Rhetorical Relations and Predicate Terms

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In this paper I will examine the implications of rhetorical relations for the content of predicate terms. Rhetorical relations (or discourse relations) have been identified as the principles which account for textual cohesion.[1] Such relations are, e.g., Narration, Parallel, Contrast and Explanation (Hobbs 1985, Mann & Thompson 1986, Polanyi 1995, Kehler 2002, Asher & Lascarides 2003).

A theory of cohesion in terms of rhetorical relations may be divided into two parts. There is first a theory of rhetorical relation assignment. What is the correlation between linguistic form and rhetorical relations and which interpretive principles are operative when assigning a rhetorical relation? Second, there is a theory of the semantic implications of rhetorical relations. The starting point is here a pair of clauses or sentences connected via a given rhetorical relation and the output is the content of the clauses or sentences connected. Since I am interested merely in how contextual specification of meaning may be explained by means of rhetorical relations, I will be concerned with the latter theory only. I will thus be interested in what happens to the content of clauses and sentences once a rhetorical relation has been assigned, and leave the question how the rhetorical relation was selected out of account.

Researchers have shown that reference resolution, temporal and spatial determinations, bridging, disambiguation, etc., can be explained as the result of linking sentences together by means of rhetorical relations (e.g. Lascarides & Asher 1993; Asher & Lascarides 1995, 1998). In this way many pragmatic modulations of meaning can be seen as the byproduct of textual connectivity. In order for two sentences to be related by Explanation, for instance, there must certainly be a specific temporal relationship between them. E.g. (1),

> (1)   a.   John fell.
>   b.   Max pushed him.

The assignment of the rhetorical relation Explanation to (1) requires that the event in (1b) precede the event in (1a), for causes precede their effects.

I will argue that the assignment of rhetorical relations to clauses and sentences not only has implications for the phenomena previously listed, but also for the actual content of predicate terms. In other words, the property ascribed by a predicate term may be affected by the requirements of the rhetorical relation assigned to the sentence in which it occurs.

Consider (2):

> (2)   a.   Anne is content.
>   b.   Celia is happy too.

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[1] I take *cohesion* to be concerned with what makes a text a text, i.e. the fact that a text is not an arbitrary collection of sentences, but that the sentences hang together. Cohesion is thus concerned with rhetorical relations and their implementation. I take *coherence* to be concerned with other aspects of text structure, such as arrangement, well-formedness, consistency, credibility, etc. All texts are, by definition, cohesive, but they need not be coherent. There may be ill-formed and absurd texts.

It is reasonable to relate (2a) and (2b) by means of the rhetorical relation Parallel. Parallel requires that either the same property is ascribed in (2a) and (2b) or that the property ascribed in (2b) is implied by the property ascribed in (2a). From a lexical point of view, however, this is not the case in (2). Being content and being happy are distinct properties and it is possible to be content without being happy. My claim is that the content of the terms *content* and *happy* in (2) is adjusted in such a way that the requirements of Parallel are satisfied. This amounts to a contextual specification of the content of the terms.

In (3) the clauses are connected via Contrast:

> (3)   a.   In the town she drove carefully;
>   b.   but once they were outside she speeded up.

(3a) considered in isolation states neither more nor less than that she drove carefully. Once we have assigned Contrast to (3), however, we have to adjust the content of (3a) and (3b) in such a way that there be contrasting elements in the two clauses. It seems reasonable to take the property ascribed in (3a) as involving the property of driving slowly.

In (4) the sentences are connected via Continuation:

> (4)   a.   Anne asked Jane to give her daughter private lessons in French.
>   b.   Jane started teaching immediately.

We understand the property ascribed in (4b) as involving the property of giving Anne's daughter private lessons in French, for that is what is required if (4b) is a continuation of (4a).

In (5) the sentences are connected via Elaboration:

> (5)   a.   Anne had a lovely meal.
>   b.   All the dishes were exquisite.

We should take *exquisite* to imply *lovely* in order for (5b) to elaborate on (5a).

In (6) the clauses are connected via Explanation:

> (6)   a.   She hollowed her hand,
>   b.   because she was hard of hearing.

The content of (6a) as considered in isolation is that she hollowed her hand some way or other. But if (6b) provides the explanation of the event in (6a), then she cannot have hollowed her hand in just any way. The property ascribed in (6a) must be adjusted in such a way that the event in (6a) is a reasonable consequence of being hard of hearing. Presumably she hollowed her hand round her ear. We must add a specification as a result of the assignment of the rhetorical relation Explanation.

The contextual specifications here considered are different in kind. In some cases the specification is akin to so called mutual adjustment.[2] In other cases, where the specification amounts to additional information, it is similar to pragmatic enrichment, the content of the sentence being richer than the compositional meaning. What is common to the examples is that the specifications in question are mandated by rhetorical relations and made in accordance with their requirements.

The implications of rhetorical relations for the content of predicate terms are methodologically interesting from the viewpoint of the semantics/pragmatics debate. For researchers who

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[2] The properties denoted by the adjective *red* in the phrases *red wine* and *red hair* respectively are arguably different, i.e. the property ascribed by *red* is adjusted in accordance with the noun qualified.

acknowledge that the context may have an impact on the truth conditional content of sentences – beside the obvious cases involving demonstratives and indexicals proper –, basically two options are available. According to indexicalism, contextual specification is required by the linguistic structure of the sentence itself. Indexicalists postulate the existence of slots in the linguistic structure the values of which are filled in by the context. This approach paves the way for a principled account of context sensitivity, but it can arguably be seen as a piecemeal and *ad hoc* manoeuvre (as argued by, e.g., Cappelen & Lepore 2005). According to radical pragmatics, contextual specification of meaning occurs without being mandated by linguistic structure. Either a principled account of context sensitivity is abandoned and appeal is made to a general urge to make sense of utterances (e.g. Recanati 2007) or the principles invoked are wholly extralinguistic (e.g. Sperber & Wilson 1995).

Rhetorical relations permit us to provide a principled account of certain important forms of context sensitivity which avoids the drawbacks of the dominant positions in the semantics/pragmatics debate. We do not have to make any assumptions regarding the lexical shape of individual linguistic items, nor do we have to explain context sensitivity by means of extralinguistic principles which are merely regulative of human interaction. Rhetorical relations are intralinguistic principles to the extent that they are constitutive for texts which are linguistic entities.

I will argue that the cohesion account has an advantage over other pragmatic accounts of context sensitivity in that rhetorical relations not only require the construction of contextual concepts and properties, but also contain definite instructions for carrying out this construction. The contextual values of predicate terms might be quite unpredictable from the viewpoint of lexical semantics, but are nevertheless obtained via 'general principles of discourse' (Grice 1989).

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