Issues in the formal and functional typology of focus

Proposed worskhop at SLE 2025 (Bordeaux)

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The proposed workshop is intended as a forum for empirical research on the various concepts used in the analysis of focus and focus-sensitivity, including the notion of focus itself. Because the workshop should provide the opportunity for a step back and for questioning established notions, no theoretical background will be privileged and theory-critical data-driven contributions are warmly welcome, especially those addressing quirky phenomena that seem to involve focus and yet challenge classical definitions of it. Contributions on lesser-described languages and varieties are encouraged.

Abstracts (max. 300 words, excluding references) should be sent to **Olivier Duplâtre (olivier-duplatre [AT] wanadoo.fr)** and **Pierre-Yves Modicom (pymodicom.ling [AT] yahoo.fr)** by **November 10th** in the evening.

Below, prospective contributors will find a non-exhaustive list of relevant domains for the workshop, with a short introduction for each of them.

1. Issues in the functional definition of focus

Within the notoriously tricky realm of information-structural concepts, the notion of focus is one of the most pervasive terms in use. In line with its Latin etymology (hearth, fireplace), the term *focus* can refer to the point in a clause where attention reaches its climax: this strain of thought, exemplified among many others by Lambrecht (1994), underlies notions such as "information focus" or "default focus" to designate the constituent of the clause conveying the most important or newest piece of information (Givon 2001). In this usage, the notion of focus partly overlaps with other information-structural notions such as *discourse-new*, *rheme* or *comment*. But the concept of *focus* can also be used to designate "contrastive focus" or "identificational focus" (see, for instance, Chafe 1976, Kiss 1998, Krifka 2007). In this acception, focus also comes to designate a segment concentrating a special semantic and pragmatic effect within the larger domain (or *scope*) affected by an operator. This definition is crucial for the study of focus-sensitive operators, especially "focus particles". More recently, alternative proposals have been made to get rid of the concept of focus as a semantic primary and supporting an emergent view of focus (Ozerov 2021). How valid is focus as a cross-linguistic category? Despite its supposed grounding in universal communicative mechanisms, is it really more than a comparative concept?

2. Formal strategies

In either of the two major definitions mentioned above, focus can be marked, among other things, by prosody (see e.g. Truckenbrodt 2015), word order, or dedicated morphemes (including, but not limited to, "focus particles"), with these different methods not being mutually exclusive (Adamou et al. 2018). Several types of focus operators need to be distinguished: exclusive operators, additive operators, and scalar operators have received much attention, but other types of focus operators do not belong to these categories, such as

markers of identificational focus or aspectuo-temporal focus. However, some of these forms do not specifically mark focus: instead, many of them also express an argument-structural status (Ozerov 2015), some other are reflexives, and some, including clefts, can be used for a variety of information-structural purposes (Karssenberg & Lahousse 2018, Palancar 2018). Contributions questioning the formal and functional categories used in the description of foci are thus especially welcome.

It is important to note that the range of strategies used to express focus is very diverse, if not entirely heterogeneous: alongside conventionalized devices like focus operators, quantificational adverbs (see Beaver & Clark 2008) are also focus-sensitive. This is also true for superlatives as well as for higher adverbs.

It seems that higher adverbs can manifest the presence of focus or even be focus-sensitive while not being focus operators (Nølke 1993). Could this mean that the speaker's evaluation, whether positive or negative, activates a contrast between the focus and alternative solutions? Or is it rather an argument for considering that the comment part of the clause, which tends to be the scope of higher adverbs, carries "default information focus", and that "focus-sensitive" occurrences are just a limit case of a broader phenomenon related to the scope of these adverbs? If so, does it mean that "information focus" is a latent, inherent property of any assertion, manifested in the structure of the clause itself, or that it is an emergent meaning effect activated upon the reception of the utterance? Or should we distinguish a specific type of "predicate focus" (Zimmermann 2015) ? How useful or how useless is the notion of focus if it becomes ubiquitous? And do these concerns carry over to identificational or contrastive focus? Contributions addressing these matters on the empirical basis of the marking of alleged focus outside the realm of European languages will be especially welcome.

3. Focus vs. what? Presupposition, prejacent, background and the informational typology of illocutionary types

If a focus operator highlights a "point of convergence" in a sentence, what is its semantic and pragmatic relation to the sentence? In the literature on focus particles, the notion of "prejacent" is commonly used to name the sentence minus the particle, while the meaning of the utterance minus the focus constituent is called the background: some particles imply that the prejacent be presupposed and the contribution of the focus operator be the only new information within the sentence. Others function in the opposite way. Do these diverging properties attach to semantic groups or categories, e.g. exclusive vs additive particles, or are they lexical idiosyncrasies which have to be determined separately for each particle? Is presupposition a relevant factor for all types of focus operators?

Similarly, these theoretical concerns would probably benefit from greater attention to the structure of questions, both content questions (where the question word is usually assumed to be the focus constituent) and polar questions, which raise the question of "verum focus" (for a critique of "verum focus", see Gutzmann et al. 2020).

4. The syntactic and semantic domain of focus operators

The syntactic status of focus operators remains unclear : do focus particles form a focus phrase with their target constituent? If so, are they the heads of theses phrases or are they dependent on their target constituent? What about focus clitics or focal prepositions? Does the difference between scope and focus account for the recurring semantic effects of focus

operators? Such claims were raised for instance by König (1991) to explain alternations in the meaning of exclusive focus particles, as exemplified by the contrast between the two readings of *only in Bordeaux* below:

(1) Only in Bordeaux, there are more than 100,000 inhabitants. (sufficient condition)

(2) Such a wine can be found only in Bordeaux. (necessary condition)

One thing is certain: notions like "modification" or "specification" do not adequately explain the semantic operation performed by focus-sensitive operators. It leads to a conflation of all operator, from the more lexical ones to the more grammatical ones and blurs the border between intensification, identification and contrast. The notion of meta-indication ("commentary on the paradigmatic choice", "meta-pragmatic maker" etc.) is also vague. What kind of meta-indication are we talking about? What about the fact that some focus operators directly contribute to the propositional content to the extent that they are negible? All contributions addressing issues on the semantic, pragmatic and syntactic status of focus markers in any language are welcome.

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