

Focus and topic

Readings: Portner, Ch. 10.4

I. Introducing focus and topic

- Harry’s response in (1) involves prosodic emphasis (extra stress) on *Madrid*, signaling that *Madrid* is the *focus* of the sentence.

(1) A: Barcelona is the capital of Spain.
B: No, MADRID is the capital of Spain.

- Typically, focus is used to convey that something is mentioned for the first time (“new information”), or in contrast with something previously mentioned (“contrastive”), or both.
- Sometimes people use the term *focus* to refer to the prosodic emphasis itself. It is useful, though, to distinguish between prosodic emphasis (all caps) and semantic focus ([...]F).
 - First, because not all languages use prosodic emphasis to signal focus.
 - Second, because even in English the same prosodic emphasis can correspond to different choices for semantic focus:

(2) a. A: What movie did you watch yesterday?
B: I watched [FRANKENSTEIN]F.
b. A: What did you do yesterday?
B: I [watched FRANKENSTEIN]F.

- We will thus use the term *focus* for semantic focus only.

2. Some properties of focus

2.1. Question-answer congruence

- *Question-answer congruence*: for every *wh*-constituent in a question, the matching constituent in the answer has to be focused, otherwise the answer isn’t congruent to the question.

(3) A: What did Richard do yesterday?
B: a. Richard watched [FRANKENSTEIN]F yesterday. *congruent*
b. #[RICHARD]F watched Frankenstein yesterday. *incongruent*
c. #Richard watched Frankenstein [YESTERDAY]F. *incongruent*

In-class Exercise 1

- What *wh*-questions would (4b) and (4c) be congruent answers to?

2.2. Presupposition-like inferences

- Focus often gives rise to existential inferences that behave like (weak) presuppositions:

- (4) a. [EMMA]_F stole Richard's mug.
→ Someone stole Richard's mug.
b. Emma stole [RICHARD'S]_F mug.
→ Emma stole someone's mug.

In-class Exercise 2

- Run the tests (embedding, cancellation, reinforcement) to show that the inferences in (4) exhibit presupposition-like behavior. Use *it's not the case that* or *I doubt that* when embedding the sentences into negative environments.

2.3. Association with focus

- Some linguistic expressions are sensitive to what's in focus in a way that changes their meaning; we say that they *associate with focus*.
- For example, the two sentences in (5) don't mean the same thing, because *only* associates with focus:

- (5) a. Hannah only likes [RICHARD]_F.
→ Hannah doesn't like Viktor.
b. Hannah only [LIKES]_F Richard.
→ Hannah doesn't love Richard.

In-class Exercise 3

- For each pair of sentences below say how the two differ in meaning and which focus-sensitive expression is the reason:

- (6) a. Lisa even danced with [HARRY]_F.
b. Lisa even [DANCED]_F with Harry.

- (7) a. Lisa danced with [HARRY]_F, too.
b. Lisa [DANCED]_F with Harry, too.

3. Theories of focus

- Intuition: focus draws attention to what could've been said instead of the focused constituent, i.e., to its alternatives.
- Thus, when we say (8a) we evoke the alternatives in (8b), and when we say (9a), we evoke the alternatives in (9b):

- (8) a. Richard watched [FRANKENSTEIN]_F.
b. {Richard watched Frankenstein, Richard watched The Lion King, Richard watched Casablanca, ...}
- (9) a. [RICHARD]_F watched Frankenstein.
b. {Richard watched Frankenstein, Harry watched Frankenstein, Lisa watched Frankenstein, ...}

- Building on this idea, Mats Rooth developed *alternative semantics* for focus.
- Gist: focus-sensitive particles operate on the alternatives. E.g., *only p* presupposes that *p* is true and asserts that all the other alternatives of *p* are false.

What you need to know

Key notions: focus, topic, question-answer congruence, association with focus, alternative semantics

Answers to the following questions:

- How does focus interact with focus-sensitive expressions like *only* and *always*?
- What is the gist of the analysis of focus in alternative semantics?