

'Concessive' as a discourse relation in expository written English

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1. Introduction

Concessive constructions have almost exclusively been studied in semantic terms, often by referring to the notion of 'surprise'. [1]

My approach in this paper will be different: I wish to examine concession as an interactive discourse relation, defining it in terms of writers' goals and readers' perceptions of these goals, and to explore the implications of viewing concession this way rather than strictly in semantic terms.

2. Previous research on concession

One of the earliest and most influential definitions of concession is that offered by Quirk (1954:6): '... the concessive relation may be said to exist between two parts of an utterance when one part is surprising in view of the other.'

A variation of this definition can be seen in Quirk et al (1972:874): 'Concessive conjuncts signal the unexpected, surprising nature of what is being said in view of what was said before', and in Quirk et al (1985:1098): 'Concessive clauses indicate that the situation in the matrix clause is contrary to expectation in the light of what is said in the concessive clause.'

Winter (1982:107-117), looking at actual texts, accepts Quirk et al.'s 1972 definition, and proposes that the differences between although and but as signals of concession are best discussed in terms of 'known' and 'new' information.

König (1985) and (to appear) suggests a further semantic property of concessive sentences: 'there is an incompatibility or conflict between the facts described by p and q' (1985:4), which is also mentioned in Harris (to appear): 'the antecedent marks an extreme value (whether potential or actual, depending on the clause type) within a set of possibilities, a value generally taken to be incompatible with the consequent.'

Shared by all the grammarians cited so far is the statement of the 'surprise' or 'incompatibility' in absolute terms; that is, it is not considered who is supposed to be surprised or to perceive the incompatibility. Further, none of these definitions distinguishes what we consider to be neutral contrast from concession, since contrast may also involve 'surprise' or 'incompatibility'. In fact, König (to appear), notes that 'many investigations that have struggled with this problem [of distinguishing 'concessive relations' from 'adversative relations'] have come to the conclusion that a clear distinction between these two types of relations or types of connectives cannot be drawn and I will therefore speak

indiscriminately of "concessive" or "adversative" relations.'

Jordan (1985) represents a broadening of the discussion of concessives in his explicit mention of the writer as responsible for signalling the 'surprise'. Jordan compares concession with other types of 'counter-expectation' in actual texts in terms of 'signaling transition between types of information' (p. 265). Accepting as a working definition Quirk's (1954) definition, he discusses the implications of several examples in which although 'the rebuttals are surprising in concessive terms ... , they also very clearly contain predicted information, which is thus hardly surprising in view of what was said before' (p. 11). Jordan goes on to discuss relations of surprise and expectation in terms of transitions from one 'type of information' to another.

In this paper, I wish to suggest that another perspective on the concessive relation may be gained by avoiding the semantic notion of 'surprise' altogether and focussing instead on what we can assume writers are doing with texts.[2]

3. Relations in Discourse Structure

It is uncontroversial that discourse is coherent, and that parts of a discourse 'go together' to form a whole. As background to an analysis of concession, I will consider one type of discourse, small written expository texts in English, and describe one factor involved in the creating and interpreting of such texts as coherent. This factor is the existence of perceived organizational, or rhetorical, relations between parts of the text.

These relations, often not directly signalled, are essential to the functioning of the text as a means for a writer to accomplish certain goals. These relations involve every non-embedded clause in the text and they form a pattern of relations which connects all the clauses together.

Let's begin by considering an example for illustration. The following short text has been broken down into 'units'; each unit consists of one clause, except that embedded complement and relative clauses are considered part of the same unit as the main clauses with which they are associated.

(from a researcher at ISI, an artificial intelligence research organization; message appeared on the ISI electronic bulletin board:)

1. I am having my car repaired in Santa Monica this Thursday 19th.
2. Would anyone be able to bring me to ISI from there in the morning
3. or drop me back there by 5pm please?

In this short text, Unit 1 poses a problem, to which a solution, the request expressed in Units 2 - 3, is proposed. We can thus postulate a SOLUTIONHOOD relation between Unit 1 and Units 2 - 3. Such judgements are inferences made

on the basis of various types of knowledge which readers bring to texts; as readers, we infer what the writer's purposes must have been. Our definitions below explicitly acknowledge that our analyses involve judgements of plausible writer goals.

Other relations which have been discussed in the literature referred to above include CONDITION, BACKGROUND, MOTIVATION, CIRCUMSTANCE, ANTI-THESIS, CONTRAST, ELABORATION, and, the focus of this paper, CONCESSION.[3]

I would like to suggest that the much-discussed clause-combining domain of 'frustrated expectation' or 'counterexpectation' be divided into three sub-domains, according to discourse function: ANTI-THESIS (see Thompson and Mann (to appear)), CONTRAST, and CONCESSION.

4. CONCESSION as a discourse relation

The definition of CONCESSION which I would like to propose incorporates the element of 'incompatibility' of König and Harris, mentioned above, but differs from them in viewing the incompatibility as potential or apparent and in relating it to the writer's purposes rather than taking it as some kind of absolute. But before I can present this definition, I must introduce the concept of 'positive regard'. Writers pursue different sorts of goals with different texts and text spans. Some are intended to persuade, i.e., to create belief. Others are intended to create an attitude of approval or interest. Still others are intended to create desire, an intention to act. These are all varieties of what we might call positive regard. In analyzing any one text span and decomposing it into parts, we use a single primary notion of positive regard, either belief, approval, or desire, with the particular choice of notion depending on the analyst's perception of the writer's intent.

The CONCESSION relation can be said to hold between two parts of a text, a and b (where b is the part doing the conceding), if it is plausible that the writer:

1. has positive regard for a and wants the reader to have positive regard for a too;
2. acknowledges a potential or apparent incompatibility between the situations presented in a and b;
3. regards the situations presented in a and b as compatible;
4. believes that the reader's recognizing this compatibility will increase the reader's positive regard for a, in that the reader will be less likely to discount a in the face of possible objections to it.

Before considering some of the implications of this textual perspective

on the concessive relation, let's look at three examples. The first is taken from a 19-unit description of one of the announcers on a Los Angeles public radio station:

17. Although Jim lists tennis, Chinese food, and travel to exotic locales among his favorite hobbies,

18. one can't help but wonder at the unmentioned interests that help spark Jim's creativity, leading him to concoct an unending stream of imaginative programs.

In this extract, all the conditions are met for taking unit 17 to be in a concessive relation with unit 18. It is plausible that the writer:

1. has positive regard for the likelihood that Jim has unmentioned interests sparking his creativity (unit 18), and wants the reader to do so too;
2. acknowledges the apparent incompatibility between listing only three hobbies and the likelihood of having a wider range of unmentioned interests;
3. views listing only three hobbies and the likelihood of having a wider range of unmentioned interests as in fact being compatible;
4. believes that the reader's recognizing this compatibility will increase the reader's inclination to have positive regard for unit 18 too, since the reader is less likely to object, 'but only three hobbies are listed.'

In this extract, the concessive relation is signalled by means of the hypotactic concessive conjunction although. But there are other ways of signalling this relation. The following example involves a paratactic construction with but; this extract is from the beginning of a personal letter:

1. Your kind invitation to come and enjoy cooler climes is so tempting,

2. but I have been waiting to learn the outcome of medical diagnosis

3. and the next 3 months will be spent having the main thumb joints replaced with plastic ones.

Here unit 1 is in a concessive relation with units 2-3. Once again, it is plausible to analyze this text in terms of a writer who:

1. has positive regard for units 2-3, the necessity of thumb surgery, and wants the reader to do so too;

2. acknowledges the potential incompatibility between the temptation of 'cooler climes' and having to undergo thumb surgery;
3. regards the temptation of cooler climes and undergoing thumb surgery as compatible (the visit will have to be put off);
4. believes that recognizing the compatibility of the temptation and the necessity of the surgery will increase the reader's inclination to have positive regard for the claim that the thumb surgery news is true, and is not just an excuse for not visiting.

The third example is also a message from the electronic bulletin board at ISI:

1. The next music day is scheduled for July 21 (Saturday), noon-midnight.
2. I'll post more details later,
3. but this is a good time to reserve the place on your calendar.

The writer of this text wants readers to believe that they should mark their calendars for the next music day. In unit 2, he acknowledges that there is a potential incompatibility between planning for the event and not having more details as to location and specific activities, but he hopes that readers will see that this isn't a real incompatibility, since they are more likely to attend if they can at least refrain from scheduling anything else for that date.

So far, then, we have seen three brief examples of the concessive relation at work in short texts. What insights can we gain by considering concession from this perspective?

First, the definition of concession given above makes explicit that the grammar of clause combining is part of the writer's supply of tools for accomplishing her/his purposes in creating the text. Recognizing this fact resolves the problem alluded to by Jordan (1985) of determining to whom a fact must be surprising in order for the definition of concession to apply.

Focussing on concession in terms of the work that the text is doing for the writer also frees us from the temptation to think of concession in terms of the interpretation of sentences in isolation. Only in terms of its discourse context can we understand how concession is a 'conceding' of something: it concedes the potential incompatibility of two situations in order to forestall an objection that could interfere with the reader's belief of the point the writer wants to make. Looking at sentences in isolation, it is impossible to infer writer purposes, and therefore impossible to determine what relation is exhibited.

Second, to return to König's point about the difficulty of distinguishing between concession and adversative, the text-functional definition I have given allows a clear distinction to be drawn between CONCESSION as a device a writer can use for manipulating readers' beliefs and neutral CONTRAST, which involves no manipulation. A definition of CONTRAST might be the following:

A pair of text spans are in a relation of CONTRAST if the situations they present are taken to be the same in many respects, different in a few respects, and compared with respect to one or more of these differences.

Here is an example to illustrate the difference between CONCESSION and CONTRAST; this is the abstract introducing a Scientific American article:

1. Animals heal,
2. but trees compartmentalize.
3. They endure a lifetime of injury and infection
4. by setting boundaries that resist the spread of the invading microorganisms.

In this abstract, units 1 and 2 are in a relation of CONTRAST according to the definition just given. It is clear that the definitions we have given of CONTRAST and CONCESSION allow a sharp analytic distinction to be made according to whether the writer can be seen as intending to manipulate the reader's beliefs or not: the definition of CONCESSION includes a component of manipulation, whereas that of CONTRAST does not.

Third, thinking of concession as a discourse-functional relation rather than as strictly an interclausal relation allows us to view CONCESSION independently of any particular markings; thus, as has been noted by König (1985, to appear) and Harris (1986), we find not only that there are many ways of signalling CONCESSION, but also that such 'concessive' morphemes as although, even though, and while don't always mark CONCESSION.

Examples of CONCESSION being marked in more than one way can be seen in our first two text extracts above; the first uses although, the second shows but.

An example of the second situation, where although marks a non-concessive relation can be seen in this paragraph from New Scientist, Aug. 11, 1966, p. 333, cited in Winter (1982:111-112) about a group of Mbuti people who were persuaded to be coached by filmmakers to make dangerous river crossings:

1. They were undoubtedly an obliging people.
2. The famous photograph of the pygmy 'bridge' and the spectacular technique of crossing a river by swinging on a vine from one side to another was taught to the Mbuti 'not without difficulty' by an enterprising moviemaker.
3. The group were able to keep it up for some years
4. and 'obligingly' repeated the act for 'documentary' film units
5. although they preferred to cross the river by wading or by walking over a tree trunk.
6. It was far safer.

The definitions given above of CONCESSION and CONTRAST suggest that this text, despite the connective although, is not an instance of CONCESSION, but is rather an instance of simple CONTRAST, since nothing is being conceded, no potential objections are being answered, no beliefs are being manipulated.

Harris (to appear) observes that 'the notion "concession" is not always explicitly marked by a specific subordinater or the equivalent in a particular language'. He goes on to suggest that 'a conditional marker and/or an adversative co-ordinator will often serve the purpose just as well'. However, my data suggest that in fact the CONCESSION relation may not be marked at all. Here is an example from a memo to members of a linguistics department from the administrative assistant explaining why they can't be reimbursed for off-campus xeroxing:

1. Some of you have occasionally given me receipts for Xeroxing done off-campus.
2. Until now I have never had any trouble getting these reimbursed for you.
3. Now the Accounting Department is clamping down and enforcing a regulation that they claim has been in effect since July 1976 that all Xeroxing on University accounts must be done through the copy centers on Campus.

The CONCESSION relation between units 2 and 3 is clear: the writer wants her readers to believe that they can't get the reimbursement they have come to expect. Acknowledging the apparent incompatibility between the previous ease with which these payments have been made and the current impossibility of getting them now increases the likelihood that her point will be believed, since it forestalls the objection 'but we have been getting reimbursed with no problems.'

These three examples suggest, then, that if we view CONCESSION in terms

of defining certain connectors or in terms of artificial example sentences, we might miss the functional unity of this relation as a means for a writer to accomplish certain goals whether or not it is explicitly signalled.

I wish to emphasize that this logical independence of form and function does not deny a close relationship between the clause-combining grammar traditionally associated with concession and the functions I have been discussing. What seems to me an appropriate way of regarding this relationship is to see the grammar of clause combining as a grammaticalization of discourse relations (as discussed in Matthiessen and Thompson (to appear)); thus forms such as although and but are often, but need not be, associated with the discourse function of CONCESSION. As Du Bois (1985) has put it, 'grammars do best what people do most'.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to show that viewing CONCESSION as a discourse relation rather than in terms of the traditional semantic characterization of 'surprise' can provide a fresh perspective on the way writers and readers actually use CONCESSION in English.

Notes

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2. I will refer to 'writer' in this paper because I am restricting myself to written language here; the claims I am making are equally applicable to speakers as well.

3. Literature discussing discourse relations includes Beekman and Callow (1974), Crothers (1979), Grimes (1975), Halliday and Hasan (1976), Hobbs (1979), (to appear), Longacre (1976), (1983), Mann and Thompson (1985), (1986), (to appear), Matthiessen and Thompson (to appear), Martin (1983), McKeown (1982), Meyer (1975), and Thompson and Mann (to appear). For a detailed discussion of a theory of such discourse relations, see Mann and Thompson (to appear).

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