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Secondary syntax: The glue of discourse?

The recent shift of focus towards a grammar of discourse has been accompanied by an increased interest in linguistic material that is in some way secondary to the discourse units under investigation. These secondary items, which used to be considered optional or superfluous, may range from single words to whole clauses and have, for example, been referred to as extra-clausal constituents (ECCs) by Dik (1997) or theticals by Kaltenböck, Heine & Kuteva (2011). The latter view discourse grammar as being composed of two gradient domains – thetical grammar and sentence grammar – whose units fulfil distinctive functions in discourse.

The disjunct *I think*, for example, whose detached status renders it as secondary syntax par excellence, acquires its particular functions only in relation to the discourse units in which it is embedded (Fetzer 2014). Depending on its positioning in discourse, the syntagmatic configuration fulfils a particularized conjunctive function, connecting textual and interpersonal planes with the ideational one (Halliday 1994). Patterning with other secondary elements, *I think* thus contributes to the creation of local or global coherence relations, e.g. in politic discourse:

(1)   I say well prove it then over the next few years. Because I am against joining the Euro. And **I think** and I think we should keep the pound.

(2)   Well **I think** all the party from the prime minister downwards recognize that there was bound to be teething troubles …

As a syntactically independent item that prototypically indicates contrastive discourse relations between larger and smaller stretches of discourse, the connective *but* operates in a similarly metatextual, secondary fashion. In Scottish English, its structural embeddedness contributes to a more interpersonal or more textual reading, respectively, as exemplified in (3):

(3)   00-M-f02:   yesterday I had to book an appointment, well I phoned the doctor to make an appointment for this stye on my eye
           00-M-f01:   oh aye, you've had that a good long while **but**
           00-M-f02:   **but** it's moved noo, it's at the other side

Fulfilling an important function in the construal of local and global discourse coherence regarding its ideational, textual and interpersonal planes, secondary syntax is thus considered to be analyzable only in relation to the discursive units it accompanies. Accordingly, discourse grammar is viewed as a granular whole whose parts are relational and thus non-decomposable.

References

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