22. ON THE SEMANTICS OF CONDITIONAL SENTENCES

Z semantyki zdań warunkowych
(Dąmska 1938c)

In memory of
Professor Kazimierz Twardowski

Introduction

The discussion presented below is a part of a more extensive work devoted to an analysis of conditional sentence. The first part of this work, philological in character, was presented by Professor Tadeusz Lehr-Splawiński at a session of the Philological Commission of the Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences.\(^1\) In the second, semantic part, I omit extensive discussion on the notion of meaning, and confine myself to present the chapters which deal with conditional sentences themselves.

Working on an analysis of conditional sentences may not seem unjustified if we consider the great role of these sentences in our scientific and non-scientific thinking. After all, each act of reasoning, either direct or indirect, can be expressed in the form of a conditional proposition, since conditional sentences are the correct expression of *a priori* and empirical laws as well as rules and norms of conduct. We encounter conditional sentences at every turn, and we use them constantly. Still, not much has been done to understand their semantic structure. The present work is an attempt to partially bridge this gap by outlining both the problems of conditional

\(^1\) Cf. (Dąmska 1934b).
sentences and a semantic approach of several basic problems provided by an analysis of actual material.²

1. The Scope of the Name “A Conditional Sentence”

Those who analyze conditional sentences usually confine the work to the analysis of a conditional proposition, that is, a sentence in the logical sense, which is either true or false. Some outright define a conditional sentence as a sentence which expresses a hypothetical judgment. This sort of definition seems too confining. After all, there are sentences whose structure is similar to the structure of conditional propositions, which express questions, commands, wishes, requests, resolutions, etc. Out of these, only the sentences which express resolutions can be included in the group of propositions, both due to their morphological structure and because resolutions may be considered as a sort of judgments about the future.³ Sentences which express resolutions are true or false. This feature is the property of propositions. Still, sentences remain which express requests, commands, and questions. Are these conditional sentences?

The following reasoning seemingly speaks against this claim: The characteristic feature of a conditional sentence is the fact that its meaning is neither the meaning of the antecedent nor the meaning of the consequent, but instead, something other, which is based on these meanings. Moreover, the meaning of the whole conditional sentence belongs to the same logical category as the meaning of the parts, considered regardless of their function in a conditional sentence. These conditions are fulfilled by conditional propositions, but not by the sentences in question. The meaning of these sentences is a specifically determined meaning of the second part of the conditional (question, command, request), and the meaning of the whole conditional belongs to a different logical category than the meaning of the antecedent in itself. We may say that the sentences in question are interrogative, or imperative sentences, etc., where the question or the command which they express are in a way determined by what is expressed in the part of the sentence which is in the form of the antecedent of the conditional statement. However, the fact that a certain component of the sentence of the type ‘n’ (in our case, the antecedent of a conditional sentence) occurs in

² In connection with the aims of the first part of the work, the material is mostly drawn from Old Polish [in English translation]. Yet, all “historical” examples present in the semantic part of this work can be easily “translated” to contemporary language. Thus, I shall leave them unchanged.

³ Cf. (Witwicki, p. 119 f.).