

Focus, Sensitivity, and the Currency of the Question

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Abstract

According to Beaver and Clark (2008), a closed class of items, primarily particles like *even* or *only*, are systematically sensitive to focus, encoding a dependency on the Current Question (the CQ). This theory appears to give wrong predictions for exclusive particles like *only* in some cases where intuitively, what the particle associates with is not the (only) constituent in focus, – something else can be in focus instead or as well, even it itself. I conclude that while both focus itself and exclusive particles always address a Question, they do not always address the same.

1 Introduction

Beaver and Clark (2008) argue that many items that have been labelled focus-sensitive do not have a lexically-encoded, conventionalised dependency on focus (some, such as negation, have a “quasi” association with focus, some, such as quantificational adverbs, have a “free” association with focus), but that some – particularly exclusive and inclusive particles – do. This dependency is modelled as a dependency on the **Current Question** (the CQ), the (explicit or implicit) question answered by the clause containing the focus-sensitive item. Beaver and Clark adopt Rooth’s (1992) theory of focus interpretation and Roberts’ (1998) model of discourse structure: Focus presupposes a set of propositions based on **alternatives**, and the Current Question serves to resolve that presupposition. Thus focus and focus-sensitive particle work in tandem because they are both anaphoric on and grammatically constrained to address the CQ.

Beaver and Clark (henceforth: BC) pay special attention to exclusives like *only*, describing their meaning as consisting of three components:

Meaning of exclusives (BC: 251)

Discourse function: To make a comment on the CQ, a comment which weakens a salient or natural expectation.

To achieve this function, the prejacent must be weaker than the expected answer to the CQ on a salient scale.

Presupposition: The strongest true alternatives in the CQ are *at least* as strong as the prejacent.

Arndt Riester & Edgar Onea (eds.)

Focus at the Syntax-Semantics Interface.

Working Papers of the SFB 732, Vol. 3, University of Stuttgart, 2009

Descriptive Content: The strongest true alternatives in the CQ are *at most* as strong as the prejacent.

Note that the three components are all formulated with sole reference to the CQ, without mentioning focus. Formally – a bit reformulated for perspicuity – the latter two can be defined as follows (the denominator is the presupposition).

The semantics of *only* according to BC (260ff.)

$$\llbracket \textit{only} \rrbracket_v = \lambda\pi \frac{\forall p \in \text{CQ}_\sigma \ p_v \supset \pi \geq_\sigma p}{\forall p \in \text{CQ}_\sigma \ \pi \leq_\sigma p}$$

The numerator, encoding the assertion, says that any true member of the CQ (relative to the information state σ) is at most as strong as the prejacent, π . The strength relation \geq_σ can be a more “interesting” ordering than entailment; that depends on σ . The denominator, representing the presupposition, says that any member of CQ_σ is weakly stronger than π . In conjunction with the Current Question Rule, stating that CQ contains at least one true proposition, this means that there is at least one true CQ member at least as strong as π . Let us look at a simple example to see how this theory works.

- (1) – What is Lucia eating?
– She’s only eating PASTa.

Consider focus first: the accent on the object tells us that the object or the VP is in focus. Let us say that just the object is in focus; then to verify the focus presupposition, the CQ should be a set of propositions ϕ such that there is an alternative α to pasta such that ϕ is the proposition that Lucia is eating α ; such an alternative might be meat, salad, meat and pasta, meat and salad, pasta and salad, meat and pasta and salad; – and the CQ is such a set of propositions if, as assumed by BC (though the second assumption is only made implicitly),

1. the meaning of a *wh* question is the set of propositions expressed by the sentences resulting from replacing the *wh* term by a relevant alternative,
2. the CQ for a sentence used as an answer is the meaning of the question.

Thus in (1), the **Focus Principle** (BC: 37) is satisfied: the set of alternatives evoked by the answer is a superset of the meaning of the question, the CQ.

Next, consider *only*. The presupposition of the answer in (1) is that the strongest true alternatives in the CQ are at least as strong as $\llbracket \text{Lucia is eating pasta} \rrbracket$. Strength is not necessarily logical strength, but let us here assume that it is; then the sentence presupposes that Lucia is eating pasta, – or meat and pasta, or salad and pasta, or all three: she is eating meat and pasta and salad. The descriptive content is that the strongest true alternatives in the CQ are at most as strong as the proposition that she is eating pasta; that is, the sentence entails that she is not eating meat and pasta, she is not eating pasta and salad, nor is she eating meat and pasta and salad – and in presupposing that those stronger alternatives were open but asserting that they are not true, the sentence fulfills its discourse function of weakening expectations.

So far, so good: we see how one and the same CQ can serve its purpose both in relation to focus and in relation to *only*. Ex- and inclusives seem focus-sensitive, but the truth, according to BC, is that focus and particle are on beat because they are both sensitive to the same contextual attribute – the CQ.

This may well be the “normal” case. However, there are also instances where focus and *only* are **not** on the same beat; where a CQ may serve its purpose with respect to one but not with respect to the other.

2 One Focus, \neq the Associate

Various types of evidence cast doubt on the hypothesis that exclusives always depend on the CQ in the same way as focus, or depend on the same Question (I use the term “Question” to denote a contextually given set of propositions). In this section, I consider one such type of evidence: there is exactly one focus, but that is not what the exclusive associates with. In the first of two cases, a Question does not seem relevant for the exclusive; in the second, the exclusive seems to relate to a less immediate Question.

2.1 CQ only goes for Focus

This case is related to the examples given by Prince (1978) and Delin (1992) to show that *it* cleft constructions do not always have the distribution between old and new information that one might expect. Suppose the proposition that Lucia is eating pasta is in the Common Ground, so that the presupposition of the question in (2) is verified. Then the answer in (2) is felicitous as far as focus is concerned, with, as marked by the indicated accent, focus on *can afford*.

- (2) – Why is Lucia eating pasta?
 – She can only **afFORD** pasta.

But intuitively, what the particle associates with is not that constituent but, as in (1), the object *pasta* – (2) entails that Lucia cannot afford pasta and salad, or meat, or meat and pasta, or meat, pasta, and salad; not, say, that she does not like pasta (only that the reason she is eating pasta is not that she likes it). Yet this constituent is evidently out of focus. We seem to have a situation where *only* does not associate with focus but with something in the background.

Note that this is not an instance of the “second-occurrence focus” phenomenon, where – in the strict sense of this term, i.e., as it was used by Partee (1999: 215) – a focus sensitive operator and its associate are both repeated and the latter appears not to be prosodically prominent in its second occurrence (BC: 119); Beaver et al. (2007) and, differently, Féry and Ishihara (2005) show that these occurrences are perceptibly prosodically marked after all. The object in the answer of (2), however, is a case of what Partee (1999: 216) called “deaccented focus”, where a competition “between contrastive

focus and focalizer-associated focus” is resolved by omitting “any marking of focus on the element . . . associated with the focalizer”.

Still, one might contend that the object is not fully deaccented there. In this connection, it is useful to look at (or rather, listen to) a language like Norwegian, where neutralisation of the “second tone” in a 2-syllable word is considered a sure sign of deaccentuation. Consider (3):

- (3) – Hvorfor gir du enhjørningen din mose? –
 – why give you unicorn-DEF your moss –
 Fordi den bare TÅLer mose.
 because it only tolerates moss
 ‘ – Why do you feed your unicorn moss? – Because it can only EAT moss.’

The word *mose* has the second tone, H*L-H, but in the answer in (3) it can be reduced to L-H, as could a first-tone word in the same context.

Examples following the same pattern as (2) or (3) are easily multiplied; cf. (4):

- (4) – Why are there so many tall students at Duke University?
 – They only offer SCHOLarships to tall students.

These are all interrogative contexts, where the sentence showing a discrepancy between ‘the focus’ and ‘what the exclusive associates with’ answers a question, and the question naturally arises what constitutes the Current Question here. The first assumption is that it is, again, the meaning of the explicit question. The meaning of a *why* question is more difficult to specify than that of a term question, but we can try. Considering (2), we may constrain it to be

the set of propositions p such that there is a relevant relation \mathcal{R}
 such that $p = \llbracket \text{Lucia is eating pasta because Lucia } \mathcal{R} \text{ pasta} \rrbracket$

and if the answer is elliptical for “Lucia is eating pasta because she can only afford pasta”, the Focus Principle is satisfied: the focus semantic value of the sentence under consideration is a superset of the CQ. That CQ, however, will not do for *only*: the content is definitely not that the strongest true alternative in the set of $p = \llbracket \text{Lucia is eating pasta because she } \mathcal{R} \text{ pasta} \rrbracket$ for some relevant \mathcal{R} is $\llbracket \text{Lucia is eating pasta because Lucia can afford pasta} \rrbracket$. The reason is obvious: the alternatives relevant for *only* are not alternatives to *can afford* but alternatives to, as earlier, *pasta*.

We may approach the CQ from another angle, abandoning assumption 2 from Section 1 to say that the CQ can be implicit even in the presence of a question:

The CQ for a sentence used as an answer is not necessarily
 the meaning of the question.

Bear in mind that the CQ is simply a set of propositions, and in a case like (2) this can well be the set containing just these two: that Lucia can afford pasta and that she can afford and is eating pasta. Then if the answer is not taken as elliptical, the Focus Principle is again satisfied – the focus semantic value of the answer, the set of $p = \llbracket \text{Lucia } \mathcal{R} \text{ pasta} \rrbracket$ for some \mathcal{R} is a superset of $\{\llbracket \text{Lucia } \mathcal{R} \text{ pasta} \rrbracket\}$ for $\mathcal{R} = \textit{can afford}$

or *can afford and is eating*. But again, the contribution of *only* to the truth conditions is misrepresented if it is computed on the basis of this simple CQ: the content is predicted to be that \llbracket Lucia can afford and is eating pasta \rrbracket is either (i) false or (ii) no stronger than \llbracket Lucia can afford pasta \rrbracket ; since the latter is clearly not the case and it is already a fact that Lucia is eating pasta, we are left with the implication that Lucia cannot afford pasta, conflicting with the prejacent.

In fact, the theory predicts that to derive the correct truth conditions, the CQ must be a set of propositions $p = \llbracket$ Lucia can afford α \rrbracket for a relevant alternative α . But if we were to interpolate such a Question in (2), the Focus Principle could not be satisfied with respect to that Question; the bit of information expressed by *afford* is not given but new in the discourse, and focus respects this.

At this point, it may be appropriate to ask what informs us of the intuitively correct truth conditions in a case like (2), (3), or (4) – how do we know that the exclusive-relevant alternatives are alternatives to *pasta*, *mose*, and *tall*, even though these words are discourse-old? We need a term for these expressions, and we could follow König (1991) and talk about the focus of the focus particle, but since the notion of focus is at issue, it is better to choose the neutral term ‘the associate’ (of the exclusive particle). Note that to say that the associate in cases like (2), (3), or (4) is, if not the focus of the current utterance, the focus of an utterance one or two turns or sentences back in the discourse comes close to vacuity: any discourse-old item was once discourse-new.

Evidently, all there is to go on to determine what *only* associates with in (2)–(4) is plausibility: it would be highly implausible to construe the answer in (4) as saying that \llbracket they offer scholarships to tall students \rrbracket is as strong a proposition as any true proposition \llbracket they \mathcal{R} tall students \rrbracket for some relevant relation \mathcal{R} . It is much more plausible to construe it as saying that that proposition is as strong as any true proposition \llbracket they offer scholarships to \mathcal{P} students \rrbracket for some property \mathcal{P} ; the implication that they don’t offer scholarships to short students answers the question, stating why there are so many tall students there.

2.2 CQ 1, CQ2

Even if in these cases, there do not seem to be any (discourse or information) structural correlates to go by when determining the associate, in others, it does look as if a suitable set of alternative propositions coincides with a Question, though not the Current Question if this is what focus is invariably sensitive to. Considering (5), the question is roughly equivalent to a Question ‘Does he speak a language I know?’ or ‘Which language(s) does he speak?’ – and this is a CQ for the exclusive in accordance with BC’s definition and everybody’s intuition.

- (5) – Will I need an interpreter?
 – Probably. If he is Russian he is likely to only SPEAK Russian.
- (6) His company sells Windows PCs, but that doesn’t mean he only USES Windows. So you really think the people who work at KFC only eat CHICKEN from KFC? (web example; accents added)

- (7) Insisting on one food does not necessarily mean he only *LIKES* that food. (web example; accents added)

Similarly, the topic of the posting that (6) is excerpted from is that Michael Dell uses Linux, and that of the posting that (7) is excerpted from is whether the child will ever again want to eat anything else than crackers. It is easy to extract from this a set of propositions coming from the prejacent by replacing the associate by an alternative, vindicating BC's analysis in terms of the CQ. However, this is not the CQ that (intonational, free) focus is sensitive to. What focus is sensitive to is a more immediate, overlying Question, such as, for (6),

{ [[Michael Dell sells Windows]], [[Michael Dell uses Windows]],
[[Michael Dell sells and uses Windows]]

By contrast, the CQ relevant for *only* is e.g.

{ [[Dell uses Windows]],
[[Dell uses Mac and Windows]],
[[Dell uses Linux and Windows]],
[[Dell uses Mac and Linux and Windows]]

We can now spell out the presupposition and the content of *only* in this case:

Presupposition: One of these is true:

[[Dell uses Windows]],
[[Dell uses Mac and Windows]], [[Dell uses Linux and Windows]],
[[Dell uses Mac and Linux and Windows]]

Descriptive Content: None of these is true:

[[Dell uses Mac and Windows]], [[Dell uses Linux and Windows]],
[[Dell uses Mac and Linux and Windows]]

Because presupposition and content jointly imply that [[Dell uses Windows]] is true, they also imply that e.g. [[Dell uses Linux]] is not, since then [[Dell uses Linux and Windows]] would be true. (The scale is here based on entailment.) This is what the *only* sentence should mean; as it is embedded under negation, there is no conflict with the given piece of information that Dell uses Linux.

Thus the meaning of the exclusive is successfully computed on the basis of one Question while the Focus Principle is satisfied with respect to another Question. Yet BC (pp. 35ff.), following Roberts (1998), assume a unique Current Question:

“A question that is ... accepted by the interlocutors as the most immediate goal of the discourse becomes the *Current Question* ...”, “A point in a discourse may be characterized in terms of a sequence of ... Questions, of which the most recent is the Current Question.”

Now the most recent Question and maybe the most immediate goal of the discourse at the point where *only* occurs in (6) is not the Question relevant for *only* but the Question relevant for focus, the Question based on alternatives to *uses*; the Question based on alternatives to *Windows* is a little less recent. This seems to imply:

Focus relates to the most current Question;

the word *only* relates to the most current Question or to the second most current Question.

In this way, the view that exclusives and other particles are discourse sensitive, although not quite in the same way as focus, would be maintained.

But the cases (2)–(4) above, where a set of propositions based on alternatives to the particle’s associate is difficult to identify as a Question, remain problematic. In the next section, we will look at another class of problematic facts.

3 Focus \times 2, one = the Associate

In the last section, we looked at cases where there is one, relatively narrow focus in the relevant clause and this focus, contrary to BC’s theory, does not coincide with the associate of the exclusive particle. But there are also cases where there are two or more foci within the confines of one clause and an exclusive particle can in principle associate with either one. Consider (8) and (9).

(8) Lois LOVES SUPERman but she only LIKES CLARK.

(9) Lois LIKES CLARK but she only LOVES SUPERman.

It would seem that in such cases, the CQ corresponds to a double *wh* question and that BC’s theory predicts that the exclusive associates with both foci, that is, that the excluded propositions are based on alternatives to the pair in focus. This, however, is counterintuitive. A reasonable guess for the Current Question at the point in a discourse where (8) or (9) is uttered is the meaning of (10):

(10) What is Lois’ emotional attitude towards which of the two of Clark and Superman?

If for simplicity we assume that there are only two relevant emotional attitudes and that one, *love*, entails the other, *like*, the CQ will be the following:

$$\{ \llbracket \text{Lois likes Clark} \rrbracket, \llbracket \text{Lois loves Clark} \rrbracket, \llbracket \text{Lois likes Superman} \rrbracket, \\ \llbracket \text{Lois loves Superman} \rrbracket, \llbracket \text{Lois likes Clark and Superman} \rrbracket, \\ \llbracket \text{Lois loves Clark and Superman} \rrbracket \}$$

Consider now the second half of (8): the presupposition is that Lois likes Clark or Lois loves Clark or Lois likes Clark and Superman or Lois loves Clark and Superman, and the descriptive content is that only the first of these is true. So the prejacent follows: Lois does like Clark. But it also follows that she does not like Superman (from the entailment that she does not like Clark and Superman and the implication that she likes Clark). This contradicts the first half of (8). (Our assumption that *love* entails *like* is not essential for the contradiction to arise; the first half could equally well say that Lois likes and loves

Superman.) The problem is that *only* is construed as expressing not just that liking is all Lois feels for Clark but also that she likes no one but him.

The source of this problem is that the two foci in the second half of (8) are treated alike, or to put it differently, that we assume a Current Question with two slots for alternatives. Intuitively, the focus on (*Superman* and) *Clark* in (8) is not a rheme focus but a theme focus (and in (9) it is the other way around, the focus on (*likes* and) *loves* is a theme focus while the focus on (*Clark* and) *Superman* is a rheme focus). Steedman (2007), for instance, would say that the accent on *Clark* in (8) and on *loves* in (9) is not the rheme focus accent H* but the theme focus accent L+H* (or even L+H*L-H). We might conclude that *only* is sensitive to rheme focus only, not to theme focus. Now for one thing, this seems an overgeneralisation in the face of data like (11) or (12), where it can be argued that (one) *only* associates with a theme focus.

- (11) Most countries have both loans and grants. Only Iceland has only loans.
- (12) Only Iceland has massive glaciers, active volcanoes, gorgeous geysirs, and magnificent waterfalls.

Besides, because the sensitivity to focus is in BC's theory mediated through the CQ, to make use of the conclusion that *only* is sensitive to rheme focus only, we must ensure that the relevant CQ is not neutral towards theme and rheme, more specifically, that the members of the CQ relevant for *only* in (8) are not based on alternatives to both *likes* and *Clark* symmetrically. In particular, they should not include the proposition that Lois likes Clark and Superman – recall that this proposition was responsible for the counterintuitive result above.

There are at least two ways to achieve this. One is to say that there is a special CQ for the second half of (8), more constrained than the CQ for the first half (which may be the meaning of (10)). As soon as the first half has been uttered, the CQ is revised to the meaning of (13):

- (13) Well, what about Clark? What is her emotional attitude towards him?

That is, it reduces to this small set: { [[Lois likes Clark]], [[Lois loves Clark]]. This yields the right result for the exclusive. However, there is a cost to this solution: first, it predicts that theme focus does not respect the Focus Principle. Second, it is a mere accident that the exclusive occurs in the second sentence; if it were to occur in the first, there would be no motivation for revising the Question whose members are based on alternatives to both *likes* and *Clark*.

Alternatively, we can assume that the CQ for (8) is the meaning of a question slightly different from (10), namely, (14); and taking our cue from Krifka (2001), we can analyse the 'pair-list' reading of (14) as a conjoined question, (15):

- (14) What is Lois' emotional attitude towards Clark and Superman?
- (15) What is Lois' emotional attitude towards Clark? And, what is her emotional attitude towards Superman?

The meaning of (15) is arguably more restricted than the meaning of (10); the union of the two sets of propositions denoted by the two conjoined questions is

$$\{ \llbracket \text{Lois likes Clark} \rrbracket, \llbracket \text{Lois (likes and) loves Clark} \rrbracket, \\ \llbracket \text{Lois likes Superman} \rrbracket, \llbracket \text{Lois (likes and) loves Superman} \rrbracket \}$$

Crucially, this set is not based on alternatives to Clark or to Superman; rather, the substitution of one for the other results from unifying the Q pertaining to one with the Q pertaining to the other. Therefore, the proposition $\llbracket \text{Lois likes Clark and Superman} \rrbracket$ does not enter into the CQ. Theme and rheme are not treated alike after all. This yields the right result for focus and for *only*.¹

So the case of two foci in the clause does not provide conclusive evidence that it is wrong to say that *only* depends on the CQ in the way described by BC; if we are careful about how to construe the CQ, in particular, assuming a ‘list’ Question for a theme focus, this case ceases to present a problem.

4 Focus \times 2: one = *only*

Sometimes, *only* itself appears to be in focus, not just phonologically, but also pragmatically, in the sense that a focus semantic value computed on the basis of that focus is a superset of a set of propositions to be found in the context. Consider first (16).

- (16) I expected to miss both my parents, but as it turned out, I **ONLY** miss my DAD.

Intuitively, *only* in the second sentence contrasts with *both* in the first sentence, so that (a subset of) the focus semantic value of the second sentence might be $\{ \llbracket \text{I miss both dad and mom} \rrbracket, \llbracket \text{I miss only dad} \rrbracket, \llbracket \text{I miss only mom} \rrbracket \}$. The embedded proposition in the first sentence is of course a member of this set, so the focus preupposition is verified (the Focus Principle is satisfied) with respect to the singleton set containing that proposition.

It has been customary, however, to ignore alternatives to accented exclusives (or inclusives) when computing focus semantic values (or related structures). And to be sure, in the case at hand, it is not necessary to take the focus on the exclusive seriously; the Focus Principle can be satisfied with sole reference to the focus on *my dad*, and BC make correct predictions about the contribution of *only* to the meaning without taking alternatives to *only* into consideration.

It is interesting to note, however, that in BC’s theory, it is in principle excluded to take alternatives to the exclusive into consideration, because that would mean considering a Current Question with propositions based on the exclusive and on alternatives to it; since to judge the relative strength of propositions in the CQ, it would be necessary to

¹Similarly, in the theory of Büring (2003), the CT (contrastive topic) value of the second half of (8) will be a set of sets of propositions, one for Clark and one for each alternative to Clark, and there will be one Question under Discussion for Clark and another for Superman. Since there is not a unique CQ in this theory, however, BC’s analysis is not directly applicable.

compute the contribution of *only*, something which in turn depends on the CQ, we are led into an infinite regress.

That may not matter at all in a case like (16), but there are cases where it might matter. These cases are otherwise reminiscent of cases considered in Section 1: the associate is given information, out of focus. What is new in (17) is that the rheme focus accent is on the exclusive:

- (17) All natural fibre garments last longer if you handwash them.
And you should ONLY handwash SILK.

It is reasonable to assume that SILK is a theme focus and that the focus semantic value of the second sentence is a set of propositions roughly like this:

{ [[you should only handwash silk]], [[you should preferably handwash silk]],
[[you should only handwash wool]], [[you should preferably handwash wool]],
[[...]], [[...]] ... }

The Focus Principle will be satisfied through the meaning of the first sentence if this is taken to be the following set of propositions, a subset of the above:

{ [[you should preferably handwash silk]],
[[you should preferably handwash wool]],
(and so on for the other natural fibre garments) }

To know what these propositions and those in the focus semantic value are, we need information from some other source on what the exclusive associates with, or on its contribution to the propositions. To that end, we may return to BC's theory, with reference to another set of propositions than the one above, given by the first sentence and satisfying the Focus Principle; it is not implausible, for instance, to assume an underlying Question like the meaning of (18):

- (18) How should I wash natural fibre garments?

The whole of (17) can well be an answer to this, but in the course of (17), the CQ relevant for focus itself is revised, while the CQ relevant for the exclusive is retained. So the situation is quite similar to the one described in Section 2 in connection with (5)–(7). The only difference is that here, in connection with (17), the CQ needed for focus is not available for the exclusive for principled reasons – the exclusive could not relate to a CQ containing propositions based on the exclusive itself and its alternatives.

5 Outlook and Conclusion

The hypothesis that focus and *only* (when interpreted at the same clausal level) consistently rely on one and the same contextually determined proposition set, defended by Beaver and Clark (2008) and adopted by Ippolito (2008) and others, can be seen as a blend of Rooth (1985) and Rooth (1992): whereas Rooth (1985) equated the set relevant

for *only* with the focus semantic value, according to Rooth (1992: 78f.), the set relevant for *only* will tend to coincide with the set constrained to be included in the focus semantic value. Rooth (1992: 108f.) was careful to point out, however, citing evidence resembling (2)–(7) above, that this coincidence is not obligatory (“focus effects should always be optional”). This point of view has been corroborated in the previous sections: It is unrealistic to assume that the contextually determined set of propositions relevant for focus always serves double duty as the set of propositions relevant for the exclusive. Careful considerations have shown that it is difficult to uphold a simple and unitary notion of the (most immediate, most recent) Current Question, even if it is conceived of as an abstract set of propositions, to do the job for both focus (expressions) and allegedly focus sensitive expressions.

It may not be surprising that the notion of a uniform Current Question, serving as a frame of reference for a range of phenomena, from intonation via various discourse devices to particles modifying truth conditions, is problematic. But here two problem sources must be distinguished. First, it is obviously unrealistic to expect the identification of the Current Question to be a mechanistic process. The notion is an abstraction, coinciding with observable interrogatives only exceptionally. This has been pointed out many times, not least by Martí (2003). But on the other hand, once a suitable amount of idealisation is taken on board, one might expect the notion of the CQ to have a wide range of applications. This expectation has now been disconfirmed.

On a constructive note, the counterevidence, in particular the cases discussed in Section 2.2 and Section 4, has brought to light the need to distinguish two or more layers of Current Questions, one, the most immediate, relevant for focus, another, perhaps less immediate, relevant for particles. This is a picture into which BC’s overall theory of the meaning of exclusives and inclusives still fits: the content can be defined in terms of sets of alternative propositions, but these expressions are less sensitive to local adjustments of Questions than focus is, more oriented towards the goal of the discourse, the Question under Discussion, the Topic in the sense of Asher (1993).

Although the counterexamples are in no way unnatural, they do perhaps strike us as exceptional, and it may well be that 99% or more of the cases conform to the BC pattern. The question why this should be so is an interesting one, and a fruitful observation may be that the interpretation of *only* and the interpretation of focus are very similar to each other, and if they both utilise the same CQ, the parallelism is enhanced and the interpretation effort is minimised.

For one thing, both focus and *only* rely on contextually determined alternatives: the members of the relevant set of propositions are in both cases based on substitutions from a restricted domain, as emphasised by Rooth (1992: 78f.) and by Martí (2003). This domain restriction, the identification of the salient set of alternatives, can be done in one step if focus and exclusive particle work in tandem, both exploiting the same contextual parameter.

Second, if the associate coincides with the focus, the meaning of the sentence with *only* is not very different from the meaning of the sentence without *only*. As noted by Schmitz (2008), exclusive meaning is a pragmatic effect of focus; a contrast implicature mirroring the exhaustive interpretation of the answer to the congruent Question; and *only*, relating to the same Question, can be seen as literalising that implicature, turning

a pragmatic inference into a truth condition. So when hearing the answer in (1), you compute an interpretation very similar to what you would compute on the basis of focus alone.

- (1) – What is Lucia eating?
– She’s only eating PASTa.

Those considerations may go some way towards explaining the fair correlation between the set of alternatives relevant for *only* and that relevant for focus. But the fact remains that the correlation is not absolute. We do encounter a more complex interaction between focus, exclusive, and Questions, where the exclusive refers to a Question a little less immediate, or the notion of a Question does not seem particularly relevant. It would seem that what we witness here is a hearer-based pressure for ease of interpretation counterbalanced by a speaker-based preference for richness of interpretation.

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