Taras Zakharko (University of Zurich)

Annotating semantics of complementisers in corpora: the case of interpretative backgrounds

Cross-linguistically, complementisers are frequently used to express propositional attitudes, modality, source of evidence and other phenomena. What all these phenomena have in common is that the complement clause encodes a proposition which is offered a more precise characterisation in the discourse (e.g. degree of believe, speaker judgement etc.) rather then being simply true or false. When studying this in a language corpus, one needs a practical, flexible annotation scheme capable of adequately capturing the complex semantic relationships expressed by the phenomena involved.

Related work on corpus annotation has so far been usually limited to specific domains, such as propositional attitudes (e.g. Saurí and Pustejovsky 2009) or modality (e.g. Rubinstein et al. 2013). While such proposals offer a very detailed treatment of a particular phenomenon in question, they lack the flexibility required to capture a wide range of conceptually similar phenomena. Formal semantic accounts such as the one developed by Kratzer (2008) are promising, but difficult to integrate in a corpus annotation schema.

I will argue that all the relevant phenomena can be described in terms of interpretational backgrounds: functions that assign plausibility values to propositions. Interpretational backgrounds can be understood as an abstraction of a point of view, and are related to the notion of collections of possible words in modal logic. As a descriptive device, interpretational backgrounds permit one to model complex semantic relationships between the proposition and the discourse elements in an incremental, hierarchic fashion.

I will present a simple, language-neutral corpus annotation schema based on the notion of interpretative backgrounds and demonstrate how this schema is able to capture a large variety of different phenomena including modality, propositional attitudes, evidentiality, conditionals, causality and others.

References

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