

INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES TO LANGUAGE AND ITS USE

Focus: Definition and formal encoding

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FOCUS

Information structural notions

- topic-comment
- given-new
- focus-background

We will approach the notion of focus (and background) via **questions**.

FOCUS DEFINITION

Focus

Rooth 1985; Krifka 2008

A FOCUSED expression indicates the relevance of alternative meanings of the same type. Whatever is not focused is called the BACKGROUND.

Question–answer pairs

- (1) A Who cooked the soup?
B DAVE_{focus} [cooked the soup]_{background}.

Alternatives to the focused constituent:

- (2) {Dave, Ben, Sue, ...}

FORMAL ENCODING OF FOCUS: PROSODY

Stress–focus correspondence

Daneš 1959; Chomsky 1971; Selkirk 1984

Focus contains sentence stress.

- (3) a. A Who did Dave write a letter to?
B Dave wrote a letter to [his BROTHER]_F.
- b. A What did Dave write to his brother?
B Dave wrote [a LETTER]_F to his brother.
- c. A Who wrote a letter to his brother?
B [DAVE]_F wrote a letter to his brother.
- d. A What did Dave write?
B Dave wrote [a letter to his BROTHER]_F. SF+NSR
- e. A What did Dave do?
B Dave [wrote a letter to his BROTHER]_F. SF+NSR

FORMAL ENCODING OF FOCUS: WORD ORDER?

Free word order languages like Czech appear to utilize word order for the expression of focus; but on a second look, prosody turns out to be more important.

Daneš 1957; Šimík & Wierzba 2017; Hamlaoui et al. 2019

(4) A Kdo napsal ten dopis?
who wrote that letter
'Who wrote the letter?'

B₁ Ten dopis napsal [DAVID]_F.
that letter wrote David
'David wrote the letter.'

✓STRESS FOCUS ✓NSR

B₂ [DAVID]_F napsal ten dopis.
David wrote that letter
'David wrote the letter.'

✓STRESS FOCUS ✗NSR

B₃ #Ten DOPIS napsal [David]_F.
that letter wrote David
'David wrote the letter.'

✗STRESS FOCUS ✓NSR

READING TIP

- Wagner, Michael. 2021. Prosodic focus. In Daniel Gutzmann, Lisa Matthewson, Cécile Meier, Hotze Rullmann, and Thomas E. Zimmermann (eds.) *The Wiley Blackwell companion to semantics*. John Wiley & Sons. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118788516.sem133>
- Hamlaoui, Fatima, Marzena Żygis, Jonas Engelmann, and Michael Wagner. 2019. Acoustic correlates of focus marking in Czech and Polish. *Language and Speech* 62(2), 358–377. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0023830918773536>
- Szendrői, Kriszta. 2017. Focus movement. In Martin Everaert and Henk van Riemsdijk (eds.), *The Wiley Blackwell companion to syntax, Second edition*. John Wiley & Sons. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118358733.wbsyncom100>

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- Szendrői, Kriszta. 2017. Focus movement. In Martin Everaert & Henk van Riemsdijk (eds.), *The Wiley Blackwell companion to syntax, Second edition*, John Wiley & Sons. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118358733.wbsyncom100>.
- Wagner, Michael. 2021. Prosodic focus. In Daniel Gutzmann, Lisa Matthewson, Cécile Meier, Hotze Rullmann & Thomas E. Zimmermann (eds.), *The Wiley Blackwell companion to semantics*, John Wiley & Sons. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118788516.sem133>.