Comments to "Interpreting Focus" by Bart Geurts and Rob van der Sandt

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Abstract

After a brief summary of the main results of the paper, I will comment on the authors' account of NPIs in the scope of 'only'. A final brief observation suggests that the semantic analysis of "too" should be stronger than the authors propose.

1. The proposal, in a nutshell

Focusing has the effect to divide sentence material into background B and focus F. This core insight is implemented in one way or another in all semantic/pragmatic treatments of focus phenomena that were proposed over the last decades. Does focusing also give rise to a presupposition to the end that there exists some x for which the background property $B(x)$ holds true? The debate with respect to this aspect was more controversial (see e.g. Rooth 1999) and has resulted in the tacit agreement to refrain from positing a general presupposition for focus, leaving it as a case-by-case exercise to decide whether some focus sensitive operator should introduce an existential presupposition as one of its pragmatic effects. Geurts and van der Sandt (henceforth: 'the authors') propose that this strategy misses an important generalization and claim that focusing does give rise to existential presupposition (*Background-Presupposition Rule BPR*). They claim that the consequences of this hypothesis have so far been misapprehended because earlier investigations lacked an appropriate theory of presupposition projection. On the basis of van der Sandt (1992), they set out to defend the BPR. Firstly, they demonstrate the observable effects of focus in various presupposition blocking and presupposition

projecting constructions. As such effects arise regularly and show the same patterns as presuppositions that are generated by other constructitons, this strongly supports the BPR. Secondly, the authors show that the BPR in their specific version can account for focus in association with quantification in a more balanced manner than earlier theories. Thirdly, they re-examine the semantics of focus particles like 'only' and 'too' under their new view on focus. Finally, they argue that the objections against the BPR that were raised by previous authors can be invalidated.

Van der Sandt (1992) treats presuppositions as a kind of complex anaphoric element. The places where they can be 'bound' (= satisfied) or accommodated are restricted by the same principles as anaphora resolution (Kamp and Reyle, 1993) Most importantly, presupposition binding can refer to existent discourse referents. This allows to resolve an existential presupposition "that there be some x such that $\phi(x)$" by attributing the property ϕ to some given discourse referent. This offers a treatment for examples like in (1) (= Geurts and van der Sandt's (19)).

(1)   Someone managed to succeed George V on the throne of England
      Correct psp: Someone succeeded George V and it was difficult for
      him to do so
      Wrong psp: Someone succeeded George V and it was difficult for
      someone to succeed George V on the throne of England.

The same feature can also be exploited in analysing sentences like (2) (= (26))

(2)   Beryl always drinks [sherry]$_F$.

Previous DRT-based treatments of such cases could be paraphrased roughly by "Whenever there is a drinking e by Beryl of something x, then Beryl drinks sherry in e". While it is not impossible to formulate an interpretation rule for focus sensitive 'always' that does the job (e.g. Rooth 1995, Krifka 2001), the consequences of such a stipulation run counter to several generalizations in the semantics of NP interpretation.

(a)   The rule requires that an indefinite NP is interpreted as refering to
      an old discourse referent. This stands against an otherwise univer-

sally valid observation that indefinite NPs introduce novel discourse referents.

(b)   The problem is not restricted to indefinites in focus. In more complicated examples like ''An arm is always attached to the LEFT shoulder'' (ex. 7, empirically false), the authors argue that one need to requantify over the unfocussed ''an arm'', following the paraphrase ''always when an arm is attached to some shoulder, *this/*an* arm is attached to the *left* shoulder''.

(c)   A further observation in favour of the account, not mentioned in the paper itself, consists in the fact that the same kind of effect arises for nominal quantifiers (e.g. Eckardt (1999)). This is more serious than the adverbial case. Adverbials do not define a syntactic position for their restrictor and scope and therefore might be forced to refer to focus structure to recover their arguments. Determiners, however, stand in fixed syntactic relations to their semantic arguments. It is unclear why they should have a focus-sensitive counterpart.

The authors propose that association of focus with quantifiers can in fact be treated as normal quantification, in interaction with the existential presupposition triggered by focus. In their account, there is no need to overwrite the common rules of NP interpretation; the only additional focus effect consists in contributing an existential presupposition which is evaluated according to general principles.

This application sets the authors' proposal aside from other proponents of an existential presupposition for focus. Their treatment of other examples of focus and presupposition projection and blocking in section four does not, as they themselves point out, show any peculiarities. I therefore will not recapitulate their discussion. Instead, I shall take a closer look at their semantic treatment of 'only' and 'too' in the next two sections.

2.   'only' a problem?

Assuming the BPR, Geurts and van der Sandt operate on the basis of pragmatically ''active'' focus. It is to be expected that focus sensitive operators can now be given a leaner semantic analysis, and the authors

discuss 'only' as a first case in question. They carefully argue that a sentence like (3) asserts, rather than presupposes, the sentence in (4). What meaning does 'only' contribute?

(3)   Only WILMA guessed the secret word.
(4)   Wilma guessed the secret word.

Building on work by Horn, the authors propose that 'only' is basically a reversed universal quantifier.

(5)   [[Only A B]] := All (B) (A)

They then, surprisingly, proceed to the logically equivalent representation in (6).

(6) $\neg \exists x\ (\neg A(x)\ \&\ B(x))$

As a primary reason for this move, the authors point out that the natural language quantifier 'all' presupposes that its restrictor be non-empty ("there are B"). According to the BPR, however, the focus construction already introduces the existential presupposition "there is an x such that B". Therefore, the authors argue, there is no need to attribute this presupposition to the meaning of 'only'. A flat and presupposition free semantic contribution like in (6) together with the existential presupposition of focus will yield the correct literal contribution of the sentence: A does B, and no one else does B.

   At this point, I think, the authors fail to distinguish between the *natural language* word 'all' and the *logical operator* $\forall$. While 'all' denotes $\forall$ and in addition presupposes that its restrictor be nonempty, the logical operator itself is neutral with respect to presupposition (and even part of an ontology – predicate logic – where presuppositions might be unknown). If we assume that 'only' denotes (a functional version of) $\forall$, we do not committ ourselves to any extra presupposition. In this light, the move from (5) to (6) might just be superfluous.[1]

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[1]   The discussion is led in terms of 'weak' and 'strong' quantifiers, which seems not very helpful here. Even if 'only' were a quantifier, it would be one which contradicts the common division of labour, namely that the nominal complement contribute the restrictor, and the "rest of the sentence" the nuclear scope. This cross-cuts important classification criteria of weak/strong determiners. It is hence unclear in what sense the notion "strong quantifier" should apply or not apply to 'only'.

The authors, however, aim at a more substantial application of this replacement of one representation by another, logically equivalent one. They report data from Horn which seem to show that not only the second, but also the first argument of 'only' can host negative polarity items, as wittnessed in (7a).[2]

(7) Only A B
a. Only [students who <u>ever</u> read <u>anything</u> of the reading list]$_A$ [are admitted]$_B$.
b. Only [professors]$_A$ [<u>ever</u> pass this test]$_B$.

Applying the standard test for NPI-licensing contexts, downward monotonicity, one would expect that B constitutes a good context for NPIs but A does not. How, then, is (7.a) possible?

Geurts and van der Sandt propose that the answer lies in the step from (5) to (6). This in itself would be surprising. According to general agreement, all normal contexts[3] that can host NPIs are defined by their semantic properties and not by configurational properties like, whether there be at least one negation sign which has scope over that context. An equivalent replacement of one representation by another should, however, not change the semantic properties of a context.

Let us have a closer look at the examples offered by the authors, which are repeated below:

(8) Only the students who had ever read anything about polarity passed the test.
(9) Only the guests who had seen any of the suspects were questioned.

A semantic representation of (8) like suggested in (6) should proceed as follows:

(10) [: ¬ [x : pass-the-test(x) & ¬ [<u>y : student(y) & read-any-polarity(y)</u>]]]

The underlined material originates from the definite NP and requires accommodation. As it stands, the NPI context is embedded under two

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[2] the negative polarity item is underlined.
[3] I want to exclude NPI uses that are unlicensed conventionalized remnants of earlier systematic examples. The examples that are offered in the paper are productive.

negations. This should not suffice to license it, unless we want to predict that any sentence licenses NPIs (after all, there is always $S = \neg\neg S$). More substantially, however, I will presently demonstrate that examples with a similar semantic representation fail to license NPIs. Therefore the constellation in (10) does not suffice to license 'anything on polarity'.

If we assume global accommodation, as supported by our intuitions about the meaning of (8), we will end up with (11). Here, the NPI context is not in the scope of negation at all.

(11)   [x : students(x) & read-any-polarity(x) &
         $\neg$ [z : z $\neq$ x & pass-the-test(z)]]

Together with the presupposition that someone passed the test, (11) will yield the correct reading. But it can not explain NPI licensing.

We can produce *some* semantic representation from (10) that locates the NPI material under exactly one negation, namely the one in (12):

(12)   [: $\neg$ [x, y : pass-the-test(x) & students(y) & read-any-polarity(y) &
         x $\neq$ y]]

The representation in (12) can be paraphrased as "there are no x, y such that x passed the test, y is a student that read anything about polarity, and x is inequal y". The structure is, as far as I can see, neither the primary semantic representation of (8) nor its final one, because the referent of "the students" should be available for further anaphoric reference, but the discourse referent y in (12) is not. Therefore (12) does not reflect the meaning of (8) even though it would license the NPI. The original suspicion that it can not suffice to replace one semantic representation by another one in order to license NPIs seems to have been justified.

The puzzle itself remains. Why are (8) and (9) good examples? A closer inspection suggests that the solution might lie in a different direction, again with repercussions on the semantic representation of 'only'. Crucially, not any sentence of the form 'only A B' licenses NPIs in A.

(13)   a.   Only some guy who had sometimes / *ever been to China
             knew the answer.
       b.   Only three girls who knew something about syntax /*anything
             about syntax passed the test.

If the authors were right in their account for examples like (7a) as well as (8)/(9), they should predict that (13a) receives the following interpretation:

(14)   [: ¬ [x : knew-the-answer(x) & ¬ [: guy(x) & was-at-China(x,t) & **some time(t)**]]]

In this representation, two negations have scope over the putative NPI context (in boldface). At this point it can be seen clearly that these negations do not suffice to license the NPI 'ever'.

    I'd like to suggest that the examples discussed by Geurts and van der Sandt share a generic or pseudo-generic flavour. This becomes apparent if we look at (near) paraphrases in b.:

(8)   a.   Only the students who had ever read anything about polarity passed the test.
       b.   Those/all students who had ever read anything about polarity passed the test.
(9)   a.   Only the guests who had seen any of the suspects were questioned.
       b.   Those/all guests who had seen any of the suspects were questioned.

Importantly, the definite NPs in (8) and (9) seem to function as identification of the category of persons who passed the test, or were questioned. Appositive modifications do not license NPIs, as witnessed in (15):

(15)   *Only the female students, who cleverly had read anything about syntax, passed the test.
      *Only Bill and Bob, who had read anything about syntax, passed the test.
      *Only the twins who had read anything about syntax passed the test.
      (assuming that there is only one couple of twins in class).

As long as we adhere to the generic pattern, new examples of the same type can be produced freely, but whenever we seriously deviate from this pattern, unacceptable examples will result. Hence, the solution to the puzzling examples in (8) and (9) might lie in a direction that requires yet

another evaluation of the semantic potential of 'only'. Consider for one final time an example like (16):

(16)   Only the guests who had had any fish salad became ill.
    a.   All the guests who had had any fish salad became ill.
    b.   No guests different from those became ill.

Geurts and van der Sandt derive the overall meaning of a sentence like (16) by combining the presupposition that "there is someone who became ill" with the assertion that "there were no persons other than the guests who had had any fish salad that became ill". The NPI data suggest that in fact, we have to count with the two assertions in (16.a) and (16.b). An NPI can be licensed either because the bare sentence (here: 16.a) licenses it, or because it is licensed by 'only', i.e. the (b) assertion. This conforms with other examples:

(17)   Only the bravest knight that will ever enter my castle shall marry my daughter.
    The bravest knight that will ever enter my castle shall marry my daughter.
    (NPI licensing by bare statement)

    Only the bravest knight shall ever marry my daughter.
    *The bravest knight shall ever marry my daughter.
    (NPI licensing by 'only')

If this line of thinking were correct, how does it relate to the account given in the paper? The main contribution of Geurts and van der Sandt may lie in their bold defense of the assumption that if we utter "only A do B", then we *assert* rather than *presuppose* that "A do B". The authors are well aware of the fact that "A do B" behaves like a presupposition in negation tests. They propose that the wellknown semantic effects of 'only' under negation can be captured by an optimality based argument to the end that "if we utter a complex negative sentence that in part overlaps with a simpler negative sentence in meaning, we are understood to convey the information that would *not* be covered by that simpler negative sentence". Even though, as the authors themselves state, this mechanism is not yet fully understood in its range and consequences, the data with NPIs under 'only' could offer a reason to take the proposal very serious.

3.   Too weak: 'too'

The authors proceed to the focus sensitive particle 'too' and discuss its properties. In particular, they address the following kind of examples:

(18)   If Bob will come, then the BOSS$_F$ will come too.

(19)   Fred may be staying at the Ritz, and [Barney]$_F$ is at the Ritz, too.

Building on earlier work of Kripke, Geurts and van der Sandt state that (18) implies that Bob is not the Boss, and that (19) is acceptable even though Barney might turn out to be the only (relevant) person at the Ritz. In answer to these facts, the authors propose an extremely parsimonious analysis of 'too'. While I have no proper solution for the sentences in question at hand, I want to point out that the proposal as it stands seems to be too weak.

   Geurts and van der Sandt claim that the only presuppositions that arise in the use of 'too' are (a) an existential presupposition created by focus, and (b) a presupposition to the end that the focussed element must be different from some other object. The overall mechanism is illustrated in their example (63), which I repeat for convenience.

(20)   (= (63)) a. Fred may be staying at the Ritz, and Barney$_F$ is staying at the Ritz, too.
   b.   [x: Fred(x), $\diamond$[: stay-at-R(x)],
         u: Barney(u), stay-at-R(u), <u>v: v $\neq$ u</u>, <u>stay-at-R(v)</u>]
   c.   [x: Fred(x), $\diamond$[: stay-at-R(x)],
         u: Barney(u), x $\neq$ u, stay-at-R(u), <u>stay-at-R(v)</u>]
   d.   [x: Fred(x), $\diamond$[: stay-at-R(x)],
         u: Barney(u), x $\neq$ u, stay-at-R(u)]

The same analysis will in principle also license discourses that are highly pragmatically marked, like the following:

(21)   ?#There is Fred, and [Barney]$_F$ is staying at the Ritz, too.

In analogy to the authors' analysis in (63), this sequence should receive the following representation:

(22)   a.   [x: Fred(x), u: Barney(u), stay-at-Ritz(u), <u>v: v $\neq$ u</u>, <u>stay-at-Ritz(v)</u>]

b.   resolution of first presupposition, v = x.
[x: Fred(x), u: Barney(u), stay-at-Ritz(u), x ≠ u, <u>stay-at-Ritz(v)</u>]
c.   Resolution of second presupposition. Who is staying at the Ritz? – Barney.
[x: Fred(x), u: Barney(u), stay-at-Ritz(u), x ≠ u]

This is clearly an unwelcome result. A sentence containing 'too' should not be licensed by the mere fact that other discourse referents are already available. Even though 'too' sometimes responds to speculations, propositional attitudes and possibilities rather than real facts, the decision to allow a sentence to bind its own presupposition seems to overdo the point.

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