

Focus particles and Alternatives

FLÓRA LILI DONÁTI

Eötvös Loránd University
School of English and American Studies

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Today's plan:

1. What is Focus?
2. How languages mark focus
3. Focus and Alternatives
4. Focus Particles and Levels of Meaning

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

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- ▶ **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.

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- (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.

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(What did Mary do?)
 - e. $[_{TP} \text{ Mary bought a book about BATS}]_F$.
(What's up?)

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

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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 fel ébresztette Fifi.
Misi VM-away woke Fifi.ACC
'Misi woke up Fifi.'
 - b. MISI_F ébresztette fel Fifi.
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Finally, many languages, such as Slavic languages, German, Japanese, Korean, European Portuguese, and Finnish, use mixed strategies for marking focus.

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

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Not alternatives: *?An umbrella likes Sue*, *?Philosophy likes Sue*, *?The table likes Sue...*

Alternatives must fit **grammatically and meaningfully**.

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The alternatives must also be **contextually salient** – they must make sense in the given situation:

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Not alternatives: *#Shakespeare likes Sue, #The king of France likes Sue, #John Lennon likes Sue...*

Focus and Alternatives

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

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

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

But focusing can also affect the literal meaning, when combined with some **focus sensitive particle**:

(13) Katie **only** introduced YASU_F to James.

(14) Katie **only** introduced Yasu to JAMES_F.

Variation of Focus Particles

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

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

- (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...*

Focus not only categorises alternatives but also interacts with **different levels of meaning**.

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- (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.

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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.

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- a. **Presupposition:** Katie danced.
- b. **Assertion:** No one other than Katie danced.

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- Only** KATIE_F won the silver medal.
 - Katie **only** won the SILVER_F medal.

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A scale organises alternatives from weaker to stronger:

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

This explains why the following sentences are infelicitous:

- (21)
- a. #Katie **only** won [THE GOLD MEDAL]_F.
 - b. #Katie **only** speaks [23 LANGUAGES]_F.
 - c. #It is **only** [44 °C]_F today.

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Q: Can you imagine scenarios that render the above sentences felicitous?

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Languages like Dutch have distinct forms of *only* for different uses:

- (23) Suzanna wilde een aantal mensen uitnodigen, maar heeft uiteindelijk **alleen**/**maar*/**pas* [MARIE]_F uitgenodigd.
'Susan wanted to invite several people, but eventually she invited only Mary.'
- (24) Jan heeft **alleen*/**maar**/**pas* [DRIE]_F vingers aan zijn linkerhand.
'John has only three fingers on his left hand.'
- (25) Carla begreep het probleem **alleen*/**maar*/**pas** op [ZONDAG]_F.
'Carla only understood the problem on Sunday.'

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

- (26) a. **Just** a LETTER_F from her makes me happy.
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Q: In which scenario will a phone call from her make me happy?

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- a. **Presupposition:** Someone other than Katie danced.
- b. **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.

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 - c. **Assertion:** Katie danced.

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

- (31) 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:

- (32) 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:

- (33)
- a. dare- mo
who MO
'everyone/anyone'
 - b. gakusei jyu-u nin- mo
student ten CL.PERSON MO
'as many as ten students'
 - c. Tetsuya- mo Akira- mo
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Q: Can you find similar examples from Hungarian?

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- ▶ Synonymous particles can differ in their uses, and some focus particles in certain languages can have other uses as well.

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