

Connectives as argumentative words (sometimes) used to indicate discourse structure

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The key role of connectives as argumentative markers making explicit the type of discourse relation holding between discourse segments has long been recognised (e.g. Ducrot 1980). Yet, in a majority of cases, these relations can also be conveyed in the absence of a connective. In this presentation, I will try to shed some light on when and why connectives are sometimes needed to convey discourse relations. I will first discuss evidence from corpus data indicating that connectives seem to be more frequently used to convey relations that convey a form of discontinuity in discourse, such as concessive and confirmation relations (expressed in French by the connective 'en effet' and in English by 'indeed'). I will then take an experimental perspective to demonstrate that the absence of a connective affects reading differently for discontinuous and continuous relations. I will argue that taken together, the evidence from language use and online processing converge to show that the need to use connectives is driven by our cognitive expectations about discourse organisation, and that the same constraints seem to hold across languages.

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