Comparing English and Hungarian Focus

This contribution is about a number of clear-cut differences between English and Hungarian Focus. A DRT-based analysis of Hungarian Focus is proposed, whose primary aim is to see how DRT as a framework can be exploited, as it were, to account for crosslinguistic differences in the semantic or pragmatic properties of focusing.

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Prosodically marked English Focus need not be exhaustive. On the other hand, a constituent in the Hungarian Focus position will be exhaustive:

(1) a. John is in love with [a singer] \(_F\). And with [a dancer] \(_F\), too.
   
   b. János [egy énekésnőbe] \(_F\) szerelmes. #És egy tánocsnőbe is.
   
   “It is a singer John is in love with. #And with a dancer, too”

As seen from the paraphrase, the contribution of Hungarian Focus is more like that of English clefting than that of prosodic Focus. Nevertheless, this paper will concentrate English Focus. This is motivated by the fact that in both languages Focus is an important factor in question-answer congruence; it is assumed, as in Roberts (1998), that Hungarian Focus is a proper subclass of Information Focus (defined e.g. by question–answer congruence).

Whether English Focus is presuppositional is an open question (Rooth (1999)). Hungarian Focus on the other hand is presuppositional. (The following is intended as a continuation of (1b), and is appropriate only as a denial of the presupposition of that sentence):

(2) #Nem lehet, János nem szeret senkit. “This cannot be, John doesn’t love anyone.”

As regards variable binding, Weak Crossover tests for English Focus are at least inconclusive (cf. Rooth (1996) and the references cited there). In Hungarian, however, Focus does show Weak Crossover effects. This supports the claim (found e.g. in É.Kiss (1994)) that Hungarian Focus involves a covert operator.

(3) a. Her professor said that [a maths student] \(_F\) received an A.
   
   b. ??A tanárak szerint [egy matekhallgató] \(_F\) kapott jelszót.
   
   The prof.-Ps3Sg acc.-to [one maths-stud.] \(_F\) got A-Acc.
   
   “According to her professor, it was a maths student who got an A.”

In Hungarian, Focus and its presupposition obey the so-called Scope Principle (É.Kiss (1994)): linear order marks scope order. This is so even with proper names in Focus:

(4) a. Minden fiú [Marit] \(_F\) szereti. “For every boy \(x\), it is Mary whom \(x\) loves.”
   
   b. [Marit] \(_F\) szereti minden fiú. “Mary is the person loved by every boy”.

In English, however, it is not clear that Focus cannot have wide scope:

(5) If [a semanticist] \(_F\) owns a donkey, he treats it well.

In Hungarian a constituent in Focus position does not readily license pronominal anaphora (whereas English has no such prohibition):

(6) János [egy énekésnőbe] \(_F\) szerelmes. #Kedvenc szerepe a Donna Elvira.
   
   “It is a singer whom John loves. Her favourite role is Donna Elvira.”

We take this inventory of cases to show that, as regards properties relevant for a sentence internal formal semantic analysis (viz one that abstracts away from issues of context and discourse structure), English and Hungarian Focus differ as regards exhaustivity, presuppositionality and variable binding.

The Analysis

The primary aim of the analysis of Hungarian Focus presented here is to highlight those factors that may be responsible for crosslinguistic variation. This investigation is therefore based on the DRT-based analysis of English Focus from Kamp (1999). The intention is that many of the differences between focusing in these languages should be read off of the representations used; also, this crosslinguistic variation is not to be captured by ad hoc means.
Kamp (1999) is a hybrid framework (in that it mingles elements of Alternative Semantics with a Structured Meanings approach). Crucially, it makes use of a rich structure of so-called preliminary representations, where the DRS for a sentence encapsulates DRS-es contributed by presuppositions and Focus. Roughly, the Focus-Background division of (7a) is represented as (7b) (square brackets enclose DRS-es, presuppositions are surrounded by \( \{ \} \)).

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{(7)} & \quad \text{a. John is in love with [a singer]_F} \\
& \quad \text{b. } [x \mid \text{singer}(x) ; \langle [C', \beta \mid C'(\beta)] \rangle , \quad \langle [\alpha \mid C'(\alpha) ; \alpha \# \beta] ; [s \mid s: j \text{ loves } \alpha] \parallel [\mid \alpha = x] \rangle]
\end{align*}
\]

(7b) says that there is a presupposed alternative set \( C' \), a singer \( x \), and a set of alternative propositions of the form \( j \text{ loves } \alpha \) (in state \( s \)); this set also serves as the Focus Frame, or the Background. Then the proposition that \( \text{John loves singer } x \) is one of these alternative propositions. The Focus-Background structure enclosed in \( \langle \rangle \) forms part of a preliminary representation; the Background is a piece of pragmatic information contained in the semantic representation of the sentence. At a later stage of processing it is in principle possible to merge the Background with the representation of preceding context. Thus (7b) is reducible to an ordinary representation (Rooth (1985)).

The analysis of Hungarian Focus differs from the English case in the following respects: (i) the ‘Background’ has the status of a presupposition (hence the \( \{ \} \)-s); (ii) exhaustivity is encoded with abstraction (\( \Sigma \)); the constituent in Focus is entered locally, as part of the Focus structure itself.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{(8)} & \quad \text{a. János [egy énekesnőbe]_F szerelmes.} \\
& \quad \text{ ("It is a singer John is in love with".)} \\
& \quad \text{b. } \langle [C' / s \alpha \mid s: j \text{ loves } \alpha ; C'(\alpha) ; \alpha = \Sigma \alpha', \alpha' / s \mid s: j \text{ loves } \alpha'] \rangle , \\
& \quad \quad \langle [x \mid C'(x) ; \text{singer}(x) ; x = \alpha] \rangle
\end{align*}
\]

This analysis yields correct results for constituent negation, and it also accounts for the scopal ‘alignment’ of Hungarian Focus (cf. (4)), and for the fact that quantifying NPs cannot occur in Focus position (Roberts (1998)).

An issue for further research is how the structure in \( \langle \rangle \) is held together, so to speak. There is evidence that such a structure cannot be reduced by merge (as in the case of English): (i) Focus in Hungarian does not license pronominal anaphora (cf. (6)). Here, this is captured by taking the constituent in Focus to contribute to a subordinate DRS — If (8b) could be reduced to a somewhat more ordinary representation, and if the contribution of the material in Focus could be percolated to a higher level, this would incorrectly allow for pronominal anaphora.

(ii) The absence of attributive readings with anaphoric presuppositions: If the presupposition of Focus has an antecedent in discourse (say, (8a) is preceded by a sentence that means “John is in love”), and if one assumes that presuppositions can be bound off, as in Sandt (1992), then one would expect (8a) to have an attributive reading only: It is predicted that in this context, the new information conveyed by the sentence is that the person John loves has the property of being a singer (plus the exhaustivity condition, of course). Now this is not so, as (8) can have a non-attributive reading in this context; this is taken to indicate that the presupposition–Focus structure stays as it is. This tallies with the Weak Crossover facts and what they are indicative of, viz Hungarian Focus involves a covert operator. At this stage of research we have no ready formal solution (apart from stipulating an \( \text{ad hoc } \mathcal{F} \) operator), but we think that (7b) and (8b) as they are can highlight the relevant points where the two languages differ. They also show the potential of working with preliminary representations, where for instance the (non)availability of merging may be used to encode crosslinguistic variation.

References


\(^1\)The reader can check that universal quantification over alternatives, i.e. a covert only operator would yield wrong results when Focus contains constituent negation, as in Hungarian equivalents of “It is not a singer John is in love with, but a singer and a dancer”.


