

INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES TO LANGUAGE AND ITS USE

Questions, focus, alternatives: An overview

Radek Šimík



FACULTY OF ARTS
Charles University

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

- Questions are the major linguistic tool for expressing
 - 1 what one doesn't know (ignorance),
 - 2 wants to know, and
 - 3 wants to find out from the hearer.
- Answers are the major tool for
 - 1 passing on new information
 - 2 which is relevant to the hearer.
- To be discussed:
 - What kinds of questions are there?
 - What is their meaning?
 - How do their meaning correspond to the meaning of the answers?

Hagstrom 2003

Focus

- Focus plays a major role in answers to questions.
- (1B₁) and (1B₂) have the same semantic meaning.
- (1B₁) is relevant and (1B₂) is not. Why?

(1) A Who helped you with the assignment?

B₁ [Sue]_F helped me with the assignment.

B₂ #Sue helped me with the [ASSIGNMENT]_F.

- To be discussed:
 - Semantic and pragmatic meaning of focus
 - Question–answer correspondence

Rooth 1985; Krifka 2001

USES OF FOCUS

- Focus is used for question–answer congruence

(2) A Who helped you?
B [DAVE]_F helped me.

- But also in combination with so-called focus particles such as *only*:

(3) a. Dave *only* [HELPED me]_F.
 ↪ Dave didn't do anything else.
 b. Dave *only* helped [ME]_F.
 ↪ Dave didn't help anybody else.

- To be discussed:
 - What role do focus alternatives play in different uses?
 - What is the semantics of focus particles and their ASSOCIATION WITH FOCUS?

FOCUS ALTERNATIVES IN THE MIND

To be discussed:

- Spalek et al. (2014)
- particles activate focus alternatives
- better recall of alternatives

REFERENCES

- Beaver, David & Brady Clark. 2008. *Sense and sensitivity: How focus determines meaning*. Wiley-Blackwell. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444304176>.
- Hagstrom, Paul. 2003. What questions mean. *Glott International* 7(7–8). 188–201.
- Krifka, Manfred. 2001. For a structured meaning account of questions and answers. In Caroline Féry & Wolfgang Sternefeld (eds.), *Audiatur vox sapientiae: A festschrift for Arnim von Stechow*, 287–319. Berlin: Akademie-Verlag.
- Rooth, Mats. 1985. *Association with focus*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts dissertation. <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/dissertations/AA18509599>.
- Rooth, Mats. 1992. A theory of focus interpretation. *Natural Language Semantics* 1(1). 75–116. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02342617>.
- Spalek, Katharina, Nicole Gotzner & Isabell Wartenburger. 2014. Not only the apples: Focus sensitive particles improve memory for information-structural alternatives. *Journal of Memory and Language* 70. 68–84. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jml.2013.09.001>.