

Stop Bashing Givenness!

A Note on Elke Kasimir's "Questions-Answers Test and Givenness"*

Thomas Weskott

Universität Potsdam

Elke Kasimir's paper (in this volume) argues against employing the notion of Givenness in the explanation of accent assignment. I will claim that the arguments against Givenness put forward by Kasimir are inconclusive because they beg the question of the role of Givenness. It is concluded that, more generally, arguments against Givenness as a diagnostic for information structural partitions should not be accepted offhand, since the notion of Givenness of discourse referents is (a) theoretically simple, (b) readily observable and quantifiable, and (c) bears cognitive significance.

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In her paper "Questions-Answers Test and Givenness: Some Question Marks" (this volume), Elke Kasimir argues against the question-answer test for focussed constituents on the ground that it involves the assumption of "(...) unnecessarily complex focus projection rules and focus interpretation rules" (Kasimir, 2005, p. 13)¹). In addition to their allegedly unnecessary complexity, these rules are incriminated for the fact that they "(...) need additional pragmatic input in form of a *givenness* property (...)" (pp.15, 18f.; Kasimir's emphasis), the addition of which the author claims to be too high a price to pay (*ibid.*). Furthermore, Kasimir claims that an alternative analysis which abandons Givenness as an ingredient in the explanation of accent placement makes better predictions for a

* Thanks to Elke Kasimir for letting me comment on her paper, as well as for clarifying discussion. The usual disclaimer holds.

¹ Henceforth, all quotes refer to that paper unless indicated otherwise.

certain class of examples.

While I do not intend to comment on the last claim, and lacking a commonly agreed upon metric for the complexity of focus projection and/or interpretation rules that would put me in a position to grapple with the first claim, I will only deal with the second, the argument against the usefulness of Givenness in determining accent assignment. But before doing so, a disclaimer might be in place. I assume that what I have to say is neutral with respect to Kasimir's first claim, i.e. I assume that my stance on the theoretical and empirical usefulness of the notion of Givenness is independent of that of the question-answer test. Furthermore, I take it that none of the following takes sides as regards the issue of which theory of focus interpretation is to be preferred (e.g., localist vs. globalist accounts, cf. Jäger (2004)). And finally, I will not try to propose a fleshed-out Givenness-based account of accent assignment or focus interpretation; for the latter, the reader is referred to Sauerland (2004), for the former, to Wagner (2005).

Kasimir argues that in order to make use of the question-answer test as a diagnostic for accent placement, one has to assume focus projection rules and focus interpretation rules which are said to be unnecessarily complex. As a further and apparently even more severe drawback, she claims that these rules need additional pragmatic input from a Givenness property, and that to assume such additional input is too high a price to pay.

My argument against this position is going to run down the following line: Firstly, I will show that Kasimir's critical example holds Givenness in store at a relatively low price—in fact, that Givenness is for free in this case. Secondly, I will argue that it is unclear exactly how Kasimir's alternative strategy, i.e. to account for the accent placement in this example by recourse to alternative sets plus a pragmatic rule that restricts the answer set, should work *without* appealing to Givenness, and that it indeed necessitates appeal to Givenness just

as much as the analysis it purports to supersede. I conclude that the argument for the alternative account *and* the argument against the Givenness-based account are equally inconclusive.

My second point will be more general and is concerned with the theoretical status of the notion of Givenness of discourse referents in determining information structural partitions. I will point out that, its shortcomings already revealed by Reinhart (1981) notwithstanding, it is indispensable as a heuristic for detecting focus-background and topic-comment structures, and that its theoretical as well as its empirical value lie in its fruitfulness for a cognitive understanding of the role information structure plays in natural language.

The pair of examples playing the central role in Kasimir's argument against a Givenness-based account of accent placement are the following (I stick to Kasimir's numbering for convenience):²

(28) Q. Who owns a bicycle?

A. [This STUDent]_{FOC} owns a bicycle.

As regards (28), Kasimir notes that the question-answer test (in its context-sensitive variant) correctly predicts the focus of the answer to be *this student*, which ultimately yields the correct accent assignment. This example is contrasted with the following:

(29) Q. As for the students: who owns a bicycle?

A. THIS student owns a bicycle.

² For what follows, I will assume for the sake of argument that Kasimir's definitions for accent placement and the question-answer test as given in the first three sections of her paper are correct—by which statement I do not mean to imply that they are not, but rather that I will take them for granted.

The issue Kasimir points to is “(...) that (28.Q) asks for arbitrary bicycle-owners, whereas (29.Q) is contextually understood to specifically ask for a DP which selects from students.” (p.16). The question is, then, how this difference can be linked to the differences in requirements on pitch accent placement. Kasimir offers two logical possibilities: one can either try to account for the differences between (28.A) and (29.A) by adjusting the rules for focus projection, or, and that is Kasimir’s choice, by sticking to the projection rules assumed so far and fix the problem instead by assuming a different interpretive mechanism (alternative sets plus a restriction on the set of contextually salient answers). The relevant sets and the respective focus-background structures of the answers look like this:

(35) a. *contextually appropriate answers to (28.Q):*

{ x owns a bicycle | x an individual }

b. *contextually appropriate answers to (29.Q):*

{ x is one of the students and owns a bicycle | x an individual }

c. \llbracket [This STUDENT]_{FOC} owns a bicycle \rrbracket ^{FOC}

{ x owns a bicycle | x an individual }

d. \llbracket THIS_{FOC} student owns a bicycle \rrbracket ^{FOC}

{ x is a student and owns a bicycle | x an individual }

Let us first consider the first alternative, which Kasimir rejects. The reason for this rejection is that it involves the adjustment of focus projection rules so as to respect the property of Givenness (cf. her rule (31), p.17), which is said to “(...) involve reference to additional pragmatic input (...)” (p.18).

Let me comment on that last point first. No matter whether one assumes a dynamic or a classical interpretation procedure, I take it that establishing the

relation between the wh-pronoun restricted by the *as for*-phrase and the subject of the answer involves no *additional* input whatsoever, be it semantic or pragmatic, since the anaphoric relation between the two sets of discourse referents is *just there*. So Givenness has not to be stipulated or derived for any price, it can be had for free. This point can be made even stronger if the question is paraphrased by the following variant featuring a d-linked wh-pronoun, which does the same (at least for the issue at hand) as the *as for*-phrase, viz. to restrict the domain of the wh-element to the extension of the noun:

(29') Q. Which student owns a bicycle?

A. THIS student owns a bicycle.

The next question is how the focus projection rules can be made sensitive to Givenness or the alternative property proposed by Kasimir. According to her, this alternative works as follows: firstly, the set of contextually appropriate answers are computed, and so are the alternative sets generated by the respective answers; the minimal set matching both restrictions then decides which is the correct focus-background structure, which in turn yields the correct accent assignment for the answer. On the Givenness account, the projection rules have to be made sensitive to the fact that the restrictor of the complex demonstrative *this student* is mentioned, presupposed, or inferable from context (cf. p.18).

My worry here is the following: it is crucial to Kasimir's argument that the way in which the complex demonstrative *this N* contributes to the computation of the alternative sets containing it does not depend on any kind of Givenness (on pain of begging the question). So obviously it is not sufficient to determine the meaning and the semantic type of a demonstrative of the form *this N* (as Kasimir does on p.24), but one also has to pin down the information structural properties of such phrases, more specifically: whether a phrase of the form *this N* carries the presupposition that there exists an N. Whatever the theoretical

stance on this question (s. Lepore & Ludwig (2000) for a discussion), I think that either answer will fit uncomfortably with Kasimir's alternative proposal. That is because if we assume that a complex demonstrative of the form *this N* has roughly the logical form

[the x : x is this and x is N]

and further assume that the quantifier *the x* carries an existential and a uniqueness presupposition which enters into the computation of the alternative set of an utterance containing it, Kasimir's alternative proposal will become corrupt because it begs the question of the role of Givenness. On the other hand, if we assume that no such presupposition is present in the computation of the alternative sets, the question arises where these sets come from in the first place. If I understand her correctly, Kasimir argues that in order to arrive at the right kind of alternative sets, she makes use of a notion of Givenness she considers uncontroversial, namely one that characterizes as given something which is "(...) corresponding to those parts of a sentence which are not focused, and are thus common to all focus alternatives." (p. 34, fn.14).

Now it seems obvious to me that this way of reasoning simply reverses the order of explanation (a focus-background structure is taken for granted in the construction of the alternative sets, instead of derived at by taking the latter and the context into consideration), and hence puts the argument for Kasimir's alternative account in jeopardy of becoming circular.

Either way, I fail to see in which way Kasimir's alternative account can make sense of the minimization of the superset of the set of contextually appropriate answers and the alternative sets *without* relying on some notion of Givenness, be it one that comes from the presupposition of the question, or one stemming from the presupposition of the complex demonstrative, or both. Her way of deriving at the alternative sets by taking a focus-background structure for granted

is at best inconclusive, at worst circular. Moreover, given the straightforward anaphoric relation between the set denoted by the question and the set denoted by the focussed part of the answer, I do not see a reason for her reluctance to employ a notion of Givenness in the derivation of accent placement, its price not being, as I have argued, high at all.

The reason for discussing Kasimir's claims with respect to the notion of Givenness—apart from the formal details criticised above—is as more general one: critical evaluations of that notion which are similar in spirit to that of Kasimir's (e.g. in Reinhart, 1981, and, more recently, Krifka, 2004, a.o.) have shown it to be neither sufficient, nor even necessary for the determination of focus-background and topic-comment structures and, accordingly, accent assignment, in various cases. While I certainly do not intend to question these findings, I want to raise the issue whether they countervail against the use of that notion in information structure research in general. My answer to that question is in the negative, and it is for the following three reasons.

Firstly, I consider the notion of Givenness, for all its shortcomings in some special cases, to be the simplest observable information structural property of discourse referents. Although the notion of anaphoricity is not unproblematic either, having an explicit antecedent in context (i.e., being mentioned) is a feature of natural language expressions that can be detected even by non-linguists. That alone would, of course, not make it theoretically interesting.³ But, secondly, properties such as the systematicity of distance of antecedent and anaphoric element on the one hand, and form of expression (s. e.g. Ariel, 1990) on the other, as well as the systematic recurrence of given elements in referential (or topic) chains illustrate the explanatory potential of the notion of Givenness in

³ Although it certainly is a virtue in e.g. instructing naive annotators how to detect information structural properties of parts of speech in corpora, which would be even more troublesome an endeavour if one were solely to rely on notions like Relevance, Contrast, Aboutness, etc.

an exemplary fashion, since both of these properties are quantifiable and hence can be put to empirical test. This brings me to the third point: not only can the systematicities of Givenness explain certain properties of texts, they moreover have been shown to be highly effective in the actual production and perception of natural language (s. Garrod & Sanford, 1994, for an overview). To give but one recent example: the notion of Givenness has been shown to be crucial in explaining the data pattern in a series of experiments on the comprehension of locative inversion constructions, since both effects on reading times found in these experiments (Relatum=Given, and the well-established Given-before-New effect) make reference to it (cf. Hörnig et al., 2005, and Hörnig et al., to appear; but s.also Clifton & Frazier (2004) for a slightly different view on the role of Givenness in comprehension).

It is on these grounds that I think arguments against the role of Givenness in the explanation of information structural partitions should be put under close scrutiny, and even if Givenness-based explanations of information structural phenomena were only to be had at a certain price, they may eventually just be worth it.

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Thomas Weskott
SFB 632, Project C1
Universität Potsdam
Postfach 601553
14415 Potsdam
Germany
weskott@uni-potsdam.de
www.sfb632.uni-potsdam.de/homes/weskott/