

## GIVENNESS AND LINEAR PRECEDENCE: A CONSTRUCTION-GRAMMAR APPROACH

ANATOL STEFANOWITSCH  
*Hamburg University*

STEFAN TH. GRIES  
*Southern Denmark University*

### I. *Given-before-new*

[A] Beginning with the notion of communicative dynamism in the Prague school of linguistics, it has been claimed by many researchers in many theoretical paradigms, that there is a general principle that *given information precedes new information*; and there is by now substantial evidence that this is true for many constructions (at least in English).

[B] Many different definitions of *givenness* and *newness* have been proposed (see esp. Chafe, e.g. 1994, Lambrecht 1994, see Prince 1981 for an overview). In this talk, we are not primarily interested in the *nature* of givenness. We will simply assume that an element is *given* if a speaker holds the following belief about it: “I think: you can think of this now” (cf. Prince’s (1981) notion of ‘assumed familiarity’).

[C] In this paper, we will discuss our ideas as to whether there is a general principle (in English) that says that for two constituents of a sentence the givenness of the first ( $G_1$ ) must be higher than the givenness of the second ( $G_2$ ), i.e.  $G_1 > G_2$  (or, in order to allow for the possibility that they have the same degree of givenness,  $G_1 \geq G_2$ ). We refer to this principle as *Given-X-new-Y*, or GXNY.

[D] We will not be concerned with the question whether a constituent X precedes a constituent Y *because* X is more given. In fact, we assume that many of the constructions which we discuss have a primary function other than to signal information structure. We are simply concerned with the issue whether they have to conform to GXNY in addition to any other functions they may serve, or constraints they may be subject to.

[E] We are aware of the fact that focus elements often behave differently than non-focus elements (cf. Lambrecht 1994, cf. also Ward, Birner, and Huddleston 2002). Specifically, it seems that focus elements often do not seem to be subject to GXNY in a construction where non-focus elements are. We have therefore tried to limit our discussion to non-focus elements wherever possible.

[F] In the discussion of the relevant data, we will say that a constituent ‘must’ be given if this requirement is *near-categorical* or *categorical*. The examples are mostly meant as illustrations rather than evidence (where solid empirical studies are available, these have been cited).

### II. The data

[A] ACTIVE VS. PASSIVE. In active sentences, the subject is *typically* given (cf. Brown 1983, Chafe 1994), as in (1a), but this is not an absolute requirement. In the passive, the subject must be given, and the by-phrase must be new (cf. Biber et al. 1999: 941, Birner and Ward 1998: 201):

- (1) a. Bill Drummond ... joined forces with colleague Jimmy Caughtie to make a series of ... records. *THEY formed a group called the Jams* but are perhaps better known ... (ICE: s2b-023)  
 b. Devereaux ... works for a shadowy organization called R-Section. *THIS DEPARTMENT was formed by John F. Kennedy* after the events at the Bay of Pigs (ICE: w2b-005)

[B] POSTPOSING. Post-posed NPs must be new (Ward, Birner, and Huddleston 2002):

- (2) Anybody who thinks that there is a great glory in war as such, erm, is off his head. On the other hand, I have to say that *the war does bring out IN PEOPLE extraordinary nobility*. (ICE: s1b-031).

[C] PREPOSING. Preposed constituents must be given (Biber et al. 1999: 900; Ward, Birner, and Huddleston 2002):

- (3) From the tales of incompetence, quarrels and disaster which are carried into the office, she has learned a great about nature, but *ALL THIS EXPERIENCE she leaves behind her* when she closes the office door ... (ICE: w2f-019)

However, this constraint does not hold for locative/temporal adjuncts:

- (4) A: The thing is it's much cheaper than the Dover to Calais ... B: You said it's cheaper. A: Yes, yes, *in the summer you can take a car and four people for a hundred-and-twenty pounds* (ICE: s1a-021)

Note also that the constraint does not hold for 'fronted exclamatives' like *Charming you are* or *Such a gift he had for gesture*, cf. Biber et al. 1999: 909).

[D] INVERSION . In the inversion+preposing construction, the preposed constituent must be given, as (5a and b) show; this does not hold for locative/temporal adjuncts, as (5c) shows (Birner 1994, cf. also Ward, Birner, and Huddleston 2002):

- (5) a. The overkingship was hereditary, however, it was not stable and the overkingship had to be constantly enforced. *UNDER THE OVERKING'S CONTROL were the kings of the many small Tuatha* (ICE: w1a-002).  
 b. \* Ireland was divided into many small kingdoms, the 'Tuatha'. *Under the/an Overking's control were the kings of the many small Tuatha*.  
 c. Secret army's war on the left. <p> A crusading judge has gathered a dossier on the Italian wing of Europe's ultra-right clandestine army with information that could topple the government. In Rome, Willian Scobie reports on the bombshells of intrigue that keep exploding across the continent, where the CIA plotted to defend democracy from the Communists. <p> *In a closely-guarded paramilitary base ... stands a well worn billiard table* which, until last week bore a shining brass plate: 'To the men of Gladio from Julio Adreotti'. The plate is no more. (ICE: w2c-010)

[E] ADVERBIAL CLAUSES. (Non-finite) adverbial clauses can appear sentence-initially if they contain given information and the main clause contains new information, and sentence-finally if the main clause contains given information, and the adverbial clause contains new information (Biber et al. 1999: 835):

- (6) a. Well, Xepe seems to love this idea of having a picnic ... [*talks about how much work preparing a picnic would be*] *IF WE HAVE A PICNIC FOR A START it's going to cost us cash* ... (ICE: s1a-006)  
 b. A: I'm rather scared that, you know, that would seem rather artificial to her as an attempt to win her over... B: But you could start slowly, but I agree it's very difficult if you never have— A: *IT'S ALSO VERY DIFFICULT if communication is virtually nil*. (ICE: s1a-031)

However, this does not hold for purely locative or temporal adverbial clauses:

- (7) a. The step though is to discover who is within the faculty on an academically-related scale. *When we had a head-of-departments' meeting last week, I circulated a piece of paper and several people have returned it to me...* (ICE: s1b-075)  
 b. I asked her, but *she never answered the question WHEN I asked her* (ICE: s1a-023)

[F] IT-CLEFT. In it-clefts, the it-clause is always contains the focus, but it may contain given information, cf. (8a) or new information, cf. (8b) (cf. Ward, Birner, and Huddleston 2002: 1424):

- (8) a. Peasant farmers are being pushe onto increasingly marginal land ... *IT IS ON THIS MARGINAL LAND that some of the most damaging environmental degradation occurs.* (ICE: w1a-013)  
 b. A: Yes, that was a novel of suspense. B: What attracted you to that form? A: I honestly don't know. *It's not the actual story or even the people that ATTRACT ME TO WRITE ABOUT SOMETHING.* It's the places (ICE: s1b-048)

[G] WH-CLEFT. In the wh-cleft, the wh-clause always contains presupposed information; it seems that in the canonical wh-cleft, the presupposed information must be given, while in the inverted wh-cleft, the focus must be given (but cf. Ward, Birner, and Huddleston 2002: 1425 for a different view):

- (9) a. Now this curve, erm, is one that, erm, has caused some concern, erm, over the last decade or so, and what this curve shows is the percentage of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere (ICE: s2a-043).  
 b. I realized after writing the letter to Tony Curtis that I must have thought of shelob as morphologically parallel to she-devil, she-goat, and so on. Perhaps *SUCH A DERIVATION is what the Tolkien letter you refer to rules out* (ICE: w1b-006)

[H] RAISING. Raised objects must be given (Biber et al. 1999:729); in contrast, the non-raised construction places no givenness restrictions on the object (but see Biber et al. 1999:729 for a different view):

- (10) a. A: I want to ask about the role of the father. ... B: We're not doing the father yet, erm, I guess *THE ROLE OF THE FATHER is difficult to type* (ICE: s1a-072)  
 (compare: ...it is difficult to type THE ROLE OF THE FATHER)  
 b. You can have the G-wagon as a long or short wheelbase with petrol or diesel power. A word of warning though: *it's impossible to fit a turbo-charger to right-hand drive diesel models.* (ICE: s2a-055)  
 (compare: ??...a turbo-charger is impossible to fit to right-hand drive diesel models)

[I] LEFT DISLOCATION. Left-dislocated elements may be given or new (Givón 1983, Brown 1983, Ward, Birner, and Huddleston 2002):

- (11) a. Inside was the engine, his engine ... *THE FINEST ENGINE IN THE COUNTRY, it had been built to last a lifetime* (ICE: w2f-007)  
 b. I take the position very firmly that the Government and I as the Arts Minister, through the Arts Council — because *every penny we give to the visual arts and the performing arts, it goes through the arts council* — we have in fact been doing very well (ICE: s1b-022)

[J] RIGHT DISLOCATION. Right-dislocated elements necessarily contain given information (Givón 1983, Brown 1983, Ward, Birner, and Huddleston 2002):

- (12) A: Books that you come back to over and over again ... B: Can you give us an example? C: Treasure Island. A: The wind in the willows — *I'm reading it, TREASURE ISLAND*, at the moment to my son.

[K] EXTRAPOSED NPs. In the NE construction, the extraposed NP must be accessible, but *not* given (cf. Michaelis and Lambrecht 1996):

- (13) Bonhoffer was, erm, a theologian during the last war in Germany and he died at one of the camps ... [6 clauses intervening] *It's amazing actually the number of German theologians that sided with Hitler* (ICE: s1a-053).

[L] DATIVE ALTERNATION. In the ditransitive construction, the Recipient (i.e. the first object) must be given, in the 'prepositional dative' construction, the Theme (i.e. the direct object) must be given (e.g. Thompson 1990):

- (14) a. The men who came ... were as a general rule well turned out, well bred and courteous, and not at all bad examples to set before a young boy. Sometimes *they gave HIM a threepenny bit or a silver sixpence* (ICE: w2f-010)
- b. She thought the bag was something of a joke ... She said 'I've given IT to another friend of mine who said she is certainly going to keep it till the summer' (ICE: s1a-022)

Note also that other VPs containing an object and an adverbial do not place givenness restrictions on these constituents. Although they may be rearranged to adhere to GXNY (see Postposing above), they do not need to be arranged in this way. It seems that they require an extreme difference in givenness between the two constituents before rearrangement becomes obligatory.

[M] PARTICLE PLACEMENT. In the verb-particle construction, the direct object must be given if it appears before the particle, and it must be new if it appears after the particle (e.g. Chen 1986, Gries 1999):

- (15) a. That's a little cold frame ... I got it from the place next door, when *they threw ALL THEIR WINDOW FRAMES out* (ICE: s1a-007).
- b. My conversation was going in on Saturday morning into a shop where *I was picking up some things that were due to be framed* (ICE: s1a-064)

[N] GENITIVE VS. OF-CONSTRUCTION. It has repeatedly been claimed that the choice between these two constructions is due to GXNY (e.g. Standwell 1982), but several studies have shown this to be wrong (e.g. Altenberg 1982, Stefanowitsch 1998, to appear). While the s-genitive does follow GXNY, the *of*-construction does not:

- (16) a. The judges ... increased the sentence on Roy Lambert ... Mr. Les Crewes, whose daughter Joanne died when *LAMBERT'S Daimler* crashed into a sports car last May, said ... (ICE: s2w-017)
- b. The massed bands move to the right and march away now from the center of the parade, as the Board of Drums — it's only since Ninteen-Sixty-One that *the flutes of the BOARD OF DRUMS* were retuned, so that they could play with the massed bands (ICE: s2a-011)

Note that other NPs containing several nominals also do not place givenness constraints on their constituents (e.g. nominal apposition, where both elements are always new).

### III. Summary

[A] GXNY applies to the following constructions:

- passive
- postposing
- preposing (except locative/temporal adjuncts)
- inversion (except locative/temporal adjuncts)
- (possibly) adverbial clauses (except locative/temporal clauses)
- wh-clefts (canonical vs. inverted)
- the object-raising construction
- the two objects in the ditransitive
- particle placement

[B] GXNY does not apply to the following constructions:

- it-clefts
- left dislocation

- right dislocation
- extraposed NPs
- the *s*-genitive vs. the *of*-construction
- nominal apposition

and it only applies weakly to the following constructions:

- active
- ‘non-raised raising constructions’
- objects and adverbials in a VP (except dative alternation)

[C] How can we account for the cases where GXNY does not apply?

- If we assume that GXNY applies at the level of the clause or the VP, but not the NP, this accounts for the *s*-genitive and the *of*-construction, as well as nominal apposition;
- if we assume that GXNY only applies to dependents of the same verb (or operator), this accounts for left-dislocation, right-dislocation, and *it*-clefts;
- if we assume that GXNY only applies to constituents which express participants of the event encoded by V (and their properties), this accounts for the exceptional behavior of locative/temporal adjuncts;
- if we assume that constructions which have individually specified information-structural properties are not subject to GXNY (‘inheritance with overrides’), we can account for extraposed NPs, and for the different behavior of focus elements which we mentioned in the introduction above.

[D] Putting aside for the moment those cases where GXNY applies only weakly, the observations from Section II can be summarized as follows:

For two constituents X and Y,  $G_x \geq G_y$  iff

- a.) X and Y are dependents of the same V; and
- b.) X and Y refer to participants of the event encoded by V (or their properties).

(Note that the constructions where GXNY applies weakly are all canonical constructions, whereas those where GXNY applies strongly are non-canonical, cf. in this context Birner and Ward 1998).

#### IV. The status of GXNY in a construction grammar: five possible analyses

[A] *GXNY is a universal (discourse-functional or cognitive) principle influencing the choice of grammatical constructions from ‘outside’ of the grammar.*

ADVANTAGES

- explains the seemingly probabilistic nature of GXNY.

DISADVANTAGES

- does not straightforwardly account for the fact that GXNY is sensitive to syntactic and semantic structure;
- does not straightforwardly account for the fact the GXNY applies more strongly to some constructions than to others.

This analysis is based on the assumption that *given-precedes-new* holds in all languages. This assumption is wrong (for example, in Hixkaryana (a Cariban language with OVS word order) and in Japanese there is a preference for new information to precede given information (Derbyshire 1986, Hawkins 1994)).

[B] *GXNY is a language-specific (discourse-functional or cognitive) principle influencing the choice of grammatical constructions to some degree from ‘outside’ of the grammar.*

ADVANTAGES & DISADVANTAGES

- see [A] above.

The introduction of language-specific principles that influence grammar but are ‘outside’ of it is problematic.

[C] *GXNY is a very general information-structure construction. Whether a more specific construction inherits GXNY must be specified on an individual basis.*

ADVANTAGES

- allows us to account for the fact the GXNY applies more strongly to some constructions than to others;
- allows us to account for the strong syntactic sensitivity of GXNY (the syntactic and semantic conditions can be specified as part of the construction).

DISADVANTAGES

- does not explain why some GXNY applies strictly only to some constructions (this is merely stipulated on the basis of observed facts);
- does not account for the fact that constructions to which GXNY does not apply strictly (i.e., which do not inherit GXNY) nevertheless weakly adhere to GXNY.

Since this analysis does not motivate the fact that some constructions are subject to GXNY more strictly than others, it should be accepted only if it can be shown that there is no motivation for this fact (or that this motivation is too vague to be integrated explicitly into linguistic theory).

[D] *GXNY is a general information-structure construction inherited by all constructions. Where there is a conflict between GXNY and some other construction (e.g. argument-structure), it is resolved by some kind of competition model, multiple-constraint-satisfaction model, etc.*

ADVANTAGES

- allows us to account for the fact the GXNY applies more strongly to some constructions than to others (see [C]);
- allows us to account for the strong syntactic sensitivity of GXNY (see [C]);
- allows us to account for the fact that GXNY has a weak influence on all constructions.

DISADVANTAGES

- requires the integration of a completely new type of principle into CxG;
- presumably very difficult to formulate explicitly.

[E] *GXNY is an information-structure construction inherited by all constructions, but constructions differ in their tolerance of differences in givenness (i.e., some constructions allow a greater difference in givenness between X and Y before they are seen to violate GXNY). Canonical constructions have a higher tolerance than non-canonical ones because of their higher entrenchment.*

ADVANTAGES

- allows us to account for the fact the GXNY applies more strongly to some constructions than to others (see [C, D]);
- allows us to account for the strong syntactic sensitivity of GXNY (see [C, D]);

- allows us to account for the fact that GXNY has a weak influence on all constructions (see [D]).

DISADVANTAGES

- requires the integration into CxG of the idea that there is an inheritance principle which allows some constructions a greater degree of freedom when it comes to adhering to the inherited properties.

## V. Conclusion

[A] The attempt to formalize *given-precedes new* forces us to be much more explicit than previous approaches with respect to the conditions under which it applies (cf. also Stefanowitsch, to appear). This allows us to come up with a differentiated principle.

[B] Those analyses that are not ruled out by theoretical or obvious empirical shortcomings anyway can be tested empirically. For example, the multi-factorial method developed in Gries (to appear) can easily be adapted to distinguish between account [D] and account [E].

## References

- Altenberg, Bengt. 1980. Binominal NP's in a thematic perspective: Genitive vs. *of*-constructions in 17th century English. In Sven Jacobson (ed), *Papers from the Scandinavian Symposium on Syntactic Variation*. Stockholm Studies in English 52. Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, pp.149–172.
- Biber, D. et al. 1999. *Longman grammar of spoken and written English*. London: Longman.
- Birner, B.J. 1994. Information status and word order: an analysis of English inversion. *Language* 70: 233-259.
- Birner, B.J., and G. Ward. 1998. *Information status and non-canonical word order in English*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: Benjamins
- Brown, C. 1983. Topic continuity in written English narrative. In T. Givón (ed), *Topic Continuity in Discourse. A Quantitative Cross-Language Study*. Typological Studies in Language 3. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: Benjamins, 315–341.
- Chafe, W. 1994. *Discourse, consciousness, and time. The flow and displacement of conscious experience in speaking and writing*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Chen, P. 1986. Discourse and particle movement in English. *Studies in Language* 10: 79-95.
- Givón, T. 1983. Topic continuity in spoken English. In T. Givón (ed), *Topic Continuity in Discourse. A Quantitative Cross-Language Study*. Typological Studies in Language 3. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: Benjamins, 343-363.
- Gries, S.T. 1999. Particle movement: a cognitive and functional approach. *Cognitive Linguistics* 10: 105-146.
- Gries, S.T. To appear. *Multifactorial analysis in corpus-linguistics: a study of particle placement*. London: Continuum Press.
- Lambrech, Knud. 1994. *Information Structure and Sentence Form. A Theory of Topic, Focus, and the Mental Representation of Discourse Referents*. (Cambridge Studies in Linguistics). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Michaelis, L.A. and K. Lambrecht. 1996. Toward a construction-based model of language function: The case of nominal extraposition. *Language* 72: 215-247.
- Prince, E.F.. 1981. Toward a taxonomy of *given-new* information. In P. Cole (ed.), *Radical pragmatics*. New York: Academic Press, pp. 223-255.
- Standwell, G.J.B. 1982. Genitive constructions and functional sentence perspective. *International Review of Applied Linguistics* 20.4: 257-261.
- Stefanowitsch, A. 1998. Possession and partition: the two genitives of English. *Cognitive Linguistics: Explorations, Applications, Research* 23, Seminar für Englische Sprache und Kultur, Universität Hamburg.
- Stefanowitsch, A. To appear. Constructional semantics as a limit to grammatical alternation: The two genitives of English. In: Günter Rohdenburg and Britta Mohndorf (eds), *Determinants of Grammatical Variation in English*. Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter.

- Thompson, S.A. 1990. Information flow and dative shift in English discourse. In J.A. Edmondson, C. Feagan, and P. Mühlhäusler (eds.), *Development and diversity: language variation across time and space*. Dallas, TX: SIL, pp. 239-253.
- Ward, G., B.J. Birner, and R. Huddleston. 2002. Information packaging. In R. Huddleston and G.K. Pullum (eds), *The Cambridge grammar of the English language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 1363-1447.