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Discourse relations, discourse connectives and discourse segmentation interdependency in the light of causality

Caroline Atallah, Myriam Bras and Laure Vieu

Abstract

Many discourse theories are based on the existence of discourse relations (DRs) linking discourse units. These DRs can be triggered by discourse markers, like connectives. For example, in French, the connective ‘parce que’ (‘because’) triggers a causal DR:

(1) [Pierre est parti]α [parce que Marie a crié.]β

‘[Pierre left]α [because Marie yelled.]β’

Identifying discourse relational devices (DRDs) associated to a DR (or a group of DRs) implies to know when there is a DR. As a DR holds between two different discourse segments — α and β in (1) —, identifying a DR implies first segmenting. Therefore, DRDs, DRs inference and discourse segmentation are interdependent issues that must be analyzed together. However, segmentation issues are rarely focused on in the literature on DRDs and DRs.

In this presentation, we will discuss the problem of segmentation across the causality spectrum in the well-formalized theoretical framework of SDRT (Segmented Discourse Representation Theory, Asher & Lascarides, 2003). We will illustrate it with the following examples:

(2) Les cris de Marie ont causé le départ de Pierre.

‘Marie’s yells caused Pierre’s leaving.’

(3) Pierre est parti à cause des cris de Marie.

‘Pierre left because of Marie’s yells.’

(4) Marie a crié, causant le départ de Pierre.

‘Marie yelled, causing Pierre’s leaving.’

(5) Marie a crié, ce qui a causé le départ de Pierre.

‘Marie yelled, which caused Pierre’s leaving.’

(6) Marie a crié. Ces cris ont causé le départ de Pierre.

‘Marie yelled. These yells caused Pierre’s leaving.’

(7) Marie a crié. Cela a causé le départ de Pierre.

‘Marie yelled. This caused Pierre’s leaving.’
In each case, like in (1), a causal relation holds between the same two events: ‘les cris de Marie’ (‘Marie’s yelling’) and ‘le départ de Pierre’ (‘Pierre’s leaving’). The aim of this presentation will be to determine whether the causal relation is the same in all cases and specifically whether this relation is a DR.

If no precise definition is given to characterize an elementary discourse unit (EDU), most theories agree on the fact that this unit approximately matches a syntactic clause. According to this criterion, (2) and (3) should not be segmented. So, how can we account for the causal relation involved in these examples? Should we consider that they are causal DRs and segment the discourse despite of the syntactic criterion violation? Or should we consider that they are not causal discourse relations but just semantic relations between events? According to the first option, ‘à cause de’ (‘because of’) and ‘ont causé’ (‘caused’) would play a discourse marker role, like ‘parce que’ in (1), i.e. they would trigger a causal DR.

Unlike (2) and (3), examples (4), (5), (6) and (7) count two syntactic clauses separated by a punctuation mark. If we follow the common syntactic criterion, we have to segment them into two EDUs and thus to assume that a DR holds between the two EDUs. As these examples do not involve phrases traditionally known as causal connectives, one might wonder about the nature of the DR involved.

Therefore, the characterization of EDUs and that of DRs are strictly interdependent tasks. They also question what is a discourse marker and more specifically a discourse connective. In this presentation, we will offer some criteria to distinguish DRs from strictly semantic relations as well as clear segmentation rules. We will also discuss the nature of a variety of causality markers in French, distinguishing DRDs among them.

References