Contrast and underspecification

It has been argued that there is a close relationship between the notions of contrast in discourse structure and in information structure, as well as between corrections and denial and information structural contrast (cf. e.g. Umbach 2004). Recent analyses of the semantics of markers of such contrastive relations, such as but and aber, suggest that the discourse objects that are being contrasted are alternatives to one another, where the opinions diverge as to whether the alternatives that have to be considered are alternatives to the sentence topic (Sæbø 2003) or the sentence focus (Umbach 2005).

I present evidence suggesting that one and the same contrastive marker may associate with different information structural units, depending on its syntactic and prosodic properties and on the particular discourse setting (coordinative conjunction, denial sequence) in which it is used. I take as a starting point Sæbø’s (2003) account of the conjunction aber because of its simple dynamic semantic format which allows dealing with complex contrastive relations and because of its imbuil flexibility as to the values of the contextual parameters involved in each particular case of contrast. I show how the general format of his analysis may be applied to other uses of aber that Sæbø does not consider, such as aber in denial sequences, as well as to other contrastive markers like doch.

Sæbø proposes a simple unitary account of the semantics of the contrastive conjunction aber in terms of semantic opposition, based on the observation that the common denominator of all different cases of contrast attributed to aber (such as semantic opposition, denial of expectation and concession) is that the first conjunct contradicts the result of substituting the topic of the second conjunct, \(T(\phi)\), for an alternative \(\alpha\) that is provided by the first conjunct. The meaning of aber consists in a presupposition that has to follow from the context \(\sigma\) in order to be verified: \(\sigma \models [\phi aber]\tau\) iff \(\sigma \models \neg \phi[T(\phi)/\alpha]\) for some alternative \(\alpha\) and \(\sigma \models [\phi]\tau\). Importantly, the context for verification \(\sigma\) is restricted to the first conjunct in an aber-conjunction. Sæbø shows further how this simple semantics can be supplemented by pragmatic mechanisms such as presupposition accommodation and conversational implicature to render other interpretations of contrast (concession and denial of expectation). Importantly, Sæbø’s account relies on the identification of a sentence topic and an alternative for the presupposition to be verified in the particular context. The identification of the topic is however often not straightforward and is based on pragmatic reasoning triggered by the effort to reconstruct the intended contrast. In these cases, an implicit topic must be derived, representing the negation (the complement) of the apparent sentence focus, be it a constituent focus or all-sentence focus.

The contrast presupposition formulated by Sæbø accounts also for other contrastive markers, such as German doch, which in its conjunctival uses is synonymous with aber. However, as it stands, it does not account for the non-conjunctival uses of aber and doch. For instance, in the case where aber is used in direct denials, (e.g. A: Es stimmt nicht. B: Es stimmt aber.), the presupposition is rather that the immediately preceding utterance should contradict the result of substituting the (all-sentence, polarity) focus for its negation, which boils down to the requirement that the preceding utterance should entail the negation of the aber-sentence (\(\sigma \models [\phi aber]\tau\) iff \(\sigma \models \neg \phi[F(\phi)/\alpha]\) iff \(\sigma \models \neg \phi[\phi/\neg \phi]\) iff \(\sigma \models \neg \phi\)). If we follow Sæbø’s analysis, the topic should be reconstructed as the negation of the apparent focus, \(\neg \phi\), which however coincides with the only possible alternative, thus contradicting the very notion of alternatives as type identical but distinct entities (cf. e.g. Rooth 1992, Zeevat 2004). The same situation is witnessed in the case of doch used in direct denials (e.g. A: Es stimmt nicht. B: Doch.), where doch is a sentence equivalent and can be understood as expressing “Es stimmt DOCH”. Note that the context that verifies the
presupposition triggered by *aber* and *doch* in denials is the preceding utterance. Focussed adverbial middle-field *DOCH* is another clear case of association with the (all-sentence, polarity) focus. Another difference here is that the alternative is the complement of the focus rather than the immediately preceding utterance (cf., Peter kommt nicht mit, er ist *DOCH* verreist). As in direct denials, the presupposition boils down to the requirement that the context entails the negation of the *doch*-sentence ($\sigma \models \neg \phi[\phi/\neg \phi]$). Crucially, the context for verification of the presupposition cannot be identified with the preceding sentence. Intuitively, this non-conjunctival use of *doch* does not establish “horizontal” interclausal contrast but “vertical” contrast between more distant discourse units. This contrast is also based on the information structural notion of alternatives and is also a kind of denial but it denies material that has been introduced into the discourse at some more distant point in time. Often this presupposition can be verified, but it may also be accommodated. Finally, like its accented counterpart, the deaccented middle-field *doch* (usually treated as a modal particle) does not establish interclausal contrast relation (cf. Peter kommt nicht mit, er ist doch verreist). It rather establishes an “epistemic” contrast between the givenness of the sentence (marked by deaccentuation) and the evidence (or assumption) that its degree of activation has decreased. In information structural terms this is a contrast between the (all-)sentence topic $\phi$, and its complement, $\neg \phi$. This version of the contrast presupposition is verified in a context in which it is suggested that the negation of the sentence is the case ($\sigma \models \neg \phi[T(\phi)/\alpha]$ iff $\sigma \models \neg \phi[\phi/\neg \phi]$ iff $\sigma \models \neg \phi$), e.g. in the context of denials (cf. A: Peter kommt mit. B: Er ist doch verreist.), or else it must be accommodated. This use of *doch* is thus also a case of denial, where in the accommodation cases it is a preemptive denial of possible contradicting utterances due to assumed decrease of activation of given material. The fact that contrastive markers like *doch* and *aber* may vary in their association with information structural units, depending on their syntactic and prosodic properties and the particular discourse setting, suggests that the meaning of *aber*, as well as that of *doch*, can be seen as underspecified between different versions of the contrast presupposition. This approach has the advantage of allowing an to a great extent unitary account of two partly synonymous contrastive markers, as well as of the individual lexical items and especially the notoriously multifunctional *doch*. It also opens the possibility of spelling out the presented observations in a framework for dealing with lexical underspecification and the process of contextual enrichment, such as UDRT (Reyle 1993).

References


