

Interpreting focus: Presupposed or expressive meanings?

A comment on Geurts and van der Sandt ¹.

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The central claim in Geurts and van der Sandt's paper is that focus marking introduces existential presuppositions.

The Background-Presupposition Rule (BPR)

Whenever focusing gives rise to a background $\lambda x.\varphi(x)$, there is a presupposition to the effect that $\lambda x.\varphi(x)$ holds of some individual.

The BPR assumes that we already know how sentences are partitioned into focused and backgrounded material, and this is quite legitimate, given the literature on the topic (see e.g. Krifka (1991), von Stechow (1991)). If the BPR was true, no more would have to be said about the meaning of focus. The behavior of whatever inferences are generated by backgrounding could be taken care of by theories dealing with the projection of presuppositions of the familiar kind, the presuppositions of definite descriptions, clefts, or factives, for example. This is a non-trivial and interesting claim.

There is a long tradition in focus research that has it that deaccented, backgrounded material has to be given, where 'given' contrasts with 'new' (Halliday (1967), Chafe (1976), Prince (1981), Rochemont (1986), Vallduví (1992), Erteschik-Shir (1997), Schwarzschild (1999)). If backgrounded material has to be given, it has to be matched

¹. I would like to thank Elisabeth Selkirk and Chris Potts for detailed comments on this paper.

with an appropriate antecedent in the preceding discourse. Recent proposals differ as to how exactly backgrounded material finds a suitable antecedent. Rooth (1992, 1996) posits special, focus-induced variables in LF representations whose values are submitted to focus-imposed constraints, thereby delimiting the choice of suitable antecedents. Schwarzschild's (1999) way of matching given material with possible antecedents looks more like what Geurts and van der Sandt propose, and thus invites comparison. According to Schwarzschild, an utterance of (1), for example, is only appropriate if there is an antecedent somewhere in the previous discourse that entails $\exists x[x \text{ ate the beans}]$, the result of replacing the F-marked constituent in (1) with a variable of the same semantic type and existentially closing the result:

(1) [Fred]_F ate the beans.

Schwarzschild's matching mechanism includes an operation of “ \exists -type shifting”, which has the effect that all of A's utterances in (2), for example, contain possible antecedents for the corresponding utterances by B, even though those antecedents themselves are mere VPs, hence predicative, and not propositional.

- (2) a. A: Bill *ate the beans*.
 B: No, [Fred]_F *ate the beans*.
- b. A: Somebody *ate the beans*.
 B: Yes, [Fred]_F *ate the beans*.
- c. A: Nobody *ate the beans*.
 B: You are wrong. [Fred]_F *ate the beans*.
- d. A: Did anybody *eat the beans*?
 B: Yes, [Fred]_F *ate the beans*.

- e. A: Who *ate the beans*?
 B: [Fred]_F *ate the beans*.
- f. A: I wonder whether anybody *ate the beans*.
 B: Yes, [Fred]_F *ate the beans*.
- g. A: I don't think anybody *ate the beans*.
 B: You might be wrong. It looks like [Fred]_F *ate the beans*.
- h. A: If Bill *ate the beans*, he won't be hungry.
 B: But look, [Fred]_F *ate the beans*.
- i. A: Who would have thought that the woman who *ate the beans* was Fred's cousin?
 B: Actually, I just heard that [Fred]_F *ate the beans*.
- j. A: Last night, Mary dreamed that Bill *ate the beans*.
 B: Yes, and when she woke up, she couldn't believe that [Fred]_F *ate the beans*.

All of A's utterances in 2(a) to (j) contain the phrase *ate the beans*. \exists -type shifting applied to *ate the beans* produces $\exists x[x \text{ ate the beans}]$, which entails $\exists x[x \text{ ate the beans}]$. It's in that sense that A's utterances in 2(a) to (j) provide antecedents for the corresponding utterances by B, which are all variations of (1). There are a few complications that Schwarzschild discusses, but at least the informal version of his proposal for matching backgrounded material with possible antecedents is as simple as that. Existential statements of exactly the kind that Geurts and van der Sandt take to be the presuppositions triggered by focus marking of corresponding sentences are looking for matching antecedents.

What does all of this have to do with presuppositions? Quite possibly nothing. The word “presupposition” does not occur anywhere in Schwarzschild’s paper, for example, and I think rightly so². If the literature on presupposition projection hasn’t fooled us for many years, there is more to presupposition projection than simply finding *some* matching antecedent *somewhere* in what was said earlier in a conversation. As 2(a) to (j) illustrate, there do not seem to be any purely linguistic constraints for the relationship between a string of backgrounded material and a possible antecedent for it. There might be limitations having to do with frequency of mention, memory span and discourse relations, but in principle, strings can be matched across clause and sentence boundaries of whatever kind. Crucially, there doesn’t seem to be any evidence of the plugs that might block the projection of run-of-the-mill presuppositions, as observed in Karttunen (1973). The different behavior of presuppositions and backgrounding comes out quite dramatically in the following contrast, observed by Chris Potts (personal communication):

- (3) a. # Sue doubts that Ed attended the meeting, but/and we all agree that Jill attended the meeting too.
- b. Sue doubts that Ed attended the meeting, but we all agree that [Jill]_F {attended the meeting/did}.

3(a) illustrates that the presupposition triggered by *too* cannot access an antecedent that is trapped in the scope of *doubt*. On the other hand, backgrounded material has no problems with a match sitting in exactly the same kind of environment. Backgrounded

². Chris Potts (personal communication) reminds me of the following passage in Schwarzschild’s paper: “A constituent that is GIVEN presupposes an antecedent with the same meaning, up to F-marked parts.” (Schwarzschild 1999:175). Well, it’s not *presupposition*. I think the verb *presuppose* is used here in a non-technical sense. What is presupposed is the existence of an antecedent. It’s not that a presupposition in the traditional sense is introduced into the discourse.

material, then, behaves quite differently from run-of-the-mill presuppositions. If we think of those presuppositions as having to find matching antecedents, too, then those antecedents have to be accessible in a more interesting and constrained sense. We can't just scan a body of text for a possible match without paying any attention to the syntactic or semantic properties of the material that separates the match from the item it is a match for.

There are other properties that distinguish backgrounding from the familiar kind of presuppositions. Suppose I uttered (1) as a response to (4).

(4) What did Fred eat?

My answer seems inappropriate, but whatever would be wrong with it wouldn't rob my utterance of a truth-value. As far as truth-conditional content is concerned, (1) does answer (4). My answer was inappropriate because it incorrectly assumed as given in the discourse that someone ate the beans. Adding that information to the context preceding (1) immediately remedies the situation:

(5) You: Bill ate the beans. What did Fred eat?

Me: Actually, [Fred]_F ate the beans.

(1) can be an acceptable answer to (4), then, after all.

Uttering (1) as a response to (4) without any prior context feels very much like an inappropriate use of a discourse particle. Take German *ja*. The discourse particle *ja* is commonly used to draw attention to an obvious fact. That fact might be one that is either already part of shared knowledge, or else can be verified on the spot, given the extra-linguistic evidence. For instance, in the mini-discourse (6), which is built around an example from Lindner (1991), Webster might very well know that Spencer is not aware of the hole in his sleeve. His use of *ja* is nevertheless appropriate, since the existence of

the hole can be verified on the spot, given the extra-linguistic evidence available to the participants in the utterance situation:

(6) Spencer is walking up the stairs in front of Webster.

Webster: Du hast **ja** 'n Loch im Ärmel.
You have a hole in+the sleeve
There is a hole in your sleeve.

In academic discourse, *ja* is widely used when well-known facts or platitudes need to be mentioned to make an argument. This is illustrated by (7), a sentence quoted from the beginning of my dissertation:

(7) Wir verstehen die Bedeutung dieses Satzes, da wir **ja** Deutsch können.

We understand the meaning of+this sentence, since we German know.

We understand the meaning of this sentence, since we know German.

Kratzer (1978), 9.

The platitude drawn attention to in (7) is that the readers of this particular German book know German. The point made in the passage is that mere knowledge of language makes it possible to understand the meaning of sentences with indexicals, even if the referents of those indexicals are not known.

(8) and (9) are examples of inappropriate uses of *ja*³:

(8) Webster asks Spencer: “Who did Austin marry?”

Spencer: # Austin hat **ja** Ashley geheiratet.

Austin has Ashley married

Austin married Ashley.

³. In addition to Lindner (1991), see also Jacobs (1991) for discussion of the following and other properties of the discourse particle *ja*.

(9) Webster has just become a father and he is breaking the news to Spencer:

Webster: # Wir haben **ja** eine Tochter.

We have a daughter

In (8), Webster's question indicates that he does not know who Austin married.

Moreover, the fact referred to in Spencer's answer is not of the kind that can be expected to be verifiable on the spot in a typical context for this mini-dialogue. As a result, the use of *ja* in Spencer's answer sounds odd. As for (9), we are told that Webster is breaking news with his utterance. Webster is thus saying something that is not already part of shared knowledge. As in (8), the fact referred to by the speaker is unlikely to be verifiable on the spot in a typical context, and consequently, the use of *ja* in (9) feels inappropriate.

Like inappropriate backgrounding, inappropriate uses of *ja* do not deprive utterances of their truth-value. Inappropriate backgrounding indicates a misjudgment of what is or isn't given information. Likewise, an inappropriate use of *ja* indicates a misassessment of what might or might not be part of shared knowledge or verifiable on the spot. There is no impact on truth-conditional content.

As suggested in Kratzer (1999), discourse particles seem to contribute expressive meanings in the sense of Kaplan (1999). Potts (2003) discusses related phenomena under the name "conventional implicatures", adopting Gricean terminology. As observed by Kratzer and Potts, a characteristic property of expressive meanings is that, once computed, they cannot participate in any further processes of meaning composition (except possibly in indirect speech contexts, see Kratzer (1999)). This is illustrated by the following example:

- (10) Ich kann nicht zu Deiner Party kommen, weil ich **ja** meine Zwillinge
I can not to your party come because I my twins
versorgen muss.
take care of must.

I cannot come to your party, because I must take care of my twins.

A typical context for this sentence might be one where it is uttered by Mary, who has just been invited to a party by Sally and explains why she can't accept the invitation. In this scenario, the *ja* in the *weil* clause indicates that it is part of shared knowledge that Mary has to take care of her twins. Mary is reminding Sally of a fact she might have forgotten about or not considered relevant when inviting Mary to her party. There is a subtle hint that Sally should have known about Mary's duties.

In the spirit of Kaplan (1999), the expressive meanings produced by discourse particles like *ja* might very well be ordinary propositions, and could thus be sets of possible situations. On this view, what is special about expressive meanings is that they come into being via appropriateness conditions, rather than truth-conditions, and that they are used differently in the semantic composition process. The expressive meaning contributed by *ja* in (10), for example, would be the set of possible situations in which *ich muss ja meine Zwillinge versorgen* is uttered appropriately. Those situations are situations in which *ich muss ja meine Zwillinge versorgen* is uttered and in which it is part of shared knowledge or verifiable on the spot that the utterer must take care of her twins. We have then:

- (11) a. Descriptive content of imagined utterance of (10):
The set of possible situations in which it is true that Mary cannot come to Sally's party because she must take care of her twins.

- b. Expressive content of imagined utterance of (10):
The set of possible situations in which *ich muss ja meine Zwillinge versorgen* is uttered appropriately.

Expressive meanings, then, are propositions that are true in situations in which certain sentences are uttered, and which contain the speakers and hearers of those utterances, and satisfy the lexically determined appropriateness conditions imposed by all the expressives involved. If a sentence containing expressives is uttered appropriately, the actual utterance situation is a member of the proposition which is the expressive content of that utterance. Under the presumption that utterances of sentences containing expressives are generally appropriate, participants in a conversation, as well as outside observers who know the language, can gain information about the actual utterance situation.

Expressives can be a rich source of factual information, then. This information includes information about shared knowledge, prejudices, social relations as conveyed by honorifics, and so on (see Potts 2003 for extensive discussion of the possible range of phenomena).

The semantic/pragmatic interpretation system treats expressive meanings as if they were on a different tier. Once computed, expressive meanings are barred from any further semantic composition of whatever kind (except in indirect speech contexts, see Kratzer (1999)). As illustrated in (11), the causal connective *weil* in (10) completely ignores the expressive meaning produced by *ja* in its syntactic scope. The reason Mary gives for not being able to come to Sally's party is that she has to take care of her twins, not that it is part of shared knowledge or verifiable on the spot that she has to take care of her twins. Quite generally, the composition of descriptive meanings is blind to any expressives in their syntactic scope. Descriptive and expressive content must be separated, suggesting a multi-tiered semantics.

Returning to the semantic contribution of backgrounding, we now have a very strong and interesting prediction: If backgrounding is like a discourse particle in that it only

contributes expressive meanings (in this case related to givenness in discourse), rather than presuppositions, operators like *only* or *always* should not be able to see such meanings. At the surface, this prediction doesn't seem to be borne out. As has often been observed, focusing (and hence backgrounding) in the scope of such operators does make a truth-conditional difference:

- (12) a. Allegedly, Fred always fed chocolate to his [dog]_F
b. Allegedly, Fred always fed [chocolate]_F to his dog.
- (13) a. Allegedly, Fred only fed chocolate to his [dog]_F
b. Allegedly, Fred only fed [chocolate]_F to his dog.

In spite of apparent evidence of the kind illustrated in (12) and (13), Rooth (1986, 1992, 1996) and von Stechow (1994, 1995) have raised the possibility that operators like *only* and *always* might not directly interact with focus-induced meanings. According to them, focusing and backgrounding in sentences like (12) or (13) might tell us something about what is given or topical in typical utterance situations for those sentences, and this information could affect what we take to be implicit contextual restrictions for the domains *always* and *only* quantify over. According to Rooth and von Stechow, there might not be any direct interaction between *always* and *only* and the meanings contributed by focusing and backgrounding. If this was so, those meanings would have the characteristic properties of expressive meanings. Expressives provide information about utterance contexts, and can thus in principle provide information about contextually provided domain restrictions. The meanings they contribute cannot directly interact with any other semantic operation. If backgrounding was an expressive device, we would understand why operators like *always* or *only* might not be able to directly interact with the meanings that device contributes.

Interestingly, the truth seems to be more complicated. Beaver and Clark (2003) have very convincingly challenged the idea that *only* cannot interact with focus-induced meanings, pointing to the following striking differences between *only* and *always*:

- (14) A: Does Sandy feed Nutrapup to her dogs?
 B: Yes, Sandy always feeds Nutrapup to [Fido]_F, and she also always feeds Nutrapup to [Butch]_F.
 Beaver and Clark (2003), 327.
- (15) A: Does Sandy feed Nutrapup to her dogs?
 B: # Yes, Sandy only feeds Nutrapup to [Fido]_F, and she also only feeds Nutrapup to [Butch]_F.
 Beaver and Clark (2003), 327⁴

If focusing and backgrounding only provided information about contextual domain restrictions for *only* and *always*, it is hard to see how to account for the substantial difference between (14) and (15). Everything else being equal, *always* sentences and their *only* counterparts should have virtually identical meanings, as worked out in (16) and (17) for a situation-based semantics:

- (16) a. Sandy always feeds Nutrapup to [Fido]_F.
 b. Contribution of context (as suggested by backgrounding):
 The contextually relevant situations are all those in which Sandy feeds Nutrapup to someone.
 c. Truth-conditions:
 16(a) is true in *w* iff all contextually relevant situations in *w* are situations in which Sandy feeds Nutrapup to Fido.
 d. Truth-conditions in context:
 16(a) is true in *w* iff all situations in *w* in which Sandy feeds Nutrapup to someone are situations in which she feeds Nutrapup to Fido. Assuming that there are situations in *w* in which Sandy feeds Nutrapup to someone, it follows that 16(a) is true in *w* just in case Sandy feeds Nutrapup to Fido

⁴. Beaver and Clark use “*” instead of “#”, however.

and to nobody else in w . Here is the reasoning that leads to that last conclusion. For the sake of the argument imagine a world w in which Sandy always feeds Fido and Butch together, and she always feeds Nutrapup to both of them. Do our truth-conditions predict 16(a) to be true in w ? No. To see this, consider any arbitrary situation in w in which Sandy feeds Nutrapup to both Fido and Butch. That situation has a subsituation in which Sandy feeds Nutrapup to just Butch and to no other dog. Consequently, it would not be true that all situations in w in which Sandy feeds Nutrapup to someone are situations in which she feeds Nutrapup to Fido.

- (17) a. Sandy only feeds Nutrapup to [Fido]_F.
- b. Contribution of context (as suggested by backgrounding):
The contextually relevant individuals are all those who Sandy feeds Nutrapup to.
- c. Truth-conditions:
17(a) is true in w iff Fido is the only one among the contextually relevant individuals who Sandy feeds Nutrapup to in w .
- d. Truth-conditions in context:
17(a) is true in w iff Sandy feeds Nutrapup to Fido and to nobody else in w .

Beaver and Clark conclude from the contrast between (14) and (15) and other contrasts between *only* and *always* that unlike *always*, *only* includes a lexical semantic dependence on focus. Earlier work on so-called “second occurrence focus” (e.g. von Stechow (1994) and Rooth (1996)) already observed that *only* seems to require a focused constituent in its scope. This fact alone might receive an alternative explanation along the lines of Schwarzschild (1999), however. Beaver and Clark went beyond the observation that *only* needs a focus in its scope, and argued that the operator denoted by *only* directly accesses focus induced meanings. If they are right, those meanings cannot be expressive meanings. If they were, the operator denoted by *only* should not be able to see them.

It does not seem to be an accident that (14) and (15) involve instances of what is often called “contrastive focus”. My earlier discussion centered around what is sometimes called “informational” or “presentational focus”. Informational focus relates to the distinction between what is given or new in a discourse. Contrastive focus can not only appear with new, but also with given material, as in (18):

- (18) A: Guess what? Fred passed.
B: If [Fred]_F passed, bar exams have become too easy.

For B’s answer, not only the proposition expressed by *Fred passed*, but also that expressed by $\exists p[\textit{Fred passed} \rightarrow p]$ is given: that last statement is a tautology. Why can B still focus *Fred*? If there is a principle to avoid focus for given material, as Schwarzschild (1999) has suggested, *Fred passed* should have to be deaccented in B’s utterance. Moreover, if all focus was informational focus, it would also be a curious fact that B couldn’t focus *if* in (18) without challenging A’s claim.

A number of authors, including Halliday (1967), Rochemont (1986), Kiss (1998), and Vallduví and Vilkuna (1998) have argued that informational and contrastive focus have to be distinguished. Informational focus affects the appropriateness of expressions in discourse. In contrast, contrastive focus may affect the content of what is said, possibly by triggering presuppositions or conversational implicatures. In B’s answer in (18), for example, focus on *Fred* induces a scalar interpretation, comparable to the overt effect of *even*. That interpretation would not be there if B had chosen to place focus on *passed* instead. Kiss (1998) discusses cases where focused DPs in designated positions receive exhaustive interpretations, comparable to the overt effect of *only*.

In the intonational literature there has also been suggestion of a phonological or phonetic distinction between informational and contrastive focus (Pierrehumbert & Beckman (1988), D’Imperio (1997). Frota (2000), Face (2002), Le Gac (2002), Selkirk (2002)). In fact, if we looked seriously at examples 2(a) to (j) from above, we might have to

recognize subtle phonological differences that would be matched by subtle differences in meaning that my earlier discussion completely neglected. When talking about focus in those cases, we might be talking about different phonological entities altogether. If that should turn out to be so, it might still be true that absence of accent or prominence indicates given information and thereby contributes expressive meaning. Informational focus, marked by accent or a certain degree of prominence, would then not have any meaning at all. It would only help us perceive backgrounded material. On the other hand, contrastive focus (possibly phonologically distinct in English) might very well introduce alternatives that operators denoted by *only* or *even* could interact with. More research on all relevant fronts is needed to get clear about those issues, including the question whether in spite of obvious differences, there might still be a common core that all types of focus share, both semantically and phonologically, a program pursued by both Schwarzschild and Rooth.

To sum up, I have discussed some general issues regarding the interpretation of focus in connection with Geurts and van der Sandt's paper. One is whether we can truly afford to neglect the distinction between different kinds of focus, in spite of piles of literature suggesting otherwise. There might very well be *some* types of focus that trigger presuppositions, but it seems that not every kind of focus does. If there is a focusing/backgrounding mechanism related to mere givenness, it is not obvious that we are dealing with presuppositions in the usual sense. The inferences contributed by such backgrounding just don't seem to behave like run-of-the-mill presuppositions. They project and compose differently. What we are seeing might be expressive meanings. While expressive meanings are often lumped together with presuppositions in the literature, this is a mistake, as argued most persuasively in Potts (2003).

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