

## CONDITIONAL VOICES: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF IF-CONSTRUCTIONS IN SRI LANKAN AND KENYAN LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Abstract

Conditional structures, typically including the word *if*, can be used in diverse ways that are still being explored. Prototypically, they occur at the beginning of a matrix clause and mitigate an assertion by setting a logical condition on its truth. However, previous research has shown both their positioning and function to correlate with genre and discourse function. The specifics of such variation are yet to be filled in; further, the research concerning this type of variation in English is so far based on an insufficiently wide variety of Englishes. To address these gaps, this research investigates the use of *if*-constructions in a corpus of several hundred 21<sup>st</sup>-century letters to the editor (LTEs) from two English-language national newspapers, one Kenyan and one Sri Lankan. LTEs are an argumentative genre, concerned with identifying and solving communal problems, in which the writer's identity as a community member is highly salient. Related to the nature of this genre, I present a data-driven taxonomy of discourse functions for *if*-constructions. I further show that the positioning of the construction relative to the main clause is linked to the discourse purposes. Finally, the data reveal some differences between Kenyan and Sri Lankan letters, suggesting that *if*-constructions are one facet of the LTEs that are sensitive to local culture.

**Keywords:** Conditionals, Genre, Kenyan English, Letters to the Editor, Sri Lankan English

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## Introduction

Phrases headed by *if* are often referred to as (the most prototypical) conditionals and have been associated with a tendency to weaken a speaker's commitment to a proposition (e.g. Mondorf, 2004). However, analysis from an increasing variety of data has shown that they instantiate a range of discourse functions in keeping with their grammatical complexity and diversity, shown in detail in Declerk and Reed (2001). The purpose of the current research is to investigate the use of *if*-constructions in letters to the editor (LTEs) in two national newspapers, from a rhetorical-discourse perspective, with emphasis on the discourse use and syntactic positioning of the constructions.

Position of *if*-constructions is defined with relationship to the clause they modify. With reference to the main subject and predicate, they can occur preposed, postposed, or, much less often, mid-clause, as seen in the examples below. (All numbered examples in this article are taken from the corpus of the present study and are unedited. K = Kenya subcorpus, SL = Sri Lanka subcorpus; months are those of letter publication.)

- (1) **If people can cheat in examinations and get away with it**, then the future of the country is at stake. (SL Apr.)
- (2) He does not huddle together with others **if those surrounding him happen not to be fellow meru tribesmen**. (K Apr.)
- (3) This trend, **if not reversed soon**, could see the death of many rivers and springs that flow into the Kisumu business district and the Nandi region. (K May)

In Example 1, the *if*-constituent precedes the main subject and predicate. In Example 2, it follows. Example 3 demonstrates an occurrence medial in the main clause.

The use and position of this kind of construction is related to the genre in which the utterances occur, which, of course, relates to certain types of purposes the participants typically have. The current study aims to increase understanding of how the genre affects the position of the constructions, affects their function, and/or mediates the relationship between position and function, by focusing on one genre, LTEs, in two varieties of English: Kenyan English and Sri Lankan English. My analysis of LTEs in these two varieties indicates that the usage patterns of *if*-constructions in the letters reflect the persuasive and problem-focused nature of the genre as well as the nature of the perceived identities and roles in the discourse community that are salient to the writers and their audience. These effects appear in the distribution of discourse functions that the constituents implement. Further, some of those functions associate with certain clause positions in ways linked to the authorial purposes typical of LTEs.

## Conditional Structures

The basic structure of a conditional construction is conveniently referred to in terms of P, the condition clause, or protasis, and Q, the matrix clause, or apodosis, in that order, often represented as *if P, then Q*. Syntactically, P is typically, though not always, expressed by means of an adjunct in the main clause, as in Examples 1-3 above. As Huddleston & Pullum (2002) argue, its internal structure is best analysed, syntactically, as a prepositional phrase headed by the preposition *if* or another preposition such as *unless* or *as long as*, as illustrated in Examples 4 and 5, respectively.

- (4) Whatever controls are adopted, they will be of no use **unless the owners and directors of these companies operate honestly** ... . (SL Apr.)
- (5) ... **as long as a commodity is essential**, people will pay the price on account of necessity and forego on something else. (SL Apr.)

However, condition phrases are widely referred to as conditional adverbial clauses; that is, *if*, *unless*, *given that*, etc. are considered subordinators rather than prepositions. The precise syntactic structure of the phrase is unimportant in this analysis, and in this article, I refer to the structures constituting my topic of analysis as *if*-constructions. Note that in the category so named I include constructions without overt verbs, e.g. *if necessary*.

More importantly, for present purposes, it is necessary to clarify the relationship between the semantic characterisation of these constructions and the discourse-pragmatic one. Not all *if*-constructions are interpreted by interlocutors as (only or primarily) setting a condition. As Ferguson et al. (1986, p. 7) put it, “In languages where conditional sentences have been well described, it is invariably found that some sentences with the formal markers of conditionality are semantically and pragmatically only marginally conditional, or not conditional at all.” Example 6 illustrates the point.

- (6) **If its history is examined and analysed**, the mere fact that Kenya has enjoyed relative peace on a continent of turmoil does not amount to much. (K Apr.)

The writer is not asserting that Kenya's relative peace is inconsequential, only if someone examines and analyses history; rather, he is using the *if*-construction to provide the source of backing for the assertion expressed by the main clause. Various other functions of *if*-constructions, situated in particular discourse contexts, have been identified. (See, for example, in addition to Declerk and Reed (2001), Lavid (1998) and Nall and Nall (2010)). Comrie's (1986) response to this problem of conditionals that do not, or do not primarily, set conditions, is that we should distinguish meaning and interpretation, which amounts to determining the semantic from the discourse-pragmatic view. Semantically, the *if*-construction does set a condition on the truth value of the apodosis, but, in context, the interlocutor interprets the relationship between the clauses differently for a relatively nuanced understanding of how speakers use *if*. In this research, I try to avoid assumptions about its functions, beyond the assumption that they are grounded in genre and other kinds of context.

Concerning the position of the constructions with respect to the main clause, research indicates pervasive agreement that the unmarked position of the *if*-construction, in English and probably across languages, is before the subject of the matrix clause. However, the order is affected by certain formal features (Lavid, 1998) and coherence concerns (Nall & Nall, 2010). For brevity's sake, and because the corpus size here is rather limited, this analysis mostly disregards these influences. It focuses on how the discourse-rhetorical functions of the conditionals affect the *if*-construction's position.

### **Conditionals in LTEs**

Research has shown the position of the construction to be sensitive to both language modality and genre. The preference for preposing is more pronounced in spoken data, possibly due to the more interactive nature of speech in general (Ford, 1993). The importance of genre is highlighted by a notable exception to the preposing tendency that surfaced in three studies on medical research articles (Rowley-Jolivet, 2007; Carter-Thomas & Rowley-Jolivet, 2008; Rowley-Jolivet & Carter, 2008), each of which found 50-60% of *if*-constructions occurring at the end of the matrix clause. Taking off from that point, and motivated by Devitt's (1989) finding that genre is a significant variable in linguistic and stylistic variation, Nall and Nall's (2010) study compared *if*-constructions across 17 genres in a corpus comprising written data from journalistic media and other sources (including personal emails – electronic writing was not distinguished from other writing) and transcriptions of spoken data from educational and informal interactional contexts. Nearly all of their data is American English, and the remaining small part is British English. Their results confirmed and extended the premise that both *if*-

construction frequencies and relationships between position and function of the constructions are sensitive to modality and genre, mediated by contextual factors such as interlocutor power configurations and speaker purpose. Across genres, they find 65.8% of *if*-constructions occurring clause-initially, but within genres, proportions differ considerably. Of particular relevance to the present study, a sub-genre in the press category of their data was LTEs in a newspaper. In the 46 letters they analysed, 60% of *if*-constructions occurred clause-finally, in opposition to the general preference for preposing. The correlation was not statistically significant; however, the other two press sub-corpora in their study, news reportage and sports news, also exhibited relatively high preposing, and when the three sub-genres were combined, the correlation was significant.

Nall and Nall (2010) discuss explanations for this pattern in terms of features common to journalistic writing in general, for example, emphasis on agents and actions and connections to prior contexts. However, LTEs may not be similar to news reporting in the ways that would justify lumping them for the purposes of these explanations. While an explanation based on prioritising agents and actions seems far more clearly connected to a narrative genre than an argumentative one, the argumentative nature is a prominent feature that distinguishes LTEs from articles that report news. Lavid and Moratón (2015), in an empirical cross-genre comparison, argue that a greater incidence of linguistic markers of stance and engagement in LTEs than in news articles corresponds to the difference in primary purpose. While news reporting is expected to impartially convey information, including opinions of others but not of the writer, LTEs mainly serve to evaluate a phenomenon and suggest action, from the writer's point of view, while for the periodical the "principal function is to help the press organise and orchestrate the debate about public opinion" (Hall et al., 1978, p. 121).

As Nall and Nall (2010) point out, to more fully understand the discursive use of *if*-constructions, we need an analysis of more diverse data, taking into account contextual factors. Further, while their study has the advantage of being broader than most in its selection of data, their findings need to be substantiated with an analysis of considerably more data. I take up this challenge with a bigger sample of LTEs, from two national newspapers, and analyse the data with close attention to specific communicative purposes relevant to the writers in their communities. As commonly noted (e.g. by Magnet and Carnet (2006)), LTEs constitute a journalistic rather than epistolary genre, in which individual and sometimes group writers address the community and position themselves vis-à-vis community issues. Usually pointing out a problem and arguing for an action on someone's part, the letters instantiate a persuasive genre that draws on the values of the community (Doury, 2010), reflects the ideology of social groups (Fontanini, 2001) and enacts a public, participatory local discourse (Magnet & Carnet, 2006; Morrison & Love 1996; Richardson, 2001).

LTEs have been investigated from various perspectives, such as applied genre theory (Ashraf, 2014), intertextuality (Cardoso, 2007), ideology and discourse (Fontanini, 2001), politeness (Gonzalez, 2002), use of first-person plural (McGarry & Michieka, 2008), critical discourse analysis (Morrison & Love, 1996), and cultural variation (Carnet & Magnet, 2002; Drewnowska-Vargáne, 2001; Lavid & Moratón, 2015; Magnet & Carnet, 2006, inter alia). The current analysis aims not to fully describe their structure but rather to explore the use of conditional structures within them so as to contribute to a fuller understanding of both the LTE genre and the relationship between conditionals and rhetorical-discourse purposes.

### Research Questions

This study investigates three questions concerning *if*-constructions in LTEs. First, the general tendency for conditionals to occur prior to the main subject and predicate of the main clause that foregrounds the demonstrated sensitivity of positioning to genre leads to Question 1.

1. What proportions of *if*-constructions in the LTEs are preposed, medial, and postposed relative to the main clauses?

Next, research suggests that conditionals can implement a variety of discourse functions, about which little is yet known. To address this gap, I investigate Question 2.

2. What purposes do *if*-constructions serve in the LTEs?

Finally, the possibility of interaction between position and purpose is the subject of Question.

3. Does the position of the *if*-construction relative to the main clause correspond to certain purposes?

### Methodology

Unsurprisingly, LTEs have been shown to vary culturally and linguistically across speech communities (Carnet & Magnet, 2002; Gonzalez, 2002; Magnet & Carnet, 2006; Pounds, 2005; Wang, 2004). However, claims about LTEs in English have so far been based on a very restricted proportion of the extant varieties. The present study attempts to address this issue by analysing data from two varieties in which LTEs have not yet been investigated: Kenyan and Sri Lankan Englishes. The analysis described here constitutes part of a larger investigation of a corpus of LTEs from these two languages. My main focus here is not on comparison between the two varieties but rather on how the LTE genre interacts with the positioning and functioning of the clauses across the varieties. Possibly, differences in the nature, especially the social class, of the newspaper and its readership affect the style of the LTEs; for an interesting discussion of this issue, see Chapter 5 of Hall (1978). A limitation of this study is that I have abstracted away from that factor. To account for the possibility of significant relevant differences due to either linguistic variety or newspaper readership, I present results both separately and aggregated. In fact, the two subcorpora yield mostly similar results, but interesting differences do appear, particularly with regard to the relationship between clause function and position.

The data for this study consist of several hundred LTEs appearing in the Kenyan newspaper *The Daily Nation* and the Sri Lankan newspaper *The Daily News*, both major national newspapers, in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Table 1 shows details on the two subcorpora constructed for this study.

**Table 01: Corpus.**

Sri Lankan English	441 letters
<i>Daily News</i> (Colombo)	128,783 words
Jan. – May 2006	
Kenyan English	687 letters
<i>Daily Nation</i> (Nairobi)	102,301 words
March – May 2008	

A research assistant and I analysed the data, using AtlasTi. We first identified all the occurrences of *if* in the corpus, with three kinds of exceptions. Cases where *if* is a subordinator with the same meaning as *whether* were excluded. Also excluded were cases in which the *if*-construction was an argument, in

semantic terms, or held a grammatical role, in syntactic terms,<sup>1</sup> as I considered them far enough removed from the core idea of conditional clauses as to be irrelevant to the current analysis.

The remaining *if*-constructions totaled 429, yielding a rate of about two per thousand words, which is close to the frequency found by Nall and Nall (2010) across genres. As shown in Table 2, this rate was quite similar between the two sub-corpora.

**Table 02: *If*-construction frequency (per 1000 words) in the LTE corpus**

Sri Lanka	226 (1.75)
Kenya	200 (1.96)
total	426 (1.84)

We then coded the constructions with regard to position and purposes. The three position categories established in previous research, i.e. preposed, postposed, and clause-medial, proved unproblematic and were thus adopted. The purpose categories emerged from close analysis of the data informed by previous research, particularly Nall and Nall (2010) and Lavid and Moratón (2015), both discussed above, and Lavid (1998). The taxonomy of seven main purposes that appeared is detailed in below, in the section on discursive function.

## Results and Discussion

### *Construction Position*

The first research question was what proportions of *if*-constructions in the LTEs are preposed, medial, and postposed, relative to the subject and predicate of the main clause. All three positions occurred in both subcorpora. Preposed constructions mostly occurred at the beginning of a sentence, as in Example 7, but could also occur mid-sentence, as in 8.

- (7) **If we are to survive and reinvent ourselves as a nation**, we must discover our truth and urgently deploy it to the task of truly setting us free. (K Apr.)
- (8) We are a sovereign nation and at a time like this when we face an unprecedented threat to the security of our country, **if India is unable to help for whatever reason** then we need to look elsewhere; (SL Jan.)

Multiple preposed constructions could occur in the same clause, as shown by Example 9.

- (9) **If this is asking too much of them, or if their pride or egos are too big**, they should honourably quit their leadership positions in the nation's interest. (K March)

Similarly, postposed constructions were usually sentence-final, as in Example 10, but could occur before other material, as in 11.

- (10) This is an unpleasant state of affairs and the residents will be too happy **if channels are cleaned at least weekly to result in a clear water flushing system**. (SL Apr.)

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<sup>1</sup> Excluding cleft sentences where the *if*-construction is a displaced subject or complement removes cases where the construction is used to make a proposal, e.g. *it would be better if ...* and also formulaic requests with extraposed objects such as *I would appreciate it if ...*. These constructions merit consideration in further analyses.

- (11) Ref. letter by Vidya Jothi Sir Arthur C. Clarke (16.03.2006), I cannot agree on the point that the households will be consuming more electricity for lighting **if we put the clock back by half an hour as proposed** as dusk will fall sooner. (SL March)

Multiple *if*-constructions in postposition were rare, but possible, as shown by Example 12.

- (12) How can plans be implemented **if instructions cannot be worded properly? if the masses are unable to use the mother tongue?** (SL April)

Medial *if*-constructions generally, though not always, occurred between the subject and predicate, as in Example 13.

- (13) This trend, **if not reversed soon**, could see the death of many rivers and springs that flow into the Kisumu business district and Nandi region. (K May)

Table 3 shows the proportions for each position, separately for each newspaper and then aggregated.

**Table 03: Positions of *if*-constructions**

	pre	post	mid
Sri Lanka	142 (62.83%)	72 (31.86%)	12 (5.31%)
Kenya	125 (62.50%)	69 (34.50%)	6 (3.00%)
total	270 (62.68%)	141 (33.10%)	18 (4.23%)

Between the two subcorpora, the percentages are remarkably similar; thus, the aggregated figures can be taken to be representative of the corpus. These numbers indicate a distinct preference for preposing. Recall that in Nall and Nall's (2010) literature review, preposed constructions were found to predominate at rates roughly between 60 and 75%. In their own general corpus, this pattern recurred, with 65.8% preposed. In their written subcorpus, the proportions were again similar, with 61.3% preposed. However, when their corpus was further divided, it emerged that the press genre exhibited a preference for postposing, at 57.2%, compared to 40.1% preposing. Further, in the 46-letter LTE subcorpus within the press genre, the tendency toward postposing was even stronger, with 60% of constructions postposed, compared to 37.5% preposed. Our data, showing 62.94% preposing and 32.87% postposing, is very close to a mirror image of the results found by Nall and Nall (2010), conforming instead to the generally observed preference, across genres and modalities, for preposing. Possible reasons for this discrepancy are discussed below, in the conclusions section.

### ***Discursive Function***

The second research question was what discourse-rhetorical purposes the *if*-constructions serve in the LTEs. Because of space limitations, I describe only the most prevalent functions found in the data. There was a certain amount of overlap in that many of the constructions could be argued to serve more than one purpose, as is typical in discourse. While acknowledging this multi-functionality, I classified each construction based on what I judged to be its main purpose, for simplicity of analysis.

Unsurprisingly, the least marked use category of *if*-constructions in the corpus, comprising just over 60% of the total, was the prototypical usage where the construction sets a condition on an assertion in a chain of reasoning, here termed logical reasoning. Often, the clause constitutes a supporting move in the writer's argument. Example 14 shows a typical *if*-construction of this type, contextualised in the entire letter in which it appears so that its role is more apparent.

- (14) I agree with Odwako of Webuye about the bad retirement benefit law that continues to do more harm to many young and energetic Kenyans.

The architect of the law, Mr. David Mwiraria, should now sit and see how young people are suffering now that he is out of Parliament.

The life span of most Kenyans is between 40 and 45, and **if the actual age for one to get these benefits is 50**, then very few people will enjoy that money.

Most organisations are either retrenching or closing down, and the most affected are those below the age of 40.

We, the victims, are now requesting members of the 10th Parliament to look into this matter since the money is ours and we worked for it. (K May)

The condition that helps explain why a retirement age of 50 is unhelpful and unfair is a logical element in the writer's argument that the law should be amended.

A subset within this category is a construction that sets a condition not on an assertion but on a proposal, demand, suggestion, or other directive, as illustrated in Example 15.

- (15) We demand of the Government that it immediately take up this matter with the Governments of Pakistan and China, **if they wish the assistance to be formalised** then let us by all means do so. (SL Jan.)

The writer makes the demand that an agreement on security assistance with Pakistan and China be formalised, conditional on the desire of those governments for such formalisation. Such calls for action, from various individual, group, and organisational members of society, are widespread, though not universal, elements of LTEs.

While *if*-constructions categorised as logical conditions could set conditions on directives, it was also possible for the writers to couch the call for action itself in an *if*-construction, as illustrated in Example 16.

- (16) The pressure on forests will only reduce **if the Government candidly and fearlessly addresses the skewed land laws and unfair distribution**. (K May)

Using this strategy, the writer uses the apodosis as direct support for their call to action, providing a reason that it is desirable.

Conversely, the writer can state in the *if*-construction what they do not want to happen, or want to stop happening, as in Example 17..

- (17) **If people can cheat in examinations and get away with it**, then the future of the country is at stake. (K Apr.)

In this category, termed problem/danger, the protasis presents an actual or potential situation or event perceived negatively, and the apodosis, accordingly, warns of or remonstrates against its undesirable consequences. The problem/danger is the second most frequent category after the logical condition, followed by directives.

The fourth most frequent type of *if*-construction, at slightly over 5%, is one that challenges the position, sincerity, or character of an addressee or third-person entity, usually a public figure. Examples 18 and 19 illustrate this function.

- (18) **If they have been so keen on doing some service to the area**, as they keep blaring on at the meetings and while parading on the roads, why have they neglected so many things that they should have done? (SL March)
- (19) **If you truly believe in bringing peace to the island**, please vet these articles which infuriate Tamils. (SL Jan.)

In some cases, the challenges can overlap with expressions of a problem or danger. One such case is shown in Example 20.

- (20) I fail to understand who the Government is serving **if it cannot hear the cry of Kenyans?** (K Apr.)

The proposition that the Government cannot hear the cry of Kenyans can be taken as stating a current problem or as challenging the Government on its attitudes and/or actions. I classified the constructions as challenges when the writer appeared to be more focused on pointing out an apparent failure on the part of the entity referenced (the Government, in this case) regarding basic expectations or commitments than on citing a current or potential path of action that would have negative consequences.

A category occurring only slightly less frequently than challenges was assumed goal, in which the *if*-construction motivates the action called for in the apodosis, involving an implicit assumption that this larger goal is commonly accepted. This usage is illustrated by Example 21.

- (21) Other concessions along the lines of regional autonomy will have to be in the offing **if healthy and harmonious relations are to be regained.** (SL May)

This category resembles the subset of logical conditions referenced above, in which the *if*-construction sets a condition on a directive. What motivated my decision to establish this category is the nature of the proposition in the *if*-construction. Rather than a result the writer is arguing for, it is presented as a result the writer assumes to be desirable to the reader community. For example, in 21, the writer assumes that healthy and harmonious ethnic relations in Sri Lanka are a goal of the community. Future research might examine more closely the overlap between conditions on directives that form part of a logic chain and those that invoke community assumptions.

A category that comprises only about 3.5% of the *if*-constructions, but is nevertheless interesting, is evidence mention, illustrated by Examples 22-23.

- (22) They did not even seem to try, **if their ruthlessness and their statements then are anything to go by.** (K March)
- (23) **If one drives past these Foreign Missions** one can see the pathetic plight of Sri Lankan Visa Applicants seating on culverts or pavement to rest their weary legs. (SL May)

The *if*-constructions in these clauses do not actually provide evidence for the assertion, though the writer may do that at other places in the letter. Instead, they only mention the source of that evidence. Thus,

the connection between the evidence and the assertion is highly implicit. For example, 22 occurs in a letter disputing a letter published two days earlier defending the Kenyan police's actions in post-election unrest. The claim that the police did not make serious efforts to maintain law and order is supported, the writer says, by their ruthlessness and their statements. In not specifying, at least at this point, what their ruthless acts were or the content of their statements, and by referencing the actions and statements in a way that assumes that the readers share knowledge of them and can thus make the connection themselves, the writer constructs and builds on a sense of a community with a common knowledge base, of which he is an integrated member, to elicit agreement with his ideas.

Interestingly, this category is nearly exclusive to the Kenyan subcorpus, in which it comprises 6.5% of the *if*-constructions. The Sri Lankan sub-corpus contains only two constructions (less than 1%) that meet these criteria, and both can be considered borderline members of the category, as they follow the structure illustrated in 23, "if one [does X], one sees/can see [Y]," which could be considered a rather formulaic instantiation of a particular kind of condition in a logic chain. Here, I classified them as evidence mentioned because they suggested a source of evidence, i., a way one would get evidence, more than a specific citation of that evidence. Clearly, significantly more data are needed to inform consideration of this specific type of conditional.

The other 5.59% of conditionals fell into three other categories, shown in Table 4, but not discussed due to space limitations. The percentages in the table indicate the ratio of the occurrences in each category to the total number of *if*-constructions in the relevant subcorpus.

**Table 04: Frequency of Discursive Functions Across All Categories**

	SL	Kenyan	Total
condition in a logic chain	159 (70.35%)	98 (49.00%)	257 (59.91%)
problem/danger	22 (9.73%)	29 (14.50%)	51 (11.89%)
directive	21 (9.29%)	13 (6.50%)	34 (7.93%)
challenge	6 (2.65%)	17 (8.5%)	23 (5.36%)
assumed goal	7 (3.10%)	15 (7.50%)	22 (5.13%)
evidence mention	2 (0.88%)	13 (6.50%)	15 (3.50%)
strengtheners	5 (2.21%)	9 (4.50%)	14 (3.26%)
deference	4 (1.78%)	4 (2.00%)	8 (1.86%)
formulaic directive marker	0	2 (1.00%)	2 (0.47%)

The condition in a logic chain, as discussed above, can be taken to be the default category and also fits in with the argumentative nature of LTEs. The next most frequent category, at about 12%, is the one where the *if*-construction presents a problem or danger, and the apodosis indicates its (potential) negative consequences. Since the LTEs are mainly responses to what the writers perceive to be societal problems, it makes sense for this type of construction to be prevalent. Similarly, the third category, in which the writers phrase an action they would like to see in an *if*-clause (about 8%), reflects the principle that the letter writers are trying to solve problems; they argue that if an action they propose is undertaken, a problem will be resolved, a danger will be averted, or another desired result will be achieved.

The following three most prevalent categories are interesting in that their frequency differs between the two subcorpora. While the condition in a logic chain is by far the predominant category in both subcorpora, it is considerably more so in the Sri Lankan letters (70%) than in the Kenyan ones (49%). The smaller proportion of these default constructions in the Kenyan corpus, relative to the Sri Lankan

data, corresponds to a larger proportion of challenges (about 8% vs about 2.5%), assumed goals (7.5% vs about 3%), and evidence mentions (6.5% vs less than 1%). The rankings for the whole corpus differ from the rankings within each corpus. Evidence exhibits the most striking difference. While in the corpus as a whole it occurs with nearly equal frequency to the next lowest category, strengthener, this result is mainly due to its near non-occurrence in the Sri Lankan data. In the Kenyan corpus, evidence mentions are as frequent as directives. Challenges also show considerably more importance in the Kenyan data, ranking third.

These frequency differences clearly suggest that these types of conditionals reflect aspects of the local culture and/or situation. Possible explanations relate to the extreme unrest in Kenya ongoing in 2008, following the 2007 election of which the results were much disputed. A great many of the LTEs in the months analysed here concerned this issue, which could affect the use of problem/danger, challenges, evidence, and/or assumed goals. However, it cannot be assumed that the Kenyan data are marked in a way that corresponds to the markedness of the contemporary sociopolitical situation. Since baseline data for types of conditionals in LTEs across time, place, and language variety do not yet exist, there is no way to know whether one or both of the subcorpora examined here are marked in this way. In fact, as the following section on discursive function and position shows, it is the Sri Lankan letters that appear to be marked regarding clause position relating to several conditional types. Thus, many possible avenues for exploration present themselves here, and I leave this topic open for future investigation.

### ***Discursive function and position***

The third research question was whether the position of the *if*-construction relative to the main clause corresponds to certain purposes. Since the default position of the *if*-construction, both generally and within the present corpus, is preposed, purposes that correspond to a relatively high proportion of mid-posed and/or postposed clauses bear examination. Table 5 shows the proportions of positions for the five most prevalent categories across the corpus.

**Table 05: Position by discursive function**

	pre	post	mid	total
condition in a logic chain	175 (68.09%)	73 (28.40%)	9 (3.50%)	257
problem/danger	30 (58.82%)	20 (39.22%)	1 (1.96%)	51
directive	19 (55.88%)	15 (44.12%)	0	34
challenge	17 (73.91%)	5 (21.74%)	1 (4.35%)	23
assumed goal	11 (50.00%)	10 (45.45%)	1 (4.55%)	22
evidence mention	8 (53.33%)	6 (40.00%)	1 (6.67%)	15

The default category, condition in logic chain, also conforms to the unmarked preference for preposing, at about 68%. This result obtains in both subcorpora (SL: 67.92%, K: 68.38%). The same holds for the challenge category, which is at 73.91% preposed overall, 83.33% in the Sri Lankan data, and 70.59% in the Kenyan data. A more marked distribution appears in some other categories.

The problem/danger constructions in the aggregated data conform to predictions, at about 74% preposed. However, examination of the subcorpora shows that this prediction does not hold for the Sri Lankan data, as shown in Table 6.

**Table 06: Problem/danger position distribution**

	pre	post	mid	total
SL	11 (50.00%)	11 (50.00%)	0	22
K	19 (65.52%)	9 (31.03%)	1 (3.45%)	29
total	30 (58.82%)	20 (39.22%)	1 (1.96%)	51

While the Kenyan data show an unmarked distribution, half the Sri Lankan constructions are postposed. Examples 24-25 illustrate postposed constructions of this type from the Sri Lankan subcorpus.

- (24) Numerous postal buildings and properties in the capital city and provincial towns, as well as those in every nook and corner of the island, could be 'given on lease or hire, mortgaged, sold or otherwise disposed of' (Sri Lanka Postal Corporation Bill - 1999 page 4 part 2 para 6F), **if the proposed Bill were adopted.** (SL May)
- (25) The perceptible ebb in international support for separation can well turn into an upsurge, **if it becomes clear to the outside world that the Government is acting with a hidden agenda to deny the Tamil-speaking people the right to manage their own affairs within an undivided country.** (SL May)

A possible explanation has to do with the problem-focused nature of the LTE genre. In the prototypical conditional clause, the protasis qualifies the assertion; since the assertion is the main point, it makes sense for it to be in the clause-final place of evidence. A clause in which the protasis appears in the final position puts more emphasis on the condition. In the problem/danger conditionals, the protasis cites the problem or danger. A postposed *if*-construction thus helps to highlight what the writer wishes to be averted. Given that the great majority of letters are written to address such problems or dangers, a reasonable hypothesis is that the relatively high proportion of postposed constructions of this type, compared to that of unmarked samples, reflects the genre's problem-focused nature. However, this explanation leads to the obvious question of why the Kenyan data show the unmarked proportion of about 65% preposed in this category. Further investigation of this question might be informed by data from other corpora of LTEs and by comparison to data from other argumentative genres.

The assumed goal constructions also exhibit an unexpected result in the Sri Lankan letters. The Kenyan distribution is the predictable 60% preposed ratio, but in the Sri Lankan results, only two of the seven constructions are preposed; the majority are postposed, as shown in Table 7.

**Table 07: Assumed goal position distribution**

	pre	post	mid	total
SL	2 (28.57%)	4 (57.14%)	1 (14.29%)	7
K	9 (60.00%)	6 (40.00%)	0	15
total	11 (50.00%)	10 (45.45%)	1 (4.55%)	22

An example of a postposed clause expressing an assumed goal is shown in 26.

- (26) Accordingly, they should not be neglected, but looked after, **if they are to continue residing and working on the plantations, preventing them from going in search of greener pastures.** (SL March)

Recall that the Sri Lankan writers used the assumed goal strategy at half the rate of the Kenyans, 3.1% compared to 7.5%. The cause for these differences in frequency or position is not clear and constitutes a question for future investigation.

For the directive *if*-constructions, on the other hand, the overall proportion of preposed clauses, about 56%, results from a predictable proportion preposed in the Sri Lankan letters but a slight majority postposed in the Kenyan data, as shown in Table 8.

**Table 08: Directive position distribution**

	pre	post	mid	total
SL	13 (61.90%)	8 (38.10%)	0	21
K	6 (46.15%)	7 (53.85)	0	13
total	19 (55.88%)	15 (44.12%)	0	34

The number of total directives in the Kenya letters, 13, is too low to allow anything but speculation on the cause of the difference. One observation is that three of the seven postposed directives occur in close proximity to the word *only*, as shown in 27.

- (27) There is optimism, however, that normalcy will eventually return everywhere, but this can **only** be sustained **if leaders genuinely embrace a truly nationalistic approach to national issues.**  
(K March)

None of the preposed directive clauses occur with *only*. In the Sri Lankan directives also, the only two that occur with *only* are postposed. The tendency for *if*-constructions preceded by *only*, in English, or by *solo* in Italian, to be postposed has been noted by Lavid (1998). The hypothesis that *if*-constructions working with *only* strongly tend to be postposed is reasonable, because including *only* and postposing are both ways of emphasising the protasis. This hypothesis does not, of course, address the question of why directive clauses occur more often in the Kenyan letters than in the Sri Lankan ones. There may be cultural or situational reasons that Kenyan writers more often choose to frame their call to action as a uniquely acceptable solution to a problem. Again, more data are necessary to investigate this possibility.

The evidence mentions category exhibits a similar pattern. Since the Sri Lankan data contains only two constructions of this type, both preposed, the imbalance towards postposed in the aggregated data is entirely due to the preponderance of postposed evidence mentioned in the Kenyan data, as shown in Table 9.

**Table 09: Evidence mentions position distribution**

	pre	post	mid	total
SL	2 (100.00%)	0	0	2
K	5 (45.45%)	6 (54.55)	0	29
total	8 (53.33%)	20 (39.22%)	1 (1.96%)	51

Another lexical observation is relevant here. Four of the six postposed constructions, illustrated in 28, instantiate the formula *if X is anything to go by*.

- (28) The effort of Nairobi council to popularise the use of zebra crossings bore no fruits **if pedestrians and driver habits are anything to go by.** (K May)

Thus, based on the limited data in this corpus, I hypothesise that this formulaic *if*-construction tends to be postposed, and its prevalence in the Kenyan data accounts for the preponderance of postposed evidence mention constructions.

### **Conclusions**

This study contributes to the understanding of the various ways in which LTE writers use conditional structures and thus to the understanding of conditionals and of the LTE genre. The communicative and rhetorical functions that emerged from the analysis indicated that the conditional usage is linked to the letters' problem-centred, persuasive nature and to the writers' positioning themselves as members of the community qualified to recognise and analyse problems and dangers and recommend solutions. Note that this claim does not imply that the argumentative nature of the genre causes a higher number of conditionals; the writers also have many other strategies at their disposal, and conditionals occur in these data at an unmarked frequency. The claim is rather that the prototypical conditionals are mainly used to support the argument. An interesting subset of these are ones where the *if*-construction is the protasis to a call for action, such as *if they wish the assistance to be formalised then let us by all means do so* (SL Jan.).

The logical nature of the *if P, then Q* construction lends itself to reasoning, which the writers use to build their arguments. Core elements of the arguments in LTEs are identifications of societal issues that call for comment and calls to action. The *if*-construction can be used to express either the perceived problem (problem/danger) or the recommended solution (directive). Protases that express the issue exhibit the second-highest frequency, after the default conditional—in both subcorpora, reflecting this problem-focused nature of the genre. Protases that express the call for action are also relatively frequent, as the apodosis then becomes a supporting reason why the action is proposed, as in *If such a scheme is implemented, there would be a marked improvement in the attendance at offices*.

Three uses of *if*-constructions that compete with directives for frequency, in the Kenyan corpus, are evidence mentions, challenges, and assumed goals. Evidence mentioned, which is almost unattested in the Sri Lankan letters, could be taken as an audience involvement strategy, in which the reader is invited to view and consider for themselves the evidence the reader is evoking. The use of *if*-constructions for challenging others' positions and characters reflects the community nature of the genre, as it references people and their actions presumably known to the reader community. The assumed goals also evoke community identity, positing an unarguable objective, understood in the local context, as in *if healthy and harmonious relations are to be regained*. Whether the differences in frequencies between the two subcorpora, with regard to directives, evidence mentions, challenges, and assumed goals, relates to cultural or situational factors or whether it is a fluke that would disappear with a bigger corpus is an empirical question. In line with other research, the results of this study reinforce the point that the view of conditionals as mitigators is vastly oversimplified and needs to be considered differently with different functions and positions.

The results also contribute to the understanding of *if*-construction positioning. While Nall and Nall (2010) found 60% of the conditionals in their corpus of 63 LTEs in a US newspaper to be postposed, in my data, the commonly observed tendency toward preposing holds, in the aggregate and within each subcorpus. Possible reasons for this discrepancy include that their finding was simply a variation that would have disappeared given a bigger sample, that American English LTEs and those in other varieties vary with regard to conditional ordering, and that they used different criteria in identifying conditionals. Their article does not specify whether they excluded any cases of *if*, such as cases where it was a subordinator, equivalent to *whether*, rather than a preposition. The current findings do concur that

postposing is linked to certain genre-specific functions. Formulaic constructions, such as *if X is anything to go by*, and *I would be grateful if*, tend to exhibit characteristic positioning, increasing or decreasing the chances of postposing. Lavid's (1998) finding that *only* preceding *if* strongly associates with postposing is confirmed. A final note on position is that my methodology here involved looking at the position distribution for each function; it might also be enlightening to analyse the results from the reverse perspective, i.e. to ascertain the function distribution for each position, in future analyses.

From a more practical point of view, the results can help inform English language teaching, with an eye to both inclusivity regarding dialect and a more accurate representation of what proficient speakers actually do with conditional structures, grounded in context. Research has previously noted the insufficiency of the traditional ESL textbook description of the first, second, and third conditionals. Ferguson (2001, p. 80) advocates encouraging teachers to "move beyond the traditional EFL verb-form based paradigm and consider other types of conditional defined in pragmatic terms" and discusses in some detail how corpus analysis of conditional structures can inform ESL teaching, particularly regarding English for Specific Purposes. Further, if dialectal differences in conditional usage become clearer, learner goals in relation to their target varieties could be better addressed with a localised description. Considering both practical and theoretical knowledge, the study has also made clear the need for more data and a wider range of data from more varieties of English.

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