

## 1 Introduction

Geurts and van der Sandt have written an important paper addressing the issue of what the semantics of focus is. The key claim of their paper is:

**Existential Presupposition Claim:** There is a consistent semantic contribution of focus, namely the Background Presupposition Rule (BPR):

Whenever focusing gives rise to a background  $\lambda x.\phi(x)$ , there is an existential presupposition to the effect that  $\lambda x.\phi(x)$  holds of some individual.

This claim faces a number of obvious counterexamples, as the authors acknowledge. But the counterexamples are only apparent counterexamples, they claim, arguing that what has defeated previous attempts to back up the existential claim is the lack of a sufficiently rich and flexible theory of presupposition and accommodation. A fair amount of this paper is devoted to laying out, in some detail, a candidate theory of the right sort, a theory motivated independently of focus, by general considerations of the phenomena of presupposition and accommodation. The upshot is that the BPR can be defended in some detail, and the key result they claim is that not only is the BPR right, but also, the existential presupposition is a presupposition like other presuppositions, which obeys certain natural and very general principles of projection.

The theory in question is called a **binding theory of presupposition** (BTP), although perhaps a better name would be a binding and accommodation theory of presupposition, since binding and accommodation seem to play equally important roles in the account. Previous approaches to anaphora have made ample use of both strategies. The chief innovation here and in previous developments of the framework by the same authors is the application of both to presupposition and the articulation of a plausible architecture for their interaction. Thus, things may go one of three ways with presupposition, in order of preference: (a) Presuppositions may be bound; (b) they may be accommodated; (c) they may fail.

I will organize the discussion into two sections. First, I will use a potential counterexample due to Rooth to illustrate the central role local accommodation plays in the BPR account. This feature raises some serious questions, particularly questions of the form: Does this “presupposition” act like other presuppositions? I will conclude that it does not and in the second section, I will argue that the BPR should be replaced with something yielding a weaker presupposition and a supplemental account of how its default binding and accommodation behavior yields existential entailments.

## 2 Counterexamples and Local Accommodation

The following discussion attempts to summarize the main points of the theory of binding and accommodation.

1. Bind a presupposition if possible. (Local Binding is preferred).
2. Accommodate a presupposition if possible.

Thus, binding is a default, with accommodation as the fall back.

Accommodation has a strong preference:

A global accommodation is preferred to a local accommodation.

Despite being a last resort, local accommodation is nevertheless critical because it offers an escape hatch: It allows the theory to explain away cases where we expect a presupposition to project but it fails to appear. As such it calls for careful scrutiny, because the major criticism of this theory is that it is too strong. It predicts too many existential presuppositions. This will be illustrated with the help of a potential counterexample due to Rooth.

### 2.1 Rooth's Counterexample

In the context of an investigation of the interaction of counterfactuals and focus, Rooth (Rooth, 1999) revisits the idea of an existential presupposition account of focus and rejects it again, as he had in Rooth (1985), despite the fact that it would offer a fairly direct line of attack in accounting for the interactions of counterfactuals and focus.

He cites several examples in which an existential entailment fails to appear. As all are of the sort Geurts and van der Sandt (G & vS) would treat as instances of local accommodation, the following will do as well as any:

- (1) A: Did someone borrow my badminton racket?  
B: I don't know. If [<sub>F</sub>John] borrowed it you can forget about getting it back in one piece.

Here clearly there is no existential entailment that survives the conditional. The discourse can be true and felicitous even if no one borrowed speaker A's racket. On the face of it this is a flat out counterexample. Yet as noted above, the G & vS theory of presupposition offers an escape hatch, local accommodation.

In the next section we review G & vS's examples of local accommodation and raise some questions. After that we return to this example and try to apply what we have learned.

### 2.2 Local Accommodation

We begin our discussion of local accommodation by considering an example G & vS discuss (23b), which uses a context promoting presupposition suspension:

- (2) I'm not convinced that the tarts were stolen, but surely [<sub>F</sub>Fred's wife] didn't steal them.

Here in apparent contradiction to the BPR, the discourse as a whole does not entail that someone stole the tarts. The explanation is that in this case the presupposition is accommodated locally. Now as indicated in the sketch of the theory above, local accommodation is marked. Thus the first question: Why is it possible here? The answer is this: Since we are in a context in which the unresolvedness of the issue of whether the tarts have been stolen has been asserted, it would be infelicitous to accommodate the information that they have been in the top level context. But this cannot be the whole story, because the discourse becomes quite strange if the word *surely* is removed:

- (3) # I'm not convinced that the tarts were stolen, but [<sub>F</sub>Fred's wife] didn't steal them.

Thus, the temptation here is to say that there is a second factor, that *surely* induces some kind of modal context, and that perhaps a covert conditional is involved. This would allow accommodation outside the negation but inside the scope of the modal operator, as in (b) and (c).

- (4) a. I'm not convinced that the tarts were stolen, but surely (if they were), [<sub>F</sub>Fred's wife] didn't steal them.  
 b. [ [ true ]  $\rightarrow$  [a stole them,  $\neg$ [Fred's wife steal them]] ]  
 c. [ [z : z stole them]  $\rightarrow$  [ $\neg$ [Fred's wife steal them]] ]

The contrast between (2) and (3) suggests that accommodating under a modal is easier than accommodating under the scope of negation.

It seems to me that a key requirement for this account is that examples with definite descriptions and factives work similarly. The relevant examples may not be perfect, but they seem to pass as fairly coherent:

- (5) a. ? I'm not convinced that Fred is married, but surely his wife isn't a Republican.  
 b. ? I'm not convinced that Fred is married, but surely he doesn't regret that he is.  
 c. I'm not convinced that Fred is married, but surely if he is, his wife is a Republican.  
 d. I'm not convinced that Fred is married, but surely if he is, he regrets it.

Thus, if local accommodation does apply here, it more or less works for the focus presupposition as it does for other presuppositions. A key point of support for the BPR, then, is that, when there are apparent counterexamples, we discover on closer inspection that focus presuppositions are only behaving just like other presuppositions.

### 2.3 Reconsidering Rooth's Counterexample

We may assume that global accommodation is blocked in (1) because it would render the discourse infelicitous. We next consider local accommodation, as shown in (6a) and (6b):

- (6) a. [ j : john = j, y : racket(y),  
 [ [x : x borrowed y, j borrowed y ]  $\rightarrow$  forget about recovering(y)] ]

- b. [ $j$  : john =  $j$ ,  $y$  : racket( $y$ ),  
 [[ $x$  :  $x$  borrowed  $y$ ,  $j$  borrowed  $y$ ]  $\rightarrow$  forget about recovering( $y$ )]]

In this case, however, canonical cases of presupposition do not seem to behave in the required way. First a case involving a definite description:

- (7) A: Does John have a badminton racket?  
 B: # I don't know, but if he takes his racket on the team bus, he'll lose it.

Again the response in B is odd, Even raising the existence of the racket as an issue does not license the use of definite descriptions in conditionals.

- (8) A: Did John take your racket without asking?  
 B: # I don't know but if he apologizes for it I will probably forgive him.

Here we use the factive *apologize for* construction. Again, (B) has the feel of missing an assumption and is quite odd.

At this point, we may as well introduce another source of presuppositional data into the fray, clefts. G & vS discuss this case in some detail. On the basis of examples from Dryer and Rooth they concede that the presuppositions triggered by clefts are “more robust than the corresponding inferences induced by focusing in that the requirement that a suitable antecedent be available is stronger for clefts than it is for focus constructions.” Putting this another way, clefts are more resistant to accommodation (and therefore local accommodation) than focus constructions. Now the idea that different constructions may have different presupposition strengths associated with them is something of a problem. Up until this example of clefts has been discussed, only two factors have been mentioned that affect the ease with which a presupposition will accommodate, (a) blandness of content, and (b) descriptive attenuation. Since we are comparing clefts and focus, two constructions which, according to the BPR, have the same presupposition, blandness of content does not arise. The issue is whether descriptive attenuation can be brought into play. The canonical case in which descriptive attenuation plays an explanatory role is in accounting for the sharp contrast between pronouns and definite descriptions in how easily they accommodate “inferred” antecedents. Clearly pronouns and definite descriptions differ in the richness of their “descriptions” ((van der Sandt, 1992)). But on the face of it there is no difference in descriptive content between clefted and focused versions of the same sentences.

G & vS try to motivate a difference in descriptive attenuation by arguing, along with Bolinger, Gundel, Borkein, and Hedberg, that the *it* in a cleft construction is basically an anaphoric pronoun, primarily on the basis of examples like the following:

- (9) It/This/That was Fred we just saw.

I am skeptical that the *it*, *this*, and *that* variants all belong to the same construction. A principle concern is that the possibility of using *this* and *that* vanishes when the cleft involves pied piping:

- (10) It/\*That/\*This was from Fred that he borrowed the racket.



Here I think that the objection that G & vS make at the very beginning of their paper stands. In certain important cases, Rooth's semantics is too weak. Thus, Rooth has no account for the fact that the negation of (12a) entails that someone loves Mary. At one extreme we have Rooth's theory which is too weak; at the other we have G & vS's theory, which is either too strong or is missing an explicit account of when presuppositions project.

The issue is thorny, but I would like to make the suggestion that the right account lies somewhere between Rooth's account and the G & vS account. What Rooth's theory claims about (1) is that there is a kind of anaphoric dependency: A set of propositions of a certain form has to be available in context. The G & vS theory ends up claiming that local accommodation is available and there is no dependency on the global context. In this particular claim, I think Rooth's theory is closer to right. But it seems such a dependency could rather straightforwardly be built into the G & vS account. I propose that something like the following be the semantics for (1):

$$[j : \text{john} = j, \quad y : \text{racket}(y), \\ \quad \underline{[p, x \in A : p = x \text{ borrowed } y, j \text{ borrowed } y]} \longrightarrow \text{forget recovering}(y)]$$

The idea, then, is that focus introduces the following presupposed condition:

$$(13) \quad \underline{p, x \in A : p = x \text{ borrowed } y}$$

Call this kind of condition a *propositional identity condition*: This condition is intended to implement the Roothian intuition of a dependency on a set of propositions (not necessarily true) in context. Now the first question in the G & vS framework is: How are propositional identity presuppositions bound? And it seems a very reasonable answer is that they can be bound by asserted propositions, and that this always should be the first choice. And the next question is: How should they be accommodated? And a reasonable answer is, they should be accommodated as asserted presuppositions whenever possible. So together these assumptions preserve all the successful predictions G & vS make about when existential entailments are projected, for example the following (from their 22):

$$(14) \quad \begin{array}{l} \text{a. Maybe } [\text{F Fred's wife}] \text{ stole the tarts.} \\ \text{b. } [x : \text{Fred's wife}(x), \diamond \underline{[p, z \in A : p = \text{stole the tarts}(z), \text{stole the tarts}(x)]}] \\ \text{c. } [x : \text{Fred's wife}(x), z : z \in A, \text{stole the tarts}(z), \diamond \underline{[\text{stole the tarts}(x)]}] \end{array}$$

Here the propositional identity condition is accommodated globally as an existential claim. Similarly, binding will proceed as in their account. To modify slightly their example (12):

$$(15) \quad \begin{array}{l} \text{a. If anybody cheered, } [\text{F Wilma}] \text{ cheered.} \\ \text{b. } [x : \text{Wilma}(x), [y \in A : \text{cheered}(y)] \longrightarrow \underline{[p, z \in A : p = \text{cheered}(z), z = x]}] \\ \text{c. } [x : \text{Wilma}(x), [y \in A : \text{cheered}(y)] \longrightarrow \underline{[y = x]}] \end{array}$$

The key difference between their version and this suggested revision comes in what the last resort is.

The last resort is not local accommodation of an existential presupposition but global accommodation of the propositional identity condition, without assertion of its truth. That is, the following is the revised account of (6):

- (16) a. [ $j : \text{john} = j, y : \text{racket}(y),$   
 $[[p, x \in A : p = x \text{ borrowed } y, j \text{ borrowed } y] \rightarrow \text{forget recovering}(y)]]$   
 b. [ $j : \text{john} = j, y : \text{racket}(y), , p : p = \exists x \in A. x \text{ borrowed } y,$   
 $[[j \text{ borrowed } y] \rightarrow \text{forget recovering}(y)]]$

Here instead of local accommodation as in G & vS's account, we globally accommodate the propositional identity condition:

- (17)  $p : p = \exists x \in A. x \text{ borrowed } y$

In both the G & vS account and the revised account, we are reduced to a last resort for the same reason, because accommodating the existential claim would render the discourse infelicitous.

The intended semantics of (17) is that any DRS it is part of must be defined for the discourse marker  $p$ , and that  $p$  be assigned to an existential proposition of the required form. It is thus assumed that the model has propositional objects. The idea of including the existential operator  $\exists$  is that in the identity condition the variable  $y$  is absorbed. The DRS is not defined for  $y$  and its set of assignments is not defined for  $y$ . This preserves an important feature of both the Roothian and the G & vS account, that (1) does not place an anaphoric requirement on the context, does not require, that is, that there already be a discourse marker for someone who borrowed the racket.

In contrast, consider the case which G & vS argue persuasively DOES make an anaphoric claim on context, *too*.

A revised version, preserving the intuition of their account, is shown in (18):

- (18) a. [ $\text{FBarney}$ ] is at the Ritz too  
 b. [ $u : \text{Barney}(u), \text{stay-at-R}(u) \underline{p, v \in A : p = \text{stay-at-R}(v), v \neq u,}$ ]

In this case, accommodation of the focus variable and the identity condition into an existential condition as in (17) is not possible, because it would give us an improper DRS, in which an occurrence of  $v$  is unbound:

$$[u : \text{Barney}(u), \text{stay-at-R}(u) p : p = \exists v \in A. \text{stay-at-R}(v), v \neq u, ]$$

This in turn predicts that examples with *too* should behave very differently from pure focus examples in cases like (1), and indeed they do:

- (19) A: Did someone borrow my badminton racket?  
 B: I don't know. # If [ $\text{FJohn}$ ] borrowed it too you can forget about getting it back in one piece.

In sum, this intermediate account reduces to something very close to Rooth's account for (1), but to G & vS's account for (12) and most of the examples in their paper. It transforms all the cases they call local accommodation into global accommodation of a propositional identity condition, which means that this presupposition projects like others. Like the G & vS account, it casts the existential entailment as a default, available when it does not

render a discourse infelicitous, but it does so without requiring any exceptional cases of local accommodation. The price for these benefits is a special story about the binding and accommodation of something called a propositional identity condition.

### 3 Conclusion

I have tried to identify some issues with respect to the status of existential presupposition with focus. First, we have argued that if there is an existential presupposition, it projects differently than other presuppositions, and that it is the burden of a theory that proposes such an account to provide some explanation of variation in presupposition projection. Although the authors have made an effort in this direction in the form of a parameter of descriptive attenuation, that does not seem to explain the data discussed here. I have argued that a better account of presupposition projection for focus is gotten by assuming a weaker propositional identity presupposition (more along the lines of the Roothian model) and making some plausible assumptions about how such identity presuppositions are bound and accommodated within the G & vS theory.

### 4 Bibliography

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