

Focus Interpretations: Comments on Geurts and van der Sandt(2004)¹

1. Background Presuppositions

The rule in (1) below is the centerpiece of Geurts and van der Sandt's *Interpreting Focus*:

- (1) The Background-Presupposition Rule (BPR)
Whenever focusing gives rise to a background $\lambda x.\varphi(x)$, there is a presupposition to the effect that $\lambda x.\varphi(x)$ holds of some individual.

According to this rule, focus on *Lyn* in an utterance of *Lyn arrived* triggers a presupposition to the effect that someone arrived. Geurts and van der Sandt saddle the BPR with the following unwarranted and incorrect claim:

- (2) "The main prediction that the BPR gives rise to ... is that focusing should cause the projection behaviour that is characteristic of definite noun phrases, factive verbs, and the like."

I will offer an example with definite descriptions to show the claim is incorrect. Below, we will see an example from Rooth(1996a) which uses a cleft to make the point. More interestingly, Geurts and van der Sandt actually have an explanation for why the claim is incorrect, which in turn serves to enhance the credibility of the BPR.

To illustrate the fallacy of the claim in (2), consider the example in (3):

- (3) If the Health Ministry has discovered a cure for cancer, they're probably still testing it, and if Merck_F has discovered a cure for cancer, they are probably working on a marketing plan.

Focus on *Merck* leads, via the BPR, to the presupposition that someone has discovered a cure. This presupposition is bound in the antecedent of the previous conditional. We now replace the second *if*-clause with one containing a definite description:

- (4) If the Health Ministry_i has discovered a cheap cure for cancer, they're probably still testing it, but if the cure they_i discovered is expensive, they are probably working on a funding plan.

The definite description triggers the presupposition that the Health Ministry discovered a cure for cancer. This type of presupposition cannot be bound inside the antecedent of the previous conditional and so the presupposition is accommodated globally.

¹ Thanks to Daniel Büring these remarks are much better than they otherwise would have been.

Background presuppositions have a wider set of binding sites to choose from than do other presuppositions. This claim is consistent with Geurts and van der Sandt's demonstration that any place you can bind a cleft or definite-description presupposition, you can also bind a background presupposition, but it isn't consistent with their claim in (2) above which implies the converse. And so the question arises, if the BPR is correct, why do background presuppositions project differently than other presuppositions? Geurts and van der Sandt observe that whereas presuppositions normally bind variables in the argument positions of their triggers, background presuppositions do not have this property. This is illustrated in the DRS they offer for [*Fred's wife*]_F *stole the tarts*:

(5) [u: u is Fred's wife, v: v stole the tarts, u stole the tarts]

If the singly underlined definiteness presupposition were removed to a DRS that was inaccessible to (5), 'u', the subject of 'stole the tarts' would be left unbound. No such problem would arise if the doubly underlined background presupposition were removed. Presumably the other kinds of presuppositions mentioned or alluded to in (2) behave like the definiteness presupposition. This explains why background presuppositions are promiscuous bindees. It also provides the foundation for explaining why cleft-presuppositions project differently than background presuppositions. The Geurts and van der Sandt DRS for *It was Fred's wife who stole the tarts* would be:

(6) [u: u is Fred's wife, v: v stole the tarts, u = v]

In this case, removing the double-underlined cleft-presupposition would leave the variable 'v' in 'u=v' unbound. Rooth(1996a, 1999) challenged the BPR to explain why (7) below is felicitous but its cleft counterpart in (8) is not:

{Did anyone win?}

- (7) Probably not, because it's unlikely that Mary_F won, and she's the only one who ever wins.
 (8) Probably not, because it's unlikely that it's Mary_F who won, and she's the only one who ever wins.

In these examples, *probably not* is understood to mean "probably it is not the case that somebody won". In (7), the background presupposition that somebody won can be bound under *not*. In (8), the cleft-presupposition cannot be so bound, because doing so would leave a variable in the cleft equation without a binder. Instead, the presupposition is globally accommodated and then it runs into conflict with the assertion.

The original argument against the BPR based on (7)-(8) rests on an assumption that is compatible with, but does not follow from, Rooth's theory. Attention to this issue will illuminate the need for clarification of the BPR. According to Rooth's theory, which background presupposition would arise from a focus depends upon the 'scope' of that focus, a matter that is settled at LF through an optional process. *George thinks that [Mary]_F won* might give rise to the presupposition that someone won or, with wider scope, that George thinks that someone won. In principle, the scope of a focus could be

any constituent containing it. If in (7) the scope of the focus on *Mary* is very narrow, including just the DP itself, then the background presupposition, if any there is, will be something mild to the effect that Mary and someone else exist. Assuming this very narrow scope, (7) is possible but (8) is impossible, because while the cleft must trigger the problematic presupposition that someone won, the focus need not. So the original argument rested on the assumption that the focus in (7) has sentential scope. What this shows is that in the absence of a theory constraining the scope of focus, there is little bite to the claim that focus has a semantics of existential presupposition. Geurts and van der Sandt therefore need to say what they mean in (1) by “gives rise to a background”.

In Schwarzschild(1999), I did not recognize the connection between backgrounding and presupposition, but I did follow Williams(1980) in saying that non-focal material ϕ requires an antecedent that entails the existential closure of ϕ . The account was spelled out in such a way that there was no room for an optional mechanism assigning scope to a focus. Rather, any and all non-focal material gives rise to what could now be called a background presupposition. This is the reading of the BPR that I would urge². On this view, the presupposition that someone won is unavoidable in (7). But as explained above, this is compatible with its felicity as opposed to the infelicity of (8).

2. Anaphoric indefinites

The initial DRS for the sentence in (9) below is given in (10):

(9) a dog is always [intelligent]_F

(10) [[e:] $\langle \forall e \rangle$ [y: dog(y), intelligent(e,y), X: z: dog(z), X(e,v)]]

Other than the uppercase variable X for the focused predicate in (9), this translation follows the procedure used in Geurts and van der Sandt’s discussion (see example (27)). Since the presupposition contains a bound variable, ‘e’, it cannot accommodate globally and we do the next best thing in (11) below paraphrased in (12):

(11) [[e, X, z: dog(z), X(e,z)]] $\langle \forall e \rangle$ [y: dog(y), intelligent(e,y)]

(12) Any event that has a dog with some property X is an event with an intelligent dog.

With minor redaction, Geurts and van der Sandt’s comment about competing approaches is appropriate here:

“The problem with this is that the indefinite NP ‘a dog’ is used twice, as a result of which certain states of affairs that should falsify (9) make its purported analysis (11)

² For further discussion of this view of focus see also Büring(to appear a,b), Reich(2002), Merchant(2001).

come out true. For example, in a world in which dogs always come in pairs, one of which is intelligent while the other is not, (9) is false but (11) is true.”

The indefinite in (9) is non-focal. But this problem, if that it is, arises with focal indefinites as well. The almost initial DRS for (13) below is given in (14):

(13) Beryl always drinks [a martini]_F

(14) [x: Beryl(x), [e:] <∀e> [z: x drinks z in e, y: martini(y), x drinks y in e]]

Again the presupposition contains a bound variable, ‘e’, so it gets accommodated locally:

(15) [x: Beryl(x), [e, z: x drinks z in e] <∀e> [y: martini(y), x drinks y in e]]

(16) Any event in which Beryl drinks something, is an event in which Beryl drinks a martini.

Clearly, if the variables ‘z’ and ‘y’ were identified in (11) and in (15), the unwanted interpretations would not arise. But I would advise against sharing variables between background presuppositions and assertions³. Recall from section 1. above that the projection behavior of background presuppositions indicates that there is no sharing of variables between the background presupposition and the assertion. The accommodation in (11)/(15) is possible because background presuppositions contain non-anaphoric variables. And presupposition binding is possible in (3) above because the assertion part has an indefinite *a cure* with a non-anaphoric variable. Whatsmore, if background presuppositions and assertions shared variables, then *John ate a sandwich and Bill ate a sandwich too* would entail that Bill and John ate the same sandwich. Allowing indefinites to quantify into both presupposition and assertion, on the model of the George V example, is just another twist on variable sharing, and is subject to the same objections.

Whatever solution one favors to the problem of requantification, I think it ought to take account of anaphoric indefinites that arise without presupposition accommodation. The consequents of the conditionals in the following examples all contain an anaphoric indefinite:

(17) Usually, if he is outsmarted by an animal, he is outsmarted by a dog.

(18) If I drink a beer, I usually drink a COLD beer.

(19) If adults address them at all, usually ANGRY adults address them.

(20) If a tourist photographs a painting, he usually photographs a Miro.

³ I’m using ‘assertion’ sloppily to mean the part of the DRS that is not presuppositional. I’m ignoring the variables x, X and e which are not introduced with the presupposition.

The presence of anaphoric indefinites seems to require repetition of the predicate that the indefinite is an argument of and repetition of the indefinite's coarguments. This suggests a connection with the accommodation examples. On the other hand, anaphoric indefinites almost always have to be internal arguments and there is no corresponding effect in the accommodation examples. The role of intonation in these examples must also be taken into consideration as Krifka(2001) has shown.

3. Association With Focus and Background-Presupposition

A central claim in Geurts and van der Sandt's account of *only* is that the Background-Presupposition Rule operates independently and simultaneously with association with focus. A focus signals material that needs to be peeled away to get at the background whether or not it appears on the locus of the exclusion that *only* makes. I agree with this view and in a moment I will offer additional evidence for it. But having observed the separation between backgrounding and association, Geurts and van der Sandt go on to adopt what they call a localist account of association with *only*. Nothing in their discussion warrants this controversial move.

The two focus phenomena mentioned at the head of this section sometimes make conflicting demands providing vivid evidence of their independence. The question posed in (21) below leads to one such case:

(21) What food will Renee only eat in Paris?

Imagine that the correct answer to (21) is *crepes*, that is, Renee eats crepes in Paris and only in Paris. Imagine further, that you wanted to use a complete sentence answer to this question. In that case, you might try:

(22) She'll only eat crepes in Paris.

and discover that (21)/(22) are not a pronounceable question-answer pair. What you'd like to have is (22) with focus on *Paris*, which would then associate with *only*:

(23) She'll only eat crepes in Paris_F.

But that would lead to a background presupposition to the effect that Renee eats crepes somewhere, which is not justified in this context. To avoid this problem, you might try:

(24) She'll only eat CREpes_F in Paris.

But now focus marks *crepes* as the locus of exclusion. (24) has poor Renee surviving on a strict diet of crepes during her Parisian sojourns! This meaning does not constitute an answer to the question that was posed, since it does not exclude Renee's eating crepes elsewhere. Focusing *crepes* leads to its association with *only* and hence the wrong assertion, not focusing *crepes* leads via the BPR to improper presupposition. The two

processes work against each other in this example to frustrate the speaker. What crucially is not possible is to somehow grant a BPR exemption to the focus in (23) due to its association with *only*. Likewise, it is not possible for the focus in (24) to escape association through its role as a trigger for a background presupposition.

The phonological events that accompany the pronunciation of focused material point as well in the direction of treating association and backgrounding as separately acting on the same target. The accent that is characteristic of new information tends to appear on associated foci and with one exception this is true of all Geurts and van der Sandt's examples with *too* and *only*. More generally, accent comes and goes on associated foci under the same conditions as on unassociated foci. Other morphological and phonological effects seem to pattern the same way. Hoeksema and Zwarts(1991:fn3) noted that the strong Dutch pronoun *mij* cannot be replaced with weak *me* when associated with the Dutch equivalent of *only*. Following von Stechow(1994:45), Rooth(1996b) observes the same effect in the following English example which is infelicitous under an interpretation where the pronoun *him* associates with *only*:

- (25) #I don't much care who John's sister likes, though I doubt that she only likes'im

'*im* stands for a reduced form of *him* and it is this reduction that causes the infelicity. But the very same effect is found in the absence of *only*:

- (26) #I don't much care who John's sister likes, but I'm sure she likes'im

Something about this context prevents the reduction of the pronoun *him*, whether or not *him* associates with *only*.⁴

Recognition of the independence of association with focus and focus-backgrounding allows Geurts and van der Sandt to achieve a better account of the meaning of *only*. What they say about the meaning of *only* is that:

- (27) "it specifies that the backgrounded information is satisfied, if at all, by the focused entity; in this respect ours is a localist analysis."

By 'localist' they mean that they make reference to focus in the meaning of a particular expression. However, when the word *only* appears in an analyzed example in their paper, its noun phrase sister is identical to the focus in its scope. So for all they discuss, the rule for *only* could specify that:

- (28) the second argument is satisfied, if at all, by the first argument.

The centralist-localist debate comes alive in examples like (24) above, where the focus is on a proper subpart of the sister of *only*. According to centralists, even in this case, the rule of interpretation for *only* need make no mention of focus. Geurts and van der Sandt

⁴ For further discussion and references related to phonological effects of focus see Beaver et. al(2002).

cite Rooth(1992) as an exemplar of centralist accounts and they fault his theory for being too weak. But Rooth’s is not the only centralist account and more importantly, Rooth makes no attempt to discover the discourse conditions that would force a focused expression in the scope of *only* to associate with it. One idea, explored in Schwarzschild(1997) and Kadmon(2001), is that something close to the BPR is responsible for this effect. In a nutshell, if *only* is part of the representation of a backgrounded presupposition, then the choice of domain for *only* will affect what presupposition is generated. In other words, assuming just the BPR, the position of focus in the scope of *only* triggers a particular representation and this in turn constrains the choice of domain for *only* giving the impression that focus is directly affecting the interpretation of the phrase headed by *only*. It remains to be seen whether what Geurts and van der Sandt say about the meaning of *only* as amended in (28) is compatible with this view. If it is, then they can unabashedly join the ranks of the centralists.

4. *too*

According to Asher & Lascarides ‘the presupposition of *too* is rather that it requires that there be some proposition in the context that bears the rhetorical relation Parallel to the content of the sentence in which *too* occurs’ (quoted in footnote 15 of *Interpreting Focus*). Assuming that Parallel includes some notion of distinctness, we can understand why (29)a implies (29)b:

- (29) a. If Herb comes to the party, [the boss]_F comes, too.
 b. Herb is not the boss.

On Geurts and van der Sandt’s alternative diagnosis, distinctness is required on a level below the proposition via a rule of association with focus. They say that a focused expression in the scope of *too* must introduce a discourse referent that is distinct from one previously introduced. Their analysis of (29)a includes the following steps:

- (30) a. $[u:\text{Herb}(u),v:\text{boss}(v),[:\text{comes}(u)] \Rightarrow [\underline{x:x \neq v}, \text{comes}(x), \text{comes}(v)]]$
 b. $[u:\text{Herb}(u),v:\text{boss}(v),u \neq v,[:\text{comes}(u)] \Rightarrow [:\underline{\text{comes}(u)}, \text{comes}(v)]]$
 c. $[u:\text{Herb}(u),v:\text{boss}(v),u \neq v,[:\text{comes}(u)] \Rightarrow [:\text{comes}(v)]]$

The two accounts can be teased apart by extending the analysis given in the paper of (63a), to the corresponding example with *not* in place of modal *may*:

- (31) *Fred is not staying at the Ritz, and [Barney]_F is staying there too.
 (32) $[x: \text{Fred}(x), \neg[: \text{stay-at-R}(x)], u: \text{Barney}(u), x \neq u, \text{stay-at-R}(u)]$
 (33) “Fred is not staying at the Ritz, Barney is staying there, and Fred is not Barney.”

(31) is incoherent. As the paraphrase in (33) makes plain, this is unpredicted on the association with focus view. Whether or not the propositional Parallelism view can account for this data, depends on how the Parallel relation is spelled out.

5. Summary of the main points:

- a) Non-focal material gives rise to existential presuppositions (BPR). These presuppositions bind easily because they don't share variables with non-presuppositional material.
- b) So-called "requantification problems" may just be contexts in which anaphoric indefinites are allowed to surface.
- c) The triggering of existential background presuppositions is separate and independent of association with focus. It is not obvious that *only* and *too* have a semantics that makes reference to focus.

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