosis. Hence the unacceptability of the sentences in [(4)]."

Finally, and most importantly, the *if you be* construction sounds marginal when embedded under the performative expression *I hereby promise*:

- (5) ?I hereby promise that if you be good, I'll take you to the zoo.
 (cf. I hereby promise that if you are good, I'll take you to the zoo.)

(Konno (2003))

According to Konno, this fact, together with the occurrence of preverbal *please* observed in (3), means that the protasis of the *if you be* construction, which conventionally conveys a request, is

functionally more prominent than the apodosis. The functional prominence inherent in the protasis clashes with the function of the performative, which necessarily foregrounds the promise described by the apodosis. Hence the marginality of (5).

3. The Syntactic Relation between the Protasis and Apodosis

What then does the functional prominence of the protasis over the apodosis mean? Its significance becomes clear when we investigate the syntactic and semantic relations between the two clauses in terms of superordination/subordination. We first discuss their syntactic relation.

As Konno (2003) shows, the *if you be* construction involves a lot of idiosyncrasies.¹ In view of them, one might assume that there is something special about the relation between the protasis and apodosis. However, this is not the case syntactically and there is nothing unusual about the syntactic relation; the protasis is syntactically subordinate to the apodosis, as strongly suggested by the use of *if*, which is generally assumed to be a subordinating conjunction which introduces an adverbial clause. To illustrate this clearly, let us consider each of the following three logical possibilities in turn: (i) that the protasis and apodosis are syntactically coordinated, (ii) that the apodosis is syntactically subordinate to the protasis, and (iii) that the protasis is syntactically subordinate to the apodosis.²

Let us first consider possibility (i). It says that the protasis and apodosis are syntactically coordinated.³ What has to be shown is therefore that the two clauses behave in the same way as coordinated conjuncts generally do. Quirk et al. (1985:921) point out that “[c]lauses beginning with *and*, *or* and *but* are sequentially fixed in

¹ For other idiosyncrasies than those reviewed in section 2, see Konno (2003).

² Note that it is impossible for both the protasis and apodosis to be subordinated, for by definition a clause is regarded as subordinate only when there is a superordinate clause on which the former is dependent.

³ The approach in question would posit either that the conjunction *if* of the *if you be* construction syntactically functions as a coordinate conjunction, or that the construction syntactically involves a covert coordinate conjunction. It does not matter which of the two structures one assumes, however. For, as we will see shortly, the coordination approach fails irrespective of whether one regards *if* as a coordinator or posits the presence of a null coordinator.

relation to the previous clause, and therefore cannot be transported without producing unacceptable sentences." This is illustrated by the following contrast:

- (6) a. They are living in England, or they are spending a vacation there.
 b. *Or they are spending a vacation there, they are living in England.

(Quirk et al. (1985:922))

If the protasis and apodosis are coordinated, it is expected that either of them is sequentially fixed in relation to the other. However, the protasis can be either preposed or postposed:

- (7) a. If you be quiet, I'll take you to the zoo.
 b. I'll take you to the zoo, if you be quiet.

(Konno (2003))

The grammaticality of the examples in (7) shows clearly that the two clauses are not sequentially fixed, which is against what possibility (i) predicts.

There is still another problem with possibility (i). It is widely assumed that coordinated conjuncts must be of the same syntactic type (cf. Schachter (1977) among others), as the following contrast illustrates:⁴

- (8) a. *It's odd for John to be busy and that Helen is idle now.
 (Schachter (1977:87))
 b. It's odd for John to be busy and for Helen to be idle now.
 (Schachter (1977:90))

Schachter argues that (8a) is ungrammatical because the infinitival and *that*-clauses are different in their surface syntax, while (8b) is grammatical because of the superficial similarity of the two clauses conjoined. Given this syntactic requirement, it is impossible to view the protasis and apodosis as syntactically coordinated. For they are superficially different in that the former involves the conjunction *if* while the latter does not; the coordination approach wrongly denies the existence of the *if you be* construction to start with. Possibility (i) is thus rejected.

⁴ We ignore here a semantic requirement on coordination that coordinated conjuncts be of the same semantic type (cf. Schachter (1977) among others).

Let us turn to the second possibility, that the apodosis is syntactically subordinate to the protasis. This alternative connects the subordinator *if* not with the protasis, but with the apodosis, and syntactically parses *If you be nice, I'll give you a big kiss*, for instance, as in the following:

(9) [If [you be nice], I'll give you a big kiss]

With this structure in mind, observe the following example:

(10) *If, I'll give you a big kiss, you be good.

As the grammaticality of (10) shows, it is impossible for the apodosis to immediately follow the conjunction. If the approach in question were tenable and structure (9) were correct, it would remain totally unclear why (10) is ungrammatical in spite of the adjacency between the subordinator and its direct complement, i.e. the apodosis. Possibility (ii) cannot be advocated, either.

The remaining possibility is thus the third one, that the protasis is syntactically subordinate to the apodosis. This is not only in accordance with the general tendency for the conjunction *if* to introduce a subordinate adverbial clause, but also gains empirical support. A first piece of evidence concerns the flexibility of the order of the two clauses. As Culicover and Jackendoff (1997:200) point out, "a subordinate clause in English can appear either to the left or to the right of the main clause." Recall here that, as we have seen in (7), the protasis can either precede or follow the apodosis. This fact suggests that the former is syntactically subordinate to the latter.

The second piece of evidence has to do with extraction. Culicover and Jackendoff (1997, 1999) argue that extraction serves as a litmus test for determining the syntactically subordinate status of a clause. This is because there is a strict ban on extraction from an adjunct, as has often been pointed out in the generative literature. Roughly, their logic is: if one clause of a sentence consisting of two clauses conjoined resists extraction and is improved by replacing the trace with a resumptive pronoun, that clause is considered to be a syntactic adjunct and hence syntactically subordinate to the other clause. This is illustrated by the following contrasts:

(11) a. ??This is the loot that if you identify *t*(,) we will arrest the thief on the spot.

b. ?This is the loot that if you identify it, we will arrest the

thief on the spot.

(Culicover and Jackendoff (1997:207))

(12) a. ??This is the senator when the Mafia pressured *t*(,) the senate voted for health care reform.

b. ?This is the senator when the Mafia pressured him, the senate voted for health care reform.

(Culicover and Jackendoff (1997:207))

Culicover and Jackendoff (1997:207) observe that “by replacing the trace with a resumptive pronoun, ... *if*-clauses [and *when*-clauses] are if anything slightly improved.” This contrast leads them to conclude that the *if*- and *when*-clauses in (11) and (12) are syntactically subordinate to the other clauses.

The same holds true for extraction from the protasis of the *if you be* construction:

(13) a. ??It is our dog, not our neighbor’s, that if you be good to *t*, I’ll give you many pieces of candy.

b. ?It is our dog, not our neighbor’s, that if you be good to it, I’ll give you many pieces of candy.

(14) a. ??This is the poor dog that if you be good to *t*, I’ll give you many pieces of candy.

b. ?This is the poor dog that if you be good to it, I’ll give you many pieces of candy.

As the contrast shows, the examples with a resumptive pronoun sound slightly better than those with a trace in cases where an element of the protasis is extracted, although the latter are not totally ungrammatical. Thus, the parallelism between (11) and (12) on the one hand, and (13) and (14) on the other strongly argues for the syntactic adjuncthood of the protasis.

Culicover and Jackendoff further point out that extraction of an interrogative *wh* from an *if*-clause is impossible:

(15) a. * Who did John say her father disinherits her if Mary goes out with [*t*]?

b. * Who did John say(,) if Mary goes out with [*t*](,) her father disinherits her?

(Culicover and Jackendoff (1997:207))

Here again, the protasis of the *if you be* construction behaves just in the same way as *if*-clauses in general do; it firmly resists extraction of

an interrogative *wh*:

(16)a. *Who do you think if you be good to *t*, I'll buy a toy for you?

b. *Who do you think I'll buy a toy for you if you be good to *t*?

By contrast, the apodosis of the *if you be* construction does not resist extraction of an interrogative *wh*:

(17)a. What do you think if you be good to the poor dog, I'll buy *t* for you?

b. What do you think I'll buy *t* for you if you be good to the poor dog?

The asymmetry between (16) and (17) also indicates the subordinate status of the protasis.

All these considerations quite naturally lead us to the conclusion that the protasis is syntactically subordinate to the apodosis in the *if you be* construction, and the syntactic structure of the *if you be* construction is depicted roughly as follows:

(18) [s [s' if you be quiet] I'll take you to the zoo]

As indicated, the syntactic relation between the protasis and apodosis is a normal one.

4. The Semantic Relation between the Protasis and Apodosis

What then is the semantic relation between the protasis and apodosis? As with the syntactic relation discussed above, there are also three logical possibilities: (i) that the protasis and apodosis are semantically coordinated, (ii) that the protasis is semantically subordinate to the apodosis, and (iii) that the protasis is semantically superordinate to the apodosis. As pointed out in section 2, the *if you be* construction conveys a request (expressed by the protasis) in exchange for a reward (expressed by the apodosis) and the protasis is functionally more prominent than the apodosis, which favors the third possibility. In what follows, I will argue that this is in fact the case. It might, however, sound counterintuitive that the protasis is semantically superordinate to the apodosis, because the former is introduced by the subordinating conjunction *if*. Therefore, we will review each of the three possibilities in turn, as we did in the previous

section.

If the first possibility is correct, it will follow that the protasis and apodosis are subject to semantic constraints which generally hold for coordination. It is generally assumed that coordinated conjuncts must have the same semantic function (cf. Schachter (1977) among others).⁵ This is illustrated by the following contrast:

(19) a. *John met Mary on a blind date and in 1968.

(Schachter (1977:91))

b. The ball flew over the fence and across the street.

(Eguchi (2002:142))

Schachter argues that (19a) is impossible because it conjoins an expression of circumstance with an expression of time. By contrast, in (19b) both prepositional phrases describe a path, as Eguchi observes, and the sentence is impeccable.

Recall here example (1b), *If you be a good girl, I'll give you a piece of candy*. As seen in section 2, the protasis conventionally functions as a request. Hence, in (1b) the protasis and apodosis describe a request and promise, respectively; the clauses conjoined are of different semantic types. Given the semantic requirement, possibility (i) wrongly predicts that (1b) would be ungrammatical, which is contrary to fact.

Possibility (i) involves still another difficulty. Observe the ungrammatical sentences in (4) again, repeated here as (20):

(20) a. *If you be good, sit down.

b. *If you be a good boy, go to bed now.

As reviewed in section 2, Konno (2003) relates this fact to the function of the apodosis, but it is also important in the discussion of the semantic relation between the two clauses. In (20) the protasis is conjoined with an imperative; both clauses express a request. If possibility (i) were tenable, it would be predicted that the examples in (20) would be grammatical, since the two clauses are of the same semantic type. This is again incompatible with what is the case. It is therefore impossible to take the protasis and apodosis as semantically coordinated.

Next, let us consider possibility (ii). Take one of the examples

⁵ We ignore here the syntactic requirement on coordination.

in (5), repeated here as (21):

- (21) I hereby promise that if you are good, I'll take you to the zoo.

The conditional sentence *If you are good, I'll take you to the zoo* uncontroversially functions as a promise, and is readily compatible with the performative *I hereby promise*. In such cases, it is clear that the protasis does not have any serious effect on the illocutionary force of the whole sentence. Here we assume the following:

- (22) The illocutionary force of a sentence consisting of two (or more) clauses is determined by its semantically superordinate clause(s).

Given this natural assumption, the acceptability of (21) means that the apodosis is semantically superordinate and hence the protasis is semantically subordinate.

With this in mind, let us look at the other of the examples in (5), repeated here as (23):

- (23) ?I hereby promise that if you be good, I'll take you to the zoo.

Unlike ordinary conditionals such as the one in (21), the *if you be* construction sounds less acceptable when embedded under *I hereby promise*. As shown in the previous section, the protasis of the *if you be* construction is syntactically subordinate to the apodosis. In this respect, the protasis of the *if you be* construction has the same syntactic status as that of ordinary conditionals. Accordingly, there is nothing syntactically problematic in (23), since the apodosis, which conveys a promise by the speaker, is rightly regarded as the direct complement of *I hereby promise*. If the protasis is also semantically subordinate to the apodosis, it is wrongly predicted that (23) would be as acceptable as (21); possibility (ii) cannot accommodate the contrast between (21) and (23).

There is still another grammatical fact that casts doubt upon this possibility.

- (24) So, if you are experiencing this problem, check for voltage leakage from every possible source.

(The British National Corpus)

As (24) shows, *if*-clauses in general can occur with an imperative, which is a main clause phenomenon and always has to be semantically

(and also syntactically) superordinate. If the protasis of the *if you be* construction were also a semantic adjunct like that of (24), nothing would prevent it from occurring with an imperative. However, what is the case is just the opposite, as shown by the unacceptability of the examples in (20). Possibility (ii), though it might appear in accordance with what is generally the case, does not gain empirical support, either.

The only remaining possibility is the third one. It is a logically necessary conclusion and, moreover, accommodates both the ungrammaticality of the examples in (20) and the low(er) acceptability of (23). Syntactic imperatives always have to be semantically superordinate. According to possibility (iii), the protasis is semantically superordinate, too. Thus, in (20), although there is only one semantic prominence to be given, each clause "scrambles for" it. This conflict gives rise to the marginality.

Let us proceed to consider how possibility (iii) accounts for the low acceptability of (23). The apodosis of the *if you be* construction, being semantically subordinate to the protasis, cannot be semantically related to the performative. Instead, the protasis, being semantically superordinate, is connected to the performative, which is schematized roughly as follows:

(25) I hereby promise that if you be good I'll take you to the zoo

As depicted in (25), there is a semantic incongruity, since the performative requires its complement to express a promise and the protasis conventionally functions as a request as seen in section 2. This is, we argue, why (23) sounds less acceptable than (21).

These considerations naturally lead us to the conclusion that the protasis is semantically superordinate to the apodosis in the *if you be* construction, which is in contrast with the syntactic relation discussed in section 3. The semantic structure of the *if you be* construction is represented roughly as follows:

(26) [REQUEST if you be quiet [PROMISE I'll take you to the zoo]]
 In view of the general tendency for *if*-clauses to be semantically (and syntactically) subordinate, we can say that the semantic relation revealed in this section is not a normal one.

5. The Syntax/Semantics Mismatch in the *If You Be* Construction

To recapitulate the discussion so far, the correspondence of the syntax and semantics of the *if you be* construction is as follows:

(27)a. Syntax:

[_S [_{S'} if you be quiet] I'll take you to the zoo]

b. Semantics:

[REQUEST if you be quiet [PROMISE I'll take you to the zoo]]

In the *if you be* construction, the protasis is syntactically subordinate to the apodosis ((27a)), while it is the latter that is semantically subordinate ((27b)); there is a mismatch between the syntax and semantics of the construction.⁶ This is summarized into the following table:

(28)

	Syntax	Semantics
Protasis	Subordinate	Superordinate
Apodosis	Superordinate	Subordinate

As table (28) shows, the syntactic and semantic relations between the protasis and apodosis are reversed in the *if you be* construction. A general conclusion drawn here is the following. Just because a clause is syntactically subordinate does not always mean that it is also semantically subordinate (or conversely, just because a clause is syntactically superordinate does not always mean that it is also semantically superordinate). There are cases in which the superordinate/subordinate relation is reversed between the syntactic and semantic levels, as exemplified by the *if you be* construction.⁷ Thus, cases in which syntactic subordination straightforwardly corresponds to semantic subordination are just general cases or

⁶ The *if you be* construction involves still another mismatch in that the protasis, although it is an *if*-clause, conventionally functions as a request, as seen in section 2. This is parallel with the fact that the interrogative sentence *Will you close the window?* (Sadock (1974:104)), for example, conventionally expresses a request. For cognitive accounts of indirect speech act constructions, see Panther and Thornburg (1998, 2003) and Stefanowitsch (2003) among others.

⁷ What then derives this reversal? According to Konno (2003), expressing what the speaker him/herself desires, the protasis is regarded as describing what is most important to him/her, and the construction conventionalizes the subjective stance of the speaker. (See also the discussion in section 2.) This observation suggests that the reversal is derived via the conventionalization of the speaker's attitude. We simply point out this possibility without further comment.

defaults.

In fact, cases like the *if you be* construction are not rare. A first case has to do with Ross's (1973:161-163) observation about the performative-like expressions *I gather* and *I take it*. They occur mainly in main clauses:

- (29) a. I {gather/take it} that you had sampled those brownies.
 b. *They realize that I {gather/take it} that you were sick.
 (Ross (1973:161))

They may, however, be used in adverbial clauses of concession or reason:

- (30) {Although/Since} I {gather/take it} that you and Miss Pecan are acquainted, I will be happy. (Ross (1973:162))

Hirose (1991:31), following Ross's observation, argues that the adverbial clauses in (30) "are asserted as if they were independent clauses." This is parallel to what is the case with (the protasis of) the *if you be* construction in the sense that an adverbial clause semantically functions as a main clause.

Furthermore, there are cases where syntactic main verbs function as semantic adjuncts (cf. Levin and Rapoport (1988), Jackendoff (1990), and Jackendoff (1997) among others). They are illustrated by sentences like the following:

- (31) a. Pauline smiled her thanks.
 (Levin and Rapoport (1988:277))
 b. Bill belched his way out of the restaurant.
 (Jackendoff (1990:211))
 c. Bill slept the afternoon away. (Jackendoff (1997:534))

The verb phrases in (31) are interpreted as *expressed her thanks by smiling* (Levin and Rapoport (1988:277)), *went out of the restaurant belching* (Jackendoff (1990:213)), and *spent/wasted the afternoon sleeping* (Jackendoff (1997:537)), respectively. As these paraphrases reveal, there is one thing that these three constructions have in common: the main verb, which is syntactically superordinate, is demoted to a semantic adjunct. This presents a remarkable parallel with what is the case with (the apodosis of) the *if you be* construction in the sense that a syntactically superordinate element functions as semantically subordinate.

The existence of these cases means that the *if you be* construction

is not an isolated case of semantic superordination despite syntactic subordination or semantic subordination despite syntactic superordination, which, though indirectly, lends credence to our conclusion schematized in (28).⁸

6. Conclusion

We have argued that in the *if you be* construction, the protasis is semantically superordinate to the apodosis despite the former's syntactic subordination to the latter. To the extent that our analysis is on the right track, the *if you be* construction counts as a striking case of syntax/semantics mismatch, and constitutes another piece of evidence in favor of the view advocated by Jackendoff (1990), Culicover and Jackendoff (1997), and Yuasa and Sadock (2002) among others that the syntactic and semantic components of grammar are, though related, independent of each other and their representations are not necessarily isomorphic.

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⁸ For other cases of syntax/semantics mismatch, see Hoeksema and Napoli (1993), Culicover and Jackendoff (1997, 1999), Asaka (2002), Yuasa and Sadock (2002), Matsuyama (2003), and references cited therein.

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