Focus structures in Thompson Salish: (im)perfections in the syntax-semantics interface

- **1. Introduction:** Based on original fieldwork, this paper shows that narrow focus structures in Thompson Salish neatly split the clause *syntactically* into its two focus *semantic* components, the Background and the Focus (e.g. von Stechow 1990, Krifka 1992). The near perfection of this focus syntax-semantics interface is compromised in the case of narrow focus within complex NPs, which are subject to the well-known Complex NP Island Constraint (Ross 1973, Krifka 2006). However, perhaps surprisingly, a *phonological* operation (rightward extraposition) rescues the semantic Background/Focus split in the surface linear order.
- **2. The Basic Data:** Thompson Salish, spoken in southwestern Canada, is severely endangered, with no more than a few hundred elderly speakers remaining. Like all Salish languages, it is predicate-initial. Basic word order is Verb-Subject-Object (VSO 1a). I assume the Structured Meaning approach to focus semantics (von Stechow 1990 etc.), where Background and Focus are represented as the pair <B, F>. In Thompson Salish, VSO order is used to mark clause-wide focus. In (1a), the split between Background and Focus is trivially met, since there is no background, and the entire clause is in focus (1b).
- (1) a. [cu-t-Ø-és e Péter e káh-s]_{FOCUS}. fix-TRANS-3OBJ-3SUBJ DET Peter DET car-his 'Peter fixed his car.'
 - b. Background/Focus structure <B, F>: <Ø, fix(Peter)(his.car)>

For narrow focus on arguments, two focus structures are used, meeting the following criteria:

- (2) a. Focus: generate the focus as the matrix predicate.
 - b. Background: generate backgrounded information as an argument.

The criteria in (2) can be met because the Salish languages have extreme predicate-argument flexibility: virtually any open-class category can function as the matrix predicate without the use of a copula, or can be turned into an argument (e.g. Kroeber 1999). Thus, the narrow focus 'dog' in (3) is base-generated as a bare nominal predicate, taking the backgrounded information as a clausal argument. The argument containing the backgrounded information has a gap t_x corresponding to the focus (Kroeber 1999, Davis 2004), just like the <B, F> semantic structure.

- $(3) \quad \text{a.} \quad [\text{sq} \underline{\mathsf{a}} \underline{\mathsf{q}} \underline{\mathsf{x}} a]_{\text{FOCUS}} \quad [\text{e} \quad \text{p\'un-m-} \emptyset\text{-ne} \qquad \qquad t_x]_{\text{BACKGROUND}} \\ \quad \text{dog} \quad \text{COMP find-TRANS-3OBJ-1SG.SUBJ} \quad t_x \\ \quad \text{`[I found]}_{\text{BG}} \left[\text{a dog} \right]_{\text{FOCUS.}} \text{'(more literally `[That I found]}_{\text{BG}} \text{ was } [\text{a dog}]_{\text{FOCUS.}} \text{')} \\ \quad \text{Because of the property of$
 - b. Background/Focus structure <B, F>: <λx.I found x, dog>

The second structure employed to mark narrow argument focus is a cleft. Since referential DPs cannot function as predicates (again, a general constraint in the language), they must be introduced by a cleft predicate when focused. The background information again follows in a separate clausal argument containing a gap corresponding to the focused subject. Once again, the syntax splits the clause precisely into the focus semantic split <B, F>.

- (4) a. $\stackrel{.}{\text{c\'e}}$ [e Bíll]_{FOCUS} [e $\stackrel{.}{\text{cupi-t-}}$ 0-mus t_x e sta? \underline{x} áns-c]_{BACKGROUND}. CLEFT DET Bill COMP eat-TRANS-3OBJ-SUBJ.GAP t_x DET food-his 'It was [Bill]_{FOCUS} [that ate his food]_{BACKGROUND}.'
 - b. Background/Focus structure <B, F>: <λx.x ate his food, Bill>
- **3. Imperfection in the Focus syntax-semantics interface:** When narrow focus falls on just a portion of a complex NP, the entire complex NP must be clefted. This is due to a very general syntactic constraint that prevents the trace in the background clause from corresponding to just a single element within a complex NP, as complex NPs are islands for extraction (Ross 1967; Krifka 2006 on the same constraint applying to association with Focus).
- (5) *[ke?†és] $_{FOCUS}$ [k pún-m-Ø-s [e [t $_{x}$] [qemút-s]] $_{BACKGROUND}$. three COMP find-TRANS-3OBJ-3SUBJ DET $_{x}$ hat-her intended: *'What she looked for $_{x}$ hats was three.'

Instead, the entire NP containing the narrow focus is made into the initial predicate:

(6) [[ke?fés] $_{FOCUS}$ tk qemút-s] [k pún-m-Ø-s t_x] $_{BACKGROUND}$. three LINK hat-her COMP find-TRANS-3OBJ-3SUBJ t_x 'What she looked for t_x was [three] $_{FOCUS}$ hats.'

A general rightward extraposition strategy (attested independent of focus) can remove the backgrounded *qemuts* 'her hats' from the initial predicate/focus position, and place it after the background clause. Thus, the surface *phonological* string maintains the Background/Focus split, even though the underlying *syntax* does not. This structure makes it easy for a listener to identify the *semantic* categories Focus and Background based on surface string order.

- (7) a. $[[ke?†\acute{e}s]_{FOCUS}$ $t_i][k$ pún-m-Ø-s $t_x]_{BACKGROUND}[tk$ qemút- $s_i]_{BACKGROUND}$. three t_i COMP find-TRANS-30BJ-3SUBJ t_x LINK hat-her 'What she looked for t_x was three hats.'
 - b. Background/Focus structure \leq B, F \geq : $\leq \lambda x$.she looked for x hats, three \geq

This extraposition process targeting backgrounded information occurs in nominal predicates like (7a), clefted relative clauses (where an unfocused relative clause head can be extraposed), and wh-questions (e.g. which dog, where unfocused dog can be extraposed). Implications for the syntax-semantics interface are discussed, as well as problems for the (non-focus) compositional semantics (e.g. both 'dog' and the background clause in (3) are of type <e,t>).

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