The Conditional Mood
Review #2: Usage

The basic meaning of the conditional is familiar to you. It is used to express "would" type things:

Bheidís sásta	they would be content
D'thiocfadh muid	we would come
D'ólfainn é	I would drink it
Cheannófá carr	You would buy a car
D'fhoghlaimeofadh sí Gaeilge	She would learn Irish

Most of the time it works very much as in English, but, as always, there are a few tricks.

A TALE OF TWO IF'S (AND ONE IF NOT)

In the affirmative, there are two words for "if", *dá* (or *dhá* in much of Conamara) and *má*. The short summary is that *dá* is used only with the conditional, and *má* is used to *express* the other four tenses, although it only uses the *forms* of *three* tenses to do that. First, how they work.

Dá

Dá is used for conditional clauses like, "If it would rain," "If they would come," "If you would buy". It is what you will use much of the time when you are thinking "would" in English.

Dá is followed by the conditional form, but with *eclipsis*:

Dá mbeifeá sásta	*Dá dtiocfadh muid*	*Dá n-ólfainn é*
Dá gceannófá carr	*Dá bhfoghlaimeofadh sí Gaeilge*	

Má

Má is used for things that might happen, but more in the sense of "if that happens" than "if it would happen, be the case, that . . .". We'll sort out the subtleties in a moment, but after the *má* version of "if":

1. the verb is lenited, except for the "*deir*" forms, and *fuair;*

2. vowel and fh forms keep the d' in front of them;

3. we can the special combination *má tá*; and

4. we don't use the future, even when that is what we mean. We use the habitual present instead.

Thus:

Má d'ól mé é	*Má cheannaigh tú carr*	*Má fhoghlaimíonn sí Gaeilge*
Má tá tú anseo (anois)	*Má bhíonn tú anseo (go hióndúil)*	

Má théann sibh 'chuile lá	*Má théann sibh amárach*
If you go every day	If you go tomorrow

This future/present habitual thing isn't as strange as you might think. When we say, in English:

If he shuts up, I will say something

"If he shuts up" is talking about a future event.

When to Use What

These two *If's* don't map perfectly to English, of course, but they are pretty close. Still, it can be hard to know where the line is at times, and I certainly am not always certain of which one I want. But the following notions and examples should help.

First, remember that most of these *If's* have a *Then* someplace. The easiest way to keep things straight is to focus on the *Then* part. If your "then" feels like a "would" phrase, use *Dá* and the conditional. If your "then" would be in some other tense, use *má* and the appropriate tense.

> *Má thagann sí, beidh fearg orm*   If she comes, I will be angry
> i.e., I told her not to come, and I will be annoyed if she shows up.

> *Dá dtiocfadh sí, bheadh áthas orm*   If she would come, I would be delighted.

In both cases, we are talking about something that might happen. The first has a more factual feel to it, if you will, and the "then" is a simple *cause-effect* outcome of the "if".

The second is less concrete: you aren't necessarily expecting her to show or not show, but if it came to be, this is how things would be. People say there's a degree of belief or probability (or sometimes wishing) in the conditional forms.

Although it is hard to explain, you can develop a feel for it, just as you have in English:

> If he shuts up, I will speak (*má*)   If he would shut up, I would speak (*dá*)

And the "if" portion doesn't have to lead the sentence:

> Cheannóinn carr nua dá dtabharfá an t-airgead dom.
> Rachaidh mé go dtí mo sheomra má thagann sí.

Remember, though, if the **non-if** part of the sentence is conditional, us *dá* + conditional in the **if** part.

If Not

The same word is used for "if not" in both situations, in all tenses. *Mura* (or *mara*) is followed by eclipsis (and dependent forms). *Murar* is used in the past, except for the usual irregular verbs.

> *Mura bhfuil tú sásta*   *Mura mbeifeá sásta*   *Mura gceannófá carr nua*
> *Mura dtiocfaidh sí*   *Mura dtiocfadh sí*   *Murar ghoid sé é*
> *Mura raibh siad ann*   *Mura ndearna tú*   *Murar ól sí é*

Other Particles

Everything else -- *an, nach, go,* etc. -- works as expected. *Dúirt sí go dtiocfadh sí*.

ODDS & ENDS

Questions & Answers

As you might expect, when you answer questions in the conditional, you can used the combined forms:

> *An ólfá tú cupán tae?*   *D'ólfainn*
> *An mbuafainn?*   *Ní bhuafá*
> *Nach gcoinneofá é?*   *Choinneoinn.*

That said, there's a tendency to answer the other persons/number with the basic form:

> *An bhfoilseoidís é?*   *Ní fhoilseodh (Ní fhoilseoidís)*
> *Nach ndíolfaidís iad?*   *Dhíolfadh! (Dhíolfaidís!)*

Murach

There is also *murach*, which is used with nouns -- If it weren't for the rain . . .. Your dictionary is clear enough on that, just mentioning it so it doesn't get mixed up with the *mura* forms.

If So

Sometimes you may respond to a statement with a *má*, to express a condition or doubt:

A: "Caithfidh muid feiceáil "Slasher Killer Gruesome Movie Part 13," tá sé go hiontach ar fad!"

> or

A: "Cuir mé ar ais isteach, "Coach," is féidir liom imirt, níl mo chos chomh briste sin!"

> *B: "Bhuel, má tá . . ."*

Féad

You have to get a handle on the verb *féad*. It's basic meaning is "to be able to", but when you put it in the conditional, you end up with "could":

> *Tá brón orm, ní fhéadfainn fanacht nóiméad eile!*
> I'm sorry, I couldn't stay a minute longer!
>
> *Nach bhféadfá . . . fanacht/teacht/dul/ é a dhéanamh . . .* Couldn't you . . .
>
> *Dhéanfainn é dá bhféadfainn*   I would do it if I could

In fact, the vast majority of the time you encounter this verb, it will be in the conditional. It is often used, even in non-autonomous forms, in general ways that feel kind of autonomous:

> *D'fhéadfá a rá*   you could say
> *D'fhéadfadh sé a bheith fíor*   It could be true

Now, this verb is used in other tenses. But you see the conditional forms so often, as the most common way to express "could" -- and I notice that people struggle with it when they encounter it in reading, say -- that you really want to make sure you know the conditional of this one.