The Dynamics of Topic and Focus

MARIA ALONI, DAVID BEAVER, BRADY CLARK AND ROBERT VAN ROOIJ

6.1 Background and Motivations

This article presents a dynamic account of topic and focus. A dynamic view on meanings as context change potentials (e.g. Stalnaker, Kamp, Heim, Groenendijk & Stokhof) will provide us with a substantial account of the dependence of focused answers on the context set up by their preceding questions. Questions pose conditions on the focal structure of their answers (see Paul, 1880) and can further restrict the domain of subsequent focusing operators like only (e.g. von Stechow, 1991, von Fintel, 1997b, and Jäger’s contribution to this volume). As an illustration of these two facts consider the following example:

(1) a. Who did John introduce to Sue?
   b. Which gentlemen did John introduce to Sue?
   c. John only introduced [Bill]$_f$ to Sue.
   d. # John only introduced Bill to [Sue]$_f$.

After question (1a) or (1b), only an answer with the focal structure in (1c) is felicitous or congruent. The focal structure in (1d) is out. Consider now the meaning of the congruent answer (1c). After question (1a), (1c) means 'The only person John introduced to Sue is Bill'. After (1b), it can mean 'The only gentleman John introduced to Sue is Bill'.

Standard analyses of focus define congruence in terms of identity between the question meaning and the focal alternatives of the answer (e.g. von Stechow, 1991, Roberts, 1996), and identify the domain...
of focusing operators like only with the set of focal alternatives (e.g. Rooth, 1985). In our example, the two distinct questions (1a) and (1b) pose the same conditions on the focal structures of their answers but can have different effects on the quantificational domain of subsequent only. These two facts constitute a problem for these standard theories unless they come equipped with a smart analysis of the dynamics of domain restriction which plays a role in these cases. The main goal of this article is to provide such an analysis.

Most existing dynamic analyses of questions have been developed in the tradition of the partition theory of Groenendijk and Stokhof (1984). In the partition theory, the meaning of a question is identified with the set of meanings of all its exhaustive answers. In a dynamic setting, questions partition information states, and answers eliminate blocks of these partitioned contexts (see Groenendijk, 1999, Jäger, 1996, both reprinted in this volume, but also Hulstijn, 1997). These theories in which interrogatives and indicatives update a context, constitute a simple model of how information in discourse is organized by the question-answer relation (e.g. Carlson, 1983, Roberts, 1996). The notion of a partial or complete answer is specified in terms of entailment which is uniformly defined for indicative and interrogative sentences. Although logically very appealing, these theories are, empirically, not completely satisfactory. First of all, partitions seem to be too coarse-grained for a proper treatment of focus, and, thus, for an account of the facts in (1). Constituent answers are hard to tackle in these analyses as well. For example, Groenendijk cannot account for the different content expressed by answer (2c) after (2a) and after (2b), for the two questions, having the same set of complete answers, induce exactly the same partition.

(2) a. Who smokes?
   b. Who doesn’t smoke?
   c. [John]ϕ.

Related difficulties also arise for theories in the Hamblin/Karttunen/Rooth tradition, e.g. problems with multiple foci (see Krifka, 1992) and alternative questions (see von Stechow, 1991, Krifka, 2001). The standard treatment of alternatives as sets of (propositional) answers is not fine-grained enough and, as many people have argued, for a proper account we need the abstracts underlying the questions (see Groenendijk and Stokhof, 1984, Ginzburg, 1995, van Rooij, 1997b) and direct access to focus, i.e. structured meanings.

In a structured meaning account we have fitting analyses of questions and focus: questions denote abstracts, λxϕ, i.e. functions that