Just *in case*

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1. Introduction

In this paper, we provide the first characterization of the semantics of conditionals headed by *in case* — henceforth, *in case*-conditionals, or ICCs. We make two empirical contributions. First, we observe that while *if*-conditionals have both hypothetical and biscuit readings, ICCs are obligatorily interpreted as biscuit conditionals (1):

(1) a. In case you're thirsty, there's beer in the fridge.

b. #In case John remembered to go to the liquor store, there's beer in the fridge.

Second, we show that ICCs are infelicitous when their antecedent is entailed by the common ground (2a) — in other words, ICCs lack *factual* readings. *If*-conditionals, on the other hand, are compatible with these readings even under their biscuit interpretation (2b):

(2) a. A: I'm feeling a bit thirsty.
B: #In case you're thirsty, there's some lemonade in the fridge.

b. A: I'm feeling a bit thirsty.
B: If you're thirsty, there's some lemonade in the fridge.

We provide a formal account couched in inquisitive semantics (Ciardelli et al. 2017, 2018: a.o.). In a nutshell, we propose that ICCs highlight the possibility that their antecedent is true, and assert their consequent.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. In §2, we frame ICCs in the bigger picture of conditional readings. In §3, we explore the interpretation of ICCs. In §4, we present the framework we adopt and our develop our positive proposal. In §5, we discuss some potential counterexamples to the generalization we propose. §6 concludes the paper.

2. The bigger picture

If-conditionals are typically compatible with both hypothetical and biscuit readings. The two interpretations are disambiguated by the interplay of the context of utterance and world knowledge. For instance, under its hypothetical reading, (3) would convey that biscuits magically appear if the addressee is hungry. In run-of-the-mill scenarios, that interpretation conflicts with world knowledge, and as a result, (3) is naturally understood as a biscuit conditional.

(3) If you're hungry, there are biscuits on the sideboard. (Austin 1956)

A substantial body of work has endeavored to find cross-linguistic morphosyntactic correlates of the biscuit/hypothetical split. One such correlate is the presence of *then*, which blocks biscuit readings (Iatridou 1991):

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(4) If you're hungry, (#then) there are biscuits on the sideboard.

Another potential correlate is word order in V2 languages, like Dutch and German. These languages allow both V1 and V2 word order in conditional consequents; the former is used in hypothetical conditionals, while the latter is reserved for biscuit conditionals:

(5) a. *Als je het wil weten **is 4** geen priem getal **V1**
if you it want know **is 4** no prime number

b. Als je het wil weten **4 is** geen priem getal **V2**
if you it want know **4 is** no prime number
'If you want to know, 4 is not a prime number.' (Iatridou 1991: ch. 2, exx. 15 & 16)

We should point out that neither of these characteristics are categorical correlates of (non-)biscuit interpretations. The *then*-generalization has been challenged by Zakkou (2017) and Biezma & Goebel (2023) on the basis of examples like (6) and (7):

(6) If you are thirsty, there is beer in the fridge. But if you don't like alcohol, **then** there is of course also tap water. (Zakkou 2017: ex. 13)

(7) Well, if you insist on knowing my opinion, **then** I think you are making a mistake marrying that guy. (Biezma & Goebel 2023: ex. 83)

Köpcke & Panther (1989) bring experimental evidence that conditionals with a V1 word order in German can sometimes also receive biscuit readings. They offer examples like (8); notice too the presence of *dann* (*then*) in the last sentence:

(8) a. Wenn Sie mich fragen, **es schneit** bald.
if you me ask **it snows** soon
'If you ask me, it'll snow soon.'

b. Wenn Sie mich fragen, **schneit es** bald.
if you me ask **snows it** soon
'If you ask me, it'll snow soon.'

c. Wenn Sie mich fragen, dann **schneit es** bald.
if you me ask then **snows it** soon
'If you ask me, it'll snow soon.' (Köpcke & Panther 1989: ex. 48)

Based on Köpcke & Panther's results, Franke (2009) suggests that word order is merely a preference. That is, while a V1 biscuit conditional or a V2 hypothetical conditional may be marked, they are not ungrammatical *per se*. Csipak (2015) reports the same intuitions and provides further experimental evidence to support them.

In this paper, we contribute to this body of research by arguing that different conditional connectives can also have the *categorical* effect of forcing or blocking certain readings of conditionals. In particular, we suggest that ICCs hardwire biscuithood. If our proposal is on the right track, ICCs may serve as a fruitful testing ground for the predictions made by different theories of biscuit conditionals.

3. The empirical landscape

In this section, we carve out the empirical profile of ICCs. We propose two generalizations: First, that ICCs are incompatible with hypothetical readings. Second, that ICCs are infelicitous when their antecedents have been brought up in the preceding discourse — that is, in Iatridou's (1991) terms, ICCs can never be factual.

3.1. Claim 1: ICCs are always biscuits

One of the paradigmatic features of biscuit conditionals is that the truth of their consequents is not contingent on the truth of their antecedents. That is, a hypothetical conditional, like (9a), conveys that the existence of beer in the fridge is conditional on whether Ana went to the market or not. In (9b), on the other hand, the antecedent merely establishes the conditions under which the information in the consequent is relevant for the addressee — that is, (9b) conveys that there *is* beer in the fridge, regardless of whether the addressee is thirsty.

(9) a. If Ana went to the market, there is beer in the fridge.
⇏ There is beer in the fridge.

b. If you're thirsty, there is beer in the fridge.
⇒ There is beer in the fridge.

Like *if*-biscuits, assertoric ICCs also entail their consequents:

(10) In case you're thirsty, there is beer in the fridge.
⇒ There is beer in the fridge.

As Rawlins (2020) points out, consequent entailment is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for characterizing (assertoric) biscuits; after all, other types of conditionals also entail their consequents. This is the case of both unconditionals (Rawlins 2013) and concessive conditionals (Bennett 1982):

(11) a. Whether Ana or Bea come to the party, the party will be fun.
⇒ The party will be fun.

b. Even if Ana comes to the party, the party will be fun.
⇒ The party will be fun.

However, ICCs are morphosyntactically distinct from unconditionals and, unlike concessive conditionals, ICCs are incompatible with *even* (12). We thus conclude that ICCs cannot belong to these other categories of consequent-entailing conditionals.

(12) a. Even if John does a good job, he will be fired at the end of the year.

b. (*Even) in case you're hungry, there are biscuits on the sideboard.

Besides rejecting *even*, ICCs and *if*-biscuits pattern together in their incompatibility with *only*:

(13) a. *There are biscuits on the sideboard **only** in case you want them.

b. There are biscuits on the sideboard **only** if you want them. ✓Hyp ✗Bis

And unsurprisingly, ICCs show a dispreference for *then*:

(14) In case you're hungry, (??then) there are biscuits on the fridge.

The last piece of evidence we bring for a unification between *if*-biscuits and ICCs is their interaction with indirect reports: both conditionals can only be embedded under indirect reports of a speech act (Bhatt & Pancheva 2006, Iatridou 1991):

(15) *If* biscuits (Iatridou 1991: ex. 17)

a. John said that if you are thirsty there is beer in the fridge.

b. John believes that if you are thirsty there is beer in the fridge. ✓Hyp ✗Bis

(16) ICCs

a. John said that in case you are thirsty there is beer in the fridge.

b. *John believes that in case you are thirsty there is beer in the fridge.

In the next section, we further refine the empirical profile of ICCs by showing that in addition to lacking hypothetical readings, ICCs are infelicitous when their antecedents have been recently uttered.

3.2. Claim 2: ICCs are never factual

If-conditionals can be felicitously uttered when their antecedent has been brought up in the preceding discourse. Conditionals of this kind are sometimes called *premise* or *factual* conditionals (Akatsuka 1985, Iatridou 1991, Haegeman 2003):

(17) A: I'm really thirsty!
B: If you're so thirsty, I'll go buy some beer.

Contrary to *if*-conditionals, ICCs are incompatible with factual readings. The judgements are very sharp:

(18) A: I'm really thirsty!
B: #In case you're so thirsty, there is beer in the fridge.

Notice that this incompatibility cannot follow from the biscuithood of ICCs, as biscuit *if*-conditionals can in fact have factual readings:

(19) A: I'm really thirsty!
B: If you're so thirsty, there is beer in the fridge.

In the next section, we develop a formal proposal that derives these two facts about the semantics of ICCs.

4. Proposal

We aim to capture the facts from §3 in an attentional semantics. According to this semantics, ICCs assert that their consequent is true and draw attention to the worlds where their antecedent and consequent are both true. We will spell this out within inquisitive semantics (Ciardelli et al. 2018). In inquisitive semantics, we generalize to the worst case and give every sentence a question-type denotation; so, instead of denoting a set of worlds, declarative sentences now denote a downward-closed set of information states (i.e., a set of sets of world).[1] An ICC denotes a set of two information states–one where the consequent is true, and one where the antecedent and consequent are both true. More concretely, we can give *in case* the following denotation:

(20) $[\![\textbf{in case}]\!] = \lambda p_{\langle\langle s,t\rangle,t\rangle}.\lambda q_{\langle\langle s,t\rangle,t\rangle}.\{|p \wedge q|, |q|\}$

where $|\phi|$ denotes the *true set* of ϕ, the set of worlds where ϕ is true, i.e., $|\phi| := \{w : w(\phi) = 1\}$.[2] This set of information states is shown in Figure 1.

[1] A set X is *downward closed* iff, if $\alpha \in X$, then for all $\beta \subseteq \alpha$, $\beta \in X$. We require a set to be downward closed because we want it to contain every possible way of resolving an issue.

[2] We treat worlds as valuation functions assigning true or false to every sentence, and we denote the set of all worlds as W.

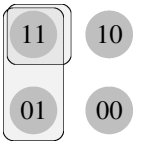

Figure 1: attentive *in case*

In the setting of inquisitive semantics, we can, following Ciardelli et al. (2009), distinguish between three types of sentences:

- ϕ is *informative* iff $|\phi| \neq W$
- ϕ is *inquisitive* iff $[\![\phi]\!]$ contains at least two maximal possibilities
- ϕ is *attentive* iff $[\![\phi]\!]$ contains a non-maximal possibility.

where a possibility $\alpha \in \mathcal{P}(W)$ is *maximal* iff there is no $\beta \in \mathcal{P}(W)$ such that $\beta \subset \alpha$. An utterance of 'in case p, q' is, assuming q is declarative, both informative and attentive, because it eliminates all $\neg q$-worlds from the information state and it contains one non-maximal possibility, the set of $(p \wedge q)$-worlds.

Given our analysis, ICCs assert that their consequent is true and draw attention to the possibility that their antecedent is true. Every sentence, of course, draws attention to certain possibilities. However, as Ciardelli et al. (2009) emphasize, "what is special about attentive sentences is that they draw attention to possibilities that do not contribute to representing their informative or inquisitive content" (p. 100). In other words, attentive utterances do not necessarily provide information to, or request information from the hearer. We believe this is a defining feature of both ICCs and biscuit conditionals more generally–their antecedent draws attention to possibilities which neither contribute to this informative content nor their inquisitive content.

We can capture the consequent entailment generalization for ICCs by defining the following informational notion of consequence:

(21) $\phi \models_{\text{info}} \psi$ iff $\text{info}(\phi) \subseteq \text{info}(\psi)$

where $\text{info}(\cdot)$ maps propositions to their informative content, which we define as the union of the proposition's information states.

(22) For any proposition ϕ: $\text{info}(\phi) := \bigcup [\![\phi]\!]$.

In words, p informationally entails q iff the union of all the information states in p is a subset of the the union of all the information states in q. Given our entry for *in case*, 'in case p, q' entails q because $\text{info}([\![\textbf{in case } p, q]\!]) = \bigcup\{|p \wedge q|, |q|\} = |q|$ which is a subset of $\text{info}([\![q]\!]) = |q|$.

4.1. The in case/might connection

In our semantics, *in case*-clauses function much like the modal *might* functions in the attentional semantics of Ciardelli et al. (2009). Ciardelli et al. define $\Diamond p$ as $\top \vee p$ where disjunction '$\vee$' is obtained by taking the union of two sets of information states. That is, for any conjoinable type τ:[3]

(23) $[\![\textbf{or}]\!] = \lambda X_\tau . \lambda Y_\tau . X \cup Y$

So, for example, the disjunction of the verbs *eat* and *drink* returns, respectively, the set of worlds where their individual argument eats and the set of worlds where she drinks:

[3] Here we follow the presentation of inquisitive disjunction found in Ciardelli et al. (2017) which more closely mirrors the analysis of disjunction in Hamblin semantics (Alonso-Ovalle 2006).

(24) $[\![\textbf{eat or drink}]\!] = [\![\textbf{eat}]\!] \cup [\![\textbf{drink}]\!]$
$= \{\lambda x.|\textbf{eat}(x)|\} \cup \{\lambda x.|\textbf{drink}(x)|\}$
$= \{\lambda x.|\textbf{eat}(x)|, \lambda x.|\textbf{drink}(x)|\}$

It's easy to see that, given this entry for disjunction, $[\![\Diamond p]\!] = [\![\top \vee p]\!] = \{W, |p|\}$.
In the current setting, we can define conjunction as pointwise intersection:

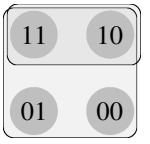

Figure 2: attentive *might* à la Ciardelli et al.

(25) $[\![\text{and}]\!] = \lambda X_\tau \lambda Y_\tau.\{\alpha \cap \beta : \alpha \in X \wedge \beta \in Y\}$

It then follows that, according to our semantics for ICCs, 'in case p, q' is equivalent to $\Diamond p \wedge q$.

(26) $[\![\Diamond p \wedge q]\!] = [\![(\top \vee p) \wedge q]\!]$
$= \{\alpha \cap \beta : \alpha \in [\![\top \vee p]\!] \wedge \beta \in [\![q]\!]\}$
$= \{\alpha \cap \beta : \alpha \in \{W, |p|\} \wedge \beta \in \{|q|\}\}$
$= \{|p \wedge q|, |q|\}\}$

This equivalence strikes us as a welcome prediction, because ICCs can often be paraphrased as *since*-clauses that contain an epistemic possibility modal:[4]

(27) a. In case you're thirsty, there's beer in the fridge.
b. ≈Since you might be thirsty, there's beer in the fridge.

Moreover, like ICCs, *since+might*-clauses are also infelicitous when their prejacent is already entailed by the common ground (28).

(28) a. A: I'm feeling a bit thirsty.
B: #Since you might be thirsty, there's some lemonade in the fridge.

In contrast, ordinary *since*-clauses pattern with the *if*-clauses of ordinary biscuit conditionals and remain felicitous when entailed by the common ground:

(29) a. A: I'm feeling a bit thirsty.
B: Since you're thirsty, there's some lemonade in the fridge.

This, we believe, supports our hypothesis that ordinary biscuit conditionals closely resemble *in case*-conditionals, but lack the highlighting effect of ICCs.

4.2. ICCs versus if-biscuits and factual conditionals

Given our analysis of ICCs, it's reasonable to think that biscuit readings of ordinary *if*-conditionals arise when the conditional's antecedent is non-informative. First, we need to introduce a semantics for the conditional. Following Ciardelli (2016), we can define a binary operation $\Rightarrow$ which encodes the standard Lewis-Stalnaker variably strict semantics for conditionals based on relative similarity, i.e., each world w is assigned a partial order $\leq_w$ on W.

(30) $a \Rightarrow b := \{w \in W : \text{any } \leq_w\text{-minimal element in } a \text{ is also in } b\}$

[4] We are indebted to Omar Agha for this observation.

Given this, we can lift the Lewis-Stalnaker semantics to inquisitive semantics via the following entry, where alt(·) is a function mapping a proposition ϕ to the maximal information state(s) which support ϕ.

(31) $[\![\textbf{if}]\!] = \lambda p_{\langle\langle s,t\rangle,t\rangle}.\lambda q_{\langle\langle s,t\rangle,t\rangle}.\forall a \in \text{alt}(p).\exists b \in \text{alt}(q) : a \Rightarrow b$

We can then show that the following holds:[5]

(32) If ϕ is neither informative nor inquisitive, then $\phi \rightarrow \psi \approx \psi$.

where $\phi \approx \psi$ iff $\text{info}(\phi) = \text{info}(\psi)$. In other words, when the antecedent neither provides nor requests information, asserting a conditional is informationally equivalent to asserting its consequent. So, an ordinary *if*-conditional can generate a biscuit reading whenever its antecedent is neither informative nor inquisitive. This mirrors many extant pragmatic accounts of biscuit conditionals which predict that biscuit readings arise when the antecedent and consequent are independent of one another (Franke 2009, Lauer 2015, Francez 2015). That is, a conditional ⌜if ϕ, ψ⌝ can generate a biscuit interpretation whenever learning ϕ provides no information regarding ψ and vice-versa. Unlike *if*-conditionals, we believe that ICCs lexicalize this informational independence. As shown in §4.1, given our analysis, the antecedent of ⌜in case ϕ, ψ⌝ always has the inquisitive meaning $\{W, |\phi|\}$. So, since ICCs have antecedents which are non-informative and non-inquisitive, an assertion of ⌜in case ϕ, ψ⌝ is always informationally equivalent to an assertion of ψ.

We also observed that ICCs cannot be used factually. In contrast, even on their biscuit reading, *if*-conditionals have factual uses. We believe that this difference has a pragmatic explanation. Roelofsen (2013) proposes that, given Maxim of Quantity-based reasoning, we can conclude that, when a cooperative speaker utters a sentence ϕ where $\alpha \in [\![\phi]\!]$ is a possibility such that $\alpha \subset \text{info}([\![\phi]\!])$, the hearer can infer that the speaker was not in a position to utter a sentence ϕ' with the informationally stronger meaning $\{\alpha\}$. Since ⌜in case ϕ, ψ⌝ draws attention to a non-maximal $(\phi \wedge \psi)$-possibility, a cooperative speaker would only produce this utterance when she's uncertain about whether ⌜$\phi \wedge \psi$⌝ is true. While, given our theory, ICCs are always attentive, *if*-biscuits are not necessarily attentive, they merely have to be non-informative and non-inquisitive.

5. An apparent exception to the generalization

All ICCs we have looked at so far could be paraphrased with *if*. However, as pointed out by Karl Mulligan (p.c.) and an anonymous reviewer, there are some limitations to this analogy:

(33) a. I'll bring an umbrella **in case** it rains.

b. #I'll bring an umbrella **if** it rains.

To understand why the sentences above look like counterexamples to the generalizations put forward in this paper, let's first address the oddity of (33b). For conditionals like (33b), with the future-oriented present in the antecedent and *will* in the consequent, the most salient reading is one that places the consequent time after the antecedent time (Crouch 1993, 1994, Kaufmann 2005, Schulz 2008, Mendes 2024, a.o.). That is, (33b) is more naturally understood as conveying that bringing the umbrella happens after the rain. That, of course, conflicts with world knowledge; as a result, the sentence is infelicitous. Example (33a), on other other hand, does not seem to force this temporal ordering. The events in the antecedent and consequent are both understood as taking place after the utterance time, but the order between them is resolved by world knowledge. Why is this flexibility available for (33a), but not for (33b)? Simply put, we believe (33a) is interpreted differently from other conditionals because it is not a conditional at all.

[5] Here's a simple proof: If ϕ is non-informative and non-inquisitive, then $W \in [\![\phi]\!]$. So, $\text{alt}(\phi) = \{W\} = \{|\top|\}$. Hence, $\phi \rightarrow \psi$ is equivalent to $\exists b \in \text{alt}(\psi) : \top \Rightarrow b$. However, since the closest world where $\top$ is true is the world of evaluation given Centering, it follows that $|\top \Rightarrow b| = |b|$ for any b. So, when ϕ is non-informative and non-inquisitive, $\text{info}(\phi \rightarrow \psi) = \text{info}(\psi)$.

In case can be used as both a conditional connective, and as an adverb. We want to suggest that (33a) contains an instance of the latter. Another example of adverbial *in case* is given in (34):[6]

(34) The plumber brought his toolbox **in case** he needed to fix something.

To support the point that (33a) and (34) both involve a different *in case* from the one discussed throughout this paper, we bring evidence from Hebrew.[7] In Hebrew, *in case* could be translated as either *be-mikre* ('in occurrence') or *le-mikre* ('DAT occurrence'). The latter is found in the translations of both (33a) and (34):

(35) ani a-vi mitria {**le-mikre** ʃe- / ??**be-mikre** ʃe-}y-ired
1SG 1-FUT.bring umbrella {**DAT-occurrence** that- / ??**in-occurrence** that-}3-FUT.descend
geʃem
rain
'I'll bring an umbrella in case it rains.'

(36) ha-instalator kana argaz kelim {**le-mikre** ʃe- / ??**be-mikre** ʃe}-hu
the-plumber bought crate tools {**DAT-occurrence** that- / ??**in-occurrence** that-}3SG.M
y-ictarex le-taken maʃehu
3-FUT.need INF-fix something
'The plumber brought his toolbox in case he needed to fix something.'

Standard biscuit conditionals, on the other hand, must be translated with either *im* ('if'), or *be-mikre*:[8]

(37) {im / ?**be-mikre** ʃe- / ***le-mikre** ʃe-}ata ra'ev, yeʃ oxel
{if / ?**in-occurrence** that- / ***DAT-occurrence** that-}2SG.M hungry.SG.M, EXIST food
ba-mkarer
in.the-fridge
'{If / In case} you're hungry, there is food in the fridge.'

Hence, we believe that the contrast between (33a) and (33b) is not a counterexample to the generalization that ICCs are always biscuits. Rather, (33a) involves adverbial *in case*. The availability of these two uses for *in case* seems to be somewhat robust across languages; exploring the similarities and dissimilarities between them sounds like a fruitful avenue for future work.

6. Conclusion & outlook

In this paper, we provided a description of the semantic behavior of conditionals headed by *in case*, and formalized our findings within inquisitive semantics. Our motivation for looking into ICCs is that these conditionals seem to be compatible only with biscuit readings; therefore, they might shed light on bigger questions related to the biscuit/hypothetical split. We will conclude by hinting at one way in which ICCs might inform theories of biscuit conditionals.

As we saw in §2 (ex. 8), Köpcke & Panther bring a series of examples that challenge the generalization that, in V2 languages, biscuit conditionals have a non-canonical word order. Crucially, all those examples

[6] If it is not clear that (34) is not a biscuit conditional, notice that in this example, *in case* cannot be replaced with *if*:

(i) *The plumber brought his toolbox if he needed to fix something.

[7] We are indebted to Omri Doron (p.c.) for suggesting we look into Hebrew. We are very thankful to our consultant, Omer Preminger, for providing judgements and glosses.

[8] Our consultant is a bilingual speaker of English and Hebrew, and he shows a general dispreference for *in case* as a conditional connective in both languages. That, we believe, explains why *be-mikre* is marked with ? in (37).

involve what Csipak (2015) calls *discourse-structuring relevance conditionals*. As Csipak observes,[9] conditionals of this kind cannot be paraphrased with *in case*:[10]

(38) a. *In case you ask me, it'll snow soon.

b. *In case I'm being honest, your essay is not in very good shape.

Csipak further notes that, unlike classic biscuit conditionals, these conditionals are incompatible with past antecedents:

(39) a. If you were hungry yesterday, there were biscuits on the sideboard .

b. *If I was being honest yesterday, your essay was not in very good shape.

If ICCs indeed hardwire biscuithood, the facts in (38) suggest that discourse-structuring conditionals should not be treated in tandem with biscuit conditionals. And therefore, counterexamples like Köpcke & Panther's should be viewed with caution.

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[9] Csipak credits this observation to Larry Horn and Kai von Fintel (p.c.).

[10] In fact, a search on the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) returns zero results for the string *in case you ask me*.

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