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# A Pragmatic Analysis of Discourse Connectives in the Framework of Relevance Theory

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Discourse connectives can be dealt with in relevance-theoretic terms, as indicators of types of relevance. These connectives can be used to constrain the interpretation of an utterance. They are analyzed in a broad classification outlined in discourse connectives which introduce contextual implications, which are concerned with strengthening and which introduce denials. A relevance based approach to discourse is a more adequate framework than a coherence based one for the analysis of discourse connectives.

*Keywords:* pragmatics, discourse connective, relevance theory

## Introduction

The notion of textual coherence can be explained in terms of the principle of relevance. So in this way, discourse connectives play a main role as constrains on implicatures (Blackmore, 1987). In actual discourse, a speaker would constrain the interpretation of the connection between two utterances which would be left specified by the use of discourse connectives like *so*, *after all*, *moreover*, or *however* (Blackmore, 1992).

According to the relevance-based framework, hearers interpret every utterance in the smallest and most accessible context that yields adequate contextual effects for no unjustifiable effort. This means that if a speaker wishes to constrain the interpretation recovered by hearer, he must constrain the hearer's choice of context. And since the constructions we are considering ensure correct selection at minimal processing cost, they can be regarded as effective means for constraining the interpretation of utterances in accordance with the principle of relevance (HE, 2000).

In fact, it seems that this framework allows us to make a more specific claim about the relationship between linguistic structure and pragmatic interpretation. According to Blackmore (1987, p. 138), there are three ways in which information conveyed by an utterance can be relevant:

(1) It may allow the derivation of a contextual implication;

(2) It may strengthen an existing assumption (by providing better evidence for it);

(3) It may contradict an existing assumption.

If the hearer does interpret an utterance in the context of the interpretation of the preceding text, then it follows that it will be connected to that text in one of the three easy corresponding to 1-3 above. It also follows

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that a language may develop structures which constrain the hearer's interpretation in any of the three ways corresponding to 1-3, or in other words, three types of discourse connectives. The following is the classification of discourse connectives in accordance of the three ways above (Blackmore, 1992).

## Discourse Connectives Which Introduce Contextual Implications

The discussion of discourse connectives has been restricted to the cases in which an expression is used to indicate how the utterance it introduces is relevant in a context which is made accessible by the interpretation of the preceding utterance (Blackmore, 1987). However, many of these so-called "connectives" can be used to constrain the interpretation of an utterance even though they are not used to connect two segments of text. The role of *so* in (1) is exactly the same as its role in (2).

(1) A: You take the first turning on the left.

B: *So* we don't go past the university (then).

(2) Hearer (who is driving) makes a left turn.

*So* we're not going past the university (then/after all).

In both cases, the speaker is confirming that the proposition *so* introduces is indeed a contextual implication of an assumption which has been made accessible. Whereas in (1), this assumption is made accessible by another utterance; in (2), the speaker is drawing attention to an assumption that he has derived from his observation of an event.

This use of *so* is clearly related to the one in (3) where the speaker is asking A what the intended relevance of his utterance is.

(3) A: Your clothes smell of perfume.

B: *So* (what)?

B is, of course, asking (rhetorically) what conclusion he is expected to draw. A proposition that is introduced by *so* must be interpreted as a conclusion. The same point can, of course, be made about *therefore.* However, while *so* can be used as (more informal) substituted for *therefore*, it seems that *therefore* cannot be always substituted for *so*. Thus while both *so* and *therefore* are acceptable in (4), the use of *therefore* is unacceptable in examples like (2) and (3).

(4) This suggestion can be cancelled without contradiction. *Therefore/So* it is an implicature.

Whereas in (4), *so* is being used to introduce a proposition that the speaker is aiming to prove by the presentation of another, in (1) and (3), it is not. That this use of *so* (and *therefore*) must be preceded by another utterance is not surprising in view of the fact, first, that an assumption may provide proof only if it comes with a guarantee of factuality, and second, that only communicated assumption comes with any sort of guarantee of relevance. In other words, a speaker cannot be said to be proving something if he does not present the proof.

## Discourse Connectives Concerned With Strengthening

Speakers do not always present the proof and then the conclusion. As we have seen, the use of *after all* indicates that the proposition it introduces is evidence for an assumption which has just been made accessible (Blackmore, 1992). In (5), the proposition introduced by *after all* is relevant as justification for the claim in the first utterance of the sequence.

(5) You have to have another drink. *After all* it is your birthday.

In other words, the aim is to increase the strengthing of the hearer's commitment to the assumption conveyed in the first utterance.

The aim is rather similar in (6), except here speaker B is providing additional evidence for an assumption which is derived from the first segment.

(6) A: Will you make pancakes?

B: I haven't really got time tonight. *Besides* there's no milk.

The suggestion is that the hearer is expected to derive the conclusion in (7) from the proposition expressed by the first utterance and from the proposition expressed by the second utterance.

(7) B will not make pancakes.

Since a conclusion that is derived from two separated sets of premises will inherit a degree of strength greater than the one that it inherits from either set alone, the effect of presenting the additional evidence is to strengthen the guarantee that the speaker is offering the factuality of (7) in his first utterance. Other expressions which introduce additional evidence are *moreover*, *furthermor*e, and utterance-initial *also*.

These are not, however, the only expressions which have to do with the strengthening of existing assumptions. In (8), B's use of *indeed* indicates that his utterance is relevant as confirmation of the assumption conveyed by A's utterance.

(8) A: That's good news.

B: It is, *indeed*.

This kind of utterance stands in direct contrast to the type we shall consider next, where the speaker's intention is to contradict some element of the interpretation of a proceeding utterance.

## Discourse Connectives Which Introduce Denials

Consider the exchange in (9) where B's intention is to deny the assumption conveyed in the preceding utterance.

(9) A: David isn't here.

B: Yes he is.

As we have seen, a hearer who is presented with an assumption which is inconsistent with an existing one will abandon the one for which he has the least evidence. This means that an utterance may be relevant in virtue of providing evidence for an assumption which is inconsistent with an assumption which the speaker believes the hearer to hold. In (9), the speaker simply presents a proposition which is inconsistent with one expressed by A's utterance and the hearer will abandon his assumption only if he thinks that B has better evidence than he has. In (10), speaker B presents evidence for the truth of a proposition which is inconsistent with the one expressed by A's utterance and the effect will depend on just how good the hearer thinks this evidence is.

(10) A: David isn't here.

B: I just saw him in his office.

In these examples, there is no need for the speaker to indicate how he expects his utterance to be interpreted. However, there are cases in which the speaker must indicate that his utterance is relevant as a denial. In (11), for example, the use of *however* indicates that the proposition it introduces is inconsistent with a proposition from the

first utterance.

(11) David is here. *However*, you can't see him.

This means that the speaker's use of *however* is appropriate only if he assumes that the speaker has immediate access to contextual assumptions which allow the derivation of the implication that hearer can see David. And this, of course, is not necessarily the case—the hearer might have brought quite different contextual assumptions to bear and derived quite different contextual implications. The use of *however* indicates how the speaker thought the hearer would have interpreted the first utterance.

## Conclusion

The relevance theory provides a better theoretical framework for the discussion of the relation between linguistic form and pragmatic understanding. It is common to use discourse connectives, which provide effects to linguistic generation and understanding, and discover the speaker's intention and the content which is not explicitly expressed on the surface, thus pragmatic constrains being realized (Unger, 1996; HE & RAN, 1999). The speaker can use discourse connectives to lead the hearer to acquire the contextual assumption and contextual effects which he expects, in other words, provide the hearer with explicit linguistic marks, thus indicating that the speaker expects how the hearer maximally acquires the effect of the relevance of utterances at minimal processing cost. Therefore, the relevance based framework is more powerful than the coherence based one in the analysis of discourse connectives.

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