

Theticity in a Bidirectional Theory of Focus

Abstract

Broad focus (or informational *integration* or *nonautonomy*) is lexically and contextually constrained, but the constraints are not well understood. On a standard theory of focus interpretation, the presupposition of a broad focus is verified whenever those of two narrow foci are. I argue that to account for cases where two narrow foci are preferred, it is necessary to assume that broad focus *competes* with two narrow foci and implicates the opposite of what they presuppose. Central constraints on thetic statements are thus accounted for in an OT enriched Alternative Semantics.

1 Introduction

It is well known that a verb and an argument can be in focus **together**, forming one focus domain with one accent, usually on the argument. Thus a verb can be in focus, conveying new information, even though it does not carry an accent. The phenomenon is known, e.g., as a case of **focus projection** (Höhle 1982), **integration** (Jacobs 1991), or **informational nonautonomy** (Jacobs 1999); or, if the argument is indefinite, a case of **semantic incorporation**¹. If the sentence only contains the predicate and the argument, it is a **thetic** sentence².

(1) (David had just come home late:) [the TRAIN was delayed]_F.

(2) [SCAFolding was erected]_F (before the sun was fully up).

The phenomenon is constrained by several factors. The predicate and the argument should be sisters, and the latter should be a **theme** (Jacobs 1999: 75).³ Semantically and pragmatically, the two must form one informational unit and be processed in one step (Jacobs 1999: 68). This notion is difficult to define. According to Rochemont (1986), the verb should be “c-construable”, Szabolcsi (1986) introduced the term “lexical integrity”, and Sasse (1995) discusses the notion “semantic agreement”. But although there seems to be a “common core of theticity-relevant states of affairs cross-linguistically” (Sasse 1995: 24), the boundaries to the area have so far not been mapped in a formal theory.

¹van Geenhoven 1996, Bende-Farkas 1999, Farkas and de Swart 2003

²Kuroda 1972, Ladusaw 1994, McNally 1998, Jäger 2001

³But, contra structural accounts of focus projection, it need not be an internal argument as long as it has a “protopatent property” (Jacobs 1999) or the “perspective on the event admits a presentational interpretation” (Kennedy 1999).

2 Constraints on Informational Integration

Among the facts that have remained ill-understood are:

- 1 A broad focus can be felicitous in some contexts but not in others, even though the grammatical conditions for broad focus are met.
- 2 A broad focus can be infelicitous even though the grammatical and the contextual conditions for broad focus are met.

Fact 1 concerns contexts where two foci are preferred over one broad focus as opposed to contexts where one focus is the preferred option.

- (3)
- a. – What happened to make you leave home?
– [My MOTHER died]_F.
 - b. # – What became of your parents? – [My MOTHER died]_F(...)
 - c. – What became of your parents? – [My MOTHER]_F [DIED]_F(...)

Fact 2 refers to predicates that resist integration regardless of the context:

- (4)
- a. [CHAMPAGNE had been offered]_F.
 - b. # [CHAMPAGNE had been declined]_F.
 - c. [CHAMPAGNE]_F [had been DECLINED]_F.

The only way to justify the absence of an accent on the verb is to interpret it as given information, out of focus: [CHAMPAGNE]_F had been declined.

We will concentrate on sentences consisting of a predicate and one argument, where focus encompasses the whole, in which case we have athetic judgment and just one accent, usually on the argument, or where there is one focus for each, in which case we have a categorial judgment and two accents; cf. (5a)/(5b). The term ‘broad focus’ will be used for this situation, although it also applies, i.a., to the case where focus comprises a transitive verb and one argument.

- (5)
- a. [ARGument predicate]_F.
 - b. [ARGument]_F [PREdicate]_F.

Here, we will assume, sentential focus, informational integration, and theticity go hand in hand. In the general case, however, sentential focus is necessary, but not necessarily sufficient, for integration and theticity. In this light, what we set out to account for is a subset of the conditions for integration and theticity.

Theticity has been described, over and above sentential focus with one accent, in terms of a dichotomy as to what the statement is about: Athetic statement has a covert location (situation, event) argument, not an object argument, as its topic (e.g. Borschev and Partee 2002). While we believe that such characterisations are valid generalisations, we hypothesise that the reasons for the constraints onthetic statements illustrated above lie in their property of broad focus.

3 Inverse Focus Presuppositions

We base our account on (1) the theory of Focus Interpretation (Rooth 1992) and (2) Bidirectional Optimality Theory (Blutner 1998), utilising the idea that a broad focus **competes** with two narrow foci, implicating that there are no salient alternatives to predicate and argument separately. By focusing the merge of the verb and the argument, one does not just not communicate what one would communicate if one were to focus the verb and the argument separately; one positively communicates the opposite.

We assume a version of Rooth’s theory where the focus presupposition is defined directly, not via the focus semantic value, generally for a focused tuple:

Semantics of \mathcal{F} (based on Rooth 1992)

$\mathcal{F}^* = \lambda \vec{\sigma} \lambda \phi \phi +$ the presupposition that

for all $\sigma \in \vec{\sigma}$ there is a set of propositions Ψ such that

$\Psi \subseteq \{ \psi \mid \exists \vec{\tau} \simeq \vec{\sigma} [\psi = \hat{\phi} [\vec{\sigma} / \vec{\tau}]] \}$ and

there is a $\psi \in \Psi$ such that $\sigma \not\sqsubseteq \psi$

Focus, \mathcal{F} , takes two arguments, the tuple in focus, $\vec{\sigma}$, and the phrase where focus is interpreted, here a sentence, ϕ . $\vec{\tau} \simeq \vec{\sigma}$ means that the τ and the σ members of $\vec{\tau}$, $\vec{\sigma}$ are pairwise **alternatives** and that they may differ in any member.

As it stands, Alternative Semantics cannot explain the infelicity of (3b) or (4b).⁴ In fact, any context verifying the focus presupposition of two narrow foci will also verify that of one broad focus, so a one-focus sentence should be appropriate whenever a corresponding two-foci sentence is. Intuitively, (3b) is inappropriate because a topic - comment (theme - rheme) structure is appropriate (Jacobs 2001, Steedman 2000). Generally, we observe that athetic sentence is out when the categorical sentence is in; i.e., when the double focus presupposition is verified. In (3c), but not in (3a), the context gives a set of propositions based on pairwise alternatives to predicate and argument. This appears to be the decisive factor: For focus on Pa to be felicitous, the given set must contain some propositions that do not split into pairs $\langle P', a' \rangle$ such that P', P and a', a are alternatives. In (4c), the meaning of the verb is what provides separate alternatives.

This is a case of a form with a more general meaning acquiring a more specific meaning through competition with a form with another more specific meaning. Both the contextual and the lexical constraints on broad focus can be accounted for by an implicature reversing the presuppositions of one or more narrow foci: Separate alternatives to P and/or a must not be salient, contextually or lexically – and this explicates the intuitions about situation-sensitive informational unity.

⁴This is not the underfocussing effect discussed by Krifka (2001); as shown by Krifka (2004), Alternative Semantics can cope with something being incongruously out of focus.

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