The Common Ground is not enough: Why Focus-sensitivity matters for Presupposition triggers

EXPERIMENTS IN LINGUISTIC MEANING - SEPTEMBER 16-18, 2020

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Introduction: Trigger Variation

Presupposition triggers are heterogeneous class

- E.g. soft vs hard triggers differ in projection (Abusch 2010):

(1) a. I have no idea whether Haley ended up participating in the Road Race yesterday. But if she won it, then she has more victories than anyone else in history.

b. I have no idea whether Joe read that proposal. But if Gordon read it too, let’s ask them to confer and simply give us a yes-no response.
Empirical Scope

- Present work investigates role of Focus-sensitivity

**STANDARD DIAGNOSTIC:** stress-placement

(2) a. Gretchen *also* met \([\text{JIMMY}]_F\) at a wedding.
b. Gretchen *also* met Jimmy \([\text{at a WEDDING}]_F\).

→ PSP of *also* varies with Focus = *Focus-sensitive*

(3) a. Gretchen met \([\text{JIMMY}]_F\) at a wedding *again*.
b. Gretchen met Jimmy \([\text{at a WEDDING}]_F\) *again*.

→ PSP of *again* doesn’t vary with Focus ≠ *Focus-sensitive*
Hypothesis & Predictions

**Focus Presupposition Antecedent Hypothesis (FoPAH)**

- **FOCUS-sensitive**: Common Ground entailment
  + **FOCUS-sensitive**: Antecedent in Discourse Model

- **Prediction #1:**
  
  + **FOCUS**: subject to QUD-salience of antecedent
  - **FOCUS**: indifferent to QUD-salience

- **Prediction #2:**
  
  + **FOCUS** harder to accommodate than –**FOCUS**
Experiment 1: Design

(4)  
**Sample Item** (16 items, plus 12 fillers; N=35), 2x2

A₁:  When did Robert leave for school on Tuesday?
B₁:  He left the house around 8am.

(A₂:  When did he leave on Thursday?
B₂:  He got a stomach ache and stayed home.)

A₃:  When did he leave on Friday?
B₃a:  He also left the house around 8am on Friday.
B₃b:  He left the house around 8am again on Friday.

- **Method:**
  - each sentence presented on its own and read in self-paced fashion
  - after final sentence, asked to rate comprehension difficulty on 7-point scale (with 1 being hard and 7 being easy)
Experiment 1: Rating & RT Results
Experiment 2: Design

(5) Sample Item (18 items split across trigger pairs, plus 62 fillers; N=48)

A: Who is having dinner in New York tomorrow?
   a. B: Saul is having dinner in New York. CONTROL
   b. B: Saul is having dinner in New York again. -FOCUS
   c. B: Saul is having dinner in New York too. +FOCUS

(6) a. A: What’s Mary been up to recently?
     B: She’s (still/even) on vacation.

   b. A: What did Jack do last winter?
      B: (At least) he flew (back) to Chicago for Christmas.

   c. A: What did Sue do yesterday?
      B: She (continued building/only built/Ø built) a tree house.
Experiment 2: Total & Split Rating Results
Takeaways

- Main findings, supporting hypothesis:

  1) +FOCUS subject to interference, -FOCUS is not
  2) +FOCUS harder to accommodate than -FOCUS

- Same kind of meaning (=PSPs) accesses distinct representations, depending on other property (=Focus-sensitivity)

- Novel contrast btw. again & also/too, which pattern together in previous distinctions (e.g. Abusch)
More details and experiments can be found in my thesis, which you can access [here](#)!