



Toward a global approach to discourse uses of conjunctions in spoken French



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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to describe the behavior of conjunctions and their syntactic relation to the main clause predicator. The study is based on two corpora of spontaneous spoken French and focuses on the conjunction *parce que* 'because' with some cases of *puisque* 'since'. We argue in favor of a division of the syntactic component into two sub-components, each with its own type of units and combinatorial system, and show that discourse uses of the conjunctions can be dealt with at a syntactic level, not restricted to combinations of heads and phrases (the microsyntactic subcomponent) but extended to pragmatic dependency relationships between utterances as discourse units (the macro-syntactic subcomponent). We show for *parce que* 'because' that constructional and configurational uses were already available in the early stages of French and argue that the polyfunctionality of conjunction is a structural feature based on underspecified semantics. We conclude that it is not necessary to postulate a change of category and bleaching of meaning to account for both types of use of the conjunction.

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1. Introduction

Since the seminal work of Haiman and Thompson (1988), numerous studies have pointed out that so-called subordinating conjunctions are polyfunctional in that they can introduce both dependent and independent sentences. Some of these studies have a general linguistic scope with regard to polyfunctionality, such as Fabricius-Hansen and Ramm (2008), Brill (2010), Brill and Rebuschi (2007), and Laury and Suzuki (2001), or concern specific languages or historical stages of a language, such as Bertin (1997) on the notion of "cause" in old French, Goethals (2002) on causal clauses in Spanish, Valma (2011) on causal conjunction in modern Greek, Verstraete (2007) on English conjunctions, and Debaisieux (2013) on French conjunctions. There are also many publications on specific markers in various languages: Bilger and Cappeau (2016), and Bilger (2013) on *alors que*; Crevels (1998, 2000) on *aunque*; Couper-Kuhlen (1996), Ford (1994), Miller and Weinert (1998), and Schleppegrell (1991) on *because*; Debaisieux (2002, 2007), Degand and Fagard (2008), Groupe Lambda (1975), Lorian (1966), and Moeschler (1986, 2009) on *parce que*; Li (2006) on *yinwei*; Scheutz (1998) on *weil*; Morel (1983, 1996) on *bien que*; Günthner (2000) on *obwohl*; Benzitoun (2006, 2013) on *quand*; Deulofeu (1999, 2013) on *que*; Haiman (1983) on *if*; Sabio (2013) on *si*. As a whole, these contributions lead to the following conclusion, as phrased by Mithun (2005, p.74):

Dependent clause markers appear pervasively in what seem, on prosodic and semantic grounds, to be independent sentences. [...] these markers are being used to signal pragmatic dependency among larger elements in discourse.

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The contrasting uses are seen in two examples from French, from an interview (1) and a conversation (2):

L1 talks about his new professional duties. He has opened a magic and juggling shop

1. L1 c'est avec mon frère que je tiens le magasin aussi et lui est magicien et jongleur
'it is with my brother that I keep the store and he is also a magician and juggler'
- L2 d'accord alors c'est de famille
'okay then it's family'
- > L1 **Oui ben moi je lui ai proposé parce qu'il était au chômage à cette époque-là quoi**
[TCOF]
'Yes well I offered it to him because he was unemployed at the time'

A conversation about a new regulation in France

2. L1 c'est interdit de mettre 'sous X' maintenant mais en fait
-> **ils nous prennent trop pour des poires parce que les papiers tu peux pas les changer** [TCOF]
'it's forbidden to put 'under X' now but in fact they take us for real suckers because the papers you can't change them'

The third turn in the first example can be analyzed as a complex sentence in which the conjunction *parce que* 'because' fulfills the standard function of introducing an adjunct clause to the main verb *proposer* 'offer' whereas in the second example *parce que* links two clauses in a paratactic relationship forming an assumption–argument discourse pattern (Debaisieux, 2002, 2007, 2013). The distinction is not clearly formally marked, except that we notice a left dislocation in (2). This is why it is necessary to develop a closer analysis to account for the syntactic and pragmatic properties which distinguish the two behaviors of *parce que* displayed in the examples. This conjunction, as well as other morphemes,¹ can be involved in two distinct levels of syntactic combinations: 'Constructions' vs 'Configurations'. The comparison of the properties of 'Constructions' and 'Configurations' will be developed in the first section of this paper. This issue will be addressed within the framework of the *Approche Pronominale* (Blanche-Benveniste et al., 1984, 1990; Smessaert et al., 2005). In the second section, we will deepen the analysis of *parce que* in 'Configurations', using also some examples of *puisque* 'since'. We will show that the use of subordinating conjunctions in a discourse function can be dealt with at a structural level. This will be done using the extended *Approche Pronominale* (Blanche-Benveniste, 1990; Berrendonner, 1991; Debaisieux, 2007, 2013; Deulofeu, 1999, 2013) in which the domain of syntactic units (the microsyntactic component) is extended to pragmatic dependency relationships between utterances as discourse units to capture the combinatorial regularities of discourse units in a separate component of linguistic description: the macrosyntax component. We will show that this division cannot be reduced to a binary opposition between grammatical and pragmatic links. Units that form a Configuration are the subject of distributional and topological constraints. This is why the term *macrosyntax* is used. In the third section, using data from Old French, we will show that constructional and configurational uses were already available in the early stages of French. This description is an alternative to the current idea that a process of pragmaticization is the source of the discourse function of conjunctions. Finally, we show that it is not necessary to postulate a change of category and bleaching of meaning to account for both types of use of the conjunction. At the microsyntactic level, *parce que* is a conjunction which introduces a subclause that is both embedded and dependent to the main clause predicator. Both clauses constitute a 'construction'. At the macrosyntactic level, *parce que* is a conjunction which links two syntactically independent utterances which are pragmatically grouped to form a 'Configuration'.

The study is based on two corpora of transcribed spontaneous spoken French: the TCOF Corpus, collected in the French city of Nancy, and the CRFP corpus compiled at Aix en Provence University. The size of the whole data base is about 1 million words representing several spoken genres: interview, conversation and storytelling. We also present some examples from CART, a corpus of telephone conversations we have transcribed personally. The spoken examples were transcribed without punctuation marks according to the source convention of the transcriptions. The symbols L1, L2 stand for speakers.

2. Complex constructions vs. discourse patterns: distinguishing properties

2.1. A syntactic approach to pragmatic dependency

Up to now the literature on morpheme polyfunctionality has had a strong bias towards pragmatic solutions. Most authors rely on the opposition between a marker functioning in subordinate clauses and a connective functioning in discourse patterns, without any syntactic analysis of the different structures the morphemes are involved in. For example Ducrot (1972, p. 176) gives a merely pragmatic account for the different behavior of *de sorte que* 'so' and *puisque* 'since' clauses in (3) and (4), which present two speech acts, vs the *pour que* 'so that' and *parce que* clauses in (5) and (6) which perform only one speech act (p.119):

¹ We use the term 'morpheme' on grounds of the grammatical status of conjunctions in French.

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