Wait a minute! What kind of discourse strategy is this? (Annotated data set)

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Abstract Work involving the *Wait a minute* test for presuppositions would benefit from a larger empirical basis. I'm seeking to help provide one, by releasing a collection of 439 lightly annotated examples drawn from interview transcripts, along with a Javascript interface. I would be delighted to have help with this effort.

1   Introduction

The *Wait a minute* test for presuppositions was introduced by Shanon (1976) and popularized by von Fintel (2004). Increasingly, researchers seem to be assuming (often implicitly) that this test yields a *definition* of presuppositions. In light of this, it is worth stepping back, to ask, What kind of discourse move is *Wait a minute*, really? To help answer this, I gathered 439 instances of the string `wait a minute` used utterance-initially from about 77 million words of CNN TV interview transcripts. I then lightly tagged the examples for (i) what I judged to be the content that "Wait a minute" is intended to address on that use; and (ii) the clause-type of the immediate follow-up. A Javascript interface to this data set is available, for download and for online exploration:

http://people.umass.edu/potts/data/waitaminute/

This note describes my motivation for collecting the data, discusses the nature of the data and the annotation, and offers some tentative first conclusions about what the data mean for the *Wait a minute* test.

Comments and suggestions are welcome. Offers to help with data collection and annotation are wonderful. Contact email: potts@linguist.umass.edu.

2   Background

Shanon (1976) seeks to use responses like *Just a moment* to make fine-grained distinctions between different kinds of presupposed content. The test was

reintroduced by von Fintel (2004), who deals mainly the less genteel (but more natural) locution *Wait a minute*, using it to distinguish presuppositions from at-issue content (proferred or truth conditional content; 'what is said').[1] Since then, the test has been steadily gaining in popularity. It is easy to see the appeal: whereas the usual array of holes and plugs bring their own complex pragmatics with them, the *Wait a minute* test is best run with simple sentence that intentionally shine a light on the item in question. This is perhaps why it serves Matthewson (2006) so well in the field.

What exactly can *Wait a minute* replies tell us, though, about the status of various pieces of meaning? I think that von Fintel (2004) and von Fintel & Matthewson (2008) endorse the generalizations in (1)–(2).

(1)   If meaning M is expressed as a presupposition, then *Wait a minute* is a suitable method for objecting to M.

(2)   If meaning M is expressed as at-issue content, then *Wait a minute* is not a suitable method for objecting to M.

In addition, (3) seems often to be assumed, at least implicitly.

(3)   If *Wait a minute* is a suitable method for objecting to a meaning M, then M is expressed as a presupposition.

If we combine (1) with (3), then the felicity of *Wait a minute* is definitional: it works with all and only the presuppositions. It is easy to see why (3) creeps onto the scene. It is the most useful of the above generalizations, since it purports to offer direct access to presuppositionality. It is also a natural pragmatic strengthening of (1). It means that we needn't state (2) at all. And it means that we really require just one test when probing for presupposed content.

Are these generalizations correct, though? It seems unlikely that a quick intuition check will yield reliable answers. These are claims about overwhelmingly complex and varied interactions between meaning and context. Semanticists and pragmaticists are increasingly adept at searching strategically through representative situation types, but I think few would say with confidence that they had thought of everything.

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1 Kai von Fintel wrote to me to clarify that the test in von Fintel 2004 is more accurately labeled the *Wait a minute! I didn't know that S* test, where the follow-up is crucial for showing that there is a discrepancy with regard to the discourse participants' understanding of whether *S* was in the common ground. The more general version of the test, which I focus on here, is assumed by Matthewson, Roeper & Bryant (2001), Roberts (2006), Matthewson (2006), and Rett (2008); the refined version is assumed by Singh (2007) and Mayol (2008). The current data set includes no examples that precisely match the form of the more refined test, but it includes rising declaratives that function in the capacity of *I didn't know that S*.

```
<example exnum="301">
        <tags>rising declarative,at-issue content</tags>
        <link>http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0103/04/lklw.00.html</link>
        <show>Larry King Live</show>
        <date>March 4, 2001</date>
        <transcript>
        N. REAGAN: Well, the Secret Service called me to say that there had been an
        accident. And I got home and Larry, it was so incredible.
        KING: Was there pain?
        N. REAGAN: Oh, Ronnie never, ever complains about pain, ever.
        KING: Wait a minute, no complaint with a broken hip?
        N. REAGAN: No.
        KING: I am told that's impossible.
        N. REAGAN: No. This time when he was frowning and he was rubbing his right
        thigh, you knew he had to be in pain because he never... </transcript>
</example>
```

Figure 1: An example in the corpus's XML format. This file is downloadable from http://people.umass.edu/potts/data/waitaminute/.

3 The data set

In my view, what is needed to assess the above generalizations is an infusion of new naturalistic data — a representative sample of *Wait a minute* tokens in real conversation. As recently as six years ago, this would once have been an extremely tall order. Now, with over 60 billion pages on the Internet, it is quite feasible.

As a first step in this direction, I collected 439 occurrences of utterance-initial *Wait a minute* tokens from over 77 million words of online transcripts at http://www.cnn.com/transcripts/. This was done with a simple regular expression:[2]

```
^[A-Z]+:\s*([Hh]ey,\s*)?[Ww]ait a minute.*\w+
```

In CNN transcripts, speakers are named with all capital letters at the start of the line, followed immediately by a colon. Thus, the above reliably found utterance-initial tokens. The pattern `([Hh]ey,\s*)?` specifies 'one or more occurrences of `hey,` or `Hey,` followed by zero or more spaces'. The final `.*\w+` helps ensure

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2 My initial searches included *wait a second*, *hold on*, and a few of the other replies that make appearances in Matthewson, Roeper & Bryant (2001). However, these are often used literally by the host to control the flow of the TV show, so I left them out.

that *Wait a minute* has an actual follow-up. Without such a follow-up, it is typically very hard to tell what the speaker was responding to.

I collected the examples in context: six lines preceding the line containing *Wait a minute* and six lines following it. In the transcripts, each turn is fairly reliably given on a single line, with blank lines separating turns. Thus, there were about three discourse turns on either side of the one containing *Wait a minute*. I then annotated the examples with two types of features, and placed them in a standards-compliant XML file (which is downloadable from the link given in the introduction). Figure 1 is a typical example.

The features (the contents of <tags></tags> in the XML format) are described in the next section.

4 Tags

The tags that annotate the examples divide into two groups: those that roughly characterize the clause-type of the follow-up to *Wait a minute* and those that roughly classify the content to which *Wait a minute* is addressed.

4.1 Clause-type tags

The following tags help identification of the clause-type of the follow-up. Individual examples can have more than one of these tags, since the follow-up often has multiple parts.

(4)   Declarative (238 hits)

        Example: "Wait a minute, Carl Levin is pushing a four to six- month plan."

(5)   Imperative (49 hits)

        Example: "Wait a minute. Don't put words in my mouth."

        Example: "Wait a minute. Wait a minute. Let me ask you a straightforward question."

(6)   Interrogative (90 hits)

        Example: "Wait a minute. Jeanine, can you serve on the jury if you have seen the tape?"

(7)   Rising declarative (94 hits)

        Example: "Wait a minute, you're going give away $10 million that night?"

(8)   Vocative (36 hits)

        Example: "Wait a minute, Frank. Tell me by how much then if you are
        so sure."

4.2   Tags for the status of the content addressed

The second group of tags seeks to mark the status of the content to which *Wait a minute* is addressed. These annotations are much less straightforward than the clause-type ones. I am sure that they could be both more accurate and more fine-grained. This is a start, though. The full list is in (9).[3]

(9)   Features for the status of the content addressed

        a.   appropriateness
        b.   at-issue content
        c.   discourse conditions
        d.   presupposition/implicature
        e.   unclear

It is worth looking at each of these on its own, with representative examples.

4.2.1   Appropriateness (38 examples)

This tag is intended to mark examples in which the speaker's *Wait a minute* was in response to something in another person's utterance that he or she found inappropriate. These could fall under the heading of 'pragmatic presupposition':

(10)   COURIC: Are you sorry you said it, Governor?

        MCCAIN: Wait a minute. Before you say, is she sorry, is she sorry, this
        was a gotcha sound bite.

4.2.2   At-issue content (122 examples)

A great many of the examples involve *Wait a minute* targeting at-issue content or entailments of at-issue content. However, it is not clear to me what these say

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3 I have made a career so far of arguing that certain bits and pieces of non-at-issue content are not presupposed. This seems indicative of my impulse to split, rather than lump, and it also means that I have incentives to reenforce such distinctions. These factors obviously bear directly on my annotations. They provide still more reasons to answer my call for help!

about generalization (2). In most of the cases, at least, it seems more accurate to say that *Wait a minute* targets speaker expectations:

(11)   MCGINLEY: We're going in under the staircase. There is a cubby hole back there enough to fit – there is eight of us with four dogs. And we'll be down in a cubby hole up under the staircase.

   COOPER: Wait a minute there are eight of to you.

   MCGINLEY: Eight, yes. My mother is here we've got two – we've got three families here, four dogs and six cats.

   COOPER: Good lord, you're going to have eight people hunkered down under a staircase. Do you have water, do you have food?

However, examples like the following do seem problematic for the claim that at-issue content is off limits to *Wait a minute* retorts:

(12)   WECHT: No, I can't, Larry. I can tell you that there's a lot of discovery still to be accomplished and shared with the defense. I can tell you that.

   KING: Wait a minute. Are you saying there is still more that you need to discover and Dr. Lee needs to discover?

4.2.3   Discourse conditions (67 hits)

This is a broad category. It includes not only cases in which the speaker seems to be objecting to something about how the conversation is going, but also cases in which the speaker wants to literally stop the conversation for a little while:

(13)   DEGENERES: A boat? Hey! I have seen a boat. It passed by not too long ago. It went this way, it went this way! Follow me!

   UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Wait a minute! What is going on? You already told me which way the boat was going!

(14)   HILL: I did. But I'm kind of lucky because my friends are the roadies, so that's how I get to see them.

   COOPER: Wait a minute. Wait a minute. You buried the lead. Your friends are the roadies for the Rolling Stones?

(15)   KING: Wait a minute. These worms are movin'.

(16)   BLITZER: Wait a minute. We've got to take a commercial, we've got to end it right here.

At first, it seemed straightforward to distinguish literal uses, where the speaker wanted to stop the conversation (say, for a commercial) from more subtly strategic ones. The line quickly blurred on me, though. Calling a commercial break can be strategic too.

4.2.4   Presupposition/implicature (129 hits)

Although there are clear cases of presupposition and clear cases of conversational implicature, the blurry area between them is very large, especially when one is dealing with real utterances. Thus, I did not try to distinguish these meaning categories. Here is a smattering of interesting cases:

(17)   QUESTION: What's your advice to the average American who is hurting now, facing the prospect of $4 a gallon gasoline? A lot of people facing...

BUSH: Wait a minute. What did you say? You're predicting $4 a gallon gasoline.

(18)   MANDELA: And then I also asked that, look, give me three weeks before you release me, because I wanted my people to prepare for my release.

KING: Wait a minute, you could have gotten out the next day ...

(19)   SIMONE: What I'm talking about is very often, certain costs, union costs, labor costs got so out of control...

BOYLES: Wait a minute, the union men and women designed those cars?

(20)   BARTLETT: It's not just productivity, it's also innovation. It's also a lot of jobs that they do here in our country cannot be done anywhere else. We need to concentrate on those kind of jobs instead of trying to save low-level jobs that we have to subsidize to keep.

DOBBS: Wait a minute. Of the 112,000 jobs created last month, the Labor Department reports that more than three-fourths of them were in low level, low paying, retail sector. I don't understand.

4.2.5   Unclear (103 hits)

In a great many cases, it is simply unclear (to me) what speakers are doing when they open with *Wait a minute*. Sometimes this is because it is hard to fully determine what was happening between the speakers involved, and sometimes it is because *Wait a minute* probably responds to a very high-level perceived implication of another speaker's utterance. Luckily, even with all 103 of these

unclear examples removed from the data, there are still well over 300 examples in the collection. In addition, it is worth noting that even unclear cases are marked for the clause-type of the follow-up, so work can be done with them from that perspective.

5 Discussion

There are a few aspects of this small project that I'd like to comment on briefly in closing.

The data set Although the examples are all drawn from TV interviews, they represent a wide range of situation types, and the conversational dynamics vary widely. The interviews are sometimes one-on-one, sometimes with groups of four five. Sometimes the speakers know each other, sometimes they don't. Friends and enemies alike are brought together to talk. Occasionally, there are live animals.

The tags The annotations can be improved in two major ways: (i) the tag-set could be enriched, to draw more nuanced distinctions; and (ii) the annotation choices could be verified by a few speakers. Annotating the entire collection takes just a few hours, so it would be feasible to get a lot of input, sort through conflicts, and emerge with a more reliable corpus.

The examples themselves My primary goal in collecting these examples was to assess generalizations connecting *Wait a minute* with presuppositions. While it is too soon to make firm conclusions, my view right now is that generalization (1), repeated here, is unproblematic:

(1)   If meaning M is expressed as a presupposition, then *Wait a minute* is a suitable method for objecting to M.   (**seems correct**)

   I think (3) is false, though; *Wait a minute* can be used to respond to a wide variety of non-at-issue content (Potts To appear).

(3)   If *Wait a minute* is a suitable method for objecting to a meaning M, then M is expressed as a presupposition.   (**seems incorrect**)

I am personally less clear on the status of (2):

(2)   If meaning M is expressed as at-issue content, then *Wait a minute* is not a suitable method for objecting to M.   (**unclear; challenging cases**)

The examples make it very clear that *Wait a minute* can be keyed into at-issue content. Sometimes it seems even to challenge or query it. However, in many of those examples, the speaker seems to be responding to an indirect implication of the at-issue content — e.g., a conflict with expectations, as in (11).

In sum Though there are many open questions, I am confident that their answers can be informed by this collection of examples. In uploading it to the Semantics Archive, I suspect I have more than doubled the sum total of distinct *Wait a minute* scenarios available to the research community, and that can only be good.

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