

Testing dependent and equipollent relations in discourse

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1. Introduction

The Speaker may give the same or a different communicative status to a pair of Discourse Acts in the same Move. Acts with the same communicative status are considered Equipollent in FDG; when they have different communicative status, one is subsidiary of the other, that is, Dependent (Hengeveld and Mackenzie 2008, Keizer 2015).

Subsidiarity is the same general principle that contrasts Coordination (non-subsidiarity) and Subordination (subsidiarity). General literature acknowledges that these relations are involved in the structure of discourse, although it is less clear which are the factors and forms involved.

The purpose of this paper is exploratory. I aim at a better understanding of the pragmatic and semantic nature of subsidiary and non-subsidiary relations between linguistic units that might improve the empirical analysis of oral discourse structure. I do so by putting together three approaches to discourse relations between linguistic units. I present these proposals in the next section. In addition, I apply them to the analysis of a short Catalan narrative segment.

2. Three approaches to discourse relations

2.1. Equipollence and Dependence in FDG

In FDG (Hengeveld and Mackenzie 2008, Keizer 2015) Equipollence and Dependence account for the *communicative status* of two Discourse Acts belonging to the same Move. A Speaker gives equal communicative status (Equipollence) to two Acts when he presents them as autonomous Acts. A Speaker gives unequal communicative status to two A (Dependency) when he gives indications that a particular Act performs a subsidiary rhetorical function

with respect to another. A number of “rhetorical functions” may hold between Discourse Acts, including Motivation, Concession, Orientation, Correction and Aside. These functions refer to Speaker's actions, and, thus, should not be confused with rhetorical functions between real-world events (such as Cause).

2.2. Asher and Vieu's (2005) Tests for Coordinating and Subordinating Discourse Relations

Test 1: If you can attach some γ to α , then R_1 is Subord. If you can attach only to β , R_1 is Coord.

Test 2: Assume $R_1(\alpha, \beta) \wedge R_2(\beta, \gamma)$ with R_2 some kind of Continuation relation and $\neg R_2(\alpha, \beta)$. Exploiting the structural semantics of Continuation, and a version of CDP strengthened with SDRT's version of the right-frontier constraint, we can infer that R_1 is Subord. Conversely, if one cannot introduce information γ that “continues” β in its relation to α , then R_1 is Coord.

Test 3: Assume as before $R_1(\alpha, \beta)$. If for any γ attached to β no pronominal element in γ can be bound by referents in α , then R_1 is Coord. If some can, then it means R_1 is Subord.

Test 4: Use the fact that Narration is the Coord prototype to test compatibility with it: if $R_1(\alpha, \beta)$ and Narration(α, β) then R is Coord.

2.3. Kehler's (2002) typology of Coherence Relations

Kehler describes three classes of relations: *Resemblance*, *Cause-effect* and *Contiguity*. *Resemblance* requires recognition of similarities and contrasts among corresponding sets of entities and properties. *Cause-effect* relations depend on a different type of reasoning: they involve the inferences drawn by connecting two propositions. *Contiguity* is as a class of relations based on world knowledge and a set of principles that use this knowledge to establish coherent multi-utterance discourses.

3. Example of application

- (1) a. Estàvem a casa (lit. we were at home)
b. Jo estava amb el meu germà (lit. I was with my brother)
c. El meu pare ja no hi era (lit. my father wasn't there)
d. I jo sentia com... (lit. and I was hearing [a noise] like...)
(...)
e. I re(s) (lit. and nothing)
f. Ens vam llevar (lit. and we awoke)
g. I tot (lit. and everything)
h. I llavors me'n vaig anar al lavabo petit
(lit. and then I went to the small restroom)
i. I la mare es (ha)via desmaiada
(lit. and the mother had fallen fainted)

(Spoken Catalan Narrative, Payrató and Fitó 2008, text C1CN06CC, #8-12, #28-34)

FDG's proposal about Equipollence/Dependence:

- (1a), (1d), (1f), (1g), (1h), and (1i) are Equipollent Acts.
- (1b) and (1c) are Dependent of (1a) and are assigned the rhetorical function *Aside*, as they provide background information about the first person plural entity in (1a).
- (1e) is a discourse marker indicating the return to the foregrounded progression of events.

A&V Tests:

- R₁(1a, 1b) is Subordination according to tests 1, 3 and 4.
- By Test 2, however, R₁(1a, 1b) is Coordination. This result comes from the fact that (1c) does not continue (1b) in its relation to (1a): whereas R₁(1a, 1b) is Elaboration, R₂(1a, 1c) is Contrast.

Note however that it would be possible to add a continuation (1b') to (1b), which would confirm Subordination for R(1a, 1b):

(1b') La meua mare també hi era (lit. my mother was also there)

The contradictory Coordinate result of Test 2 tells us that (1a) and (1b) are not simply an Aside or an Elaboration of (1a). In (1c), the Speaker is calling our attention to the relevance of the father not being at home at the moment when the mother felt fainted. This relevance becomes evident later in the text, when the Speaker tells what happened when the children called their father at work: the father's brother, who worked with him, took the phone and thought that it was his own child who was calling, and that it was his wife, and not his brother's wife, who had fallen fainted.

- R2(1a, 1c) is Subordination according to tests 1, 2, and 3.
- By test 4, however, R2(1a, 1c) is Coordination: although it is not Narration (the prototypical Coordinating relation), it is Contrast, which is typically understood as well as a Coordinating relation.

However, some coordinating relations are coordinating just by default, and that they can coerce into Subordinating structures when certain factors are in play, such as the type of information to be attached, and the presence of a coordinating conjunction like *and* in combination with relations like Contrast or Parallel (Asher & Vieu 2005). This seems to be the case for R2(1a, 1c): as shown in (2), a conjunction *and* (*I*) may have the effect, in combination with Contrast, to coerce a Subordinating relation between (1a) and (1c).

(2) *Estàvem a casa i el meu pare ja no hi era*

(lit. We were at home and my father wasn't there)

This use of *and* (*I*) is different from its use as first element of an independent unit in a sequence of events. We can see this Coordinating use of *and* (*I*) in the Acts (1d above) to (ii above)

- (1e) to (ii) are Coordination according to tests 1, 2, 3 and 4.

Additional problems of application of A&V Tests are the following:

Test 3 is difficult to apply because of *topic construction*, which accounts for the fact that a single Topic dominates two coordinated elements; if the Topic contains the referents of the first segment, these referents are accessible to the following attached segment.

Test 4 works well with sequential coordinations (typically found in Narratives) and Elaborations (which are typically Subordinating); but it is less useful in non-sequential coordinations. Even within Narratives, application of this test to non-sequential segments such as (1a) to (1d) (a Narrative Orientation

segment in terms of Labov 1972) might misjudge the Coordinating or Subordinating nature of the relation among the Acts.

Kehler's typology of coherence relations:

- R₁(1a,1b) is Elaboration
- R₂(1a,1c) is Contrast.
- R₃(1a, 1d) is some kind of Contiguity relation that places together all backgrounded information that is relevant for the foregrounded events of the Narrative (that is, (1e) to (ii)).
- A relation of Contiguity (maybe Occasion) links the foregrounded events (1e) to (ii).

5. Conclusions

- (a) Looking at linguistic facts from three different perspectives helps us to lighten factors that might stay hidden when looked from a single perspective. This has been the case in the analysis of Narrative (1), where the Act of referring to the father not being at home (1) has been shown to be relevant not only as Aside to (1a), but as a way of highlighting a relevant factor in the story that is being narrated.
- (b) Application of A&V Tests to the analysis of a combination of Discourse Acts does not give the same results for all tests. These tests need some improvement in order to deal better with problems such as topic-construction, the possibility of coercing Subordination from Coordination, the intentions of the Speaker in both the related Acts and the overall discourse chunk. Consideration of Kehler's distinction of three levels of coherence relations (entities and properties, propositions, and experience-based sequences), and further investigation of FDG's rhetorical functions at IL, and SoA modifiers at RL, may be a right path to follow.

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