

Constraint Interaction in Focus Particle Constructions

Petra Hendriks

The term *focus* is usually used to refer to the parts of utterances that are accented for communicative purposes. Following the question *What did Jane eat*, the answer *Jane ate RICE* is felicitous but the answer *JANE ate rice* is not (capitals indicate main accent), since *rice* but not *Jane* is new information which requires the attention of the hearer. This new information is called the focus of the sentence.

In addition to the structure of the discourse, focus is also intimately related to the syntactic structure of the sentence. It has been argued that there is an unmarked accent position which is determined purely syntactically (Cinque 1993, Reinhart 1995, Zubizarreta 1995). In English, for example, this unmarked sentence accent is on the object of the verb. However, sentence accent does not by itself determine the focused element unambiguously, but merely restricts the possibilities for focus. These possibilities can be restricted even more by syntactic structures such as cleft constructions or by scrambling. The position of focus is also dependent on the semantic properties of certain lexical elements. Focus particles such as *only* can appear almost anywhere in the sentence but require the focused element to be in their c-command domain (Rooth 1985, Bayer 1996). A consequence is that these focus particles also impose restrictions on the possible positions of focus. Finally, the assignment of focus is dependent on the prosodic properties of the expressions involved. As is well-known, elements such as weak pronouns and light verbs cannot receive stress. Because of all of these factors playing a role, purely syntax-oriented or semantics-oriented approaches to focus seem inadequate.

This article will concentrate on focus particle constructions. The hypothesis will be investigated that the different components of grammar all contribute to the structure and interpretation of focus particle constructions in an optimality theoretic fashion. That is, discourse considerations regarding the placement and interpretation of focus interact with syntactic, semantic and prosodic factors. The constraints playing a role are argued to be soft in nature and to differ in strength. A fundamental linguistic issue that becomes relevant here is the question regarding the ordering of the constraints: are the constraints that play a role in focus constructions ordered modularly, and if so, how do the different modules relate to each other?