When language users do not seem behave according to cognitive categories:
An analysis of causal connectives in various genres

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Introduction. Some linguistic regularities seem genre-dependent. We investigate whether the use of causal connectives is an example. In general, language users systematically prefer one lexical item over another, even if it is highly similar. An example is the expression of causal relationship in discourse, for which English speakers can use *because* and *since*. However, this preference seems less clear in some genres than in others. In three genres, viz. written newspaper articles, conversations and chat interactions, we analyze the Dutch connectives *omdat* ('because') and *want* ('since/for'). These connectives can be considered a case in point for linguistic categorization, since related European languages show similar distinctions (compare French *parce que*, *car/pour que*, German *weil*, *denn*; Stukker and Sanders, 2012). Our research question is whether the difference in subjectivity between *omdat* and *want* that has been reported in earlier work (Verhagen, 2005) is homogeneous across the three genres.

Method and results. On the basis of earlier corpus work, we have established a profile for the interpretation of *omdat* and *want*, namely that *want* occurs typically in subjective contexts, whereas *omdat* typically occurs in objective contexts. However these distinctions are not absolute, and in our corpora we find many deviations from the prototypical pattern. In this paper we focus on these deviations: How can they be explained? Is there a relationship with the genre of the discourse? For instance, in general we find more subjective relations in argumentative contexts. These then are typically expressed using *want*. Nevertheless, we find instances of *omdat* in such contexts, as in example (1), a paraphrase from a background article on the possibilities of prosecution of the Surinam leader Desi Bouterse.

(1)   Th. van Boven, professor of international law: "That the court does not give a final judgment is very sensible OMDAT the international law is very much on the move".

We argue that such deviant cases are rhetorical uses of *omdat*. The author deliberately chooses to express the causality with *omdat* rather than with *want* to suggest that the conclusion does not follow from a self-constructed subjective line of reasoning, but that it follows more or less deterministically from the circumstances in the situation. We discuss and explain a number of such deviant cases and link them to the genre in which they occur.

Conclusion. Deviations can be explained in terms of core elements of the prototypical use. Therefore, the semantic-pragmatic profile of *want* and *omdat* should not be considered as hard-wired all or nothing rules, but rather as a prototype structure, with a core meaning/use, and more peripheral uses. The non-prototypical uses are motivated deviations: we need the elements in the core profile to understand them. This approach accounts for the genre-dependency of the use of causal connectives.

References

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