

The prosodic expression of focus, contrast and givenness: A production study of Hungarian



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Abstract

This paper reports the results of a production experiment that explores the prosodic realization of focus in Hungarian, a language that is characterized by obligatory syntactic focus marking. Our study investigates narrow focus in sentences in which focus is unambiguously marked by syntactic means, comparing it to broad focus sentences. Potential independent effects of the salience (textual givenness) of the background of the narrow focus and the contrastiveness of the focus are controlled for and are also examined.

The results show that both continuous phonetic measures and categorical factors such as the distribution of contour types are affected by the focus-related factors, despite the presence of syntactic focus marking. The phonetic effects found are mostly parallel to those of typical prosodic focus marking languages like English. The prosodic prominence required of focus is realized through changes to the scaling and slope of F₀ targets and contours. The asymmetric prominence relation between the focus and the background can be expressed not only by the phonetic marking of the prominence of the focused element, but also by the phonetic marking of the reduced prominence of the background. Furthermore, contrastiveness of focus and (textual) givenness of the background show independent phonetic effects, both of them affecting the realization of the background. These results are argued to shed light on alternative approaches to the information structural notion of contrastive focus and the relation between the notions of focus and givenness.

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1. Introduction

There is a growing body of theoretical and experimental research on the prosodic expression of information structure (IS) in linguistic utterances (or sentence-level pragmatic meaning, in the sense of Ladd, 2008), as well as its variation across languages. Perhaps the best studied information structural status that can affect the prosodic realization of sentences in systematic ways is focus. *Prosodic focus marking* is characterized by rich variation across languages, including marking by tonal means (like pitch scaling, and tonal alignment), by accent type, by prosodic phrasing (such as

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the insertion or deletion of prosodic boundaries, and concomitantly, accents), or various combinations of these. Typically, prosodic marking serves to render the focus prosodically prominent (Büring, 2009). But cross-linguistic variation is not limited to the prosodic *means* used to mark focus status. The property of the obligatoriness, or the possibility, of prosodic focus marking seems to be parametric (see e.g., Kügler and Genzel, 2012; Zerbian et al., 2010 for a brief overview of selected African languages). Another aspect of variation concerns the role of word order. Many languages, especially those with relatively flexible word order, may use, often as an alternative to prosodic marking, syntactic reordering in order to mark focus (call this phenomenon *syntactic focus marking*) (for relevant discussion, see Büring, 2009). Syntactic focus marking and prosodic focus marking may in principle either be complementary alternatives within a language, or they may be able to co-occur. (see Calhoun, 2015, on Samoan, for a case study of the latter type.) A relevant parameter within syntactic focus marking languages is whether syntactic focus marking is optional or obligatory. Call the latter type *obligatory syntactic focus marking* languages. While the prosody of focus has been widely studied in languages that optionally utilize word order in marking focus (including Germanic and Romance), relatively little experimental work has concentrated on prosodic focus-marking strategies in obligatory syntactic focus marking languages.

This paper addresses this paucity by reporting on a production experiment carried out to explore the prosodic realization of focus in Hungarian, an obligatory syntactic focus marking language. Our study investigates narrow focus in sentences in which focus is unambiguously marked by syntactic means, comparing it to broad focus sentences. In order to control for the potential independent effect of the salience of the background of the narrow focus, target sentences are inserted in two kinds of contexts: contexts in which the background part of the sentence is salient (textually given), and contexts in which it is not. Further, in order to explore any prosodic effects exerted by the contrastiveness of narrow focus, both non-contrastive and contrastive narrow foci are employed.

The results show that both continuous phonetic measures and categorical factors such as the distribution of contour types are affected by the focus-related factors, despite the presence of syntactic focus marking. The phonetic effects found are mostly parallel to those of typical prosodic focus marking languages like English. The prosodic prominence required of focus is realized through changes to the scaling and slope of F0 targets and contours. The asymmetric prominence relation between the focus and the background can be expressed not only by the phonetic marking of the prominence of the focused element, but also by the phonetic marking of the reduced prominence of the background. Furthermore, contrastiveness of focus and (textual) givenness of the background show independent phonetic effects, both of them affecting the realization of the background. These results are argued to shed light on alternative approaches to the information structural notion of contrastive focus and the relation between the notions of focus and givenness.

The structure of the paper is as follows. Section 2 starts by delineating the key notions of information structure that we adopt for the purposes of the paper. This is followed by a brief overview of aspects of the syntax and prosody of Hungarian that are of crucial relevance to the production experiment we present. Section 3 explicates the research questions the experiment is designed to address. Section 4 lays out the design, the method, the materials used for the production experiment, and provides a summary of the processing and analysis of the data that were obtained. Results are presented in two parts. Section 5 reviews the results obtained for the focused element and a pre-focal topic phrase, while Section 6 presents the results for the post-focal region. In Section 7 we discuss what prosodic structures may match the outcomes, and how the findings bear on current alternative views of the information structural notions of ‘contrast’ in contrastive focus, and givenness of the background. The main conclusions are summed up in Section 8.

2. Background

Notions of information structure (IS) are notorious for having been conceptualized and defined in many different ways. In order to embed our research questions in the context of sufficiently well-defined information structural concepts, we begin by providing formulations of the particular notions of IS at the center of our investigation.

2.1. Information focus, contrastive focus, background and givenness

Although focus is a multi-faceted notion that has been approached in diverging ways, most accounts agree that the focused part of a sentence is associated with some type of pragmatic prominence. Here we follow a common view held by formal pragmatic approaches that focus indicates the presence of (contextually restricted) alternatives to the focused element with which alternative propositions can be formed that are relevant to the interpretation of the current sentence (Rooth, 1985, 1996); call these *focus-alternatives*. In the case of *information focus*, these alternatives correspond to alternative propositions in the meaning of the (explicit or implicit) question that the sentence containing the focus answers

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