On the utility of conditional answers
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Whereas most earlier work on conditional answers looks at them only as responses to conditional questions (e.g. Isaacs & Rawlins 2008), conditional answers can also naturally be responses to regular, non-conditional questions:

(1) A: Will John come to the party?
   B: If he finishes his work, he will.

Such answers are given when the answerer has incomplete knowledge about A’s question. These data call for an account of the utility of conditional answers: under which conditions does a speaker prefer a conditional answer over an ignorant one (“I don’t know”), and if various conditional answers are possible, which one is determined most relevant?

A second reason to study the utility of conditional answers comes from the pragmatic phenomenon of "conditional perfection", i.e. interpreting conditionals as biconditionals. Recent theories propose that conditional perfection occurs when a conditional is interpreted as an exhaustive answer (e.g. Herburger 2015). In separate work, it has been proposed that "human interests" determine whether answers get an exhaustive interpretation or not (van Rooij 2004, Cariani & Rips 2017), and game theory has been applied to model this (Benz & van Rooij 2007, i.a.).

In this paper I discuss how utility-based frameworks of pragmatics can be combined with a theory of conditionals, in order to gain insight into the utility of conditional answers.

As a first step towards a theory of the utility of conditional answers, I zoom in on two case studies. First, a conditional answer ‘p → q’ is relevant in the specific case in which B knows that A knows whether p (but B doesn’t know whether p; ¬Kb?p ∧ KbKb?p). This also triggers a situation in which B may raise ?p as a subissue responding to A’s question (instantiating the default pragmatic assumption of ‘addressee competence”), thus showing a link between conditional answers and subquestion strategies.

Second, I consider more generally the utility of a conditional in utility-based theories like Benz & van Rooij (2007). I assume that it is the conditional dependency conveyed by a conditional answer that makes it relevant. I argue that conditional answers as in (1) are conditional speech acts, rather than conditional propositions. Therefore a theory like van Rooij’s (2004), which is based on the utility of propositions, cannot be straightforwardly applied to conditional utterances (e.g. by taking the material conditional). Instead, a conditional answer leads to a shift from A’s original decision problem (“am I in a q-world?”) to a new one (“am I in a p-world?”). The utility of the conditional answer is measured by the degree to which the new decision problem is easier to resolve for A than the original one.