Defining a connective by the company it keeps:
A corpus-based study on students' (creative) ways of expressing causality using polyfunctional 'e'

Arianna Bienati & Jennifer-Carmen Frey
Eurac Research
Arianna.Bienati@eurac.edu, JenniferCarmen.Frey@eurac.edu

The use of semantically underspecified, polyfunctional connectives is often a matter of concern in the educational sector. Presumably a sign of less routinized writing that uses a reduced repertoire of elements, such connectives are expected to decrease the expressive argumentative power of the text by introducing unnecessary ambiguity (Calamai, 2012).

However, recent research on discourse relations is shifting the focus from discourse connectives to less investigated lexical or non-lexical cues (Das and Taboada, 2018), showing that connectives and other non-connective cues interact with each other, both in mutually exclusive and in redundant ways (Hoek et al., 2019) and that also non-connective cues play a role in facilitating comprehension (Crible et al., 2021). In our study, we investigate the interplay between the polyfunctional connective 'and' and connective and non-connective cues added to specify its meaning in the argumentative writing of students attending their 4th year of Italian upper secondary school in the Province of Bolzano/Bozen, Italy. In particular, we focus on causal uses of the Italian 'e' investigating connective and non-connective cues appearing segment-internally in the essays using Das's and Taboada's, 2014 tagset for signaling discourse relations. Moreover, we compare the patterns found in our corpus with a reference corpus of comparable edited texts, to assess the differences between expert and non-expert writers.

Through the results of our corpus exploration we will discuss the students' ability to create texts using either routinized, frequent and conventionalized ways, or more *ad-hoc* ways of signaling discourse relations.

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