

The puzzle of the three foci

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Discussing “inaudible” foci, Manfred Krifka (2004, 194f) characterizes ex. (1), originally presented by M. Rooth, as having a paraphrase (2) and thus proposes to analyze it as (3):

- (1) Farmers that GROW rice often only EAT rice.
- (2) Farmers that grow rice often eat nothing but rice.
- (3) ASSERT₁ [Farmers that GROW_{F1} rice often only₂ EAT_{F1} rice_{F2}]

As Krifka writes, we “have to assume, for semantic reasons, that *rice* is the focus of *only*, but we find that it is not marked by any audible accent. We cannot explain this simply by the fact that *rice* has been previously mentioned, because if it is a focus constituent (and not just a part of a focus constituent), we should expect that it receives accent even if it is anaphoric or mentioned before.”

Along with the puzzle of inaudibility, Krifka discusses the puzzle of “association with focus” or “focus effect” as determined either grammatically, or contextually (pp. 195ff). Not going into the complex issues connected with contextual (and situational) restrictions of quantification, we can only recall here that if focus is understood as a part of the underlying structure of the sentence, it is determined grammatically, since it is both semantically relevant and expressed by grammatical means (accent and word order); this has been discussed in Hajičová et al. (1998, esp. Ch. 2).

However, there is also a third puzzle present in Krifka’s analysis of the example, with *grow*, *eat* and *rice* all present as foci: How is it possible that there are three distinct foci in a single sentence? Even if we bear in mind that *rice* is the focus of *only*, rather than of the sentence (i.e. of *ASSERT*), there remains the question of the relationship of *grow* and *eat*.

If it is recalled that the *focus* of a declarative sentence is primarily understood as what the sentence asserts about its topic, then several criteria concerning the negation of the sentence offer themselves. The focus constitutes the scope of sentence negation (in the prototypical case, especially in absence of an operator binding the focus). Thus, it is worth to observe the negation of (1), which we present as (4):

- (4) Famers that GROW rice often don’t only EAT rice.

What is negated here clearly can be made more explicit by a paraphrase such as (5):

- (5) About (those) farmers that GROW rice it is true that they don’t only EAT rice.

This indicates that “only EAT rice” (or, more exactly, its underlying, tectogrammatical counterpart) is the focus of (1). The (counterpart of the) word *grow* is not in the focus of (1), and *rice* is an unstressed part of its focus, the stressed part of which, *eat*, may be seen as the core of the focus of (1).

An analysis of this kind requires an application of a systematic and detailed theoretical framework. If the framework of Functional Generative Description (Sgall et al. 1986, Hajičová et al. 1998, Hajičová and Sgall 2004) is used to this aim, two points may be stressed:

- (a) each of the lexical items occurring in a sentence is either contextually bound (CB), i.e. presented by the speaker as being immediately available in the hearer(s) memory (“given”), or non-bound (NB), presented as “new” in the given context; in the prototypical case, CB items constitute the topic of the sentence and NB ones belong to its focus, but CB (NB) items may occur in a focus (topic) if they are more deeply embedded (not depending directly on the main verb); in (1), the second occurrence of *rice* is CB, and so is the operator (adverb) dependent on it, *only*, although both these words belong to the focus of (1), i.e. (1) can be appropriately used in a context in which growing rice is activated;

(b) the term *focus* is ambiguous; even if its phonetic meaning is left aside, *focus* is used for two different concepts: for the focus of the sentence (F in the sequel) and for the focus of a focus sensitive operator, focalizer (ff).

Having these points in mind, we can formulate the following hypotheses:

(i) the tectogrammatical counterpart of *eat* constitutes the focus proper, the most dynamic item of (1);

(ii) the counterpart of *grow* is a contrastive part of the topic of (1);

(iii) the counterpart of *rice* is the focus (ff) of the operator *only*; both these words belong to the F of (1), although they are CB.

Two remarks on sentence prosody may be added:

(a) Perhaps the position of *rice* at the end of the sentence (1), after the stressed *EAT* is a factor relevant for the fact that this repeated (“second occurrence”) contrastive CB item is not (necessarily) stressed;

(b) Krifka (2004, 193) distinguishes two kinds of stress, namely ‘a stronger’ and ‘a weaker’ one; however, it is possible to prefer understanding them as Jackendoff’s A and B contours, i.e. to see here what more recently started to be called a hat contour, with a typically rising stress on a CB contrastive item (as *grow* in (1)) and a typically falling one on F, i.e. on *EAT* in (1) (cf. Hajičová et al. 1998, 75).

References

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