Concessive conditionals in and beyond Europe: A typological approach

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My talk is concerned with adverbial subordinate clauses called concessive conditionals. Following Haspelmath & König (1998), I distinguish three subtypes, exemplified for German in (1)–(3):

(1)  a. scalar concessive conditional
[Selbst wenn es morgen regnet], gehen wir spazieren.

b. alternative concessive conditional
[Ob es morgen regnet oder nicht], wir gehen spazieren.

c. universal concessive conditional
[Egal wie (wie auch immer) das Wetter morgen wird], wir gehen spazieren.

Though concessive conditionals like (1)–(3) are formally heterogeneous in many European languages (e.g. German), they nevertheless share some important semantic features: like conditionals, they express a relationship between a protasis and an apodosis, but whereas prototypical conditionals have a single antecedent in their protasis (i.e. ‘if $p$, then $q$‘), concessive conditionals have a set of antecedents: ‘if $\{p_1, p_2, p_3, \ldots\}$, then $q$‘ (König 1986; Leuschner 2006: 19–23).

In keeping with this basically conditional meaning, some languages mark their concessive conditionals uniformly as conditionals. As demonstrated by Haspelmath & König (1998: 627–628), such languages can be found in the Caucasus, e.g. Godoberi, in which all concessive conditionals consist of a conditional converb plus an additive focus particle that evokes the multiplicity of antecedents.

(2)  a. scalar concessive conditional
[c'ai  r-a^2-alara-la], iLe išqa-ru ma-n-iLibu-da.
[rain  PL NT-come-COND-also]  ABS home-ELAT PL.H-go-FUT.PART-COP

‘Even if it rains, we will go outside.’

b. alternative concessive conditional
[c'ai  r-a^2-alara-la], mili b-ax-alara-la], iLe išqa-ru ma-n-iLibu-da.
[rain  PL NT-come-COND-also]  sun  F-fall-COND-also]  ABS home-ELAT PL.H-go-FUT.PART-COP

‘Whether it rains or the sun shines, we will go outside.’

c. universal concessive conditional
[inL'ašu nāwab u-k'-alara-la], iLe išqa-ru ma-n-iLibu-da.
[which weather NT be-COND-also]  ABS home-ELAT PL.H-go-FUT.PART-COP

‘Whatever the weather will be, we will go outside.’

According to Haspelmath & König (1998: 625), differences in the marking of concessive conditionals are associated with different subordinating strategies: finite-subordinating languages like German mark all three subtypes differently as in (1), whereas nonfinite-subordinating languages like Godoberi have uniformly-marked triplets as in (2). This suggests a bi-directional universal ‘finite subordination ↔ differential marking’ (or its contrapositive: ‘nonfinite subordination ↔ uniform marking’).

While Haspelmath & König (1998) consider only European languages, I will present preliminary data from an on-going investigation into concessive conditionals based on a global sample. My main goals are to investigate...
(i) which coding strategies are used to express concessive conditionality in the languages of the world; 
(ii) which grammatical factors determine the coding strategy used in any given language.

Initial results from my study suggest that the main subordinating strategy is indeed important, but that finite-subordinating languages with identical marking can be found, e.g. Kanuri (Saharan). If this is confirmed in the course of the investigation, it means that we are dealing with an implicational universal 'nonfinite subordination → uniform marking' rather than a bi-directional one.

References


Leuschner, Torsten. 2006. Hypotaxis as building-site: The emergence and grammaticalization of concessive conditionals in English, German and Dutch. Munich: Lincom.