

Call for Papers: Workshop on larger discourse units in (spoken) language, Paris, March 21-22, 2024

The choice of grammatical forms and constructions used for event descriptions, such as voice, differential case marking, or the realization of argument expressions, can be influenced by many different factors. One such factor is the internal organization of a text into what we call here “(larger) discourse units”.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, a number of works on the internal structure of discourse have been published (cf. Chafe 1980, Longacre 1979, van Dijk 1981) that investigate the syntax and semantics of so-called “paragraphs” or “episodes” in spoken and written language, i.e. units characterized as “coherent sequences of sentences of a discourse, linguistically marked for beginning and/or end, and further defined in terms of some kind of 'thematic unity' – for instance, in terms of identical participants, time, location or global event or action” (van Dijk 1981: 177). While in written language, discourse units are usually signalled graphically, in oral or signed speech such units are much less easily recognizable.

In the literature on the segmentation of discourse one finds basically two approaches: the unit-based approach and the cohesive-ties approach. Longacre (1970, 1972), one of the major proponents of the unit-based approach, assumes a hierarchical discourse structure where higher level units are built from lower level ones: sentences from clauses, paragraphs from sentences, chapters from paragraphs, etc. (cf. also Hinds 1979). Frameworks like Rhetorical Structure Theory (e.g. Mann & Thompson 1987) or Segmented Discourse Representation Theory (Asher & Lascarides 2003) segment discourse into basic units by assigning rhetorical relations such as “Explanation”, “Elaboration”, “Contrast”, etc. Similar attempts have also been made for conversational data: Egbert et al. (2021) have defined units by their communicative goals; Flammia (1998) assumes “discourse segments” to span over several “dialogue moves”, usually spanning over several “dialogue turns”. Swerts (1997), finally, investigates the role of prosody in signalling hierarchical discourse structure.

Cohesion-based approaches, in contrast, as proposed by Halliday & Hasan (1976), focus on the means that turn a sequence of clauses into a coherent text through the use of e.g. anaphors, conjunctions, or ellipsis. Kehler (2019) additionally distinguishes “coherence” as a phenomenon defined in terms of the underlying semantic relationships that characterize and structure the transitions between utterances.

The present workshop is based on a collaboration between the projects “Morphosyntax in Discourse” of the LABEX *Empirical Foundations in Language* in Paris (<https://en.labex-efl.fr/>) and “Prominence-related structures in symmetrical voice systems and Papuan languages” of the Collaborative Research Centre *Prominence in Language* in Cologne (<https://sfb1252.uni-koeln.de/en/>). We hope to discover operationalizable methods for identifying larger discourse units with the help of semantic, lexical, grammatical and/or prosodic cues both in well-studied and in more recently documented languages. We are particularly interested in cues that so far have not been considered as being discourse boundary related such as differential case marking, specific voice constructions, etc. The workshop is meant as an opportunity for researchers from different theoretical backgrounds and with an expertise on typologically distinct languages to make further progress in the analysis of discourse data. We invite abstracts (max. 500 words plus abbreviation and reference list) on topics including but not restricted to the following:

- cues for unit boundaries
- cues for cohesion within a unit
- discourse units in different text genres
- units in monologic vs. dialogic discourse
- discourse structuring in spoken vs. written language
- the role of reported speech for discourse structure
- ...

Keynote speakers:

Jakob Egetenmeyer (Universität zu Köln)

Tatiana Nikitina (CNRS, Paris)

Dates:

End of submissions: January 20th, 2024

Notification of acceptance: February 2nd, 2024

Workshop dates: March 21st-22nd, 2024

Scientific Committee:

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t.b.a. in the second call in January

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