

What's New (And What's Given) in the Theory of Focus?

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Rooth (1992) and Schwarzschild (1999) each present a semantic/pragmatic mechanism to interpret focus, the former based on alternatives, the latter on givenness. The two accounts look (and are often presented in the literature as) very different, but the differences turn out to be rather minimal, conceptually and empirically. In particular, both effectively reduce the notion of contrast to givenness, and seem to find no use for a 'stronger' notion of contrast (although this, too, is not always clearly recognized in the literature). In the first half of this talk I substantiate these claims by way of presenting a hybrid theory that, I argue, subsumes both Rooth's and Schwarzschild's accounts.

Kehler (2005) and Wagner (2006) discuss different examples that present challenges to Schwarzschild's (and thus arguably: Rooth's) account. Though the theories they outline to meet these challenges differ from their predecessors's in various ways, I think the main point of departure is that they require a stronger notion of contrast (again, not a new claim by any means, see e.g. Vallduví and Vilkuna, 1998, but never as convincingly argued). I thus explore how a stronger notion of contrast could be integrated in the theory presented in the first half of the talk, and how that could capture Kehler's and Wagner's examples, as well as some novel ones.

My main aim is to show where and why exactly one needs to depart from the Rooth/Schwarzschild approach, while abstracting away from what I thinks are orthogonal points, such as the question whether to mark F(ocus) or G(ivenness) in the grammar. A subordinate aim, though, is to present at least some suggestive arguments for choosing to mark F, rather than G.

References

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