Salience and (not-)at-issue status of subordinate clauses

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Not-at-issue content (presuppositions, conventional implicatures) is often diagnosed by its inability to be targetted by direct rejection like *No, she didn't* or *That's not true*. However, AnderBois et al. (2011) have observed and Syrett and Koev (2015) have confirmed experimentally that appositive relative clauses (ARCs), which according to Potts (2005) contribute conventional implicatures, are easier to reject if they stand in the sentence-final position:

(1)   a.   A: Chloe, who decided to dress in a classical ballet style, has been chosen to audition for the All Stars Dance Company. B: ?? No, she didn't.
        b.   A: The All Stars Dance Company has chosen to audition Chloe, who decided to dress in a classical ballet style. B: No, she didn't.

Developing Koev's (2013) idea, the present paper argues that the apparent variable rejectability of ARCs is related to their salience in discourse, which in turn is affected by recency of processing. However, subordinate clauses of other kinds, in particular adverbial clauses, have a similar effect on salience, which raises the question of whether this is due to the same underlying principles, and whether adverbial clauses, like ARCs, contribute not-at-issue content.

Anaphoricity of direct rejection: Phrases that fall under Farkas and Bruce's (2010) notion of direct rejection are composed of anaphoric expressions whose interpretation is strongly dependent on resolution to a salient antecedent in immediate context: answer particles like *yes* and *no*, VP ellipsis in *she didn't*, demonstrative pronoun *that* in *That's not true*. In contrast, "indirect" rejection, which is able to target all kinds of content, is usually more explicit, which makes its target more easily identifiable even if it is not the most salient one:

(2)   A: Chloe, who decided to dress in a classical ballet style, has been chosen to audition for the All Stars Dance Company. B: Chloe didn't dress in a classical ballet style!

Main clause preference: But if direct rejection is really sensitive to salience, and since subordinate clauses are quite generally known to reduce the salience of the proposition they express, then not only ARCs, but also restrictive relatives (3-a), as well as adverbial clauses, (3-b)–(3-c), should be difficult to directly reject, or the rejection prefers to target the main clause:

(3)   a.   A: The dancer who decided to dress in a classical ballet style has been chosen to audition for the 'All Stars' Dance Company. B: ?? No, s/he didn't.
        b.   A: After Mary laughed, she made a joke about the supervisor. B: No, she didn't. ($\rightsquigarrow$ Mary didn't make a joke; $\not\rightsquigarrow$ Mary didn't laugh)   adapted from Frazier & Clifton
        c.   A: Because/Although Chloe danced like an amateur, she was (not) chosen to audition for 'All Stars'. B: ?? No, she didn't.

Clause order: Although experimental evidence is fragmentary on this point (Frazier and Clifton, 2005; Cooreman and Sanford, 1996), it apears that causal and concessive adverbial clauses give rise to the same clause order effect as ARCs, cf. (4) vs. (3-c), whereas temporal adverbial clauses and restrictive relatives show a main clause preference regardless of clause order.

(4)   A: Chloe was (not) chosen to audition for 'All Stars', because/although she danced like an amateur. B: No, she didn't.

Explaining rejection of subordinate clauses: We assume that the unit of discourse structure is a speech act. Koev argues that ARCs constitute independent speech acts, since they can contain

speech act adverbials like *frankly* in (5), which is not the case for restrictive relatives. *Because*- and *although*-clauses (5-b) also allow *frankly*, whereas temporal adverbial clauses do not (5-c), which shows that causal and concessive adverbial clauses can constitute speech acts of their own, while this is not the case for temporal clauses.

(5) a. Chloe, who *frankly* danced like an amateur, has been chosen to audition for the All Stars Dance Company.
  b. Chloe has (not) been chosen, because/although *frankly* she danced like an amateur.
  c. Chloe cried after (#*frankly*) she danced like an amateur.

The standard machinery of e.g. Segmented Discourse Representation Theory (SDRT, Asher and Lascarides, 2003) can be used to explain the rest: Speech acts in discourse are connected by co-ordinating (*Narration*, *Parallel*, *Contrast*) and subordinating coherence relations (*Elaboration*, *Explanation*, *Background*). Syntactically subordinate clauses *normally* express subordinating relations (although there are exceptions). The Right Frontier Constraint (RFC) says that only the last processed speech act and the speech acts it is discourse-structurally subordinated to are accessible for attachment of new discourse material. If an ARC, a causal or a concessive clause is in sentence-final position, as in (4), it is the last processed speech act, but it is (normally) discourse subordinate to the speech act of the main clause, therefore RFC correctly predicts that a rejection can be attached to the speech act of either the main or the subordinate clause.

However, if the ARC is sentence-medial (1-a) or if the causal or concessive clause is sentence-initial (3-c), then the main clause is the last processed speech act and therefore the rejection can only attach to the main clause. Further assuming that anaphoric devices like *no* and VP ellipsis have a strong preference to be resolved to an antecedent in the discourse unit to which the present sentence is *directly* attached, we predict that direct rejection can always target the main clause, but it can only target the subordinate clause if it is sentence-final.

An indirect rejection (2) may attach in the discourse structure to the whole preceding sentence, but because it provides more explicit cues that help identify its target, it is less restricted in finding its antecedent. In this respect the distinction between direct and indirect rejections is parallel to that between anaphoric pronouns like *he* vs. definite descriptions like *the man*.

Finally, the main clause preference in subordinate clauses that do not constitute independent speech acts, e.g. temporal *after*-clauses, can be explained by a principle like Frazier and Clifton's (2005) main assertion hypothesis: "Other things equal, comprehenders prefer to relate material in a new sentence to the main assertion of the preceding sentence." The main assertion of a complex sentence is normally found in the main clause (but again there are exceptions).

(Not-)at-issue status of subordinate clauses: In sum, ARCs and other subordinate clauses that can function as speech acts independent of the main clause show parallel behaviour with respect to direct rejection which can be explained by the same underlying principles. What does this mean for semantic theory? One possibility is that contra Potts (2005) ARCs are difficult to directly reject not because they contribute some special kind of content (conventional implicature), but because they are subordinate clauses that have reduced salience in discourse. This would also mean that the rejection test is not reliable in identifying not-at-issue content. However, in this paper we explore another theoretical possibility: that discourse salience and at-issueness are closely related notions, that adverbial clauses can be not-at-issue like ARCs, which however makes us rethink the relationship between at-issueness and projection.

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