

The use of *only* for focus marking in Indian English

(3491 words)

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1. Introduction

Focus markers such as *only*, *also* and *itself* are used widely in spoken Indian English with such frequency and distinctiveness that they have become a marked feature of this variety. Spoken Indian English can be said to exist on a continuum of registers, influenced varyingly by the regional and ethnolinguistic background of the speaker. Because the prestige or acrolectal forms of Indian English are those that conform most to standard British or American English in word choice, stress pattern and syntactical constructions, the use of these focus markers are marked as a more nativized manner of speaking. Many ways in which these markers are used seemed to be calqued from substrate Indian languages, and they interact with stress pattern and word order in unique and interesting ways.

In this paper I will investigate the use of *only* in spoken Indian English (henceforth referred to as IndE), focusing on the relationship between placement, stress and function. I will study how varying the placement of *only* and varying patterns of stress in sentences affects shifts in meaning by relating it to its use in IndE and Standard English (henceforth referred to as StE). In addition, I will investigate how *only* interacts with negation. My goal will be to focus on example sentences using *only* to illustrate the paradigm of this focus marker, and discussing their varying readings in IndE and StE and the function of *only* in each one. I will also be collecting data from Brigham Young University's corpus of Global Web-based English (GloWbE), and using different constructions containing *only* to support my analysis. I will also discuss these constructions in relation to similar ones in substrate Indian languages.

Only has been called a “presentational” or “non-contrastive focus marker” in IndE, appearing as evidence for a “nativized syntactic pattern” in the dialect (Lange 2007: 115). According to Bernaisch and Lange, “*only* has become polysemous in IndE, marking not only contrastive, but also presentational focus” (2012). Contrastive focus or identificational focus can be defined as follows:

An identificational focus represents a subset of the set of contextually or situationally given elements for which the predicate phrase can potentially hold; it is identified as the exhaustive subset of this set for which the predicate phrase actually holds. (Kiss 1998: 245)

Presentational or as Kiss refers to it informational or wide focus, on the other hand, does not select in this manner:

If a sentence part conveys new, nonpresupposed information marked by one or more pitch accents – without expressing exhaustive identification performed performed on a set of contextually or situationally given entities, it is not an identificational focus but a mere information focus. (1998: 246)

It is using these categories of focus that I will be analyzing the function of *only* as a focus marker in IndE. I will attempt to determine what characteristics of stress pattern and position of *only* exactly are responsible for and salient in bringing out focus. My argument will try to bring out the importance of stress pattern in determining the nature of the focus and whether it is contrastive or presentational.

The remainder of this paper will be structured as follows: in section 2, I will briefly discuss the use of *only* in StE and discuss its role as a focus particle. In section 3, I will investigate various uses of *only* in IndE in affirmative senses and attempt to delineate its nature in the different contexts. In section 4, I will study the interaction of *only* with negation in IndE, and in section 5 I will discuss similar phenomena in substrate Indian languages as discussed in the literature and how they may be influencing the use of *only* in IndE as I am discussing it.

2. *Only* in StE

In StE, *only* is often characterized as an adjective or adverb in an exhaustive sense, that is to say that there is only one or very few of the thing in question, or that it is quantitatively limited. In our analysis, we are interested in the adverbial use of *only* as it works to indicate focus. To see this, let us consider the following sentence:

(1) I am doing homework.

Now let us consider the placement of *only* at various points in this sentence to understand the resulting effects:

- (2) Only I am doing homework.
- (3) #I only am doing homework.
- (4) I am only doing homework.
- (5) I am doing only homework.

In StE, *only* always occurs before the focus in natural speech. In order to determine the focus of a proposition, Lambrecht uses the technique of “asking an information question whose WH-constituent corresponds to the presumed focus constituent in the answer” (1996: 297). Let us then consider the sentences above (except for (3), as it is not a particularly natural utterance) as question-answer pairs in order to flesh out their focus:

- (6) Who is doing homework? Not just you? – Only I am doing homework.
- (7) What are you up to? Not just doing homework? – I am only doing homework.
- (8) What are you doing? Not just homework? – I am doing only homework.

We see that the presuppositions that necessitate the use of *only* in the answer sentence – that it is not just the hearer doing homework, that the hearer is engaged in some other activity as well or that the hearer is doing more than homework – are largely refuted by the exhaustive meaning of *only* in the sentence, as it is applied to its referent, i.e. the hearer, the act of ‘doing’, and the homework. We also see that here, *only* is marking contrastive focus by selecting a particular detail of the utterance from all possible elements, as indicated by the relevant presupposition. This idea of exhaustivity and contrastiveness in StE *only* will be juxtaposed with its use in IndE in the next section.

3. *Only* in IndE

Unlike in StE, where *only* may precede or follow the entity or syntactic chunk that it is in reference to, in the nativized IndE constructions in question it follows the focus. Fuchs calls this type of order ‘post-adjacent’, and this is one of the primary markers of non-acrolectal spoken IndE. In order to study the usage of *only* in IndE, let us consider the same sentence as in the previous section, and the placement of *only* at various points in this sentence in the nativized IndE pattern:

- (9) I *only* am doing homework.
- (10) I am *only* doing homework.
- (11) I am doing *only* (the) homework.
- (12) I am doing homework *only*.

Each of these constructions is valid in spoken IndE and have different objects of focus, as in StE, but also type of focus. Just like in the preceding section, let us consider the sentences above as question-answer pairs delineate their focus, with appropriate prosodic stress to illustrate the focus:

- | | |
|--|---|
| (13) Who is doing homework? Someone else? | – I <i>only</i> am doing homework. |
| (14) Who is doing homework? Someone else? | – I <i>AM</i> <i>only</i> doing homework. |
| (15) What are you up to with the homework? Not doing it? | – I am <i>DOING</i> <i>only</i> the homework. |
| (16) What are you doing? Not homework? | – I am doing <i>HOMEWORK</i> <i>only</i> . |
| (17) What are you up to? Not doing homework? | – I am * <i>DOING</i> homework* <i>only</i> . |
| (18) What are you up to? | – I am doing homework <i>only</i> . |

In example (17), there is heightened prosodic stress starting from *doing* through *homework*. In example (18), the stress is consistent throughout the utterance. In each of these cases, we see that the different placements of *only* and different stress patterns correspond to varying nuances in meaning. First of all, we see that the use of post-adjacent *only* differs from pre-adjacent StE *only* lexically – while StE *only* when used in front of its referent implies that there is just one or very few of something (quantitatively exhaustive), IndE post-adjacent *only* is more concerned with the relevance of the referent itself, that is it marks qualitative exclusivity. This is illustrated by the questions in the preceding examples – in all of them the focus particle *only* helps the hearer to refute a presupposition about the referent itself rather than about whether there is more of the referent. In this sense, while StE *only* marks exhaustivity, but IndE *only* more strongly and uniquely marks exclusivity.

With regard to the nature of the focus evoked, there are differences in the pragmatic context that induce the use of the marker *only* and also corresponding prosodic stress patterns. In particular, we see that the questions in examples (13) to (17) contain presuppositions, which are refuted in the answer sentences. The post-adjacent use of *only*, combined with the use of stress on the object of focus, serves to refute the presupposition made in the question (or in a more realistic context, implied by the conversation), in a way that is similar to the use of pre-adjacent *only* in StE, and restrict the focus entity from a set of potential entities, thereby contrasting it. Even if the

prosodic stress were not to be employed, the use of *only* itself would serve to refute the presupposition involved and contrast the focus entity occurring before it.

However, when neither the stress pattern nor the syntax highlights a unique chunk of the sentence, it is not countering a presupposition, and instead simply serves to emphasize the sentence as a whole. This is what we see in example (18). Examples (13) through (17) can therefore be called examples of contrastive focus, where information is coded in a way contrary to the presuppositions of the interlocutor, whereas example (18) is an example of presentational focus using *only*, the innovative feature of IndE that is of interest to us.

Turning to the GloWbE Indian corpus for examples of post-adjacent *only*, we see examples of presentational and contrastive focus in the following examples:

(19) Once he/she has finished medical residency program successfully **ONLY** and **ONLY** then he/she is eligible to practice in USA. Getting into medical residency program is very difficult, as all programs are funded by US government **only**.

(20) According to the mythological and Geological concept Himalayas emerged from the vast ocean called Tethys and is youngest of all mountains. It seems resort is named on that fact **only**.

(21) . Discussing the word 'Arya', he says: " But it was more faithfully preserved by the Zoroastrians, who migrated from India to the North-west and whose religion has been preserved to us in the Zind Avesta, though in fragments **only**.

(22) The first seven questions only have to be ticked because they are choices about which of the five occupations and two leisure activities (or something similar) might interest you if you had the necessary skills. Here, for every tick add one point. The Yes and No come in for the last five questions **only**.

In each of the examples (19) and (20), it is impossible to obtain readings in which *only* marks the referent as the focus in contrast to all other possible referents. In each of these examples, the referent in question – the US government or the fact about the Himalayas – is not being identified as a subset of the set of elements (e.g. other governments or other facts) for which the predicate phrase can potentially hold. However, in examples (21) and (22) the entity referred to by the focus particle is exclusively picked out by *only* as being relevant to the proposition, i.e. the religion of the Zoroastrians has been preserved only in fragments, and in no other form, and the 'yes and no' come in only for the last five questions, and not the others.

The use of the innovative presentational focus marker *only* in IndE is therefore characterized by two things – the post-adjacent position relative to the focus, which is a nativized pattern observed with focus markers in IndE in general, and the lack of a stress pattern or syntax highlighting the focus to point to the pragmatic context in which this *only* is limiting the object of its focus from a set of potential elements, merely making the focus entity more emphatic.

4. *Only* and negation in IndE

Only co-occurs with negation particles in IndE in interesting ways. Two similar examples from the GloWbE corpus are as follows:

(23) Score is very important for winning. For instance if there would be no score, then there would be no sports **only**.

(24) Uggs coming from Mezoboots.org are really lightweight and so are created from EVA/rubber. These kind of Uggs are designed to enable them to become put on with no stockings **only**.

In these examples, the construction *no X only* can be rephrased as *no X at all*; i.e. the ‘negatedness’ of the entity that is being negated is emphasized. The paradigm of the previous homework example can be reused here to illustrate the interaction between negation particle *not* and *only*:

- (25) I only am not doing homework.
- (26) I AM only not doing homework.
- (27) I am not DOING only the homework.
- (28) I am not doing HOMEWORK only.
- (29) I am not *DOING homework* only.
- (30) I am not doing homework only. / I am NOT doing homework only.
- (31) ?I am not only doing homework.

Examples (25) to (30) are similar to the previous paradigm; (25) to (29) are examples of contrastive focus marked by optional prosodic stress and the use of *only* after the word to be contrasted. (30) contains two sentences with the same implications – one with a consistent stress pattern and one with stress on *not* – showing presentational focus, in that the person is saying that they are ‘not doing homework at all’. Example (31) is not a unique example from IndE – here *only* cannot appear in this position in the IndE pattern as it cannot mark focus on the negation particle *not*; however, it can occur in StE to mean that the person is not only doing homework, but also something else.

While the paradigm of these examples seems to behave similarly both in the affirmative and negative *not* cases, extending this analysis to other negation words seems to show that they behave differently with this respect. Consider the following examples with negation and their affirmative counterparts:

- (31) I have no patience only. / *I have some patience only.
- (32) Nobody is opening the door for them only. / *Somebody is opening the door for them only.
- (33) Nothing is happening only. / *Something is happening only.

While in the negation sentences, the use of *only* seems to indicate presentational focus, as in ‘I have no patience at all’ or ‘Nobody is even opening the door for them!’, this does not work with their affirmative counterparts, i.e. when we try to use presentational focus *only* with these affirmative sentences, it sounds unnatural. Of course, if prosodic stress were assigned, e.g. ‘NOTHING is happening only!’ vs ‘SOMETHING is happening only!’, then contrastive focus would be evoked, in the form of the rejection of a presupposed alternative (that something or nothing is happening, respectively).

While *not*, which is used with an auxiliary verb or ‘to be’ to form the negative form and is classified as an adverb, interacts with *only* in similar ways as similar affirmative sentences, particles or words that negate nouns like *no*, *nobody* and *nothing* do not interact with *only* similarly to their affirmative counterparts in consistent stress contexts. With these negation

particles *only* behaves like *at all*; however, while *at all* carries the implication of ‘in any way’ or ‘to any extent’, *only* has more of a qualitative character in IndE. This may have to do with the affirmative counterparts in these examples denoting the presence of ‘some’ of a quantity or entity rather than a definite thing, and because *only* is a strongly qualitatively exclusive focus marker in IndE as I previously argued, it requires a definite subject or argument with which to interact.

5. Substrate influence on *only* in IndE

The use of *only* in IndE is a marked feature of South Asian varieties of English, that is certainly influenced by contact with substrate languages. The substrate influence of emphatic clitics and focus particles in Indo-Aryan and Dravidian languages on marking focus is an intriguing area of study. Lange demonstrates with the following examples from Koul (1990) the “different shades of meanings of the Hindi particle *hii*”:

- (34) mohan jaayegaa – ‘Mohan will go’
 mohan go.3SG.M.FUT
 mohan jaayegaa **hii** – ‘Mohan will certainly go’
- (35) voh aaj gayaa hogaa – ‘He might have gone today’
 3SG today go.3SG.M.PST be.3SG.M.FUT
 voh aaj **hii** gayaa hogaa – ‘He might have gone today itself’
- (36) main gayaa nahiin – ‘I did not go’
 1SG go.1SG.M.PST NEG
 main gayaa **hii** nahiin – ‘I did not go at all’
- (37) yeh acchaa huua – ‘It is good’
 it good.M be.M.PST
 yeh acchaa huua **hii** huua – ‘It is good (emphatic)’

Lange says, “these examples show that the Hindi particle *hii* already displays the same polysemy as *only* in IndE, marking both exclusive/contrastive as well as presentational focus” (2012: 194). The issue in Hindi is that it is sometimes difficult to differentiate between these exclusive and emphatic meanings, as illustrated by this sentence from Verma (1971: 91), which can be translated in two different ways:

- (38) larke **hii** aa rahe hain – ‘Only the boys are coming’
 boys EMP come PROG.M.PL be.M.PL
- (39) larke **hii** aa rahe hain – ‘It’s the boys who are coming’

Both these translations are valid with consistent stress patterns, although emphasizing *larke* might favor the contrastive focus translation in (38) more. I would put (38) in my IndE paradigm with contrastive stress pattern as ‘The BOYS **only** are coming’ and (39) for simple presentational focus as ‘The boys **only** are coming’. The more appropriate reading would therefore have to be determined from pragmatic context.

Murugaiyan in his study of focus constructions in modern Tamil discusses the focus suffixes -*daan* and -*e*, and summarizes them as follows:

The particle -*daan* is primarily concerned with ‘argument focus’ and encodes semantics of ‘exhaustivity’. If the utterance does not allow identificational (exhaustive) reading, the

particle assumes other discourse functions. The particle *-e* is mainly concerned with ‘verb focus’ and encodes semantics of ‘common ground’/‘shared knowledge’. (2009)

He also does an analysis of these particles in compound form, as in *-daan-e* and *-e-daan*, and shows that while the semantics of the rightmost particle is dominant, “each particle maintains its proper semantic-pragmatic value”.

Being influenced by the polysemy, lexicality and cross-interactions of focus particles in substrate Indian languages, it is therefore unsurprising that *only* has evolved into the polysemous focus marker in IndE that it is – highly sensitive to position, stress and pragmatic context.

6. Conclusion

This paper was largely concerned with the various mechanisms underpinning the use of *only* as a focus marker in IndE. The main findings may be summarized as follows: while in StE, *only* encodes the semantics of exhaustivity, IndE *only* is less about limiting quantity and more about the relevance and exclusivity of the referent. IndE *only* takes a post-adjacent position to the focus referent, and may indicate contrastive or presentational focus depending on stress pattern and syntax – where is there no stress pattern or syntax highlighting the focus to point to the pragmatic context in which *only* is limiting the focus from a set of potential elements, then the focus is presentational. I have also proposed that because of the nature of IndE *only* as a qualitative exclusive focus marker, it does not operate on words that negate nouns such as *no*, *nobody* and *nothing* in the same way as on their affirmative counterparts – IndE *only* requires a definite subject or argument with which to interact. An overview of focus particles in substrate Indian languages shows that it is very possible that the polysemy and cross-interaction of focus particles with other words and each other in these languages may have diffused into IndE and influenced the usage of *only* to mark focus.

Although quantitative studies on the frequency and distribution of *only* among demographic categories and syntactic contexts have been studied, a formalized quantitative study of the use of stress patterns in influencing the semantics of *only* could be an interesting avenue to explore.

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