Discourse connectedness: Towards a unification of topic and D-linking

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Introduction

- D-linked wh-phrases have a number of special syntactic characteristics: e.g., obviation of Superiority effects (1); intervention effects; position effects in Romanian and other languages; wh-ex situ in Mandarin Chinese (Peetsky 1997, 2000; Kotak 2014, 2017; Comorovski 1996; Pan 2014, a.o.)

1. a. ?What did who read? Superiority obeying
   b. Which book did which student read? Superiority violating

- But what is D-linking, from a discourse perspective?
  - Salience: Alternative sets saliently shared by the speaker and addressee (Comorovski 1996; Peetsky 1987, 2000)
  - Discourse Restricted Quantification (DRQ): Alternative sets of which at least two members have been previously mentioned (Grinnell’s 1998, et seq.)
  - Topicality (i.e. wh-topics) (Polinsky 2001; Greenleaf 2012, a.o.)

Proposal: D-linking is constrained by discourse connectedness, which makes new discourse structural predictions

Experimental design

- State the speaker and addressee’s organization of discourse (a–b) (Direct Question-Answer pairs act as one discourse unit in SDRT, Asher & Lascarides 2003: 313)
  - Salience: Make two sets saliently shared by the speaker and addressee (c)
  - DRQ: Mention at least two members of both alternative sets (c–d)
  - DC: Vary the discourse-connectedness of each phrase (e–e’)

Survey

- Survey distributed through Amazon Mechanical Turk to 50 participants
  - Participants evaluated 17 utterances in one of 5 contexts, with controls:
    - Task 1: Read target utterance out of context, rate out of 100
    - Task 2: Listen to audio context, ending with target utterance

Results

- In our survey, discourse connectedness affects ratings and A-ratings
  - [-DC] lowers median ratings by about 24/100 ± 8.3 ($p = 6.6, p < 0.05$)
  - [-DC] raises median A-ratings by 13.2/100 ± 5.4 ($p = 5.8, p < 0.05$)

- Topic and D-linked wh-phrases are in the same discourse class:

Problem

- Discourse relations can be added in the absence of the prior utterance (cf. Asher & Lascarides 2003: 63 on presupposition accommodation, ex. from Peetsky 1987: fn. 9)

Future research

- Can use of a [DC] feature lead to new analyses of intervention effects, the interaction between D-linking and Superiority effects, etc.?
- Are there other information structure categories that are sensitive to DC?
- Contrastive topic (compare Büring’s (2001) d-trees to SDRT trees)
- Answers to D-linked wh-phrases
- Specificity (cf. Enç 1991)
- Are grammatical phenomena sensitive to other discourse relations?
- German ‘Subpart of Focus Fronting’ is sensitive to SUBORD, but without reference to anaphora (Baclawski Jr. 2018)

Conclusion

- D-linked wh-phrases are constrained by discourse connectedness
- Salience and previous mentions are not sufficient to license D-linking
- Why discourse connectedness?
- DC has been shown to constrain topic in Catalan and Eastern Cham (Lopez 2009: 55, Baclawski Jr. 2015)
- Topics and D-linked wh-phrases are in the same discourse class:

For more information, references, and acknowledgments, see the handout at http://linguistics.berkeley.edu/~kbaclawski/