

Semantic Effects of Focus on Modifiers in Complement Clauses

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Data Focus on modifiers (e.g. adverbials or attributively used adjectives) in complements of propositional attitude predicates induces some interesting semantic effects. (1a) and (1b) only differ in accent placement and focus structure. Both (1a) and (1b) assert that Anna believes/doubts that Barbara has a black cat, but (1b) additionally conveys (presupposes) that Barbara does have a cat. In effect, (1b) says that Barbara has a cat and Anna believes/doubts that it is black.

- (1) a. Anna glaubt/bezweifelt dass Barbara [eine schwarze Katze hat]_F
Anna believes/doubts that Barbara a black cat has
- b. Anna glaubt/bezweifelt dass Barbara eine [SCHWARZE]_F Katze hat
Anna believes/doubts that Barbara a black cat has
'Anna believes/doubts that Barbara has a black cat'

Analysis We will argue that this effect can be explained in an elegant way by a natural extension of the presupposition theory of focus proposed by Geurts and van der Sandt (2004), building on the binding theory of presupposition (van der Sandt 1992; Geurts 1999).

The analysis is illustrated in (2) for (1b). (2a) is the preliminary DRS prior to presupposition resolution. The backgrounded material in the complement in (1b) introduces a presuppositional DRS (shaded). Since the presupposition cannot be bound in this context, it will be accommodated as high as possible (cf. Geurts (1999)), in this case in the global DRS. The resulting final DRS in (2b) exactly reflects the actual reading of (1b): Barbara has a cat and Anna believes that it is black.

- (2) a. [a: Anna(a), believe(a, [b x: black(x), Barbara(b), cat(x), own(b,x)])]
b. [a b x: Anna(a), Barbara(b), cat(x), own(b,x), believe(a, [:black(x)])]

In (1a), in contrast, the expression 'eine schwarze Katze hat' is in focus, hence not presupposed, which means that the conditions 'cat(x)', 'black(x)' and 'own(b,x)' are directly generated in their local DRS without escape potential. The resulting reading is exactly as desired, lacking the presupposition that Barbara owns a cat.

Extensions So far, we concentrated on attributively used intersective adjectives, but similar semantic effects are also found with all kinds of adverbials, illustrated in (3).

- (3) Anna glaubt dass Barbara [FREIwillig]_F zur Polizei gegangen ist
Anna thinks that Barbara voluntarily to the police went

The correctly predicted reading is that Barbara went to the police and Anna thinks that she did so voluntarily. We conclude that one simple mechanism – accommodation of a background presupposition – is responsible for the semantic effects of focus on a wide range of modifiers in complements.

References

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