Towards a constructionist approach to discourse markers and the construal of underspecified pragmatic meaning

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Construction Grammar

Main tenets of CxG (Golberg 2006, 2013):

- form-meaning **pairings** at all levels of language
- "constructicon" made of **networks** of constructions with inheritance links at different degrees of granularity (cf. usage-based framework)
- formal **distinctions** convey semantic or pragmatic distinctions (cf. Cog. Ling.)
- some constructions should be generalizable **crosslinguistically**

Criteria: **non-compositionality** OR sufficient **frequency** for entrenchment

Discourse markers

Functional category of syntactically optional, multifunctional expressions with little or no propositional content. E.g. *you know*, *well*, *so*, *however*… (Schiffrin 1987)

CxG-relevant **features** of discourse markers: very frequent, register-sensitive, polysemy, tendency to co-occur with other discourse-level elements

Patterns of function x position (Crible 2017): e.g. structuring functions in initial; interpersonal functions in final

Debate whether they **highlight** an existing relation or whether they **create** a relation which does not exist without them (Taboada 2006) ➔ how optional are they?

Construction Grammar for pragmatics and discourse markers

Previous studies on **constructional pragmatics**: e.g. Fillmore (1996) on *let alone* and negative questions; Gras (2011), Gras & Sansiñena (2015) on Spanish *que*-constructions
Previous studies on **CxG for DMs**: e.g. Fischer (2006) on *okay*; Aijmer (2016) on *anyway*; Degand (2014) on turn-closing *donc euh*; Crible (2015) on final *ou sinon*

Challenge #1 "are we dealing with constructional pragmatics, conventional pragmatics, or regular pragmatics" (Fillmore 1996: 65) ➔ interpretation of DM meaning
Challenge #2 "the fact that individual speakers have a variety of forms which they may use to refer to the same thing" (Östman & Trousdale 2013: 1) ➔ high variation in discourse

The construal of underspecified meaning

Where does **pragmatic interpretation** come from? Marker itself vs. context
Particularly relevant for highly **polysemous** markers such as *and* or *so*
Underspecification is an unbalance between encoded semantics and pragmatic effect

> *"elle avait un problème de boiler* ***et*** *j'ai été lui remettre un nouveau*"

Golberg (2013: 4) on **polysemous vs. ambiguous** constructions:

> "ambiguity is relatively rare compared with polysemy. Moreover, if a single phrasal pattern were truly associated with unrelated functions […], then their distributional behavior is not likely to be identical. […] What is typical is neither ambiguity nor functional identity, but rather polysemy: the same form has different but related functions."

Goal #1 coming to terms with underspecification and polysemy through a CxG approach, based on form-function patterns extracted from corpus annotation
Goal #2 account for crosslinguistic and register variation
Goal #3 systematic approach to the DM category in constructionist terms (first steps!)

Methodology

DisFrEn dataset (Crible 2017): 163,000 words, English-French, 8 spoken registers
Manually **annotated** for DMs (bottom-up) and their features:

- domain of use and specific function
- position in the turn and in the clause
- co-occurrence with other DMs and with disfluencies (pauses, repetitions, etc.)

Quantitative analysis to look for formal/contextual restrictions on DMs polysemy

Structural context for underspecified "and"

In 489 out of 1140 cases, *and* is doing something more than its basic additive meaning
Most frequent: [specification], [consequence], [topic-shift], [temporal]
Possible in all registers, with some preferences, e.g. [specification] in interviews

Underspecified meaning and position in the turn:
[Topic-shift] is the only function where *and* can be turn-initial: 27% vs. 3% as additive
➔ Position (and also type of previous segment) activates certain meanings in context

Underspecified meaning and co-occurrence with pauses:
2/3 additive *and* / *et* co-occur with a pause (silent or filled)
The only function where pauses are more frequent is [topic-shift] in EN (75%)
The presence of a filled pause (*uh*, *uhm*) is anecdotal in [consequence] and [temporal]

➔ English filled pauses indicate a major boundary [addition, topic-shift] or a new discourse move [specification], but the most "direct" interpretations of *and* only take silent pauses or nothing. No restrictions in French.

Register restrictions for polysemous "so"

English
Structuring functions of *so* [topic-shift, topic-resume, closing] only occur in dialogues
➔ Co-presence of an interlocutor is necessary (including over the phone)
Within pragmatic relations, only [conclusion] is possible in all registers
[Specification] mostly occurs in interviews (19/25)
➔ Descriptive discourse, semi-interactive setting with long monologic turns
➔ S1 contains one rather generic referent, *so* introduces an example or more information in S2:

> "*we can indeed take babies from (0.320) anywhere in the South West (0.350)* ***so*** *we're talking about (0.430) Cornwall (0.360) to uh (0.380) you know (0.220) Gloucestershire*"

French
Structuring *donc* never functions as [topic-shift], mostly [topic-resume] and [closing]
➔ There must be a prior context to which *donc* refers (not necessary in English)

Towards connective constructions

[S1 + conjunction + S2]

- **phrasal level**: S1 and S2 must have the same nature and function; non predicative; the conjunction is non-optional
- **subordination level**: S1 and S2 must have a finite predicate, one is subordinated (sometimes morphosyntactically marked); the conjunction is optional; the relation is mostly semantic/objective/content-level
  - [pragmatic contrast] is (almost) never expressed in a subclause (2/82)
- **sentence level**: S1 and S2 must have a main clause; the conjunction is optional; the relation can be semantic or pragmatic; the scope is local
- **discourse level**: S1 and S2 are hierarchically larger segments with at least one main clause each; the conjunction is optional; the relation is pragmatic; the scope is global; the conjunction is turn-initial (or turn-final) and/or co-occurs with pauses

➔ **Future work**: consider type of unit (subact, act, discourse, cf. Val.Es.Co 2014)

Selected references

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