The use of conditionals in argumentation: a proposal for the analysis and evaluation of argumentatively used conditionals

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Conditionals functioning as a standpoint

5.1

Introduction

Let me start this chapter by saying that the chapter heading might be misleading. As we have seen in the last chapter, any statement – if challenged – can become a standpoint that has to be defended when the antagonist calls for it. Therefore, any conditional sentence can ‘function’ as a standpoint, as soon as another party engaged in the dispute doubts whether this conditional sentence is true. In fact, in the last chapter examples were given of conditionals that function as a connecting premise but could just as easily be called a ‘conditional that functions as a standpoint’, since these conditionals were supported by argumentation in order to convince the antagonist of their acceptability.

Nevertheless, it is of importance to dedicate a separate chapter to conditionals that function as a standpoint because otherwise an interesting category of conditionals might escape our attention, namely those conditionals a speaker uses in the situation when he puts forward this standpoint only on a certain condition. The condition mentioned in the antecedent sets the stage for the discussion that will take place concerning the standpoint that is expressed in the consequent. In my opinion, there are three types of standpoint ‘on a condition’: conditional standpoints, conditional defences and hypothetical standpoints. These different types vary in the stance both the speaker and the other party take with regard to the condition expressed in the antecedent of the conditional.

Conditional standpoints are used when certain information needed for the discussion is not available at the time the discussion takes place. To allow the discussion to proceed, this information is posited explicitly at the beginning of it. An example of a conditional standpoint is given in 100:

100 I don’t know exactly when Tess will arrive, but if she is here on Wednesday, then we should all go to the theatre. Wednesday night is the final night King Lear will be performed and I have heard it is very good.
It is characteristic of conditional standpoints that at the time the discussion takes place, neither the protagonist nor the antagonist knows whether the antecedent is true or not. The antecedent is taken to be true and on that basis the discussion can be carried out.

A speaker using a conditional defence takes a position ‘on condition’ as well. There are two ways in which a speaker can put forward a conditional defence. First of all, he can support his standpoint with multiple argumentation whilst introducing his second line of defence by means of a conditional. The antecedent of this conditional depicts the situation that the first line of defence fails to accomplish and the consequent restates the standpoint being defended. In 101 such a conditional defence is brought forward:

101 We shouldn’t remain home all day. It is far too sunny to stay inside. And even if it were cloudy, we should go out. We all need some fresh air.

The second way in which a conditional defence can be conducted is demonstrated in 102:

102 The prosecution has not been able to prove that my client dealt the blow that turned out to be fatal. Therefore, I request for his acquittal. However, if the jury considers the proof the prosecution delivered to be solid, my client should be discharged, given the circumstances under which this tragic event took place.

This example differs from 101 in that the original standpoint is not restated. It is retracted and replaced by another standpoint: the request for acquittal is replaced by a request for the client to be discharged. Nevertheless, 101 and 102 belong to the same category since the antecedent implies in both cases an explicit denial of the first line of defence.

It is because of the status of the antecedent that 101 and 102 belong to the same category and differ from the conditional standpoint in 100. In 100, both parties in the discussion agree that it is uncertain whether Tess will arrive on Wednesday or not. In 101 and 102, the situation is quite different: there the speaker is convinced the antecedent is false. After all, it was the speaker who put forward a proposition contradicting the proposition expressed in the antecedent as his first line of defence. But although the speaker considers the antecedent to be false, he does not exclude the possibility that others are of a different opinion. For the other party engaged in the discussion, the antecedent may be true.
In case of a hypothetical standpoint, it is not only the protagonist who considers the antecedent to be false: the antagonist also shares this point of view. Both participants in the discussion agree that the antecedent is false and will not become true. The proposition is only maintained ‘for the sake of argument’. An example of a hypothetical standpoint is 103:

103 It is a pity Tess arrives not until Thursday. Had she been here on Wednesday, we should have gone to the theatre together. Wednesday night is the final night King Lear is performed and I have heard it is very good.

For the evaluation of argumentatively used conditionals it is important to differentiate between conditional standpoints, conditional defences and hypothetical standpoints. This is true, not only because the various ways in which a speaker can maintain a standpoint ‘on a condition’ ask for different kinds of criticism, but also because the consequences of successful criticism vary. For instance, when the antagonist can show that the antecedent of a conditional standpoint is false, this will result in the discussion being abandoned, unless the protagonist rephrases his standpoint as a hypothetical one. On the other hand, when the antecedent of a conditional defence is criticized, there is no need to stop the discussion or rephrase the standpoint. In conditional defence, criticism of the antecedent only reinforces the argumentative strength of the first line of defence.

In this chapter, conditional standpoints, conditional defences and hypothetical standpoints will subsequently be discussed. For each type, the relevant critical reactions are listed and the consequences of successful criticism are shown.

89 That the speaker leaves this possibility open explains why using a conditional defence has two opposite effects. By putting forward more than one line of defence, the standpoint is supported more strongly. At the same time, the position of the speaker is weakened since the speaker explicitly points out to his interlocutor that his first line of defence might not be that strong. This latter effect would not have occurred if the speaker had only restricted himself to his first line of defence.
5.2 Conditional standpoints

A conditional standpoint is typically put forward when there is uncertainty concerning a fact or uncertainty concerning the correct interpretation of a previous remark. Since the discussion can proceed only when this uncertainty is removed, the statement of fact or the interpretation must be taken as correct. Within the context created in that manner, the discussion can be carried on. In 100, it is not clear yet when Tess will arrive:

100 I don’t know exactly when Tess will arrive, but if she is here on Wednesday, then we should all go to the theatre. Wednesday night is the final night King Lear will be performed and I have heard it is very good.

This discussion can be schematically represented as follows:

1. If Tess is here on Wednesday: we should all go to the theatre.  
   ↑  
   1.1a 1.1b  
   Wednesday night is I have heard it is  
   the final night very good  
   King Lear will be performed

In 104, not uncertainty about a fact, but uncertainty about the correct interpretation of a previous remark, gives rise to a conditional standpoint.

104 I don’t know what our European friends mean by ‘a moment of meditation’, but if they mean the air strikes should be interrupted for novel peace negotiations, their suggestion is disastrous. Interruption of the air strikes allows for the reorganisation of the enemy troops. Furthermore, it would boost our enemy’s morale. They’ll find the strikes suspended although they have not met any of our demands, and that could be interpreted as proof of their power.

Once again, the situation depicted in the antecedent sets the stage
for the discussion, the schematical representation of this discussion being:

if our European friends mean by ‘a moment of meditation’ that the air strikes should be interrupted for novel peace negotiations:

\[
\begin{array}{c|c}
\text{1.} & \\
\hline
\text{their suggestion is disastrous} & \\
\hline
\text{1.1} & \text{1.2} \\
\hline
\text{interruption of the air strikes} & \text{interruption of the air strikes would boost our enemy’s morale} \\
\text{allows for reorganisation of the enemy troops} & \\
\hline
\text{1.2.1a} & \text{1.2.1b} \\
\text{they’ll find the strikes suspended although they have not met any of our demands} & \text{that could be interpreted as proof of their power} \\
\end{array}
\]

By means of the conditionals in 100 and 104 the speaker proposes his point of view ‘on condition’: the standpoint expressed in the consequent can only be attributed to the speaker (or: the speaker only accepts the duty to defend this standpoint), when the condition expressed in the antecedent is met. The protagonist puts forward his opinion conditionally, because he only will be able to defend his standpoint successfully if the proposition in the antecedent is realized. If ‘Tess is not there on Wednesday’, a discussion on whether to go together with her to the theatre that night is senseless. And criticizing the proposal to interrupt the air strikes for peace negotiations only makes sense if that is indeed the proposal put forward by the European countries.

Whether a standpoint can be put forward conditionally or not, is independent of the type of proposition the standpoint expresses. The standpoint can contain a prescriptive proposition, as in 100, where it is argued that a certain action should be taken. But it can also contain an evaluative proposition, as in 104 or a descriptive one, as in 105:

105 I don’t know when the women’s final is scheduled, but if it is scheduled today, it is cancelled.
All that is needed for a conditional standpoint is that the antecedent contains information that is not (yet) available, but that indeed necessary for the discussion to proceed. As a result, it must be explicitly assumed.

The defence of a conditional standpoint resembles the logical form of a conditional proof in many ways. Schematically, a conditional proof can be represented as follows:

\[
\begin{align*}
X \\
Y \\
Z \\
A \\
\ldots \\
\ldots \\
B \\
A \rightarrow B
\end{align*}
\]

In a conditional proof, an assumption \([A]\) is added to the set of premises that forms the basis of the proof \([X, Y, Z]\). Subsequently, the proof continues within the context of that assumption, until the desired conclusion \([B]\) is reached. Finally, the context of the assumption is left, whilst adding the assumption as an antecedent to the conclusion \([A \rightarrow B]\).

Conditional proof resembles the defence of a conditional standpoint in that an assumption is used as background for the reasoning that takes place. It differs however regarding the aim of the reasoning: whereas a conditional proof is used in order to prove a conditional sentence, in a defence of a conditional standpoint, proof of a conditional sentence is not the main concern. One is not (primarily) concerned with proving a conditional sentence that could be used as a connecting premise in, for instance, a \textit{modus ponens}. One does not want to show that it is true that from ‘A’ one can deduce that ‘B’. The discussion is focused on the standpoint expressed in the consequent and the condition expressed in the antecedent is only there because it is a necessary precondition for that standpoint.\textsuperscript{90}

How can a conditional standpoint be criticized? Criticism of the conditional sentence as a whole is not possible. Conditional standpoints are comparable to other conditional speech acts such as 9:
If you would appreciate it, I could ask the manager for a special discount.

Sentence 9 can be seen as an (indirect) offer. The offer expressed in the consequent is presented as only being made if one of the felicity conditions for making an offer is met: the recipient must like that which is offered. But although the offer is made through a conditional sentence, through the act of putting forward sentence 9, the offer is made.

Although the comparison may not hold in its entirety, I think that conditional standpoints have much in common with conditional offers like 9 and other conditional speech acts. One of the preparatory conditions for putting forward a standpoint is that the speaker believes he can support his standpoint with argumentation (Houtlosser 1995: 79). This then makes it clear that in 100 the speaker has to put forward his standpoint conditionally:

I don’t know exactly when Tess will arrive, but if she is here on Wednesday, then we should all go to the theatre. Wednesday night is the final night King Lear will be performed and I have heard it is very good.

If the speaker were to put forward his standpoint unconditionally – knowing that it is not clear whether Tess will be there or not – the preparatory condition would not be met. In that case, the speaker cannot

90 This is not to say that a conditional sentence that functions as a conditional standpoint never can function as a connecting premise in a modus ponens. Suppose both parties engaged in the discussion about the conditional standpoint ‘If Tess is here on Wednesday, we should all go to the theatre together’ agree that it is a good idea to go to the theatre with Tess. Any doubt regarding the conditional standpoint has been removed. Now suppose a few days later it turns out Tess will arrive on Tuesday. In that case, the antecedent of the conditional standpoint is acceptable to both parties. Furthermore, it has been agreed upon that in the situation when Tess is there on Wednesday, it is a good idea to go to the theatre together. Therefore, the conditional ‘If Tess is here on Wednesday, then we should all go to the theatre together’ can function as a connecting premise and a statement like ‘Tess is here on Wednesday, so we should all go to the theatre’ makes perfect sense.

91 Consult Sweetser, who describes conditional speech acts as follows: ‘the performance of the in-process speech act (the apodosis) is presented as being conditional on some factor expressed in the protasis’ (1990: 120).
believe he can successfully support his standpoint with argumentation, since he knows there may be a fatal counter-argument: Tess may not be there. This counter-argument would make his standpoint untenable and therefore he presents his standpoint as only being put forward if the condition in the antecedent is met, i.e. the fatal counter-argument is excluded.

This means a speaker putting forward a conditional standpoint says something like ‘In case the antecedent is true, my standpoint is that X’. As a result, criticism of the conditional as a whole is not possible. Doubting whether X is really his standpoint, or denying that it is his standpoint, is pointless. Just as with any other conditional speech act, by putting forward the conditional standpoint, the speech act is carried out and the standpoint is taken.\(^{92}\)

Nevertheless, the following two reactions seem to be directed at the conditional sentence as a whole:

\[106\] Is it true that we should all go to the theatre if Tess is here on Wednesday?

\[107\] It isn’t true that we should all go to the theatre if Tess is here on Wednesday.

Although \[106\] and \[107\] seem to question and criticize the conditional sentence as a whole, the doubt / criticism is directed only at the

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\(^{92}\) I realize that it may be difficult to see the distinction between a conditional standpoint and a standpoint about a conditional proposition functioning as a connecting premise like ‘If Emile is a snob, he doesn’t eat macaroni and cheese’, especially since criticizing the standpoint would in both cases involve showing the consequent to be false given the antecedent. Still, I think this distinction is important. First of all, an attack on a standpoint about a conditional functioning as a connecting premise would rather be aimed at either the ground of the connecting premise or at the connection between the ground and the connecting premise. In the case of a conditional standpoint, the opponent does not seem to have that option. Secondly, conditional standpoints differ from standpoints about conditionals functioning as a connecting premise in that contraposition is not valid for conditional standpoints, e.g. someone putting forward 100 ‘if Tess is here on Wednesday, then we should all go to the theatre’ would not be committed to ‘If we should not all go to the theatre, Tess is not here on Wednesday’ – as it is not so for conditional speech acts in general. Thirdly, in the case of conditional standpoints ‘not (if A, then B) seems to express the same as ‘if A, then not-B’, where in the case of a standpoint about a conditional this is not the case (see section 5.5).
consequent: the standpoint put forward conditionally is attacked. In 106 it is questioned whether it is a good idea to go to the theatre together, in 107 this is denied. That the criticism is indeed directed at the consequent can be seen from the kind of response 106 and 107 would receive. A relevant reaction to 106 and 107 would be ‘but it is the final night King Lear will be performed and I have heard many good things about it’ – a reaction by which the proposition expressed in the consequent is supported and not the conditional sentence as a whole.

An attack on the consequent of a conditional standpoint amounts to an attack on the standpoint put forward under a condition. If the antagonist accepts the antecedent and goes along with the hypothetical context sketched, he can either question the consequent or put forward the opposite standpoint. In both cases, within the hypothetical context, a discussion takes place about the acceptability of the standpoint conditionally put forward. This happens for instance in 108:

108 We should not all go to the theatre that night, I think Tess would hate that play. The last time I saw her she explicitly told me she hates ‘Shakespeare updated’.

The antagonist accepts the antecedent of the conditional standpoint and goes along with the hypothetical context in which Tess is there on Wednesday. However, he disagrees with the standpoint conditionally put forward and argues that the consequent of the conditional is incorrect. Subsequently, within the hypothetical context, he puts forward argumentation in support of his point of view.

Up until now, the other party in the discussion has always been willing to go along with the hypothetical context proposed by the protagonist. It is just as well possible that he is unwilling to do so. In such cases, the other party criticizes the antecedent of the conditional standpoint. He might for instance say that the antecedent is untrue. Since the protagonist only has taken an obligation to defend his point of view under that condition, a successful attack on the truth of the

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93 Again, this illustrates it is the function that the conditional fulfils that determines what kind of criticism is relevant / acceptable and what is not. A conditional that functions as a connecting premise could never be criticized in such a way, in fact it would be seen as a grave logical mistake if the conditional ‘If Daniel is an athlete, he has stamina’ were criticized by pointing out that Daniel is not an athlete, exactly because the conditional does not imply the truth / falsity of the Gedanke expressed in its antecedent and consequent.
antecedent results in the cancellation of the standpoint and all the arguments put forward to support it, or it results in the necessity to reformulate the standpoint as a hypothetical one.

However, not every attack on the antecedent leads to this result. In some cases, the antecedent of the conditional standpoint can be untrue, without making a discussion about the conditional standpoint pointless. This could happen in the case of 109:

109 I don’t know exactly how tall Ann is, but if she is 1,35 meter, we must take a ride on that rollercoaster. I have heard it is absolutely terrific.

Ann’s length is relevant to the discussion, since the rollercoaster is only accessible for people over 1,35 meter. Therefore, the protagonist only accepts the burden of proof for his standpoint if this precondition is met. Now suppose Ann is not 1,35 but 1,40 meter. In that case the antecedent of the conditional standpoint is strictly speaking untrue. However, the discussion concerning the hypothetical standpoint can proceed, since the untruth of the antecedent does not affect the tenability of this standpoint: the precondition that Ann is allowed to take a ride on the rollercoaster is still met.

The antecedent of a conditional standpoint can also be challenged by pointing out that the proposition expressed in the antecedent is not untrue, but very unlikely. An antagonist is in such cases not willing to go along with the hypothetical context sketched since he finds it highly unrealistic. A discussion on a standpoint put forward in an unrealistic setting might be seen as pointless.

When a speaker puts forward his standpoint conditionally because there is uncertainty concerning the correct interpretation of a previous remark, criticism directed at the antecedent is comparable to a reaction to the fallacy of the straw man. In the straw man fallacy, the standpoint of the opposing party is deliberately distorted so as to make it easier to attack. If the interpretation given in the antecedent is too far away from what might be meant by an individual who partakes in the discussion, this could be a reason to reject the context proposed (whether this distortion was deliberate or not).

In sum: in addressing a conditional standpoint, the antagonist can do two things: he can either reject the hypothetical context proposed (by criticising the antecedent), or he can go along with the hypothetical context and question or reject the standpoint put forward in that
context (by criticizing the consequent). If he takes the first course and succeeds, the discussion will be abandoned since the standpoint and the argumentation put forward in support of it have become pointless. If he takes the second course, then a discussion will be conducted on the tenability – in the context sketched in the antecedent – of the standpoint put forward.

5.3
Conditional defence

A speaker using a conditional defence puts forward a point of view ‘on condition’ as well. In 110 a conditional defence is used:

110a The plan to close all service offices must be abandoned. First of all, it is not true that it is too expensive to keep the service offices open. The annual report shows that only a small percentage of the turnover is dedicated to the cost of these offices. And even if it were too expensive, the plan to close the offices should be dropped. Closing the offices would not provide a solution, since ‘Mobile service employees’ in combination with permanent camera observation will cost just as much.

An analysis of 110 yields the following schematic representation:

1. the plan to close all service offices must be abandoned

   ↑

1.1 it is not too expensive to keep the service offices open

   ↑

1.1.1 the annual report shows that only a small percentage of the turnover is dedicated to the cost of these offices

   even if it were too expensive:

      1. the plan to close the offices should be dropped

          ↑

      1.2 closing the service offices would not provide a solution

          ↑

      1.2.1 ‘mobile service employees’ in combination with permanent camera observation will cost just as much
In a conditional defence, the main standpoint is defended with a minimum of two lines of defence whilst the second line of defence is introduced by means of a conditional sentence. At first sight, conditionals that function as a conditional defence do not seem to belong to the category of conditionals functioning as a standpoint. After all, it is the second line of defence that is preceded by a conditional sentence. Should a conditional defence therefore not rather be seen as a conditional that functions as an argument? A closer look at such conditionals reveals however, that the conditional sentence does not contain any argumentation. In the antecedent the situation is sketched in which the first line of defence does not hold; in the consequent the standpoint is restated. The conditional sentence can therefore not be seen as support for the standpoint under discussion.

A conditional defence is used when the protagonist wants to put forward two lines of defence to which he cannot be committed simultaneously. If he wants to bring forward his second line of defence, he has to first sketch a context in which the first argument is said to be untrue, otherwise he would contradict himself. In 110, the argument that ‘the plan to close the service offices does not provide a solution’ is in contradiction with the argument that ‘keeping the service offices open is not too expensive’. The claim that a course of action is no solution to the problem, presupposes that there is a problem. Therefore, this second line of defence can only be brought forward in a context where the first line of defence does not hold.

In 110, it is clear why the speaker feels the need to add a condition to the second line of defence. However, a conditional defence can also be put forward in contexts where there is no apparent risk of contradiction, as in 101:

101 We shouldn’t remain home all day. It is far too sunny to stay inside. And even if it were cloudy, we should go out. We all need some fresh air.

The first line of defence in support of the standpoint that ‘we should not remain home all day’ is not in contradiction with the second one: one can commit oneself simultaneously to ‘it is far too sunny to stay inside’ and ‘we all need some fresh air’. Why then is the second line of defence preceded by a conditional in which the first line of defence is negated and the standpoint restated?

A clue is given by Eggs in his article on the use of ‘even if’. Eggs writes:
Wird ein irrealer Konditionalsatz durch selbst wenn eingeleitet, so muß er als Zurückweisung eine möglichen Folgerung seitens des Gesprächspartners verstanden werden (1979:429).

According to Eggs, a speaker using an ‘even if’ sentence like the one in 101 suspects that the other party engaged in the conversation will draw a certain conclusion. By means of the conditional sentence introduced by ‘even if’, which contains the irrealis in the antecedent, this conclusion is then rejected.

Now what conclusion does the speaker expect from his opponent? If we take another look at the conditional sentence in 101, just one conclusion seems to be possible. The conditional ‘Even if it were cloudy, we should go out’ can only be seen as a rejection of ‘If it is not far too sunny to stay inside, then we may remain home all day.’ That means, apparently the speaker expects the other party to conclude that if the first reason happens to be false, the standpoint is false as well. From a logical point of view, this is rather odd, since the speaker seems to expect that in that case the other party will be committing the fallacy of denying the antecedent.

This oddity can be explained when we shift our attention from the propositions expressed in the sentences in 101 to the function these propositions fulfil in the context of argumentation. The standpoint put forward in 101 is ‘we should not remain home all day’. This standpoint is supported by the argument that ‘it is far too sunny to stay inside’. Now, suppose the other party engaged in the discussion shows that it is not sunny at all. In that case, the defence fails. If the defence fails, the protagonist has to retract his standpoint: he has not been able to remove the doubt concerning the acceptability of the standpoint and one cannot commit oneself to something which is not considered to be acceptable. Therefore, if the other party manages to show that the defence fails, he can conclude from this failure that the speaker will retract his standpoint. The conditional used in a conditional defence is meant to reject this conclusion: even if the first line of defence fails, the standpoint is maintained.

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94 In pragma-dialectics, one of the rules of critical discussion pertains to the closing stage of the discussion. In what Van Eemeren and Grootendorst call rule 14a, it is stipulated that ‘the protagonist is obliged to retract the initial standpoint if the antagonist has conclusively attacked it (...)’ (2004:154).
It is not the case that in all types of conditional defence the speaker can maintain the standpoint he initially put forward. Sometimes a speaker uses a conditional defence to put forward an alternative standpoint, as in 102:

102 The prosecution has not been able to prove my client dealt the blow that turned out to be fatal. Therefore, I request for his acquittal. However, if the jury considers the proof the prosecution delivered to be solid, my client should be discharged, given the circumstances under which this tragic event took place.

The argumentation in 102 can schematically be represented as follows:

1. my client must be acquitted
   ↑

1.1 the prosecution has not been able to prove my client dealt the blow that turned out to be fatal

   if the proof is considered to be solid: my client should be discharged
       ↑

1.1 the circumstances under which this tragic event took place are such that his act is not punishable

In 102, the speaker thinks he has been able to show conclusively that there is not enough evidence to consider his client to be guilty as charged. Therefore, he argues his client must be acquitted: he must be declared not guilty. However, as is the case with other conditional defences, the speaker does not exclude the possibility his interlocutor may be of a different opinion. He leaves room for the jury to accept the evidence submitted by the prosecution as being conclusive. Only if that is the case, is the alternative position taken: the speaker puts forward the standpoint that his client should be discharged. His client will be considered guilty as charged, but will not be punished, possibly because he acted out of self-defence.

As in other forms of conditional defence, in 102 the speaker anticipates his first line of defence may fail. In order to not to be left empty
handed, he advances an alternative standpoint as well. Both stand-
points are not of the same order: the standpoint initially put forward is
preferred over the alternative standpoint. Only if the former standpoint
cannot be defended conclusively, will the speaker resort to the latter
one. This is illustrated more clearly by the following legal example:

111 My client is not legally liable for the damages the claimant
suffered. Therefore I ask Your Honour to find against the
claimant. However, if Your Honour considers my client to be
legally liable, I ask to reduce the damages to €5,000, since the
claimant is partially responsible for the occurrence.

In 111 it is clear that the first standpoint is the one preferred: if the
judge agrees, the client does not have to pay anything. Only if the
judge is not convinced by the defence of this standpoint, does the
defendant take the alternative position. In that case, the client is legally
liable – albeit not for the full amount.

Whether the speaker restates his standpoint or retracts it and replaces
it with an alternative one, ultimately the evaluation of conditionals
that are used in a conditional defence proceeds along the same lines.
In conditional defence, the speaker puts forward a standpoint under
a certain condition. For that matter, conditionals used in conditional
defence have a lot in common with conditionals used as a conditional
standpoint. As is the case with conditional standpoints, attacking the
conditional sentence as a whole is not possible. A speaker putting
forward a conditional defence says something like ‘if my first line of
defence fails, my standpoint is X’. Questioning whether this is his
standpoint, or saying that it is not, does not make sense. By using this
conditional sentence, the speaker actually puts forward the standpoint.

That conditionals used in conditional defence differ from condi-
tionals used as a conditional standpoint becomes clear when the
antecedent of the conditional is attacked. With regard to conditional
standpoints, after a successful attack on the truth or possibility of the
antecedent the protagonist has to withdraw his standpoint and all the
argumentation put forward in support of it. In a conditional defence,
such an attack has a rather different effect. If the conditional is such
that the standpoint is restated in the consequent, attacking the antec-
dent leads to a reinforcement of the standpoint put forward. Since
the antecedent depicts the situation in which the first line of defence
fails, challenging the antecedent amounts to confirming the first line
of defence. If the conditional is such that the consequent contains an alternative standpoint, the antecedent depicts the situation in which the primary standpoint is rejected. Therefore, an attack on such an antecedent amounts to acknowledging the primary standpoint.

This leaves an attack on the consequent of the conditional as the only reasonable follow up to a conditional defence. In it could for instance be argued that going out is not a good idea because it will be too enervating. In one could doubt whether the circumstances of the incident indeed are such that the suspect should be discharged and in the claimant could argue that the damages should not be reduced to €5,000. As a result, a discussion will be conducted on the tenability of the different standpoints at issue – within the assumed context that the first line of defence fails.

5.4 Hypothetical standpoints

If a speaker puts forward a hypothetical standpoint, he advances a standpoint on a condition, just as he does when enunciating a conditional standpoint or conditional defence. What makes the category of hypothetical standpoints different from the two categories discussed earlier is the status of the antecedent. The antecedent of a conditional used as a hypothetical standpoint contains something the speaker considers to be untrue / impossible. Moreover, the speaker deems it to be out of the question that others could think differently. Although the proposition expressed in the antecedent is false, it is taken to be true ‘for the sake of argument’ and on the basis of this assumption, the discussion is carried on further.

In an example of a hypothetical standpoint is given:

103 It is a pity Tess arrives not until Thursday. Had she been here on Wednesday, we should have gone to the theatre together. Wednesday night is the final night King Lear is performed and I have heard it is very good.

In 103 both participants in the discussion know that Tess will not be there on Wednesday Nevertheless, they continue discussing whether in the event that Tess could be there on Wednesday, it would be a good idea to go to the theatre together.

Hypothetical standpoints can not only contain a prescriptive pro-
position, as in 103, but also can contain an evaluative or a descriptive proposition. An example of a hypothetical standpoint containing an evaluative proposition is 112:

112  It is a pity this book is written by a winner of the Nobel Prize. Had it been written by a debutant, it would have been outstanding. The characters are well-developed and the subject matter is original. Moreover, the constant changes in perspective makes one curious about what will happen next.

Both the protagonist and the antagonist agree that the book under discussion is not written by a debutant. Still, within the hypothetical context that a debutant did write it, the book is evaluated as outstanding. Furthermore, the speaker expects that the other party will not immediately agree with this evaluation. In order to convince him, the speaker supports his hypothetical standpoint with argumentation.

In 113 the hypothetical standpoint contains a descriptive proposition:

113  What a lucky thing the match is scheduled for next week! If it had been scheduled for today, it would have been cancelled. Not only out of respect for the Duchess who lost her husband, but also because it is pouring.

Again, in 113 both the protagonist and the antagonist know that the situation sketched in the antecedent is contrary-to-fact: the match has not been scheduled for today but for next week. Despite their knowledge to the contrary, they discuss within the hypothetical context whether the descriptive standpoint is acceptable.

Since both the antagonist and the protagonist agree that the antecedent of a conditional that functions as a hypothetical standpoint is false, an attack on the antecedent is fruitless. Still, 114, that is mentioned below, seems to be a relevant reaction to the conditional in 112:

114  Yes, but the book is not written by a debutant.

In such cases, the antagonist explicitly denies that the situation sketched in the antecedent obtains. He thereby does not reject the hypothetical standpoint as such (as can be seen from the ‘yes’), but rather indicates that he does not want to conduct a discussion within such an unreal and impossible situation.
As is the case with the other conditionals that function as a standpoint, it doesn’t make sense to question or criticize the conditional sentence as a whole. It is useless to question whether the speaker adopts the proposition expressed in the consequent in the hypothetical situation sketched in the antecedent: by putting forward the conditional he actually does. Even responses like 115 should not be seen as criticism of the conditional sentence as whole, but rather as criticism of the standpoint expressed in the consequent.

115  Is it true that the novel would be outstanding if it had been written by a debutant?

115 demonstrates that the other party indicates he does not (immediately) agree with the statement that the novel would be outstanding in the hypothetical context sketched. That the hypothetical standpoint is criticized, indeed can be seen from the kind of follow up 115 could receive: the speaker has to either retract his standpoint that the novel would be outstanding, or he has to come up with arguments in support of it.

5.5 Conclusion

Conditional standpoints, conditional defences and hypothetical standpoints differ in the stance both the speaker and the other party take with regard to the proposition expressed in the antecedent. In the case of a conditional standpoint, the question whether this proposition is true is clearly open: both the speaker and the other party do not know whether it is true or false. In the case of a conditional defence, the two parties engaged in the discussion might have a difference of opinion on the truth of the proposition expressed in the antecedent. The speaker thinks this proposition is false: otherwise he would undermine his first line of defence. However, he does not exclude the possibility that the other party is of a different opinion. In the case of a hypothetical standpoint, both parties agree; to be sure, not on the uncertainty of the proposition expressed in the antecedent – as in the case of a conditional standpoint – but on the falsity of it.

As a result, successful criticism of the antecedent yields different outcomes in all three cases. If the other party rejects the hypothetical context sketched by the antecedent of a conditional standpoint – by
showing the antecedent to be untrue or impossible – the standpoint and all the support put forward in defence of it, will be retracted (or changed into a hypothetical standpoint). Discussing it would be superfluous. In the case of a conditional defence, such criticism only reinforces the first line of defence. The antecedent of a hypothetical standpoint cannot be criticized in this manner: both parties agree that the proposition expressed in the antecedent is false. But the antagonist might be altogether unwilling to conduct a discussion just ‘for the sake of argument’.

Despite these differences, there are similarities between these three types of conditionals that function as a standpoint. First of all, criticizing the conditional sentence as a whole is pointless. Conditionals that function as a standpoint indicate the fact that the speaker commits himself to the standpoint expressed in the consequent under the condition mentioned in the antecedent. It does not make sense to question or deny that the speaker adopts this standpoint: by using the conditional, he does. Secondly, in all three uses a reasonable follow up is a discussion on the acceptability of the standpoint expressed in the consequent – within the context sketched in the antecedent

In that respect, conditionals that function as a standpoint display a characteristic of conditionals that Stalnaker already has drawn our attention to (1975: 173). In colloquial speech, the negation of a conditional often is equivalent to a conditional with the same antecedent together with a negated consequent. Suppose a discussion takes place on the following conditional standpoint:

116 I am not sure whether grandmother will come to your birthday or not, but if she comes, we cannot go out for a picnic

The other party can attack this standpoint by negating the conditional, as in 117:

117 It is not true that if grandmother comes, we cannot go out for a picnic.

But indeed he can say (and probably more frequently will say) the same using a conditional with the identical antecedent and a negated consequent:

117’ If grandmother comes we can go out for a picnic.
After all, sentence 117’ indicates more clearly that the discussion centers around the acceptability of the standpoint expressed in the consequent.

That this equivalence is characteristic of conditionals that function as a standpoint and is not characteristic of conditional sentences in general, can be illustrated by the following example:

118 Of course Marc is a Catholic. If his parents are Catholics, then Marc is a Catholic.

In response to 118 the other party cannot choose freely between 119 and 119’ because those sentences clearly do not have the same meaning:

119 It is not true that if Marc’s parents are Catholics, Marc is a Catholic.

119’ If Marc’s parents are Catholics, Marc is not a Catholic.

In 119, the question whether Marc is a Catholic or not remains unsettled. 119 only expresses that from Marc’s parents being Catholics, one cannot conclude that Marc is a Catholic as well, because the denomination of Marc’s parents is not a sufficient reason to do so. The other party thereby does not exclude that Marc is a Catholic: he just does not want to draw this conclusion on the basis of the truth of the direct premise. Sentence 119’ expresses (in this context) something different. The other party argues that the premise put forward by the protagonist leads to the opposite conclusion: from Marc’s parents being Catholics, one can conclude that Marc is not a Catholic.

The conditionals discussed in this chapter fulfil a different function than the ones discussed in the previous chapter. As a result, the characteristics the conditional must possess in order to be able to fulfil this function, differ as well. This becomes clear when we compare conditionals that function as a hypothetical standpoint and conditionals that function as a connecting premise in a modus tollendo tollens. Although in both cases the conditional is in the subjunctive mood, the status of the antecedent differs. In a conditional functioning as a hypothetical standpoint, both parties agree the proposition expressed in the antecedent is false. It is merely considered to be true ‘for the sake of argument’. In a conditional functioning as a connecting premise in a
modus tollendo tollens, the question whether the proposition expressed in the antecedent is false is not yet settled. On the contrary: the discussion is aimed at proving this, because the standpoint is the negation of this very proposition.

Along the same lines one can explain how a conditional functioning as a connecting premise in a modus ponendo ponens differs from a conditional functioning as a conditional standpoint. A conditional can only function as a connecting premise in a modus ponendo ponens if both parties can agree on the truth of the antecedent. After all, the antecedent contains the same proposition as the direct premise and the conditional is used to ‘transfer’ acceptability from this direct premise to the standpoint under discussion. In a conditional standpoint, the acceptability of the antecedent is not established. It is because both parties do not know whether the proposition expressed in the antecedent is true that the standpoint in the consequent is only put forward ‘under condition’.

Since the use of a conditional as a conditional standpoint requires that the conditional possesses certain characteristics, some categories of conditionals are more apt to function as a conditional standpoint than others. The non-hypothetical conditionals belonging to Dancygier’s category of ‘predictive conditionals’ seem to be tailor-made to fulfil this role. Predictive conditionals are characterized by the feature that the situation sketched in the antecedent is not yet known. There is in Funk’s words ‘objective uncertainty’ about the truth of the antecedent since the state of affairs depicted in the antecedent did not yet manifest itself and is therefore unverifiable. To continue with the discussion in spite of this uncertainty, a speaker may put forward his point of view only on the condition that this state of affairs is taken to be ‘realized’.

This is not to say that predictive conditionals by definition function as conditional standpoints. And the opposite does not hold true either: lack of objective uncertainty does not mean a conditional cannot function as a conditional standpoint, as can be derived from 109:

109 I don’t know exactly how tall Ann is, but if she is 1.35 meter, we must take a ride on that rollercoaster. I have heard it is absolutely terrific.

Of course Ann’s height can be established and the uncertainty is therefore only momentarily subjective. But for the participants in the
discourse this is irrelevant: this information is not known to them, but since it is needed for the discussion to proceed it has been posited explicitly in the antecedent as a condition for the standpoint.

It is not only irrelevant whether the proposition is objectively uncertain or not, it is also irrelevant what the analyst thinks of the proposition expressed in the antecedent. What matters only is the stance participants in the discussion have on the issue. Sentence 120 provides us with such an example:

120 If Hitler had invaded the UK, the UK would have had a German head of state for a while.

An analyst might be tempted to think this conditional ‘is’ a hypothetical standpoint (and might question whether this hypothetical standpoint is correct). Hitler never invaded the UK and therefore the antecedent is ‘objectively known to be false’. But it might very well be the case that the parties involved in the discussion are not so knowledgeable about this subject matter. Hence, the following context is imaginable:

120’ Hitler did not invade the UK. If he had invaded the UK, the UK would have had a German head of state for a while, and I have never heard of such a thing, have you?

In 120’ the conditional does not function as a hypothetical standpoint but as a connecting premise in a modus tollens, aimed at convincing the other party that Hitler did not invade the UK.

One has to know the stance the participants take, and therefore one cannot say of a conditional sentence that it ‘is’ a conditional standpoint or alternatively a connecting premise just from looking at it in isolation. One has to take the context into account. Many conditional sentences can fulfil different functions (although not simultaneously). Let’s take another look at 20:

20 If the bottle of olive oil is leaking, you have not closed it properly.

This conditional cannot only ‘be’ a conditional standpoint as in 20’, it can ‘be’ a connecting premise just as well, as in 20”:

20’ I don’t know whether the bottle of olive oil is leaking or not, but if it is leaking, you have not closed it properly. You were the last to use it.
Of course you haven’t closed the bottle properly! If it is leaking – and it is, as you can see – you haven’t closed it properly.

Conditionals ‘are’ not conditional standpoints or connecting premises, rather, these are the argumentative functions a conditional may fulfil. And since it is the function that determines the characteristics a conditional needs to have in order be able to fulfil this function, in the last instance, the capability of interpreting and evaluating a conditional requires that one takes the context into account.