

Response to Abbott's Discussion Note

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Abbott raises two major objections to our analysis of definites in *there*-sentences (Ward & Birner 1995): first, that it uses the term ‘hearer-new’ in a way that differs significantly from the original definition given in Prince 1992, and second, that it fails to account for the data. We will address these issues in turn.

It is true that we extend the use of the terms ‘hearer-old’ and ‘hearer-new’ (and, correspondingly, ‘discourse-old’ and ‘discourse-new’) in two related ways. First, Prince restricts their use to describing the information status of entities realized as NPs. However, it seems clear that such statuses are also applicable to, for example, events, locations, and properties that may be realized as VPs, PPs, AdjPs, etc. (see Birner 1994). Second, Prince in fact recognizes three distinct categories of ‘given/new’: discourse-old/discourse-new, hearer-old/hearer-new, and focus/presupposition. By analyzing an entity as representing a hearer-new instantiation of the focus variable in an open proposition, we implicitly assume that the three categories are not mutually exclusive, but rather that the focus of an open proposition itself has an independent discourse- and hearer-status. In fact, it’s unclear to us why the fact that we extend Prince’s usage of this term should constitute counterevidence to the claim in question. While it is true that we extend Prince’s theory in a direction that Prince herself did not

envision, such an extension is not in itself a shortcoming; on the contrary, it is an improvement if it handles the data in a unified and predictive way.

In connection with this same criticism, Abbott notes that sentences like *Then there is that resentment* in her example (2) contain an explicit marker of hearer-old status (i.e., the demonstrative); however, as explained in our original analysis, the entity in such cases is being marked as simultaneously hearer-old (in that it has been previously evoked) and hearer-new (in that the hearer is not expected to recall it). Thus, it is not at all surprising that an indication of hearer-old status would be present; in fact, such a state of affairs is entailed by the analysis of these tokens as ‘reminders’: something must be (assumed to be) hearer-old in order for the hearer to be reminded of it. The claim is merely that it is being TREATED as hearer-new. For this same reason, Abbott’s remark that “the obvious way to treat an entity as hearer-new would be to refer to it using an indefinite NP” misses the mark, since referring to the entity in this way in would treat it ONLY as hearer-new and omit the crucial treatment as SIMULTANEOUSLY hearer-old and hearer-new that signals the NP’s reminder status. Moreover, indefiniteness correlates only indirectly with hearer-new status, by virtue of marking information as not being uniquely identifiable (see Hawkins 1978, 1991; Gundel et al. 1993; inter alia). Thus, just as accommodation involves

the use of a definite in a context where it has not (strictly speaking) been licensed, the ‘reminder’ use of a *there*-sentence treats a (strictly speaking) hearer-old entity as hearer-new via its realization in postverbal position.

Abbott further objects to our analysis of sentences of the form *there is that*, as illustrated in her example (7c):

(1) Cathy: Alex lives in a crummy apartment with \$75 worth of furniture and a \$15,000 sound system... He has a roommate with a Mohawk... A CD rack full of groups I never heard of... And he hangs around with a bunch of dateless bodybuilders with part-time jobs at the video store! I’m a mature, intelligent, condominium-owning business person! What am I doing getting involved with a man who goes to work in tennis shoes??!

Friend: He’s adorable and he worships you.

Cathy: Well, there is that.

[=Abbott (this issue), ex. 7c; from the comic strip “Cathy”]

In Ward & Birner (1995) we argue that such examples involve the presence of a salient open proposition whose variable is instantiated by the discourse entity represented by postverbal NP. It is this entity’s status as a new instantiation of the variable in the open proposition, we argue, that licenses its realization in postverbal position. However, Abbott claims that

it is “impossible either to argue that the referent of *that* in any of these [=Abbott’s (7a-c)] sentences (i.e. the situation or factor) is new to the addressee, or to argue that the fact that this referent satisfies the salient open proposition is new information”. We maintain that it is not only possible to argue that such NPs are hearer-new in the sense of Ward & Birner 1995, but that the data in fact support such an analysis. Consider example (1) above. Here the proposition ‘Alex is adorable and he worships you’ is being presented as hearer-new information in the ‘reminder’ sense discussed above. What Cathy is being reminded of in this example is a pair of attributes that stand in opposition to her litany of reasons to NOT date Alex. Thus, Cathy first evokes the open proposition ‘there are X reasons to NOT date Alex’. Cathy’s friend offers a countervailing consideration, in effect evoking the open proposition ‘there are X reasons TO date Alex’, while instantiating the variable with two reasons. These reasons constitute new instantiations within this open proposition, despite representing presumably familiar information to the speaker.

Cathy then affirms this instantiation by conceding its appropriateness (in this case, the truth of the resulting proposition) with a *there*-sentence. In saying *there is that*, she conveys her acceptance of her interlocutor’s selection of a new instantiation for the variable in the open proposition. In

this way, the information status of the postverbal NP extends to Cathy's utterance much as indefiniteness can be extended across conversational turns, as in (2):

(2) A: Look – a man is shooting BBs at a squirrel.

B: Wow – you're right; a man is shooting BBs at a squirrel. What a jerk.

Here, B uses indefinites to refer to a man and a squirrel that are not only hearer-old but discourse-old as well; that is, even though they are both familiar and uniquely identifiable, the affirmation of the proposition retains the information status of the entities evoked within that proposition. To confirm the role of affirmation/concession in *there*-sentences such as that in (1), we need only note that the felicity of such an utterance depends on the salience of the relevant open proposition. Without the salient open proposition, *there is that* is infelicitous, as seen in (3):

(3) A: Hi, Mom. I'm home from school.

B: Did you remember to ask your teacher about the field trip?

A: #There is that.

B's query in this example is clearly a reminder, yet A's final utterance cannot be seen as affirming or conceding a new instantiation for the variable

in a salient open proposition to the effect that ‘there is X to be considered’, and the *there*-sentence is correspondingly infelicitous. Such an open proposition is, however, salient for each of the examples of *there is that* in Abbott’s discussion note. Thus, we maintain that our original analysis is correct; i.e., that the open proposition sets up a narrower context into which discourse entities may be introduced as new.

Finally, Abbott argues that the *that* in postverbal position in such cases undergoes ‘anaphoric destressing’, “forcing main sentence stress to occur on *is* so that it cannot be contracted”. However, this is simply not true; all three examples that Abbott provides are perfectly felicitous with a contracted copula. Not only is contraction possible, but so is a pitch accent on the postverbal NP *that*. In fact, such utterances are completely natural when produced with the ‘fall-rise’ intonation contour, with an L*+H pitch accent on the postverbal NP. As noted in Ward & Hirschberg (1985, 1988), the fall-rise contour conveys lack of speaker commitment to the appropriateness of an evoked scale or scalar value. Such a scale is clearly salient in all of the examples Abbott discusses. In (1), for example, a scale of ‘reasons to be involved with someone’ has clearly been evoked by the speaker herself.¹

¹Interestingly, Abbott allows for two exceptions to her claim regarding the non-contractability of the copula in this kind of *there*-sentence: (1) the presence of a sentential adverbial and (2) ‘contrastive stress’ on the postverbal NP. However, in all of the

In summary, Abbott’s reservations arise largely from her assumption that the term ‘hearer-new’ must be restricted to its original use as defined in Prince 1992 (i.e., for entities alone, and only with respect to their status as having ever been present within the hearer’s knowledge store). However, if the use of the term ‘hearer-new’ may be extended to encompass both a wider range of ‘entities’ (including events, attributes, etc.) and a greater flexibility in its potential applications (e.g., in contexts where previously known information is nonetheless being marked as hearer-new for a specific purpose, or where it is being marked as hearer-new only with respect to a certain salient proposition), we are left with a rich tapestry of ways in which information may in fact be new to the hearer, and correspondingly marked as such via an existential *there*-sentence.

Thus, we have not argued that *there*-sentences introduce new entities into the discourse, but rather that they mark new information, as when a previously known entity is provided as a new instantiation for the variable in an open proposition. Although Abbott argues that this less constrained notion of hearer-newness “certainly could not be what is distinctive about *there*-sentences, given the commonality of new information of this type

cases that Abbott discusses, the postverbal NP may bear a ‘contrastive’ pitch accent (e.g., L*+H or L+H*; see Pierrehumbert & Hirschberg 1990), and may be interpreted contrastively, as a proposition being singled out from a set in order to be affirmed or conceded by the speaker.

that sentences in general can express,” such an argument — in essence, that there are too many other ways in which such information may be expressed — leads to the conclusion that no marked syntactic construction could serve to mark information as given or new, since such a wide range of information in discourse has one or the other status; but clearly this is precisely the function served by many constructions. Abbott concludes that “it may be a mistake to think that *there*-sentences have only one function,” and that “it may not be the case that any single discourse-based principle can account for the distribution of NPs in this construction.” While this may be true, we do not feel that the objections Abbott raises are sufficient to warrant abandoning just such a unified account, and we therefore stand by our original analysis.

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