The antecedent-only conditional constructions: 
the ‘-tara to omou to’ construction compared with the ‘I can (just) imagine if P’ construction

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Predictive conditionals are typically expressed with bi-clausal conditional constructions, such as the if \( P \) (then) \( Q \) construction in English and the \( P –tara/-(e)ba/\) to + \( Q \) constructions in Japanese. Both English and Japanese, however, can convey conditional meanings without explicitly stating the consequent clause (\( Q \)) (e.g., (1)). This paper explores such ‘antecedent-only conditional constructions’, focusing on the specific construction involved with (1), namely the ‘I can (just) imagine if P’ construction, and particularly its Japanese counterpart construction — the ‘-tara to omou to’ construction.

(1) I can just imagine if it was my daughter. (Dancygier and Sweetser 2005) Vancouver Sun (Oct. 4, 2000)

Bi-clausal predictive conditionals in English normally involve three construction types requiring particular patterns of paired verb forms in P-clauses and Q-clauses: a. If P-present, Q-will-future (neutral stance); b. If P-past, Q-would (distanced negative stance); c. If P-pluperfect, Q-would have (distanced negative stance). The speaker selects one of these constructions according to his or her epistemic stance as well as temporal viewpoint. By virtue of the specific tense/aspect/mood morphology and semantics associated with each construction, the antecedent-only construction (by maintaining the same morphology) can evoke conditional mental spaces in the same manner as the bi-clausal version, by construing the single clause as part of a bi-clausal conditional. (1), for example, presents P alone with distanced stance (i.e., b) and evokes a counterfactual mental space including the corresponding counterfactual consequent as well. Another interesting property of this truncated construction is that the antecedent-only construction is embedded within the complement of the verb ‘imagine’. Furthermore, in (1), the use of “can (just) imagine” is required to accommodate the antecedent-only construction (* I imagine if it was my daughter).

The Japanese equivalent of (1) is shown in (2):

(2) (kore ga) zibun no musume dattara to omou to.

Lit. As/when/if (I) think if (it was) my daughter. (Cf. I can imagine if it was my daughter.)

The Japanese equivalents also use the antecedent-only construction without an ostensive consequent, and are embedded within the complement of a cognitive verb such as omou ‘think’, soozoo suru ‘imagine’ and kangaeru ‘think’. What is very special and unique to the Japanese version is that the whole utterance ends with another conditional clause-linker to, constructing the antecedent of another conditional/temporal construction without its consequent clause. Though its consequent can be either ostensive (e.g., osorosii ‘feel terrified’; zotto suru ‘shudder’) or non-ostensive, Japanese requires this second layer of antecedent construction.

I will discuss two issues: (i) How is the interpretation of a negative emotive valuation obtained so clearly without the ostensive consequent; (ii) Why is the clause containing the complement of the cognitive verb ‘think’ embedded in yet another space-building antecedent? Why does it come in two layers of conditional antecedents? For (i), this paper presents a corpus analysis, examining 1000 tokens of “-tara to omou to”, and shows that the -tara to omou to construction associated with negative valuation has been highly entrenched. To examine (ii), this paper explicates the mental spaces the -tara to omou to construction evokes, showing that the higher-order antecedent (marked with to ‘as/when’) builds an on-site emotive mental space and triggers how the speaker feels now in the speech site as a result of imagining the counterfactual situation (evoked by the embedded antecedent). The -tara to omou to construction thus highlights the speaker’s fear in the speech site, whereas the ‘I can (just) imagine if P’ construction highlights the speaker’s imagination of her/his negative emotion in the counterfactual space.

In conclusion, this paper shows both that certain patterns of antecedent-only utterances constitute well-entrenched (yet language-specific) constructions associated with specific functions, and that such truncated constructions inherit important properties of their fuller bi-clausal constructions.