

Focus and Recursion

The compositional view: This paper presents evidence that focus, topic, and givenness marking are achieved by a class of presuppositional focus operators that combine in a compositional way with syntactic objects and, depending on the language, may or may not be overtly expressed. Evidence against an approach that ties these information-theoretic notions to specific syntactic positions or outsources them to non-compositional interface constraints is provided by looking at cases in which focus operators are recursively nested. Three cases are discussed, givenness-within-givenness, second occurrence foci, and contrastive topics.

Givenness within Givenness: There is evidence that givenness marking is recursive. A constituent can be prosodically marked as given within VP that itself is marked as given, e.g. the pronoun in (1b). Neeleman and Reinhart (1998); Szendrői (2001); Reinhart (2006) argue based on this example for two different kinds of destressing (anaphoric destressing vs. the focus-to-stress principle). This paper presents evidence that this distinction is unnecessary, and in fact undesirable since it introduces rampant redundancy in the possible explanations of many stress facts.

Second-Occurrence Focus: Another type of case of recursive givenness-marking is ‘second occurrence focus’. Rooth (1996) and Beaver et al. (2005) show that relative prominence within the VP disambiguates the location of the second occurrence focus in examples like (2). This can be accounted for as follows: ‘Book’ is marked as given at the VP level in (a), and ‘Anna’ in (b). But then, the entire VP can be marked as given relative to the subject. Givenness marking is recursive, just as prominence marking and phrasing more generally. More complex syntactic examples raise interesting issues with respect to the relation between prosody and surface structure.

Contrastive Topics: Contrastive topics are argued to involve a recursive nesting of covert focus operators, similar to cases of nested overt operators like (3), and the associate of the focus operator with wider scope is what we call a CT.

The analysis makes the prediction that the syntactic distribution of contrastive topics should track the syntactic distribution of nested focus operators. In English, a focus operator can take wide scope over a preceding focus operator, as is evidenced by the truth conditions of (4). This can be analyzed as LF-movement. The correct prediction is that contrastive topics in English can either precede or follow foci in surface structure (5) (cf. Jackendoff, 1972, a.o.). In German, however, the scope between focus operators in similar examples is fixed (6), and concomitantly a contrastive topic cannot follow a focus (7). Further data is presented from Italian and Hungarian supporting the cross-linguistic predictions. The proposal shares with Neeleman and van de Koot (2007) that it syntactically restricts the distribution of CTs, but differs in the expected pattern, e.g. Neeleman and van de Koot (2007) predict that CTs can be base-generated below the focus.

An interesting fact about focus operators is that when even they directly attach to their associate, operator and associate can take split scope. E.g., in German contrastive topics often take narrow scope relative to a focus, but the focus operator involved takes wide scope. This is a general property of focus operators. Büring and Hartmann (2001) provide evidence that in German, e.g., focus operators cannot reconstruct even if their associate can. This fact can be constructed as a further argument against an analysis in terms of focus projections and in favor of the compositional view.

Notation: All accented words are in capitals and bear a high pitch accent if not marked as either:
fall: \ ; **rise:** / ; **fall–rise:** \/

- (1) a. Only MAX can afford buying cars.
 b. Only MAX can afford seeing her.
- (2) a. This time, Mary only gave ANNA a book.
 Last time, JOHN only gave Anna a book.
 b. This time, Mary only gave Anna A BOOK.
 Last time, JOHN only gave Anna a book.
- (3) Even JOHN climbed only a SMALL hill.
- (4) Except for Bill, the kids in this summer camp have no respect for animals and the potential dangers, which makes them take too many risks, including with poisonous snakes..
 a. Even the MOST poisonous snake frightens only BILL.
 b. Only BILL is afraid of even the MOST poisonous snake.
- (5) What did you buy on 59th street?
 a. CT First: On \fiftyNINTH street, I bought SHOES.
 b. CT Last: I bought SHOES on \fiftyNINTH street.
- (6) (Same context as 4; this particular example is incompatible with German ‘auch nur’, a relevant control since some authors argued that English ‘even’ is ambiguous and can mean both the equivalent of German ‘sogar’ and ‘auch nur’)
 a. Sogar die am WENIGSTEN giftige Schlange ängstigt nur BILL.
 b. # Nur den Bill ängstigt sogar die GIFTIGSTE Schlange.
 only the bill frightens even the most poisonous snake
- (7) What did you buy on 59th street?
 a. CT First: Auf der /NEUNundfünfzigsten Straße habe ich SCHUHE\ gekauft
 b. CT Last: Odd under any rendition that accents ‘NEUNundfünfzigste Straße’:
 # Ich habe SCHUHE auf der NEUNundfünfzigsten Straße gekauft.
 I have shoes on the 59th street bought

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