

Contrastive Focus on Unpronounced Elements

In English, primary sentence stress typically falls on the rightmost content word, (1a). Any deviation from the canonical assignment of highest prominence is accompanied by a change in the pragmatics and semantics of the sentence. Compare the sentence in (1b), in which contrastive focus falls on *built*, to the unfocused example in (1a).

- (1) a. John built a house.
b. John BUILT a house.

Comparing (1b) to (1a), it is apparent that the two sentences do not have the same import; while (1a) is felicitous when uttered without preceding context, (1b) is not. The dialogue in (2) might serve as an appropriate preparatory context for the utterance in (1b). Contrastive focus on an element typically has the effect of introducing the focused element as new information in the discourse. So, in the example in (2), the speaker B accepts A's presupposition that John did something to a house, but adds that what he did was build a house, rather than buy one.

- (2) A: John bought a house.
B: No, John BUILT a house.

Interestingly, the pragmatic/semantic import of contrastive stress on *built* can be changed if the framing context of the utterance changes, as shown in (3). In these examples, the tense and aspect of the sentence are introduced as new information, despite the fact that the highest prominence still falls on the verb. Note that though a word receiving focal stress is generally taken as new information, in these cases the focally stressed element, *built*, is part of the presupposition, as shown by the simplified Herburger-style semantic interpretation provided for these sentences in (3b,d). The examples in (3) are interesting because they show that semantic focus may pick out phrases that are assumed to be syntactically present but are phonologically null.

- 3) a. A: John will build a house.
B: No, John BUILT a house.
b. $\exists e$ [Ce & building(e) & Agent(e, John) & Theme(e, house) & Cul(e)] [PAST(e)]
c. A: John is building a house.
B: No, John BUILT a house.
d. $\exists e$ [Ce & building(e) & PAST(e) Agent(e, John) & Theme(e, house)] [Cul(e)]

The data in (3) strongly suggest that focus is syntactic in nature, not purely semantic or pragmatic. This is also exemplified by the dialogue in (4), which shows that contrastive focus on the modal *will* can be interpreted as highlighting the affirmative nature of the sentence. Laka (1994) proposed that affirmation, like negation, is syntactically present in the derivation.

- (4) A: I don't believe John will build a house.
B: John WILL build a house, trust me.

In this paper, I propose to take a syntactic approach to focus which allows us to explain why focus can target any syntactic phrase, despite the fact that it is phonologically null. Taking this syntactic approach to focus, the fact that an AffP, (ΣP for Laka) can be targeted by focus is expected. More generally, this approach suggests that contrastive focus can be used as a tool to help articulate the syntactic structure of an utterance; if contrastive focus can target an element it must also be syntactically present. This approach has interesting implications for the adjectival projection. Consider, for example, the dialogues in (5). Just as focal stress on the verb is ambiguous between focus on the verb, TP, AspP or AffP, focus on the adjective is also ambiguous.

- (5) a. A: John is short. (A thinks John is 5' tall)
 B: No, John is TALL. (B thinks John is 6' tall)
- b. A: John is short. (A thinks John is 6' tall, but considers that short)
 B: No, John is TALL. (B thinks John is 6' tall, but considers that tall)
- d. Napoleon was short, but Toulouse Lautrec was SHORT.
- e. John is tall, but Yao Ming is TALL.

In (5a), the focused element is not the verb, but rather the measure function which maps John's actual height to the scale, while (5b) contrastively focuses the reference point at which all things measuring above that point are considered *tall*. Additionally, focus on the adjective can shift the reference point up or down, (5c,d).

In this paper, I suggest that focus on an element is a result of that element having a focus feature (+FOC) that forces overt feature checking movement when strong, but is PF interpretable when weak. This approach gives us a straightforward way in which to handle the fact that syntactic focus on phonologically null elements is realized as increased prominence on the next-most element. I propose that English's weak [+FOC] feature is given a phonological realization by PF: focal stress. Thus, in a case in which an empty element is [+FOC] it will be interpreted by the phonological component as if it were non-null; it lacks segmental information, but is associated with suprasegmental characteristics. At spell-out, the PF will be faced with the task of linearizing an element with an F⁰ contour that is not segmentally linked, and which would be impossible to articulate faithfully. Instead, the PF linearizes the suprasegmental information in such a way that it overlaps with another word in the sentence. Thus, the intonation contour of the null element will link to an appropriate host word in order for the phonological realizations of both to surface. An important consequence of this approach is that linear ordering is not uniquely determined by hierarchical relations among constituents, contra Kayne (1994). Instead, phonological considerations may result in perturbations of the expected word order, as has been suggested previously in some analyses of clitic position, for example, Anderson (1999).

Selected References:

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