

Variation in Focus

Daniel Wedgwood
University of Edinburgh

Abstract

This paper takes a broad view on the notion of focus. It calls into question the idea that focus is a unitary, cross-linguistically applicable notion and also questions the implicit metatheoretical reasoning that apparently leads linguists of various schools to posit such a thing. A comparison of the Hungarian ‘focus position’ with the English *it*-cleft provides a case study of how even considerable similarity of form and function may spring from independent origins. This is accompanied by brief demonstrations of more blatant diversity in ‘focusing’ phenomena.

1 Introduction

There is a popular perception among linguists (directly reflected in textbook presentations like that in Saeed, 1997) that there is a single notion of focus that can be associated with a variety of grammatical phenomena in different languages. Commonly cited examples include focal pitch accenting in English (as in (1)), Hungarian ‘focus movement’ (as in (2)) and focus morphemes in Somali (as in (3)):

- (1) a. [What did Susan drink?]
Susan drank GIN. / #SUSAN drank gin.
b. [Who drank gin?]
#Susan drank GIN. / SUSAN drank gin.
- (2) a. János meghívta Marit.
János VM-called Mari-ACC
‘János invited Mari.’
b. János MARIT hívta meg.
János Mari-ACC called VM
‘János invited MARI.’ / ‘It’s MARI who János invited.’
- (3) a. Amina wargeyskii baa-y keentay.
Amina newspaper FOC-she brought
‘Amina brought THE NEWSPAPER.’
b. Amina baa wargeyskii keentay.
Amina FOC newspaper brought
‘AMINA brought the newspaper.’

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Focus at the Syntax-Semantics Interface.

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All of these phenomena appear to involve those aspects of meaning that are said to be characteristic of ‘focus’: in particular, some relationship to the expression of ‘new’ information and/or contrast, and the involvement of the intuitively somehow related notion of sets of alternatives. Given such similarity of meaning, it is tempting to suggest that all of the phenomena in (1)–(3) are driven by, or sensitive to, a particular grammatical feature—call it [+focus]—which has a cross-linguistically consistent semantic correlate. This is indeed a popular assumption. One school of thought in the Chomskyan ‘universal grammar’ tradition even ties this feature to a particular syntactic functional projection in the left periphery of underlying sentence structure (see Rizzi, 1997, and note the crucial role of Hungarian ‘focus movement’ in motivating this proposal). While it is not clear that this particular proposal is intended to account for prosodic focusing as in (1), it does illustrate the depth of the assumption that focus may be treated as a grammatical primitive with universal applicability—a truly fundamental notion, then¹.

In spite of this popular perception of the status of focus, it is easy to show that—at least in the implied, superficial way—(1)–(3) do not involve varying grammatical expressions of a single meaning (let alone a single feature). It is a commonplace of the literature on the Hungarian ‘focus position’ that, despite its name, the occupants of this position do not simply correspond to those expressions that carry focal pitch accenting in English. Instead, the relevant Hungarian syntactic position is generally said to host ‘exhaustive focus’ or ‘identificational focus’ (see, for example, Szabolcsi, 1981, 1994; É. Kiss, 1998; Horvath, 2000). It is often claimed that this makes the Hungarian ‘focus position’ more similar to an English *it*-cleft construction than to English accent-based focusing. The accuracy or otherwise of such claims is discussed below, but it is at least clear that this syntactic phenomenon in Hungarian cannot be simply assumed to provide evidence for a grammatical primitive that also drives English focal accenting.

Similar observations may be made with regard to the Somali ‘focus morpheme’ exemplified in (3). Like the Hungarian phenomenon, it may bear sufficient interpretive similarities to English focal accenting to have been given the name ‘focus morpheme’ by linguists, but more detailed consideration shows it to have quite different properties too.

Such cases are merely illustrative of a broader cross-linguistic picture. Phenomena to which the term ‘focus’ has been applied are by no means homogeneous. Some are very clearly distinct from general definitions of focus, with decidedly idiosyncratic properties. Others may illustrate common cross-linguistic tendencies, but close comparison shows that significant differences may exist even between superficially very similar constructions and that such cases may require an analysis whereby distinct mechanisms happen to produce similar results.

This calls into question any simple form of universal structure-meaning mapping that is driven by a unitary focus feature. One might then retreat to a position whereby focus phenomena are accepted to be diverse in many ways, but to share certain core

¹Note that the object of my arguments is not merely the idea of [+focus] as a universal *syntactic* feature. Not all proposals that reify focus would do so in this particular way. My point is to question any conception of a unitary ‘focus’ as a universal category in human language. Indeed, what is common to all such universalist positions is arguably the idea that there is a universal semantico-pragmatic category of focus, so this might be seen as my primary target.

elements (perhaps a core set of features that may be combined and recombined to produce a variety of effects cross-linguistically). However, even this is questionable in the case of focus. For one thing, those elements of meaning that seem to crop up regularly in putative focusing phenomena relate to such fundamental aspects of communication that one must ask whether they need to be considered part of the grammar at all, in any given case, let alone ascribed to universal grammatical primitives. In section 4, I also briefly consider more philosophical arguments for positing universal (or otherwise cross-linguistic) categories like focus, and suggest that appeals to scientific methodology do not suffice to justify this practice.

2 Starting to lose focus: Hungarian ‘focus movement’ and English clefts

If focus were shown to drive syntactic movement this might lend significant support to the idea that focus is a primitive grammatical notion. However, as mentioned above, it has long been observed that Hungarian ‘focus movement’ does not occur in all and only those circumstances where focal pitch accenting arises in English. Commonly, the claim in the literature on Hungarian is that the ‘focus position’ (henceforth FP—the scare quotes remaining, implicitly) conveys ‘exhaustivity’ or ‘identification’, like an English *it*-cleft, whereas English accenting may convey simply ‘information update’. Thus, FP constructions are often translated in linguistic work with an *it*-cleft, as in (2). Moreover, this apparent parallelism with the *it*-cleft has led to a distinct kind of universalist analysis: that there is a common underlying syntactic structure to FP and the *it*-cleft, even if focal accenting has a different basis (É. Kiss, 1998, 1999).

Irrespective of universal or language-specific claims, the conventional way to account for the Hungarian ‘focus position’ has in recent years been to assume the existence of some dedicated functional projection (‘FocusP’) whose contribution to compositional semantics is an ‘exhaustivity operator’ (Szabolcsi, 1981) or an ‘identificational operator’ (Kenesei, 1986; Szabolcsi, 1994):

(4) **Exhaustivity operator:** $\lambda x [\lambda P [P(X) \wedge \forall y [P(y) \rightarrow y = x]]]$

(5) **Identificational operator:** $\lambda x [\lambda P [x = \iota y [P(y)]]]$

The assumption in all such work is therefore that some notion of uniqueness, contrast or exclusion constitutes the core semantics of this syntactic position, the difference between the exhaustive and identificational approaches being a matter of whether this uniqueness or contrast is thereby asserted or presupposed.

Evidence that FP does not introduce an *assertion* of uniqueness (as in (4)) is provided by the contrast between (6)(7-a) and (6)(7-b)². This exploits the fact that Hungarian can use a plural-marked version (*kik*) of the question word *ki* ‘who’. It might be expected that a singular noun phrase would be acceptable in response to a *kik*-question

²This example is due to Balogh (2005) (who uses it to reach different conclusions); see Wedgwood (2005, 137) for a separate demonstration that FP does not contribute an assertion of exhaustification, which is in turn based on work on the English *it*-cleft by Horn (1981).

iff it is accompanied by some explicit assertion of exhaustivity/uniqueness, which would in effect cancel the expectation of a plural noun phrase. (6)(7-a) shows that this is indeed the case: *kik* ('who-plural') can be felicitously answered with *csak Anna* ('only Anna'). (6)(7-b) shows that the use of FP does not have the same effect. Since it thus fails to have the effects predicted of an assertion of uniqueness, we must conclude that this syntactic position does not inherently introduce such an assertion³.

- (6) Kik hívták fel Emilt?
 who-PL called.PL VM Emil-ACC
 'Who called Emil?'
- (7) a. #Anna hívta fel Emilt.
 Anna called VM Emil-ACC
 b. Csak Anna hívta fel Emilt.
 only Anna called VM Emil-ACC

Therefore, if we are to account for FP in terms of the direct association of a syntactic projection with a semantic operator, the latter must be the presuppositional 'identificational' operator⁴.

For the time being, then, let us accept this identificational operator analysis. For present purposes, the important question is then to what extent this has any connection to traditional notions of focus, such as might be encapsulated in any putative universal focus feature. As I outline below, the evidence suggests that the usage and interpretation of FP sometimes has parallels with English prosodic focus but in other ways is clearly not the same. At the same time, it resembles the English *it*-cleft in many ways, but not perfectly.

Before going further, let me make clear that any genuine parallel with the *it*-cleft militates against the idea that the 'focus position' lives up to its name (in the sense of bearing any similarity to focal accenting). Clarification is necessary here, since clefts are

³There are two ways to interpret (6), both of which have the same force with regard to the putative semantics of FP. The first interpretation is that offered in the main text: on the assumption that *csak* has essentially quantificational exhaustive semantics, (6)(7-a) shows how an exhaustive assertion cancels expectations of plurality, and (6)(7-b) shows that FP alone is incapable of doing so and therefore does not inherently convey an exhaustive assertion. The second interpretation would be in terms of a recent trend in the literature on *only* (e.g. Beaver and Clark, 2008, and two talks at the Stuttgart workshop) which claims that part of the semantics of such 'exclusive' items is that they are 'mirative': they cancel expectations. Balogh (2005) suggests that this is sufficient to explain the contrast in (6) while preserving exhaustive semantics for FP. But the question remains why FP in this case does not also have mirative properties. Beaver and Clark argue that 'exclusives' as a class are mirative. The crucial point here is that *asserting* exhaustification amounts to an act of exclusion. Therefore, by either interpretation of the semantics of *csak/only*, we should see 'mirative' effects in (6)(7-b) if exhaustification were encoded in FP as in (4). Note that this does not rule out the involvement of exhaustivity/uniqueness as some form of presupposition in the interpretation of FP, as argued below.

⁴With the exception of Kenesei (1986) and Szabolcsi (1994), this seemingly rather significant point has been somewhat glossed over in the literature on Hungarian. É. Kiss (1998, 2002) speaks of 'identificational focus' but provides only an informal definition of its semantics, which appears to equivocate between the assertional and presuppositional analyses, while Horvath's recent (2000; 2007) proposals continue the tradition of opposing a general, 'information update' type of focus with what is effectively an assertion of exhaustivity, without considering a presuppositional analysis.

sometimes thought of as focusing devices. This is not the case, as a number of analysts have pointed out in the past. It is plain that whatever focal pitch accenting contributes to meaning must be orthogonal to whatever clefting contributes, since pitch accents may be shifted around within an English cleft sentence, with concomitant changes in interpretation. Thus, in addition to the ‘citation form’ *it*-cleft in (8) (what Prince, 1978 calls a ‘stressed focus’ cleft and Hedberg, 1990 calls a ‘topic clause’ cleft), we find cases like (9) (which Prince terms an ‘informative presupposition’ cleft and Hedberg calls a ‘comment clause’ cleft). Indeed, Delin’s (1989) corpus study finds the latter kind to be more common in texts.

- (8) Debbie’s been trying to take the credit for my tango-dancing prize. But it’s HARRY who taught me to tango.
- (9) A: Why are you so fond of Harry?
B: Because it’s Harry who taught me to TANGO.

Consequently, if the Hungarian ‘focus position’ truly resembles the *it*-cleft, it cannot be a manifestation of the same ‘focus’ that putatively underlies focal pitch accenting; on the other hand, if it truly resembles focal accenting in any significant way, then it cannot be identical to the *it*-cleft. The worst situation for any universalist analysis is therefore one in which the Hungarian phenomenon shows significant similarities to both of the English phenomena—and this is what we find.

On the one hand, FP bears close parallels to the *it*-cleft. As already noted, it is typically associated with contrastive or exhaustive readings, just as the *it*-cleft is. It also precludes a classic ‘topic-comment’ (or ‘VP-focus’) reading of the sentence (a point made by Lambrecht, 2001 regarding clefts)—i.e. one in which everything except a single argument or adjunct is ‘in focus’ by traditional definitions such as passing the question-answer heuristic. In this respect, FP and the *it*-cleft are quite unlike focal accenting, which is commonly reckoned to allow for the expression of ‘VP-focus’ via placement of an accent on the rightmost argument within that VP, as in (10):

- (10) A: What did John do?
B: John [_F kissed MARY].

A sentence like B’s contribution in (10) would not be felicitously translated in to Hungarian using FP, though it plainly involves focal pitch accenting, which relates to the crucial focus heuristic of answering a *Wh*-question.

Moreover, it is as true of the Hungarian ‘focus position’ as of English clefts that the locus of information update may be found at various points in the sentence. (11) is an attested example of a ‘focus position’ sentence that parallels ‘comment-clause’ *it*-clefts:

- (11) Nagyon szeretek fát vágni. Ha csak lehet, [favágással]
much love-1SG wood-ACC chop-INF if only may.be woodchopping-with
kezdem a napot.
start-1SG the day-ACC
‘I love to cut wood. If possible, it’s with wood-cutting that I start the day.’

It is plain, then, that FP could not be said to host all and only focused material, if ‘focused material’ is taken to bear any relation to that which is focally accented in English and/or that which is in focus according to question-answer heuristics.

On the other hand, the Hungarian ‘focus position’ shows certain important differences to English *it*-clefts. Notably, there is a significant connection between the use of FP and question-answer coherence. Specifically, when the ‘answer’ part of a sentence happens to be just the size of a single, structurally simple noun phrase or adjunct—i.e. in cases traditionally called ‘narrow focus’ (or Lambrecht’s ‘argument focus’)—the unmarked sentence form uses FP, as shown in (12).

- (12) Ki hívta fel Emilt?
 who called VM Emil-ACC
 ‘Who called Emil?’
 a. Anna hívta fel Emilt.
 Anna called VM Emil-ACC
 b. ?? (Anna) felhívta (Anna) Emilt (Anna).

This is quite unlike the English *it*-cleft, which is by no means an unmarked way to answer such a question, let alone *the* unmarked way.

There seems little chance, then, of unifying Hungarian ‘focus position’ with any notion of focus that could be at work in the grammar of English: the semantic contribution of the Hungarian position cuts across what must be different notions in English (cleft-presuppositionality and focus as conveyed by accent). Consequently, there is no common [+focus] feature to be found here, even though there are undoubtedly various comparable elements of both structure and semantico-pragmatic effect.

2.1 Similar effects; different causes

Since we have just concluded that the Hungarian ‘focus position’ is not functionally just the same as the English *it*-cleft, it is worth also noting that the Hungarian construction doesn’t look quite like a cleft structurally.

Once again, there certainly are some striking superficial similarities: in both constructions a ‘left-peripheral’ noun phrase (or similarly sized expression) is lent some special status and commonly carries some form of pitch accent, while the rest of the sentence appears to be given a presuppositional reading of some kind. On the other hand, there are very notable differences. In particular, the Hungarian ‘focus position’ doesn’t involve those defining characteristics of cleft constructions, (i) a copula verb whose subject is some form of pronominal and (ii) a relative clause⁵. Note further that Hungarian does use other, more cleft-like constructions, as in the (attested) example (13), a fairly clear indication that FP is not simply this language’s way of realising some universally available, underlyingly cleft-like structure⁶.

⁵Note that while Hungarian has a null copula in the present tense, this is not the reason for the lack of a visible copula in FP sentences: the past tense copula is non-null and does not appear in such sentences.

⁶Indeed, this example shows not only an overt cleft structure in the main clause but also an FP structure in the subordinate clause that would not be felicitously translated with an English *it*-cleft.

- (13) ... édesanyám volt az, aki a munkahelyén magasabb pozíciót töltött
 mother-1SG was that who the workplace-in superior position-ACC fill
 be.
 in(VM)
 ‘{It was my mother who / My mother was the one who} occupied the superior
 position in the workplace.’

Nevertheless, we have also seen that the *it*-cleft and the ‘focus position’ do regularly look alike to a very considerable extent (and on-going work with corpus-derived data suggest that the interpretive parallels stretch into areas of meaning that have not previously been considered in this connection).

What this suggests is a very natural kind of situation, but one which linguists often seem rather unhappy to recognise: rather than different manifestations of some underlying shared core, we simply have close *resemblance* across distinct phenomena. This is of course a very common situation in all kinds of extra-linguistic domains; simple examples from everyday experience include fluorescent, incandescent and LED-based light bulbs, which these days can all look very similar both on the shop shelves and in use, or plasma screen and LCD-screen televisions. In both of these examples, quite distinct kinds of underlying technology produce strikingly similar results in terms of both function and superficial form. In a parallel fashion, there are many instances in the natural world of resemblances of both form and function that we know to have different origins, both in the evolutionary sense and in the sense of the ‘synchronic’ mechanisms involved. Different kinds of eye or wing found across animal species provide obvious examples (about which more below).

What, then, might be the particular mechanisms involved in the *it*-cleft and the Hungarian ‘focus position’ respectively, such that these are underlyingly distinct but produce just the degree of similarity that we observe?

My proposal is in part based on taking the surface-structural properties of the two constructions seriously. I assume that the *it*-cleft has relatively straightforward, compositional semantics: a presupposition of the existence of some unique entity is introduced through the use of a pronominal subject and this entity is identified as one that bears a certain property or properties through the use of the copula verb. This leads naturally to essentially the meaning expressed in the ‘identificational operator’ analysis of the Hungarian ‘focus position’, as given in (5) above. I further propose that this Hungarian construction also takes on this meaning as a result not of an atomic ‘operator’ that we stipulate to form part of the grammar, but rather as a result of more basic semantic operations. As I outline below, the details of the interpretations of the English and Hungarian constructions are closely related, but they are not identical. In the Hungarian case, interpreting the relevant construction is not such a transparently compositional process.

Both sides of this analysis involve controversial elements, which I can only briefly allude to here. The idea that the *it*-cleft has broadly transparent compositional semantics goes against a common assumption that the subject *it* is merely an expletive element. However, a growing number of analysts now recognise that this is not the case: the *it* of the *it*-cleft may not have all the characteristics of a full pronoun (such as number

and gender agreement), but nor is it typical of expletive elements (see Bolinger, 1972; Borkin, 1984; Hedberg, 1990, 2000; Geurts and van der Sandt, 2004). Crucially (as observed by Geurts and van der Sandt), the same necessarily neuter pronoun appears in all identificational copula sentences, not only clefts, as in *Guess who I saw at the swimming pool? It / *He was Alfred Tarski!*. It seems reasonable to suggest that the lack of gender and number agreement on this pronoun relates to the very fact that it denotes something that requires identification, and as such carries minimal semantic specification itself. In any case, it is clear that this *it* maintains those elements of full pronouns that are crucial to the present argument: definiteness and its associated presuppositions of existence and uniqueness.

My analysis of FP is essentially that of Wedgwood (2005) (and a relative of that of É. Kiss, 2006, 2008), which again can only be presented in rough outline here. The core of the proposal is that the occupant of FP itself (which I define as the expression immediately left-adjacent to the tensed element in the sentence, whose occupancy is accompanied by the postposing of any otherwise pre-verbal ‘verbal modifier’ element in the sentence) must be interpreted as the ‘main predicate’ of the sentence. Unlike most analysts, I assume that all of the following occupy the same syntactic position: a ‘syntactic focus’, a verbal modifier when in its unmarked, pre-tense position, and a main verb in its unmarked pre-tense position⁷.

Evidence for this is found in the behaviour of infinitival main verbs in the presence of an auxiliary verb (and hence morphologically free of the expression of tense). (14) shows how the main verb then seems to ‘compete’ with any verbal modifier (such as the particle *meg*) for the pre-tense position, just as foci seem to. Still more significantly, the presence of a ‘syntactic focus’ causes an infinitival main verb to postpose, as in (15).

- (14) a. János látni fogja Marit.
János see-INF will Mari-ACC
‘János will see Mari.’
b. János meg fogja {hívni Marit / Marit hívni}.
János VM will call-INF Mari-ACC Mari-ACC call-INF
‘János will invite Mari.’
c. #János meghívni fogja Marit.
János VM will call-INF Mari-ACC
Intended: ‘János will invite Mari.’
- (15) a. János MARIT fogja látni.
János Mari-ACC will see-INF
‘It’s Mari who János will see.’
b. *János MARIT látni fogja.
János Mari-ACC see-INF will
Intended: ‘It’s Mari who János will see.’

⁷Note that in Wedgwood (2005) I argue for an approach to syntax based on linear processing, in the manner of Dynamic Syntax (Kempson et al., 2001; Cann et al., 2005); hence, I am not claiming here that main verbs, verbal modifiers and ‘foci’ move to the same syntactic *projection* in the sense of conventional frameworks, nor that they necessarily could.

Given this, my claim is that a requirement that the occupant of the position in question be interpreted as the main predicate predicts the different readings that are associated with different kinds of expression in this position. That is, it is predicted that a main verb or verbal modifier in this position will generally trigger an unmarked, ‘topic-comment’ reading, while the appearance of a noun phrase in this position will trigger a cleft-like ‘identificational’ reading.

The basic reasoning behind the first part of this is straightforward enough: a verb is inherently predicative and in fact carries sufficiently rich structured semantic material (in the form of argument and event structure) that applying this predicate to some referent (given also some temporal anchor) can in itself constitute a fully propositional property-ascription. Similar reasoning applies to the Hungarian ‘verbal modifiers’, which are clearly in some sense intrinsically predicative elements, though here the arguments are relatively complex (see Wedgwood, 2005, Chapter 7).

Other expressions, such as ordinary definite or indefinite noun phrases, are not thought of as being inherently predicative. What, then, should we predict when such an expression appears in a position that requires its occupant to take on a predicative reading? An answer may be sought in Partee’s (1987) type-shifting principles. The type-theoretic equivalent of lending a predicative reading to an individual-denoting expression would of course be a shift from type $\langle e \rangle$ to type $\langle e, t \rangle$, an operation that Partee notably calls *ident* and which amounts to the shift exemplified in (16)⁸:

- (16) $mary' \rightarrow \lambda x. x = mary'$
 (‘interpret *Mary* as the set of things that are *Mary*’)

The informal English paraphrase given in (16) hints at where my argument is going: the result of requiring an individual-denoting expression to be read as a predicate is precisely to introduce an identificational element to the semantics of that expression. We are no longer merely dealing with *Mary*, but rather with those things (or more plausibly that thing) that *can be identified as being Mary*.

From this point, the full ‘identificational’ reading of ‘focus position’ sentences follows—not as a matter of strict logical necessity, but by reasonable inferences nevertheless. An act of identification implies the existence of something to be identified, whence the presuppositional element to the identificational reading. Just what is presupposed is determined by the rest of the sentence. Essentially, the predicate that is the ‘focus position’ expression needs a term to predicate over and also needs to be made to relate in some coherent way to the rest of the material in the sentence in which it appears. Both of these issues are resolved if we take the rest of the sentence to be what is identified by the *ident*-style predication—thus fulfilling the requirement that the pre-tense expression is the *main* predicate. Putting all of this together, we in effect end up with just the reading given in the ‘identificational operator’ in (5). That is, the overall effect of the ‘focus position’ is (i) to abstract the denotation of its occupant from the normal meaning of the sentence, (ii) via a process of inference, to bind the remainder with an iota (rather than merely a lambda) and (iii) to apply the predicative reading of the ‘focus position’

⁸Alternatively, one might assume a shift from $\langle e, \langle e, t \rangle \rangle$ to $\langle e, t \rangle$, Partee’s *BE*. This would not affect my main point.

expression to this iota-expression.

For example, the interpretation of (15)(15-a) involves a grammatically encoded requirement to read *Marit* as the main predicate. It is therefore (lambda-)abstracted away from the compositional semantics of the rest of the sentence and given essentially the reading ‘be Mari’. This remainder, being inferred to relate to ‘that which is to be identified’ is understood to represent ‘the thing(s) that János will see’ (and note how the selection of this as the term for the main predicate is practically forced in this case by the presence of accusative case-marking in *Marit*). The resulting reading is therefore essentially that of *The entity that János will see is Mari*.

The idea that the Hungarian ‘focus position’ is essentially predicative receives independent support from the distribution of quantified noun phrases across different positions in the Hungarian sentence. The data are somewhat complex but boil down to the observation that intersective quantifiers can appear in FP, while lexically simple proportional quantifiers cannot, unless they are to be interpreted with contrastive focus on the restrictor noun. Intersective quantifiers are notably those that can be thought of as cardinality predicates; lexically simple proportional quantifiers cannot, and as such fail to provide a potential main predicate. A phrasal proportional quantifier, meanwhile, allows for the possibility that one of its constituent words is taken to provide the required predicate (for reasons of space, the reader is referred to Wedgwood, 2005, Chapter 5 for more details).

For present purposes, the point of all of this is simply to give one reasonably detailed illustration, from within the domain of putative focus phenomena, of how very similar interpretations may arise from different kinds of linguistically encoded meaning. It is not necessary posit common underlying structure to account for such similarities. As noted above, there are also significant differences between the *it*-cleft and FP and the present proposals fit well with these also. While both constructions tend to be associated with a presuppositional, identificational reading, in my analysis this is intrinsic to the basic compositional semantics of the *it*-cleft, while it is something that merely follows by inference (albeit regularly) from a more basic semantic procedure in the case of FP. Given this, it is natural that the *it*-cleft should be more marked in contexts such as the reply to a *Wh*-question. The Hungarian construction is compatible with any context in which its implicit presupposition happens to be satisfied, whereas use of the *it*-cleft constitutes a more active move on the part of the speaker to *introduce* the identificational reading (hence its typical infelicity in a *Wh*-question context).

3 Losing focus on a cross-linguistic view

This section takes a much broader and shallower perspective than the previous one, merely noting a number of further examples of the existence of variation in what gets called ‘focus’ in different languages (for reasons of space, in several cases I just mention claims from the literature; I refer the reader to the cited works for examples). Even this small number of illustrations is, I believe, sufficient to cast serious doubt over the viability of ‘focus’ as a unitary cross-linguistic notion. The final section of the paper will address on a more philosophical level why the assumption of any such notion would be

mistaken in any case.

As noted in section 1, Somali has been presented as having a ‘focus morpheme’, *baa*. Examples like (3) apparently bear a close resemblance to Hungarian ‘focus movement’ (on a conventional understanding of that phenomenon), insofar as both correspond to ‘narrow’ (or ‘argument’) focus and relate to a sense of contrast or exhaustivity. However, consideration of a broader range of examples shows that the *baa* has other, quite distinct uses. Lecarme (1999) shows how *baa* can mark what by pretty much any definition are topics, in addition to foci:

- (17) árdaygan baa wuxuu dóonayaa ínuu arkó warqáddiisa
 this.student F expl-F wants comp see his.note
 ‘This student wants to see his notes.’

Lecarme argues that *baa* can mark both contrastive and non-contrastive topics. This is debatable given the examples Lecarme presents (as is perhaps inevitable: it is hard to see how contrast can ever be fully divorced from the business of predication and assertion, for standardly Gricean reasons). The way might just be open therefore to maintain at least an analysis in the style of Vallduví and Vilks (1998), whereby *baa* could be considered a marker of contrast (or ‘kontrast’), which might separately combine with focus and topic features. Note, however, that even this kind of analysis would have to recognise that this contrast feature would be manifested in the grammar in a rather different way than in other languages: Lecarme points out that *baa* can be attached to an expletive element, as in (18) (where it is manifested as the allomorph *búu*), and thereby in effect fails to attach to the point of contrast within the VP, which in this case is the verb meaning itself:

- (18) A: (sáaka) wax má akhriyay?
 today thing Q read
 ‘Did he read (today)?’
 (19) B: Máya, wax búu qoray
 No thing F wrote
 ‘No, he wrote’ (lit. ‘No, he wrote THING’)

The Siberian language Even is another that appears to use the same morphological marking on narrow foci and on contrastive topics. Again, this might be taken as support for a grammatical primitive relating to contrast, but again it has idiosyncratic properties that undermine any simple claim of universality. Matic (2007) reports that the relevant suffix in Even relates not to just any sense of contrast but specifically to closed sets of alternatives, typically with just two members. This is notably quite different to many other kinds of putative contrast marking—including the situation in Somali described above, where potentially open sets of alternatives make it difficult even to judge whether a *baa*-marked topic is contrastive or not.

While Somali and Even appear to grammaticalise (different) meanings that cut across the traditional information-structural categories of topic and focus, Aghem seemingly grammaticalises a multitude of distinctions that roughly fall within traditional definitions of focus, thus undermining the unity of the notion of focus from the opposite

direction. Watters (1979) (cited in Bearth, 1999) claims that complex interactions of morphology and word order allow Aghem to encode all of the following distinctly: (i) information ('assertive') focus, (ii) corrective ('counter-assertive') focus (i.e. 'X, not Y, is P'), (iii) 'counter-assertive polar' focus (i.e. assertion of a proposition following its denial), (iv) focus that allows an inference to be drawn, as in 'they gave the dogs [_F porridge] (and that's why they are sick)'. Of this list, only (i) fits straightforwardly into existing universalist theories of focus. Note that even (ii) looks subtly different to other kinds of 'contrastive focus' (going by Watters' description).

It is notable that Aghem has been cited as a 'focus movement' language alongside Hungarian, as support for the existence of a focus position in universal grammar (É. Kiss, 1995). Yet the details of focus-related phenomena in this language speak of considerable cross-linguistic diversity, rather than of language-specific exploitation of a common focus primitive.

Luganda is a language that seems to mark focus straightforwardly, if one only considers simple question-answer cases. In this case, the language appears to mark the part of a sentence that answers a *Wh*-question by the *absence* of a certain prefix, traditionally known as an 'augment'. This might be dealt with by the assumption that focus licenses the absence of the augment (as Hyman and Katamba, 1993 argue), but this phenomenon once again proves to have very different properties to those associated with focus in more widely studied languages. For example, Hyman and Katamba (1993) note that this putative focus-marking is neutralised within the scope of negation; something which they note to be "quite pervasive in African languages", but which is not characteristic of more widely discussed 'focus-marking' phenomena. Also, the presence of an adverb in a non-negative main clause necessitates would-be 'focus-marking' (i.e. the absence of an expected augment) on some constituent within the clause, even if the interpretation is predicate (or VP-) focus. Most unexpectedly for a focus-marking device, the relevant distinction is neutralised in the case of proper nouns, which always lack the augment, and demonstratives, which always carry the augment. Perhaps relatedly, Hyman and Katamba note that the augment can often be translated with a definite article (though they argue convincingly that it is not one).

Whatever the proper description of the augment is, these properties strongly suggest that it cannot be simply defined in terms of a category of focus that is also operative in phenomena like English accenting, or indeed Hungarian 'focus movement'. Yet it does overlap substantially with traditional notions of focus, including passing the key test of marking the answer to a *Wh*-question. Taken together, these facts imply similarity of effects, rather than identity of (grammatical) causes.

As a final point on Luganda, note that even if one could justify the idea that this is 'focus' in some meaningful sense, it would have to interact with the rest of the grammar in ways that differ from other languages. For example, Hyman and Katamba show that interpretations that might be called predicate (or VP-) focus, polarity focus and focus on tense or aspect all correspond to one linguistic form. This is not what we would expect from other cases of putative focus-marking, including both English accenting and Hungarian 'focus movement', where such interpretive distinctions are associated with quite different linguistic forms.

Finally, English shows the inadequacy of ‘focus’, or related primitive notions, in the face of the diversity of relevant phenomena within just a single language. Consider the case of ‘focus fronting’, as in the second part of (20) (an utterance attributed to Jerry Fodor by Prince, 1999):

(20) Let’s assume there’s a device which can do it—a parser let’s call it.

Vallduví and Engdahl (1996) rightly note that this has different properties to focus-by-accent, but claim that it still fits nicely within their universalist view of ‘information packaging’: on this view, the fronted expression instantiates both a ‘Link’ (essentially, a contrastive topic) and a ‘Focus’; that is, it sets up a background ‘set or scale’ and then picks out an element of that set or scale. But note that this would describe *any* focused item that may be read contrastively and therefore fails to provide sufficient conditions for the use of fronting. Furthermore, Prince (1998, 1999) has shown this kind of construction to be subject to subtle kinds of variation, cross-linguistically and cross-dialectally, above and beyond what we could call ‘contrastive focus’. Thus, Vallduví and Engdahl’s attempt to squeeze this construction into a universally applicable schema actively suppresses an accurate characterisation of its particular properties. It is easy to see that the risk of significant distortion of the empirical picture is high when such an approach is scaled up to the level of cross-linguistic analysis.

4 Assumptions of universality

Some readers may be unmoved by the above demonstrations of variation in putative focus phenomena. It might be argued that such variation is merely superficial—or, at any rate, that we should entertain the idea that it might be so. Moreover, it is key to any scientific endeavour to seek to make unifying generalisations through bold hypotheses, not simply to accept and re-describe the data. Is it not therefore the correct way to proceed to assume that there is a universal category of focus unless and until it is shown to be otherwise?

The answer is no, for a number of reasons. First, it is quite unclear what could falsify such a supposition, if not the kind of ‘superficial’ evidence presented above. I will not pursue this point, however, as this is not the place to delve into the details of falsificationist philosophy of science. Here, I am more interested in the following points: (i) it matters *which* generalisations we try to make and (ii) comparison with parallel cases in the natural sciences shows the approach to universal categories described in the previous paragraph to be a fallacy.

(i) is a crucial corollary to the mantra that we should ‘pursue the strongest hypothesis’. Many absurd hypotheses could be described as being ‘strong’. Meanwhile, the notion of comparing the strength of hypotheses implies that we have already identified a coherent, appropriate domain about which to hypothesise. Is this really the case when we speak of notions like focus in a cross-linguistic context?

Here the accusation of dealing in superficial phenomena cuts both ways. If we seek to identify those things that are so fundamental as to underlie the structures of all human languages, we should be wary of taking surface effects, albeit ones that appear in

similar forms across different languages, and reifying them as theoretically significant atomic entities. Surface similarities are of course there to be explained, and we can all agree that doing so means making generalisations; it does not follow that the relevant generalisations should be stated *in terms of* the observed similarities. Whatever is truly common to all languages need not bear much resemblance to the effects that it ultimately produces. Therefore, to question notions like universal focus features on the basis of observed cross-linguistic variation does not constitute an unscientific refusal to go beyond superficial data; on the contrary, it implies a demand for a higher degree of abstraction: a greater separation of surface effects from underlying causes.

This point could of course be applied to linguistic theory more generally, but at this stage I want to emphasise that the properties of focus make it a notion that is particularly prone this criticism. Those properties that are typically ascribed to focus are generally associated with domains that lie outside linguistic structure, but interact with it (focus is, after all, regularly described as an ‘interface phenomenon’). Thus, ‘newness’ or noteworthiness clearly pertain to broader, extra-linguistic faculties of information processing and to general cognitive issues of salience and selective focus of attention. Even related ideas that have been modelled in terms of logical semantic formalism, like assertion and contrast (or more loosely the relevance of alternatives), are essentially matters of communication and of information processing, rather than being necessarily matters of *linguistic* competence. Moreover, these ideas are truly fundamental within their respective extra-linguistic domains.

It is therefore not *a priori* necessary to invoke a linguistic primitive (such as a grammatical feature) to explain any given ‘focusing effect’ in a given language, let alone to explain the existence of a number of similar effects cross-linguistically. It is hard to imagine how linguistic communication could occur without ideas like newness and contrast seeming significant, even if no language were formally sensitive to them within its grammar. Note that this is not to deny that grammars *may* be sensitive to such notions—it is always a logical possibility that a given language may conventionalise a particular aspect of communication—but certainly it does not take a universal linguistic primitive to explain how languages regularly appear to show a concern for such matters.

Let us now turn to point (ii) from above. In comparable scientific domains we unproblematically assume many kinds of ‘category’ to be rather loose: descriptively useful labels rather than minimal and invariant theoretical objects.

For example, an obvious analogy to the study of comparable phenomena across different languages is that of comparable biological organs across different animal species. Some organs may be truly very similar in a wide variety of species, constructed from similar proteins as well as performing closely comparable functions. Others, however, may show significant variation at all levels while still being recognisably part of the same general ‘category’ of organ. The eye is an example of the latter kind of organ. As Land and Fernald (1992) describe, the animal world contains a rich variety of solutions to the problem of perceiving the outside world via the processing of light, from the pinhole camera-like eyes of the chambered nautilus to the complex interaction of cornea, lens and retina in eyes like those of humans. Both of these contrast with the compound eyes of flies: arrays of individual image-processing units which must interface with the brain in such a way that a composite picture is perceived. In addition to such gross morpho-

logical differences, eyes plainly differ in function, some being adapted (for example) to process subtle colour distinctions or to provide sharply focused images at considerable distances, while others may provide only crude impressions of light and shade. The material composition of eyes is also subject to significant variation: Land and Fernald describe how some are apparently evolutionary innovations for optical use, while in some species proteins have identifiably been co-opted from use in other tissues in ancestor species. This reminds us that variation in eyes across species is attributable not only to divergence and specialisation over time but also to convergence, eyes having evolved independently several times in the history of animal life.

Far from requiring us to assume identity until shown otherwise, the sensible and fruitful scientific approach to the business of understanding eyes clearly involves recognition of the value of descriptive labels that cover broadly similar physical forms with broadly similar functions. Useful as the term ‘eye’ is in cross-species comparison, it does not describe the same thing in each of its uses, nor is variation in eyes best understood as parameterisation or as the result of combinations of a small number of primitive elements (note that one could make essentially the same argument regarding, say, ‘lens’ as I am making regarding ‘eye’).

There is in fact one level at which a large proportion of the animal world’s eyes are to some extent unified: the level of genes. There are surprising commonalities at this level⁹. It seems that certain bits of genetic coding relevant to the production of eyes have been co-opted repeatedly in the course of evolutionary history. Does this in any way swing the analogy back in favour of universal notions of linguistic focus? Not really. Note how far removed the genetic level is from any of the observable properties of a given manifestation of the notion of ‘eye’. There is no chain of reasoning from the surface similarities of some species’ eyes to the existence of certain sequences of DNA that many species genuinely have in common. A mouse’s eye is still emphatically not the same entity as a fly’s eye. Nor would assuming that they were the same have helped in making the relevant genetic discovery (though recognising very broad functional and formal *similarity* undoubtedly was involved). In any case, it is entirely unclear what could be the analogue of the genetic level when it comes to discussions of linguistic structure.

One thing that is clear is that a notion like focus, which is so closely drawn from observable form and meaning, could not be considered analogous to shared genetic material. Bringing together the strands of argumentation in this section, the role of the genetic level within the broader analogy with cross-species comparison points up how positing a universal notion like focus constitutes the reification of an observed *effect* of language structure and use, at an essentially arbitrary level of detail—and indeed one that is suspiciously superficial. The biological analogy shows that the level at which similar-looking phenomena really share the same material may, at least in principle, be at many removes from observable phenomena—if they truly share anything at all.

The degree to which putative ‘focusing phenomena’ across and within languages really resemble each other, let alone work with the same grammatical primitives, is in the end a wholly empirical matter. It will not be clarified by working to an assumption

⁹Thus, Halder et al. (1995) report that relevant sections of mouse gene spliced into a fly’s DNA can cause normal fly eyes (not mouse eyes) to grow on different parts of the fly’s body.

of maximum similarity. Above, I have given some reasons to believe that such resemblances are limited, though nonetheless interesting. While much further cross-linguistic comparison and detailed analysis is undoubtedly required, this strongly suggests that our approach to explaining such phenomena should move beyond the simplistic approach of reifying focus (or a minimal set of related notions) as a part of the grammar; instead recognising it to be a cover term for numerous *effects* of grammars and their uses.

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Daniel Wedgwood
Linguistics and English Language
University of Edinburgh
Dugald Stewart Building
3 Charles Street
Edinburgh, EH8 9AD

dan@ling.ed.ac.uk