

# Information status: Old vs. new

Chris Potts, Ling 390a: Controlling the Discourse, Fall 2007

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## 1 Information status (Prince 1992)

### 1.1 Discourse-old

Information that has been explicitly introduced into the discourse.

For the most part, discourse-old information must be introduced by language. However, some highly salient events, participants, etc., can count as discourse-old once they have happened or appeared.

### 1.2 Discourse-new

Information that, at the point at which it is offered, has not appeared in the discourse before.

Once some discourse-new information is offered and accepted by the discourse participants, it becomes discourse-old (and hearer-old).

### 1.3 Hearer-old

Information that is assumed to be known by the hearer even if it is not discourse-old.

- There is a huge amount of such information — assumptions about linguistic conventions, social norms, general goals, etc.
- It is easy for some information to be hearer-old but not discourse-old — some things are so obvious that one doesn't bother mentioning them in any discourse.

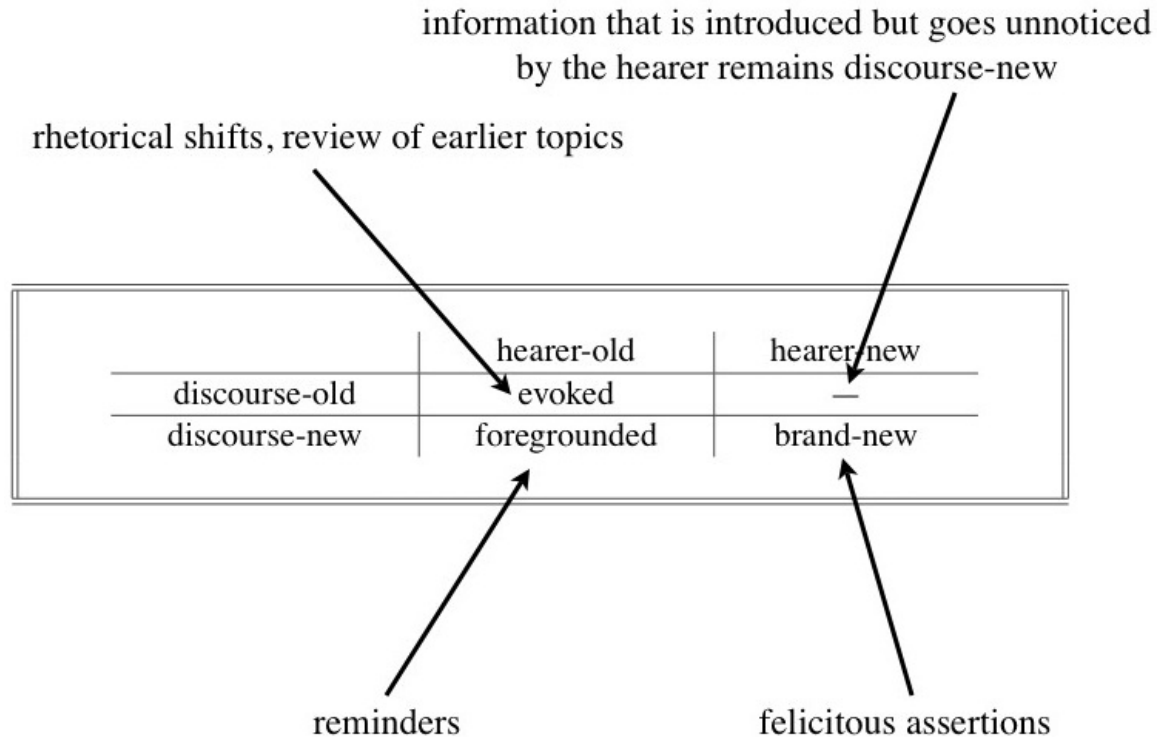
### 1.4 Hearer-new

Information that is new to the hearer.

- It seems that hearer-new information is discourse-new as well.
- But not all discourse-new information is hearer-new information: I might remind you of something that you already know.

## 2 Categories

We have four categories, which work out as follows (Ward and Birner 2004:156):



## 3 Morphological and syntactic cues to information-status

- Indefinites (e.g., *a movie*, *someone*) are likely to be discourse-new and hearer-new.
- Non-demonstrative definite pronouns (*it*, *he*, but not *that* and *one*) are likely to be both discourse-old and hearer-old.<sup>1</sup>
- Parenthetical expressions like *as you know* and *as we discussed* often mark material that is both discourse-old and hearer-old (i.e., “evoked”).

<sup>1</sup>Demonstrative pronouns might be able to pick out phrases that are discourse-new but hearer-old, though their contrastive uses complicate things.

## 4 Examples

- (1) Jim showed a movie. It was about intonation.  
 ↑ ↑ ↑  
*discourse-new discourse-new discourse-old*  
*hearer-old hearer-new hearer-old*
- (2) # Jim showed it<sub>i</sub>. A movie<sub>i</sub> was about intonation.  
 ↑ ↑ ↑  
*discourse-new discourse-old discourse-new*  
*hearer-old hearer-old hearer-new*
- (3) # He<sub>i</sub> looked around. Bob<sub>i</sub> was pleased with the apartment.  
**discourse-old discourse-new**  
*hearer-old hearer-old*
- (4) Jim showed a movie. The movie was about intonation.
- (5) #Jim showed the movie. A movie was about intonation.
- (6) #Jim invited five of his friends. A friend couldn't come, though.
- (7) Jim invited five of his friends. One (of his friends) couldn't make it, though.
- (8) The President of the U.S. spoke on TV last night.
- (9) The giraffe in my office doesn't have enough space to stretch outs.
- (10) a. It is clear that pigs can fly.  
 b. As we discussed earlier, pigs can now fly.
- (11) I've asked you five times already to take out the trash.

## 5 Processing double object constructions

Beckman (1996) proposed a Definiteness Asymmetry Constraint: In a double object structure (e.g., *gave the girl the book*), the first object cannot be less definite than the second.

**Note** This constraint does not apply to corresponding prepositional structures (e.g., *gave the book to the girl*).

- (12)
- a. I gave a girl a book.  
(Both objects are indefinite; this should be ok.)
  - b. I gave the girl the book.  
(Both objects are definite; this should be ok.)
  - c. I gave the girl a book.  
(The first object is more definite than the first; this should be ok.)
  - d. I gave a girl the book.  
(The first object is less definite than the second; this violates the Definiteness Asymmetry Constraint.)

**Self-paced reading** (d) takes longer to read than (c).

## References

- Beckman, Jill. 1996. Double objects, definiteness, and extraction: A processing preference. In Mike Walsh Dickey and Susan Tunstall, eds., *University of Massachusetts Occasional Papers in Linguistics*, volume 19, 27–70. Amherst, MA: GLSA.
- Prince, Ellen F. 1992. The ZPG letter: Subjects, definiteness and information structure. In Sandra Thompson and William Mann, eds., *Discourse Description: Diverse Analyses of a Fundraising Text*, 295–325. Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Ward, Gregory and Betty Birner. 2004. Information structure and non-canonical syntax. In Laurence R. Horn and Gregory Ward, eds., *Handbook of Pragmatics*, 153–174. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.