

INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES TO LANGUAGE AND ITS USE

Discourse givenness vs. related notions

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DISCOURSE GIVENNESS VS. RELATED NOTIONS

Delimiting discourse givenness:

- givenness vs. definiteness (referentiality)
- givenness vs. background to focus
- givenness vs. topic

GIVENNESS VS. DEFINITENESS

Givenness is sometimes imperfectly distinguished from definiteness. While it is true that definite NPs are often given, all possible combinations of \pm given and \pm definite are attested; see the examples of *the/a senator* and *the mayor* below:

Umbach 2001; Šimík & Wierzba 2017

- (1) a. DEFINITE, GIVEN
Mr. Smith was present. I had a chance to SPEAK to the senator.
- b. DEFINITE, NEW
I visited the townhall. I had a chance to speak to the MAYOR.
- c. INDEFINITE, GIVEN
Senators frequently come to this restaurant. Actually, I once had a chance to SPEAK to a senator.
- d. INDEFINITE, NEW
We visited the congress. I had a chance to speak to a SENATOR.

GIVENNESS VS. BACKGROUND TO FOCUS

Given constituents are often illustrated by backgrounds to foci:

- (2) A Did John finish the meal?
B No, the DOG_{focus} [finished it]_{given}.

While it is true that given constituents are often also backgrounds to foci, it need not be the case.

cf. Wagner 2012

- (3) A Shall have some ice-cream?
B Oh [we forgot to BUY [ice-cream]_{given}]_{focus}, unfortunately.

Given constituents can also be focused. In such cases, the requirement to stress focus overrides the requirement to destress given:

- (4) A Who helped you most – John or Mary?
B MARY_{focus & given} did.

GIVENNESS VS. TOPICALITY

Topical constituents are sometimes thought of the “most given” ones in the sentence (on a gradient approach to givenness, pretty much in line with Firbas’s 1992 communicative dynamism approach). Yet, the existence of new (= non-given) topics, esp. contrastive ones, has been broadly acknowledged.

- (5) A Would you like green tea?
 B Well, [something without CAFFEINE]_{topic} would be BETTER.

READING TIPS

Šimík, Radek and Marta Wierzba. 2017. Expression of information structure in West Slavic: Modeling the impact of prosodic and word-order factors. *Language* 93(3), 671–709.
<https://doi.org/10.1353/lan.2017.0040> [section 2.4]

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Umbach, Carla. 2001. (De)accenting definite descriptions. *Theoretical Linguistics* 27(2-3). 251–280. <https://doi.org/10.1515/thli.2001.27.2-3.251>.

Wagner, Michael. 2012. Focus and givenness: A unified approach. In Ivona Kučerová & Ad Neeleman (eds.), *Contrasts and positions in information structure*, 102–147. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511740084.007>.