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Mapping Prosody and Syntax as Discourse Strategies: How Basic Discourse Units Vary Across Genres

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Abstract

The aim of this contribution is to explore the identification of different types of basic discourse units (BDUs), and the role they might fulfil in discourse production and interpretation. A sampled corpus of four discourse genres (political address, radio news, conference talk and conversational narration) was annotated both for syntactic units and for prosodic units. The originality of this contribution lies in the mapping of syntactic dependency clauses and major prosodic units giving rise to four types of BDUs: congruent (one-to-one mapping), syntax-bound (one dependency clause cut off into several major prosodic units), intonation-bound (one major prosodic unit enclosing several dependency clauses) and regulatory (one discourse marker or adjunct with prosodic autonomy). Our corpus analysis revealed that prosodic and syntactic units combine in different ways depending on the genre at stake. We propose that each type of BDU represents a discourse strategy. We suggest this segmentation method should be used in the frame of discourse models, in order to provide the researcher with established basic units.

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1. **INTRODUCTION**

Individuals engaged in discourse are involved in a process of interpreting what they hear. We know, since Grice, that this process of interpretation does not rely solely on literal meaning, but that one also builds inferences on expectations, background knowledge, and all sorts of aspects of the form of the message (Gumperz, 2001). We also know that discourse meaning is not restricted to semantic structure, since speakers express personal stance about the events, ideas or persons they speak about. Discourse meaning thus consists of conceptual structures, contextual information (about speakers’ attitudes, the situation etc.) and is linked to the management of the ongoing discourse itself (planning, executing and controlling) (van Dijk, 1997: 193).

Moreover, interpreting discourse is also a dynamic process requiring synchronization between speaker and hearer, as well as a temporal processing of linear structures, displayed and perceived within a temporal frame (Auer et al., 1999; Auchlin, to appear). Discourse meaning is construed in a step-by-step process. The identification of discourse units within the discourse flow is essential for understanding and modelling how interpretation occurs, where and when inferences are made, and how each ‘piece’ of discourse is related to the others in a (more or less) coherent way.

In this context we seek to define ‘basic discourse units’ (hence BDUs) and to determine the role they play in discourse comprehension and production. Our contribution should be regarded as taking part in the ongoing debate on the nature and status of discourse units (see, Rossari, 1996; Roulet, 2002; Degand and Simon, 2005; Hannay and Kroon, 2005; Steen, 2005).

In our view BDUs constitute the segments that speakers and hearers use to interpret the discourse they are engaged in. We thus aim for a kind of ‘minimal discourse interpretation segment’ from which a (coherent) discourse representation can be built. Our starting point is the surface analysis of discourse, that is, the syntactic structure and the prosodic realization with their respective boundaries as key elements in deciding where and when a BDU starts and ends. Thus, a BDU is a text segment with linguistic properties which are used to construe both semantic representations and the text and context models at stake (Degand and Simon, 2009). It follows from this that the BDU should not be restricted to the smallest semantic, syntactic, information or conversational unit, nor to any other type of minimal discourse unit (cf. Chafe’s (1994) intonation units, Halliday’s (1994) tone units, Selting’s (2000) turn constructional units or Mann and Thompson’s (1988) clauses). Rather, we consider BDUs as the segments speakers and hearers rely on to construct and interpret the ongoing discourse, viz. segments on the basis of which inferential processes can take place. Thus, in view of its syntactic and prosodic completeness, the BDU would represent an input to the inference process given the specific discourse situation; these segments may be very short, but they may also be fairly long, sometimes comprising internal (local) coherence relations. What is relevant here is that speakers segment their discourse in such a way that it helps hearers build a coherent representation of the discourse situation, and it is these