

Focus particles and Alternatives

FLÓRA LILI DONÁTI

Eötvös Loránd University
School of English and American Studies

Focus Particles and Variation

What are focus particles?

Linguistic items sensitive to **focus placement** in a sentence.

Examples: *only, also, even, just, exclusively, merely, as well, in addition to*, etc.

(1) Katie **only** introduced Yasu to James.

- ▶ **Q:** How is this sentence ambiguous?
- ▶ **Hint:** The meaning changes based on which part of the sentence is in focus.

Focus Particles and Meaning Variation

- (2)
- a. Katie **only** introduced YASU_F to James.
⇒ Katie didn't introduce anyone else to James.
 - b. Katie **only** introduced Yasu to JAMES_F.
⇒ Katie didn't introduce Yasu to anyone else.

Why does this matter?

- ▶ The placement of focus (e.g., *Yasu vs. James*) directly affects the meaning.
- ▶ Focus particles interact with sentence structure to create different interpretations.

What is Focus?

Focus refers to a constituent in a sentence that is emphasized through grammatical means such as:

- ▶ **Prosodic salience**

(3) We saw a TIGER_F on the road.

- ▶ **Syntactic reordering**

(4) It was a TIGER_F that we saw on the road.

What is Focus?

Focus typically contributes **new** or **contrastive** information to the sentence.

- (5) a. (What did you see on the road?)
We saw a TIGER_F on the road.
- b. (Mary told me that you saw a lion on the road!)
No, we saw a TIGER_F on the road.

Focus Marking and Ambiguity

Focus marking can be ambiguous, as it can answer different questions depending on the size of the **scope of the focus**.

- (6) Mary bought a book about BATS.
- a. Mary bought a book about [_{NP} BATS]_F.
(What did Mary buy a book about?)
 - b. Mary bought a book [_{PP} about BATS]_F.
(What kind of book did Mary buy?)
 - c. Mary bought [_{NP} a book about BATS]_F.
(What did Mary buy?)
 - d. Mary [_{VP} bought a book about BATS]_F.
(What did Mary do?)
 - e. [_{TP} Mary bought a book about BATS]_F.
(What's up?)

Focus Marking Across Languages

Languages vary significantly in how they mark focus.

- ▶ In many languages, the **focused constituent** is the most prosodically prominent part of the sentence.
- ▶ English uses **pitch accent** to signal focus.

- (7) a. We saw a TIGER_F on the road.
b. We saw a tiger on the ROAD_F.

Q: How does this compare to other languages you know?

Focus Marking Across Languages

In some languages, focus is marked by a **morphological marker**, such as the focus marker *à* in Gùrùntùm (Nigeria), which precedes the focused element in a sentence.

- (8) A: *Who is chewing the colanut?*
B: **À** fúrmýò bà wúm kwálingálá.
FOC fulani PROG chew colanut
'The FULANI_F is chewing the colanut.'
- (9) A: *What is he chewing?*
B: Tí bà wúm **à** kwálingálá.
3SG PROG chew FOC colanut
'He is chewing COLANUT_F.'

Focus Marking Across Languages

Languages like Hungarian use **syntactic reordering** to mark focus, with a structural **focus position** directly in front of the verb.

- (10) a. Misi el aludt.
Misi VM-away slept
'Misi fell asleep.' (What happened?)
- b. MISI_F aludt el.
Misi slept VM-away
'MISI fell asleep.' (Who fell asleep?)

Finally, many languages, such as Slavic languages, German, Japanese, Korean, European Portuguese, and Finnish, use mixed strategies for marking focus.

Focus and Alternatives

Q: How does focus affect the meaning of a sentence?

- ▶ Focus can change the interpretation of a sentence by highlighting a specific part of it.
- ▶ When something is focused, it introduces **alternatives** or different possible propositions, depending on what part of the sentence is emphasized.

(11) MARY_F likes Sue.

Alternatives: *Anne likes Sue, Bella likes Sue, Cat likes sue...*

(12) Mary likes SUE_F.

Alternatives: *Mary likes Anne, Mary likes Bella, Mary likes Cat...*

The alternatives are essentially the same proposition as the original utterance, but with the focused element replaced.

Focus and Alternatives

Q: What can we replace the focused element with?

- ▶ They must be of the **same syntactic and semantic type** – we replace the focused element with something that can fit grammatically and meaningfully.
- ▶ The alternatives must be **contextually salient** – they must make sense in the given situation.

Focus and Alternatives

The examples below have the same literal meaning, but the alternatives differ, making them suitable in different contexts:

- (13) a. MARY_F likes Sue.
b. Mary likes SUE_F.

In these sentences, focusing affects the **felicity conditions** (whether the sentence is appropriate in a given context), but not the **literal meaning**.

Focus and Alternatives

But sometimes focusing has also effect on the literal meaning, when combined with some **focus sensitive particle**:

- (14) a. Katie **only** introduced YASU_F to James.
⇒ Alternatives: *Katie introduced Anne/Bella/Cat to James...*
- b. Katie **only** introduced Yasu to JAMES_F.
⇒ Alternatives: *Katie introduced Yasu to Anne/Bella/Cat...*

Variation of Focus Particles

Focus particles can be divided into two main types based on the information they provide about alternatives:

- (15) a. Katie **only** introduced YASU_F to James.
b. Katie introduced YASU_F to James, **too**.
Alternatives: *Katie introduced Anne/Bella/Cat to James...*

- ▶ **Exclusives** (e.g., *only, merely, just*)
All other alternatives are false.
⇒ *Katie didn't introduce anyone else to James.*
- ▶ **Additives** (e.g., *too, also, even*)
There is some alternative that is true.
⇒ *Katie introduced others to James as well.*

Focus not only categorizes alternatives but also interact with **different levels of meaning**.

Presuppositions and Levels of Meaning

Levels of Meaning: Sentences can convey multiple levels of meaning, including:

- ▶ The **asserted meaning**: The main content of the sentence that is explicitly uttered.
- ▶ The **presupposed meaning**: Conveyed, backgrounded information treated as an established fact.

- (16) Mary is reading *War and Peace* again.
- Asserted: Mary is reading *War and Peace*.
 - Presupposed: Mary has read *War and Peace* in the past.

Presuppositions and Levels of Meaning

Pragmatic Roles:

- ▶ The asserted meaning is typically the main point of the utterance.
- ▶ The presupposed meaning is backgrounded and not the main point of the conversation.

Note the question it can be an answer to:

- (17) A: Which book is Mary reading now?
A':#Which book has Mary read before?
B: Mary is reading *War and Peace* again.

Presuppositions and Levels of Meaning

Presupposition: An implicit assumption or background belief tied to an utterance, not explicitly uttered, but taken for granted in discourse.

- (18)
- a. Guillaume quit smoking.
presupposition: Guillaume used to smoke.
 - b. The King of France is bald.
presupposition: France has a king.
 - c. Bill reread War and Peace.
presupposition: Bill has read War and Peace before.
 - d. Lucy forgot to submit her homework.
presupposition: Lucy was supposed to submit her HW.
 - e. Masaya walks his dog in the morning.
presupposition: Masaya has a dog.

Exclusive particles

Only presupposes its **prejacent** (the sentence that *only* modifies) and asserts that it is the only true proposition among its alternatives.

- (19) **Only** KATIE_F danced.
- a. **Presupposition:** Katie danced.
 - b. **Assertion:** No one other than Katie danced.

Exclusive Particles

The word *only* has two main uses:

- ▶ **Non-scalar use:** Excludes alternatives.
- ▶ **Scalar use:** Highlights something as "less than expected."

- (20) a. **Only** KATIE_F won the silver medal.
b. Katie **only** won [THE SILVER MEDAL]_F.

What is a scale?

A scale organizes alternatives from weaker to stronger:

⟨no medal, bronze medal, silver medal, gold medal⟩

Exclusive Particles

This explains why the following sentences are infelicitous:

- (21) a. #Katie **only** won [THE GOLD MEDAL]_F.
b. #Katie **only** speaks [TWENTY THREE
LANGUAGES]_F.
c. #It is **only** [44 °C]_F today.

Exclusive Particles

The English word *only* can have a **temporal reading**:

(22) Carla **only** understood the problem on SATURDAY_F.

In languages like Dutch, there are distinct forms of *only* for different uses:

- ▶ Exclusive reading (e.g., *alleen*)
- ▶ Scalar reading (e.g., *maar*)
- ▶ Temporal reading (e.g., *pas*)

Exclusive Particles

Some exclusive particles, like *just* in English sometimes lack the exclusive meaning, and give rise to a **minimal sufficiency reading**:

- (23) a. **Just** a LETTER_F from her makes me happy.
b. **Only** a LETTER_F from her makes me happy.

Additive Particles

Additive focus particles, such as the English *too*, *also*, *as well*, *in addition* carry an **additive presupposition**.

(24) KATIE_F danced **too**.

Presupposition: Someone other than Katie danced.

Assertion: Katie danced.

Note that the assertion is identical to the prejacent, so *too* doesn't alter the literal meaning. Its role is to activate the presupposition that there is an additional dancer.

Negative Additive Particles

The English *either* works similarly to *too*, as it also triggers an additive presupposition, but it is restricted to **negative contexts**.

Like *too*, *either* doesn't affect the literal meaning; it only triggers a presupposition.

(25) KATIE_F didn't dance **either**.

Presupposition: Someone other than Katie didn't dance.

Assertion: Katie didn't dance.

Scalar Additive Particles

In addition to simple additives, many languages also have one or more **scalar additives**, like *even*, which triggers two presuppositions:

- (26) **Even** KATIE_F danced.
- Assertion: Katie danced.
 - Additive presupposition: Somebody other than Katie danced.
 - Scalar presupposition: Katie was unlikely to dance.

Scalar Additive Particles

The scalar presupposition, like that of *only*, places restrictions on what *even* can associate with, such that it sounds odd when used with items low on a scale.

(27) #The dean of the university has **even** graduated from [HIGH SCHOOL]_F.

There are also cases where the additive presupposition seems to be absent with *even* :

(28) Katie **even** won [THE GOLD MEDAL]_F.

Variation of Focus Particles

Certain focus particles can also have other functions – Serbian particles *i* and *ni* for example can function as coordination markers as well:

- (29) a. Sofija ne piše **i** pesme **i** priče.
Sofija NEG writes (and) poems.ACC and stories.ACC
'Sofija (doesn't) write(s) poems and/or stories'
- b. **I** Lea je uradila domaći.
FP Lea AUX.3SG do.PART homework.ACC
'Lea did the homework, too.'
'Even Lea did the homework.'

Variation of Focus Particles

Also the Japanese *mo* particle, meaning 'also/even' can have several other functions as well:

- (30)
- a. dare- mo
who MO
'everyone/anyone'
 - b. gakusei jyuu- nin- mo
student ten CL.PERSON MO
'as many as ten students'
 - c. Tetsuya- mo Akira- mo
Tetsuya MO Akira MO
'both Tetsuya and Akira'
 - d. Tetsuya- mo
Tetsuya MO
'also/even Tetsuya'

Q: Can you find similar examples from Hungarian?

Summary

- ▶ **Focus particles** are words or expressions that mark focus within a sentence.
- ▶ **Focus** is the part of a sentence that conveys new, contrastive, or important information.
- ▶ Languages mark focus by various means, including prosody, word order, and focus markers.
- ▶ Focus introduces **alternatives**, highlighting a set of possible propositions.

Summary

- ▶ Focus particles give us more information about these alternatives.
- ▶ They can be categorized into two types:
 - ▶ **Exclusives**: Indicate that all other alternatives are false.
 - ▶ **Additives**: Indicate that some other alternative is true.
- ▶ **Scalarity** ranks the alternatives on a scale, according to the expectedness of the alternatives.
- ▶ Synonymous particles can differ in their uses, and some focus particles in certain languages can have other uses as well.

Conclusion

- ▶ Focus and focus particles provide valuable insights across several areas of linguistics, including:
 - ▶ Phonology and intonation
 - ▶ Syntax and morphology
 - ▶ Semantics and pragmatics
- ▶ Different languages employ distinct strategies to mark focus, highlighting its cross-linguistic variability.
- ▶ Focus particles reveal how speakers often convey more than what is explicitly stated.
- ▶ Examining focus brings us closer to understanding:
 - ▶ How we interpret and process alternatives
 - ▶ How these alternatives are mentally represented
 - ▶ The mechanisms behind meaning comprehension