

If... then...

by Ken Taylor

In international negotiations°, we are looking for “win-win” outcomes. Success depends on bargaining, with proposals and counterproposals°. For example:

“If you give us a six per cent discount°, then we will sign the contract°.”

It is important to master such “conditional” sentences so that you send the correct messages to your business partner. There are several varieties of conditional sentences in English, but the following three basic forms cover most situations.

1. When you want to make a proposal that is likely or possible:

“If you **accept** the new delivery terms, then we **will give** you a two per cent discount.”

This is the most common form and is easy to use. You use it to signal to your partner that you think agreement is near and likely.

Note: the most common mistake for German speakers of English is to put the “will” in the “if” part of the sentence (“~~If you will accept...~~”).

2. When you want to make a proposal that is less likely or even improbable, and when you are making a counter-proposal:

“If you **gave** us a four per cent discount, then we **would accept** your offer.”

This gives the feeling that you think your business partner will be more reluctant° to accept this proposal. Or it suggests that you are offering a counter-proposal to an offer you are not happy about.

Note: the typical German mistake is to put “would” in the “if” part of the sentence (“~~If you would give...~~”).

3. When you want to show clearly that an offer is unacceptable or when you are speculating about the past:

“If you **had accepted** a three per cent discount, then we **would have agreed** to the new delivery terms.”

This conditional is used after the negotiation to show what might have happened. It is also used during a negotiation to reject° a proposal while, at the same time, setting out your own terms for agreement. Note: the typical German mistake is to put “would have” in both parts of the sentence (“~~If you would have...~~”).

In negotiations, it is important to be careful about translating “wenn” into English. It can be either “when” or “if”. A mistranslation can change a definite promise (“I will call you when I get back this afternoon.”) into a conditional sentence (“I will call you if I get back this afternoon”).

Perhaps the most quoted° use of the conditional in English is when Winston Churchill was approached° by a female political opponent° who said: “Mr Churchill, if you were my husband, I would put poison in your tea.” To which Winston Churchill replied: “Madam, if you were my wife, I would drink it.”

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Vocabulary

negotiation
Verhandlung

counter-proposal
Gegenvorschlag

discount
Rabatt

contract
Vertrag

to be reluctant to do sth
zögern etw zu tun

to reject sth
etw. ablehnen

quoted
zitiert

to approach sb.
jmdn. ansprechen

opponent
Gegner(in)