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Accentual Focus in Cleft Constructions¹

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In this note, I discuss two issues that have come to mind when looking at the accentual patterns of cleft constructions, particularly *it*-clefts, in connection with theories of focus based on sentence accent. First, the *it*-cleft seems to be one of a group of syntactic structures that prevents the focal scope of clause-final accents extending over material prior to the accents, although this material could be supposed to be in the same FOCUS DOMAIN (cf. Gussenhoven, [1983]). Second, the position of accents in *it*-clefts is often not predictable from the information that might be judged to be 'in focus', since that information has no accentable lexical material straightforwardly associated with it. The note sets out these two issues in outline, and incorporates suggestions made by Bob Ladd, in a meeting I had with him on February 8th 1990, as to how the research might be pursued.

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0.1 Introduction

For this note to be turned into a paper, the following introductory material needs to be included:

- What is this paper about?
- Who has looked at accent and focus? Why is it a problem?
- What are the approaches ordinarily adopted?
- What do I mean by focus?
- What do I mean by broad and narrow scope?
- What light do I think this data is going to throw on the problem?
- To whom do I think the discussion will be of interest?
- What am I going to do in this paper?
- What terms and notation am I going to use?

0.2 Two Issues

In this section, I will simply introduce two issues that I hope might shed some interesting light on the vexed question of the relationship between syntactic structure and accentual focus. These are as follows:

- First, there is evidence to suggest that the syntactic structure of the *it*-cleft acts as a barrier to focal scope, in that accents that might normally be expected to have broad scope appear to take narrow scope
- Second, some theories of accentual focus predict an accent to appear on the lexical realisation of the focal semantic material. Some lexical material in the cleft is rarely accented, and yet it is arguable on other grounds that the semantic material underlying the unaccented realisation is focal.

We will deal with each of these points in turn.

0.2.1 Sentence-Final Accents in Cleft Constructions

On most accounts of accentual focus, it is usual to suppose that the scope of the accent in examples such as (1) is ambiguous²:

- (1) The figure MOVED.

The ambiguity resides in the fact that the focal information in the sentence could be anything from (part of) the meaning of *moved*, right up to the entire content of the sentence. To take a possibly over-simple view of what it means for information to be in focus, the sentence in (1) could answer, for example, either of the following questions:

- (2) a What happened?
b What did the figure do?

It could not, however, be an answer to (3), indicating that focal scope cannot be confined to the information realised as *the figure*. This demonstrates that accents may in general take scope over part or all of the meaning of the constituent upon which they appear, as well as some or all of the meaning of material that appears to the *left* in a phrase or sentence (or is it just tone group?).

- (3) What moved?

There do exist, however, cases where accents are prevented from taking broad scope over information realised by lexical material appearing prior to the accented constituent, even in cases where it might be predicted that the preceding material is part of the same tone group as the accent. The *it*-cleft appears to produce this behaviour systematically, as is shown in the following examples. In each example, a sentence is embedded in the context *It is not the case that . . .*. In (4a), the embedded sentence is an *it*-cleft with sentence-final accent; in (5a), the embedded sentence is a declarative with the same accentual pattern. In each case, an English gloss intended to highlight the scope of the focal information appears beneath the example. Note that only in (5) do we get the ambiguity of focal scope described and illustrated above: the focal scope of the accent in the cleft is not capable of extending over the whole of the sentence:

- (4) a It is not the case that it was the figure that MOVED.
b The figure did something, but it didn't MOVE. Something else moved.
- (5) a It is not the case that the figure MOVED.
b The figure did something, but it didn't MOVE.
c The figure didn't move. Nothing of the kind happened.

²For future reference, it is best to avoid examples that have a definite NP subject and intransitive verb. These examples are actually quite bad at showing the ambiguity of focus that you are trying to get at. There is a paper by Faber in the *Journal of Linguistics* (sometime in 1987-1988) that explains why this is.

What these examples are intended to show is that the cleft in (3) is able to focus only the information realised by *move*, incidentally at the same time (by virtue of the presupposition inherent in the cleft construction) presupposing that something moved (something else, since we know that whatever moved, it wasn't the figure). The declarative in (5), on the other hand, is capable of a variety of scope interpretations: at least, one in which only *move* is focused, and one in which the entire content of the sentence is focused. Other available readings need not concern us for the moment: it is sufficient to note that the declarative allows the accent to have scope over *the figure*, while the cleft, although identical in accentual pattern, does not allow the accent to penetrate to the head of the cleft.

To show that this is not a mere quirk of the data or context, it is possible to construct other contexts in which a similar pattern emerges. In the following examples, similar behaviour is shown where sentences such as those discussed so far are turned into questions. The explication of the focal scope of the accent in the cleft example, (6a), is given as (6b); the scope of the accent in the declarative (7a) is capable of (at least) the same interpretation, as well as an additional one, given as (7c):

- (6) a Was it the figure that MOVED?
 b [I know something moved, and that] the figure did something—but did the figure MOVE?
- (7) a Did the figure MOVE?
 b I know the figure did something, but did the figure MOVE?
 c Did something happen?

If the cleft head is unaccented, as it is in the cleft examples above, it would be expected to form part of the same focus DOMAIN as the accented constituent in the cleft complement (cf. Gussenhoven [1983]) and therefore be amenable to a broad interpretation of the final accent. Why do sentence-final accents in cleft constructions fail to obtain such an interpretation?

I was trying to explore how this might affect a theory such as Gussenhoven's. His theory predicts that unaccented material can be part of the same focus domain as adjacent accented material. If this is the case, the scope of the accent ought to be able to extend over the accented material, since the two are in the same domain. This doesn't appear to be the case here: the unaccented material appears in some way to be out of the scope of the accent, even though it is arguably in the same focus domain. Selkirk has noticed a related phenomenon: in her examples, there are cases where focal accent falling at the end of a phrase doesn't have scope over preceding information. For example, in (8a), the referent of the NP is a lake, in (8b) it is a hill:

- (8) a lake HILL
 b LAKE hill

Gussenhoven's thesis also has examples where accents that should be ambiguous are not. for example, while (9a) is ambiguous between broad and narrow scope (it could be an answer to either *what does he do?* or *what does he teach?*), (9b) has to have only a narrow reading (that

is, answering *where does he teach?*), requiring an extra accent, as in (9c), to get the broad scope reading:

- (9) a he teaches linguistics
b he teaches in GHANA
c he TEACHES in GHANA

This may be a similar phenomenon to the case of clefts: there is something syntactic or contextual that is preventing the broad reading. How is this to be investigated, short of including focus-domain rules for each of these syntactic structures (if it is indeed syntax that is influencing focal scope)? And how can I demonstrate clearly that something similar is happening in the clefts?

Bob Ladd's opinion here was that my own data are extremely difficult to interpret, and that the tests that I have produced so far stretch intuition to such a hair's breadth that it is very difficult to rely upon them. My problem was that the clefts data in particular isn't suited to many of the focus tests available, such as tests using *only*, *even* and *also*, since to place these focusing particles where they are required to tell you something about focus violates the clefts' maximality condition³. In the end, we reduced the problem I was facing to that of not really knowing what focus is: what kinds of information are focal? How can we tell? We noted, for example, that the kind of information that is 'focused' by *also* are very different from the things that are 'focused' by *only*: the first is additive information, the second is exclusive. Does this mean that focal information can sometimes be incremented, sometimes replaced?

Bob's view of focus is independent of Given-New; he sees it as something that is deliberately encoded in the language, and would therefore see the focus-presupposition division of the cleft on a syntactic basis as a valid one. I argued that you could call the cleft head 'focus', if you wanted, but without pinning that down to obvious and observable discourse or psychological effects, it was as useful as calling that information a table or a garden hose. My view was then to go down the path of psychological experimentation to see what effects could be associated with various parts of the cleft.

Bob's suggestion was that I was trying to find evidence of explicit focus-encoding in a language where it was very difficult to see—English; a bit like looking for evidence of definiteness in Japanese, or gender in English. In addition, the study wasn't yet mature enough to go off and start doing psychology experiments—I wouldn't know what I was looking for, or how to look. Another way in to the problem of focus is to look at what focal information is in languages where it is marked *explicitly* in some way. For example, some African languages have focus morphology; broad and narrow scope focus are differentiated within the accentual system in Bengali (cf. Hayes and Lahiri), and Irish does this too. The methodology might then be to get a clear idea of what focus is by looking at these languages, and then coming back to see if similar things can be found in English.

³This may be interesting in itself: what does it tell you about clefts and focus?

0.2.2 Predicting the Position of Accents in Cleft Constructions

It is a common assumption that anything from a single semantic feature to one or more whole propositions can have focal status. The mapping from this focal status to the appearance of sentence accent on a particular lexical item is not straightforward, but it is generally assumed that the accented item realises some semantic constituent that either includes, is co-extensive with, or is itself part of the focal material. Whichever the case, accent would not be expected to appear on lexical material that did not realise part or all of the focal material.

The corollary of this assumption seems to be that semantic constituents have a fairly direct relation with accentable syntactic ones. However, as I argue elsewhere (Delin [1989]) it seems to be one of the primary functions of the cleft not to highlight any semantic constituent for which a syntactic realisation can readily be found (although this may additionally take place), but to draw attention to CONNECTIONS between such semantic constituents. An example will serve to make this clear. In the following context, the speaker is making it clear that he or she is perfectly aware of the background status of much of the information that is syntactically realised by the cleft, such as the fact that John is available in the current discourse, and that there someone has done some running, but is using the cleft to draw attention to the novelty of the connection between them:

- (10) I knew someone ran, and I saw John a moment ago, but I didn't know
that it was JOHN who RAN.

The accents in (10) are typically read as fall-rise, which is characteristic of secondary focal accent. The question then arises, how is primary focus being communicated? Bob's view was that the cleft itself may be communicating primary focus, while the accentual system is acting in a complementary role.

For the moment, however, it doesn't much matter where the accents appear in the example (it is still acceptable, with the same apparent meaning, with either of the accents removed). What does matter is the fact that the only constituent that could arguably be said to be realising this connective relationship, copular *was*, does not receive the accent—indeed, a marked and odd reading results if it is accented, as is shown in the examples below:

- (11) I knew someone ran, and I saw John a moment ago, but I didn't know
that
a ?it WAS John who RAN.
b ?it WAS JOHN who ran.
c ?it WAS JOHN who RAN.
d ?it WAS John who ran.

In the examples I have come across, the only time when the copular receives accent in the cleft construction is when a contrast is taking place between the copular and its negation: what is in focus in this case is arguably a feature such as [+ positive], rather than the connective relation between subject and predicate as expressed by the cleft. In fact, accent on the copula has been said by Dik to be typical of counterassertives. An example of this kind appears in

(12), where speaker A appears to be under the impression that her original opinion, that John ran, has been shown to be incorrect:

- (12) A: I thought it was John who ran.
B: It WAS John who ran.

It appears, then, that the way to focus on the connection between subject and predicate is not to place accent on the copular, the only constituent in the cleft construction that could sensibly be said to realise this part of the meaning of the cleft. It is not immediately clear how a theory of sentence accent, given the information that a particular cleft is focusing the NEXUS between the cleft head element and the presupposed information realised by the cleft complement, could correctly predict the position of sentence accent.

This focus on the connections between things has been discussed by Chomsky [1971]. Bob's suggestion was that I look in general at what has been said about focal accent on elements that are not straightforwardly realised as lexical items, such as polarity and modality. Focus on 'nexus' may be another such thing. Related to this are the cases where focal accent seems to appear when the theta-roles of arguments in a proposition have been reorganised from how they stood in preceding discourse; for example, my LOB example *now it's MOTHER who picks up recipes from her DAUGHTER*, where before mother had been the source of all homely wisdom. We also discussed briefly examples such as *as FOR John, he's been asked to be in a play*. All of these examples have in common the fact that focal accent is appearing in places where it is actually rather hard to predict, since what is focal seems not to be semantic material that can straightforwardly be associated with the surface element that is receiving the accent.

0.3 Conclusion

In this note, I have set out two issues that have presented themselves as possible areas for further research with respect to the study of cleft constructions and focus. There appear to be two possible paths to pursue: the first is to look at other languages for evidence of what focus actually *is*, and then compare this evidence with the clefts data to see if the same kind of information could possibly be being focused. The second is to concentrate on how theories of sentence accent actually predict the position of accents, concentrating on the cases where those theories talk about well-known problem areas such as modality and negation, to see if any are capable of explaining the position of accents in examples such as (9). Further areas of interest are to explore the kinds of information that are 'focused' by the so-called 'focusing subjuncts' (cf. Quirk *et al.* [1985]), and outline what kinds of information seem to appear.