Focus marking and focus interpretation

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

The languages of the world exhibit a range of formal phenomena (e.g. accenting, syntactic reordering and morphological marking) that are commonly linked to the information-structural notion of *focus*. Crucially, there does not seem to be a one-to-one mapping between particular formal features (focus marking devices) and focus, neither from a cross-linguistic perspective, nor within individual languages. This raises the question of what is actually being expressed if we say that a constituent is focused in a particular language, and whether, or to what extent, the same semantic or pragmatic content is formally expressed by focus-marking across languages. This special issue addresses the question of focus and its grammatical realization from a number of theoretical and empirical perspectives.

In this introductory article we elaborate on this question by making an explicit proposal about what we take to be the correct way of thinking about the information-structural category of focus and its formal realization. In the first part, we introduce a unified semantico-pragmatic perspective on focus in terms of alternatives and possible worlds. In the second part, we present a cursory cross-linguistic overview of focus marking strategies as found in the languages of the world. Finally, in the third part, we discuss the connection between the notion of focus, different pragmatic uses of focus and different focus marking strategies employed in the grammars of natural languages.

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1. The characterization of focus

1.1. Focus and information structure

We take focus to be a universal category of *information structure*. From a communication-oriented perspective, information structure can be understood as belonging to the dimension of *common ground-management*, as opposed to *common ground-content* (Chafe, 1976; Krifka, 2008; Féry and Krifka, 2008). The *common ground* is here understood in the spirit of Stalnaker (1973, 1974, 2002), i.e., as the mutually shared knowledge of the interlocutors in a discourse. *Common ground management* introduces an additional dimension of meaning that relates to the aims, to the internal structure and to the future development of the discourse. One way of thinking about common ground management is in terms of discourse development that is driven by hierarchies of open questions in need to be settled (Roberts, 1996).

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Information structure in this sense is not primarily concerned with the actual information content of an utterance, but rather with the ways in which this information is integrated into the common ground. Hence, whenever information structure appears to have a direct impact on the information conveyed, such as, for example, with instances of focus-sensitive expressions, this will constitute an explanandum for semantic and pragmatic theory.

Another way of thinking about information structure is by adopting a more cognitive perspective. From this perspective, the central function of information structure lies in the optimization of the processing of information coded in a linguistic utterance in light of the specific discourse needs of the interlocutors at the time of utterance. In the case of focus, for instance, such information updating is aided by providing a set of alternatives for an asserted utterance. This set of focus alternatives serves as a preliminary evaluation context, for example, by relating the utterance containing the focused constituent to a particular relevant question in need of resolution at the current state of discourse. This task is intimately tied to a number of other cognitive faculties, such as, for instance, attention and short term memory. For this reason, it seems appropriate to think of information structure as belonging to the domain of central general-purpose cognitive processes in Fodor's (1983:112) classification, rather than to the specialized linguistic systems with their central function of input analysis. Information structure is hence best thought of as a cognitive domain mediating between the linguistic core modules, such as syntax, phonology, and morphology, and other cognitive faculties serving the central purpose of communication by way of pragmatic reasoning and general inference processes (Zimmermann and Féry, 2010).

Finally, assuming that the cognitive tasks employed in the organization and updating of the common ground and the cognitive faculties involved at this very basic level of processing are by and large the same across languages and cultures, we take information structure and the category of focus, but *not* its structural coding, to be universals.

1.2. Focus and alternatives

Most semanticists will agree on the basic intuition that focus relates an utterance to a set of relevant alternatives (Rooth, 1985, 1992, 1996; von Stechow, 1991; Krifka, 2001, 2006, 2008). In the words of Krifka (2008), focus 'indicates the presence of alternatives' that are relevant for the interpretation of a given linguistic expression. Consider, for example, the English sentence in (1), in which the focus status of the subject is overtly indicated by the falling nuclear pitch accent on the subject (marked by 'CAP\').

(1)   PE\ter went to Paris.

Intuitively, focus marking on the subject in (1) indicates that alternative propositions of the form *x went to Paris* are relevant for the interpretation of (1): for instance, (1) would constitute an ideal answer to the *wh*-question *Who went to Paris?* (Roberts, 1996; Büring, 2003; Beaver and Clark, 2008), or it could also be used in order to contradict and correct a preceding assertion, such as *John went to Paris*.

More needs to be said about the presence of alternatives, though, and about the specific role they play in the interpretation of utterances. In what sense, and at which level, are focus alternatives present in *a privileged way*, and in what sense are they relevant for interpretation?

We assume that the central function of focus is not unlike that of modals: Similar to modal expressions (Kratzer, 1991a), focus imposes an ordering relation on the overall set of possible worlds that serve as the general background for interpretation, such that a subset of worlds is identified as being relatively more important for the interpretation of a given utterance. This set of higher-ordered, or *privileged possible worlds* (PPWs), is identical to the set of worlds denoted by all the alternative focus propositions, which are derived by replacing the focused constituent in a linguistic utterance by alternative expressions of the same semantic type (within some given domain); see below.[2] In short, by singling out a set of privileged possible worlds, focus indicates for which part of its containing utterance U there existed relevant alternatives before U was uttered.

For illustration, consider the standard analysis of the interpretation of the assertion in (1) in terms of common ground update (Stalnaker, 1978). Abstracting away from the role of focus for a moment, a successful assertion of (1) requires the acceptance of the state-of-affairs described by the utterance as true by the hearer. This, in turn, results in a change, or update, of the common ground, which contains all the propositions (asserted or presupposed) that are mutually accepted as true by the interlocutors. In particular, the successful assertion of (1) effects the inclusion of the proposition $p = \lambda w$. *Peter went to Paris in w* into the common ground.

Notice that common ground update is a matter of reducing and not extending the set of possible worlds by including new propositions, as the updated common ground now requires the truth of both the previously established propositions and the newly accepted utterance. In other words, a successful assertion of (1) leads to the exclusion of all the possible worlds in which the negated counterpart of p, $p^{NEG} = \lambda w$. *Peter did not go to Paris in w*, is true, from the *context set*, which is the set of possible worlds that still qualify as candidates for the actual world w_0, according to the knowledge states of speaker and hearer(s) (Diagram A1).

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[2] Technically, a set of propositional alternatives can be modelled as a set of sets of possible worlds, with the set-theoretic unification of which constituting the set of privileged possible worlds.