Topic and focus—what are we doing here? And why is this room so cold?

Topic and focus play an important role in:
- syntax (sometimes affects word order)
- semantics (sometimes affects truth conditions)
- pragmatics (felicity conditions)
- prosody (placement of accent(s))

But… We have received conflicting reports on what topics/foci are, what kinds of topics/foci there are, what effects they have, …

So… We want to see what’s out there and figure out what’s really right.
(Or failing that, we at least want to see what’s out there).

I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description; and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I know it when I see it …

(though we hope we can do better than that!)

de Swart & de Hoop (1995) “Topic and Focus” GLOT International 1(7):3–7 (and a lot of other stuff thrown in for good measure)

FOCUS and TOPIC primarily refer to the information structure (of a sentence).

To a first approximation:
- FOCUS is on new (unexpected, informative) information
- TOPIC is on given (expected, uninformative) information

Question–answer congruence for focus (examples and quote from Rooth 1996):
“The position of focus in an answer correlates with the questioned position in wh-questions, and the position of disjoined alternatives in alternative questions.”

(1) Does Ede want tea or coffee? Who wants coffee?

Ede wants [coffee], [Ede] wants coffee

So, you ask who wants coffee? and “wanting coffee” becomes non-newsworthy— but the identity of the coffee-wanter(s) is newsworthy, new, focused.

As for the non-newsworthy (non-focus) part, let’s call it the presupposition.

(2) (Hey, guess what I just found out?) Bill asked [Mary], to the Superbowl party.

This only sounds good under the presumption that the speakers know that Bill asked somebody to the Superbowl party, they just didn’t know who.

That is: (2) asserts that Bill asked Mary to the Superbowl party
(2) presupposes that for some x, Bill asked x to the Superbowl party.

The presupposition is just what’s left when you take out the focus and put in an x. (This proposal goes back at least as far as Jackendoff (1972).)

So focus opposes presupposition, together they exhaust the sentence.

Topichood in English (examples from Vallduví & Engdahl 1996):

(3)a. John saw the play yesterday.
   b. Yesterday John saw the play.
   c. The play John saw yesterday.

Sentences can be split into a topic (what the sentence is about) and a comment upon it.

Topics… what sentences are about… that sounds kind of like “old”… or “not new”… and comments, well, that sounds like something new about the old thing.

Could we say that topics are “old” and oppose foci, which are “new”?

That is, can we conflate topic—comment with focus—presupposition?

(4) Q: What about John, what does he do?
   A: John drinks beer.

Looks like they line up pretty close—maybe there’s hope for this.

(5) Q: What about John, what does he drink?
   A: John drinks beer.

But, here they don’t. So we need three divisions: topic, focus, and neither.
This is basically Vallduví’s analysis—
His terminology for topic, focus, neither is link, focus, and tail.
He further assumes that link and tail are both parts of the non-focus ground.
de Swart & de Hoop give examples from Vallduví (1990)

(6) What did Mary give to Harry?
   a. Mary gave [a shirt] to Harry.
   b. To Harry Mary gave [a shirt].

There’s some difference between (6a–b), and it isn’t at the focus–non-focus split.
In both cases, a shirt is the newsworthy part, corresponding to what in the question.
The answer: In (6b), To Harry has been topicalized. So, we have:

(6) b’.
       [To Harry] Mary gave [a shirt] to Harry.

(6) b’’.
       [[To Harry] Mary gave] [a shirt] to Harry.

Point One: Without a Topic—Comment distinction you can’t distinguish (6a–b).
Similarly…

(7) a.
       [Mary] gave a shirt to Harry.

b.
       [Mary] gave a shirt to Harry.

Point Two: Without a Focus—Presupposition distinction you can’t distinguish (7a–b).

Point Three: Point One + Point Two = we need topic, focus, and neither.

Notice: de Swart & de Hoop don’t try to draw the structure of (7a–b), but look at this:

(7) a’. [Mary] gave [a shirt] to Harry. Where’s the tail?
   It must be that the tail need not be a constituent.
   (though we probably already knew that—look at (6b’’).)
   That is, gave and to Harry together comprise the tail.
   Seems like “neither focus nor topic” might be a better description, no?
   (But cf. (8–8’) below—these probably contraindicate describing tail in terms of
   having no distinguishing features, since movement should be motivated)

Vallduví & Engdahl (1996) defend the partition with the help of Catalan:

(8) a. El Joan va deixar una nota damunt la TAULA.
   b. El Joan hi2 va deixar una NOTA, damunt la taula2.
   c. El Joan l3’hi2 va DEIXAR, una nota3, damunt la taula2.

‘John left a note on the table.’

(8a) is typical topic-focus (John = topic, left a note on the table = focus).
In (8b), on the table is part of the ground, e.g. “—After lunch I laid out all the gifts on the table. —Oh, by the way, did you see? (8b)?”.
In (8c), all of the arguments are part of the ground, e.g. “—John did something with a note and the table… —(8c)’.

So:

(8’)
   a. [El Joan] [va deixar una nota damunt la TAULA] [focus].
   b. [El Joan] [hi2 va deixar una NOTA] [damunt la taula2] [tail].
   c. [El Joan] [l3’hi2 va DEIXAR] [una nota3] [damunt la taula2] [tail].

Vallduví et al. propose that: Topics (=links) left-dislocate out of the clause.
Tails right-dislocate out of the clause (leaving a clitic).
That which remains in the clause is the Focus.

In other words— Three different behaviors, so three different kinds of things.

English indicates focus with prosodic prominence (from Vallduví & Engdahl 1996):

(9) a.
       The pipes are [F RUSTY ]
       Why does the water from the tap come out brown?
       I have some rust remover. You have anything rusty?
       I wonder whether the pipes are rusty.

   b. The PIPES are rusty.

   c. The pipes ARE rusty.

English encodes ground—focus by moving prosodic stress.
Topic—Tail is less clear, but at least sometimes this is encoded by fronting the topic.
A famous case in which word order (syntax) encodes information status: Hungarian. (10) show s word orders for szereti 'loves', János 'John', Marit 'Mary-ACC' (from É. Kiss 1981)

(10) a. szereti János Marit ‘J loves M.’
    b. szereti Marit János ‘J loves M.’
    c. János szereti Marit ‘It is J who loves M.’
    d. Marit szereti János ‘It is M whom J loves.’
    e. János szereti Marit ‘As for J, he/loves M.’
    f. Marit szereti János ‘M, J loves.’
    g. Marit János szereti ‘As for M & J, he/loves her/him.’
    h. János Marit szereti ‘As for J & M, he/loves her/him.’
    i. János Marit szereti ‘As for J, it is M whom he/loves.’
    j. Marit János szereti ‘As for M, it is J who loves her/him.’

region I   II    III IV
Main stress (bold) falls on the first element after topic.
Why do we find topic(s) before foci before neutral information in Hungarian?
Generative syntacticians (e.g., É. Kiss 1981) like to believe it’s movement.
• There is a “basic” order, either (10a) or (10b).
• A focusing rule moves things from region IV into region II.
• A topicalization rule moves things from region IV into region I.

Famous argument for focus movement via Weak Crossover (Chomsky 1976):
(11) WCO: A variable cannot be the antecedent of a pronoun to its left.
(Pronouns require antecedents, quantifiers/wh-phrases are inappropriate, traces are fine).

Rules out (12c–d) because he is left of t. Who “crossed over” he when moved from t.

(12) a. The woman he, loved betrayed John,
    b. His, professor criticized John,
    c. * Who, did the woman he, loved betray t?
    d. * Who, did his, professor criticize t?

Quantifiers seem to act the same way, even though they don’t appear to have moved.
(13) a. * The woman he, loved betrayed someone,
    b. * His, professor criticized every student,
    c. Someone, was betrayed by the woman he, loved.
    d. Every student, was criticized by his, professor.
    e. Every professor, criticized his, student(s).

Maybe the quantifiers really are moving but you can’t see it— (quantifier raising “QR”) a hidden relation between a higher position and the overt position of the quantifier.
• If so, then (13) is exactly parallel to (12).

(13′) a. * someone, the woman he, loved betrayed t.

(12′) c. * Whoi did the woman he, loved betray t?

One way to think about this:
[Underlying structure] wh-mmt
[pronomination] QR
[Input to interpretation] (LF)

That is, what’s different between wh-movement and QR is just the “timing”—QR just happens to take place after the pronunciation form has already been determined.

Ok, the point, the point…
(14) a. Bill likes JOHN. It’s John, [who, [Bill likes e]]
    b. BILL likes John. It’s Bill, [who, [e likes John]]

(15) a. The woman he, loved betrayed John.
    b. * The woman he, loved betrayed JOHN.

Focus behaves like QR—it behaves as if it involves a hidden movement.
(though note: Rooth 1985 has a counterargument against this)

So: An attractive hypothesis is that Hungarian shows us overtly what every language (including English) does eventually. In some languages, it’s just hidden by timing.
Why move? A common assumption is that there’s a direct mapping from structural position to semantic interpretation:

- Things in a “focus position” will be interpreted as focused (and correspondingly, things that need to be interpreted as focused need to find themselves in a focus position)
- Things in a “topic position” will be interpreted as topics (and correspondingly, things that need to be interpreted as topics need to find themselves in a topic position)

E.g., Rizzi (1997) who proposes that topics and foci (eventually) occupy specifiers of functional heads high in the structure (“TopP” and “FocP”). (Rizzi was by no means the first to propose something like this—but his is the paper we’ll probably look at in this seminar)

Some languages use morphology (not just syntax or prosody) for information structure:

Japanese—marks topic with morpheme (roughly in the case marker position) wa.

(16) Kuzira wa honnyuu-doobutu desu
whale TOP mammal is
‘A whale is a mammal’ (‘As for a whale, it is a mammal’)

Ok, so that’s pretty easy.

- There are three kinds of information. Focus, Topic, and Neither.
- Any category may be referred to by a language in order to encode information structure:
  
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Neither</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Catalan</td>
<td>Topic moves left, Neithers move right. …</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>Main accent falls in the Focus constituent. Topics (can) move left. …</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>Topics are marked by wa. …</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungarian</td>
<td>Foci move left, Topics move left even further. Main accent in first non-topic region. …</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If that’s all there is to it, what’s all the interest about?

Well, the problem is that focus isn’t focus and topic isn’t topic—There are differences between (and even within) languages that indicate that we need a richer typology than that.

---

Example I: “Exhaustiveness” in focusing

(17) Mária látta Pétert.
Mary saw Peter
‘It was Maria (and no one else) who saw Peter.’

Focus in Hungarian is exhaustive—it means X (and only X). Is it in English (18a)?

(18) a. Susan is in Groningen.
    b. Only Susan is in Groningen.

Well, no—if it were, (18a–b) would mean the same thing. (Right?)

Oh no! Does this mean focus isn’t focus isn’t focus? Sadly (or happily), it does indeed.

Example II: “Identificational” vs. “informational / presentational” focus

Modern Greek, Finnish, Hungarian—an in situ focus and a preposed focus (É Kiss 1998). É. Kiss (1998) says:

identificational (moved) focus is exhaustive. (yet still non-presupposed).
informational (in situ) focus is not exhaustive. (yet still non-presupposed)

(19) a. Ston Petro dhanisan to vivlio
    b. Dhanisan to vivlio STON PETRO
‘It was to Petro that they lent the book.’

‘They lent the book TO PETRO.’

(20) a. Annalle Mikko antoi kukkia
    b. Mikko antoi kukkia ANNALLE
‘It was to Anna that Mikko gave flowers.’

‘Mikko gave flowers TO ANNA.’

(21) a. Tengap este Marinak mutattam be Pétert.
    b. Tengap este be mutattam Pétert MARINAK.
‘It was to Mary that I introduced Peter last night.’

‘Last night I introduced Peter TO MARY.’

Even Catalan! (Was Vallduví talking only about presentational focus?)

(22) a. Del calaix la Núria (els) va treure els esperons.
    b. La Núria els va treure DEL CALAIX els esperons.
‘It was out of the drawer that Núria took the spurs.’
Example III: ±Contrastiveness in focus

Even in their identificational focus, languages can differ on the dimension of “contrast”:

(23) a. It was because of the rain that we arrived late. English

b. A Háború és békét Tolsztoj írta Hungarian

the War and Peace ACC Tolstoy wrote

‘It was Tolstoy who wrote War and Peace.’

These are both evaluated against an open set (of reasons, of writers). (“[–contrastive]”)

In Rumanian, Italian, Catalan, and Finnish, identificational focus can only take place against a closed, known set of candidates (“[+contrastive]”). (24) is only good as an answer to something like Which you two broke the vase? (not Who broke the vase?).

(24) (*) Maria ha rotto il vaso Italian

‘It is Maria who broke the vase.’

Example IV: Two kinds of identificational focus?

Bush & Tevdoradze (2000) argue we should split identificational focus again:

(25) Foci (reproduced from Bush & Tevdoradze 2000)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Informational</th>
<th>Identificational</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Type I</td>
<td>Type II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English f-clefts</td>
<td>English foci with rising intonation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungarian focus-moved constituents</td>
<td>Georgian focus-moved constituents</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Informational focus:
- ✔ (Yesterday) Mary bought a book. She also bought a pen.
- ✔ What did Mary see? She saw most of the books.

Type I focus:
- ✔ (Yesterday) it was a book that Mary bought. #She also bought a pen.
- ✗ What did Mary buy? #It was most of the books that Mary bought.

Type II focus:
- ✗ (Yesterday) Mary bought a book. #She also bought a pen.
- ✔ What did Mary buy? Mary bought most of the books.

Informational focus can be narrow (What did Mary buy? Mary bought a hat.) or wide (What happened? Mary bought a hat.)

Identificational focus can be narrow (I: It is [Mary, a coat] that Mary bought.) or wide (II: [Mary bought [a coat] ] inside)

Example V: ±Contrastiveness in topics

Foci aren’t the only things that can be contrastive, topics can be contrastive too:

(26) Mary’s DOCTORATE is in CHEMISTRY.

Vallduví & Vilkuna (1998): contrastiveness is orthogonal to topic/comment.

(27) Q: What do you know about John’s sisters?
A: [John’s [eldest] sister] is very nice.

Show that topic can’t just be old information, since eldest isn’t old. This might qualify as a contrastive topic, however.

Example VI: Shifted vs. continuing topics

A left-dislocated topic can be entirely new, as in (28): A shifted topic.

(28) This guy, he tells me he wants a job in my firm. Shifted topic

Continuing topics are the kind that are discourse-old, like to be replaced by pronouns:

(29) a. He/Max saw Rosa yesterday. Continuing topic
b. Max saw her/Rosa yesterday.

Aissen (1992) studies three Mayan languages, Tzotzil, Tz’utujil, and Jakaltek.

She argues that Topics in Tzotzil and Jakaltek are clause-external.

She observes that Topics in Tzotzil and Jakaltek are always switch topics.

She speculates that Crosslinguistically, there may be two topic positions, one for switch topic (CP-external), one for continuing topic (CP-internal).

Ok, let’s get back to de Swart & de Hoop —

What did they talk about that we haven’t talked about so far?
**Theme—Rheme**

Unclear and not often used—we’ll come back to try to figure out what Halliday (1967) meant by “theme” and “rheme” if it ever becomes relevant.

**Topic—Comment**

Insofar as the sentence is “about” the topic, the topic needs to be defined. Reinhart (1982) notes that an ill-defined topic causes a sentence to lack a truth value whereas an ill-defined non-topic constituent can lead simply to falsity:

(30) a. The King of France visited the exhibition yesterday. *no truth value*
    b. The exhibition was visited by the King of France yesterday. *false*

We saw in (29) that the subject *need not* be the topic, so if we can make something else be the topic in (30a), we should be able to salvage it (i.e. make it have a truth value, namely *false*), right?

(31) As for the exhibition, the King of France visited it yesterday. *false*

I think that’s correct.

If we want to talk in terms of “new information” when we talk about focus, we have to be very careful what we mean by “new.” For example, it can’t be new in terms of reference, since you can focus *himself* in (32).

(32) Q: Who did Felix praise?
    A: Felix praised *HIMSELF*.

**Topic-focus articulation**

Prague school (e.g. Spála, Hajičová & Panevová 1986).

We’ll be getting a more in depth introduction to this on February 15, when Eva Hajičová visits the seminar.

Everything has a level of communicative dynamism (newness increases this)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Communicative Dynamism</th>
<th>Sentence is “about”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>lower</td>
<td>topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>higher</td>
<td>focus</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Every sentence necessarily has a focus (but it might be all focus).

Claim: Czech pretty much shows us communicative dynamism on the surface.

(left → right = topic → focus).

**Association with focus—pragmatics or semantics?**

Some effects of focus appear to be outside the semantics, i.e. in pragmatics.

“Pragmatics” is almost canonically = conversational implicature (Grice 1975).

> Conversation is generally *cooperative*: A speaker’s contribution is relevant (RELATION), (only) as informative as required (QUANTITY), something for which the speaker has adequate evidence and does not believe to be false (QUALITY), and is unambiguous, succinct, orderly, and not obscure (MANNER).

Rooth’s (1992) example: Mats and his roommates took a test. *How’d it go, Mats?*

(33) a. Well, I passed. [I passed]. I did no better than passing.
    b. Well, I passed. [I, passed]. Somebody didn’t pass.

• if you *ace* a test, you *passed* the test; so *ace* would make a stronger statement.
• since the strongest statement was not used, we conclude Mats thought it was false.
• (33b) conversationally implicates that *Mats did not ace the test.*
• if *Mats, Steve, and Paul* passed the test, *Mats did…* (33b) conversationally implicates that *Steve and Paul did not pass the test.*

There’s an additional component which I’m not sure about—namely:

(33) c. Well, I passed. [I passed].

This has no conversational implicature. Why? *Steve, Mats, and Paul* *all* aced the test would still be a stronger statement, wouldn’t it?

Two things: • (33c) is treated by de Swart & de Hoop as all-focus.
This might ruin the “scale of strength”—is *John left* a stronger statement than *I passed?*
• In (33a) and (33c) both, stress falls on *passed*—but in (33a) it isn’t *default* stress. It appears to be a “B accent” (same as in Mary’s [doctorate]B is in [chemistry]A from (26))
Of what importance is this?

Pragmatic effects don’t affect truth conditions (i.e. (33a–c) are all true iff Mats passed).

Same with (34)—true in the same model worlds, but with different “suggestions”

(34) a. John did not introduce Bill to Sue. *He introduced Bill to somebody else.*
    b. John did not introduce Bill to Sue. *He introduced somebody else to Sue.*

But focus *can* affect truth conditions (Jackendoff 1972), so focus isn’t just pragmatic:

(35) a. Mary only introduced Bill to Sue. *false if M introduced B to J.*
    b. Mary only introduced Bill to Sue. *false if M introduced J to S.*

This means that semantic interpretation has to have access to focus structure.
If focus structure is determined by phonology than phonology must feed interpretation?
    Maybe, but more common (Jackendoff 1972):
    • There is a syntactic feature F which affects semantics, interpretation
      (and can drive movement? e.g., in Hungarian.)

**Multiple foci:**

Occasionally, one finds allegations that there can be only constituent in focus.
But consider (from Krifka 1991):

(36) John only introduced Bill to Sue.
    (The only pair x, y of which John introduced x to y is true is Bill, Sue.)

That’s one kind of potential multiple focus—Krifka calls it complex focus.

But consider this (*prepare your brain, these take a little bit of thinking*):

(37) John only introduced [Bill] to Mary. (Rooth 1996)
    That is, John introduced just Bill to Mary.

(38) He also only introduced [Bill] to [Sue].
    That is, John also introduced to Sue just Bill.
    He also, only, introduced [Bill] to [Sue].

Rooth (1996) points out a problem for his 1992 approach based on examples like these:

(39) We only, recovered the diary entries that [Marilyn] made about John.
    Of the diary entries about John, only Marilyn’s were recovered.

(40) We also, only, recovered the diary entries that [Marilyn] made about [Bobby].
    Like with John, the same was true for Bobby—
    Of the diary entries about Bobby, only Marilyn’s were recovered.

What the problem is we’ll save for when we discuss Rooth (1996).

The point: The meaning of these sentences (given association of also and only with
    a focused element) really seems to tell us that there can be more than one
    focus in a sentence.

**Something like a Summary:**

**Questions to keep in mind:**

Do we need all these distinctions?
    If not, which ones do we keep? Which ones can be collapsed?
    If so, what was overlooked by authors who failed to distinguish them?

Where do the distinctions belong? Syntax? Semantics? Pragmatics?
    To what extent do these overlap?

Identificational vs. Information Focus
    [independently able to be wide/narrow?]

±Contrastive Focus

±Exhaustive Focus

Shifted vs. Continuing Topic

±Contrastive Topic

Focus vs. Presupposition

Focus vs.

Topic vs. Ground

Tail vs.

Link