Focus particles and contrast in German

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Abstract

This paper investigates the relation between focus particles (FPs; *nur* 'only', *auch* 'also', *sogar* 'even', etc.) and information structure in German assertive main clauses. The question under consideration is whether FPs induce contrastive focus, as is sometimes claimed, or whether they interact with an independently given focus structure, being able to associate with both contrastive and new information foci. An empirical approach, which takes into account the prosodic properties of the associated elements, is employed to decide between these two possibilities. First, it is demonstrated that contrastive and non-contrastive nuclear accents differ in many categorical and gradient prosodic properties, such as accent type, the occurrence of downstep, f_0-peak, and intensity. Second, it is shown that the same differences can be observed in sentences where the element bearing the nuclear accent is associated with a FP, and that the prosodic realization depends on the context rather than on the presence or absence of a FP. The results are interpreted as supporting the view that FPs are not necessarily associated with contrastive foci, but instead interact with information structure in a modular way.
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1. Introduction

Focus particles (FPs), such as *nur* 'only', *auch* 'also', and *sogar* 'even', are generally assumed to interact with the information structure of the sentences in which they occur. In the standard case, they are associated with a focused element to their right, referred to as the domain of the FP in this paper. The FP quantifies over the alternatives of its domain (cf. Rooth, 1985; Krifka, 1992). In (1), for instance, *nur* is associated with the subject *Carina*, the specific meaning contribution of the particle being that no one apart from Carina went to Berlin.

(1)   Nach Berlin ist nur [CaRIna]_domain gefahren.
        to   Berlin is only Carina   gone
        'Only Carina went to Berlin.'

The consensus in the literature is that in such cases, the domain of the particle corresponds to the sentence focus, which is in turn marked by the nuclear accent.[1] However, the question of how *association with focus* – as the phenomenon has been called since Jackendoff (1972) – is established in grammar has been the subject of controversy. Two main theoretical lines can be distinguished: FPs are regarded either as focus-inducing elements which create a focus structure themselves, or as focus-sensitive operators interacting with an independently given focus-background partition.

The former approach is characteristic of the so-called *relational theory of focus* (cf. Bayer, 1996; Jacobs, 1983, 1986; Taglicht, 1984, among others). According to this theory, a FP assigns a focus feature to its domain, which results in the prosodic marking of the domain by means of a focus accent. The central claim is that the division into focus and background is not independently given, but only exists in relation to some focus-inducing element, or, as Jacobs puts it: "A focus (background) in a sentence always is the focus (background) of some linguistic element in that sentence. This element I call the FOCUS INDUCER. Within this view the meaning of focus and background depends on the choice of the focus inducer" (Jacobs, 1986, p. 104). As a consequence of this assumption, the presence of a phonologically empty operator must be postulated for sentences that do not contain an overt focus inducer. Another common claim connected with the relational view on focus is that FPs induce contrastive focus; cf. Altmann (1976) and Foolen (1993). According to these authors, the domain of a FP is always contrasted with some contextually given or derivable alternative, resulting in an interpretation comparable to a correction (cf. Steube, 2001).

The alternative view of the relation between FPs and information structure is taken by Büring and Hartmann (2001), Dimroth (2004), and Dimroth and Klein (1996), among others. Their basic assumption is that FPs do not create a focus-background partition themselves, but interact with an independently given one. The particles are analyzed as focus-sensitive operators rather than focus inducers in the sense of Jacobs; their meaning contribution depends on the actual choice of the focus. Dimroth (2004), for instance, characterizes FPs as optional elements operating on the initial structure (*Ausgangsstruktur*) of the sentences in which they occur. The initial structure corresponds to the respective sentence without the particle and is already divided into focus and background parts, i.e. it comes with a fully specified information structure. While the individual analyses within this second line of research differ in their conceptions of how focusing works, they share the assumption that it does not depend on the presence of an overt or covert operator. In addition, this view predicts that FPs can associate with both contrastive and new information foci, depending on the information-structural status of the particle's domain in the initial structure.

The issue to be dealt with in the remainder of this paper is whether FPs always co-occur with contrastive foci. It can be reformulated as a prosodic question that is empirically testable: Does the domain of a FP always carry a contrastive pitch accent? To answer this question, which is decisive for the choice between the two competing views on the interaction between FPs and information structure, the paper will proceed as follows. The next section will take a closer look at the concept of contrastive focus relevant in the present context, and briefly review previous findings on the prosodic peculiarities of contrast marking in German. Sections 3 and 4 will present a speech production study which investigates how contrastive nuclear accents differ prosodically from non-contrastive ones, and whether the presence of a FP influences the prosodic realization. Section 5 will describe a speech perception experiment based on the utterances elicited in the production study, testing whether listeners are able to use the encoded prosodic information to determine the information structure of the sentences. The final section will interpret the results of the experiments with respect to the interaction between FPs and information structure, summarize the theoretical implications, and point out a number of open questions.

2. Contrastive focus

The term *contrastive focus*, as it is used here, refers to a subtype of the general concept of focus. While all foci are contrastive in the sense that their interpretation involves a set of alternatives (cf. Rooth, 1985), contrastive focus in its narrow sense – as opposed to (new) information focus – imposes specific restrictions on the alternatives. Different definitions can be found in the literature,[2] but among the various criteria, the most important seem to be that the

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[1] Constructions with stressed additive FPs following their domains form an exception to this generalization (cf. Reis and Rosengren, 1997; Krifka, 1999). They are excluded from consideration here.

[2] See Molnár (2006) for an overview.