

1. Introduction

1.1. The Notion of “Focus”

It has long been observed that two strings of words that just differ in their accentuation may differ in acceptability in given circumstances. For example, Paul (1880) observes that the same sentence must receive different accent when used as an answer to different constituent questions, with examples like the following ones. Here, the accented syllable is marked by accent.

- (1) a. Where will Mary drive tomorrow?
Mary will drive to Prágue tomorrow.
*Máry will drive to Prague tomorrow.
- b. Who will drive to Prague tomorrow?
Máry will drive to Prague tomorrow.
*Mary will drive to Prágue tomorrow.
- c. Who will drive where tomorrow?
Máry will drive to Prágue tomorrow.

We observe: The underlined constituents correspond to the wh-constituents in the preceding question. We will say that the underlined constituents are the **focus** of the answer, whereas the rest constitutes the **background**.

The accented syllables are within their focus of the sentence. But notice that this type of focus marking is ambiguous. For example, the proper answer to (1.b) is also the proper answer to the following sentence, which presumably has a different focus:

- (2) What will Mary do tomorrow?
Mary will drive to Prágue tomorrow.

Cf. Gussenhoven (1983) for data that show that the acoustical markings of sentences like the answers of (1.b) and (2) actually are identical.

Terms that have been used to express the background/focus distinction (or something similar to it):

- Psychological subject vs. psychological predicate (H. Paul, 1880)
- Theme vs. Rheme (Ammann, 1928)
- Topic vs. Focus; Functional Sentence Perspective (Prague School; Mathesius, Danes, Firbas, Sgall, □ □)
- Given vs. New (Halliday, 1967)
- Focus vs. Presupposition (Chomsky 1971, Jackendoff 1972)

Beware of other uses of the term “focus”. It is sometimes used for the potential antecedents for pronouns at a particular point in a text.

Focus is an important notion that speakers are often aware of. There are jokes and language plays that make use of focus:

- (3) Why do firemen wear red suspenders? -- To keep their pants on.
Why do we buy clothes? -- Because we can't get them free.
Why do we dress baby girls in pink and baby boys in blue? -- Because they can't dress themselves.

[Czech joke, November 1989]: I have one good piece of news and one bad piece. The good news is that the Czechs made revolution. The bad news is that it was the Czechs that made revolution.

Friedrich Schiller, *Xenien*:

S p r i c h t die Seele, so spricht, ach! die S e e l e nicht mehr.
talks the soul so talks alas! the soul no anymore
'If the soul is talking, then the sóul isn't talking anymore.'

1.2. More Cases

It seems that focus, as identified with answers to questions, plays an important role in other areas as well. Of course, "focus" is a theoretical notion, and it is a theoretically important issue whether we actually have the same phenomenon in these other areas. Let us, for the time being, identify focus as "a constituent which is highlighted by a stressed syllable". Then we find that such constituents are important for the following cases.

In **corrections**, focus marks the part in which the corrected form differs from the original:

- (4) A: Mary will drive to Paris tomorrow.
B: No, Mary will drive to Prágue tomorrow.
B: *No, Máry will drive to Prague tomorrow.

In certain types of **negation** followed by a *but*-phrase, focus and negation correspond to each other.

- (5) Mary will not drive to Páris tomorrow, but to Prágue.
*Mary will not drive to Páris tomorrow, but to Prágue.
*Máry will not drive to Paris tomorrow, but to Prágue.

Focus also is important for **textual coherence**, although this is more indirect and probably the outcome of several interacting principles.

- (6) a. Mary likes to visit important European cities. She will fly to Prágue tomorrow.
b. Mary doesn't like to drive. She will fl'y to Prague tomorrow.

1.3. Focus and Truth Conditions

The examples so far did not lead us to assume that focus has an influence on the **truth-conditional meaning** of a sentence. For example, *Mary will drive to Prágue tomorrow* and *Máry will drive to Prague tomorrow* seem to be true and false in exactly the same circumstances, and the acceptability differences have to come from outside of truth-conditional semantics. However, there are cases in which the placement of focus actually affects the truth conditions of a sentence.

First, **focus-sensitive particles** like *only*, *also* may affect the truth conditions (see König (1991)).

- (7) a. Mary will only drive to Prágue tomorrow.
'Mary will drive to Prague tomorrow and to no other city'
b. Mary will only drive to Prague tomorrow.
'Mary will drive to Prague tomorrow, and go there by no other means of transportation'
c. Mary will only drive to Prágue tomorrow.
'Mary will drive to Prague tomorrow, and do nothing else tomorrow'
- (8) a. John only introduced Bill to Sue.
(The only person x such that John introduced x to Sue is x = Bill).

- b. John only introduced Bill to Súe.
(The only person x such that John introduced Bill to x is x = Sue).

Other cases are focus-sensitive **negation**

- (9) a. Mary will not drive to Prágue tomorrow.
'she will drive to some other place tomorrow'
- b. Mary will not drive to Prague tomórrow.
'she will drive to Prague some other time'

Quantifiers (cf. Rooth 1985):

- (10) a. In St. Petersburg, officers always escorted ballerínas.
'Whenever officers escorted persons, they were ballerinas'
- b. In St. Petersburg, ófficers always escorted ballerinas.
'Whenever persons escorted ballerinas, they were officers.'
- (11) a. In English orthography, a Ú always follows a Q. (true)
- b. In English orthography, a U always follows a Q. (false)

Modals (cf. Halliday (1967))

- (12) a. [Sign in front of an escalator:]
Dogs must be cárried.
*Dógs must be carried.
- b. [Sign in front of a restaurant:]
Shóes must be worn.
*Shoes must be wórn.

Reason clauses (cf. Dretske (1972)):

- (13) [Clyde, a bachelor, has a relationship with Bertha, a busy academic and confirmed bachelorette. They see each other once a week. He learns that he stands to inherit a great deal of money at the age of thirty if he is married. Clyde asks Bertha, and she agrees to go through the legal formalities of a marriage, it being understood that their relationship will continue as before.]
 - a. The reason Clyde márried Bertha is to qualify for the inheritance. (True)
 - b. The reason Clyde married Bértha is to qualify for the inheritance. (False)

Certain **attitudinal operators**, like *fortunately* and *by mistake*:

- (14) a. Fortunately, John spilled whíte wine on the carpet.
'It was fortunate that the whine John spilled on the carpet was white'
- b. Fortunately, John spilled white wíne on the carpet.
'It was fortunate that what John did was to spill white wine on the carpet'
- (15) a. Mary gave John the tíckets by mistake.
'Mary should have given John something else.'
- b. Mary gave Jóhn the tickets by mistake.
'Mary should have given the tickets to someone else'

Certain **coordination** and **comparison constructions**:

- (16) a. John gave Súe a rose and Máry.
b. Jóhn gave Sue a rose and Máry.
- (17) a. John admired Súe more than Máry.
b. Jóhn admired Sue more than Máry.

1.4. Two ways of looking at focus

The examples we have considered so far suggest that there are two ways of looking at focus:

- If we take the role of focus in questions and answers and in establishing textual coherence, then the role of focus seems to be to **identify the new information** in a sentence.

For example, in a question/answer exchange like *Where will Mary drive tomorrow? -- Mary will drive to Prágue tomorrow*, the questioner indicates an interest to get the following information: For which X does it hold: Mary will drive to X tomorrow? The person that answers highlights the constituent that corresponds to X as the most relevant part of the answer: It is X = Prague for which it holds that Mary will drive to X tomorrow.

We can analyze focus that establishes textual coherence in the same way. Consider *Mary likes to visit big cities. She will drive to Prágue tomorrow*. The first sentence states a general fact, that big cities are among the things Mary likes to visit. The second sentence gives a particular instance of this rule, namely, that she will visit Prague. The additional information, that she will drive there, and that it will happen tomorrow, is less important in this setting.

- If we take the role of focus with *only*, with negation, with quantifiers, with modals, it seems that focus identifies a set of **alternatives** that are relevant for these operators. For example, in *Mary will only drive to Prágue tomorrow*, it is said that among all the alternatives X to Prague it holds that the only X such such Mary will drive to X tomorrow is Prague.

Some theories stress the first view, others the second. Clearly, they should not be incompatible when we consider the

Questions that we will be concerned with:

- How can focus be integrated in a framework of semantic interpretation?
- How can we describe the role of focus in question-answer exchanges?
- What are the syntactic principles behind focus assignment and the relation between focus-sensitive operators and their foci?

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Lektüre bis zur nächsten Sitzung

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