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Contrastive study of textual coherence in Dutch and French. Functional description and experimental study of discourse markers in L1 and L2

This research project lies within the framework of discourse studies. It builds on recent findings in text linguistics, psycholinguistics and text quality and document design. One of the fundamental insights in these domains is that readers construct a representation of the information in the text, and that this representation is coherent (Graesser, Millis & Zwaan, 1997). Readers establish coherence by relating the different information units in the text by means of coherence relations that hold between the text segments (say clauses up to paragraphs). Examples are *cause-consequence*, *contrast* and *problem-solution* relations. Coherence relations are conceptual and they can, but need not, be made explicit by linguistic markers like connectives (*because*, *but*, *and*).

Linguistic research focuses primarily on the characteristics of these discourse markers and it is our aim in this project to study the role connectives may play in establishing relational coherence. This cannot be done without a detailed description of the pragmatic, semantic and syntactic constraints on the use of these markers in natural texts. As a matter of fact, we want to combine both “top-down” and “bottom-up” descriptions so as to establish the degree of convergence and divergence of these constraints on the use of the different connectives. This would be a first step towards the construction of a general functional model of text coherence. Working with more than one language may appear to be particularly relevant at this stage because it can help to reach more language-neutral levels of description. Therefore, we want to contrast the expression of text coherence in Dutch and French. The ultimate goal of this contrastive description is to arrive at a kind of contrastive “dictionary” of discourse markers in the two languages giving rise to functionally motivated translation equivalences in the discourse domain.

Research in psycholinguistics concentrates on the processing of discourse markers. Although there has been a lot of work in this area, there is still no detailed consensus on the role of explicit discourse markers in text (for an overview, see Sanders & Noordman, to appear). In the literature it is assumed that they influence both the reading process and the reading result, i.e. the mental representation constructed by the reader. There is indeed much empirical support for the position that connectives and other linguistic coherence markers play a facilitating role *during* the reading process, i.e. on-line (Britton et al., 1982; Haberlandt, 1982; Sanders, 1992). With respect to the influence of explicit coherence markers on the text representation afterwards, i.e. off-line, the positions are not so clear. On the one hand, there are studies which seem to show that linguistic marking of coherence relations improves the mental text representation (better recall, better comprehension) (Degand, Lefevre, Bestgen, 1999; Loman & Mayer, 1983; Meyer et al., 1980). On the other hand, there are a number of studies indicating that linguistic markers do *not* have this facilitating role (Meyer, 1975; Sanders, 1992; Sanders & Noordman, to appear; Spyridakis & Standal, 1987) or even a negative impact (Millis et al., 1993). The exact reasons for this variability of the results remain to be investigated. In particular, the specific knowledge of the reader seems to play a major role, including his/her linguistic knowledge. Only explorative research seems to exist in this latter area. That is why we will concentrate on this factor contrasting L1 and L2 readers. Our hypothesis is that the expected advantage of linguistic marking will be stronger in the case of L2-readers, because general and implicit linguistic knowledge is lower in the foreign language.

The results of both of the above mentioned research directions add up to a third insight, in the field of text design. If we know, first, how exactly text coherence can be made explicit in two languages, and, second, how this affects the reading process, then we can answer the question whether it is possible to improve the quality of texts by making the text structure explicit, both in reading a text in L1 and in L2. This should give rise to advice, i.e. a set of writing guidelines to writers and/or translators of public communication texts, for native as well as for foreign language readers.