On Focus and Contrastive Topic: 
Climbing Büring’s D-Tree, looking for Beans and B-Accents*

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This paper focuses on Daniel Büring’s article “On D-Trees, Beans, and B-Accents,” published in Linguistics and Philosophy 2003. It is an attempt to compare the map of ‘contrastive topic’ and ‘focus’ outlined in Büring’s paper to the terrain his paper sets out to describe (i.e. the intonation patterns of spoken English), tracing the lines from Büring’s own monograph *On the Meaning of Topic and Focus: the 59th Street Bridge accent* (1997) via Roberts (1996) to his (2003) model.

All publications by Daniel Büring seem to have some very positive properties in common: they take up burning questions of linguistic research; they are well-written and persuasive; they generate inspiration in the reader and an inclination to respond — and also, admittedly, to protest.

My present paper can be seen as one such response. It is an attempt to compare the map of ‘contrastive topic’ and ‘focus’ outlined in Büring’s article “On D-Trees, Beans, and B-Accents,” with the terrain it sets out to describe, i.e. the intonation patterns of spoken English. I shall also try to trace some lines from Büring’s (1997) monograph *On the Meaning of Topic and Focus: the 59th Street Bridge accent*, via Roberts (1996), to Buring’s (2003) paper.

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In his 1997 monograph Büring claims that there is a one-to-one relationship between the two-peaked ‘bridge accent’ consisting of a rise (or a fall-rise) and a fall, and the topic-focus structure of the German sentence, in that the first accent of this intonation pattern (the rise or the fall-rise) necessarily denotes the sentence topic and the fall the focus. Büring’s concept of (sentence) topic is somewhat vaguely described as “‘what the rest of the sentence is about,’ or ‘the entity anchoring the sentence to the previous discourse’” (Büring 1997: 55). But beware these two: ‘what the rest of the sentence is about’ and ‘the entity anchoring the sentence to the previous discourse’ are not necessarily the same thing; there is a vast difference between the notion of ‘aboutness-topic’ in the sense of psychological subject (Paul 1880) and referentially ‘old’ or ‘given’ constituents.

Büring’s notion of ‘focus,’ on the other hand, is understood as the counterpart of ‘background,’ and is explicated as follows: “Focus marks what is new or unexpected in a sentence” (Büring 1997: 29).

This means that Büring postulates a one-to-one relation between rising accents and aboutness (or anchoring entity), and a one-to-one relation between falling accents and what is “new” and “unexpected” in the sentence. But the domain where these assumptions are taken to hold is extremely restricted: topic and focus are defined only in the constellation of a fall-rise accent to the left of a fall.

The accents called ‘rising accents’ by Büring (1997) correspond more or less to what has been described as the first accent of the German ‘hat pattern’ (Cohen and t’Hart 1967), or the ‘bridge contour’ (Féry 1992, 1993), or the ‘root contour’ (Jacobs 1997). As to the English counterparts of Büring’s rising ‘topic’ accents, there is no doubt: accents evoking the effects shown in Büring’s language material are fall-rises, with interpretations substantially

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1 There is some controversy as to the relevance of the difference in interpretation between rises and fall-rises in German, see Jacobs (1997), Molnár and Rosengren (1997), Hetland (1999, 2002, 2003) for discussion.