Rhetorical arguments for distinguishing PCIs from GCIs

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1. Do GCI's and PCI's differ only in degree?

The status of Generalized Conversational Implicatures (GCIs) versus Particularized Conversational Implicatures (PCIs) has been a matter of controversy in research on conversational implicatures. Many researchers have argued that the distinction either does not exist, or is one of degree rather than type, e.g. Relevance theorists, (Hirschberg, 1985) and (van Rooy, 2003).

This paper offers evidence to support the distinction based on the very different tendencies found for GCIs and PCIs to contribute to rhetorical relations. While GCIs do not seem to naturally take part in major discourse relations, PCIs generally can. After illustrating these differences with a number of examples, I'll offer some tentative conclusions about why these differences exist.

2. Implicatures and rhetorical relations

Main stream theories of rhetorical relations (coherence relations) such as Rhetorical Structure Theory (RST) (Mann and Thompson, 1987) and Segmented Discourse Representation Theory (SDRT) (Lascarides and Asher, 1993) all accept relations such as e.g. REASON, ELABORATION and PARALLEL.

Below each of these three relations is tested with three different implicature types, Scalar GCIs, Clausal GCIs and two standard PCI examples.[1] For each example the explicit assertion of the information to be implicated can naturally contribute to the rhetorical relation. But when the assertion is replaced with an utterance that implicates the information, GCI's and PCI's behave very differently.

2.1. REASON relations

A REASON relation consists of two parts, a nucleus (N) that is some situation expressed by the speaker, and a satellite (S), that explains why the situation holds. The satellite of a REASON relation can be explicitly marked by *because*.

(1) I have to make a new exam (N) because not all the students passed it (S).

(2) ? I have to make a new exam (N) because some of the students passed it (S).

(3) I have to make a new exam (N) because some of the students failed it (S).

(4) ? I have to make a new exam (N) because not all the students failed it (S).

(2) illustrates that the information that not all the students passed the exam cannot take a satellite role in an REASON relation if this information is implicated by a scalar implicatures (triggered by *some*), while (1) shows that an explicit assertion of the same information naturally can. That the implicature plays little or no role in the calculation of the rhetorical relation is further illustrated by (3), where the implicature doesn't make the sequence at all awkward; the same information explicitly stated in (4) it is clearly awkward.

We find the same behavoir with clausal implicatures. Generally, a sentence with *believe* implicates that the speaker doesn't know for sure. But this clausal implicature cannot participate in a REASON relation, irregardless of whether it is in the nucleus or satellite.

(5) We'd better ask John (N) because I don't know for sure if he will come (S).

(6) ? We'd better ask John (N) because I believe he will come (S).

(7) ? I believe John will come (N) because he didn't inform me of his schedule (S).

At this point the reader may conclude that conversationally implicated information perhaps is never able to contribute to rhetorical relations, but this would be too hasty. By manipulating two classic examples of PCIs, (8) and (9), we can test this. (8) particularly implicates that the dog might have eaten the roast beef, and (9) particularly implicates that John might have a girlfriend. We can easily rewrite the examples so that the implicatures participate in a REASON relation, done in (10) and (11) below.

(8) A: What on earth has happened to the roast beef?
B: The dog is looking pretty happy.

(9) A: Does John have a girlfriend?
B: He's been spending a lot of time in New York these days.

(10) (roast beef missing) We may not need to feed the dog tonight (N) because he's looking pretty happy (S).

(11) John might bring someone special to the Christmas party (N) because he's been spending a lot of time

[1] I have also looked at other core relations such as e.g. EVIDENCE and CONTRAST, with other types of GCIs and PCIs, but these are not presented for reasons of space.

in New York these days (S).

2.2. ELABORATION relations

The ELABORATION relation in RST or the NARRATION relation in SDRT (Lascarides and Asher, 1993) holds between (in RST terms) a nucleus which gives basic information and a satellite that contributes additional information (i.e. details). An example with a scalar is given in (13), and with the implicature asserted in (12). Example (14) illustrates the explicitly asserted version of the information implicated, but (15) shows that the implicated version is unnatural.

(12) Nick didn't work at all in school. (N) He didn't pass all the subjects. (S)

(13) ? Nick didn't work at all in school. (N) He passed some of the subjects. (S)

(14) Ward doesn't know for sure that Santa Claus will come. (N) He's been naughty all year. (S)

(15) ? Ward believes that Santa Claus will come. (N) He's been naughty all year. (S)

But again we see that PCIs have no problem in participating directly in an ELABORATION relation.

(16) (roast beef missing) I think the dog ate part of our dinner. (N) He may have eaten the roast beef. (S)

(17) (roast beef missing) I think the dog ate part of our dinner. (N) He's looking pretty happy now. (S)

2.3. PARALLEL relations

In the examples below PARALLEL relations are signalled with *and* and *too*. This is a multi-nuclei relation so both segments contribute equally. (18) and (19) illustrate the relation with scalars and (20) and (21) illustrate it with clausal implicatures.

(18) Not all the students failed and my favorite student got an A+ too.

(19) ? Some of the students failed and my favorite student got an A+ too.

(20) Ward doesn't know for sure if Santa Claus will come and he doesn't know for sure if the Easter Bunny will come too.

(21) ? Ward believes that Santa Claus will come and he doesn't know for sure if the Easter Bunny will come too.

Once again, PCIs have no trouble contributing to a PARALLEL relation, and the reader can confirm that the explicit forms would be just as fine as well.

(22) (roast beef missing) The dog ate the special Swedish sausage yesterday and he's looking pretty happy now too.

(23) John's business is going well and he's been spending a lot of time in New York lately too.

3. Discussion

Thus this short survey illustrates that PCIs more easily contribute to rhetorical relations than GCIs. There also seems to be a slight asymmetry in that PCIs tend to be more natural in the satellite position of rhetorical relations than in the nucleus.

Exactly why these differences exist requires more research but it may in part have to do with the relationship between the implicature of an utterance and what it asserts, i.e. what "is said". If the implicatures are not cancelled, PCIs and GCIs contribute very different information in relation to other discourse information that is asserted with the same utterance. GCIs contribute information that is highly compatible, parallel, and one could argue, in many cases even redundant. PCIs contribute compatible information that is new, and certainly is not redundant. PCIs are therefore more relevant to the information exchange than GCIs. Perhaps because GCIs are to a certain degree redundant, they are not considered when inferring discourse structure, which leads to an sense of anomaly. Hearers on the other hand may attempt to incorporate the more informative PCI into the discourse structure by default.

Additionally, the close relationship of PCIs and rhetorical relations may be necessary for recoverability reasons. Because PCIs are not associated with standard expressions, such as semi-conventionalized scales, their interpretation is contextually dependent. The hearer must be able to draw an inference from contextual information to recover the intended PCI. If PCIs by default participate in rhetorical relations, one way in which the hearer can optimize the search process is by looking for PCIs plausibly implicated by the said utterance that are rhetorically related to the context.

If PCIs contribute to the rhetorical structure and GCIs tend not to, they cannot both be handled in the same way once an analysis reaches the stage where the implicated information is related to the discourse structure. Therefore, this is an argument against a reductionist strategy

Furthermore, because PCIs play a key role in discourse meaning, formal models of discourse which incorporate conversational implicatures in the discourse representation need to be able to handle them. Unfortunately, PCIs have largely been ignored, with researchers content to focus on the less context-dependent GCIs. However the observations here emphasize the pressing need for formal strategies for treating PCIs.

4. References

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