From prosodic events to focus expressions

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The goal of this talk is to outline our current understanding of the relationship between prosodic events and focus expressions, drawing from empirical and analytical research in the syntax-phonology interface, information structure, and intonational phonology. Three empirical configurations have been identified in prosodic data, listed in (1a): (a) focused constituents (carrying pitch accents in some languages); (b) non-focused constituents (deaccented or tonally compressed in some languages); (c) contrastively focused constituents (carrying different accents from simple foci in some languages).

The analytical challenge is to identify the most parsimonious set of linguistic entities that can account for the observables in (1a). Two prominent lines of thought have been discussed in the recent research. The first question is whether the distinction between focus and contrastive focus is justified by the data, or if the facts can be reduced to a binary contrast between focused and non-focused constituents, as in (1b); see discussion in Repp (2016), Kügler & Calhoun (2021). The second question is whether plain focus needs to be explicitly represented in grammar (Gussenhoven 1992, Truckenbrodt 1995) or if it merely reflects the default prosodic structure, as sketched in (1c) (Kratzer and Selkirk 2020; see discussion in Ladd 2008: 254-259).

(1)   a.   out of focus | focus | contrastive focus

       b.   out of focus | focus

       c.   out of focus | – | contrastive focus

The aim of this talk is to outline the relevant facts reported from different languages that may contribute to the decision between the models in (1a-c).

- The distinction between exponents of contrastive and non-contrastive foci faces three major problems (Arvaniti et al. 2022, Féry 2017: 301-303, Watson et al. 2008): (a) the cues are gradient; (b) the reflexes of contrastive foci can be accounted for as a form of hyperarticulation (reflected in pitch scaling and alignment) of prosodic events that are independently defined rather than as contrasted phonological entities, (c) invoking alternatives is not a necessary condition for using the cues that are attributed to contrastive focus. Consequently, these cues are a more general strategy to draw the hearer's attention to a part of the utterance, which is the source of manner-based implicatures, which may invoke alternatives under specific contextual conditions.
- The elimination of plain foci (i.e., new information foci) from the grammar is based on the assumption that new information is realized with the default prosodic structure. New information does not require additional marking; marking only applies to deviations from the default, e.g., when a constituent must be marked as 'out of focus' or when it invokes alternatives (in contrastive foci).

Finally, the conjunction of (1b) and (1c) leads to a maximally underspecified grammar, containing only a single information structural feature (namely 'out of focus'/'given'). This model is empirically confirmed in grammars that do neither provide evidence for the association of distinctive prosodic events with contrastive/non-contrastive foci nor necessitate the postulation of focus independently of the default prosody.

References

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