Deconstructing the Givenness Hierarchy

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1 Introduction

The Givenness Hierarchy (GH) presented in Gundel, Hedberg & Zacharski (1993) has proved to be a very useful tool in research on reference and discourse anaphora, since it offers a valuable answer to the question of how hearers manage to identify the intended referent of referential expressions. The basic idea of the GH hypothesis is that different determiners and pronouns encode different cognitive statuses, i.e., different statuses of a referent in the hearer's mental representations. This explains the relationship between referring forms and their conditions of use in discourse.

2 Linguistic meaning and cognitive statuses

According to Gundel, Hedberg & Zacharski (1993), six cognitive statuses are relevant for interpreting referential expressions, as shown in (1). The statuses are implicationally related: Each status unidirectionally entails the statuses on its right, so they are ordered from most restrictive ('in-focus') to least restrictive ('type identifiable').

(1) **Givenness Hierarchy**

In-focus	Activated	Familiar	Uniquely identifiable	Referential	Type identifiable
it, *she*	*that*, *this* *this N*	*that N*	*the N*	*indefinite* *this N*	*a N*

Relying on the distinction between conceptual and procedural meaning as developed in Relevance Theory (Wilson & Sperber 1993), the GH considers that the conventional meaning of determiners and pronouns is procedural, i.e., it is a processing instruction for the hearer – in the present case, the instruction to locate a referent that has a certain cognitive status in his/her mental representations. Thus, the GH assumes that the cognitive status signalled by each determiner or pronominal form is (a part of) its conventional meaning (see Gundel 2010, Gundel & Hedberg 2016).

Although we partially agree with this idea in the case of definite articles, we believe that the cognitive statuses in the GH are not part of the conventional meaning of determiners and pronouns. More specifically, we claim that the correspondence between referring forms and cognitive statuses in the GH is not a direct relation built on encoded meaning but an indirect, inferred relation that obtains from combining encoded meaning, on the one hand, and contextual information, on the other. This is by no means a suggestion to dispense with the use of the GH in current research; rather it is a way to answer some questions concerning the place of the GH in grammatical systems.

We concentrate on three significant facts related to definite DPs (leaving aside the two statuses at the right end of the hierarchy, which concern indefinite interpretations).

1. In the GH framework, pronouns – more precisely, zero and unstressed pronouns –encode a condition on the *in-focus* status of their referents, so they are used for referents that are familiar to the hearer, activated in discourse and at the current centre of attention. This generalization is descriptively correct. However, from this point of view, there is no principled

explanation for the correlation between pronouns and their cognitive status, in the sense that there is no explicit connection between the definiteness feature of pronouns (namely, uniqueness, assuming that definiteness is exactly the same semantic feature in pronouns and definite articles) and the interpretation obtained. This is particularly puzzling, since the left part of the GH is but an ordered scale of definite interpretations, from the most restrictive to the basic and most general one. In addition, certain uses of plural pronouns seem to be incompatible with the *in-focus* status, as shown in Borthen (2010). A natural way out of these problems is provided by an alternative view in which the cognitive status is not directly encoded by pronouns, i.e., it is not a part of their conventional meaning. In order to explain the correlation, only the minimal assumption is needed that pronouns, being definite, encode the instruction to locate a uniquely identifiable referent. Since they also lack conceptual or descriptive content, they are only able to retrieve highly accessible referents that do not need to be additionally described for the hearer to be able to locate them. This gives the result of constraining the use of pronouns to *in-focus* referents, as the by-product of definiteness and the absence of descriptive content. In this way, cognitive statuses are pragmatically inferred based on contextual information. The explanation is thus made on more general, principled grounds and the account is also more flexible.

2. The same problem reappears with demonstratives. The GH stipulates that they conventionally signal the statuses *activated* and *familiar* for their referents: Demonstratives refer to given referents. Again, this does not explain how the correlation between forms and statuses emerges from the combination of definiteness and the deictic component of demonstratives, nor does it clarify the role of descriptive content. It seems better to assume, instead, that demonstratives encode an abstract procedure based on definiteness and deixis that does not specify the cognitive status of the referent, but rather gives indications to the hearer towards specifying it in a way that is consistent with the semantic requirements encoded. Again, the association between forms and statuses is not conventional: The linguistic meaning of demonstratives does not directly indicate cognitive statuses but a more abstract set of instructions for inferring them.

3. The case of definite descriptions has been already addressed by Gundel, Hedberg & Zacharski, who realize that such forms may be used in many contexts not only for uniquely identifiable referents but also for "higher" statuses, such as *activated* and *familiar*, which entail identifiability. This results in a one-to-many mapping between forms and statuses, which is not what we would expect from a conventional association between them. Gundel, Hedberg & Zacharski (1993) claim that forms encoding a particular status are underspecified for higher statuses. The problem with this view is that it gives rise to contradictory interpretive outcomes: In some cases, this gives rise to stronger interpretations for weaker forms (as can happen with definite descriptions), whereas in others it is the negation of stronger readings that prevails, as in quantity (Q1) scalar implicatures with demonstratives. In the current GH approach, it is not easy to explain how the two opposed strategies coexist, and which one wins over the other in which case. Whatever the optimal account of these facts may be, we believe that it should lead us to abandon the assumption that cognitive statuses are directly encoded by referring forms.

3 Conclusion

The main consequence of our discussion is that, as it stands, the GH cannot be a part of the grammatical system of a language and does not represent genuine linguistic knowledge. For it to be useful it must be deconstructed. There is no direct correlation between linguistic forms and cognitive statuses; rather, linguistic forms encode more abstract semantic instructions, which combined with the presence or absence of descriptive content and contextual

information make it possible to infer cognitive statuses. As pointed out in von Heusinger & Schumacher (2019: 123), in the GH the relation between forms and statuses is fixed and static: A more central role for a dynamic process of competition between options is needed to account for the use of referential expressions (see also Ahn 2019).

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