

The role of prosody in distinguishing different backward causal coherence relations in spoken English.

Ingrid Persoon (Utrecht University)

Ted Sanders (Utrecht University)

Hugo Quené (Utrecht University)

1. Introduction: Different types of causal relations

The following causal relation is expressed in a conversation that was collected within the Santa Barbara Corpus of American English (SBCAE).

there's no= .. parking either,
% on one of those sides,
because it's street sweeping day,
or something,

Without intonation, this causal relation might be interpreted in multiple ways. The speaker might reason, “There would be no parking either on one of those sides”. This conclusion is then based on the argument, “It’s street sweeping day, or something”. This causal relation is interpreted as such by the speaker herself. We can describe such a causal relation as relatively subjective (cf. e.g. Pander Maat & Sanders 2001, Pander Maat & Degand 2001a, Pit 2003, Verhagen 2005a).

However, it might also be the case that the speaker is describing a causal relation in the real world. It is something happening in the real world that “There is no parking either on one of those sides, because it’s street sweeping day, or something”. Such a causal relation can be identified as relatively objective (cf. e.g. Pander Maat & Sanders 2001, Pander Maat & Degand 2001b, Pit 2003, Verhagen 2005a).

In both written and spoken Dutch the difference between the two interpretations can be remarked by the use of different connectives. To describe an objective causal relation a speaker or writer can use *omdat* (“because1”). To describe a subjective causal relation *want* (“because2”) can be used (cf. e.g. Pit 2003, Spooren et al. in press, Sanders & Spooren submitted). In other words, by using two different causal connectives to express backward causal relations, Dutch language marks a distinction between relatively subjective and relatively objective causal relations. *Omdat* is most frequently used to describe a causal relation situated in the real world. *Want*, on the other hand, is most frequently used to describe a causal relation interpreted as such by the speaker herself.

2. Main question: expression of different types of causal relations in spoken English

In written English, a distinction between objective and subjective backward causal relations seems not to be made. Writers use *because* for both types of causal relations (cf. e.g. Couper-Kuhlen 1996). However, in spoken English a distinction between different causal relations might be made by the use of different prosodic characteristics.

In this paper, I’ll address the question whether different prosodic characteristics are used to mark different degrees of subjectivity of the causal relation (and thus marking a distinction between different types of causal relations)? In answering this question I’ll also draw attention to way in which a possible interaction between prosody and discourse function

might be described from a construction grammatical point of view.

3. Background: Previous research to the interaction between prosody and type of causal relation

The idea that prosodic characteristics can be used to distinguish between different types of causal relations in spoken English is not new. Different researchers have already pointed in this direction.

For example, Ford (cf. Couper-Kuhlen 1996) & Sweetser (1990) describe an interaction between the type of the causal relation and the intonation of the because pattern. Following Chafe (cf. Couper-Kuhlen 1996) they distinguish between whether because follows comma or period intonation. In the example above because follows the comma intonation of there's no .. parking either, on one of those sides,. Comma intonation is described as related to objective causal relations. Period intonation, on the other hand, is related to subjective causal relations.

Also Couper-Kuhlen (1996) describes an interaction between prosody and different types of causal relations. She looks at the presence or absence of a declination reset. A because clause with declination reset seems to describe what I above called a subjective causal relation. A because clause without declination reset, on the other hand, seems to describe what I called above an objective causal relation.

4. The present research: a pilot study to the use of because

This paper is meant as a follow-up on the research described above. I describe a pilot study to the use of because in spoken English. (Be)cause utterances spoken by same speakers where annotated for the types of causal relations and different prosodic characteristics. First of all, it was investigated whether a distinction between different types of causal relations could be marked by the occurrence of an intonation unit boundary (cf. DuBois et al. 1991, DuBois et al. 1993) within the because-pattern. An intonation unit can roughly be defined as “a stretch of speech uttered under a single coherent intonation contour” (DuBois et al. 1993). Boundaries of intonation units can be identified by (a combination of) e.g. pauses, a declination reset, a lengthening of final syllables (cf. DuBois et al. 1993, DuBois et al. 1991). Thus, the observation of an intonation unit boundary is the result of an interaction between different prosodic characteristics.

Besides looking at the occurrence of intonation unit boundaries, it was also investigated whether some of the different prosodic characteristics more than others indicate a certain type of causal relation. Therefore, utterances were described with respect to the occurrence of a declination resets, changes in articulation rate and pauses.

4. Interpretation the results within a construction grammatical framework

I will relate prosodic characteristics of because patterns with functional discourse characteristics by using a construction grammatical framework (cf. Goldberg 2003, Goldberg 2006 Verhagen 2005). I assume that function words like connectives may be best analyzed not as separate words, but as constructions (cf. Schilperoord & Verhagen 1997; 2006). Because in isolation does not have any function. Function may however be subscribed to bigger because-patterns. Just like the form because, prosodic characteristics can be part of the form of a certain because construction as well (cf. e.g. Couper-Kuhlen 1996). This form (e.g. because plus presence of a pause) can then be associated with a certain function. Discourse functions like expressing a specific type of causal relations might be part of the function of a

because construction (cf. e.g. Fischer 2006).

5. Conclusion: different because-constructions?

I'll conclude this paper by trying to identify and describe different because constructions. Thereby a preliminary answer will be given to the main question described above.

6. Bibliography

- Couper-Kuhlen, E. (1996): "Intonation and clause combining in discourse: the case of because." In: *Pragmatics* 6-3, p. 389-426.
- Dubois, J.W., S. Scheutze-Cobum, S. Cumming, D. Paolino (2001): *Discourse Transcription*. Unpublished manuscript. University of California, Santa Barbara.
- Dubois, J.W., S. Scheutze-Cobum, S. Cumming, D. Paolino (2003): "Outline of Discourse Transcription". In: J.A Edwards & M.D. Lampert (eds.) *Talking data. Transcription and coding in discourse research*. Hillsday [etc.]: Lawrence Erlbauw Associates, Publishers, p. 45-89.
- Fischer, K. (2006): "Konstruktionsgrammatik und Interaktion". In: K. Fischer & A. Stefanwitsch (eds.) *Konstruktionsgrammatik. Von der Anwendung zur Theorie*. Tübingen: Stauffenburg.
- Goldberg, A.E. (2006): *Constructions at Work. The nature of Generalization in Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Goldberg, A.E.: "Constructions: a new theoretical approach to language." In: *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 7 (2003), p. 219-224.
- Pander Maat, H. & L. Degand (2001a): "Scaling causal relations and connectives in terms of speaker involvement." In: *Cognitive Linguistics* 12-3, p. 211-245.
- Pander Maat, H. & Sanders, T. (2001): "Subjectivity in clausal connectives: an empirical study of language in use." In: *Cognitive linguistics*, 12-3, 247-273.
- Pit, M. (2003): *How to express yourself with a causal connective*. Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi.
- Sanders, T. & W. & Spooren (submitted): "Causal categories in discourse – Converging evidence from language use."
- Schilperoord, J. & A. Verhagen (1997): "Functionele elementen in een cognitief perspectief. Evidentie uit taalproductie." In: *Nederlandse Taalkunde* 3, 223-248.
- Schilperoord, J. & A. Verhagen (2006): "Grammar and language production. Where do function words come from?" In: J. Luchjenbroers (ed.) *Cognitive Linguistics Investigations: across languages, fields and philosophical boundaries*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Spooren, W., T. Sanders, M. Huiskes & L. Degand (in press): "Subjectivity and Causality: A Corpus Study of Spoken Language." In: J. Newman & S. Rice (eds.) *Conceptual Structure in Discourse and Language*.
- Sweetser, E. (1990): *From etymology to pragmatics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Verhagen, A. (2005a): *Constructions of Intersubjectivity. Discourse, Syntax, and Cognition*. Oxford [etc.]: Oxford University Press.
- Verhagen, A. (2005b): "Constructiegrammatica en "usage based" taalkunde." In: *Nederlandse Taalkunde* 10, p. 197-222.