The discourse functions of dependent clauses and phrases: A usage-based analysis of synonymous constructions

The present paper deals with the discourse function of dependent clauses (DC) and dependent phrases (DP), arguing the following two points: First, DC have a more global function than DP in the sense that they are more related to a previous context, while DP function much more locally at the sentence level. Second, this difference of discourse functions is motivated by the constructional characteristics of DC and DP. Generally, DC are more independent of their main clause in the sense that they include their own verb. They can, therefore, function more freely beyond the main clause at the discourse level.

Data and Methods
To discuss the discourse functions of DC and DP, this paper quantitatively considers two types of synonymous constructions—*aside* constructions and *notwithstanding* constructions. Both constructions have discourse-organizing functions, each incorporating DC or DP respectively, as follows:

(1) a. However, *leaving aside* that possibility, it can be argued that such a clause merely defines the seller's obligation.
   (DC)
   b. Politics *aside*, the Vietnam industry is a profitable one.     (DP)
(2) a. Mrs. Jones did not understand that it had that effect, *notwithstanding* that the creditor's solicitor went through the mortgage with her and explained it to her before she signed.     (DC)
   b. Strong pressures *notwithstanding*, the social workers undertook a substantial developmental role.     (DP)

In this study, all examples of these constructions are extracted from the British National Corpus (BNC). Then, all examples are coded according to the following five variables: (a) location of DC and DP relative to the main clause, (b) word class of *aside* and *notwithstanding*, (c) types of NP in DC and DP, (d) length of NP, and (e) registers.

Results and Discussions
The total number of *aside* constructions and *notwithstanding* constructions is 420 and 727, respectively, in BNC. Note that the total instances of *aside* are 3447, but only 420 examples are used in dependent structures and have discourse functions. The results support the hypothesis that DC are more global in function than DP. In *aside* constructions, this is clearly demonstrated by the distribution of definiteness of NP.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>definite</th>
<th>non-specific</th>
<th>pronoun</th>
<th>total</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DC (participial use of <em>aside</em>)</td>
<td>171 (70%)</td>
<td>63 (26%)</td>
<td>10 (4%)</td>
<td>244 (100%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>DP (postpositional use of <em>aside</em>)</td>
<td>44 (25%)</td>
<td>103 (59%)</td>
<td>29 (16%)</td>
<td>176 (100%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>total</td>
<td>215 (51%)</td>
<td>166 (40%)</td>
<td>39 (9%)</td>
<td>420 (100%)</td>
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A NP in DC tends to take a definite article, while a NP in DP tends to take an indefinite article. This suggests that the NP in DC has already been mentioned in a previous context. Moreover, the results show the different constructional meanings of the DC and DP types. The discourse function of DC is to exclude an old topic (=NP), mentioned in the previous context, and introduce a new topic in the associated main clause. In contrast, the DP type has a function to exclude one crucial but unfavorable aspect of a new topic in advance.

Similar characteristics are observed in *notwithstanding* constructions. The DC type is somewhat independent of the content of its associated main clause, connecting more wholly to a previous context, while the DP type is linked more strongly to the content of an associated main clause. Especially, the conjunctive use of *notwithstanding* has an elaborative function—amplifying the concerns of a previous context. In contrast, postpositional use of *notwithstanding* has the function of openly acknowledging the importance of an aspect of the topic of the main clause.

(References)