

THE SYNTAX, SEMANTICS AND PRAGMATICS OF IF-PARENTHETICALS IN FICTIONAL DIALOGUE

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Abstract: *This paper investigates the pragmatic functions of **if-parentheticals** in fictional dialogue, focusing on Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield*. If-parentheticals, often overlooked in traditional syntactic and semantic studies, are examined at the syntax-semantics-pragmatics interface to reveal their discourse-regulating roles. Two primary types are identified: **if-metatextual parentheticals**, which serve as anchored devices offering commentary and evaluation, and **if-speech-act parentheticals**, which function as floating elements to regulate politeness and mitigate face-threatening acts. By analyzing their syntactic positioning, semantic contribution, and illocutionary functions, the study highlights their critical role in shaping discourse coherence, interpersonal dynamics, and pragmatic interpretation. The findings underscore how these parentheticals contribute to the depth and subtlety of fictional interactions, emphasizing their value in both linguistic analysis and literary studies.*

Keywords: *If-metatextual parentheticals, if-speech-act parentheticals, syntax-semantics-pragmatics interface, politeness strategies, anchored and floating parentheticals, pure and impure parentheticals, illocutionary force*

Introduction

Parentheticals have long been an object of interest to research in many fields, including phonetics, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. They pose a number of questions due to their wide variety of forms, and an even more overwhelming

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variety of semantic representations and pragmatic interpretations. Parentheticals often provide additional information; however, their syntactic and semantic integration into sentence structure varies greatly depending on the significance of the message they contribute to the overall meaning of the utterance. Only when analysed from a form-meaning-use perspective, are their different forms and degrees of integration revealed and identified. Another no less significant factor of misleading and divergent interpretations of parentheticals lies in the extent to which they disrupt the smooth flow of ideas in a given sentence, sometimes leading to misunderstanding between interlocutors. Such disruptions, which may sometimes interfere with the well-formedness of the utterance, can be explained or justified on the basis of the functions that parentheticals fulfill and the discourse they are part of. The illocutionary functions of *if-parentheticals* stand out for their diverse discourse-regulating roles, including, but not limited to, commenting, comparing, content evaluation, presupposition triggering, and post-scripting.

This article is an attempt to explore two types of *if-parentheticals* distinguished by various syntactic, semantic and pragmatic properties. The study is carried out on the examples from Dickens's *David Copperfield*, employing contextual-semantic and pragmatic methods of analysis.

Theoretical Background

A considerable number of linguists refer to *if-parentheticals* using different names to denote them. Quirk et al. (1985, p. 618–620) attach them to a specific group of style disjuncts, which may function as comment clauses due to their metalinguistic use (e.g., *if I may say so*). However, these clauses may be perceived as both style and content disjuncts, depending on the extent to which comments are hedged or boosted to express different levels of certainty, tentativeness, or the speaker's stance in reaching the illocutionary force of the utterance (Quirk et al., 1985, p.1114–1115). In Asher's (2000) list of non-truth-conditional structures, *if-parentheticals* are referred to as "pragmatic conditionals". According to Peltola (1982/1983, p. 103), comment clauses are labelled as "metacommunicative" due to their threefold commenting functions on the truth value of an utterance, on the organization of the text, or on the speaker's stance. Her extended classification of comment clauses includes *non-conditional if-clauses* (e.g., "if I refrain from discussing these questions," "if you'll forgive the expression"), which do not establish causal relationships between antecedents and consequents. Instead, they explicitly assess the appropriateness of the antecedent while simultaneously facilitating interaction with the interlocutors, indirectly involving them in the ongoing discourse. From a semantic perspective, Bolinger (1989, p. 190) identifies

three types of parentheticals: comment, revision, and decision. The first two types, with their “afterthought” and “metalinguistic repair” functions, share much in common with *if-parentheticals*. Due to their diverse syntactic properties, some researchers, such as Grenoble (2004, p. 1954), argue that parentheticals should be classified and analyzed according to their pragmatic functions, rather than their morphosyntactic characteristics since they all perform metacommunicative functions within a particular discourse. She proposes four main categories of discourse shifts, of which metastatements are of particular importance for the listener, serving as indicators for the interpretation of the ongoing discourse.

In this article, *if-parentheticals* (a term we adopt to avoid terminological confusion) are analysed from the perspective of syntax-semantics-pragmatics interface, aiming to identify the basic differences between metatextual conditionals and speech-act conditionals. The latter, often known as “Austin conditionals” (Horn 1985, 1989) after Austin’s famous sentence *If you are hungry, there are biscuits on the sideboard*, are also referred to as “biscuit conditional antecedents” (Koev, 2022, p. 9), “relevance conditionals” (Declerck & Reed, 2001, p. 320), “conditional speech acts” (Sweetser, 1996, p. 327), “illocutionary conditionals” (Dik, 1990, p. 252), and “pragmatic conditionals” (Wierzbicka, 1997, p. 21). As is perceived from Austin’s example, the *if*-clause does not express the appropriateness of asserting that there are biscuits on the sideboard, but implicitly, yet politely offers biscuits to the hearer. Declerck and Reed (2001, p. 320) refer to the *if*-clauses of speech-act conditionals as “relevance-expressing” because they comment on the relevance of uttering the main clause. Dancygier (2006, p. 105) notes that the primary similarity between metatextual conditionals and speech-act conditionals is that they do not express causative-consecutive relations between antecedents and consequents. Instead, they express conditions on appropriateness and, consequently, do not use hypothetical forms. For this reason, Dancygier refers to them jointly as “conversational conditionals.” For the sake of uniformity and clarity we will label *if-parentheticals* that express metatextual function as *if-metatextual parentheticals*, and the ones conveying speech-act relations as *if-speech-act parentheticals*. As for nomenclature, the antecedent (protasis) will be expressed symbolically by P, and the consequent (apodosis) by Q. (N. Rescher, 2007, p. 2).

Syntactic and Semantic Peculiarities of *If-Parentheticals*

If-speech-act parentheticals have formulaic and idiomatic forms and serve as stylistic devices, thus ensuring appropriateness of the utterances in Q-clauses making them more polite. *If-metatextual parentheticals*, on the other hand, are in

an echo-repair format and are related to specific parts of the Q-clause. Herein lies the main difference between these two types, when viewed from a syntactic perspective. *If-speech-act parentheticals* can occupy three positions in a sentence (initial, medial and final), the former being more frequent though. As for *if-metatextual parentheticals*, they are typically sentence-final since they focus on a specific fragment of the previous utterance by echoing it or referring to it anaphorically. As a theoretical base for the syntactic and semantic analysis of *if-parentheticals*, we have observed the classification of parentheticals into *anchored* and *floating*, as proposed by Kavalova (2007, p. 149–52). According to this classification, anchored parentheticals refer back to a specific element (anchor) in the “host”, and for this reason, their position in a sentence is typically restricted, and being located adjacent to their anchor becomes obligatory. Floating parentheticals, on the other hand, do not refer to any constituent part in the Q-clause and comment on the entire utterance. This makes their position in a sentence more flexible. Below are presented examples of *if-speech-act parentheticals* (1) and (2) *if-metatextual parentheticals* analysed from Kavalova’s perspective.

(1) *This really is a very bad side of human nature! Don’t say anymore, **if you please**, Biddy. This shocks me very much.* (Ch. Dickens, 280–81)

(2) *‘Well! Don’t cry!’ said Miss Betsey. ‘You were not equally matched, child - **if any two people can be equally matched** - and so I asked the question.* (Ch. Dickens, 17)

To identify the “floating” nature of the *if-speech-act parentheticals* (1) we will analyse the different positions it can occupy in the following sentences.

(1a) *This really is a very bad side of human nature! **If you please**, don’t say anymore, Biddy. This shocks me very much.*

(1b) *This really is a very bad side of human nature! Don’t say anymore, Biddy, **if you please**. This shocks me very much.*

As can be seen from the examples (1a) and (1b), the mid-positioned *if-speech-act parenthetical* in (1) can also be placed in the initial and final positions without distorting the main utterance, which proves the floating nature of these parentheticals. *If-metatextual parentheticals* (2), however, do not possess this flexibility as they must be anchored to the antecedent of the previous utterance.

(2a) *‘Well! Don’t cry!’ said Miss Betsey. ‘You were not equally matched, child, and so I asked the question- **if any two people can be equally matched**.*

In sentence (2a) above, the *if-parenthetical* is moved away from its antecedent (equally matched) making the link between them loose. Therefore, the use of the *if-parenthetical* in this sentence is not appropriate since it renders the meaning of the

whole utterance ambiguous. Thus, *if-metatextual parentheticals* can be labelled as “anchored parentheticals” because of their fixed position in the sentence.

When analysed from the semantic perspective, *if*-parentheticals are typically characterized as detached from the Q-clause while implicitly or explicitly contributing to the overall meaning or interpretation of the entire utterance. For our analysis we have studied the major classification of parentheticals into *pure* and *impure*, as suggested by Koev (2022, p. 20). According to his classification, *pure* parentheticals are “semantically inert” and have no or little influence on the interpretation of the Q-clause. *Impure* parentheticals, on the other hand, can affect the perception of the meaning expressed in the main sentence. Among these types of parentheticals, Koev includes “antecedents of biscuit conditionals” which align with *if-speech-act parentheticals*. This match also holds true for *if-metatextual parentheticals* inasmuch as they enhance the understanding of the Q-clause; thus, they can be categorized as *impure*.

To proceed with our analysis, it is necessary to compare the types of *if-parentheticals* in sentences (1) and (2) in order to identify the similarities and differences they have between their structural and semantic characteristics. While *if*-parentheticals in sentences (1) and (2) differ syntactically (with the first categorized as *floating* and the second as *anchored*), they exhibit certain similarities when analysed in terms of their semantic properties. Both belong to the *impure* subcategory of Koev’s classification of parentheticals since they are semantically embedded into the main clause, the degree of semantic dependency being conditioned by the extent to which *if-parentheticals* contribute to the interpretation of the entire utterance.

The semantic properties shared by these *if*-parentheticals become more apparent when examining the insertion of the resumptive pronoun *then* between the Q and P clauses in these conditionals. The pronoun *then*, which highlights the sequential and causative-consecutive relations between the clauses, serves as an efficient tool for revealing the differences between the two types of *if-parentheticals* in terms of the degree of semantic dependence they have on their Q-clauses (Dancygier, 2006). The use of *then* is unacceptable in sentences with *if-metatextual parentheticals* due to their syntactic properties. Their static, final anchored position precludes the use of *then* and determines their low-level semantic contribution to the Q-clause since they refer to only one element in the Q-clause. In contrast, *if-speech-act parentheticals* have a relatively high degree of semantic contribution, providing a sufficient condition for the realization of the action in the Q-clause. The use of *then* is highly unlikely in *if-speech-act parentheticals* when they occupy medial or final positions; however, it cannot be

entirely excluded when they are placed at the beginning of sentences, as is seen in sentence (3) given below.

(3) ***“If I am not mistaken”***, said Mr. Spenlow, as Miss Murdstone brought a parcel of letters out of her reticule, tied round with the dearest bit of blue ribbon, *“those are also from your pen, Mr. Copperfield”* (Ch. Dickens, 526).

(3a) ***“If I am not mistaken”***, said Mr. Spenlow, ***“then* those are also from your pen, Mr. Copperfield.”***

(3a) demonstrates the unacceptable insertion of *then*, which highlights the “parenthetical nature” of these conditionals (Koev, 2022, p. 41). However, the insertion of *then* may be perceived as appropriate only in specific cases, as shown in (4) below.

(4) *If you are hungry, there are biscuits on the sideboard.*

The use of *then* in Austin’s famous example is highly dependent on the analysis of the sentence at syntactic and pragmatic levels. Analysed syntactically, the Q-clause is a declarative sentence, the illocutionary force of which is of the representative type. *Then* is unacceptable if the whole utterance is viewed as direct speech-act since the *if P, Q* is not interpreted as biconditional, i.e., as expressing both *if P, Q* and *if not- P, not-Q* (Declerck & Reed, 2001, p. 478).

(4a) *If you are not hungry, *then there are not any biscuits on the sideboard.*

However, analysed from the pragmatic perspective, the use of *then* is quite possible with the following interpretation:

(4b) *If you are hungry, then help yourself to some biscuits on the sideboard.*

It is clear that the syntactic form of the utterance in the Q-clause does not match the illocutionary force it expresses. The Q-clause, having the structure of a declarative sentence, indirectly expresses an offer. Consequently, at this level, the whole conditional sentence is perceived as biconditional.

(4c) *If you are not hungry, then do not help yourself to the biscuits.*

Pragmatic Functions of *If-Parentheticals*

Both *if-speech-act* and *if-metatextual parentheticals* serve a variety of pragmatic functions, which are interpreted differently based on both linguistic and extralinguistic factors. *If-metatextual parentheticals* primarily express commenting and evaluating functions and typically occupy a final position acting as postscript clauses. These functions can be expressed either explicitly or implicitly, depending on how much emphasis is placed the contribution of the parenthesis.

(5) *‘No. I was a young boy, and she exasperated me, and I threw a hammer at her. A promising young angel I must have been!’ I was deeply sorry to have touched on such a painful theme, but that was useless now. ‘She has borne the*

*mark ever since, as you see,' said Steerforth; 'and she'll bear it to her grave, **if she ever rests in one** - though I can hardly believe she will ever rest anywhere... There's the history of Miss Rosa Dartle for you' (Ch. Dickens, 441-442).*

The commenting function of the metatextual if-clause in (5) reflects Miss Rosa Dartle's restless mind and soul, caused by the unfavorable conditions she has lived in. This parenthetical clause contributes to a deeper understanding of the relationship between the interlocutors by highlighting the endless suffering caused by the "unfortunate accident." Though seemingly unnecessary, this parenthesis carries a significant illocutionary force: it creates an illusion of fantasy, making readers perceive her eternal suffering after death as something real. This parenthetical clause, though structurally simple, adds substantial semantic weight by expressing her emotional state in a way no other part of the discourse could express.

*(6) 'My dear Copperfield,' said Mr. Micawber, rising with one of his thumbs in each of his waistcoat pockets, 'the companion of my youth - **if I may be allowed the expression** - and my esteemed friend Traddles - **if I may be permitted to call him so** - will allow me, on the part of Mrs. Micawber, myself, and our offspring, to thank them in the warmest and most uncompromising terms for their good wishes (Ch. Dickens, 795-796).*

The *if-metatextual parentheticals* in (6) referring to "the companion of my youth" and "my esteemed friend Traddles" in the Q-clauses anaphorically, are interpreted as "echoes" with an important pragmatic function, that of fulfilling the positive-negative politeness shift. First, Mr. Micawber dares to demonstrate closeness and solidarity with the individuals in question, but instantly doubting the appropriateness of these specific utterances, offers alternative expressions to redress his bald attempts to put himself and his companions on the same wavelength. By showing proper respect to their negative face, with these *if-metatextual parentheticals*, Mr. Micawber maintains distance, while avoiding intruding their social territory.

*(7) The mild Mr. Chillip could not possibly bear malice at such a time, **if at any time** (Ch. Dickens, 11).*

The postscript if-metatextual comment clause "if at any time" in (7) indirectly objects to the phrase "at such a time", ascribing an additional layer of negation to the negative particle *not*, which functions as a sentential negation of the Q-clause. It has a strong resemblance to Horn's metatextual negation where *not* is used in its sentential negation position and interpreted metalinguistically. Horn (1989, p. 363) defines metalinguistic negation as "a device for objecting to a previous utterance on any grounds whatever, including the conventional or conversational implicata it

potentially induces, its morphology, its style or register, or its phonetic realization". The pragmatic value of "if at any time" comment clause is significant as it emphasizes the absolute exclusion of Mr. Chillip's bearing malice by broadening the scope of *not*. Without the comment clause, the negation would be partial, applying only to "at such a time". It is the comment clause that makes the negation total by extending it to all possible times. As a result, "if at any time" is interpreted as "at no time" or "under no circumstances". Herein lies the pragmatic function of if-metatextual parentheticals which (without bearing negation themselves) can drastically change the pragmatic interpretation of the Q-clause.

As regards *if-speech-act parentheticals*, they mainly carry out discourse-regulating functions by making utterances in Q-clauses more polite and acceptable. Attaching a certain amount of uncertainty is an effective means to make the utterance more tentative and non-imposing.

As can be observed from sentence (3) given above, "if I am not mistaken" serves as a means of reducing the level of certainty and accuracy of the utterance addressed to Mr. Copperfield. The pragmatic interpretation of this *if-parenthetical* is two-fold: firstly, it helps Mr. Spellow to avoid imposing the irrefutable truth on Mr. Copperfield by characterizing himself as either forgetful or careless even if he may, in fact, be confident in the truthfulness of the statement. Secondly, this *if-parenthetical* is a means of distancing himself from the possible consequences of imparting inaccurate information, thereby protecting himself from being accused of slandering Mr. Copperfield.

(8) ***If I am sure of anything***, of course, you know, I am sure of that. (Ch. Dickens, 417)

In sentence (8) the level of uncertainty expressed by the *if-speech-act parenthetical* "if I am sure of anything" is even higher, which is a vivid example of Modesty Maxim proposed by Leech (1983, p. 136). According to this maxim the importance of showing politeness to interlocutors is expressed by "minimizing praise of self and maximizing dispraise of self". The uncertainty embedded in the *if-parenthetical* demonstrates the speaker's intention not to assume too much responsibility and not to present himself as a know-it-all. At the same time this *if-parenthetical* may connote a tinge of irony with the aim of enhancing the truth value of the propositional content.

(9) "Mr. Copperfiled", said miss Mills, "come to this side of the carriage a moment - ***if you can spare a moment***. I want to speak to you (Ch. Dickens, 467).

The *if-speech-act parenthetical* in sentence (9) is a formulaic expression that enhances the level of politeness of the Q-clause. It aligns with Leech's (1983, p.119–123) Tact Maxim of Politeness Principle, which reduces the imposition on

the hearer. The imperative “come to this side of the carriage a moment” with no mitigating device would be a face threatening act (FTA) which would sound rude and direct. Through the *if-speech-act parenthetical* “if you can spare a moment”, Ms. Mills is mitigating and changing her bald-on-record command into a polite request. Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 98) explain these FTA-oriented bald-on-record usages as the ones where “other demands (at least metaphorically) override face concerns”.

Conclusion

To sum up, *if-metatextual parentheticals* have a number of constraints in terms of syntax and semantics, but gain diverse pragmatic interpretations due to the potential semantic shift they bring to the Q-clause. Their pragmatic interpretations range from explicitly addressed constituent opposition to implicitly yet profoundly expressed contribution to the interpretation of the entire utterance. For this reason, the omission of this clause from the sentence can lead to a considerable semantic change, resulting in different pragmatic interpretations. Unlike *if-metatextual parentheticals*, *if-speech-act parentheticals* demonstrate greater syntactic flexibility and independence from their Q-clauses. They also have more generic and widely-accepted semantic representations, which are geared towards regulating politeness norms, conventionally and culturally acceptable for different situational contexts. In this respect, they serve as hedging devices which can be omitted from the utterance without drastically disrupting the main propositional content of the Q-clause. However, their omission can make the speaker’s illocutionary force vague, potentially affecting the pragmatic interpretation of the extralinguistic elements, such as interpersonal relations between interlocutors and contextually-based attitude towards the whole discourse.

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Ա. Չուբարյան, Մ. Էվոյան – *If-շաղկապավոր ներդրյալ կառույցների շարահյուսական, իմաստաբանական և գործարանական բնութագիրը գեղարվեստական երկխոսությունում*. – Սույն հոդվածի նպատակն է քննության ենթարկել *if-շաղկապավոր ներդրյալ կառույցների* լեզվագործաբանական գործառնությունները և տեքստակազմիչ դերը գեղարվեստական երկխոսությունում Չ. Դիքենսի Դեյվիդ Քոփերֆիլդ վեպից քաղված փաստական նյութի վերլուծության հիման վրա: Հոդվածում վերոնշյալ կառույցները, որոնք հաճախ անտեսվում են ավանդական շարահյուսական և իմաստաբանական հետազոտություններում, դիտարկվում են շարահյուսություն-իմաստաբանություն-գործաբանություն եռամիասնության

լույսի ներքո՝ բացահայտելու դրանց դերը դիսկուրսի կազմավորման և կայացման գործընթացում: Նախադասության մեջ սույն կառույցների շարահյուսական դիրքի, իմաստային բեռնվածության և իլոկուցիոն գործառույթների քննությունը բացահայտում է այն նշանակությունը, որ վերջիններս ունեն երկխոսական դիսկուրսի կապակցելիության, միջանձնային փոխհարաբերությունների զարգացման և լեզվագործաբանական համապատասխան մեկնության ապահովման գործում: Արդյունքները ցույց են տալիս, որ սույն կառույցները զգալիորեն հարստացնում են գեղարվեստական խոսքը, իսկ դրանց քննությունը կարևոր է ինչպես լեզվաբանական վերլուծության, այնպես էլ գրական ուսումնասիրությունների համար:

Բանալի բառեր. *if-շաղկապավոր ներդրյալ կառույցներ, շարահյուսություն-իմաստաբանություն-գործաբանություն եռամիասնություն, քաղաքավարության ռազմավարություն, իլոկուցիոն ուժ, մետատեքստային գործառույթ, խոսքային ակտ*

А. Чубарян, М. Эвоян – Синтаксис, семантика и прагматика *if*-вставных конструкций в художественном диалоге. – В данной статье исследуются прагматические функции *if*-вставных конструкций в художественном диалоге на примере романа Чарльза Диккенса «Дэвид Копперфильд». *If*-вставные конструкции, которые нередко остаются вне поля зрения традиционных синтаксических и семантических исследований, рассматриваются на стыке синтаксиса, семантики и прагматики с целью выявления их роли в организации дискурса. Выделяются два основных типа: метатекстовые *if*-вставные конструкции, выполняющие функцию закреплённых элементов, обеспечивающих комментариев и оценку, и речевые *if*-вставные конструкции, функционирующие как плавающие элементы, регулирующие вежливость и смягчающие ликоугрожающие речевые акты. Анализ их позиций в предложении, семантического вклада и иллокутивных функций позволяет выявить их важную роль в формировании связности дискурса, межличностной динамики и прагматической интерпретации. Результаты исследования подчёркивают, что подобные вставные конструкции вносят значительный вклад в глубину и тонкость художественного взаимодействия, что подчёркивает их ценность как для лингвистического анализа, так и для литературоведческих исследований.

Ключевые слова: *метатекстовые if-вставные конструкции, речевые if-вставные конструкции, взаимосвязь синтаксиса, семантики и прагматики, стратегии вежливости, закреплённые и плавающие вставные конструкции, иллокутивная сила*