

# Discourse new, F-marking, and normal stress

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## Abstract

My main goal in this paper is to argue that English grammar makes a distinction between two notions of focus, focus-as-new (NEW) and focus-as-alternatives (FOCUS). The arguments center around the claim that if FOCUS is F-marked, then NEW cannot be. A review is made of two proposals for F-marking, one liberal (marking both FOCUS and NEW), and one conservative (marking FOCUS only). The conclusion is that if grammar employs F-marking, it must be conservative rather than liberal. For conservative F-marking to achieve descriptive parity with liberal F-marking, appeal must be made to a mechanism of normal stress that determines the distribution of phrase stress in NEW and in all-GIVEN phrases. The properties of such a mechanism are spelled out and representative proposals from the literature are assessed. A new proposal is made, in the form of GIVENness accommodation, to capture the most recalcitrant classical problems for normal stress – the predicates ofthetic sentences and the possibility for unaccented NEW constituents generally, where found.  
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## 1. Introduction and background

In his very cogent chapter on sentence stress and focus projection, Ladd (2008:213) says “. . . [I]t is now generally accepted that the pattern of sentence stress in an utterance reflects the utterance’s intended focus, . . .”. This quote expresses the widespread assumption in the field that sentence stress in English is inevitably tied to focus. But it begs two questions: what is meant by “sentence stress” and what is meant by “focus”? Even within transformational generative grammar, there is considerable disagreement on the answers to these two questions. “Sentence stress” has been taken to refer to phrase stress generally or to nuclear stress in particular. (I take it for granted that phrase and nuclear stress are normally associated in English with pitch accents – that will not be at issue here, though I generally abstract away from it in the discussion to follow, referring only to sentence stress.) I will show directly that phrase stress and nuclear stress are both relevant to focus, both being instances of sentence stress. Before I do so, I want to turn to the disagreement about the answer to the second question, what is meant by “focus”? Here again, Ladd (2008:219) offers an insightful observation: “. . . various authors distinguish the ‘newness’ of a word or phrase (e.g. whether the entity referred to has been recently mentioned or is newly introduced to the discourse) from its ‘contrastiveness’ or ‘informativeness’ (whether the point of the sentence is to state that a proposition is true of one discourse entity rather than another).”<sup>1</sup> Thus, in the former view, “focus” expresses the new information in a sentence relative to the encompassing discourse. In the latter, “Focus indicates the presence of alternatives that are relevant for the interpretation of linguistic expressions.” (Krifka, 2008:247).

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<sup>1</sup> Authors include Chafe (1970, 1974, 1976), Daneš (1974), É. Kiss (1998), Halliday (1967), Lambrecht and Polinsky (1997), Rochemont (1986), Selkirk (1995), Steedman (2000), and Vallduví and Vilkuna (1998).

Numerous proposals are seen to reduce one of these formulations to the other. Schwarzschild's (1999) proposal on GIVENness, for instance, appears to reduce the latter to the former; Rooth's (1992) might be seen to reduce the former to the latter. Whether such a reduction may be achievable or not, the question remains whether the distinction between "focus-as-new" and "focus-as-alternatives" is merely conceptual, or whether it has also empirical consequences for grammar, as some have claimed (see especially É. Kiss, 1998; Rochemont, 1986 and more recently, Selkirk, 2002, 2008; Kratzer and Selkirk, 2007; Féry and Ishihara, 2009, 2010; Katz and Selkirk, 2011). I will argue that there is empirical support for the claim that this distinction between two types of "focus" is reflected in English grammar, both in prosody and in syntax.<sup>2</sup>

Turning back to the dispute about sentence stress, there has been disagreement whether the notion of stress relevant to focus is phrase stress generally, or nuclear stress in particular, where nuclear stress refers to the final phrase stress in a sentence. The relationship between phrase stress and discourse new constituents is best seen in all-new utterances in which major phrases whose denotations are discourse new consistently bear phrase stress. Gussenhoven, in a series of works, is one author who has explored this issue in great depth. Responding to approaches that emphasize only the position of nuclear stress in a sentence, Gussenhoven (1999:46) says: "There is a widespread belief that a full-focus version of a sentence is always equivalent to the narrow focus version with the pitch accent on the last pitch-accented word, as well as to a whole series of intermediate focus interpretations. A pitch accent on *feather*, in this view, would be sufficient for the whole sentence *John's tickling Mary with a feather* to have full focus. But this is not the case: sentences often have more than one obligatory pitch accent, and this particular example is a case in point. Consider the minimal pair in [1 – MR]. . ." (In all examples, material in braces provides context for the sentences that follow and a terminal bearing phrase stress is capitalized.)

1. a. {What's going on?}  
JOHN's tickling MARY with a FEATHER.
- b. {What's John tickling Mary with?}  
John's tickling Mary with a FEATHER.

In both (1a,b), nuclear stress falls on *feather*, but only (1a) can be all-new. Therefore, if one is to capture the evident contextual sensitivity of sentence stress, one must look beyond just the nuclear stress. In (1a), phrase stress is mandatory on each of the major constituents of the all-new sentence, as illustrated, whereas in (1b), phrase stress is mandatory only on the alternatives-based-focus in the response. This consistent prosodic production is confounded, as Gussenhoven also observes, by the possibility for optional phrase stress on pre-nuclear (given) constituents in examples like (1b), which may render a pronunciation that to the ear is indistinguishable from that in (1a). This confound aside, examples such as (1) demonstrate clearly that phrase stress is critical to the expression of focus-as-new. A similar demonstration is possible also in regard to focus-as-alternatives. In Rooth's (1992) famous example in (2) below, each instance of phrase stress marks an explicit focus-as-alternatives contrast (between *American* and *Canadian*), and yet only the final such stress is nuclear. And in (3) both *even* and *only* are widely recognized as focus-as-alternatives sensitive operators (Jackendoff, 1972; Rooth, 1992) that obligatorily associate with phrase stress, but only the second such stress is nuclear.

2. An AMERICAN farmer was talking to a CANADIAN farmer.
3. {Many animals here are strictly vegetarian.} Even the APES only eat BANANAS.

Thus, for focus-as-new and focus-as-alternatives both phrase stress and nuclear stress are relevant.<sup>3</sup> Single minded attention to just the nuclear stress does not provide sufficient descriptive force to faithfully reflect the prosodic expression of Information Structure (IS). That both focus-as-new and focus-as-alternatives play a role in the prosodic expression of IS is suggested by their equally evident manifestation through phrase/nuclear stress.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The distinction between focus-as-new and focus-as-alternatives is equivalent to Rochemont's (1986) distinction between Presentational and Contrastive Focus, respectively. It is not to be confused with the Information/Contrastive Focus distinction familiar from Romance and other studies on the focus/discourse relation, where the former names the possibly non-canonical word order in responses to wh-questions and the latter the contrasting canonical order of other focus-as-alternatives examples. See Brunetti (2003) for critical discussion of this distinction in Italian.

<sup>3</sup> Zubizarreta (1998) analyzes multiple focus cases as complex (see Krifka, 2008), that is, tied to a single focus operator akin to the Absorption process assumed for multiple wh-phrases with the same scope (see Chomsky, 1976 and much later work). But this proposal is not plausible for (3). Moreover, the distinct phrase stresses in (2) are not attributable to "emphatic/contrastive stress", as Zubizarreta (1998: 44ff.) has it. They are neither "... metagrammatical, signalling correction or repair. . .", nor are they "... used to reassert or deny the hearer's presupposition . . .". In Rooth's (1992) analysis this example is analyzed through distinct focus interpretation operators, neither in the scope of the other, and each taking the other's focus semantic value as antecedent.

<sup>4</sup> To be sure, focus-as-alternatives always attracts the nuclear stress if it can, but is satisfied with phrase stress if it can't (assuming there is but a single nuclear stress in any sentence). This is a consequence of the Focus Prominence Rule (Chomsky, 1971; Jackendoff, 1972; Rooth, 1996; Selkirk, 2008; Truckenbrodt, 1995, 2006), which determines maximal prosodic prominence for an alternatives-based focus within its domain.

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