

Is Focus Universal?

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Much of the work done on focus constructions in linguistic typology rests upon the silent assumption that there exists a crosslinguistically valid focus meaning which may serve as a basis for language comparison. The evidence for semantic/pragmatic variation, however, is abundant. First and foremost, focus constructions across languages display different context compatibilities – what is a felicitous context for a focus construction in one language may be incompatible with the apparently equivalent focus construction in another. Second, focus constructions often produce diverging truth-conditional effects in interaction with focus sensitive items. Third, the use of similar focus constructions in different languages may systematically generate different generalised implicatures in identical contexts. On closer inspection, then, focus does not resemble the classical Aristotelian category defined in terms of sufficient and necessary conditions, but is rather reminiscent of a fuzzy set of family resemblances. On a strictly categorial interpretation, what is called focus seems to be merely a set of partial overlappings of certain linguistic structures lumped together because of the general feeling that they somehow convey some kind of emphasis.

There is more than one way to address the problem of focus variability. One radical position would be to treat the focus meaning defined on the basis of some European languages as a language specific/areal feature of certain constructions in these languages; the superficially similar linguistic structures in other languages/areas would on this analysis encode distinct (non-focal) semantic/pragmatic or formal categories in their own right. Another, diametrically opposed, radical position would be to claim that there exists a universal core meaning shared by all focus constructions, the observed variation being due to parametrisable peripheral components of this core focus meaning. A number of intermediate positions between these two extremes are also conceivable.

The present talk does not offer a ready-made answer to the question posed in the title. It rather aims at illustrating the full range of cross-linguistic variation and at scrutinising the merits and faults of the possible approaches to this variation. At a more abstract level, the question of the ontological justification of positing universal cross-linguistic categories will be raised.