

# *The Standoff – what is unsaid? A pragmatic analysis of the conditional marker ‘if’*



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**ABSTRACT.** News leaves many things unsaid; as in diplomatic discourse or political discourse, frequent use is made of ‘implicatures’ (Grice, 1975), in order to suggest information not explicitly expressed in the text. These inferences are usually based on particular beliefs, opinions and knowledge of some concrete situation. This article attempts to explore the stances, intentions and ideologies of the United States and China that underlie news stories of the spy-plane event that occurred in April 2001. For this, 94 news stories from a US online medium (CNN.com) and 15 from a Chinese online medium (ChinaOnline.com) during the 12-day period between the air collision and the return of the 24 US crew members (1–12 April 2001) were selected and analyzed. By interpreting utterances containing the *if*-clause + the situational context, the implicature of ‘uncertainty’ is revealed through one of the key pragmatic implicatures that is linked to the conditional marker ‘if’.

**KEY WORDS:** *conditional markers, implicature, news analysis, news, political discourse, pragmatic, the spy-plane event, the Standoff, the United States and China*

## **April 1, 2001. Web posted at 7:12 AM EDT (1112 GMT) at CNN.com**

HONOLULU, Hawaii – A US Navy patrol aircraft has been forced to make an emergency landing in China after what officials describe as a ‘minor’ mid-air collision with a Chinese fighter jet.

The incident occurred at approximately 0915 local time Sunday over the South China Sea when Chinese fighters intercepted the EP-3 surveillance plane during what the US Navy says was a routine patrol flight. . . .

(The Associated Press & Reuters contributed to this report.)

Both the US and China have brought to a close the Standoff as the final parts of a US Navy spy-plane stranded at a Chinese military base for three months flew out of China on 3 July 2001.

The spy-plane had been detained on the Chinese island of Hainan since 1 April, after it made an emergency landing on the island following a collision with a Chinese fighter jet. The collision over the South China Sea killed the Chinese pilot Wang Wei and badly damaged the EP-3 aircraft. Both countries blamed each other for the incident, which attracted the attention of the world.

For the politicians, their concern was whether the plane collision might strain US–Sino relations and lead to a full-blown diplomatic crisis between the two nations; for the business community, their concern was whether business interests might be damaged if the situation became drawn out; and linguists were probably interested in the tactical usage of rhetoric for diplomatic resolution between both parties.

Orwell's (1974: 111) view of political language has been very influential: 'In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defense of the indefensible. . . . Thus political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness.' Orwell's perception is palpably visible in this incident.

Interestingly, news leaves many things unsaid, news reporters tactically choose the right things to report 'objectively' in order to express their views; as in diplomatic discourse or political discourse, frequent use is made of 'implicatures' (Grice, 1975), in order to suggest information not expressed explicitly in the text. These inferences are usually based on particular beliefs, opinions and knowledge of some concrete situation. This article attempts to explore the stances, intentions and ideologies of the US and China in their maneuvering in the spy-plane 'incident' through their diplomatic language. For this, 94 news stories from a US online medium (CNN.com) and 15 from a Chinese online medium (ChinaOnline.com) during the 12-day period between the air collision and the return of the 24 US crew members (1–12 April 2001) were selected and analyzed. These two media were chosen because they were representative of the views of both nations, and were easy to access to obtain updated information during the course of the incident.

In total, 113 *if*-clauses from the 109 news stories were collected and analyzed. By interpreting the utterances containing these *if*-clauses + the situational context, the implicature of 'uncertainty' is revealed through one of the key pragmatic implicatures that is linked to the conditional marker 'if'. Wilson (1990: 21) proposes several functions of implicature: first, it can direct addressees' interpretations on events in such a way their viewpoints are shaped; second, it helps politicians to maintain 'face' while dealing with some politically risky issues by the way they present themselves and act toward others. Like indirectness, as stated by Obseng (1997: 49), it allows politicians to avoid communicating directly while talking about potential face-threatening acts or politically risky topics. So, as Fowler (1985: 74) remarks, implicature is not accidental, but an intentional act, which may be consistent with the other lexicons and may add into a semantic system to form a set of ideologies to addressees. It can be considered as another important communication tool for politicians other than the mentioned linguistic tactics in political discourse in presenting the world in any ideological manner.

Apparently, the conditional marker ‘*If*’ played an important role as a face-saving tactic during the incident. As shown in the conditional clauses collected, several characteristics of conditionals are revealed. First, there are special rules about which tense to use in conditional sentences (Sinclair, 1990: 348–52):

- 1 Use of the simple present tense or the present continuous tense in the conditional and main clauses represents a *common occurrence*;
- 2 Use of the simple past tense or the past continuous in the conditional clause, and the simple past tense or a modal in the main clause represents a *common occurrence in the past*;
- 3 Use of the simple present tense or the present perfect tense in the conditional clause, and a modal in the main clause represents a *possible situation*;
- 4 Use of the simple present tense in the conditional clause, and the simple future tense in the main clause represents *possible future occurrences*;
- 5 Use of the simple past tense in the conditional clause, and ‘would’, ‘should’, or ‘might’ in the main clause represents an *unlikely situation*;
- 6 Use of the past perfect tense in the conditional clause, and ‘would have’, ‘could have’, ‘should have’, or ‘might have’ in the main clause represents *something that might have happened*;
- 7 Use of ‘only if’ to represent *one situation is necessary for another*; and
- 8 Use of ‘even if’ to represent *one situation that would not affect another*.

Second, two typological approaches of conditionals as proposed by Taylor (1997) and Sweetser (1990) are found. A three-way division can be made between ‘factual’, ‘hypothetical’ and ‘counterfactual’ conditionals (Taylor, 1997: 301), which is similar to Harris’ (1986a, b) traditional classification as ‘real’ (realis), ‘potential’ (irrealis) and ‘unreal’ (counterfactual):

In a FACTUAL conditional, the content of the *if*-clause is presumed to be the case, whilst in a COUNTERFACTUAL the content of the *if*-clause is taken to be contrary to fact. Between these categories stand the HYPOTHETICAL conditionals, in which the content of the *if*-clause is entertained as a possibility, neither in accordance with reality, nor necessarily inconsistent with it.

And Sweetser (1990) distinguishes three types of conditionals as ‘content’, ‘epistemic’ and ‘speech-act’, as elaborated by Schwenter (1999: 13–4), the nature of each domain-type is as follows: (1) content – speaker makes a prediction about the external sociophysical world; protasis postulates a situation; (2) epistemic – speaker draws an [abductive] inference in the apodosis; internal; protasis provides basis for inference; (3) speech-act – speaker performs a speech act conditionally in the apodosis; protasis makes the speech act ‘relevant’. These cognitive domains are held to be structured via metaphor.

Third, as further elaborated by Schwenter (1999: 16), there is an interrelationship among these conditionals, the cross-classification of conditionals by typological parameter is shown in Table 1.

He explained that the  $\pm$  of each cell represents the POSSIBILITY for that

TABLE 1

	<i>Content</i>	<i>Epistemic</i>	<i>Speech-Act</i>
Factual	-	+	+
Hypothetical	+	+	+
Counterfactual	+	+	-

particular combination of characteristics: content domain conditionals cannot be factual but can be either hypothetical or counterfactual; epistemic domain conditionals may be any one of the three; and speech-act domain conditionals cannot be counterfactual.

Both 'hypothetical' and 'counterfactual' conditionals share the characteristics in the content domain and the epistemic domain that speaker either makes a prediction about the external sociophysical world, and the protasis postulates a situation; or s/he draws an [abductive] inference in the apodosis, and the protasis provides basis for inference.

According to my data, among the 113 *if*-clauses, 81 are from CNN.com, and 32 are from ChinaOnline.com. To concentrate my analysis of the stances, intentions and ideologies of both countries, only *if*-clauses related to either US or Chinese officials are chosen in this study.

According to the 'conversation' between the countries, the course of the incident can be marked by four stages: first, pointing the finger at each other; second, 'regret' – hope for resolution; third, intensive discussions – Beijing and Washington worked to end spy-plane impasse; and fourth, release of the 24 US aircrew members. These stages are hinted at by the abovementioned *if*-clauses used by both the US and China. Throughout the whole course, mythic, sometimes duplicitous, uses of political language are ferreted out. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, the utterances of the speakers in these clauses project their intentions and beliefs, and even explain their situation.

### *First stage: pointing the finger at each other (1–3 April)*

In the first stage of the incident, both the US and China reacted and pointed the finger at each other. The statements given in Table 2 set the tone of their argument.

Apparently, both the US and China were under pressure. The issue of US arms sales to Taiwan had inflamed Sino-US relations, this incident definitely brought forth an arcane struggle between the hawks and doves in Washington, and reformist modernizers and hard-line hawks in Beijing.

President George W. Bush was facing the most complex crisis in his presidency of fewer than 100 days:

first, the 24 crew members of the Navy aircraft were detained by China;  
second, the spy-plane was stranded at a Chinese military base;

TABLE 2

<i>US</i>	<i>China</i>
Our priorities are the prompt and safe return of the crew and the return of the aircraft without further damaging or tampering. (Bush, CNN, 2 April)	Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan told reporters, 'It's not our plane which hit the American plane. Quite the contrary, our pilot is still missing.' (Tang, <i>ChinaOnline</i> , 2 April)
I am troubled by the lack of timely Chinese response to our request for this access. Our embassy officials are on the ground and prepared to visit the crew and aircraft as soon as the Chinese government allows them to do so. And I call on the Chinese government to grant this access promptly. (Bush, <i>ChinaOnline</i> , 2 April)	The direct cause of the damage and crash of the China jet was that the US plane suddenly veered into the Chinese jet, which was against flight regulations. (Spokesman Zhu Bangzao, <i>ChinaOnline</i> , 2 April)

third, China did not give a timely response with regard to access by embassy personnel to the 24 US crew members; fourth, they found that the Chinese may have boarded the US spy plane.

From a US perspective, Bush, as a new president, would look anxious and uncertain which counteracted his tough and resolute image, if he tried to express his apology. Thus, he and his administration were trying to signal to China that they were running out of patience with a firm and exasperated tone (e.g. 1, 2 and 3 below):

(1) WASHINGTON (CNN) – A Pentagon official said Monday that **if** the Chinese boarded the US spy plane that made an emergency landing on China's Hainan Island, 'they have violated the sanctity of this aircraft,' and in so doing, violated international law. (CNN.com, 2 April)

In this statement, a simple past tense is used in the protasis, it postulates the situation of the Chinese boarding the US spy-plane, and this provides the basis for an abductive inference in the apodosis that they [China] have violated the sanctity of the aircraft. By doing so, the US declared China's violation of the EP-3 aircraft.

(2) Pentagon officials also said that **if** China does not release the 24 crew members soon, it is hard not to consider them hostages. (CNN.com, 3 April)

Use of the simple present tense in both the protasis and the apodosis is evidenced, it represents a common occurrence, and the Pentagon officials performed a speech act conditionally in the apodosis, and protasis made the speech act 'relevant', thus the Pentagon officials proclaimed their crew members to be hostages, as China had not released them.

(3) One Republican aide said senators are deeply troubled by the situation. '**If** China wants to behave like a rogue nation, ignoring all the conventions of international law,

this will indicate to us that they seek confrontation over cooperation,' said the aide. '**If** they want to get members of the U.S. Senate upset over relations with China, this is the way to do it.' (CNN.com, 3 April)

In this statement, use of the simple present tense in the conditional clause and simple future tense in the main clause is found, such use represents possible future occurrences of confrontation between the countries, and of course at the same time displaying an arrogant air and expressing their discontent with China's detention of the US crew members.

But the US's exasperated tone did not achieve its effect, as the Chinese leadership remained in a state of inaction the US became worried that the standoff might be dragged out, especially as they were not sure whether sensitive technical information had been destroyed or could have been copied (e.g. 4).

(4) 'The expectation would have been **if** they were going somewhere where the equipment would have been compromised, they would begin the process of destroying the equipment,' the official said.

But, the official noted, 'We are not sure **if** that was accomplished.' (CNN.com, 2 April)

Thus, they tried to avoid cold war language and switched to a more measured tone in their utterances of possible situations, so as to prevent antagonizing China and a potentially volatile standoff from escalating into a crisis (e.g. 5).

(5) So even **if** we view the Chinese as taking unjustified improper actions, we should react in a way that keeps these larger interests in focus. (CNN.com, 3 April)

The use of a conditional protasis 'even if' presumes that the situation will not affect the other in the apodosis; and this signals that the US official has called for patience and prudence.

On the other side, Chinese President Jiang Zemin had to seek a face-saving solution too, as he had been strongly criticized domestically for his handling of the Belgrade embassy bombing two years previously, and he was under pressure from the hawks in Beijing to be tough. Thus, instead of communicating directly on the politically risky topics, he responded to Bush's comments by repeating his demand for Washington to 'accept full responsibility for the collision' and 'formally apologize'; also, he demanded that the US 'halt all surveillance flights near China's coast'.

### *Second stage: 'regret' – hope for resolution (4–5 April)*

In addition to the US officials' adverse comments on China's WTO entry and hosting of the 2008 Olympics, public anger had manifested itself in an Internet chat room on the part of both nations; whereas in China, the nationalism complex seemed to revive, all these had given hardliners on both sides the upper hand.

At this stage, both leaderships looked for a stepping stone for resolution in order not to bring forth a 'genuine, full-blown' crisis.<sup>1</sup> Secretary of State Colin Powell choreographed a diplomatic solution by sending a personal statement of regret:

'We regret the Chinese pilot did not get down safely, and we regret the loss of life of that Chinese pilot.' (CNN.com, 4 April) Yet, he 'stopped short of issuing an apology and instead urged Beijing to end the standoff' (CNN.com, 5 April) because apology might mean accepting responsibility.<sup>2</sup> And 'the White House suggested for the first time publicly that trade with China would be damaged if the incident involving the US reconnaissance plane in Hainan is not resolved quickly' (CNN.com, 5 April).

On the other side, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Sun Yuxi told a news conference that 'the US expression of regret is a step in the right direction by the US side.' He expressed that China would allow a second meeting between US officials and the detained American aircrew, but **only if** Washington took a 'cooperative approach'.<sup>3</sup> Use of the conditional marker 'only if' indicates that a cooperative approach is necessary for a second meeting. This 'conversational implicature' apparently states one of the characteristics of the conditional marker.

On 5 April, President Bush took a further step by expressing his 'regrets for the loss of a Chinese pilot and jet after a collision with a Navy surveillance plane' (CNN.com, 5 April), but China was dismissing the United States' expression of regret over the loss of its fighter pilot, and plane deadlock continued despite 'regret' and 'sorry'.

### *Third stage: intensive discussions – Beijing and Washington worked to end spy plane impasse (6–10 April)*

Intensive discussions were carried out between Beijing and Washington, efforts to resolve the dispute were 'making progress'. In the US, the official media gave a lot of prominence to the expressions of regret by Bush and Powell; on the other side, the Chinese ambassador to the US Yang Jiechi, in his interview with CNN, had hinted at the possibility of a solution (e.g. 6):

(6) 'The US ambassador to China and the Chinese Foreign Ministry are also drafting a joint statement on the incident. **If** President Jiang [Zemin] is convinced Washington has adopted the "right attitude," he might agree to a formula and wording that may let both sides solve the problem without losing face.'

The two sides were working on a written accord on the incident. The document was expected to include an expression of regret for the loss of the Chinese pilot, but would not contain the apology wanted by China, according to the White House: 'Under the formula under discussion, a joint letter signed by the US ambassador in Beijing and a Chinese official would be made public in which regret would be expressed about the accident, which led to the apparent death of a Chinese pilot. Officials in Washington said the word "apology" would not be included, but the two sides would agree to a mechanism to resolve who was to blame for the accident.' (CNN.com, 7 April)

A face-saving formula of 'creative diplomacy' was being worked out making

tactical use of ambiguous terminology. According to Kenneth Lieberthal, a political science professor and member of the National Security Council under former US president Bill Clinton, 'At the same time it used ambiguous terminology so that the Chinese text reads as something closer to an apology than the English text does – using legitimate translation but just in different connotations of words.' (Asiaweek.com, 20 April 2001, Vol.27, No.15) And he added: 'China is having a tough time figuring out what the language is to allow them to back off.' (CNN.com, 6 April)

Nevertheless, China expressed that use of word 'sorry' by Powell was a step towards resolving the standoff.

#### *Fourth stage: release of the 24 US aircrew (11–12 April)*

On 11 April, the Chinese media, which had previously been denouncing Washington, reported that Powell had been using the words 'sorrow' and 'regret' over the incident and had set the scene for a resolution that could be presented as an apology.

President Jiang appeared to soften his stance. And after a formal statement, which offered an apology for the loss of the pilot and for the spy-plane's landing at Hainan without verbal clearance from the Chinese, was delivered by the US ambassador to China Joseph Prueher to the Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan, the Chinese Foreign Ministry announced the release of the 24 crew members. On 12 April, the US crew members returned home, and were called 'heroes' by their parents.

Careful language worked, intensive diplomacy saved face for both sides.

What was said, had been reported by the media; and what was unsaid, had been hinted at by various pragmatic markers and should be further explored by the linguists.

#### NOTES

1. Lieberman said China could make the incident a 'genuine, full-blown' crisis **if** they don't soon return the 24 crew members, comprised of 21 men and three women. (CNN.com, 5 April)
2. '**If** you apologize, you're accepting responsibility which gives the Chinese legal leverage to try to make us back off from the flights,' said former US ambassador Winston Lord. (CNN.com, 9 April) And civil rights activist Jesse Jackson further elaborated, 'The difference between apology, regrets and I'm sorry is not a good enough distinction to leave the American soldiers there. We should be able to say that **if** there is an offense, unintentional, a mistake, we apologize.' (CNN.com, 10 April)
3. '**If** the US takes a cooperative approach we will consider arrangements for the next visit,' Sun Yuxi told a news conference (CNN.com, 5 April); China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesman Sun Yuxi said a second meeting between US officials and the crew members in Hainan, who 'violated international laws,' would **only** be considered **if** the United States 'takes a cooperative approach,' according to the Xinhua shue (ChinaOnline.com, 5 April).

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