
Principles of information-structure and discourse analysis

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Lisa Brunetti
Université
Paris-Diderot/CNRS
lisa.brunetti@linguist.univ-
paris-diderot.fr

Kordula De Kuthy
Universität Tübingen
kdk@sfs.uni-tuebingen.de

Arndt Riestler
Universität Stuttgart
arndt.riestler@ims.uni-
stuttgart.de

We present a pragmatic, i.e. meaning-based, method for the information-structural analysis of corpus data, which is built on the idea that for any assertion contained in a text there is an implicit Question under Discussion (QUD) that determines which parts of the assertion are focused or backgrounded. The discussed method is largely in accordance with Alternative Semantics (e.g. Rooth 1992). At the same time, the method makes strong predictions concerning the structure of discourse. In our discourse trees – which structurally differ in a systematic way from analyses of SDRT or RST – the terminal nodes of a tree represent (A)ssertions and non-terminal nodes represent (Q)uestions. An annotated corpus example is given in (1) (for space reasons, the tree is represented by > symbols).

(1) (Snowden interview, ARD TV, Jan 2014)

A₁₄: When you are on the inside and you go into work everyday and you the power you have.

Q₁₅: {What power do [employees of the NSA] have?}

> Q_{15.1}: {Whom can you wire tap?}

>> A_{15.1}: [You_T can wire tap [the President of the United States]_F]~,

>> A_{15.1'}: [you_T can wire tap [a Federal Judge]_F]~

QUD identification, which has often been waived as arbitrary or circular, is shown to be a highly constrained process. Principles (derived from Schwarzschild 1999 and Büring 2008) involve, among others:

- (i) Q-A-CONGRUENCE (QUDs must be answerable by their respective answers in the text).
- (ii) Q-GIVENNESS (implicit QUDs may only consist of given material).
- (iii) MAXIMIZE-Q-ANAPHORICITY (QUDs should contain as much given material as possible).

Further constraints govern the treatment of simple parallelisms (contrastive focus) and complex parallelisms (contrastive topic + focus; Büring 2003).

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