

Focus

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Focus refers to a constituent within a sentence that is highlighted or emphasized by grammatical means. English sentences with marked accent patterns provide prototypical examples, like (1) (focus on the direct object):

(1) They ordered COffee_F at the bar.

Focus Realization: Typically, (1) has a high pitch accent, a local maximum of the voice's fundamental frequency, on the syllable *co* (indicated by capitals). As important as, or perhaps even more important than, the pitch accent on the focus itself is the lack of pitch accents following it, e.g. on *bar*.

The privative syntactic feature F is a common means of *Focus Representation* in the syntax. The F-markers in the tree (its “focus structure”) mediate between semantic interpretation and prosodic realization.

The pragmatic functions of focus seem wide and varied, and are often characterized in vague terms such as “speaker’s highlighting”, “most important information”, “evoking alternatives” etc. More formal approaches towards *Focus Interpretation* start from certain rather solid facts about the discourse distribution of focus: In an answer to a constituent question, the phrase corresponding to the question phrase is focused: (1) can answer the question “What did they order at the bar?”, but not e.g. “Where did they order coffee?”, “Who ordered coffee?” or “What happened?” Similarly, in corrections, the item that differs from the corrected sentence is focused: (1) can be a correction to *they ordered beer at bar*, but not e.g. *they spilled coffee at the bar*.

To predict such facts, the notion of *alternatives* proves useful. Focused *coffee* in (1) has, among others, beer, milk, steak etc. as alternatives; non-focused elements (the *background*) don't introduce alternatives. By pointwise combination, the whole sentence gets assigned an *alternative set*, statements of the form “they ordered x at the bar”, where x ranges over the alternatives to coffee. Roughly, the alternative set of an answer must correspond to other conceivable answers to the question; the alternative set of a correction must include the meaning of the utterance corrected.

Alternative semantics, as it is called, also accounts well for cases in which focus influences truth conditional content, in association with particles such as *only*: (2) excludes ordering juice, beer, etc. at the bar (i.e. other members of the alternative set), but not ordering coffee elsewhere, or ordering sausages at the grill:

(2) They only ordered COffee_F at the bar.

If one accepts these uses of focus as definitional, one can explore focus realization beyond pitch accents. Many languages use cleft-like sentences or more generally marked constituent order in corrections or answers (often in addition to intonation); also common are special morphemes, as well as prosodic phrase boundaries, to mark the edge of a focus.

— Daniel Büring

Selected Further Readings

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