Focus and Topic in a Complex Model of Discourse

(1) phrase marker Vallduví
non-focus focus background focus

(2) a. An F-marked constituent is prosodically realized by an F-accent on its most prominent syllable.

b. A T-marked constituent is prosodically realized by a T-accent on its most prominent syllable.

c. For any domain D, σ is the most prominent syllable of D iff
   i. σ bears the lexical accent of some word W in D
   ii. W is lexical
   iii. W is the head of the rightmost maximal projection in D (if YP dominates XP, XP is “to the right” of YP).

(3) Every statement ever made is the answer to some (perhaps implicit) question. That question is the Question Under Discussion or QUD.

Focus?
For a sentence S with focus, replace focus with wh-word and form question. Congruence requirement: the question just formed must be the QUD.

Topic?
• Signals deviance from the QUD:

(4) Q What did the pop stars wear?
A The female pop stars wore caftans. (…but that’s all I noticed)

The female pop stars wore caftans would not have been congruent (it answers the QUD What did the female pop stars wear?)

The deviation is replacing pop stars with female pop stars, so mark T.

• Induces implicatures.

(5) Q Where were you at the time of the murder?
A I was at home.

I was at home would have been fine. But by saying I was at home you invite the question Where was the gardener?

• Does “funny things” to the truth conditions (via scope disambiguation).

(6) Q Are all politicians corrupt?
A All politicians are not corrupt.

All politicians are not corrupt would allow either “all-not” or “not-all” readings (maybe preferring all-not, at least in German), but All politicians are not corrupt disambiguates to not-all. Or so Büring says, anyway.

Question to ponder: This is quite a different way to think of topics—it isn’t clear how it relates to topic as “old information”. Are we talking about the same thing we were talking about before?

Basic idea, a pretty elegant theory circa 1997.

Given a sentence A…
• Form the F-question A’ by replacing the F-marked constituent with a question word (and performing appropriate syntax).
• Form the T-value A’, a set of questions obtainable as F-questions with type-identical things replacing the T-marked constituent.

So:

Q What did the pop stars wear?
A The female pop stars wore caftans.

A The [female] pop stars wore [caftans].

A’ What did the female pop stars wear?
A’ { What did the female pop stars wear?, What did the male pop stars wear?, What did the male or female pop stars wear? }

Congruence condition:
For A to be congruent to QUD,
 a. QUD must be an element of A’, and
 b. if A contains T-marking, some question in A’ must remain open to serve as the new QUD.

Pop stars—fine, the new QUD can be What did the male pop stars wear?

Murder—by using topic marking you communicate that something else in the set should be under discussion, e.g. Where was the gardener at the time of the murder?
Corrupt politicians—trickier:

Q Are all politicians corrupt?
A [All] politicians are [not,] corrupt.
A' Are all politicians corrupt?
A' { Are some politicians corrupt?, Are many politicians corrupt?, Are most politicians corrupt?, Are all politicians corrupt? }

To be congruent, the QUD must be an element of A' (it is), and A' – QUD has to be nonempty, leaving something open for discussion.

All politicians are not corrupt under the all-not (‘all politicians are non-corrupt’) reading implies the truth values of all of the questions in A'. (If all politicians are non-corrupt, are some politicians corrupt? No. Are many politicians corrupt? No. Are most politicians corrupt? Well, no.)

☞ Under the all-not reading, A fails to be congruent.

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Under the not-all reading, though, all of those questions remain open to serve as a new QUD.

Hence, A is disambiguated to the not-all reading.

Here ends the pretty elegant theory, circa 1997.

Problems and obnoxious questions

- Multiple questions

(7) Q Who bought what?
A [John], bought [a plastic gorilla],
    [Silvie], bought a [a slimy monster], …
A' What did John buy?
A' { What did John buy?
      What did Silvie buy?
      What did the gardener buy? }

Doesn’t meet the current congruent condition—the QUD is who bought what? but that is not in A'.
Discourse as hierarchy:

(12) How was the concert?
   Was the sound good? No.
   How was the audience? It was enthusiastic.
   How was the band?
      How was the drummer? fantastic
      Did they play old songs? not a single one.
   So what did you do afterwards? …

Questions, and subquestions:

(13) discourse
    question
    question
    subquestion
    subq. subq. answer
    answer
    ans subsubq subsubq
    ans ans

What we’re after: A theory of discourse
    that tells us which D-trees are admissible.

The Immediate Question Under Discussion (IQUD) for node (move) M is the question immediately dominating M.

QUD(M) is a stack of questions, all the questions that dominate M.

The subtree rooted in a question M is a strategy to answer M.

Any move M must be:
- congruent to the IQUD(M).
- relevant to the IQUD(M).
  i.e. (partially) answers IQUD(M).
  or if answers to M are at least partial answers to IQUD(M).

(14) Q When are you going to China?
    A Well, I’m going to [China] in [April].

(15) When are you going where?
   When are you going to China? When are you going to Japan?
   I’m going to China in April.

(16) Congruence condition
   For M to be congruent to IQUD(M) the following conditions must be met:
   a. F-condition: IQUD(M) = M'.
   b. T-condition: M' indicates a strategy S to answer IQUD(IQUD(M))
      (provided M contains T marking)

Notice: (I think we’ve observed this before)
   The T-accent in the answer matches the F-accent in the subquestion.
   Q. Who ate what?
   SQ. What did [John], eat?
   A. [John], ate the [beans].

Examples from before, restated

(17) Q. What did the pop stars wear?
    SQ. What did the [female] pop stars wear?
    A. The [female] pop stars wore [caftans].

(SQ indeed indicates a strategy to answer Q, F-congruence is met at each step)

(18) Q Who bought what?
    SQ What did [John], buy?
    A [John], bought [a plastic gorilla],
    [Silvie], bought a [a slimy monster], …
    A' What did John buy?
    A' [What did John buy? What did Silvie buy?
    What did the gardener buy?]

(A' indicates a strategy to answer Q, A, is SQ = IQUD(A). All is well.)

A problem with the idea that T-marking requires a QUD to be left?

(19) Q Which musician played which instrument?
    SQ1 Which instrument did Copeland play?
    A1 [Copeland], played [the drums],
    SQ2 Which instrument did Summers play?
    A2 [Summers], played [the guitar],
    SQ3 Which instrument did Sumner play?
    A3 [Sumner], played [the bass].

Strategy is now over, Which musician played which instrument? has been answered. No remaining QUD, yet the T—F marking is allowed.
(We wanted this in the first place to disambiguate [All,F politicians are [not], corrupt.)

Maybe what’s wrong is that ‘all-not’ answers not only the SQ Are [all,F politicians corrupt? but the Q as well How many politicians are corrupt?…

(20) Q. How many politicians are corrupt?  
SQ. Are all politicians corrupt?  
A. [All,F politicians are [not], corrupt.

Well, no, because if you don’t have a T-accent, you can do that.. (T-accent indicates the need for a “residual topic”)

(21) Q. How many politicians are corrupt?  
SQ. Are at least some politicians not corrupt?  
A. Some?? [All,F politicians are [not], corrupt.

But wait—why do we consider A to be part of the SQ answer strategy? Why not the Q answer strategy?

(22) Q  
SQ1  
SQ2  
A2  
A1

Idea: Put an move “as high as you can” in the tree—  
If Q dominates A, A must not only be relevant to Q but there can’t be a higher Q dominating Q such that A is a complete answer to Q.’

And, look—you can topic mark in a complete answer to get at an even higher question

(23) How many politicians are corrupt? Some?  
Yes, some are.  
Most?  
Even most.  

SQ1. Are perhaps all politicians corrupt?  
A1. Yes, the [politicians,F are [all], corrupt.

(24) What about corruption in society?  
How many politicians are corrupt?  
How many oil magnates are corrupt?  

Some p’s c? all p’s c? the [p’s,F are [all], c.

Informativeness, implicit moves and precedence, AvoidF, and so forth

We need to figure out when and why T-marking is obligatory—so far, we haven’t said anything about that. We do, however, have the following data points, where italics indicate implicit moves.

(25) a. Q  
SQ  
A  
F-accent obligatory. T-accent optional.  
(ex. [Fred,F] ate the [beans,F].)

b. Q  
SQ  
A  
F-accent obligatory. T-accent obligatory.  
(ex. [I,F] was at [home,F].)

c. Q  
SQ  
A  
F-accent obligatory. T-accent obligatory.  
(ex. the [female,F] pop stars wore [caftans,F].)

With (b) “obligatory” means “to get the implicatures.”  
With (c) “obligatory” is really obligatory (again, where SQ is implicit).

Alternative approaches to congruence:

Match the Question!  
(MTQ): Focus in the answer must match the wh-word in the question!

Deaccent as must as possible!  
(DAMAP): Do not focus what is contextually Given!

We’ve been really following a MTQ kind of approach, but we need DAMAP too:

(26) Q  
What did Mary’s husband do?  
A  
He [KISSED Mary],  
Mary is deaccented because it’s old.  
A’  
He [kissed SUE],  
A”  
He [kissed MARY],

So, if we need DAMAP anyway, can we get by with just DAMAP?

Next time: Schwarzschild and Avoid F, as we continue with Büring...
Don’t mark Given constituents with F.

(27) Who drank Martin’s beer?
    [OTIlie], drank Martin’s beer.
    [IP O_t [VP [v drank] [sdr[Martin’s] beer ] ]]

(28) Q What did Mary’s husband do?
    A He [KISSed Mary].

Mary is given, kissed is not given…
    …is [kissed, Mary] given?
Well, is [do something to Mary] in/implied by the context?
    No. So [kissed, Mary] is not given, and so we F mark it.

(29) Rule of interpretation:
    If a constituent is not F-marked, it must be Given.

A case where a Given thing must nevertheless be F-marked:

(30) Q Who did Mary’s husband kiss?
    A He kissed MARY.

Mary is F-marked. Why?
    Suppose it weren’t: consider the VP [kissed Mary].
        Is someone kissed Mary deducible from context? No.
    So the VP is not Given. But if it is not F-marked it must be.
    Can we F-mark [kissed Mary]? Not without F-marking something inside.
    Ok, so suppose kissed is F-marked.
    Now is [kissed Mary] Given?
        (i.e. is someone did something to Mary implied by context?)
    Well, no. So the VP is not Given, but if it is not F-marked it must be.
    So

(32) Q What did the pop stars wear?
    SQ What did the female pop stars wear?
    A #The female pop stars wore [caftans].

The proposal: Relate congruence with explicit predecessor, not just IQUD(M).

(33) For any move M, PRED(M) is the move M’ such that:
    a. M’ precedes M
    b. M is explicit
    c. There is no M” such that M’ precedes M” and M” meets (33a–b).

(31) Avoid F
All else being equal, F-mark as little as needed to be consistent with the
Rule of Interpretation.