The Interpretation of Focus Ambiguity in Sentences with English Focus Particle only

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Kim, Soyoung. 2011. The Interpretation of Focus Ambiguity in Sentences with English Focus Particle Only. The Journal of Studies in Language 27.1, 23-45. This study investigates how children and adults resolve focus ambiguity in sentences containing preverbal only with the help of contexts. The sentences with only were ambiguous between an NP scope analysis (focus assigned to the direct object) and a VP scope analysis (focus assigned to the verb phrase). Using a Truth Value Judgment task (Crain & Thornton 1998), they judged whether sentences with preverbal only were a true description of the event or not. A true/false distinction was determined depending on which scope analysis they adopt. The results showed that contextual support guided adults to access both scope analyses. It also helped children adopt the NP scope analysis that was dispreferred in previous study (Paterson et al. 2006). These results were discussed in relation to a processing account of focus interpretation (Crain et al. 1994) (University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa)

Key words: contextual support, focus ambiguity, focus particle, child acquisition, focus interpretation

1. Introduction

The English focus particle only marks newly asserted information in an utterance containing it. It indicates that the explicit entity or event (a so-called focus set) is to be contrasted with a set of implicit alternatives (a so-called contrast set or an alternative set). To access implicit information, readers or listeners have to employ pragmatic

1) Focus particles such as only are traditionally grouped into a subclass of adverbs. The attempt to group them in such a way is grounded in distributional behavior reflecting the types of elements with which focus particles can occur and in their positional variability.
knowledge or the discourse context (Paterson et al. 2009; Sedivy 1997). For example, for a sentence like Only John washed a dog, they construct a discourse model involving John, a dog, and the event described by the sentence, with John specified as a focus set. In addition, readers or listeners infer unspecified people who did not wash a dog out of their pragmatic knowledge when there is no prior referential context. However, if a context where John and Mary were in the backyard is provided, they can infer that Mary did not wash a dog. In this sense, the selection of alternatives is highly context-dependent.

The choice of focus in a sentence has been recognized as an important aspect of semantic interpretation (e.g. Jackendoff 1972; Rooth 1992). A factor that contributes to influencing the choice of focus is to determine the syntactic constituents that only can operate on (Jackendoff 1972). The scope of only is restricted to the constituents that it c-commands in the parse tree (Grain et al. 1994; Reinhart 1983). The constituents within this c-command domain of only can be eligible to be focus in a sentence. For example, only that occupies a pre-subject position within subject NP c-commands the subject noun phrase. The particle cannot be associated with the VP as a whole or with any constituents within the VP. Thus, it takes just the following subject NP as focus because that is the only element within its scope. Likewise, only in a pre-object position takes scope over the object constituent, but excludes the upper constituent (i.e. the subject NP) in the parse tree. Thus the object constituent is in focus in a sentence with a pre-object only.

After identifying a focus within the scope of only, readers or listeners construct a qualitatively different contrast between a focus set and its alternative set depending on the syntactic position of only. When only restricts the subject NP as in (1a), it indicates the contrast to be made

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2) The term c-command was first introduced by Reinhart (1976) and the relation has been formalized under the notion of c-command (Chomsky 1981; Reinhart 1976) as below.

C-command

Node A c-commands node B if and only if
(i) A does not dominate B and B does not dominate A; and
(ii) The first branching node dominating A also dominates B.