

## From clue to culprit: epistemic conditionals in detective fiction

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Conditionals (*if-then* sentences) enable us to express our thoughts about possible states of the world, and they form an important ingredient for our argumentative capabilities. This study presents a corpus-based analysis aimed at uncovering how detectives, and in extension authors and readers, use *if* conditionals in their reasoning and argumentation.

Different argumentative uses of conditionals have been distinguished in the literature based on a connection between the subordinate *if* clause (*antecedent*), and the main clause (*consequent*). While general connectedness in conditionals is analysed as a conventional implicature, specific connections are explained as conversational implicatures (cf. Reuneker 2022). Dancygier and Sweetser (2005) argue for a distinction between *predictive conditionals*, in which antecedents and consequents are causally related, as in (1), and *non-predictive conditionals*, such as *epistemic* and *speech-act conditionals*, in which the clauses present inference chains from argument to conclusion, or between felicity condition and speech-act, as in (2) and (3) respectively.

- (1) *If you mow the lawn, I'll give you ten dollars.*
- (2) *If he typed her thesis, he loves her.*
- (3) *If you need help, my name is Ann.*

Dancygier and Sweetser (2005, p. 22) suggest that epistemic conditionals are more frequently found in detective fiction than in other literary genres, because detectives need to infer conclusions from evidence found, i.e., they frequently reason not from cause to effect, but from clue to culprit. To test this hypothesis, and to understand in more detail the type of reasoning expressed in detective fiction, a corpus-based study was carried out.

By means of a comparison of 500 conditionals from 10 detective novels and 10 works of general fiction, this paper addresses the question to what extent conditionals in the former genre are more frequently used to express epistemic reasoning than in the latter. Furthermore, as detectives frequently reason from evidence to perpetrator, comparable to an *abductive* argument scheme or 'inference to the best explanation' (cf. Walton 2004, p. 22), this study analyses conditionals in terms of *deductive*, *inductive* and *abductive* reasoning schemes (cf. Peirce 1960), enhancing our knowledge of how *if* conditionals are used argumentatively – not only as expressions of reasoning by detectives and their authors, but also as implicatures inferred by readers.

### References

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