The explicit marking of contingency relations in English and German texts: A contrastive analysis

– preview version –

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1   Introduction

Coherence: A discourse is coherent if and only if all of its segments directly or indirectly contribute to the discourse purpose (Grosz and Sidner 1986).

Cohesion: A discourse is cohesive if and only if it contains formal cues/markers – such as connectives – that signal its coherence (cf. Bublitz 1998). Cohesion is a form of *explicitness* (cf. House 2004).

Connective: A conjunction, sentence adverbial or particle that creates cohesion by assigning thematic roles to sentences (e.g. CAUSE–EFFECT) (Pasch et al. 2003, Blühdorn 2008a, 2008b).

1.1   English vs. German

Studies have indicated that German texts tend to contain more connectives than comparable English texts (Stein 1979, House 2004, Behrens 2004, Doherty 2002: 109, Fabricius-Hansen 2005, Becher submitted).

1.2   The present study

Aim: corroborate or challenge previous results and provide explanations

Object of investigation: causal connectives

Data: corpus of ca. 100 short English and German business texts[1] (letters to shareholders) from 1993–2001. Word count: ca. 50,000 per language.

2 Results[2]

2.1 Conjunctions[3]

German	English
denn 'for, because' (28)	*because* (15)
weil 'because' (14)	*as* (4)
da 'as, since' (11)	*since* (2)
TOTAL: 53	TOTAL: 21

Table 1: Occurrence of causal conjunctions in the corpus

2.2 Adverbs[4]

German	English
damit 'thus' (107)	*thus* (0)
deshalb (43)	*therefore* (3)
daher 'hence' (21)	*hence* (0)
–	*as a result* (5)
also 'so, thus' (15)	*so* (7)
folglich (0)	*consequently* (1)
TOTAL: 186	TOTAL: 16

Table 2: Occurrence of causal connective adverbs in the corpus

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[1]Additionally, translations into the respective other language are available for most of the texts.

[2]Work on the corpus is not complete, so the figures presented may change (minimally).

[3]Non-connective uses (e.g. "*as* much *as*"), temporal uses (e.g. "*since* we entered the stock market") etc. were not counted. Since

[4]NB: Non-connective uses of *damit, deshalb* and *daher* were not sorted out. Since such uses are rare (ca. 10-20%) the figures are valid (though not exact).

3   Interpretation

Three Hypotheses...

...that might explain the observed frequency mismatch between English and German causal connectives:

1. Contexts in which causal connectives may appear (argumentation, evaluations, etc.) are rare in English economic texts. They make use of other "rhetorical structures" (Mann und Thompson 1988), or "discourse patterns" (Jordan 1984; Hoey 1994, 2001), than comparable German texts.

2. 'Causal contexts' do occur frequently, but they are signaled by other cohesive devices such as causal subjects, verbs with causal meaning, etc. (cf. *This makes it difficult...* vs. *It is therefore difficult...*).

3. 'Causal contexts' do occur frequently, but most of them aren't signaled at all!

ad Hypothesis 1 (few 'causal contexts' in English)

Difficult to assess, since there are no hard and fast criteria for the identification of rhetorical relations.

ad Hypothesis 2 ('causal contexts' signaled differently in English)

Hypothesis supported by qualitative analysis of English-German and German-English translations. Causal connectives often translated by means of a *subject switch* in German-English translations:

(1)   (a) *Damit* verstärken wir unsere Kapazität vor allem für den
          Chemie-, Biotechnologie- und Pharmamarkt.
          'Thus *we* [AGENT] *increase our capacity...*'

       (b) *This* [CAUSE] will increase our capacity, especially for the
          chemical, biotechnology and pharmaceutical markets.

ad Hypothesis 3 ('causal contexts' often not signaled in English)

Hypothesis supported by qualitative analysis of English-German and German-English translations. Causal connectives often *omitted* in German-English translations:

(2)   (a) Wir sind mehr als doppelt so stark wie der Markt gewachsen und
           haben *damit* weltweit Marktanteile dazugewonnen.
           '*We have grown more than twice as strongly as the market and
           have* thus *gained market shares worldwide*'

       (b) We grew at double the market rate and gained market shares
           throughout the world.

Conversely, causal connectives are often *added* in English-German transla-
tions:

(3)   (a) XY Business Support Services [was] launched in the first
           quarter [...].

       (b) *Deshalb* wurde im ersten Quartal die XY Business Support
           Services gegründet [...].
           'Therefore, *XY Business Support Services was founded in the
           first quarter.*'

Quantitative results are under way!

4   Conclusion

Hypotheses 2 and 3 both seem to be correct. However, Hypothesis 3 is in
need of an explanation: *why* are connectives added in English-German trans-
lations and removed in German-English translations? Two conflicting (?)
explanations:

Doherty's (2002) explanation: "German indicates and spells out discourse
relations more often than English... The left-peripheral English verb
phrase can rely on the verb as a natural, early clue to the semantic
and pragmatic relationships in which the elements of a sentence partic-
ipate... In German, the processor has to wait till the end of a sentence
before it really knows all about the semantic and pragmatic functions
of its constituents... Thus, additional clues which indicate discourse
relations and the beginning of focus... are welcome in German." (119f)

House's (2004) explanation: Diverging frequencies of connectives in En-
glish and German are due to differences in "linguistic-textual conven-
tions" (189), i.e. cultural differences between the Anglophone and
German language communities[5]. (Translators apply a "cultural filter"
[House 1997], so that differences like this one get 'filtered out' in trans-
lation.)

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[5]cf. also Fabricius-Hansen (2005)

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