Focus Intervention in Declaratives

1. The issue Early research into focus intervention effects, created by a focused phrase preceding a wh-phrase in a wh-question (1) or the disjunction of an alternative question (2), was dominated by syntactic (Pesetsky 2000) and semantic analyses (Beck 2006). However, recent evidence suggests that the phenomenon is information structural in nature (Tomioka 2007), reflecting faulty realization of the information structure (IS) of questions. This paper provides new data involving focused phrases in declaratives that strongly supports an IS-based explanation, and has significant implications for theories of focus association, as well as for general questions regarding the place of IS in the grammar.

2. The data I introduce the following crosslinguistic generalization: an information focus can precede an only-phrase which is not an information focus, e.g. in the answer to a question (3) and in a corrective context (4). However, the same strings are unacceptable when the focus status of the arguments is reversed, that is, when the only-phrase which is not an information focus precedes the information focus, requiring an alternative structure to yield a well-formed sentence (5)-(6). The acceptable and illicit configurations are schematized in (7). I note that the distinction between the two configurations is also borne out by its effect on the truth conditions of (8a) vs. (8b). The fact that these sentences have different entailments, as observed by Atlas (1991), does not stem from differences between the meanings of the active and passive in English, as Atlas argues; rather, it reflects the questions under discussion (QUDs) each of these sentences can answer, in accordance with (7).

3. Non-IS analyses Four potential non-IS analyses of the pattern described above fail to account for the asymmetry between the configurations in (7), and in particular the unacceptability of (5)-(6). First, syntactic accounts of intervention, such as Pesetsky (2000), have nothing to say about this data since there is no syntactic difference between (3)-(4) and (5)-(6). Second, given Beck's (2006) assumption that focus-sensitive operators always attach to verbal projections and clausal nodes, her General Minimality Effect (9) is unable to distinguish between the two configurations: both should be illicit (10). Third, Büring's (2008) theory of focus realization predicts that (5)-(6) are acceptable, since they do not violate FOCUSPROMINENCE (11), as can be seen in (12). Lastly, pace Rooth (2010), there is no constraint which would rule out the metrical configuration represented by (5)-(6) on grounds of phonological ill-formedness, since the two foci are not adjacent (cf. Speyer's 2008 Clash Avoidance Requirement). Moreover, placing additional phonological material between the two foci does not have an effect on acceptability (13).

4. An IS approach I argue that the cause underlying the unacceptability of (5)-(6) is information structural: the subject in these examples cannot be mapped onto an appropriate IS category. Following Vallduví (1990), the IS of a sentence is divided into a focus and a ground, the latter partitioned into a topic-like link and tail. Any element outside the information focus must thus occupy the ground, but this is precluded in (5)-(6), as in (1)-(2). In both cases, the only-phrase surfacing in addition to the information focus cannot be the link due to its non-referential status (cf. Reinhart 1981). It is not a possible tail because subjects preceding the nuclear stress are incompatible with tailhood (Vallduví 1990); in addition, in (1)-(2) the only-phrase bears prosodic prominence, which is prohibited on tails. The same problem does not arise when the only-phrase follows the information focus ((3)-(4), (5A3), (6b), (14)) because it is then positioned in the domain of postnuclear deaccenting (cf. Féry & Ishihara 2009) and is not a prenuclear subject, enabling it to be (part of) the tail. This account is supported by the observation that the corresponding illicit sentence in Catalan (15A1) is made acceptable by overtly placing the only-phrase which is not an information focus in the right-dislocated position reserved for tails (15A2).

5. Conclusion The fact that the IS analysis proposed for wh- and alternative questions also captures the behavior of foci in declaratives strongly supports its validity as a general approach to intervention and contests existing alternatives. In addition, this paper provides evidence for the existence of a distinction between information foci and the associates of only-type operators (i.e. semantic foci), thus favoring pragmatic theories of focus association (Vallduví 1990, Rooth 1992, Schwarzschild 1997, a.o.), which make this distinction, over semantic theories (Rooth 1985, Krifka 1992), which do not. Only an analysis that recognizes the distinction, conceding that the associates of only-type operators need not be information foci, can account for the data presented here.
   Minsu-only who-ACC see-PAST-Q
b. nuku-lûl Minsu-man po-ass-ni?
   who-ACC Minsu-only see-PAST-Q
   'Who did only Minsu see?'

(2) Q: Does only John like Mary or Susan?

(3) Q: Who drank only beer?
   A: Only JOHN drank only beer. (small caps = pitch accent; italics = associates of only)

(4) It's not true that Mary drank only beer, only JOHN drank only beer.

(5) Q: What did only John drink?
   A1: *Only John drank only BEER.
   A2: ??Only John drank BEER.
   A3: Only BEER was drunk by only John.

(6) a. *It's not true that only John drank wine, only John drank only BEER.
   b. It's not true that only John drank wine, BEER was the only thing that only John drank.

(7) [... XP …] [... xp …] vs. */?*[… xp …] [... xp …]

(8) a. Only John eats only rice. (↔ No one other than John eats rice.)
   [QUD: Who eats only rice?, *What does only John eat?]  
   b. Only rice is eaten by only John. (↔ No one other than John eats rice.)
   [QUD: What does only John eat?/What is eaten by only John?]

(9) General Minimality Effect: The evaluation of alternatives introduced by an XP cannot skip an intervening ~ operator. (Beck 2006:17)

(10) *[Q/AC [~C [only][~D [only] [~E [John] drank beer]]]]]

(11) FOCUSPROMINENCE: If P is the domain of a focus sensitive operator O, the most prominent element in P is a focus of O. (Büring 2008:11)

PA
\[\]
\[
PA (PITCH ACCENT)
\]
\[*
\]*

(12) [[Only₁ John₁] drank [only₂ beer₂]-3 CC

(13) Q: What did only the secretary drink?
   A1: *Only the secretary drank only BEER.
   A2: ??Only the secretary drank only BEER.

(14) Q: Did JOHN or SUSAN invite only Mary?

(15) Q: Què va beure només el Joan?
   A1: *Només el Joan va beure només cervesa.
   only John drank only beer
   A2: Només cervesa, va beure només el Joan.
   only beer drank only John
   'Only beer, only John drank.'