

# Motivations for Using Non-Initial Conditionals and Their Pragmatical Functions

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## Abstract

There has been a lack of attention to the order of conditional clauses and resultant clauses in the study of conditional sentences in the Chinese research field. One commonality of human languages is that the conditional clause precedes the resultant clause. Previous researchers have given comprehensive explanations for the predominant antecedent order of initial conditional clauses, but there is still a research gap concerning the motivations for using non-initial conditionals and their pragmatical functions. With the help of the corpus, this paper focuses on the phenomenon of non-initial conditionals and explores the motivation for using them and their pragmatic functions. The current study finds that there are 2 main motivations for the use of non-initial conditional clauses, namely, to maintain discourse coherence and to act as post hoc complements; there are four main pragmatic functions of non-initial conditionals: boundary function, assessment function, euphemism function, and supplementary function. Similar microscopic studies help us reconceptualize conditional sentences' actual role in communication to further reveal the dynamic nature of natural language communication.

**Keywords:** conditional sentences, clauses order, non-initial conditional clauses, pragmatic functions

## 1. Introduction

Chinese syntax is not only fixed, but also flexible (Lu, 1986), and this feature is reflected in all aspects of Chinese grammar, especially in Chinese word order. Modern Chinese vocabulary, phrases, sentences, complex sentences, and even chapter structures all reflect the fixed and flexible aspects of Chinese syntax. The Chinese conditional sentences are a typical representative of this. From the 1940s to the present, most of the studies on gerund-like main-subordinate clauses, including conditional sentences, have focused on the conjunctions in these sentences, and the study of the order of the

resultant clauses and gerund clauses has usually been summarized by the statement that the main clause is postposed to the subordinate clauses (e.g., Wang, 1943; Xing, 2001; Xu, 2002, etc.), except a few scholars who have studied the structure of gerund main-subordinate clauses and gerund clauses. Scholars have specifically explored the order of pronominal subject-subordinate clauses (e.g., Wang, 2010, etc.). In recent years, some scholars have begun to utilize corpus statistics to consider the inflectional order between adverbial subordinate clauses and main clauses and have come to different conclusions from those of the past (e.g.,

Tao, 2008, etc.).

Similarly, contemporary research on the type of order with pronominal subject-subordinate compounds seems to be experiencing this expansion of research perspectives. Greenberg's (1996) related study pointed out linguistic commonality 13, linguistic commonality 14 and linguistic commonality 15, as mentioned by Greenberg above commonalities 13, 14 and 15 involve the relationship of order between dependent clauses and their main clauses, but since then however, scholars have not continued this research field, but focused on conjunctions in conditional sentences. As a result, Chinese and foreign scholars have not paid extensive attention to the postpositions of conditional clauses as they should.

Scholars have mostly considered the overall grammatical features of conditional sentences, the semantics of conditional sentences, and the pragmatic features of conditional sentences (Quirk, 1985). Research on the motivation and pragmatic function of postpositions in conditional clauses lacks attention. In the current study, we choose non-initial conditional clauses as the object of study and analyze their motives and pragmatic functions, which will help us reconceptualize conditional sentences' actual role in communication to further reveal the dynamic nature of natural language communication.

## 2. Weak Order of Non-Initial Conditional Clauses in Chinese

Scholarly studies on conditional clauses have shown that it is rare for conditional clauses to be postpositioned.

Yeh (2000) and Wang (2006) have collected data and statistics on the position and order of dative subject-subject composite sentences including conditional clauses, and the relevant statistics on the relationship between result clauses and conditional clauses show that conditional clauses are placed after result clauses only account for 10% (Yeh, 2000) and 14% of the total number of statistics (Wang, 2006). In addition to the difference in the order of conditional clauses and result clauses, Wang (2006) has also compiled statistics on the position of some gerund composite clauses in the relevant written corpora in addition to the spoken corpus, and the results of the statistics on the relationship between conditional clauses and result clauses show that the postpositions of conditional

clauses account for only 3.7% of the statistics. From these statistics, we can see that although there is a difference between the two in the absolute value of the statistical results, we can still draw the following conclusion from the statistical results: the result clause postpositioned and the conditional clause prepositioned are the dominant inflectional order in Chinese conditional sentences. This result is not only consistent with the findings of relevant studies on language typology, but also supported by experimental evidence from psycholinguistics (Zhang & Mo, 2005). Greenberg (1966) discussed the typology of the common inflexions of result clauses and conditional clauses in his study, in which he pointed out the following:

- (1) commonality 14: in declarative conditional sentences, it is a universal norm for the conditional clause to precede the result clause.

Additionally, Comrie (1986) also asserted a similar stance, stating that until the publication of his research, no counterexamples had been found. Numerous typological studies have also confirmed that the preposition of conditional clauses and the postposition of result clauses are cross-linguistic universal features. Therefore, we can infer from the abovementioned statistical results that the tendency for conditional clauses to be preposed and result clauses to be postposed is a universal phenomenon. In addition, while statistical results indicate that the preposition of conditional clauses is a cross-linguistic human language commonality, relevant corpus statistics also show that there is a portion of conditional sentences where the conditional clause is not preposed but instead postposed, and the number of postposed conditional clauses is significant enough to warrant attention. Therefore, why is there a certain portion of the corpus showing the existence of the phenomenon of conditional clause postpositions when the statistical results show that conditional clause prepositions are a cross-linguistic human language commonality? That is, what are the motivations for the existence of non-initial conditionals? What are the pragmatic functions of non-initial conditionals? These three questions will be examined in detail in the following sections.

## 3. The Reasons for the Weak Order of Non-Initial Conditionals in Chinese

From the statistical results of many scholars on conditional sentences and main clauses as above, we can see that there is no order advantage in the postposition of conditional clauses, i.e., there is a tendency for conditional clauses to be prepositioned.

The former scholars have given explanations for the prepositional tendency of conditional clauses from many different perspectives. Some scholars have explained this prepositional tendency from the discourse processing point of view, Comrie (1986) pointed out that because the markers carried by conditional clauses do not appear in result clauses, but mostly in conditional clauses. Therefore, prepositioning conditional clauses with such markers can help the addressee to process discourse markers directly. In addition, some other scholars have given explanations from a cognitive perspective. Greenberg (1966) argues that language is parallel to actual experience and cognitive order. In the relation between result clauses and conditional clauses, although their truth-value relation is not temporal, logicians always symbolize the order of condition and result in the order of “antecedent—consequent” as in natural language. This viewpoint is consistent with the likelihood of human thinking. Some other scholars have given explanations on this topic from the perspective of the information function of discourses. Fang (2008) analyzed the reason why pronominal clauses tend to be prepositioned from the perspective of information status. She pointed out that, analyzed from the perspective of information status, gerund clauses carry mostly known information or backward-looking information. Therefore, pronominal clauses are used to organize the flow of information in the ongoing discourse and to construct a starting point for subsequent discourse. Therefore, precisely because of the function that pronominal clauses assume in discourse, they inherently have the advantage of preposition order.

However, there are certain problems with all three explanations as above, they can be a consequence of the tendency of conditional clauses to be prepositioned, but they cannot be simply understood as the intrinsic motivation of the tendency of conditional clauses to be prepositioned. This paper agrees with Wang (2010) that the tendency of conditional clauses to be prepositioned is made possible by its own semantic features.

The mental space constructed by conditional sentences is an optional possibility space (Fauconnier, 1994). Conditional sentences express possible events in possible worlds, which are possible events selected from multiple possible worlds with interchangeable outcomes. The conditional clause “If the U.S. tariffs are implemented” in example (2) below is a possible event that is selected from two possible worlds: “The U.S. tariffs are implemented” and “The U.S. tariffs are not implemented”. The option “implemented” was chosen.

(2) We note that the U.S. announcement was published at 20:45 Beijing time on the 8th of August, and only two hours later, at 23:23, China’s Ministry of Commerce formally issued a statement pointing out that if the U.S. tariff measures are implemented, China will have to take the necessary countermeasures. Although China’s wording is calm, the resolute attitude of confrontation is very clear.

Example (3) is a rather typical counter-conditional clause. The situation described in this example is contrary to reality, i.e., the following clause is used to introduce another possible world, thus enhancing the expressive effect of the more descriptive events that follow.

(3) If there were indeed angels in this world, then they would be individuals like Teacher Deng who, with their lives, defend the environment for the growth of children.

From the analysis as above, we can basically conclude that conditional clauses seem to carry a natural contrast. When people utter a conditional clause, another situation corresponding to it appears accordingly. This kind of contrast has some connection with the mental space constructed by conditional clauses. The mental space constructed by conditional clauses gives the conditional clause itself two or more possibilities and hypotheses, which can be a predictive hypothesis about the future or a hypothesis about past facts or common reality. In either case, each conditional clause is selected from an aggregated group of possible worlds. This choice is the one made by the speaker after a careful comparison of the possible worlds constructed by the conditional clause, and it is the particular choice that comes closest to the speaker’s desired reality. Therefore, the current study argues that it is the contrastive features resulting from the hypothetical nature of the

conditional clause that make it prepositioned in the sentence, which would avoid the appearance of the possibility that the addressee would interpret it as being in one of the other possible worlds. Thereby, the possibility of the addressee misinterpreting the speaker is also avoided.

#### 4. The Reasons for the Appearance of Non-Initial Conditional Clauses in Chinese

As the description above shows, there is no postpositive dominant order for conditional clauses, but we still cannot deny the existence of a large number of postpositive cases of conditional clauses in both written and spoken corpus. As shown in example (4):

(4) Peak: What about writing my own PBO2? It cannot happen!

Junior: Brew it up, if you get the chance.

From the previous discussion, we know that the tendency of conditional clauses to be prepositioned is due to their own semantic features. That is to say, there is a dominant order in which conditional clauses tend to be prepositioned. Then, why do conditional clauses appear after result clauses? There must be some other factors competing with the semantic features of conditional clauses, and these factors win in the competition, which finally make conditional clauses come after result clauses. After analyzing the collected corpus, the current study proposes that there are two main factors leading to the pre-positioning of result clauses and the post-positioning of conditional clauses: one is that conditional clauses want to keep discourse coherence in the whole text, and the other is that conditional clauses make a complementary narration of the content described before the main clause, i.e., they are used as a post-hoc complementary phrase.

##### 4.1 Conditional Clauses as Discourse Coherence

Some scholars have pointed out that postpositive and prepositive gerundive clauses have different chapter discourse functions. Longacre & Hwang (2007) pointed out that postpositive gerundive clauses are closely related to the main clause and have little relation to the whole text, while prepositive gerundive clauses carry on the previous sentence and at the same time lead to the main clause. Therefore, the prepositional clause has the feature of chapter discontinuity because of the condition, time or reason it provides instead, which limits the smooth narration of the chapter to a certain

extent; while the postpositional clause is closely related to the main clause only, so its appearance in the chapter does not interrupt the coherence of the narration. For example, the clause in example (5), "If there is such a vat," is a typical postpositive conditional clause, which appears later in the chapter, and it is only related to the preceding clause, "they all hated to go straight into that big vat filled with sterilized water," but not closely related to the preceding and following clauses. It is not closely related to the preceding and the following. The appearance of the subsequent conditional clause does not break the coherence of the whole narrative. On the other hand, the clause in Example (6), "If you believe that children's attempts to avoid winter vacation assignments are easily exposed," is a typical prepositioned conditional clause, which, on the one hand, is related to the previous clause, "winter vacation assignments," and on the other hand, it opens up a new topic: "Children avoid winter vacation assignments"; at the same time, the passage is stating a topic related to winter vacation assignments, and the presence of this conditional clause interrupts the continuity of the chapter.

(5) Yiming saw a terrible dark gray color appear on Jun Ye's face. He understood that even people like him, who were regarded as little brothers by Jun Ye and were very close to each other, once they entered the quadrangle, they all hated to go straight into that big vat filled with sterilized water-if there was such a vat-so as not to infect the germs to that lovable little baby.

(6) Observing the adorable children in the aforementioned news, struggling with their winter vacation assignments, one can truly empathize with their dilemma even through the computer screen. If you believe that children's attempts to avoid winter vacation assignments are easily exposed, such as by falsely claiming that their assignments were stolen, then you are out of touch. The most popular trend this year, the "elaborate homework-copying technique," involves a device called a handwriting robot.

From this, we argue that the aim of maintaining the continuity of the discourse is one of the reasons for the use of non-initial conditional clauses.

##### 4.2 Conditional Clauses as Post Hoc Complements

The term "post hoc" means to add something that was not thought of beforehand to something that has already been said. This is



shown in example (7) below.

(7) I have numerous digressions I'd like to discuss with you, but for now, I'll just address. The most essential ones here to avoid forgetting later. Assuming you were to transform this event into a novel—if this material were to potentially become a novel—you must ensure its logical coherence and narrative continuity.

From the example above, “if this material were to potentially become a novel” serves as a post hoc complement to the preceding event. As a post-event remedial expression, the conditional clause's contrasting semantic features have diminished, and its function is merely to append an additional explanation to the preceding result clause, serving to supplement the context and thereby enhancing the precision of the speaker's expression.

Hence, one of the reasons for using non-initial conditionals is that the speaker did not initially provide a complete expression, thereby utilizing postposed conditional clauses as a means to achieve a more complete and precise expression.

In conclusion, we believe that two important reasons lead to the preposing of result clauses and the postposing of conditional clauses: maintaining discourse coherence and using conditional clauses as post hoc complements, i.e., as postposed adjuncts. In both of these cases, the postposition of conditional clauses tends to conform more closely to conventional usage, making expressions and communication more easily comprehensible. This facilitates more accurate and clear information transmission, as well as enhances narrative coherence and completeness. Consequently, to some extent, it promotes smoother communication and dialogue, while also providing listeners with greater understanding and room for reflection, thereby facilitating the smooth progression of discourse and conversation.

## 5. The Pragmatic Functions of Non-Initial Conditional Clauses

Research in the related field predominantly focuses on the pragmatic functions of conditionals as a whole, with relatively less attention given to the pragmatic functions of non-initial conditional clauses. However, non-initial conditional clauses, as a distinct linguistic structure, also hold unique significance and roles in communication. Therefore, it is imperative to shift the research focus from conditional sentences as a whole to

non-initial conditional clauses, analyzing their specific pragmatic functions. In the following discussion, we aim to concentrate on non-initial conditionals and provide a detailed analysis of their pragmatic functions.

### 5.1 Boundary Function

Boundary function refers to the role of non-initial conditionals as background information. By linking the main clause with a postposed conditional clause, they create a narrative progression from foreground to background, from strong to weak, thereby serving a boundary-setting function. They can indicate the conclusion of a topic or imply the beginning of another. We argue that non-initial conditionals help soften the information, allowing the narrative to transition to another topic. As illustrated in example (8), “Unless he is not a good person, you can punish him,” this non-initial conditional serves to transition the narrative discourse from a dominant state to a weaker one, enabling the conclusion of the current topic and the initiation of another.

(8) Hong Jiandao said, “I know he is unattractive, but because he is our benefactor, I cannot bear to scrutinize him. For someone who is ugly, scrutinizing them is a form of cruelty—unless he is not a good person, you can punish him.”

### 5.2 Assessment Function

The assessment function refers to providing immediate judgment and evaluation of the components described in the preceding text. It indicates the speaker's evaluation, attitude, and opinions regarding the events or content described in the preceding discourse. As exemplified in the following text (9), Wenjun feels guilty about her son's accident, blaming herself and seeking reasons from her own. In response, Junhui's reply, “if you hadn't given it to him,” conveys Junhui's attitude toward the matter, suggesting that Wenjun is not to blame. Through this postposed conditional clause, we can discern Junhui's expression of his views and attitude toward the situation.

(9) Wenjun: “If I hadn't given him the car keys, he wouldn't have had the accident.”

Junhui: “Stop overthinking it. He would have gone for the spare keys anyway, if you hadn't given him yours.”

### 5.3 Euphemism Function

The euphemistic function is a manifestation of the politeness strategy. Non-initial conditionals

can hide the speaker's attitude and opinion in the background, and then express them euphemistically. For example, in Example (9) above, Wenjun blames herself for her son's accident, and Junhui treats "if you hadn't given him yours" as a non-initial conditional clause, which to some extent serves as a euphemism, and this euphemistic tone also serves to comfort Wenjun.

#### 5.4 Supplementary Function

The supplementary function involves providing additional explanations and clarifications to the described object without affecting the main topic, thereby enhancing the narrative's transition and coherence, making the narrative more precise, and rendering subsequent actions more reasonable. As illustrated in example (10), when Xiao Wang asks Xiao Li to borrow his computer, he uses a non-initial conditional clause: "if you don't need it today." This postpositioned clause serves the function of supplementary explanation, providing additional clarification about the precondition for Xiao Wang borrowing Xiao Li's computer. Additionally, the use of this non-initial conditional also serves a tactful and polite purpose.

(10) Xiao Wang: "Could you lend me your computer? Mine was taken for repairs yesterday. If you don't need it today."

Therefore, although preposing of conditional clauses is a common phenomenon and is well-supported by research data, postposing of conditional clauses also possesses its unique and indispensable pragmatic functions and communicative significance. From the above discussion, it can be inferred that we believe postposed conditional clauses primarily serve four pragmatic functions, namely boundary function, assessment function, mitigating function, and supplementary function. These four functions are indispensable in our daily interactive communication and play crucial roles. Through a thorough exploration of the reasons behind the preposing and postposing of conditional clauses, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the grammatical structures and information transmission modes in language communication, thereby providing new perspectives and insights for linguistic research. Simultaneously, it also offers better choices for interactants in communication and facilitates smoother conversations.

## 6. Conclusion

In Chinese conditional sentences, the conditional clause naturally has a preposed word order advantage, which is also one of the cross-linguistic universals. The main reason for the preposition of conditional clauses is their inherent contrasting semantic features.

There are numerous non-initial conditionals in Chinese. Their existence is primarily related to two factors: first, as discourse coherence that maintains the continuity of discourse, and second, as post-hoc complements. Non-initial conditional clauses primarily serve four pragmatic functions: boundary function, assessment function, euphemism function, and supplementary function. Future research should broaden its scope by examining more examples of non-initial conditional clauses from a typological perspective across different languages, in order to identify more precise cross-linguistic commonalities. Additionally, further investigation should be conducted to explore the reasons behind the non-initial conditional clauses in more depth, considering various perspectives and disciplines. For example, insights could be gained from the perspective of conversation analysis by analyzing the interactional details of authentic data between dialogue participants to understand the reasons for the occurrence of the non-initial conditional clauses. Microscopic studies at the linguistic level help us reassess the actual role of conditionals in communication, further revealing the dynamics of language in natural interaction.

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