Multifunctionality of 'after all': A unitary account

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

This article attempts to establish a relevance-theoretic account of the multifunctionality of the English discourse connective *after all*. First, this article proposes a revision of the constraint imposed by *after all* on the interpretation of the utterance in which it occurs and, second, presents a unitary account of its multifunctions. In the unitary account, the procedural information of the connective instructs the addressee to construct a context in which certain evidence resolves a contradiction between previous assumption and conclusion. Another aim of the article is to demonstrate that the unitary account elucidates the well-known but little investigated puzzle that *after all* occurs in the context of concession and justification. The proposed unitary account also helps facilitate the argument that both concession and justification share a context of interpretation involving three assumptions: previous assumption, evidence and conclusion. This argument implies that *after all* imposes a constraint on the selection of the context, and the different context types lead to the multiple uses of *after all* along with different cognitive effects.

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1. Introduction

It has frequently been observed that discourse connectives tend to be multifunctional. This is true of the present-day English discourse connective *after all*, which has specific functions depending on context and whose discourse behavior can manifest entirely different characteristics. Traugott (1997) distinguishes the multiple uses of *after all* using the terms 'concessive adverb', 'epistemic connective' and 'discourse marker'. Another form of classification is suggested in Schourup and Waida's (1988) functional account without specific terms being assigned, although we may call them literal, concessive, and justificatory uses. These two classifying schemes partly cover the same types of usage: Traugott's 'concessive adverb' and Schourup and Waida's concessive use refer to the sentence-final use; obviously, 'discourse marker' has the function of justification. Drawing on these two schemes, the four classificatory terms used in this article are 'literal', 'concessive', 'justificatory' and 'reminding', as illustrated in (1a-d) respectively.

(1) a. Maggie chewed at her lip, wondering how to put it to him, but **after all** there was no way but straight out. (BNC: HGK)[1]
     b. Rang up Doreen and told her I cannot come **after all**. (BNC: H9G)
     c. **After all**, the government itself has felt it necessary to set up an agency simply to find fathers who want to spend no time at all with their families. (BNC: FLD)
     d. The men's fear of change took the form of vociferously defending the status quo in which **after all** they had everything to lose. (BNC: EVJ)

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[1] The codes following British National Corpus (BNC) indicate the filenames of examples.

The literal use (1a) occurs in the left margin of the conjunct, frequently following the conjunction *but*. This use roughly means "after everything relevant has been considered" (Halliday and Hasan, 1976: 270—271). The concessive use (1b) typically but not necessarily occurs at the right margin of the conjunct. This use indicates a contrary relation between a previous expectation and the outcome; therefore, it is equivalent in meaning to 'nonetheless' or 'despite what was expected' (Traugott, 2004: 554). This relation is referred to as 'concession' in this article, a term derived from Quirk et al. (1972: 674), and indicates "the unexpected, surprising nature of what is being said in view of what was said before that." For the present discussion, it corresponds to a contrary relation between what was said just now and what was or was assumed to have been said before by the same person (i.e. the speaker). The justificatory use (1c) is positioned outside the conjunct. This use is often regarded as meaning the same as 'because' in that it indicates the reason for what the speaker asserts in the preceding conjunct. The reminding use (1d), which Traugott (1997) calls the "epistemic connective", occurs flexibly in a clause-internal position. The positional flexibility of this use stems from its function of reminding the addressee of a proposition in the conjunct following the connective. Since this function is especially difficult to encapsulate in a single descriptive term, we may paraphrase its meaning with the expression 'as we all know' for convenience.

The aim of this article is to offer a unitary description of the meaning of *after all* on the basis of Grice's (1989: 47) methodological principle of the "Modified Occam's Razor" ("Senses are not to be multiplied beyond necessity"), and according to the cognitive economy involved in the process of decoding, retaining and retrieving lexical information. The unitary account assumes that pragmatic principles and inferences, which are independently motivated, explain why a linguistic expression has more than a single interpretation and that multiple interpretations of a linguistic expression will therefore be attributed to its interaction with the context. A lexical item that would usually be regarded as polysemous can rather be recognized as monosemous because it will be modified in context by a process of inferential enrichment of the encoded lexical meaning (Fretheim, 2001: 80). Unlike concept-expressing words, words encoding procedural meaning are not polysemous nor polyprocedural (Carston, 2016: 161). Nevertheless, to my knowledge, there have so far been no straightforward attempts to investigate how the multiple uses of *after all* are related to each other, nor to solve the theoretical issue posed by the fact that the same lexical item occurs within these different environments. With regard to these issues, the procedural constraint originally defined in Blakemore (1987, 2002) needs to be revised.

This article reveals that the revised procedural constraint makes it possible to propose a unitary account within a relevance-theoretic framework. This new analysis of *after all* mainly uses empirical data from the British National Corpus and various Internet web pages. The article is organized as follows. Section 2 criticizes the current dichotomous accounts of *after all* in a discourse-analytic approach and a relevance-theoretic approach. Section 3 shows that the multiple uses of *after all* involve three contextual assumptions which can be effectively recaptured in a trichotomous representation. Section 4 proposes a unitary account in which the procedural constraint encoded by *after all* is revised. Section 5 elaborates on the relation between concession/justification and cognitive effects. Section 6 is a brief conclusion.

2. Current dichotomous accounts

In discourse-analytic approaches, the crucial role of discourse connectives is in "the identification of the particular coherence relation obtaining between two textual units" (Schourup, 1999: 204). However, these approaches seem unconvincing for cases in which a discourse connective links a linguistically unarticulated constituent or in which it occurs discourse-initially. As a matter of course, these frameworks for the semantics of *after all* draw exclusive attention to the justificatory use with an explicit linking function (Fraser, 1990; Fraser, 1996; Schourup, 1999). Even in attempts to deal with the multiple uses of this connective, the primary purpose is to give a different functional explanation (Schourup and Waida, 1988) or to offer a polysemy account of such a multifunctionality (Traugott, 1997; Traugott, 2004; Lewis, 2007). In other words, discourse-based approaches have theoretical difficulties in finding a unified meaning encoded by the multiple uses.

Within a discourse-based account, the concessive use and the justificatory use contribute to a different coherence relation. Let us consider the following commonly accepted formulations.

(2)   a.   concessive use: (*P*) *Q* after all.
           Ben decided not to come **after all**.
     b.   justificatory use: *P*. After all *Q*.
           Judy ought to get a promotion. **After all**, she's been a cashier for over five years now.

In these formulations, utterances containing both uses are interpreted with two propositions labeled as *P* and *Q*. The concessive use, which very often follows only a single term *Q* that is overtly expressed, takes effect in the schema (2a), where *P* corresponds to a previous expectation and *Q* is what Traugott (1997) calls an 'argument' expressing the denial of *P*. Thus, this use of the connective guides the addressee to recognize that the proposition expressed by *Q* is coherent as an argument with respect to the previous expectation expressed by *P*. In the justificatory use (2b), on the other hand, *P* is called a 'conclusion', whereas *Q* is a premise or 'evidence' (the latter being a term originally used by Blakemore (1987)) for validating the truth of *P*. Thus, the connective guides the addressee to recognize that the proposition expressed by *Q* is coherent as a premise with respect to the conclusion expressed by *P*. Apparently, in spite of *P* and *Q* being used in the two uses, neither of the two terms represents the same property.