

# The French conditional vs Would + Verb - and how to translate it into English

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# The French conditional vs WOULD + Verb<sup>1</sup>

Jean-Marie Merle\*

This study is a comparison between the French conditional and *WOULD + Verb*. It is based on the assumption that no grammatical markers are meaningless (*i.e.* no grammatical markers are dummies).

The English form *WOULD + Verb* is usually described as the closest equivalent of the French conditional, but the problem is, the modal verb *would* cannot be used blindly to translate the French conditional.

*Would + BV* can be used to translate the first series of conditionals (1-4):

(1a) [...] si j'étais à ta place, je **ferais** réparer cette marche au plus vite. (Hergé, *Les bijoux de la Castafiore*)

(1b) And if I were you, [...], I'd **get** that step fixed. (transl. Leslie Lonsdale-Cooper & Michael Turner, *The Castafiore Emerald*)

(2a) Il avait pourtant bien dit qu'il **viendrait...**

(2b) But he did say that he **would come** —

(3a) — Quelqu'un a sonné deux fois ce matin  
— Ah, ça **serait** le facteur, alors...

(3b) “Somebody rang twice this morning.”  
“Well then, that **would have been** the postman.”

(4a) — Vous me **rendriez** un service ?

(4b) **Would** you **do** me a favour?

The second series of conditionals (5-9) cannot be translated by *would + BV*:

(5a) Comme chaque soir, dès qu'il **serait** avec Odette, [...], il cesserait de pouvoir penser à elle, [...] (Marcel Proust)

(5b) As on every other evening, once he **was** in Odette's company, [...], he would cease to be able even to think of her, [...] (transl. C. K. Scott Moncrieff & Terence Kilmartin)

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is a simplified version of a paper read at Berkeley on August 31 2000.

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(6a) { Ils **seraient** à notre recherche } que cela ne m'étonnerait pas  
(*Coke en stock*)

(6b) I wouldn't be surprised { **if they're looking** for us }. (*The Red Sea Sharks*)

(7a) [...] comme s'ils avaient écouté les progrès lointains d'une armée en marche **qui n'aurait pas encore tourné la rue de Trévise**. (Marcel Proust)

(7b) [...] as if they had caught the distant approach of an army on the march, **which had not yet rounded the corner of the rue de Trévise**. (transl. C. K. Scott Moncrieff & Terence Kilmartin)

(8a) “ Admettriez-vous, leur **aurait-il dit**, que nous discussions des problèmes du Golfe avec l'Irak en votre absence ? ” (*Le Monde*)

(8b) "Would you accept it if we discussed the problems of the Gulf with Iraq but without you ?" he **is said to have asked** them. (*The Guardian Weekly*)

(9a) Il avait bien pensé au **conditionnel enfantin** : “ On **aurait** un oncle, il **serait** en Amérique, il **s'appellerait** l'oncle Victor. ” (Marcel Aymé, “ Les bottes de sept lieues ”)

(9b) He thought of the **old childish formula** : "Let's pretend we **have** an uncle in America and his name's Uncle Victor." (transl. Norman Denny, “The Seven-League Boots”)

## 1. WOULD + VERB BASE coincides with the French conditional

The equivalence between the two forms is restricted to the following cases (1-4).

### 1. The translation of *apodoses* as in (1):

[apodosis / *i.e.* located => contextual dependency] **Prototype**

(1a) [...] si j'étais à ta place, je **ferais** réparer cette marche au plus vite. (Hergé, *Les bijoux de la Castafiore*)

(1b) And if I were you, [...], I'd **get** that step fixed. (transl. Leslie Lonsdale-Cooper & Michael Turner, *The Castafiore Emerald*)

## 2. Indirect prediction as in (2):

[indirect prediction / *i.e.* located => contextual dependency]

(2a) Il avait pourtant bien dit qu'il **viendrait**...

(2b) But he did say that he **would come** —

3. The translation of *epistemic* (French) conditional as in (3):

[epistemic / conjectural => congruence subj.–predicate–context above]

(3a) — Quelqu'un a sonné deux fois ce matin

— Ah, ça **serait** le facteur, alors...

(3b) “Somebody rang twice this morning.”

“Well then, that **would have been** the postman.”

4. And a few cases of tentative use of *would* as in (4):

[tentative => congruence subject–predicate]

(4a) — Vous me **rendriez** un service ?

(4b) **Would** you **do** me a favour?

## 2. *WOULD* + *VERB BASE* cannot be used to translate the French conditional

In many other cases *Would* + *Verb* is not (or cannot be) used to translate the French conditional. The following list, (5-9), is not intended to be exhaustive.

## 5. Temporal adverbial clauses as in (5):

[Temporal adverbial clause / *i.e.* locator]

(5a) Comme chaque soir, dès qu'il **serait** avec Odette, [...], il cesserait de pouvoir penser à elle, [...] (Marcel Proust)

(5b) As on every other evening, once he **was** in Odette's company, [...], he would cease to be able even to think of her, [...] (transl. C. K. Scott Moncrieff & Terence Kilmartin)

## 6. Hypothetical clauses, or protases as in (6):

[protasis / hypothetical clause / *i.e.* locator]

(6a) { Ils **seraient** à notre recherche } que cela ne m'étonnerait pas  
(*Coke en stock*)

(6b) I wouldn't be surprised { **if they're looking** for us }. (*The Red Sea Sharks*)

## 7. Fictitious modification of the antecedent, in a relative clause, as in (7):

[chimerical (fictitious, hypothetical) property in a relative clause]

(7a) [...] comme s'ils avaient écouté les progrès lointains d'une armée en marche **qui n'aurait pas encore tourné la rue de Trévis**.  
(Marcel Proust)

(7b) [...] as if they had caught the distant approach of an army on the march, **which had not yet rounded the corner of the rue de Trévis**. (transl. C. K. Scott Moncrieff & Terence Kilmartin)

## 8. The so-called *journalistic* conditional as in (8):

[*journalistic* conditional / virtualisation (-**R-**) + tuncalisation<sup>2</sup> (-**ait**) of uncertain facts / external dependency : subjective + non prospective conditional]

(8a) “ Admettriez-vous, leur **aurait-il dit**, que nous discussions des problèmes du Golfe avec l'Irak en votre absence ? ” (*Le Monde*)

(8b) "Would you accept it if we discussed the problems of the Gulf with Iraq but without you ?" he **is said to have asked** them. (*The Guardian Weekly*)

## 9. The conditional used by children to map out an imaginary world of their own as in (9):

[The conditional as used by children / subjective + arbitrary / *thetic conditional* (*i.e.* structuring a new theme or topic)]

<sup>2</sup> The opposition *nuncal* / *tuncal* is basically referential. *Nuncal* (from Latin *nunc* = now) & *tuncal* (from Latin *tunc* = then) refer to two different sets of coordinates, or two different actualities. The **nuncal** coordinates include the speaker's ego-hic-**nunc** (*I-here-now*); the **tuncal** coordinates imply disconnection from the *nuncal* plane.

(9a) Il avait bien pensé au **conditionnel enfantin** : “ On **aurait** un oncle, il **serait** en Amérique, il **s'appellerait** l'oncle Victor. ” (Marcel Aymé, “ Les bottes de sept lieues ”)

(9b) He thought of the **old childish formula** : "Let's **pretend** we **have** an uncle in America and his name's Uncle Victor." (transl. Norman Denny, “The Seven-League Boots”)

### 3. The archetype

**10.** The conditional expressing predestination is also the archetype, derived from the etymon, as in (10):

[Archetype, expressing predestination]

(10a) Henri IV, qui **serait assassiné** en 1610, eut néanmoins le temps d'assainir les finances du pays.

(10b) Henry IV, who **was to be assassinated** in 1610, had nevertheless time to improve the financial health of the country.

This type of conditional (10a) can also be translated with *would + V*:

(10b) Henry IV, who **would be assassinated** in 1610, had nevertheless time to improve the financial health of the country.

### A problem for the translator

The difficulty for the translator is to know when and why the two forms (the French conditional and *Would + V*) do or do not coincide. The next step will be to compare them. **The French conditional** will come first (§ 4), as the problem is a problem of translation from French into English.

### 4. The French conditional

The French conditional is usually described as a combination of future tense and *imparfait* as in (11), **which it is not**, definitely, even though there *are* indeed morphological similarities between the French future and the French conditional:

**11. [CONDITIONAL : je marcherais, tu marcherais, il / elle marcherait, nous marcherions, vous marcheriez, ils / elles marcheraient** (semantic prototype of *marcher* = semantic prototype of *walk*)

Usually described as : CONDITIONAL = \*[FUTURE + IMPERFECT]

Marcherais = \*[Marcherai + ais]

This description of the conditional is definitely inadequate as diachrony provides evidence that the conditional appeared **before** the future tense (cf. example 12, *infra*).

The morphology of the conditional provides further evidence that the conditional is not derived from the future. The future tense is a fused form of the infinitive + the present of the verb *avoir* (*marcherai* [future tense] = *marcher* + *ai*). If the French conditional tense were derived from a combination of \*[future tense + imperfect], the combination would be self-contradictory as it would imply [infinitive + present of *avoir* \*+ *avoir* in the imperfect]. This combination is unacceptable because of the contradiction and incompatibility between present and imperfect, which refer to two fundamentally distinct planes or actualities. The present refers to a plane or actuality including the speaker's coordinates (a *nuncal* plane defined by *nuncal* coordinates *I, here, now*), whereas the imperfect refers to a plane or actuality (a *tuncal* plane) disconnected from the speaker's coordinates. Hence the contradiction in the traditional description of the conditional tense, which must be given up altogether as it does not tally with facts.

The etymon, or first occurrence, appeared in the 3rd century (A.D.). It was originally a periphrastic form, made up of the infinitive of a lexical verb + the imperfect of Latin *habere*, as shown in (12):

**12. [Etymon – in late Latin and early Roman]**

(12a) [...] a quibus [...] suscipi habebat. (Tertullian)

Literally: by whom [...] be welcomed had + 3<sup>rd</sup> pers [marking localisation].

(12b) [...] by whom [...] he **was to be welcomed**.

(12c) [...] par qui [...] il **serait accueilli**.

– This new form expressed predestination, not constraint, and it was an equivalent of 'was to + Verb', not of 'had to + Verb'.

– It coexisted with the classic Latin future tense (expressing intention) until the 7th Century, when the classic future tense was supplanted by the new form.

– Originally it was used in subordinate clauses, mainly relative clauses; the infinitive was passive and *habere* in the imperfect.

– The archetype as given in (10) *supra* is the present-day use of the conditional which is closest to the etymon.

Contemporary morphology of the conditional is the result of the fusion of the markers **-R-** of the infinitive, and of *avoir* / *have* in the *imperfect*, as shown in (13):

### 13. [CONDITIONAL]

**CONDITIONAL = [INFINITIVE + (avoir) + IMPERFECT]**

Marcherait = marcher + Ø + -ais  
= [I] would walk

Markers of the conditional = **-R-** + **-ais**

Semantic value of markers = virtualis + (= localisation) + tuncal

The French future tense came after the etymon of the conditional, and it was formed on the same pattern: **infinitive + present** of *HAVE*.

My first conclusion will be that the French conditional can be read as follows:

Validation of the predicative relation is explicitly *virtualis* (role or **-R-**, marker of the infinitive), and localized on a *tuncal* plane (role of **-ais**), *i.e.* disconnected from the *nuncal* coordinates. This description seems to apply to all uses of the French conditional.

### 5. Would + V

The English form is made up of [*Will* + *ed*] + *Verb base*.

1. The verb base implies notional reference just as the marker of the infinitive does in the French conditional.

2. **-ed** functions as a marker of disconnection, which can be defined as follows (14).



**14. Disconnection:** an operation through which the reference built up in a predicative relation (the event or state of things referred to), is cut off (disconnected) from the **nuncal** set of coordinates (speaker's *ego-hic-nunc* / *I, here, now*).

In English, **-ed** is the operator of disconnection par excellence (*-ed* can indicate temporal disconnection or hypothetical disconnection or “tentative” disconnection,...).

There are two types of disconnection in French as opposed to one in English :

— **Aoristic disconnection**, structuring a narrative through successive operations of disconnection from the utterer's coordinates (*e.g. Elle est venue, elle a vu, elle a vaincu* / *She came, she saw, she conquered*). Aoristic tenses are: *passé composé* (*elle est venue = she came*) and *passé simple* (*elle vint = she came*).

— **Tuncal disconnection**, or non aoristic (non narrative) disconnection implying a new set of coordinates (**tuncal** coordinates instead of **nuncal**), *i.e.* a new level of actuality (or *tuncal* plane). Tuncal tenses are all marked by **-ais** (imperfect *marchais*, conditional *marcherais*, past perfect *avais marché*).

*E.g.:*

(14a) Il **dit** (aoristic) qu'il **aimait** (non aoristic, *i.e.* tuncal) le chocolat.

(14a') Il **dit** qu'il **\*aima** le chocolat.

(14b) He **said** [**(-ed)**] he **liked** [**(-ed)**] chocolate. No distinction is made in English between *aoristic* or *tuncal* disconnection.

(15a) S'il **mangeait** (**-ait** tuncal) du chocolat, il **serait** (*virtualis* tuncal) plus optimiste.

(15b) If he **ate** (**(-ed)**) chocolate, he **would feel** (*will* + **(-ed)** + *Verb base*, *i.e.* *virtualis*) more optimistic.

Remarks about disconnection in English:

– no distinction is made between hypothetical disconnection and temporal disconnection (with the exception of *were*, as in (1b): *And if I were you, [...], I'd get that step fixed*;

– no distinction is made between *tuncal* and *aoristic* disconnection, as in (14b);

– and no distinction between *virtualis* and *non virtualis* as in (5b) – *As on every other evening, once he was in Odette's company, [...], he would cease to be able even to think of her, [...]* –, which may be a temporary cause of ambiguity, if you compare *once he was* and *dès qu'il serait*. The French conditional (*dès qu'il serait avec Odette*) indicates *virtualis* status and is immediately perceived as anticipatory, whereas *as soon as he was with Odette* is ambiguous.

## 6. WILL

The original meaning of *willan* (*wyllan*), *to desire, to wish*, implies a gap between the state of affairs desired (which is necessarily virtual) and its validation or actualization. This entails at least two semantic characteristics.

The first characteristic is an **orientation towards validation of the predicative relation**, which might be called *prospect of validation* (*Where there's a will there's a way*). This characteristic is shared by *shall* and *will*.

The second characteristic is **semantic compatibility** or **semantic agreement** or **semantic concord** between subject and predicate (cf. 16). This property might be called *contextual congruence* (*i.e.* congruence between subject and predicate). The characteristic of *congruence* is shared by *will / would* and *can / could*; but not by *shall / should* as in (17) and (18): *you should wash your hands* or *she should be twenty by now*), which both mark the utterer's intrusion, *i.e.* respectively in (17) deontic interference and in (18) epistemic subjectivity.

(16)

	(+) congruence	(-) congruence
(+) orientation towards validation	WILL / WOULD	SHALL / SHOULD
(-) orientation	CAN / COULD	MAY / MIGHT

(17) You **should** wash your hands! (deontic interference / external dependency)

(18) She **should** be twenty by now – (epistemic subjectivity / external dependency)

- (19) All right, you **may** go. (deontic interference / external dependency)
- (20) She **might** be twenty by now. (epistemic subjectivity / external dependency)
- (21) She **will** be twenty next month. (prediction based on congruence between subject and predicate / no external dependency)
- (22) He **can** swim for hours. (congruence between subject and predicate / no external dependency)

My conclusion about *will* is that *prospect of validation* and *contextual congruence* between subject and predicate are what might be called the **semantic residual value** of the modal *will*.

### 7. Translations of the French conditional

Now, bearing in mind these two semantic characteristics of *will* (*prospect of validation* and *contextual congruence* between subject and predicate), and the referential characteristics of the French conditional as *virtualis* and *tuncal*, we can try to elicit the reasons why in (5-10) the form *would + Verb* is not or cannot be used to translate the conditional.

- (5a) Comme chaque soir, dès qu'il **serait** avec Odette, [...], il cesserait de pouvoir penser à elle, [...] (Marcel Proust)
- (5b) As on every other evening, once he **was** in Odette's company, [...], he would cease to be able even to think of her, [...] (transl. C. K. Scott Moncrieff & Terence Kilmartin)

My comment on (5) is based on the assumption that time adverbials are time locators, *i.e.* the clause *once he was in Odette's company* functions as a locator (a semantic or referential locator) for the clause *he would cease to be able even to think of her*. Two remarks can be made here. Remark one will be that the locating criterion **is the validation of** the predicative relation *he was in Odette's company*, **not** the prospect of validation. Second remark: the prospect of validation of the locator is not relevant here. As it is validation which serves as locator, *will* or *would* is normally not necessary in a standard temporal adverbial clause.

- (6a) { Ils **seraient** à notre recherche } que cela ne m'étonnerait pas  
(*Coke en stock*)

(6b) I wouldn't be surprised { **if they're looking** for us }. (*The Red Sea Sharks*)

About (6): the first clause in 6a (*Ils seraient à notre recherche*) is both conjectural and hypothetical. The difference between the conjecture in (3) (*that would have been the postman*) and the conjecture in (6) (*Ils seraient à notre recherche*) is that in 3 it has thematic value, it is conclusive probability, *i.e.* it develops and concludes the topic being discussed, and it indicates congruence between subject, predicate and context above; whereas in (6), *Ils seraient à notre recherche* is not conclusive : it has thetic value, *i.e.* it initiates a new theme which reflects the speaker's subjectivity and arbitrariness (or external dependency of the utterance). Congruence is not relevant.

Incidental remark: this does not mean of course that *will* or *would* cannot be used in an *if*-clause, as in (23):

(23) *I have to show you, he said. May I come in?*  
*I don't know. **If it won't take long**, I said. I'm pretty busy.* (Raymond Carver, "Collectors", 1976)

(7a) [...] comme s'ils avaient écouté les progrès lointains d'une armée en marche **qui n'aurait pas encore tourné la rue de Trévise**. (Marcel Proust)

(7b) [...] as if they had caught the distant approach of an army on the march, **which had not yet rounded the corner of the rue de Trévise**. (transl. C. K. Scott Moncrieff & Terence Kilmartin)

My comment on (7) is that the relative clause *qui n'aurait pas encore tourné la rue de Trévise* has thetic value: it refers to a fictitious, defining property, reflecting just as in 6 the speaker's subjectivity and arbitrariness. Congruence and prospect of validation are not relevant here.

Incidental remark: this does not entail of course that *will* or *would* cannot be used in a restrictive relative, as in (24):

(24) *Do you know of a sherpa who'd agree to go with us to search for Tchang ?*

(8a) “ Admettriez-vous, leur **aurait-il dit**, que nous discussions des problèmes du Golfe avec l'Irak en votre absence ? ” (*Le Monde*)

(8b) "Would you accept it if we discussed the problems of the Gulf with Iraq but without you ?" he **is said to have asked** them. (*The Guardian Weekly*)

The journalistic conditional in (8) is used to *virtualize* and *tuncalize* uncertain facts, or facts gathered from unreliable sources. Prospect of validation is not relevant here. The orientation to be expressed is not towards validation but the exact reverse, *i.e.* away from validation, as the journalist needs to decline responsibility for the reported statement.

The solution used in English is to suggest or mention the existence of an intermediary situation of utterance without mentioning the unknown or unreliable intermediary speaker. The most frequent solutions are: *reportedly, allegedly, is said to, is reported to, etc.*

(9a) Il avait bien pensé au **conditionnel enfantin** : " On **aurait** un oncle, il **serait** en Amérique, il **s'appellerait** l'oncle Victor. " (Marcel Aymé, " Les bottes de sept lieues ")

(9b) He thought of the **old childish formula** : " **Let's pretend** we **have** an uncle in America and his name's Uncle Victor." (transl. Norman Denny, "The Seven-League Boots")

The conditional used by children, as in (9), is fundamentally *thetic*, which entails that the utterance depends entirely on the speaker structuring arbitrarily a new world of his / her own.

Contextual congruence is not relevant here, and *would + Verb* cannot be used, at least in the early stages initiating the new theme.

(10a) Henri IV, qui **serait assassiné** en 1610, eut néanmoins le temps d'assainir les finances du pays.

(10b) Henry IV, who **was to be assassinated** in 1610, had nevertheless time to improve the financial health of the country.

In (10) congruence is not relevant in a context expressing predestination (but the use of *would* is not precluded).

### **In conclusion**

The French conditional and *would + Verb* are fundamentally asymmetric both syntactically and semantically.

Syntactically because the French form is synthetic, and concentrates nodal, modal and predicative functions, whereas the English form is periphrastic: the modal *will* concentrates two functions, nodal and modal.

This difference has semantic consequences: the semantic value of the French conditional – **-rais** – is more stable and abstract / the semantic value of *will* has more flexibility and can either be revived, as in (23) or (24) or be very abstract as in pure prediction – see (21).

The semantic asymmetry between the two forms is of course the key to the problem of translation.

Contextual congruence implies internal compatibility between subject and predicate and precludes external dependency.

Whenever the French conditional isthetic as in (6), (7), or (9), (*i.e.* whenever the utterance falls within the scope of external dependency), *would* cannot be used.

When the prospect of validation of the predicative relation is not relevant, as in (5) or (8), *would* cannot be used either.

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