

Operationalizing the function of discourse markers via sequencing constraints: The case of English *so*

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An important challenge in the study of extra-clausal constituents, specifically discourse markers (DMs), is the task of objectively determining their extra-clausal (i.e., discourse-level) status. The English discourse markers *and*, *but*, and *so* are a case in point. These markers remain formally identical to their sentence-level counterparts, i.e. coordinating or subordinating conjunctions. As a result it may be difficult or even impossible to determine with certainty whether a speaker intended for the form to be understood as marking a discourse-level relationship or a sentence-level relationship. This indeterminacy hampers the objective study of DMs, as the burden of evidence shifts entirely to qualitative observations.

In this talk, we argue that a solution to this problem can be found if we capitalize on the well-known tendency for DMs to be used in two-part sequences, e.g. *now therefore, but then*, etc. In earlier work, we have found that DMs in such sequences exhibit strong ordering preferences (Koops & Lohmann 2013). Typically, two DMs' preferred order is that which is predicted from the canonical order of their sentence-level counterparts, so that, for example, DMs deriving from coordinators precede DMs deriving from subordinators. Accordingly, the sequence *and so* is common but the sequence *so and* is rare. Here we are specifically interested in the conditions underlying non-canonical ordering, for example the initial position of *so* in *so and*. We test the hypothesis that occurrence in non-canonical position is correlated with a DM's discourse-level (as opposed to sentence-level) function. In this sense, ordering constraints serve as a formal indicator of DM status.

Our analysis focuses on *so* in sequence with *and* and *but*. We extracted all instances of the ordering possibilities of *so* relative to *and* and *so* from the *Fisher* corpus of North American English telephone conversations (Cieri et al. 2004, 2005), i.e. both canonical and non-canonical ordering. Our results show that, as predicted, in the case of canonical ordering (e.g. *and so*), *so* typically functions as a marker of result or consequence, with scope over the following clause only. When occurring in a non-canonical order (e.g. *so and*), it frequently has larger scope and functions to structure discourse, as in signaling topic continuation or functioning as a turn-taking device. We interpret these results as reflecting varying degrees of decategorialization of *so* as DM (in the sense of Hopper 1991), with an increase in positional variability reflecting *so*'s taking on more abstract, discourse-level functions.

References

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