

Homeric Conditional Sentences

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The first thing to know about conditional sentences in Epic Greek is that all the types available in the standard Attic grammars hold true. Homer just has a bit more freedom in certain types to use other moods and tenses.

In the discussion below I will first give an overview, then Attic usage, then additional Epic notes for the different sorts of conditionals. I will regard as equivalent εἰ and αἰ, as well as ὅν and κεν. This assumption isn't entirely warranted, but it'll do for now. Most of the basic information comes from one of Helma Dik's wonderful handouts and Goodwin for Attic and Monro, Benner and Pharr for Epic.

Specific Conditions

Conditional sentences represent the speaker's attitude about the likelihood of a particular condition being met, and come in two kinds: specific and general. Specific conditionals are usually one-off sorts of things, or statements of particular events. General conditions are about general, repeatable situations. We'll start with specific conditions.

Neutral. "If X is true, then Y." The speaker makes no commitment to whether or not the condition is likely to be met.

εἰ + *any indicative, any indicative*

εἰ τοῦτο ποιεῖ, καλῶς ἔχει *if he is doing this, it is good*; εἰ τοῦτ' ἐποίησε, καλῶς ἔχει *if he did this, it is good*.

Contrary-to-fact (often also called the *unreal*). "If I were a god, I could do anything." The speaker knows that the condition is false and cannot be met.

εἰ + *any past indicative, any past indicative* + ὅν

Traditional grammars usually speak of present contrary-to-fact conditions, which use the imperfect in both clauses, and past contrary to fact conditions, which use the aorist. The difference is actually one of aspect. For speakers of English, the

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most natural translation of an aorist contrary-to-fact condition will in fact use a past tense, εἰ τοῦτ' ἐποίησε, καλῶς ἂν ἔσχεν *if he had done this, it would be good*. But *in Attic* for the imperfect the then-clause may be reasonably translated either as a present or a past, εἰ τοῦτ' ἐποίει, καλῶς ἂν εἶχεν *if he were doing this it would be good or it would have been good*.

Epic. In Homer the imperfect in the then-clause always refers to past time. When the present is needed, the then-clause is in the optative: εἰ μὲν τις τὸν ὄνειρον ἄλλος ἔνισπεν, ψευδὸς κεν φαίμεν *if any other had told this dream, we would call it a lie*, II.2.80.

Future More Vivid. “If I find your keys, I’ll call you.” The speaker considers it likely or plausible that the condition will be fulfilled.

ἔάν, ἦν, εἴ κεν + *subjunctive, future*

The future in the then-clause may be a future indicative, or another form referring to the future, such as an imperative: εἰ μὲν κεν Μενέλαον Ἀλέξανδρος καταπέφνη, αὐτὸς ἔπειθ' Ἑλένην ἐχέτω *if Alexander slays Menelaos, let him then have Helen*, II.3.281.

In *Epic* the then-clause may also take the subjunctive with ἂν, κεν. Further, the if-clause will sometimes drop ἂν, κεν.

Future Less Vivid. “If you would just agree with me, everything would be better.” The speaker thinks fulfillment of the condition is not very likely.

εἰ + *optative, optative* + ἂν

The choice between present and aorist optative is a matter of aspect. εἰ τοῦτο ποιήσῃ (ποιήσῃ), καλῶς ἂν ἔχοι *if he would do this, it would be good*.

In *Epic* the if-clause may also take ἂν, κεν, and the then-clause may take nearly anything: present indicative, future indicative (with or without κεν), and the subjunctive (again, with or without ἂν, κεν).

General Conditions

Present General. “If it rains, the streets get wet.” A statement of general truth in the present.

ἔάν, ἦν, εἴ κεν + *subjunctive, present indicative*

Note carefully the then-clause here — it is in the present. This is the only thing which distinguishes the present general from the future more vivid condition. ἐάν τις κλέπτη, κολάζεται *if anyone (ever) steals, he is punished.*

In *Epic* the if-clause may drop ἄν, κεν.

Past General. This is a statement of general truth in the past.

εἰ + optative, imperfect

The then-clause may take ἄν.

The past general condition occurs only once in Homer.

Things to Remember

Only by noting both the if-clause and the then-clause can you correctly identify the type of condition.

The if-clause is usually negated with μή, the then-clause with οὐ.

In *Epic* an if-clause subjunctive may drop ἄν, κεν.

condition	if-clause	then-clause
Neutral	εἰ + indicative	indicative
Contrary-to-fact <i>Present contrary-to-fact, Epic</i>	εἰ + past indicative εἰ + past indicative	past indicative present optative
Future more vivid <i>Epic variants:</i>	ἐάν, ἦν, εἴ κεν + subjunctive εἰ + subjunctive	future future subjunctive + ἄν, κεν
Future Less Vivid <i>Epic variants:</i>	εἰ + optative εἰ ἄν (κεν) + optative	optative + ἄν, κεν optative + ἄν, κεν present indicative future indicative future indicative + κεν subjunctive subjunctive + κεν
Present General <i>Epic variant</i>	ἐάν, ἦν, εἴ κεν + subjunctive εἰ + subjunctive	present indicative present indicative
Past General	εἰ + optative	imperfect