

THE INFERENTIAL GAP CONDITION

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1 Introduction

In a number of genetically and typologically widely divergent languages, a construction has been observed which on the basis of its discourse-functional characteristics has been described as inferential (Delahunty 1990, 1995, 1997, Declerck 1992) or as explanatory („emploi à valeur explicative“ (Robert 1993:38)). Delahunty (1995) - the hitherto most detailed study of inferentials in English - purports to account for the conditions of its occurrence in terms of discourse-sequential constraints specifically tied to inferential and counter-inferential operations. More recently, the same author has proposed an interpretation of "expletives" - an alias based on what he takes to be a universal formal property of inferentials - in a relevance-theoretical framework (Delahunty 1997). Declerck (1992), while carefully delimiting true inferentials against superficially similar constructions, advocates - against Delahunty (1990) - a semantic, rather than pragmatic analysis in terms of their invariant role as specifications of a discourse-variable. Robert (1993), on the other hand, as part of her investigation of focus polysemy in Wolof, attempts to accommodate the predicate focus construction typically used for explanatory purposes in this West African language, as a contextually determined subcategory derived from a unitary definition of focus in constructivist terms along the lines of Culioli's theory of „enunciation“ (cf. Culioli 1995).

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An example taken from Delahunty (1990:11), which is also quoted by Declerck (1992:205), will suffice to give the reader a first glimpse of what is meant by "inferential construction":

- (1) Not that Uther was ever unkind to me: *it was simply that he had no particular interest in a girl child.*

Even without much contextual information, it is intuitively clear that the italicized sentence addresses a perceived need for explaining some facet of the personage's behavior.

Further references and examples attesting the widespread occurrence of a construction of this type in the languages of the world are found in Delahunty (1995:342, n 3) and Robert (1993:29f., 38, 44); see also Kuno (1973) on Japanese (cit. in Delahunty 1995:350ff.). Yet until recently, in spite of its ubiquity, all article-length studies devoted to it have been, to the best of my knowledge, on English inferentials. A recent exception is Bearth (1997) on inferential markers in Swahili. In spite of many valuable insights conveyed by the various analyses of inferentials proposed so far - some of which will be discussed in more detail below -, at least two very fundamental questions remain to be answered:

1. Given the crucial part played by inferential reasoning in establishing discourse coherence in the context of verbal interaction, what prompts a speaker to make use of seemingly redundant procedures such as inferential marking?
2. What is it that explanations functioning as a sort of auxiliaries to larger discourse units have in common with core functions of focalization? Which communicative need motivates the constructional homonymy cross-linguistically observed between inferentials and certain types of constituent focus?

My own interest in the subject has been sparked by observations in the field of African languages (see e.g. Biber (1984), Lecarme (1991), and Ajello (1995), all on Somali; Bearth (1992) on Toura, a Southern Mande language; Marc Liberman, p.c., on West African languages) to the effect that current models of information structure regularly fail to explain many typical occurrences of grammatical focus in natural discourse. In the light of the recurrency of such observations, and to the extent that it will be possible to ascertain that inferential constructions universally share crucial properties with focus constructions, their study in a broader sample of the world's languages appears to be an indispensable prerequisite to a fuller understanding of the functional range of focus phenomena.

In trying to answer the above-mentioned and related questions, I shall concentrate on the positive inferential construction whose conditions of use, judging from Delahunty (1995), are less well understood than those of negative inferentials. Conversational sequences from Akan, a Niger-Congo language spoken in Ghana, to be supplemented by further evidence from French and Swahili, will serve to illustrate the usage of positive inferentials against the background of prototypical uses of markers representing core focus functions (sections 2-3). It will be shown that, notwithstanding their functional divergence, the common pattern of grammaticalization underlying these types of constructions in Akan provides exceptionally strong support in favor of viewing "inferentials" as a type of focus construction (4.3).

After reviewing earlier attempts to account, within semantic or pragmatic theory, for the specific formal and functional properties of inferentials (section 4), I shall examine the particular conditions of usage of positive inferentials from the perspective of their contribution to establishing discourse coherence (sections 5-7). This will lead me to postulate **minimization of non-inferability** as an important albeit generally overlooked principle of coherence which guides speakers in the construction of discourse. It will be argued that contrary to Delahunty's claim regarding the pragmatic indeterminacy of positive inferentials, their occurrence is consistently motivated from the angle of discourse coherence as a means of "repairing" perceived violations of this principle. It will be argued that the specificity of "explanations" lies in their role as an **inferential gap repair** (IGR) mechanism. It will also be shown that this analysis provides the appropriate scenario for the formal characterization of IGR as a sub-category of focus (section 8). In concluding (section 9), I will point out some interesting consequences that the proposed discourse processual analysis of inferentials has for a general theory of discourse coherence as well as for focus theory. The most important of these is the demonstration that the cognitively or informationally based paradigm underlying most recent accounts of so-called information structure is unable to account for the full range of phenomena which it purports to describe and needs to be supplemented by a theory giving its proper and explicit place to interactional variables of the type epitomized by the IGR phenomenon.

In terms of general methodology, the paper is meant to document the well-known fact that reputedly marginal data, if put into proper perspective, may raise questions and provide insights of much broader significance. Thus, while African language data will serve as a point of departure for introducing the line of argumentation which will lead to the conclusions briefly summarized above, the extrapolations from this material should make it enlightening to a non-Africanist audience as well, not least as a contribution to a general typology of focus constructions. And while the positive inferential construction as such might appear to be of limited interest due to its being a locally determined and - at least in terms of its frequency of occurrence - a rather peripheral phenomenon, the fact that it can be shown to be of considerable diagnostic value for testing hypotheses about general principles of discourse coherence and interactional teleonomy will hopefully enhance the following study's value as a contribution to cognitive and conversational pragmatics.

2 The core function of grammatical focus in Akan

The focus construction in Akan has been rather consistently described as resulting from a combination of placement of the focus element in pre-sentential position and its morphological marking by the particle *nà* (Ameka 1992; Boadi 1974; Heine & Reh 1983; Saah 1988). While this type of description fits in rather nicely with a widespread pattern of focus marking found in languages of the West African Kwa family, of which Akan is a member, it is deficient in terms of both the formal and the functional properties of focus in the language. In this and the following section, I will point out neglected aspects of Akan focus grammar and will show how these can be accounted for by stipulating an explanatory function regularly correlated with apparently deviant formal characteristics of certain focus constructions.

Example (2) illustrates the core function of focus in Akan. It is taken from the play *Guasohantan* by E.O.Koranteng (1974/1991). The male protagonist Osei Bonsu (henceforth B) rejects what he considers his fiancée's, Akyere's (henceforth A), interference with his prerogative - exclusively male in his understanding of traditional gender roles - to preside over their wedding arrangements.

(2) (*Guasohantan* - Koranteng 1991:35)

- 1 *mé nà méré!hyiá wò àyèfóró*
1s F 1s-PRG-provide (for-)you wedding
- 2 *nà ènyé wó nà wóré!hyiá mè*
and it-not-be you F you-PRG-provide (for-)me
- 3 *enti wó dè, hwè mé árá.*
therefore you FT, look-to me simply.

'It is me who is marrying you, and not you who are marrying me. As for you, just depend on me.'

Grammatical focus in (2-1) is indicated, in accordance with the normal procedure of F-marking in Akan (Boadi 1974, Saah 1988), by placing a copy of the focus element - *me* '1s' - in sentence-initial position and attaching the focus marker *nà* to its right.² The F-marking invites the construction of a discourse-referential variable - designated as *x* in *P(x)*, where *P* stands for the action of organizing the wedding, and *x* for the person in control of *P* - and of a set of individual values competing for its instantiation.

X takes its value from the set of possible candidates for *P(x)*, which in the given situation are identical with the participants in the conversation, i.e. *a* (for A) and *b* (for B). The referential identity of the members of the "presuppositional set" (Jackendoff 1972) is not, in this particular case, conversationally pre-established, but is inferentially derived by linking the F-marked utterance to the preceding discourse whose interpretation by the speaker it reflects. In fact, in terms of its occurrence as part of the conversational sequence, (2) is B's reaction to A's plea for a modest wedding in accordance with the couple's economic situation, which she had been reiterating throughout the foregoing conversation. B perceives A's reluctance to agree to his plan to turn the event into a grandiose fête as a challenge to his own role as the organizer of their wedding.

The effect of the first part of B's utterance, based on this interpretation which he imposes on A's preceding contribution, is to establish *b*, i.e. the element referring to himself, as the true and unique value to be assigned to *x* in *P(x)*, and by the same token to remove the competing value *a*, referring to his fiancée, from the list of possible instantiations of *x*, thus denying her the right to interfere which she had been, supposedly, claiming.

Note that, in defining the distinctive properties of F, it is not sufficient to say that a given member or subset of the presuppositional set, in this case *a*, is excluded from the assertion. What distinguishes the F-marked construction from its F-unmarked counterpart is that **the exclusion of a member or subset is conventionally implicated by the assertion itself**. I will use the term "countervalue" to designate this property,

² Concomitant tonal changes - replacement of Lows by Highs in the predicate complex of the out-of-focus part of the sentence - are noted in the examples but are irrelevant to our purpose.

which is central to understanding grammatical focus in its core function in discourse. The notational convention I will use to represent countervalue is $P(a \setminus b)$,³ a shorthand for stating (in the simplest possible reading of the formula) that a preconstructed " $p(a)$ " - or " $p(a+b)$ " - is replaced by an asserted " $p(b)$ ".

In the present example, the countervalue is made explicit in (2-2). But its characterization as a conventional implicature suggests that the countervalue effect *per se* is independent of its explicitation and is to be distinguished from the propositional content associated with the excluded value. In other words, (2-1) by itself, without the "tandem" corollary expression (2-2), would require, under the contextual assumptions outlined above, a calculation of a conversational implicature similar in content to the negated proposition explicitly expressed in (2-2).

The example also illustrates what might be called a characteristic subsidiary effect of countervalue. In informal terms, the rejection of the claim attributed to A entails the complementary question: "What then should A do?" In more formal terms, we might say that " $P(a)$ " - the claim attributed to A and rejected by B - presupposes that there exists a value satisfying the predicate ϕ in $\phi(a)$. While from the rejection of a as a proper value instantiating an argument of P , it follows tautologically that P is not the proper value instantiating the predicate ϕ in $\phi(a)$, the presupposition that a value satisfying $\phi(a)$ does exist is not invalidated by the invalidation of $P(a)$. The net result is that countervalue introduces a derived discourse-variable, setting the scene for adding a complementary statement intended to assign a value to the "left-over" variable: (2-3) does precisely this by assigning the value H (*hwe* 'to look-at') to the predicate variable ϕ .⁴

Wó dè, the point of departure of (2-3) is thematically derived from the original presupposition set inferred from (2-1). The particle *dè* (or its dialectal variant *dèè*) has been analyzed as another, "non-exclusive" type of focus marker (Boadi 1974; Ameka 1992). Its designation as focus could be disputed, and some might prefer to call it a contrastive topic or focus topicalization marker. But leaving aside the question of its theoretical status, the essential feature distinguishing *dè* from *nà* is the absence of countervalue: While *dè* does encode a relationship of contrast to some preceding element - in this case between *wó* 'you' and *mé* 'I' - it does not authorize the countervalue reading $*H(b \setminus a)$. The fact that b is excluded from being asserted as an argument of H , does not mean that its exclusion lies in the scope of the assertion of (2-3) in the same way as the exclusion of a is co-asserted in (2-1). One could say that the exclusion in the case of *dè* is thematic, not rhematic.

Turning to H as the value instantiating ϕ , we obtain " $H(a)$ " for (2-3). The marker *ára* belongs to a series of so-called "emphatic morphemes" (Boadi 1974:54) or "emphatic intensifiers" (Ameka 1992:17f.) which to my knowledge have not been described

³ Backslash symbolizes *countervalue*. The symbol to the left represents the *presupposed*, the symbol to the right the *asserted value*. This type of notation may be used as a convenient shorthand for typologizing subcategories of focus within an elementary interaction-based model (cf. Bearth (1986, 1992, 1998b) and Dik (1989, ch. 13) for the categories). A theoretical discussion of the countervalue concept is the subject of a forthcoming publication.

⁴ For our purpose, we may ignore the fact that (2-3) is an injunction.

systematically so far. It illustrates a more complex type of counter-instantiation.⁵ In its predicative use, *ará* implies that competing values are placed in a scalar relationship to each other and that the value being assigned to the current variable - the *ará*-marked term - represents the lower value on this scale.⁶

The question may of course be asked to what extent this example reflects the typical use of core focus. From a cross-linguistic perspective, constraints on the appearance of grammatical focus may be identified according to the following scale of criteria, listed in ascending order of strength:

- a) the focus constituent binds a discourse-induced propositional variable which derives from a salient open proposition inherited from the preceding discourse activity;
- b) the discourse variable bound by F is non-uniquely determined in the local context (Bearth 1992:83);
- c) the assertion of the F-marked element being the proper value of the discourse variable carries countervalue: i.e. it has in its scope the exclusion of alternative values included in the presuppositional set;
- d) the referential identity of the focus is locally asserted against the background of its being subject to overt negotiation between participants in the ongoing conversation.

Condition (a) on its own yields identificational or completive focus (often erroneously equated with "new" information),⁷ (b) corresponds to selective and parallel focus types (Dik et al. 1981; Dik 1989:282); various types of "contrastive focus" (Dik 1989:282) are accommodated by criteria (c) and (d). For a number of African languages, it has been observed that criterion (a) is not in itself sufficient as a condition for the appearance of (morphosyntactic) focus marking; see the definitions of focus e.g. by Robert (1993) for Wolof, by Bearth (1992) for Toura, and by Mous (1997) for Tunen. Exploiting this observation from a typological viewpoint, one could hypothesize that focus is construable as countervalue in these languages. Another way of stating the common property of criteria (b-d) is to notice that they imply second instance processing, as against (a) which by definition is associated with first instantiation.

However, there are indications that things are not quite as simple. Evidence from Toura (Bearth 1992) and Akan suggests that the assignment of grammatical focus is sensitive to a syntactico-semantic hierarchy of sentence constituents defined in terms of their relative informational weight in the least marked sentence alternant. Generally speaking, the

⁵ One might speak of "inverted countervalue", since it appears that predicative *ará* always relates back to a preceding primary countervalue effect. The kind of "spin-off" illustrated by (2-3) is a typical subsidiary effect of countervalue.

⁶ Valuation is an abstract notion which may be projected onto various types of referential dimensions. For instance, *ará* may reflect the distinction between preferred and less preferred points on the time line for an event to take place, as in the case of *òbédí árá*, 'He/she-will-eat (in-the-end)', referring to a child who currently refuses to take food - but by feeding him/her a little from time to time, the mother will be successful in restoring him/her to normal eating habits in the end.

⁷ In distinguishing the concepts of "information focus" in a Hallidayan sense (Halliday 1994:282f.) on the one hand, and of identificational or completive focus on the other, the latter terminology should be restricted to refer to the first instance assignment of a value under the interactionally established constraint of an "information gap" (Dik 1989:280f.); the most obvious, but by no means the only cases illustrating this constraint are explicit requests for information uttered in the form of wh-questions.

lower the natural informational status of an element in the unmarked sentence, the weaker the minimal condition for its being marked as grammatical focus. Vice versa, the higher its unmarked informational status, the stronger the minimal condition for the appearance of grammatical focus. Thus grammatical subjects carrying completive focus (i.e. filling in missing information e.g. in response to an informative question, where no alternative value is manifestly involved), obligatorily take the form of grammatical focus in Akan and Toura. On the other hand, in the case of certain types of syntactically optional adjuncts (e.g. expressions of time and location) which are placed highest on the scale of inherent informational status, the contextually motivated presumption of openly negotiated assignment (criteria c and d) seems to be a necessary condition for focus marking to occur. In the absence of prosodic correlates of information structure (Bearth 1998c:78-82), this co-variation of inherent communicative dynamism (in the Praguean sense, cf. Firbas 1974) and grammatical focus constitutes an indirect trace of a cognitively motivated and syntactically coded natural focus hierarchy⁸ interfering with interactional parameters.

3 Grammatical focus as a marker of the explanatory function in Akan

3.1 A prototypical example

Against the background of this rapid sketch of the core function of focus, consider now example (3) which is taken from the same play (Koranteng 1991:7) and is chosen for ease of comparison on account of the homonymy of the focussed element in (2-1) on the one hand, and in (3-3) on the other. The protagonists are the same as in (2).

- (3) (B has just proposed to A. B is from the Ashanti region, whereas A's parents live in the Akuapem area. A's first reaction to the proposal is to evoke the opposition which the idea of a marital union across sub-ethnic boundaries is likely to encounter in the suitor's family. B attempts to defeat this counter-argument by playing - for once - the card of his emancipation from traditional views of courtship.)

- 1 A: *Nà mèyè Okùàpénní yí, wò nkúrófó bépéné?*
And I-be an-Akuapem DX, your village-people FUT-agree?
'Given that I am an Akuapem, will your people in the village agree?'
- 2 B: *Wɔ-à-m-péné â, wòbépéné.*
they-PF-not-agree COND they-FUT-agree
- 3 *Sé mé nà mètè Nkran yi.*
After-all 1s F 1s-live in-Accra DX
'If they won't agree, they will agree. I am living in Accra!'

As indicated by the underlining, the point of comparison with the preceding example lies in (3-3), i.e. in the second part of B's answer. The claim made in the first part (3-2) that "if they should not agree now, they *will* agree eventually" must be interpreted to mean that B is free to choose his mate at his own discretion and is under no obligation to

⁸ See Bearth (1992) on Toura for further details.

follow his family's advice in this matter as tradition would have it. Such a bold claim, moreover cast in a rather aphoristic form, calls for further explanation, particularly as the young lady obviously does not share her suitor's assurance in the matter. This explanation is what (3-3) purports to provide.

In (3-3), as in (2-1) above, the subject pronoun referring to the speaker carries grammatical focus. On the sole grounds of its formal similarity with (2-1), the F-marked subject *mé nà* would suggest the countervalue reading (3-3'): 'It is *me*, not *them*, that lives in Accra.' Based on the foregoing reference made by A to B's relatives and on the analogy with (2-1), it could indeed be contextually inferred that by F-marking the constituent referring to himself, the current speaker is comparing himself to the latter group, claiming for himself the exclusive right to judge the matter at hand from the viewpoint of the city-dweller. The implication would be a mere dismissal of A's argument; any further inference would be very indirect and argumentatively weak.

Yet, considering the argumentative setting and tentatively disregarding the placement of the grammatical focus, a more natural expanded reading, coherent with the idea of optimization of processing effort,⁹ would be (3-3''): 'After all, I am living *in Accra*, not *in the village*.' The implication would be the legitimization of B's claim to freedom from interference in his personal affairs, and, as a corollary, the rejection of the parental claim to submission to their authority and to views prevailing in the unenlightened backward conditions of the countryside. Formally speaking, the construction of *Nkran* 'Accra' as the possible locus of countervalue has the double effect of affording strong support in favor of the proposal which the speaker is addressing to A, and of depriving A's argument against it of its force.¹⁰

Spontaneous native readers' reaction further supports this latter interpretation. But this of course does not resolve the linguist's dilemma as to how to reconcile the seemingly counter-intuitive positioning of grammatical focus and the fact that, functionally speaking, if the proposed interpretation is correct, the F-marked subject of (3-3) is no focus at all in the sense of any of the defining criteria listed above. It is therefore of particular interest to note that a previous study on Akan focus (Boadi 1974) had already postulated that *na*-focus represents two quite different and not obviously interdeductible uses. (I shall return to Boadi's analysis of Akan focus polysemy in section 4.)

As already noted above, (3-3) taken as a whole differs from (2-1) by the fact that in the local discourse context, it functions as an explanation. We may hypothesize that it is prompted by the speaker's self-monitored recognition of a missing piece of evidence

⁹ "Someone who wants to achieve a specific cognitive effect must therefore try to produce a stimulus which, *when optimally processed*, will achieve just the intended effect." (Sperber & Wilson 1995:153, italics TB)

¹⁰ A detailed analysis of the initial and final discourse particles framing (3-3) is outside the scope of this study. But it seems in order to point out, first, that the sentence-final deictic *yí* typically co-occurs with F-marking in presenting an evidence as argument. And second, as to sentence-initial *sé*, Yelbert (1996) - a theoretically oriented but at the same time exceptionally well documented study of the multifarious range of usage of this particle - defines its invariant meaning, in a nutshell, as "altérité prise en compte et éliminée" (p. 314) - otherness recognized and rejected. Translating this operational characterization into the argumentative setting of (3) further confirms the view that the purpose of (3-3) is indeed to take up the challenge of the counter-argument and, by refuting it, to re-validate the speaker's original position. See also note 37.

which would have made the peremptory claim in (3-2) more acceptable to the interlocutor. I will call this putative discourse-processing prerequisite to inferential marking the "inferential gap condition" and suggest that it provides a key towards understanding the relationship between inferentials and core focus phenomena.

Before attempting to give substance to these claims, let us look at a few other cases of non-core uses of grammatical focus in Akan, involving different syntactic categories and types of constituents.

(4) (B comes to work, wearing a new dress.)

- 1 A: àtààdéé yí yè fě́ papaapa
 dress DX be beautiful very-much
 'What a beautiful dress!'
- 2 B: òbí nà òdé kyéè mé
 somebody F he-take give-PST me
 'Somebody gave it to me.'

B's response to the compliment offered to him¹¹ by A is remarkable in two respects:

- (4-2) shows F-marking on a constituent inherently incompatible with any and all of the criteria of prototypical focality. Disregarding the famous special case of the empty set (but see below), indefinites are synonymous with propositional variables - they carry the same presuppositions as *wh*-questions - and are therefore unable to bind a referential variable; *a fortiori*, they are incompatible with countervalue. From a cross-linguistic viewpoint it is significant that whereas the translational equivalents of *obi* 'somebody' in European languages - *somebody*, *quelqu'un*, *jemand* - are incompatible with clefting and topicalization,¹² the Akan counterpart *obi* admits morphological F-marking in cases like (4).
- The F-marking is treated by our informants as being obligatory in the context in which (4-2) was uttered. The unmarked counterpart of (4) would be (5):

- (5) *obi dè kyéè mè* 'Somebody (took) gave-(it) to-me.'

While (5) is not in itself ungrammatical, it is rejected as inappropriate in the context in which the original dialogue took place.

It could be argued that to the extent to which indefinites stand in a relationship of mutual exclusion with the specification of an empty set, they are indeed capable of generating countervalue. In fact there are cases where F-marking of indefinites could be justified on the grounds that they carry a zero value as countervalue. Since attributing a zero value to *x* in $P(x)$ is tantamount to negating the truth of the proposition containing the variable, constituent F-marking of indefinites could be exploited as a convenient strategy for

¹¹ In the original setting, (4-1) was addressed to the author on account of his stylish shirt by one of his colleagues at the University of Ghana. In response, he offered a simplified version of (5), whereupon the complimenter volunteered (4-2) as the contextually appropriate form of the intended response. The appropriateness of an inferentially marked form was later confirmed by other speakers for analogous hypothetical test cases.

¹² For focus accent, see note 13 below.

counter-asserting the proposition against the background of its negated or questioned truth.¹³

Applied to (4), the interpretation of the grammatical focus occurring on the indefinite as an instance of zero countervalue would imply that the statement was made to uphold its truth against a suggestion according to which no giving had taken place, but that maybe the dress had been bought or manufactured by the person wearing it. Such a contextual specification, however, is hard to derive from the situation in which (4) was uttered in the first place. Moreover, even if it could be inferred by some reasoning, it would not elicit (4) but F-marking of the verb as in (6):

- (6) *kyé nà òbí dé kyéè mé*
 give F somebody take give-PST me
 'Somebody GAVE it to me.'

It seems that, generally, if the counter-instantiation has scope over the predication as a whole or over its truth value, verb focus is the preferred marking strategy.

Taking the interactional setting into account, an explanation of the F-marking of (4-2) may be attempted by analogy to (3-3) above. It is intuitively clear that B, in uttering (4-2), proposes an explanation in response to a compliment. But why should a compliment require a F-marked response? One is inclined to invoke face needs, but while a strategy of positive politeness deflection may indeed be responsible for the thematic choices underlying (4-2), it can hardly account for the F-marking which appears to be redundant in regard to any recognizable purpose of face-work. On the other hand, however, together with the compliment, the complimenter conveys the notion that some feature out of the ordinary is attached to an ordinary piece of clothing worn by the complimentee. The mutual recognition of the presence of an unusual phenomenon - an explanandum - in the local discourse situation seems to be the single motivating factor for the use of a specially marked form in this case. Extrapolating from this observation, we may tentatively interpret (4-2) as a token of a general tendency, not limited to specific politeness requirements, to make the unusual inferable from the usual as part of the communicative contract under the principle of cooperation. This, of course, is just another way of saying what explanations are good for. We will develop the notion of minimization of non-inferability in section 7 below.

3.2 The positioning of explanatory F-marking in Akan

¹³ This would seem to describe the typical communicative setting in which English indefinites may take focus accent. I owe the following example to an unknown reviewer of this article: "A: I didn't break the window. B: Well, SOMEBODY did." However, as is shown in the following paragraph, the occurrence of F-marking on the indefinite in (4-2) cannot be plausibly interpreted as a counter-instantiation of a pragmatically induced zero value assignment.

From a comparative viewpoint, it is worth mentioning that focus accent on the English indefinite subject is ungrammatical in a fully rhematized construction comparable to the Akan example (4-2): *SOMEBODY gave it to me. This correlates with the observation that, whereas examples (4) and (6) are formally distinguished in Akan, their English equivalents would normally both be marked in the same way, i.e. by placing sentence stress on the verb: *Somebody GAVE it to me.* (For a principled explanation of the restricted accentability of non-referring terms, see Lambrecht 1994:248ff.)

It should also be made clear that the English positive inferential would not normally be used under conditions corresponding to those of (4-2). For further discussion of the conditions of use of inferentials in English as compared to Akan, see the final part of Section 4 below.

Lest the impression should prevail that the type of apparently deviant F-marking which we have been observing so far is limited to grammatical subjects, let us look at the following - elicited - series of examples:¹⁴

- (7) *Mɛpɛ ɔ́héné á!wáré*
I-want chief CONS-marry
'I want to marry a chief.'

- (7') *Mɛpɛ àwáré ɔ́héné*
I-want CONS-marry a-chief

(7) or its variant (7')¹⁵ - both without F-marking - would be uttered by a girl e.g. in response to a general question about her future plans, or in order to correct a negative assumption about her marriage prospects. The F-unmarked sentence is designed for transmitting factual information, whether for the purpose of correction or for filling in a missing piece of information.

- (8)
- 1 Q *Á!má/ nà wón!wárèè?*
Ammá, and you-NEG-marry-PF
'Ammá, you are not married, are you?'
- 2 A *Mɛpɛ ɔ́héné nà áwá!ré*
I-want chief F CONS-marry
'(It is that) I want to marry a chief.'

(8-1) does not in fact question A's unmarried status - which is taken for granted - and yet is not a rhetorical question either. It may be paraphrased as an indirectly formulated request for an explanation of some state deemed contrary to expected norms. The F-marking in (8-2) therefore falls on the constituent representing the value on the strength of which (8-2) is credible as the sought-for explanation of the protracted state of being unmarried - namely (the determination to marry not just anybody but) a CHIEF.

In (9), by contrast, it is assumed that A is faced with a choice between two suitors one of whom is a chief:

- (9)
- 1 Q *hwán nà wóbéwàré nòó?*
who F you-FUT-marry him-TM
'(Of the two,) whom do you want to marry?'
- 2 A *ɔ́héné nó nà mɛpɛ sê mɛwáré nòó*
chief DEF F I-want that I-marry him-TM
'It is the chief whom I want to marry.'

¹⁴ The choice of elicited examples here is determined by considerations of ease of presentation of alternants in the form of paradigms. My corpus also contains a number of spontaneous occurrences of analogous uses of non-subject explanatory F-marking.

¹⁵ (7) and (7') are not necessarily interchangeable in all contexts. However, it is not clear, and not important for our purpose, how they differ in meaning.

The difference in use between unmarked assertive sentences on the one hand as in (7), and an F-marked sentence of the type illustrated in (8) can be captured by characterizing the former as "informative", the second as "explanatory". (9-2) may be either, but above all, what conditions its use is the fact that it carries countervalue, i.e. it conveys the exclusion of a specific competing value, which is clearly not the case in (8-2).

Discounting the definiteness marker in (9-2), the difference in form which correlates with these functional differences may be described as follows: Between the F-marked sentences (8) and (9), the grammatical focus shifts from sentence-internal position in (8-2), to pre-sentential position in (9-2). The pre-sentential position of the focus appears to be obligatory if countervalue is involved. Notice, however, that while the F-unmarked object may follow either of the two verbs of the verbal series in (7/7') - *pé* 'to like' and *wàré* 'to marry' - the sentence-internal F-marked object in (8-2) must follow the first verb. F-marking of an object which occurs in sentence-final position as in (7') is strictly ungrammatical.

This restriction on the possible positioning of focus reflects the grammaticalization history of the focus marker *nà* (which will be briefly touched upon in 3.3 below). Together with the strictly contrastive use of verb focus signalled in section 3.1 above, it explains why it is the subject, and not some other constituent, that gets the F-marking in examples (3-3) and (4-2). A tentative generalization can be made to the effect that in the case of explanatory focus, where the whole sentence rather than one of its constituents is in the scope of the focus, F-marking selects the first constituent from right that is eligible for F-marking under the stated conditions.

3.3 The source of inferentials in Akan

The following series of elicited examples corroborates observations made in the preceding sub-section, and at the same time will allow me to address the question of the derivational history of inferentials:

- (10) 1. *Kòfi ábá,* 2. *ɔ̀dɛ káà bààè*
 Kofi PF-come, he-take car come-PST
 'Kofi has come. He came by car.'

(10-2), which is F-unmarked, simply adds a further detail to the report of Kofi's coming.

Now compare (11), where the report about Kofi's arrival contains an element of surprise expressed by *déda* 'already'. (11-2), in contrast to the propositionally equivalent (10-2), is F-marked, as it is intended to provide an explanation for the fact that Kofi arrived earlier than expected.

(11)

- 1 A *Kòfi ábá déda*
 Kofi PF-come already.
 'Kofi has already come.'
- 2 B *Áánè, ɔ̀dɛ káà nà ɛ̀báàè*
 Yes, he-take car F SS-come-PST
 'Yes, he came by CAR.'

Compare this to a situation where Kofi was expected to come by train:

- (12) *Dààbí, káà nà òdé báàè*
 No, car F he-take come-PST
 'No, he came by CAR.'

Again, we find that where one element is asserted at the expense of the other, resulting in countervalue, this naturally leads to the placement of the focus element in presentential position (12). On the other hand, if the sentence serves an explanatory purpose, the element carrying the implicature from which the plausibility of the target utterance (11-1) can be inferred takes F-marking in situ (11-2). This seems to correlate with the fact that in the latter case, no countervalue is involved.

Sentence-internal F-marking as illustrated in (8-2) and (11-2) is a rare albeit well attested phenomenon in Akan.¹⁶ It is worthy to be noted that all instances of sentence-internal focus which I have been able to record either in spontaneous or in elicited material are at least compatible with the hypothesis of a close association between this positional feature and an explanatory, non-contrastive discourse function of the sentence containing the focussed element.¹⁷ From a discourse-functional perspective, the dual manifestation of non-subject *na*-focus in pre-sentential ((9-2) and (12)) and in sentence-internal position ((8-2) and (11-2)) correlates with the dual use of the single marking option open to subjects which was observed above in examples (2) on the one hand, and (3-3) and (4-2) on the other.

The association of the explanatory function with the positional variation of grammatical focus provides strong empirical evidence in favor of the derivation of inferentials from focus proper, rather than directly from expletives as Delahunty (1997) suggests. Moreover, in spite of claims to the contrary which might be based on undemonstrable historical links between a Niger-Congo copula **na* and the Akan focus marker *nà*,¹⁸ the latter, at least in the reconstructable past of present-day Akan, is not a direct reflex of a copula, but of a sentence connective preceded by an expletive copula construction. For pre-sentential focus, the grammaticalization history can be reenacted synchronically; (12') is attested as a variant of (12):

- (12') *èyè káà nà òdé báàè*
 it-is car and he-take come-PST
 'It is the car which (litt.: and he) took and came.'

It is easy to see how the deletion of the expletive *èyè* 'it is' may have led to the reanalysis of the sentence connective *nà* as a focus marker, in passing from (12') to (12). By contrast, there is no obvious way in which sentence-internal F-marking - which, as stated above, appears to be more closely associated with the explanatory function - could be

¹⁶ As far as I can tell, the option of sentence-internal focus has not been noted at all in the literature on Akan focus.

¹⁷ At the present stage of investigation, it would be premature to conclude that internal focus marking in and by itself represents a grammatical category corresponding always and exclusively to the explanatory function, rather than to a broader category still to be defined under which the explanatory function might be subsumed as one of its uses, depending on contextual factors.

¹⁸ See Givón (1990:725, n. 33): "The Copula *na* was most likely borrowed from some Niger-Congo source, where its distribution as either locative serial verb, copula, locative preposition or conjunction is almost universally attested (Lord 1973)."

derived in a straightforward manner (e.g. by omission or constructional simplification) from the expletive form illustrated in (12'). And even if it were possible to trace its origin ultimately to an underlying form containing an expletive, its more immediate source must of necessity be the focus construction supposedly derived from the expletive, and not the expletive itself. Additional confirmation of the close link between focus and inferentials may thus be drawn from the observation that although expletives would have been available as an immediate source of derivation as illustrated in (12'), inferentials did not directly develop from the latter but were grafted on the constituent-focus marking system. This may at first appear as a derivational paradox: The pre-sentential focus construction, which is typically associated with non-inferential uses in accordance with the core paradigm of focus, allows for straightforward derivation from a - still contemporarily existing - 'it is'-paraphrasis. The derivational history of the *in situ* construction which is typically associated with inferential usage as demonstrated by examples (8-2), (11-2) and many others, however, cannot be traced in any straightforward manner to an "expletive" construction; instead it originates in a *na*-connective which serves as a link between two predicates and which is reanalyzed as an F-marker assigning the focus role to the argument of the first predicate. The paradox disappears if one is prepared to accept that inferentials are not, at least not in any sense based on inherent necessity, derived from expletives, but are to be explained as a genuine albeit specialized function of focus itself.

To summarize our analysis thus far, a good number of recorded examples of non-core focus marking in Akan are characterized as explanations and fit as such into their explicit or reconstructable discourse context. As we shall see, this characterization, while supported by the observable facts, is still not adequate as an explanation for their use and for their formal similarity to canonical focus constructions.

4 The discourse function of inferentials

Constructions similar in form and function to the ones presented above from Akan have been observed in other languages. Formal similarity should be understood here to refer to the fact that sentences fulfilling an explanatory function tend to draw on the same morphosyntactic or prosodic resources as canonical focus constructions in the same language. The nature of this isomorphism points to a deeper connection between the two domains of usage. In spite of different sources of the grammaticalization of focus markers in languages such as Wolof (Robert 1993), Swahili (Bearth 1997) and Akan (3.3 above), the language-internal constructional homonymy between core focus marking and inferentials seems to be ubiquitous and calls for an explanation. A number of such explanations have already been offered in the literature.

In his early study of focus in Akan, Boadi (1974:20f.) draws attention to constructions "which have the syntactic structure of exclusive focus-marked sentences but neither have the phonological features described above¹⁹ nor the semantic interpretation of these sentences." Specifically, he says that these sentences do not have "the same

¹⁹ Boadi here refers to intonational properties of his exclusive *na*-marked focus construction which, according to him, are absent from the non-exclusive variety of *na*-focus. I have not been able so far to confirm this prosodic difference (which might be dialectally conditioned) from my own data.

presupposition or answer the same questions as the exclusive focus-marked sentences", and furthermore he considers *na* in these cases to be "a sentence modifier (unlike the exclusive focus-marker) which serves the semantic function of emphasizing the assertive force of the whole sentence."

- (13) *Akosua na ɔpe asem*
 Akosua F she-likes affair
 'Akosua is undoubtedly inquisitive.'

Boadi proposes the gloss "undoubtedly" as a means of expressing the additional assertive force conveyed by the F-marking of the subject.²⁰

Boadi must be commended for drawing attention to the alternative use of F-marking in Akan. A limitation of his account lies in the fact that it does not attempt to capture the conditions of this alternative function of F-marking by systematically investigating the natural discourse environments in which it occurs.

Robert (1993:38) observes that in many languages, as is the case in Wolof whose focus system she describes, it is the morpheme expressing focalization of the predicate which is also used as a means of indicating an explanatory discourse function of the sentence containing the predicate.²¹ The following example from Wolof illustrates the use of the "verbal emphatic form" of *remove* in the second pair part.²²

- (14)
- 1 A *néég bii mu ngi sedd!*
 room this PRES 3s be-cold
 'It is cold in this room!'
- 2 B *paa bi dafa dindi palanteer bi*
 daddy DEF F_{verb} remove shutter DEF
 'Daddy has removed the shutters.'

B's utterance (14-2) provides the explanation for the state-of-affairs noticed by A in (14-1). Robert's analysis is based on the Culiolian notion of *pre-construct* (cf. Culioli 1995) - which differs from the related notion of presupposition in that (i) it is not "given" but constructed as part of the focus semantics, and (ii) it is not the opposite term of assertion but one of the components of what Robert calls „dédoublement assertif“ (p. 33; perhaps translatable as „split assertion“). She proposes an axiomatics of focus polysemy whose aim is a coherent and unitarily motivated account of the three basic types of focus use

²⁰ From a comparative viewpoint, it is of interest to note that Boadi gives alternant focus placements in (13) as evidence for his contention that grammatical focus having the whole sentence in its scope may fall on any of its constituents. Our own preliminary observations partially concur with his, but see section 3.2 on possible conditioning factors. As example (15) below clearly shows, even in Wolof, the explanatory function is not exclusively limited to predicate focus.

²¹ "Or il semble que dans beaucoup de langues, le morphème de focalisation du prédicat présente de manière comparable des emplois à valeur explicative." (Robert 1993:38) Wolof distinguishes three paradigms of morphological F-marking, associated respectively with the subject, the verb, and the complement (Robert 1993:27).

²² Translation and arrangement by TB.

which she observes in Wolof, i.e. *identification*, *high degree*, and *explanation*. The latter type of usage results, according to her, from relating an asserted process (represented by the F-marked predicate) to a preconstructed state or process (which may be verbally expressed, as in (14), or left implicit). Verb focus, in this particular use, is the linguistic correlate of an inter-predicate relationship which, according to Robert, is necessarily causal in nature.

In addition, the type of use of wide-scope subject F-marking which we observed in Akan is also well attested in Wolof. One of several examples given by Robert (1993:29) is (15):

(15) (A hears someone cry and inquires of B what is happening.)

- | | | | |
|---|---|--|------------------------|
| 1 | A | <i>Lu xeew fi?</i> | 'What's the matter?' |
| | | What happen here | |
| 2 | B | <i>Musaa, moo dóór Ndey!</i> | 'Moussa has hit Ndey!' |
| | | Moussa, F _{subj} hit Ndey ²³ | |

The reader will notice the close similarity between the communicative settings of (15-2) and of (4-2) above: In both cases, a sentence containing an F-marked subject takes care of a communicative need arising from the perception, made mutually manifest by verbal means, of a phenomenon thought to be contrasting with the ordinary course of events or state of affairs, in other words from the emergence of something manifestly in need of explanation. Robert (1993:35) interprets this particular use as a projection of the core model of focus usage: The predicate is treated "as if" it was given, and the selection of the subject as focus is due to its special role as controller of the situation or of the speech act.²⁴ As interesting as it is, this attempt at reducing the cleavage between core focus and its explanatory counterpart by a constructivist "tour de force" does not lend itself easily to extrapolation and general validation. First, the "as if" interpretation overlooks the discourse-functional autonomy of the explanatory F-marking and is not supported - at least as far as Akan is concerned - by native metalinguistic competence.²⁵ Second, Swahili (Bearth 1997) illustrates a tendency to mark inferential constructions through sentential markers which still show traces of their origin in the constituent focus marking system but function independently of it as operators having in their scope the state-of-affairs expressed by the sentence.²⁶ And thirdly, I doubt that Robert's harmonizing attempt at this point fully satisfies the evidence from Wolof itself. For while Robert's proposal to associate subject F-marking with control offers an interesting hypothesis on

²³ Robert (1993:29) quotes analogous examples from French, and even the French translation of (14) attests this parallel: "C'est Moussa qui a frappé Ndey!"

²⁴ "Mais l'énonciateur fait comme si ce fait était déjà connu, puisqu'il lui donne le statut de préconstruit, et fait porter l'information sur le sujet: c'est lui le responsable de la situation et pas un autre." (p. 35)

²⁵ One of my Akan informants spontaneously and repeatedly justifies the use of sentences such as (11) instead of (10) by pointing to the argumentative link which it serves to establish to a preceding factual statement. Just as Boadi (1974) does in his analysis (see this section above), he clearly and explicitly distinguishes this explanatory function from the core focus function, rather than interpreting the first as an instance of the second as one would expect him to do if Robert's analysis was to be generalized.

²⁶ See note 36 below.

the motivation of subject F-marking in explanatory constructions, one wonders what - assuming this hypothesis stands - would in turn motivate the shift of F-marking to the verb in (14), since in this case, too, it would seem that the action causing the cold is subject-controlled.²⁷

No doubt the most significant attempt so far to examine explanatory constructions from the standpoint of their discourse function in a framework of conversational pragmatics is Delahunty (1995). At the outset, Delahunty defines inferential constructions in formal terms as follows (1995:342): "Inferentials, in English, are sentences in which a tensed subordinate clause is embedded as the complement of a form of *be* whose subject is expletive *it*." While this analysis concerns its use in an English corpus, "... it appears to be universal." At the same time, the construction is relatively rare in his corpus of English written and spoken texts; moreover, negative inferentials are much more frequent than positive ones (p. 344). In regard to the discourse-functional correlates of the latter, Delahunty says (p. 346): „It is not possible to provide a complete characterization of ... contexts which precede positive inferentials.“ The uses of positive inferentials are more difficult to characterize „because speakers may interpolate an inferential whenever they feel the need to expand on what they have just said - either to explain it or to reinterpret it, or deny an inference derivable from it.“ Nevertheless "the textual positions at which the speaker will feel these urges are unpredictable.“ (p. 346f.).

Delahunty identifies explanations, reasons, causes, conclusions, results, consequences, comparisons and contrasts (pp. 349-354) as typical uses of the construction. Explanation is the most frequent of these: *It is (not) that ...* can often be paraphrased as *The explanation is(, not) that p*. What do these various uses have in common? Delahunty's answer is: „... we can view all of these categories as representing a single natural class: They all represent aspects of interpretation ... of the local context.“ (p. 355) Following Delahunty, one might say that the construction places a clearly defined constraint on Gricean conversational implicatures: „Indeed the range of particular implicatures seems to be limited to those which have to do with interpretation.“ (p. 355)

²⁷ Robert treats subject F-marked and verb F-marked explanatory sentences in separate parts of her paper (1993:31-35; 38f.). It is not clear if and how they are functionally distinguished from, or related to each other, and what conditions the choice of the subject focus paradigm in the first case, and of the verb focus paradigm in the second.

An interesting parallel as far as shifting patterns of prominence marking under generally comparable conditions of sentential focus scope are concerned, is offered bythetic constructions, or "sentence focus" (Lambrecht's term). A review of various attempts at dealing with the rationale behind this positional variation on theoretical grounds is found in Lambrecht (1994:307-321). It must, however, be stressed that inferential constructions are by no means identical with what in the functional-typological tradition is known asthetic sentences. Although both constructions may be - and have been - regarded as special cases of focus constructions on the basis of their formal properties, and although a subclass of each of them is explicitly associated with the explanatory function in discourse (Sasse 1995:18ff.), the type of sentences which Delahunty and others treat as inferentials are *a priori* distinguished fromthetic sentences by their defining formal characteristics. The fact that both types can be described as focus constructions with scope over the whole sentence points to the diversity of discourse functionality behind the apparently simple notion of explanation. For further reference see Sasse (1987; 1995:18), and Sperber & Wilson (1995:211f.), as well as Perrot (1974). No doubt, the relationship between these two types of construction would be an interesting field for further research.

The main drawback to this analysis of the function of inferentials is that many other types of constructions would also fit the description of the same natural class. Conversely, inferentials are by no means the only, nor even the preferred way of expressing some of the particular inter-predicate relations given as typical instances of their occurrence, such as results and consequences. Additional criteria are therefore needed in order to answer the crucial question: What is it that triggers the choice, by a given speaker at a given moment, of the particular construction which Delahunty calls inferential, rather than some other, perhaps less or differently marked type of construction signalling the same or a similar type of relation? And what is it that makes the informationally unmotivated F-marking sound more appropriate to native ears than the corresponding unmarked sentence, e.g. in responding to a compliment as in (4-2) above?

One of the difficulties in judging the validity of universal claims regarding the so-called inferential construction is the fact that such claims are partly based on formal characteristics such as propositional embedding into expletives, and partly on functional properties defining a natural class of constructions assigned to a specific discourse-function. Nor is it clear how language-specific differences in the use of constructions identified by either type of criteria ought to be handled. As an example for the latter problem, we may start from a perspicuous remark in Delahunty (1997, footnote 1) regarding the opposite effects of negative and positive inferentials in English: "So negative inferentials unexpectedly deny the relevance of the most plausible assumption(s) in the context, and positive inferentials assert the relevance of less accessible ones." This observation, if confirmed, would seem to provide a valid candidate for a functional universal associated with inferentials. However, the use of positive inferentials in Akan as illustrated in (4-2) contradicts this hypothesis, since it manifestly serves to weaken "the most plausible assumptions" conveyed by the compliment, rather than to strengthen the less accessible ones. On the basis of this apparent divergency of usage, one may speculate about possible language-specific differences between conditions of use of what has been identified as inferentials on primarily formal grounds. If Delahunty's characterization of their effect on contextual assumptions is correct for English, it could explain why in this particular case, it seems inconceivable to replace the Akan F-marked explanatory statement (4-2) by an inferential construction in English. Interestingly, though, the addition of a restrictive modifier to the expletive matrix seems to make the use of inferentials at least marginally more acceptable in such and similar cases: "It's *just* that ...". But this in turn would seem to at least relativize Delahunty's claim regarding the inference-strengthening tendency of positive inferentials. It is also tempting to speculate about different implicatures inherently associated with positive inferentials in English and Akan which could explain the requirement of an explicit restrictive marker in English but not in Akan in order to make them compatible with an intended weakening effect on contextual assumptions. But a worthwhile discussion of such matters will have to wait until large-scale comparison on the basis of a truly representative sample from both languages becomes possible.

Declerck (1992:205f.) maintains in substance - arguing specifically contra Delahunty (1990) - that all true inferentials are explanations, either of what was said before or of why it was said. On the basis of my own observations, I concur with her restrictive characterization of positive inferentials (1992:206): "I have come to the conclusion that it is typical of the inferential *it is that*-construction that it always expresses what the

speaker thinks to be the correct explanation or interpretation²⁸ of something that happened or has been said, or of the fact a speech act has taken place." But if so - what is an explanation?

5 The inferential gap condition - a French example

Central to the following proposal for "explaining explanations" is the notion of inferential gap, initially developed in Bearth (1997) and exploited for analyzing a corpus of Swahili conversational texts. I shall not repeat what I attempted to show there: that this notion is central to an extended, non-idealizing Gricean view of the constitution of conversational meaning, integrating processing routines such as self-monitoring and negotiation of inferences as part of the theoretical framework. My purpose here will rather be to outline the place which the notion of "inferential gap" occupies in a pragmatic theory of discourse coherence. To illustrate my point, I will turn to a French example. The following dialogue sequence is extracted from Sempé/Gosciny (1964:105):

- (16) (The parents of little Nicolas had agreed that their son, Nicolas, would make a short appearance at the dinner which they were about to offer to the husband's boss and his wife. Mother (M) instructs Nicolas to be prepared to come down to the hall to greet the guests when they arrive. But now suddenly, the father (P) fears that his son's unpredictable whims might become a cause of embarrassment.)

- 1 P *Euh... Tu crois que c'est bien nécessaire?*
'Hm ... You think it's really necessary?'
- 2 M a. *Mais bien sûr.* b. *Nous étions d'accord sur ce sujet.*
'But of course. We had already agreed on this.'
- 3 P *C'est que j'ai peur que Nicolas fasse des gaffes.*
'It's that I am afraid that Nicolas will let us down.'

(16-3) illustrates a highly characteristic use of a positive inferential sentence, marked as such by the expletive copula construction *C'est que* ... Omitting the expletive matrix, P could have said:

- (16') (2-2 as above.)

- 3 P *J'ai peur que Nicolas fasse des gaffes.*
'I am afraid that Nicolas will let us down.'

The first question we might ask is this:

What makes the difference between this "normal" sentence and the little increment *C'est que* ..., which changes the sentence into an inferential construction? Said in normal affirmative tone, (16-3') would have the force of a counter-argument aimed at re-launching the initiative taken by P in (16-1), in defiance of M's unyielding stance to which

²⁸ It is clear from her critical remarks on Delahunty's generous circumscription of inferentials (Delahunty 1990) that, unlike Delahunty, she uses "interpretation" as a technical synonym of "explanation".

she gives expression in (16-2). The inferential construction, intuitively perceived as defensive rather than defiant, has the opposite effect: In replacing the argument by an explanation, it implies that the argument is defeated and that P knows that it is. If this is the case - as the continuation of the conversation reported by "little Nicolas" as fictive narrator suggests it is, and M's subsequent closing move ratifies it -, why then should there be a need for an explanation? In other words, if the discourse function of (16-3) is explanatory rather than argumentative, as is being claimed for inferentials in general, what is it that it purports to explain?

The answer is to be found by relating (16-3) to its *verbatim* context. Having taken care in (16-2a) of the material aspect of her husband's inopportune intervention, M addresses in (16-2b) the rationality of P's verbal conduct: Her appeal to the maxim of consistency - "We had already agreed on this" - is a means of justifying the outright dismissal of P's initiative on the grounds that it violates the rules of coherent discourse.

The maxim indirectly acknowledged in (16-2b) may be formulated in truth-conditional terms as follows:

A speaker, in the course of a conversation, may not claim *p* and its contrary both to be true.

Reformulated in pragmatic terms, the consistency maxim might read like this:

Utterances (including questions) carrying contradictory implicatures or presuppositions, produced or supported by one and the same speaker in the course of a conversation, are liable to be sanctioned as violations of a fundamental principle of discourse coherence.²⁹

While M's exploitation of the consistency maxim appears to be a well-motivated part of a coherent strategy of counter-action, we still need to justify the claim - assuming that conversational moves tend to occur in a non-random and motivated way under the general premises of the cooperative principle - that an explanation of the kind shown in (16-3) opens a way out of the argumentative deadlock which one would normally assume a flagrant violation of a principle as rigid as this would have led its perpetrator into. There is indeed an important - albeit obvious - proviso to be made regarding the validity of the consistency maxim. By necessity, conversation is an activity which takes place in space and time and which is embedded in a sequence of sometimes parallel and sometimes successive verbal and non-verbal action - all of which may introduce "on-line" modifications which affect conditions under which claims may be legitimately made and upheld by the participants at a given point. Local "on-line" modifications of the global conversational setting may be a sufficient reason for an apparent suspension of the consistency rule in a given local context. *Non-p* asserted or inferred by speaker S after S's prior assertion of *p* is considered to be acceptable under the condition that a new non-

²⁹ See Moeschler/Reboul's meta-rule of non-contradiction (Moeschler & Reboul 1994:467): "Pour qu'un texte soit cohérent, il faut que son développement n'introduise aucun élément sémantique contredisant un contenu posé ou présupposé par une occurrence antérieure ou déductible de celle-ci par inférence." What applies to monological text, is also true of statements, presuppositions and inferences attributed to the speaker in conversation. The true difficulty in operationalizing meta-rules of this type is the delimitation of the domain to which they apply.

verbal fact or verbal argument has emerged in the course of the ongoing verbal exchange and has been mutually recognized as a communicatively relevant source of inferential deduction by the interactants.

This means that a claim s (\rightarrow non- q) which contradicts a claim q made earlier in the conversation by the same speaker, or supported by him, is receivable to the extent that its plausibility can be legitimately inferred from an intervening trigger r .³⁰ In the absence of an appropriate trigger r , the resulting "inferential gap" will be perceived as a violation of the inferability maxim:

A claim made by a dialogue participant is coherent to the extent to which its validity is *inferable for the hearer independently of the statement* on which the claim is based. Failure to satisfy the inferability requirement results in an *inferential gap*, which in turn calls for the activation of an appropriate repair mechanism.

Inferability is a matter of degree, and measures taken to ensure it vary according to communicative settings and individual styles of accommodation to audience needs. This variability does not invalidate the principle, which may be appropriately described as a **tendency to minimize non-inferability**.

I have attempted to show the usefulness of a maxim of this kind in a rather special context, where it enters so to speak in competition with the well-established maxim of consistency. Extending it to all types of communicative events, including non-verbal ones, amounts to its recognition as a general and fundamental principle of discourse coherence.

6 The direction of inferential processing

Taking this line of reasoning a step further, I will assume that the trigger r of an inferential process normally³¹ precedes its target s , resulting in the canonical sequence $r \rightarrow s$. Alternatively, r may also be integrated into s , yielding the compact structure s ($s' \leftarrow r$).

Taking advantage of the inferability maxim, P could have expressed his concern over Nicolas' possible misbehavior as part of his initiating move:

(16")

- | | |
|----------|--|
| 1a = r | a. <i>J'ai peur que Nicolas fasse des gaffes.</i> |
| 1b = s | b. <i>Tu crois vraiment que c'est nécessaire de lui demander de descendre?</i> |
- I am afraid that Nicolas will let us down. Do you really think it is necessary to have him come downstairs?

Alternatively, inverting the order of the sentences, he might have said:

³⁰ Inferential processes may be analysed as consisting of three phases: (1) the emergence of a verbal or non-verbal *trigger* (the source of the inference) as part of ongoing discourse activity, (2) the *mediating phase* (the overt verbal utterance or the verbal exchange carrying the inferential operation), and (3) the *target* (the inferential proposition which the speaker intends to be accepted by the addressee).

³¹ I.e. corresponding to a law of sequential ordering requiring logical antecedents to precede logical consequents.

(16''')

- 1a = s' a. *Tu crois que c'est bien nécessaire?*
 1b = r b. *J'ai peur que Nicolas fasse des gaffes.*³²
 'You think it's really necessary? I am afraid that Nicolas will let us down.'

Having opted for one of these two variants, P could still have been indicted for changing his mind, but not for violating the consistency maxim. The change of mind implied in P's question would have been locally motivated by a change of the situation due to P's evocation of a hitherto unforeseen threat to the family's reputation the avoidance of which could be assumed to be in the interest of both main participants, and from which the necessity of revising a position previously agreed upon could be rationally deduced. At least, it would have made M's insinuation of inconsistency refutable.

Closing the circle, we come back to (16-3). Having noted (i) that the statement contained in (16-3) would have met the criterion of inferability quite naturally if it had been produced as a dependent act related to the head act expressed in (16-1), having also noted (ii) that the lack of inferability resulting from its omission was brought to the attention of the speaker in (16-2), it does not seem too far-fetched to suspect that its occurrence in (16-3) is motivated by its non-occurrence in (16-1). In other words, (16-3) fulfils a compensating or corrective function in respect to (16-1), its previous omission being retrospectively perceived by the speaker himself as an error of conversational performance. This corrective function is what explains the use of the inferential form in (16-3).

On the basis of the distinction between an unmarked pre-target inference ($r \rightarrow s$) and a marked post-target inference ($s <- r'$), we are in a position to offer a slightly more formalized version of the Inferential gap hypothesis, and of the condition under which an Inferential gap repair sequence (IGR) is likely to occur:

A manifest failure to realize r before s or as a constituent part of s (s ($s' <- r$)) results in an inferential gap $\lambda x[(x \rightarrow s)]$. The inferential gap produces a salient discourse variable which calls for a subsequent repair action through which a value comes to be assigned to the pre-constructed inferential variable: ($\lambda x[(x \rightarrow s)](x = r')$). The surface result of the inversion of the preferred order of inferential processing is the marked sequence ($s <- r'$) - where r' is liable to be described as an "explanation".

The fact that the preferential direction of inferential processing is from left to right correlates with the systematic difference in the way pre- and post-target inference triggers are coded. Indeed, the inferential of (16-3) is ungrammatical if it precedes the target:

(16''')

- 1a = r a. **C'est que j'ai peur que Nicolas fasse des gaffes.*³³
 1b = s b. *Tu crois vraiment que c'est nécessaire de lui demander de descendre?*

³² An all Low prefinal intonation contour contributes optionally to mark the right-dependency of r with respect to s' , its head.

³³ Of course, the sequence is possible if (1a) refers back to a previously staged explanandum.

*It is that I am afraid that Nicolas will let us down. Do you really think it is necessary to have him come downstairs?

Thus the pre- vs. post-target dichotomy, where the latter implies an inversion of the processing direction, seems to be supported by distributional facts.

A possible objection to this is that the *immediate* post-target position appears to accommodate both types of construction. Thus, besides (16'''), where the inference is triggered by an unmarked adjoined sentence, (16''') is equally possible:

(16''')

1a = s' *Tu crois que c'est bien nécessaire?*

1b = r *C'est que j'ai peur que Nicolas fasse des gaffes.*

'You think it's really necessary? It is that I fear that Nicolas will let us down.'

We will see in the next section that there are good reasons for interpreting (16''') as being systematically different from (16''') in terms of its interactional structure.

7 Inferential strategies and interactional coherence

It is generally recognized that repair sequences may be other-initiated or self-initiated. While this distinction is not always as clear-cut and operational as one would like it to be, it seems reasonable to say that the French example discussed at some length in the preceding sections provides a clear instance of an other-initiated IGR, occurring in response to an incoherence overtly signalled by the interlocutor.

By contrast, the following example from Swahili is a clear case of a self-initiated IGR in a monologue type of oral discourse.

(17) (Interview of Mzee Gore. *Dahe* 2, 1989:45)

1. *Kitumbatu liko neno ambalo huwezi kulipata katika herufi za ABCD, 2.*

isipokuwa mpaka iko herufi moja katika fonotiki, ambayo ya kitaalamu. 3.

Unaona, ndiyo ninatumia hiyo ambayo nimefundishwa na Profesa Maganga.

1. In-Kitumbatu,³⁴ there-are words which you-cannot spell in the-letters of the-alphabet, 2. except to-the-extent-that there-is one letter in phonetic(-script), which is scientific. 3. You-see, **it-is-that** I-am-using that which I-have-been taught by Professor Maganga.

The interviewee, a well known local poet and historian, tells his interviewer about the difficulties he encounters in spelling words in the Tumbatu dialect of Swahili, and how one is able to solve these problems with the help of the phonetic script. The conditions under which the interview took place make it seem likely that the use of the inferential construction in (17-3) is due to auto-feedback.³⁵ The claim to specialized knowledge in the field of phonetics which the speaker implicitly makes at this point is in no way

³⁴ A dialect of Swahili spoken in Northern Zanzibar. I thank Mr. Abudalla M. Mzee, Wetzikon, for helping me cross-check my interpretation of this example.

³⁵ This judgment is based on internal evidence from the transcribed text of the interview to which I do not have access through audio-, let alone video-recording.

inferable from those domains of knowledge where his authority is recognized, such as local culture and history, and on which the interview draws almost exclusively elsewhere. Thus speaker recognition of the need for an indication of the source of this special knowledge follows from the application of a self-monitored strategy of minimization of non-inferability. It is this discourse function which is marked in (17-3) by the sentential focus marker *ndiyo*.³⁶

However, the example also offers evidence in support of the distinct role played by inferentials in maintaining or restoring conversational coherence. Notwithstanding that the IGR here is self-initiated, it is coupled with an explicit reference to the hearer or, we might say, to the co-enunciator's perspective. A verbatim reading of the discourse marker *unaona* 'you see' is suggestive of its interpretation as an invitation to the audience to co-validate not so much the factual correctness of what is going to be said, as its significance for ensuring coherence, and more specifically, inferability of the speaker's previously expressed views.³⁷

Even without the presence of an explicit marker of this kind, this strongly interactional bias would also seem to account for the intuitively recognized difference between the unmarked sequence (16''') - *Tu crois que c'est nécessaire? J'ai peur que Nicolas fasse des gaffes* - and its inferentially marked counterpart (16''''') - *Tu crois que c'est nécessaire? - C'est que j'ai peur que Nicolas fasse des gaffes* - in section 6 above. Both may be said to give a reason for the change of attitude underlying the question, and both in this sense naturally contribute towards ensuring logical coherence. But the inferentially marked utterance gives the impression that the act of questioning itself is in need of justification. Its operational domain is conversational or interactional coherence, which needs to be considered apart from the need of meeting requirements of logical coherence. If the co-occurrence of inferentials with traces of interactional proceedings is not merely coincidental, it follows that a description of the properties of inferentials, and, for that matter, an explanation of what "explanation" is, cannot be given in a fully satisfactory way by stating how inferentials contribute towards explicating certain types of logical relationships between sentences and discourse constituents, as both Delahunty's inventory of possible functions of inferentials (Delahunty 1995, cf. section 4 above) and Declerck's specificational analysis (Declerck 1992) suggest.³⁸ Instead, inferential marking

³⁶ The origin of the sentence adverbial *ndiyo* would seem to corroborate Delahunty's hypothesis according to which "an expletive subject and a form of copular *be* ... are defining characteristics" (Delahunty 1997:115) of inferentials: *Ndiyo* can be traced back to an underlying copular construction *ndi-* which expresses contrastive identification or, more generally, focuses on the relation of identity between two elements and which may be literally rendered as "it is that", the ending *-yo* being interpretable in the source context as an expletive class marker. It is remarkable that inferential *ndiyo* does not function syntactically as a matrix clause but has undergone reanalysis as a sentential focus marker (Bearth 1995:221ff.), thus supporting the view that the operation represented by inferentials has the sentence as a whole in its scope, rather than any of its constituents.

³⁷ In this respect, the Akan discourse particle *sé* in (3-3) above seems to play a similar role in claiming from the interlocutor adherence to the argumentative force of the speaker's statement about his residence (cf. note 10 above).

³⁸ It is interesting to note her repeated use of the epithet "correct" in characterizing the explanatory function of inferentials; for instance, inferentials are described as providing the "correct explanation"

always seems to take place in response to a perceived threat to interactional coherence which may, in the extreme case, lead to communicative breakdown.

The crucial importance of inferability in natural language processing has been recognized for long. For instance, it is a centerpiece of the inferential model of verbal communication propounded in Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson 1995). The notion of inferential gap is not in contradiction with such a view. However, the concept of interactional coherence on which it hinges, would seem to be less congenial to a view according to which the metacommunicative goal of retrievability and increase of knowledge monopolizes the cognitive processes associated with human verbal interaction at the expense of socially defined goals.³⁹ From a relevance-theoretical point of view, the purpose of inferentials may be said to be, in the light of the observations made so far, to instruct the audience to revise the set of assumptions on the basis of which they were processing a foregoing speech act *s*, by enriching the set with the inferentially marked utterance *r*. Thus, in the Akan example (3), the F-marked statement to the effect that B lives in Accra (3-3) - a fact previously known to A - appears as an IGR destined to change the set of assumptions on the basis of which A would have processed, upon first hearing, B's claim - supposedly new information to A - that his parents will eventually concur with his marriage proposal. To put it again in relevance-theoretical terms, the overall contextual effect of the target statement - B's claim - is dramatically enhanced by the calculated effect of the IGR since, if successful, it may mean nothing less than A's acceptance of B's proposal to marry her.

This example might be considered to provide a perfect illustration of "relevance" as defined by the "multiplication effect" resulting from the interconnection of "new and old items of information ... used together as premises in an inference process" (Sperber & Wilson 1995:48). At the same time, it raises a fundamental question Sperber and Wilson's characterization of verbal interaction as a goal-oriented activity. In their view, the purpose of verbal communication is equal to "improving the individual's knowledge of the world" (Sperber & Wilson 1995:47). Now, the purpose of explanations is very often to make a claim more acceptable to the interlocutor, which is another and a very plausible way to interpret the function of (3-3) in the given interactional setting. The question which must be asked is if the goal of eliciting consent ought to be subsumed as a sub-goal under the axiomatic and pervasive notion of "information processing" (*loc. cit.*) geared towards "improving one's knowledge of the world". Why not invert the relationship between the means and the end? It would seem that it is at least as reasonable to assume that providing added value in terms of accessible knowledge by means of verbal communication is subservient to the superordinate goal of obtaining the interlocutor's assent to one's claims. The coherence requirement as I see it, which provides the rationale behind the IGR phenomenon, is far more overriding and all-encompassing than the deductibility of one statement from another.

(Declerck 1992:206). This is in itself highly suggestive of the intrinsically corrective nature of the inferential construction.

³⁹ For an explicit statement to this effect see Sperber & Wilson (1995:47f.). The identical statement in the first edition (Sperber & Wilson 1986:47f.) is central to the critique of this view of communication by Berg (1991, see p. 419). See also Gorayska and Lindsay (1993) for a critical appraisal.

For instance in (3), reminding the young lady of the fact that her suitor lives in Accra may be thought to be motivated by B's desire to increase her knowledge about B's intentions and the way he sees the chances for them to be realized. But what justifies the selection of this particular piece of knowledge and the inferential process triggered by it is the recognition by both participants of the superordinate purpose of negotiating A's adhesion to B's project of inter-ethnic marriage. It is the goal of securing A's adhesion, not the increase of her knowledge, which triggers the IGR.

Since for the speaking individual eliciting consent from his audience is a high priority, it is also a crucial object of his/her self-monitoring activity which is the source of IGR's. The degree to which he/she can expect to elicit assent to his/her claims correlates with the latter's degree of inferability, more exactly of the hearer-inferability of these claims as estimated by the speaker. The extent to which the speaker, whether guided by his own monitoring activity or by hearer reaction, estimates this factor to be insufficient determines his perception of inferential gaps and calls for redressive action in order to optimize coherence. It is this redressive verbal action which elicits special marking procedures of the type illustrated by our Akan and Swahili examples.

But why, so we may ask, should praise for a nice dress (4-2) create a need for verbal compensation by means of an inferential construction? The answer is that inferential gaps may arise not just from inferential trigger "dephasing" - from a missed opportunity so to speak - as in (16), but from a number of different causes, one being the violation, or the desire to prevent a violation, of the principle of matching inferences.⁴⁰ Corrective IGR-type action in these cases is based on the recognition or suspicion by the speaker that the inferences which the hearer draws deviate from those intended by him. In order to distinguish inferential gaps due to mismatches in synchronic processing from gaps caused by delayed uttering of inference triggers, one could speak of "inferential clashes" in the former case.

The invariant criterion underlying the inferential strategy in all cases is the necessity of retroactively establishing conversational and interactional coherence. In the case of the Akan example (4), the praise may have been understood to carry an undertone to the effect that A must be rich. The purpose of the F-marking in the second instance, then, would be to signal that the goal of the F-marked utterance is to replace the incorrect implicature purportedly derived from the first instance statement by a corrective statement which permits the intended inferences to be drawn while blocking the undesired ones.

Using procedural terminology, we may characterize the inferentially marked type of construction against the background of its unmarked counterpart as follows: The unmarked sequence contains an instruction to the hearer to process *r* as part of the assumptions being used in interpreting *s*. The inferentially marked sequence, by contrast, contains an instruction to the audience to return to *s* and to re-process it, using a new set of assumptions enriched by *r*. While second instance processing is most clearly seen to occur in cases where an overt hearer reaction intervenes between *s* and *r*, as in the original example (16), it also provides a logically coherent and intuitively plausible model for interpreting inferentials triggered by self-monitoring, which, as in the case of (4), may

⁴⁰ See Bearth (1997:3) for a justification of this principle as part of an extended Gricean view of conversation.

follow directly the statement to which they refer. The crucial point is not the hypothesis of some hidden self-monitoring activity which would trigger the IGR and which may be impossible to substantiate empirically, but the observable and testable fact that the flow of left-to-right inferential processing is interrupted by an inferential process taking place in the opposite direction. In certain cases, this is not a matter of choice but of necessity, given the specific condition under which the inferential gap occurs.⁴¹

8 The common rationale behind core focus and inferentials

Many if not all of the world's languages resort to some kind of *focus marking strategy* (clefting syntax, focus morphology or prosody) for marking IGR constructions. The inferential gap hypothesis provides a *natural explanation* for this systematic isomorphism, based on an extended instantiation model of the type outlined above.

Fig. 1 recapitulates the IGR hypothesis in the form of a step-by-step schematic representation of the prototypical genesis of an "explanation":

---> PROCESSING TIME --->			
1. r	-> s		Inference (pre-target trigger)
2. $\lambda x[(x \rightarrow s)]$			Inferential gap
3. x	=	r'	Inferential gap repair (IGR)
4. s		<- r'	IGR surface representation (post-target " explanation ")

Fig. 1 Schematic representation of an IGR

At first glance, step 3 appears as the logico-semantic equivalent of an instantiation of a discourse variable under the provision of the minimal condition (a) of F-marking, as set out in section 2 above:

- (1) **Identificational focus:** An identificational constituent focus binds a variable $p(x)$ of an open proposition inherited from the preceding discourse:

$$p(x) \qquad x = a \qquad (a = \text{focus})$$

- (2) **Inferential gap repair:** A post-target trigger r' binds an inferential gap variable $\lambda x[(x \rightarrow s)]$ inherited from the preceding discourse:

$$\lambda x[(x \rightarrow s)] \qquad x = r' \qquad (r' = \text{explanation, IGR})$$

However, from what was said in section 7, it should be clear that the assignment of a value to an inferential gap variable lacks the simplicity and straightforwardness of a first instance assignment. As we have seen, in terms of inferential processing, explanations

⁴¹ Delahunty (1997:120f.) not only maintains - against Declerck (1992) - that "the proposition made manifest by the inferential can play either an antecedent or a consequent role", but the ambidirectionality of the inferential process is central to his understanding of the function of the construction. To the extent, at least, that this view is also applied to positive inferentials (as I think it is in Delahunty's opinion), it would make the inferential gap theory proposed here untenable insofar as the latter crucially depends on the notion of unmarked vs. marked directionality in inference processing.

always represent a shift to second instance processing. It is this intrinsic second instance characteristic which underlies the common surface representation characteristics of core focus and inferentials.

9 Conclusion

I conclude that the use of positive inferential constructions

1. is not as arbitrary and unpredictable as Delahunty (1995) assumes;
2. typically correlates with a perceived violation of sequential constraints operating at the level of inferential processes, calling for the activation of a mechanism of *ex post facto* compensation of the perceived lack of inferential deductability;
3. correlates quite often with observable traces of a lack of conversational coherence perceived by the participants, requiring a corrective intervention on the part of the speaker;
4. reflects, in terms of its relative frequency, an interesting difference in discourse-planning and discourse-processing between spoken (conversational) and written registers of language.

Admittedly, the last point is more speculative than points (2-3) which I have been able to substantiate in the preceding sections. Point (4) rests on the assumption that written monologues tend to conform optimally to the preferred order of inferential processing. This assumption if proven would provide a hypothesis capable of explaining the extreme rarity of positive inferentials in written documents, and, indirectly, the lack of attention positive inferentials - and inferentials in general - have received until recently in the literature.

To be sure, the notion of inferability itself needs further elucidation to make the IGR hypothesis truly operational, and to show its place in a comprehensive theory of the construction of discourse meaning and of discourse-processing. An inferability calculus capable of taking into account intersubjective variables undoubtedly has to be seen as a key factor in the formulation of a full-fledged natural discourse logic. As a prerequisite, it must be recognized, against an informativity-centered theory of human communication, that the social goal of ordinary conversation is not to maximise increase of knowledge of the participants but to optimize mutual adherence to their respective claims. This is to say that discourses are produced, and conversational activities conducted, as if optimization of mutual adherence was the goal, dialogue being fundamentally consensus-oriented.

Minimization of non-inferability provides the rationale for the existence and use of the type of utterances we have been considering in this paper. Minimization of non-inferability is the global principle that explains the mysterious "urge" (Delahunty 1995) felt by speakers to resort to inferential constructions as a means of compensating for locally recognized inferential gaps. Whenever a failure to meet the global requirement of inferability is recognized by the speaker on the basis of self-monitoring or hearer reaction, IGR's - alias "inferential constructions" - are liable to function as *local post-target substitutes implementing the global requirement of inferability* in compensation of the failure. It is the globality of this principle which explains why Nicolas' father, while

perfectly aware that his argument is lost, still feels the need to justify his abortive attempt at reversing a decision already taken. The verbal behavior manifested in his using the inferential construction testifies to the overriding power of global coherence requirements, and to the fact that they tend to be observed independently of the success or failure of local conversational goals pursued by participants.

What has been termed „inferentials“ thus represents a type of repair mechanism whose domain is the regulation of inferential processes (a function also hinted at by Delahunty in the concluding paragraphs of his 1995 paper) with the ultimate purpose of optimizing discourse coherence both in the representational and in the interactional dimension. In the former, inferentials serve the purpose of making the world as it is said to be, fit the world as it is expected to be, e.g. of making a statement inferable and therefore more acceptable or easier to interpret. In the latter - although both domains are of course to some extent interdependent - inferentials are part of the repertoire of metapragmatic tools for dealing with mismatches between inferences assumed to be made (or assumed to be likely to be made) by the audience and those intended by the speaker. In either case, what triggers the use of an inferential construction is the recognition by the speaker of what may conveniently be described as an „inferential gap“. The type of operation involved in „repairing“ an inferential gap is quite analogous to that of negotiating the assignment of a value, e.g. from a set of conflicting values, to a discourse-activated variable which gives rise to focus marking. What differs is the type of entity which lies in the scope of the operation. The partial homonymy of marking procedures is therefore quite plausible.

Finally, I will try to sketch some possible implications of the results of this study for a general theory of focus.

As argued for already on other grounds in Bearth (1998a), the above observations show that the definition of the proper domain of focus must be extended to include inferential values as negotiables to which focus-marking applies in a fundamentally similar way as it does to values represented by referential terms. Sensitivity of focus operations to inferential processes is part of the explanation of the constructional homonymy between prototypical focus constructions and inferentials. As a corollary, the difficulty as to what to do with instances of focus-marking which apparently contradict local criteria designed for calculating information structure at sentence level, vanishes once it is recognized that focus-marking may intervene as a local representation of global constraints on inferential processing.

In terms of their respective discourse-functions, the distinction between what we have called the core function of focus on the one hand and the explanatory function on the other would clearly have to be retained within a comprehensive typology of focus categories. As we have seen, the presence vs. absence of countervalue is a likely operational criterion for delimiting the two uses on a functional basis.

It is at the level of their discourse-processual properties that these subcategories seem to merge. As we have seen, the inferential focus-marking phenomenon finds its natural place in an elementary model of focus based on the assumption that non-initial instantiation is the most basic discursive operation triggering focus marking. Thus the proposed explanation of the isomorphic relation between inferentials and focus construction strengthens a theoretical position which considers second instance or metalinguistic processing to be a defining characteristic of focus *per se*.

Symbols and abbreviations

COND	conditional
CONS	consecutive marker
DEF	definite marker
DX	deictic marker
F	focus marker
F-marking	focus-marking
FT	focus topicalization marker
FUT	future marker
PF	perfect
PRG	progressive
PST	past
SS	same subject person prefix
TM	terminal marker (of out-of-focus part of F-marked construction)
1s	1st person singular

Tones: \acute{a} = High, \grave{a} = Downstep, \grave{a} = Low, \hat{a} = Falling, a = uncertain tonality

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