

# **Rhetorical Relations in Dialogue:** A Contrastive Study<sup>\*</sup>

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## **1. Rhetorical Relations**

The study described in this paper is an analysis of rhetorical relations in a set of task-oriented dialogues, in English and in Spanish. For this purpose, I followed Rhetorical Structure Theory, henceforth RST. Rhetorical relations, under different names and with somewhat different characteristics, have been both theoretical constructs and tools in the work of many discourse analysts. This section introduces the notion of rhetorical relations—

and cohesion, all three as related to the staging of the dialogues. In addition to the results described here, the RST analysis also contains a study of the presence (or absence) of discourse markers to signal particular relations. For the analysis of underlying relations I chose Rhetorical Structure Theory for different reasons. The most important one is that RST has been extensively tested and applied—although only to written texts. A secondary reason is that it provides definitions of all the relations to be considered, thus increasing the reliability of the analysis.

The next sections describe the results of a cross-linguistic analysis of spoken language, in order to show the explanatory power of rhetorical relations. I only considered the initial set of relations provided by Mann and Thompson in the central description of the theory (1988). The extension, and sometimes reduction, of the number of useful rhetorical relations has been a very much debated question—



### **3. The Study**

As explained

The next section provides a detailed analysis of two conversations, where we will also see instances of the intra-turn relations. The remainder of this section will consider some specific problems encountered when

fjab\_12\_04: /ls/ /h#/

much attention to the effects achieved on the hearer, but to the cohesiveness of the text as an entity, leaving aside the fact that there was a target hearer or reader for these texts.

In such a situation the procedure was to scan the conversation for the main purpose of the interaction, and from that macro-relation to proceed onto the analysis of the smaller segments. The span or spans that represented the main point in the interaction were usually the ones that contained the proposal for a meeting. Once the problem was expressed, the rest of the conversation dealt with its solution, that is, with finding an appropriate time for holding a meeting. This main point is the Comprehensive Locus of Effect, the ‘‘portion of the text that represents the essence of the text as a whole’’ (Mann et al., 1992, p. 61).

Obviously, at the lower levels of analysis, the relations holding were the same as those found for the turn-by-turn analysis. At the higher level, however, there were new relations between the turns uttered by the different speakers. That is to say, a speaker might create a relation that includes one or more spans previously uttered by the other speaker. Segmentation was not always based on turns (i.e., a segment of text did not always start and end with a turn), although the turn boundaries frequently showed a natural breaking point. The decisions taken in the analysis of turns and the analysis of the conversation as a whole influenced each other, because decisions previously taken—for instance, for the internal structure of a turn—biased the analyst’s decision when the conversation was considered as a whole. In order to avoid, or at least balance, this influence, out of the 30 conversations, 15 were first analyzed as whole conversations, and then broken down in turns. Then the other 15 were analyzed in the reverse order.

I present here one example of analysis of two full conversations, one for each language. Example (4) shows a complete sample English conversation, and its RST analysis is represented in Figure 2. The spans in the figures are represented in between square brackets in the conversations.

(4) [MAGH\_MTNZ\_11]

magh\_11\_01: [1] #key\_click# /h#/ /h#/ okay {comma} would you have {comma} two hours {comma} on Thursday afternoon {comma} the third {comma} or Friday {comma} the fourth {period} /ls/ #key\_click# {seos}

mtnz\_11\_02: [2] /h#/ /ls/ /h#/ no {comma} [3] that’s not good {comma} {seos} [4] <I have a {comma} {seos}> I’m actually on vacation {comma} Wednesday {comma} Thursday {comma} and Friday {period} {seos} /sniff/ [5] how about /uh/ {comma} this Tuesday {period} {seos} tomorrow {period} #key\_click# #click# /h#/ /h#/ {seos}

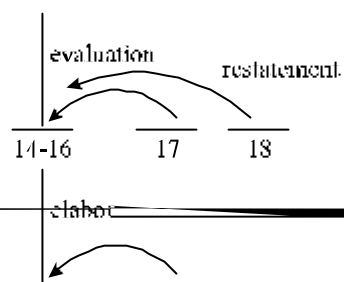
magh\_11\_03: [6] /h#/ no {comma} {seos} [7] /um/ that sounds like this week {comma} doesn’t work {period} {seos} [8] /h#/ next week {comma} the earliest I could do it {comma} would be again {comma} Thursday afternoon {comma} or {comma} anytime Friday {period} #key\_click# #noise# {seos}

mtnz\_11\_04: [9] /sniff/ okay {period} {seos} [10] yeah I can’t do it on {comma} Thursday {comma} {seos} [11] but Friday {comma} in the afternoon would be good {comma} {seos} [12] how about /uh/ {comma} one to three {quest} #key\_click# #noise# {seos}

magh\_11\_05: [13] /h#/ /ls/ that’s Friday {comma} June eleventh {comma} one {comma} to three {quest} {seos} [14] <that’s [f(ine)] {seos}> [15] okay {comma} [16] that’ll work {period} #paper\_rustle# #key\_click# #paper\_rustle# {seos}



mtnz\_11\_06: [17] #key\_click# great {period} {seos} [18] let's meet then then {period} {seos}  
 [19] #key\_click# /ls/ /h#/ #paper\_rustle# see you {period} #key\_click# /h#/ /h#/ {seos}  
 magh\_11\_07: [20] #key\_click# okay {comma} [21] I guess we're done {period} #click#  
 #key\_click# #headset# {seos}



*Figure 2. Rhetorical relations in Example 4*

The Comprehensive Locus of Effect in this dialogue is a relation of Solutionhood: speaker MAGH asks from speaker MTNZ whether he has free time on a particular date. The problem-posing span is the satellite to the rest of the spans, which provide the solution. The next higher-order division takes place at the moment where speaker MAGH evaluates the current proposal, repeatedly, in spans 14-16: “that’s [f(ine)], okay, that’ll work”. The conversation is divided in two clear sequences at that point, which I will describe now.

The first stage of the conversation, spans 2-13, is organized in another Solutionhood relation, the satellite being a question by MTNZ on a meeting date, and the nucleus the reply to that question. The question itself is composed of a Concession relation with an embedded Cause, which could be paraphrased as “although I can’t on that date because of x reason, how about this other date?” There is also an Elaboration on the negative: “no, that’s not good for me” which softens the bluntness of a single “no”.

Spans 6-13, the nucleus of the reply in the Solutionhood relation, are again broken down into a Solutionhood relation. The satellite is composed of spans 6-8 with a similar structure to the one described above, a Concession and an Interpretation: the “no” of speaker MAGH means that the week under consideration is out of the question and, despite that unavailability (Concession), he is willing to propose another date. Speaker MTNZ uses the same structuring in his reply: a Concession plus a proposal, this time the definitive one. Speaker MAGH elaborates on that proposal in span 13, which is an example of a possible multiple analysis. It could be a Restatement of what has been previously said, or an Elaboration on the date. In this situation, it was decided to assign it to an Elaboration relation because of the addition of new information to the previous speaker’s utterance. We can see how spans 11-12 mention Friday one to three, and speaker MAGH repeats some of that information, but also elaborates on it, adding June the eleventh to the information describing the date.

So far we have seen the description of the first stage of the conversation. The interaction changes its character once the date has been settled. From that point on—spans 14 to 21—there are no more Concession or Solutionhood relations, but Evaluations, Restatements, and Elaborations. Spans 19 to 21 were excluded of the RST analysis because they were considered to be purely interactional, a result of the specific holistic and generic structure of this type of discourse, and then showing no internal RST structure.

In this second part, spans 17 and 18 are the final ones, constituting an Evaluation (“great”) and a Restatement (“let’s meet then”). The previous three spans, 14-16, are simply Elaborations on the Evaluation relation that this second part of the conversation displays with relation to the problem-solving part.

A comparison of the above analysis with Spanish is provided in Example (5), a dialogue whose corresponding RST analysis is shown in Figure 3, and discussed below.

(5) [FSMA\_MENF\_05]

*fsma\_05\_01: [1] /h#/ hola Edu {period} {seos} [2] mirá {comma} {seos} [3] /eh/ qué te parece si arreglamos /h#/ para /s/ la semana que viene {comma} /eh/ bueno <vernos> /eh/ reunirnos un par de horas {period} {seos} [4] /h#/ /eh/ yo tengo libre el /mm/ lunes veintiséis {comma} después de las doce del mediodía {period} {seos} #paper\_rustle# /h#/ /s/ [5] qué te parece {quest} {seos}*

*menf\_05\_02: [6] /ls/ /h#/ no {period} {seos} [7] mirá {comma} {seos} [8] yo el lunes no puedo {period} {seos} [9] /eh/ el martes tampoco {comma} {seos} [10] /ls/ /h#/ el miércoles puedo a la tarde {comma} [11] /h#/ y el jueves a la mañana {period} {seos} [12] porqué no me decís qué te parece <en> /h#/ entonces miércoles a la tarde o jueves a la mañana {period} {seos}*

*fsma\_05\_03: [13] /ls/ /h#/ mirá {period} {seos} [14] imposible porque el /ls/ /eh/ miércoles yo tengo de dos a cuatro y media una reunión {comma} {seos} [15] y el jueves a la mañana tengo una conferencia de nueve a doce {period} {seos} /h#/ [16] así que tendría <que> /crky/ que ser recién {comma} /h#/ el miércoles de la semana de [yain (ya\_en)] agosto {comma} {seos} el miércoles cuatro {period} {seos} [17] porque yo voy a estar afuera el treinta {comma} /h#/ hasta el tres {period} /h#/ {seos} [18] <y {seos}> bueno {period} {seos} [19] recién sería el miércoles cuatro {comma} /h#/ después de la una del mediodía {comma} o a lo*







facr\_au\_05: #key\_click# /ls/ /h#/ that would be fine on August eighth at #paper\_rustle# nine thirty  
{comma} {seos} /h#/ /um/ #paper\_rustle# /ls/ I would love to get some lunch as well afterwards  
{comma} /noise/ /noise/ #click# #key\_click# #microphone# {seos}

The next predominantly inter-turn relation is Solutionhood. Mann and Thompson (1988, p. 272) define Solutionhood as a situation, expressed in the nucleus, that presents a solution to the problem stated in the satellite. The terms problem and solution are

#### **4. Rhetorical Relations and Staging**

The dialogues included in this study, as instances of a particular genre, proceed in a series of clearly definable stages. I will briefly describe how the stages in the dialogues are represented by, and usually contain, specific relations. It is beyond this paper to discuss genre theory, and how speakers and hearers may come to know that such a conversation should evolve in a *scripted* manner, but the conversations, invariably, evolved in an easily predictable sequence of steps.

The first level of organization is that of a







## 5. Concluding Remarks

I have presented the results of a cross-linguistic analysis of spoken language, where I have closely examined the underlying relations between propositions in the discourse of two speakers who are trying to complete a task.

Results show, first of all, that spoken language is suitable for a rhetorical structure analysis, and that patterns in the staging of the dialogues correlate with the type of rhetorical relations present in a particular stage. The cross-linguistic analysis showed no significant difference between the English and the Spanish data in terms of staging or type of relations. The only difference was found in the length of the initialization and closing stages of

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