

**Playing the language game, and answering the Question Under Discussion in pursuit of the Big Question...**

What we do during discourse, the goal of it all and how we approach that goal...

Stalnaker, Robert (1979). Assertion. In P. Cole (ed.), *Syntax and Semantics 9: Pragmatics*. New York: Academic Press.

Stalnaker's truisms;

- The act of assertion is the expression of a proposition.
- Assertions are made in context
- Sometimes the content of the assertion is dependent on the context.
- Acts of assertion affect (and are intended to affect) the context;  
how the assertion affects the context will depend on its context.

A discourse is treated as a kind of a game played by participants A and B.

- There are certain things A believes to be true.
- There are certain things B believes to be true.
- There are certain things which both A and B believe to be true.
  - There are certain things A believes both A and B believe to be true.
  - There are certain things B believes both A and B believe to be true.
- An assertion is an attempt to add a proposition to the common ground.
- If accepted by the hearer, it is added, and the common ground is changed.
- The goal of the game is to maximize the common ground.
  - To come to agreement on "the way the world is"

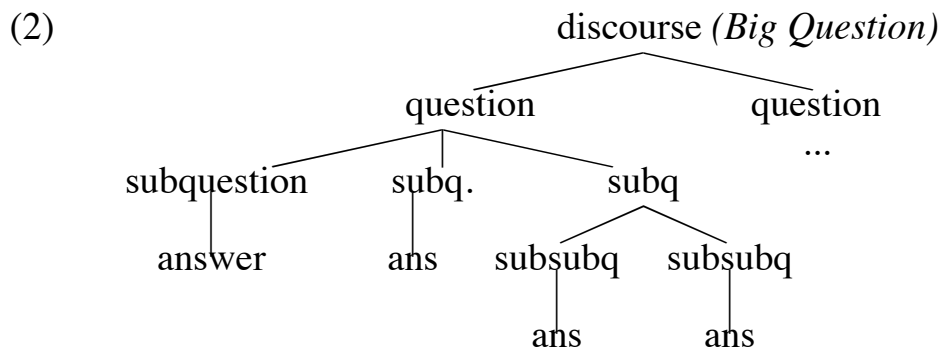
Roberts, moves, and questions under discussion.

- The game is at the most abstract level trying to answer the Big Question:  
*What is the way things are?*
- The game consists of "moves" which are designed to answer (completely or partially) the Big Question.
- What moves one undertakes is a matter of strategy; planning an effective way to answer the Big Question (or any other question).
- The discourse, through strategies, ends up being structured as a hierarchical organizations of questions and subquestions (ultimately aimed at answering the Big Question).

Discourse as hierarchy:

- (1)     How was the concert?  
          Was the sound good?                     No.  
          How was the audience?                 It was enthusiastic.  
          How was the band?  
              How was the drummer?             fantastic  
              What about the singer?           better than ever  
          Did they play old songs?             not a single one.  
          So what did you do afterwards?       ...

Questions, and subquestions:



We haven't answered the Big Question.

...But we *have* made progress.

∴ It is possible to make progress without answering the question.

To **address** a question would be to:

- Answer the question
- Provide a partial answer to the question  
(narrowing down the range of possible answers to the question)
- Ask a question whose answer will help find a (partial) answer to the question.

We do have intuitions about what are well-formed moves and what aren't...

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <p>(3) How was the concert?<br/> Was the sound good?<br/> How was the audience?<br/> How was the band?<br/> How was the drummer?<br/> <b>What is “Topic”?</b><br/> <b>What’s my name?</b><br/> Did they play old songs?<br/> So what did you do afterwards?</p> | <p><b>My Aunt Rosa arrived today.</b><br/> <b>Mr. Morgan gave me an F.</b><br/> <br/> <b>This is my thumb.</b><br/> <b>The singer was better than ever.</b><br/> <b>The bass player was drunk.</b><br/> not a single one.<br/> ...</p> |
|---|--|

It seems that well-formed discourses of this kind require (at least) something like.

- **Be informative.** Don’t say stuff that’s already known.  
Don’t ask questions to which the answer is already known.
- **Be relevant.** Say or ask stuff that is pertinent to answering the current question under discussion.

Inexplicit questions

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <p>(4) <i>How was the concert?</i><br/> Was the sound good at the concert?<br/> How was the audience?<br/> <i>How was the band?</i><br/> How was the drummer?<br/> What about the singer?<br/> Did they play old songs?<br/> So what did you do afterwards?</p> | <p>No.<br/> It was enthusiastic.<br/> <br/> fantastic<br/> better than ever<br/> not a single one.<br/> ...</p> |
|---|---|

You don’t need to hear every question—in a normal discourse, you are commonly supposed to *infer* the question.

### Association with focus

Pragmatic effects don’t usually affect truth conditions

Same with (5)—true in the same alternative universes, but with different “suggestions”

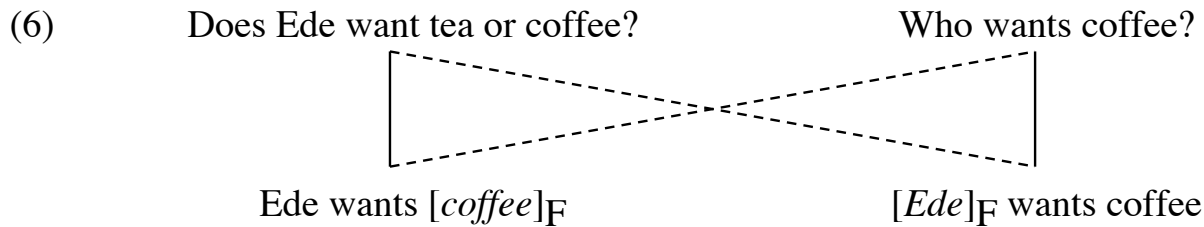
- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <p>(5) a. John did not introduce <b>Bill</b> to <b>Sue</b>.<br/> b. John did not introduce <b>Bill</b> to Sue.</p> | <p><i>He introduced Bill to somebody else.</i><br/> <i>He introduced somebody else to Sue.</i></p> |
|--|--|

(5a) seems to evoke a question: *Who did John introduce Bill to?*

And (5b): *Who did John introduce to Sue?*

Question–answer congruence for focus (examples and quote from Rooth 1996):

“The position of focus in an answer correlates with the questioned position in *wh*-questions, and the position of disjoint alternatives in alternative questions.”



So, you ask *who wants coffee?* and “wanting coffee” becomes non-newsworthy — but the identity of the coffee-wanter(s) is newsworthy, new, focused. Or, you say *Ede wants [coffee]<sub>F</sub>* and you evoke the question *Does Ede want coffee or...?*

Some effects of focus on discourse...

Conversational implicature (Grice 1975).

Conversation is generally **cooperative**: A speaker’s contribution is relevant (**RELATION**), (only) as informative as required (**QUANTITY**), something for which the speaker has adequate evidence and does not believe to be false (**QUALITY**), and is unambiguous, succinct, orderly, and not obscure (**MANNER**).

Rooth’s (1992) example: Mats and his roommates took a test. *How’d it go, Mats?*

- (7)
- |  |                            |                                  |                                      |
|--|----------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
|  | a. Well, I <b>passed</b> . | I [ <i>passed</i> ] <sub>F</sub> | <i>I did no better than passing.</i> |
|  | b. Well, I <b>passed</b> . | [ <i>I</i> ] <sub>F</sub> passed | <i>Somebody didn’t pass.</i>         |

- (7a–c) are all true iff Mats passed.
- if you *ace* a test, you *passed* the test; so *ace* would make a stronger statement.
- since the strongest statement was not used, we conclude Mats thought it was false.
- (7b) conversationally implicates that *Mats did not ace the test*.
- if *Mats, Steve, and Paul* passed the test, *Mats* did...
- (7b) conversationally implicates that *Steve and Paul did not pass the test*.

Certain things associate with focus, sometimes in ways that can affect truth conditions.

- (8)
- |  |  |                                      |
|--|--|--------------------------------------|
|  | a. Mary only introduced Bill to <b>Sue</b> . | <i>false if M introduced B to J.</i> |
|  | b. Mary only introduced <b>Bill</b> to Sue.  | <i>false if M introduced J to S.</i> |

How do you evaluate these?

- (9) Mary introduced Bill to [*Sue*]<sub>F</sub>  
 (10) Evoked question: Who did Mary introduce Bill to?  
 (11) Asserted answer: Sue (assumed to be a complete answer).

- (12) Mary introduced [Bill]<sub>F</sub> to Sue.
- (13) Evoked question: Who did Mary introduce to Sue?
- (14) Asserted answer: Bill (assumed to be a complete answer).

So: Focus plays a role in *structuring the discourse*. Determining certain things about the questions under discussion.

## Being relevant

**Relevance:** Address the most recent question under discussion (the top of the “stack”).

*Please evaluate Mr. Morgan’s scholarly ability.*

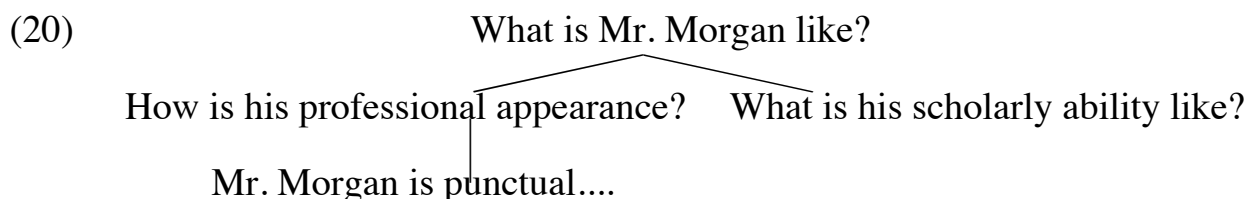
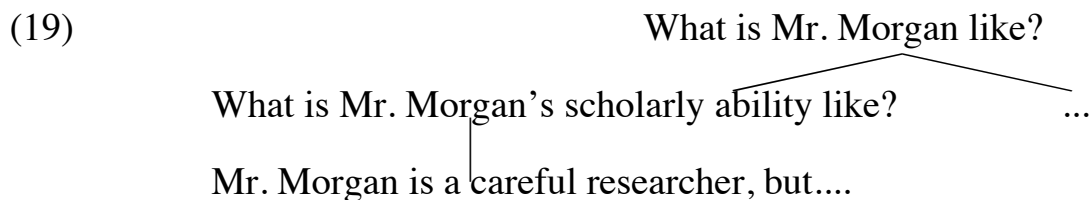
*(What is Mr. Morgan’s scholarly ability like?)*

- (15) Mr. Morgan is a careful researcher, but his originality leaves something to be desired.
- (16) Mr. Morgan is punctual and dresses neatly.
- (17) My Aunt Rosa is punctual and dresses neatly.
- (18) My Aunt Rosa is a careful researcher, but her originality leaves something to be desired.

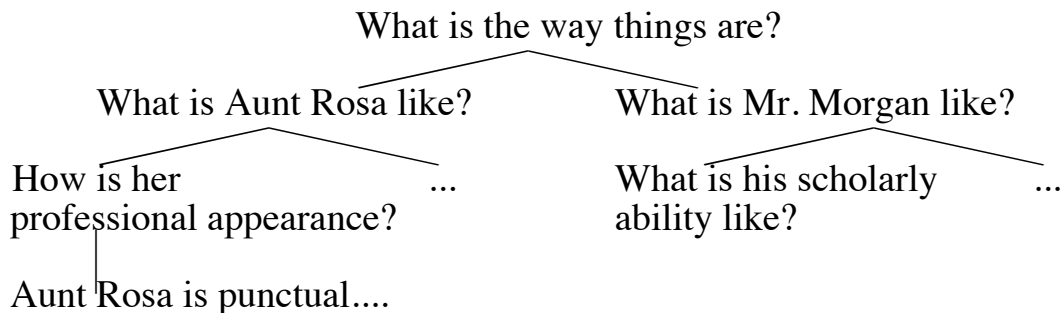
(16–18) all flout Gricean Be Relevant, but (16) has implicatures, the others don’t.

Seems to be possible to repair violations of expectations about *discourse topics* more than of *sentence topics*.

How does this fit into the discourse game?



(21)



Seems like the topics can be encoded in these trees in some way...

### Partial answers

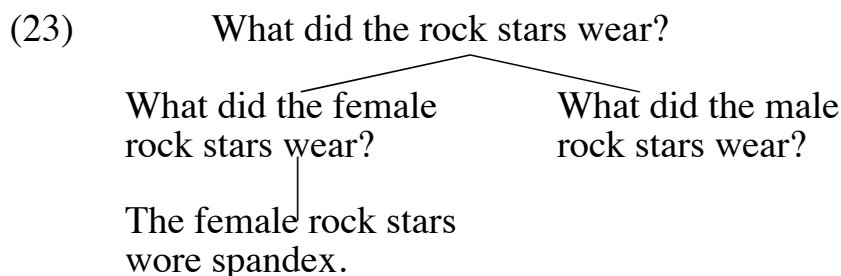
- (22) Q What did the rock stars wear at the award show?  
A The **female** rock stars wore **spandex**.

This seems well-formed. It shouldn't be, should it?

Possible answers would be like

{ The rock stars wore spandex, the rock stars wore overalls,  
the rock stars wore tuxedos, ... }

And we didn't pick any of those. Instead we seem to have induced an intermediate QUD.



This intermediate QUD is part of a strategy to answer the original QUD.  
And it *brings to mind* the other question(s) in the strategy.

- (24) Q Where were you at the time of the murder?  
A **I** was at **home**.


*I was at home* would have been a fine response.

*I was at home* invites the question "Where were the other people you know about?"

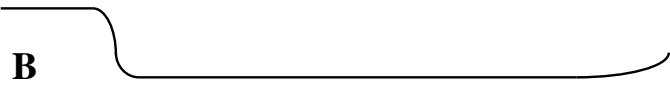
## A and B accents, and discourse trees

Jackendoff (1972) §6.7 on the “A and B accents” (cites Bolinger for the terminology)


(25) a. FRED doesn't write poetry in the garden. *Who doesn't...?  
(It is F who doesn't  
write poetry in the g.)*




b. FRED doesn't write poetry in the garden. *BILL does.  
(It isn't F who writes  
poetry in the garden.)*



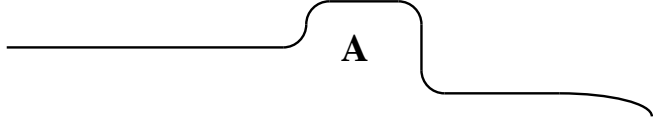
(26) a. Fred doesn't WRITE poetry in the garden. *What doesn't Fred  
do with poetry in the  
garden?*



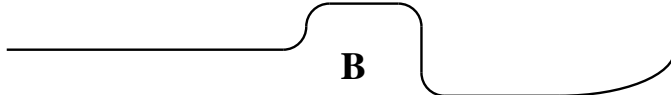
b. Fred doesn't WRITE poetry in the garden. *He READS it there.*



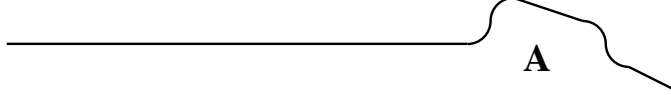
(27) a. Fred doesn't write POETRY in the garden. *What doesn't Fred  
write in the garden?*



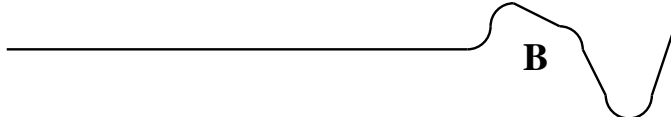
b. Fred doesn't write POETRY in the garden. *He writes NOVELS  
there.*



(28) a. Fred doesn't write poetry in the GARDEN. *Where doesn't Fred  
write poetry?*



b. Fred doesn't write poetry in the GARDEN. *He writes poetry in  
the SHED.*



So:	<b>A</b> = pitch bump and final falloff.	“H* L L%”	Focus	F-Accent
	<b>B</b> = pitch bump and final rise.	“H* L H%”	Background	T-Accent

(29) a. Well, what about people? Name someone, what did he eat?  
FRED ate the BEANS. B—A



bump—rise, bump—fall

b. Well, what about the food? Who ate it?  
FRED ate the BEANS. A—B



bump—fall, bump—rise

---

(30) a. Well, what about people? Name someone, what did he do to the beans?  
FRED ATE the beans. B—A



b. I know who COOKED the beans. But then, who did the rest?  
FRED ATE the beans. A—B



(...but Mary DROPPED the beans).

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(31) a. I know what Fred COOKED. But then, what did he EAT?  
Fred ATE the BEANS. B—A



b. Well, what about the FOOD? What did Fred do with IT?  
Fred ATE the BEANS. A—B



So, intonation plays a large role in indicating how the current sentence is supposed to fit into the evolving discourse game. They signal how the current sentence is related to the questions under discussion.



## The B accent

- (32) Q      When are you going to China?  
A              Well, I'm going to [China]<sub>T</sub> in [April]<sub>F</sub>.

- (33)                      *When are you going where?*  
When are you going to China?      *When are you going to Japan?*  
I'm going to China in April.

It seems that what the B (T) accent is doing is indicating the existence of a *strategy* that the IQUD (immediate question under discussion) is part of.

### Notice:

The T-accent in the answer matches the F-accent in the subquestion.

- Q.      Who ate what?  
SQ.      What did [John]<sub>F</sub> eat?  
A.              [John]<sub>T</sub> ate the [beans]<sub>F</sub>.

## Büring (2003) and CT marking

CT-marking (the B accent, essentially) indicates a strategy.

- (34) CT-value formation  
step 1: Replace the focus with a wh-word and make a question.  
step 2: Form a set of questions by replacing the contrastive topic with alternatives.
- (35) a.      [John]<sub>T</sub> ate the [beans]<sub>F</sub>.  
b.      What did [John]<sub>T</sub> eat?  
c.      {What did John eat?, What did Mary eat?, What did Bill eat?, ...}
- (36) CT-congruence:  
An utterance  $U$  containing a contrastive topic can map onto a move  $M_U$  within a d-tree  $D$  only if  $U$  indicates a strategy around  $M_U$  in  $D$ .
- (37)  $U$  indicates a strategy around  $M_U$  in  $D$  iff:  
there is a non-singleton set  $Q'$  of questions such that for each  $Q$  in  $Q'$ , (i)  $Q$  is identical to or a sister of the question that immediately dominates  $M_U$ , and (ii)  $[[Q]]^0$  is a member of  $[[U]]^{CT}$ .

Development of a discourse

- (38) Q. Where were you at the time of the murder?  
A. I was [home]<sub>F</sub>.

- (39) Where were you at the time of the murder?  
I was [home]<sub>F</sub>.

This is good question-focus congruence: The focus value of the answer is equal to the question.

- (40) \* Where were you at the time of the murder?  
[I]<sub>CT</sub> was [home]<sub>F</sub>.

This is not good. The CT value here is something like:

- (41) {Where were you?, Where was the butler?, Where was the gardener?, ...}

The utterance “[I]<sub>CT</sub> was [home]<sub>F</sub>” contains a contrastive topic. So it must indicate a strategy around that move. Does it indicate a strategy?

No. The question that immediately dominates the move is *Where were you?* That’s not a non-singleton set, that’s just one question. There needs to be a non-singleton set.

Moreover, the question *Where were you?* must be in that set, and the other things in that set must be alternatives like *Where was X?* for different alternatives to me *X*.

These would be a strategy to answer *Who was where?*—and if we assume that discourse is being carried out in a cooperative way, then the discourse must really look like this (if the response is to be congruent:

- (42) *Who was where?*  
Where were you?      *Where was the butler?*  
I was home.

The non-singleton-set requirement is basically a requirement that there be something left to talk about, that the answer given doesn't completely exhaust the topic.

A similar situation with the popstars and caftans—

(43) What did the popstars wear?

The popstars wore [rags]<sub>F</sub>.

(44) \* What did the popstars wear?

[the *female* popstars]<sub>CT</sub> wore [caftans]<sub>F</sub>.

(45) What did the popstars wear?

*What did the female popstars wear?*    *What did the male popstars wear?*

[the *female* popstars]<sub>CT</sub> wore [caftans]<sub>F</sub>.

### What to do with the incoming information

Topic is *what the sentence (or discourse) is about*. But what does that mean?

In the game, it seems like it is essentially (the non-*wh* part of) a question higher in the discourse structure.

What are topics good for? Reinhart and Vallduví suggest that it's a means of filing the information in the Common Ground.

Analogy:      Library card catalog by subject

The topic tells you what card to look at, where the *new information* represented by the focus is going to be stored. Where to look to see if you are willing to adopt the assertion you just heard into your Common Ground.

## Portner & Yabushita (1998)

- (46) setup a. A woman with a small child came in first.  
b. [She]*wa* ordered chicken-fried steak.  
c. Next, a young man holding a tennis racket came in.  
d. [He]*wa* handed her the racket and went to the bar to get a beer.  
e. Another man and woman, who were late, came in.  
f. It seemed (they) had been at a movie. [Japanese]
- g. The woman who ordered chicken-fried steak left first.  
g'. ??The woman who the man had handed a racket to left first.
- b: record “ordered chicken-fried steak” on card for *she* (woman with small child).  
d: record “handed tennis racket to \_” on card for *he* (man with racket).  
g: Check cards for women: does one have the property of having ordered CFS?  
    Yep; recorded in step b. on the card of the woman with the small child.  
g': Check cards for women: does one have property of having been handed a racket?  
    Nope. (In step d., this was recorded on tennis-racket-man’s card, never on a woman’s card).

Point: There is a sense in which information is recorded *with respect to* a topic.

## Reinhart (1982)

Referentiality (not necessarily oldness) seems to be important.

- (47) ??As for a fly, it’s in my tea / there is one in my tea.
- (48) When she was five years old, a child of my acquaintance announced a theory that she was inhabited by rabbits.

Sentence topics carry *existential presuppositions*. To accept an assertion you have to believe that the referent of the topic exists. This isn’t necessarily true with non-topics.

- (49) Let’s talk about museum visitors, shall we?  
    Among yesterday’s museum visitors was the King of America.  
    *False, duh*—there is no King of America.
- (50) Let’s talk about some people and their hairstyles.

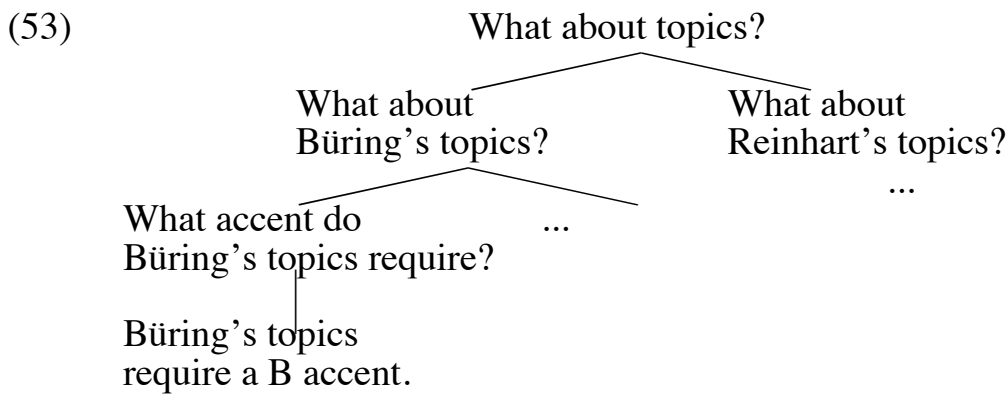
As for the King of America, he is bald.  
*Truth gap*—not true, not false, a presupposition failure.

- (51) As for the exhibition, the King of America visited it.  
*False?*

**How do topics with the B accent relate to *topics* more broadly construed?**

- (52) We are speaking today of topics.  
 Some topics require no special accent.  
 [[Büring’s]<sub>B</sub> topics]<sub>T</sub> require a [B]<sub>F</sub>-accent.

The B accent “topics” seem to be a special kind of topic—the kind that indicates a strategy that the IQUD is part of, and the placement of the accent seems to indicate the form that strategy takes.



It’s really not clear—perhaps what’s special about the B accent is only that it *brings to salience* the strategy.

**Implicit moves and accents...**

- |      |    |   |    |   |   |
|------|----|---|----|---|---|
| (54) | a. | Q | SQ | A | F-accent obligatory. T-accent optional.<br>([Fred] <sub>(T)</sub> ate the [beans] <sub>F</sub> .)                 |
|      | b. | Q | SQ | A | F-accent obligatory. T-accent obligatory.<br>([I] <sub>T</sub> was at [home] <sub>F</sub> .)                      |
|      | c. | Q | SQ | A | F-accent obligatory. T-accent obligatory.<br>(the [female] <sub>T</sub> rock stars wore [spandex] <sub>F</sub> .) |

With (b) “obligatory” means “to get the implicatures.”

With (c) “obligatory” is really obligatory (where SQ is *implicit*).

Anything not Given (in an explicit move) must be marked.