On focusing operators

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Abstract

The talk discusses focusing operators in regard to their interaction, to differences in their semantic/pragmatic effects, and to restrictions on their scope. I start from three theoretical assumptions, which update ideas from Jacobs (1984), (1991), and combine them with results from research on use-conditional meaning, cf. Potts (2005):

a) All instances of focus-background structure (FBS) correspond semantically to a bipartition of the scope of an operator into a background B and a focus F.
b) There is more than one operator whose scope is split into B and F. In particular, in addition to a covert use-conditional operator DF that spells out the discourse effects of free FBS, roughly 'new vs. 'old' information, there are several use-conditional or truth-conditional operators, e.g. those denoted by focus particles, which establish a relation between F and a set of alternatives.
c) These operators can co-occur in the same sentence, subject to certain restrictions.

First, I will show that this operator-based view of FBS (OFBS) correctly predicts a variety of semantic/pragmatic FBS effects, including cases where the background of an FBS is 'new' information, which have largely been neglected in the literature. Moreover, OFBS offers a straightforward way to represent complex interactions of different instances of FBS in the same clause, e.g. cases where B,F of an operator is included in B or F of another operator. The much debated phenomenon of second occurrence focus is only one of these forms of FBS interaction.

However, the interplay of focusing operators with other focusing or non-focusing operators is subject to restrictions. For example, if B,F of Op_1 is in either B or F of Op_2, Op_1 can never be DF. In the second part of talk, I propose an explanation of this restriction based on well-established constraints on the scope of use-conditional operators, cf. Potts (2005). I will also show that these constraints entail restrictions on the interaction of FBS with expressive elements. In addition, OFBS explains why a dependent clause X can only be included in a single FBS with the main clause Y if X is syntactically integrated into Y, a fact that is well known, cf. Reich & Reis (2013), but for which no principled explanation has been proposed yet.

In sum, OFBS in combination with scope constraints for use-conditional operators covers an array of data that earlier FBS research has not recognized as reflecting the same principles. As concerns the topic of the workshop, ambiguities in information structure, the theory explains why many potential FBS readings don't arise in the first place, thereby reducing the number of FBS ambiguities that have to be resolved prosodically or pragmatically.

References

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