

# The role of context in focus intervention effects

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## Background

**Focus intervention effects (FIE):** A *wh*-expression cannot be preceded by a focus expression.

1. \*只有 [小琪]<sub>F</sub> 买了 哪本 杂志 呢?  
only [Xiaoqi]<sub>F</sub> buy-Asp which-CI magazine SFP  
Int ‘Which magazine did only Xiaoqi buy?’ (Target)

Ordinary *wh*-questions

2. 小琪 买了 哪本 杂志 呢?  
Xiaoqi buy-Asp which-CI magazine SFP  
‘Which magazine did Xiaoqi buy?’ (Plain)

Front-*wh* questions

3. 哪本 杂志 只有 [小琪]<sub>F</sub> 买了 呢?  
which-CI magazine only [Xiaoqi]<sub>F</sub> buy-Asp SFP  
‘Which magazine did Xiaoqi buy?’ (Fronted)

### Grammatical view:

FIEs result from violation of syntax/semantics rules.

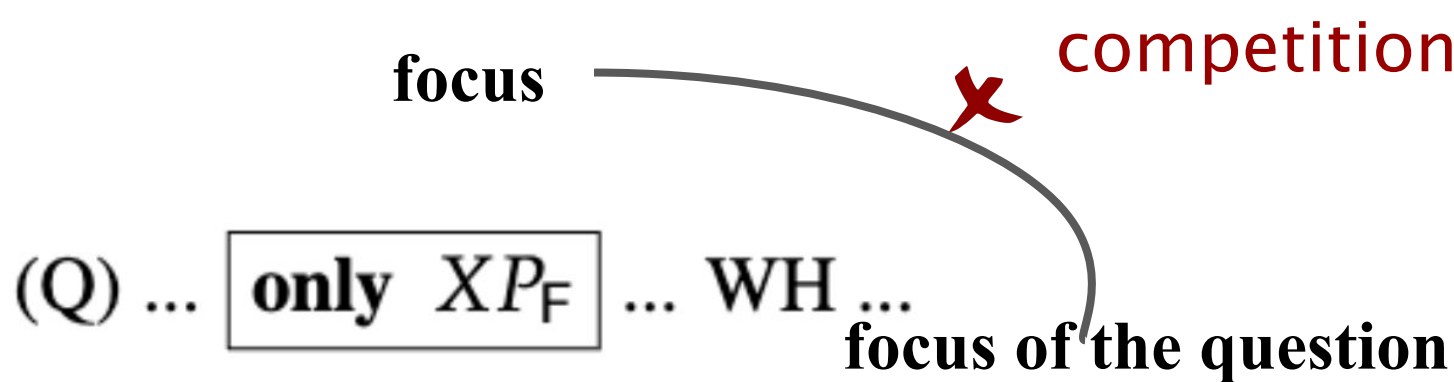
(Q) ... only *XP<sub>F</sub>* ... WH ...  
blocking effects (Beck 1996, 2006; Soh 2005; Kim 2006; Li & Cheung 2015; a.o.)

Q-op  
[CP ... [FP only *XP<sub>F</sub>* ... WH ... ]]  
F-op  
Competition (Yang 2012)

... only [*XP<sub>F</sub>* ... WH ...]  
semantically uncombinable  
Compositional failure (Beck 2006; Kotek 2014; Li & Law 2016; Erlewine & Kotek 2017)

### Pragmatic view:

FIEs result from competition of foci in a sentence, whose information structure only allows one focus.



(Tomioka 2007, 2020; Eilam 2011; Glasbergen 2022)

## Prediction

If a context is provided that turns the intervening focus expression into background, ...

	Availability of FIEs
Grammatical view	YES
Pragmatic view	NO

## Take Home Message

Two experiments to probe the role of context in FIEs:

- Task 1: Acceptability rating
- Task 2: Self-paced reading

Result: In both tasks, ...

- The rating task detects FIEs
- The SPR task does not detect FIEs

## Experiment 1: Without Context

**Design:** 63 stimuli with 3 conditions were grouped into 3 Latin-Square lists

**For each list:**

21 Items			22 Fillers	
Plain	Target	Front	grammatical	Ungrammatical
7	7	7	11	11

**Participants:** 148 college students

**Procedure:**

- Step 1: Self-paced reading
- Step 2: Acceptability rating (5 point scale)
  - 1 completely unnatural; 2 basically unnatural; 3 marginally natural;
  - 4 basically natural; 5 completely natural

## Experiment 2: With Context

**Design:** the same as Experiment 1

**Participants:** 155 college students

**Sample context:** the contribution of focus is **entailed** by the context

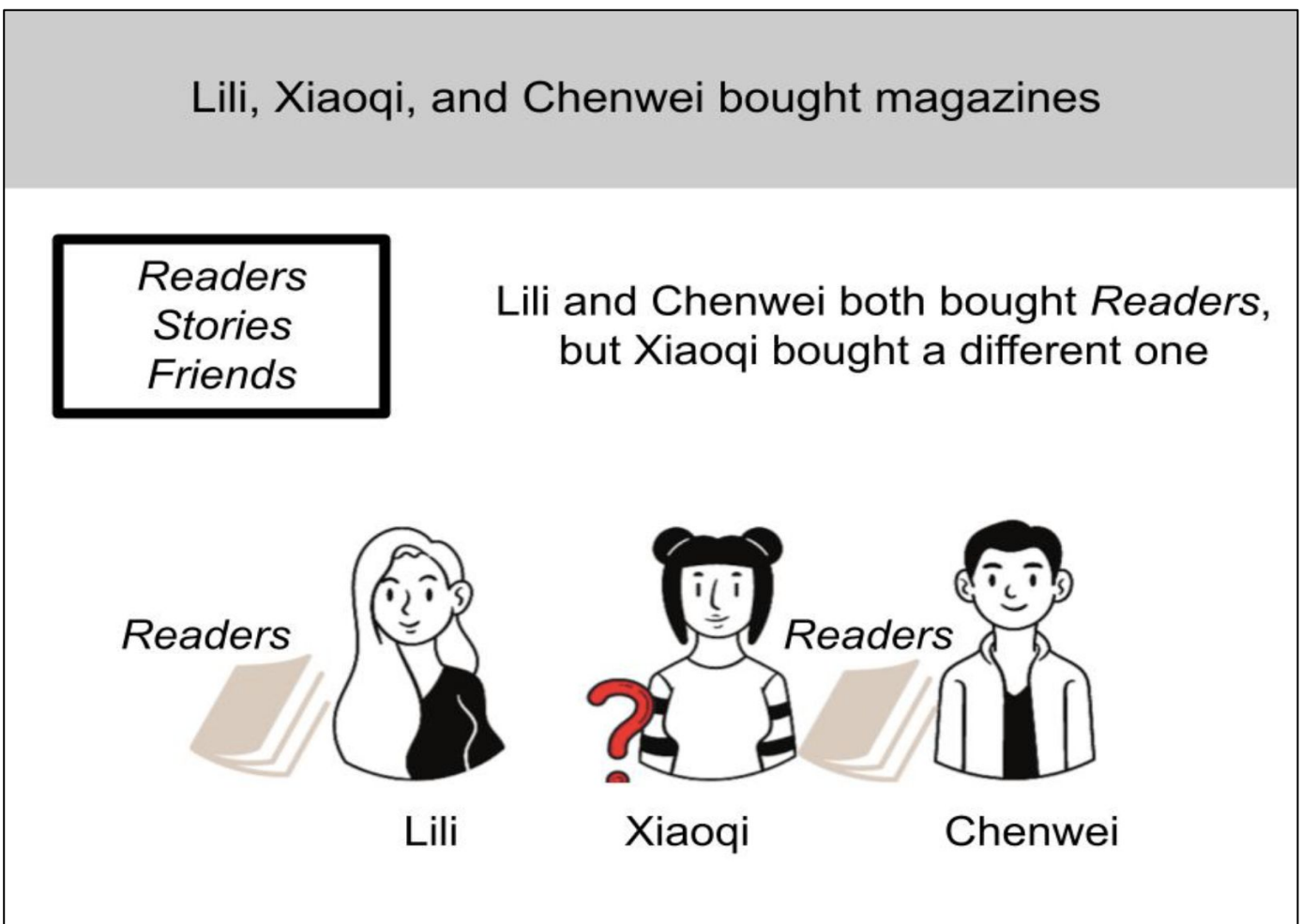
The context entails:

**Only Xiaoqi** bought a different magazine.

→ “Only Xiaoqi” is in background

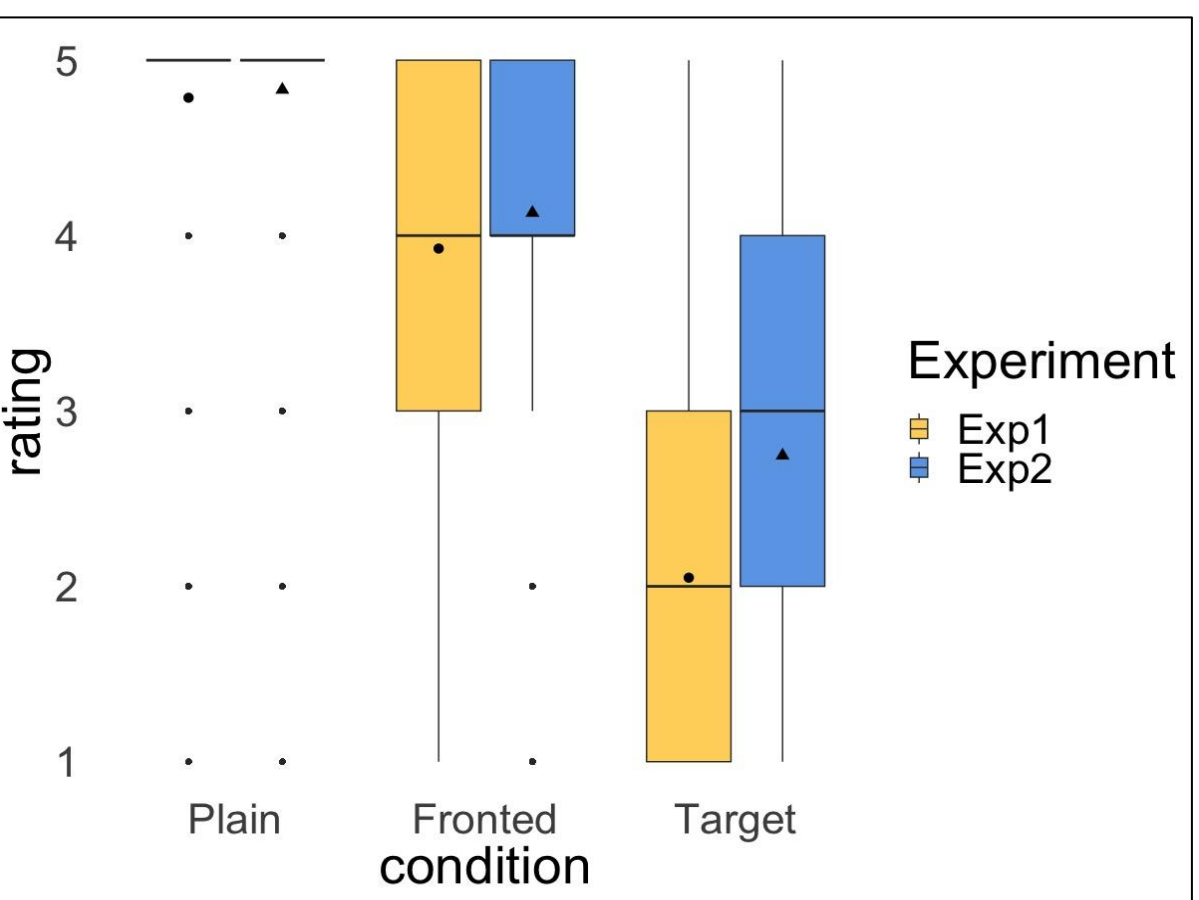
**Procedure:**

- Step 1: Read the context; answer a comprehension question
- Step 2: Receive feedback on the answer
- Step 3: Self-paced reading
- Step 4: Acceptability judgment (context provided again)



## Result

### Acceptability rating

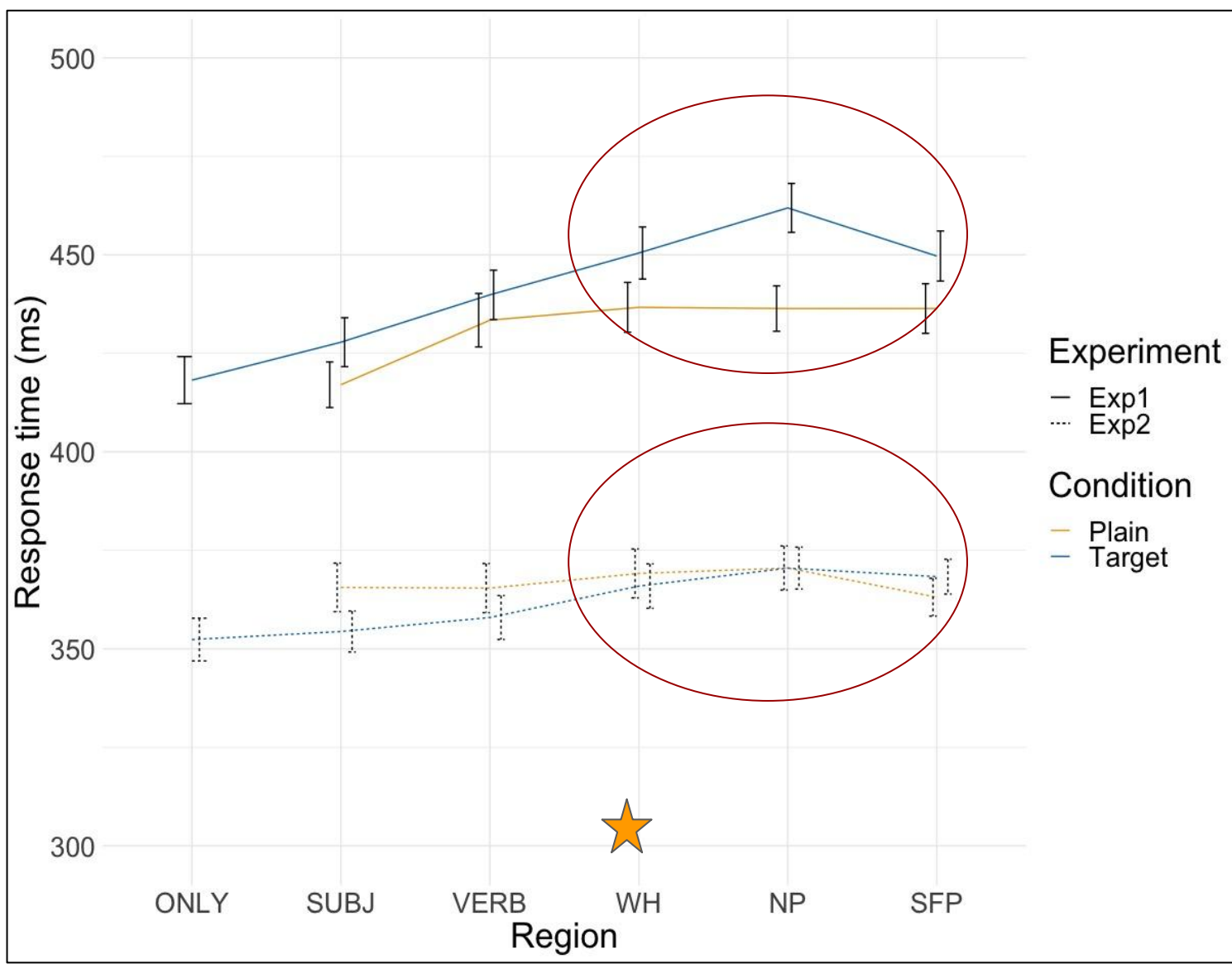


- Context improved the acceptability rating across the 3 conditions.
- Target received the lowest rating in the ‘unnatural’ range in Exp 1 & 2.
- Context significantly interacts with structure in Target ( $\beta = 0.83$ ,  $SE = 0.074$ ,  $z = 11.3$ ,  $p < .001$ )

Context significantly improved the rating of Target, but is **not sufficient** to eliminate FIEs.

### Reading time

- Target induced a slowdown in the critical region (★) and the spillover region (NP and SFP) in when **no context** was provided (Exp 1).
- Target did **not** induce a slowdown when **context** was provided in the critical and NP regions (Exp 2).
- FIEs resurfaced at the SFP region.



Context **temporarily neutralized** FIEs in processing.

## Discussion

- Context facilitates the processing of FIE sentences.
- Context improves the judgments of FIE sentences.
- Despite the facilitation, context does not fully ameliorate FIEs.

	Availability of FIEs
Grammatical view	YES
Pragmatic view	NO

Acceptability judgments do not always align with processing (see also Holfmeister & Norcliffe 2013; Beltrama & Xiang 2016)

### Possible reasons of the temporary neutralization in processing

- Facilitation effects induced by contextually supported focus (Birch & Rayner 2010; Hoeks et al 2021)
- Facilitation effects induced by contextually supported WH