On the sensitivity of temporal markers to discourse structure

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Interactions between temporal markers – a subclass of discourse markers – and discourse structure have been studied by several authors: Glasbey 1993 and 1994, Alves and Txurruka 1999 and 2001, Alves 2003, Bras et al. 2001a, 2001b, 2009. All of them show that some temporal markers may occur in sequences involving certain Discourse Relations, but block other Discourse Relations conveyed in other sequences. In most of these works, it is suggested that Discourse Relations based on mereological or causal relations between eventualities, such as, for instance, Elaboration and Result, respectively, are somehow part of the meaning of temporal markers: Glasbey 1994, for instance, proposes the existence of one use of sentence-final then as a means of expressing relations between eventualities, to be distinguished from another use of sentence-final then as an anaphor referring back to an Explicit Temporal Referent. Bras et al. 2009, focusing on alors, conclude that this French connective, among other possibilities and in several contexts, is a trigger of the Discourse Relation of Result.

Analysing the examples presented in these works as well as new ones, like those presented below, I depart from these authors by claiming that the semantic meaning of temporal markers is the expression of temporal relations: cause-effect or mereological relations between eventualities and Discourse Relations are not part of the semantic meaning of temporal markers under study. However, temporal markers are, I believe, SENSITIVE to these relations and that explains why some can occur in some discourse contexts, but not in others. To sustain my claim, I analyse the effects of introducing explicit temporal markers in sequences in which the temporal information they convey was only implicit. I concentrate on three subclasses of locators: (i) locators that express forward sequencing – e.g., depois (next), depois disso (after that), a seguir (next); (ii) locators that express backward sequencing – e.g., antes (beforehand), antes disso (before that); and (iii) locators expressing temporal overlap – e.g., enquanto isso (meanwhile), entretanto (in the meantime) or durante esse tempo (during that time). These locators are inserted in sentence-initial position in sequences of two juxtaposed sentences with the pretérito perfeito simples in Portuguese and with the simple past in English. Although other Discourse Relations (henceforth, DRs) will be taken into account, here, due to space constraints, I present cases involving only the DRs of Result (cf. (1)-(4)) and Elaboration (cf. (5)-(8)). (cf. Lascarides and Asher 1991 and 1993, and Asher and Lascarides 2003 for a definition of these DRs):

1. A Ana teve um acidente de carro há dois anos. Deixou de guiar.
   Ana had a car accident two years ago. She quit driving.

2. A Ana teve um acidente de carro há dois anos. {Depois disso / a seguir a isso / dois dias depois / two days after} deixou de guiar
   Ana had a car accident two years ago. {After that / afterwards / two days after} she quit driving.

If, however, these temporal markers are replaced by depois / next and a seguir / next, the inference that the second eventuality results from the first no longer exists:

3. A Ana teve um acidente de carro há dois anos. {Depois / a seguir} deixou de guiar.
   Ana had a car accident two years ago. Next she quit driving.

While in (1) and (2) the second segment is easily interpreted as describing a result of the car accident described in the first, in (3) what the discourse sequence conveys is just forward sequencing, without the speaker committing herself to a consequence relation between the two states of affairs. One could argue at this point that depois disso has a different meaning than depois. That depois disso is temporal-consequential marker or a trigger of Result, and that depois is just temporal or narrative. At least, two arguments may be used against this hypothesis: first, it is not always the case that depois disso has a temporo-consequential meaning (cf. (4)).

4. A Ana foi ao supermercado. {Depois / depois disso} Foi ao banco
   Ana went to supermarket. {Next/ after that} she went to the bank.
Furthermore, the consequence relations were there (cf. (1)) before depois disso or depois were inserted, which I take as an argument against the hypothesis that these DRs are triggered by the temporal markers.

Let us now turn to cases involving temporal markers that express temporal overlapping. Sequence (5) below is understood as communicating that the eventuality described in the second segment is a part of the eventuality described in the first (Elaboration case).

Ana went to Paris. She stayed at the Hilton.

In (6), to which durante esse tempo / during that time was added, the sequence preserves the same interpretation:

Ana went to Paris. During that time, she stayed at the Hilton.

However, this interpretation is not available in (7), where entretanto / in the meantime and enquanto isso / meanwhile are present:

(7) A Ana foi a Paris. {Entretanto / enquanto isso} ficou hospedada no Hilton.
Ana went to Paris. {In the meantime / meanwhile} she stayed at the Hilton.

Once again, one could argue that entretanto and enquanto isso have a different meaning than durante esse tempo, for the latter, unlike the former, occurs in sequences where there is a mereological relation between two eventualities. Once again, this is disputable. The mereological relation is not introduced by durante esse tempo. It is inferred in the absence of the temporal marker. Furthermore, the three temporal markers at stake are interchangeable in other contexts:

(8) A Ana foi nadar. {Durante esse tempo / entretanto / enquanto isso} roubaram-lhe o carro.
Ana went to for a swim. {During that time / in the meantime / meanwhile} her car was robbed.

To conclude: although temporal markers react to Discourse Relations, their meaning is primarily temporal. They express temporal relations and not DRs. They are sensitive to cause-consequence and to mereological relations between eventualities – which have impact in the inference of certain DRs – and this explains why some of them cannot co-occur with certain DRs.

References