Autonomy of Syntax and Information Structure

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The Issue

Information Structure is reflected in the choice of syntactic constructions in many if not all languages. One class of models (represented, e.g., by Rizzi 1997) assumes that there is a direct and transparent mapping between syntax and information structure, such that features related to information structure are encoded in the syntax. A different class of models (see, e.g., Chomsky 2005) subscribes to the view that syntax is autonomous, such that, in particular, no features that are not properties of items in the lexicon can figure in syntactic computations. For many (if not all) languages this implies that concepts of information structure play no role in syntactic derivations. Syntax interacts only in an indirect way with information structure: the relation is mediated by the syntax-PF interface. The second type of model can be shown to be empirically superior for at least a certain class of languages.

1 Is Syntax Sensitive to Focus?

If syntax would represent information structure in a direct and transparent way, we would expect that there are structural slots reserved for focus phrases, or that focus plays a role in triggering movement. But what appears to be a focus position often (if not always) turns out not to be one under closer inspection.

Thus, in German, Turkish, Hindi, and further SOV languages, the preverbal 'focus' position is obligatory for focused objects only. Focussed subjects and adjuncts can, but need not appear there. The best analysis for these facts involves a prosodic alignment principle for stressed XPs, with a preference for right-alignment in IP. Focussed objects already are rightmost (and have no reason to move away). Subjects and adjuncts do not move to the right, rather, de-stressed objects can be scrambled across subjects/ adjuncts, in which case the latter elements appear preverbally. Given the optional nature of scrambling, we understand why stressed non-objects need not appear in preverbal position. There is no preverbal focus position, but rather a preference for right-aligned stressed XPs.

Likewise, the left-peripheral position in CP to which focussed phrases may move in several languages (Hungarian, German, Czech, Russian, Italian, Greek) is not a focus position. Evidence from the movement of idioms and intervention effects (see Fanselow & Lenertova 2006) reveal that the crucial properties of the movement element is its bearing stress, which can, but need not be related to being in focus.

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Information Structure → Syntax →

Prosody

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Information Structure → Prosody →

Syntax

The well-formedness of syntactic representations and the licensing of movement operations is therefore often linked to stress -and not to focus- in quite a number of languages. Since stress is related in a complex way to focus, one may sometimes get the incorrect impression that syntax is sensitive to focus, too.

2 A Model for Focus-Free Syntax

Autonomous "narrow" syntax itself would still have a hard time being sensitive to factors such as stress, however! Stress is not a lexical feature and movement is triggered by (abstract) features of lexical items (Chomsky 1995, 2005). The impact of stress on syntax must thus be explained differently. In narrow syntax, XPs move independent of their prosodic properties.
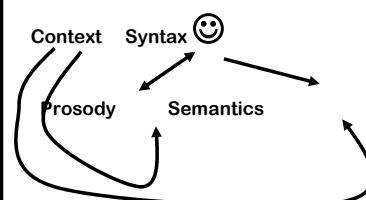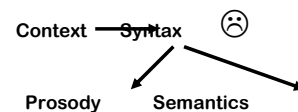
This leads to *overgeneration* in contexts in which, e.g., only the leftmost stressed XP can move. Structures with an incorrect placement of stressed XPs are filtered out when syntactic structures are interpreted prosodically. Scrambling and movement to the left periphery do not change prominence relations among stressed elements. This restriction of what movement does (it must not change prominence) can be expressed in terms of the copy & deletion theory of movement: the copy of the moved phrase in the target position can be spelled out there only if this does not imply a reversal of the prominence relations established so far.

3 An Apparent Problem Explained Away

If focus is a notion formally interpreted by prosody only, how can it have an impact on interpretation in a Y-/T-like model of grammar, in which there is no direct link between PF and LF, such that prosodic distinctions can be interpreted at LF only if they are reflected in the syntax?

The answer to this question fails to motivate the use of focus features in the syntax, however: that a phrase is *in focus* is not so much a prosodically determined feature but a property of the context of an utterance. "Focality" is anchored in the context. Context influences interpretation, and whatever impact focus may have on meaning can be described in the context-meaning interface alone. Certain prosodic contours are, however, inappropriate in certain contexts, and interpretations are interpretations of appropriate utterances only.

There is no need for formal links for an exchange of information between PF and LF. All we need is context.

Context — Syntax ☹

Prosody   Semantics

Context   Syntax ☺

Prosody   Semantics

4 Further Issues

Extensions of this line of research to topicality can be found in Fanselow (2006). In a weak interpretation of our model, we confine the claim that information structure is irrelevant for syntax to those languages in which it has no morphological reflex (in the form of topic or focus markers, or corresponding agreement morphology), this being linked to the claim that languages may differ with respect to the lexical features they employ. A stronger interpretation claims that syntax never responds to information structure in a direct way. The obvious task then lies in reanalysing focus- and topic markers as elements of a different sort.