

ONLY

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According to the standard view backgrounding by focus and backgrounding by presupposition are distinct phenomena that are to be handled by separate though possibly interacting modules. Jackendoff (1972) and Rooth (1999) claimed that focus theory should not be strengthened so as to give us existential presupposition, the major argument being that the a focally induced presupposition that someone drank the wine would also be incorrectly invoked for (1) (Jackendoff) and would moreover be wrongly predicted to project out in a case like (2) (Rooth).

- (1) [Nobody]_F drank the wine.
- (2) I don't know whether anybody drank the wine, but if [John]_F had done so, the bottle would have been emptied straight away.

Beginning with Horn (1969) presuppositionalists have claimed that *only* is a presupposition inducer. Thus (3a) is said to presuppose (3b).

- (3) a. Only [Muriel]_F voted for Hubert
- b. Muriel voted for Hubert

However, when we inspect its behaviour under embedding or in non-assertoric environments it turns out that the 'standard' presupposition is too strong.

- (4) It is possible that only [Muriel]_F voted for Hubert.
- (5) If only [Muriel]_F voted for Hubert, he will certainly lose the election.
- (6) Did only [Muriel]_F vote for Hubert?

Instead of suggesting that Muriel voted for Hubert these sentences rather suggest the weaker existential inference that someone voted for Hubert.

In Geurts and van der Sandt (1997) we considered the hypothesis that the following principle holds:

- (7) *The Background/Presupposition Rule (BPR)*
Whenever focus gives rise to a background $\lambda x[\varphi(x)]$, the presupposition $\delta[x: \varphi(x)]$ is triggered

The binding theory of presupposition then requires that $\delta[x: \varphi(x)]$ has to be resolved according to the standard rules of presupposition projection and predict that the anaphoric variable will be existentially interpreted at the level where it is resolved.

The relevant issue with respect to (3) is what parts, if any, of the information conveyed by an utterance of this sentence are entailed, presupposed, implicated, and so on. If we adopt the BPR and the binding theory, however, we can do with a minimal semantics for 'only' (in fact, it is just the semantics proposed by Geach 1962): it suffices to specify that 'only *a* φ ' means that nobody else than *a* has the property φ . Thus the 'conventional meaning' of (3) is the following:

(8) [: $\neg[u: u \text{ voted for Hubert, } u \neq \text{Muriel}]$]

As the grammar of ‘only’ requires that ‘Muriel’ is the focus, the semantic correlate of ‘___ voted for Hubert’ is background information, and the BPR implies that the corresponding presupposition is triggered in the scope of the negation operator, as shown in (9a):

(9) a. [: $\neg[u: u \text{ voted for Hubert, } u \neq \text{Muriel, } \delta[v: v \text{ voted for Hubert}]$]
b. [$v: v \text{ voted for Hubert, } \neg[u: u \text{ voted for Hubert, } u \neq \text{Muriel}]$]

The binding theory predicts that, in the absence of a suitable antecedent, this presupposition is preferably accommodated in the main DRS. Hence the default interpretation of (3) should be (9b). The analysis thus predicts that (3) entails that Muriel voted for Hubert which is what orthodoxy takes to be presupposed. The analysis also correctly predicts for (4) through (6) the weaker presupposition that someone voted for Hubert.

Note that these predictions are obtained by claiming that the presupposition deriving from ‘only $a \varphi$ ’ is not $\varphi(a)$, but that there is an x such that $\varphi(x)$, and note moreover that this presupposition is *not* taken to be triggered by the occurrence of ‘only’: its source is the focus/background division of the sentence.

In (3) through (6) the presupposition is accommodated globally, and as long as a binding interpretation is not available, this option is strongly preferred. There are however cases in which the option of local accommodation is exercised. (1) and (2) are cases in point and thus don't present problems for the current analysis. Another case is (10):

(10) a. Only Rumpelstiltskin may kiss me.
b. [: $\neg[u: u \text{ may kiss the speaker, } u \neq \text{Rumpelstiltskin, } \delta[v: v \text{ may kiss the speaker}]$]]
c. [$v: v \text{ may kiss the speaker, } \neg[u: u \text{ may kiss the speaker, } u \neq \text{Rumpelstiltskin}]$]

In a context in which it is taken for granted that Rumpelstiltskin doesn't exist, (10a) is a way of conveying that *nobody* is allowed to kiss the speaker. This reading comes about as follows. Suppose now that, as in the previous example, this presupposition is accommodated globally, as shown in (10c). Given that it is part of the common ground that Rumpelstiltskin doesn't exist, this reading would be inconsistent, and therefore the hearer decides to resolve the presupposition locally.

References

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