

# Backgrounded $\neq$ Given — The relation between focusing, givenness and stress in English

Daniel Büring, Vienna

MIT Colloquium, May 6, 2016

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Ideas advocated in this talk

- a focus-utterance and its focal target are always mutually excludable ('focussing is always contrastive')
- focal targets need not be contextually salient, as long as they are identifiable ('focus is not anaphoric')
- all deaccenting is an instance of focusing (backgrounding, really) ('there is no anaphoric deaccenting')
- privative givenness is a condition for *prosodic reversal* ( $\approx$  deaccenting) ('focus alone does not license deaccenting')

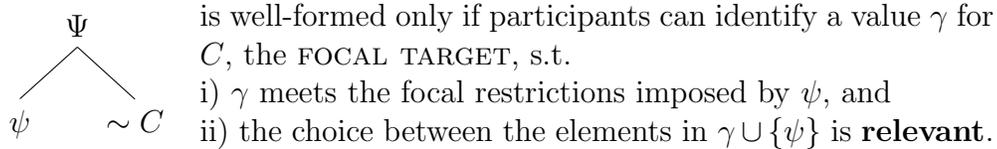
### 1.2 First illustration

- (1) [one thief to another] I'm afraid I'm developing a moral conscience lately. Last week, I went to a book store and BOUGHT a book. ✓
- (2) [regular person] I was bored. So I went to the book store and...
  - a. ...bought a BOOK.    b. # BOUGHT a book. ✓
  - *I [bought]<sub>F</sub> a book* takes 'I stole a book' as its focal target
  - this target is *not* contextually given, but it is identifiable and relevant in the thief context
  - ...and it is (innocently) excludable by the focal utterance
  - focussing *bought* requires deaccenting *book*, which is possible only because *book* is given
  - no comparable target is identifiable or relevant in the 'normal person' context

## 2 Sketch of Implementation

### 2.1 Focus Pragmatics

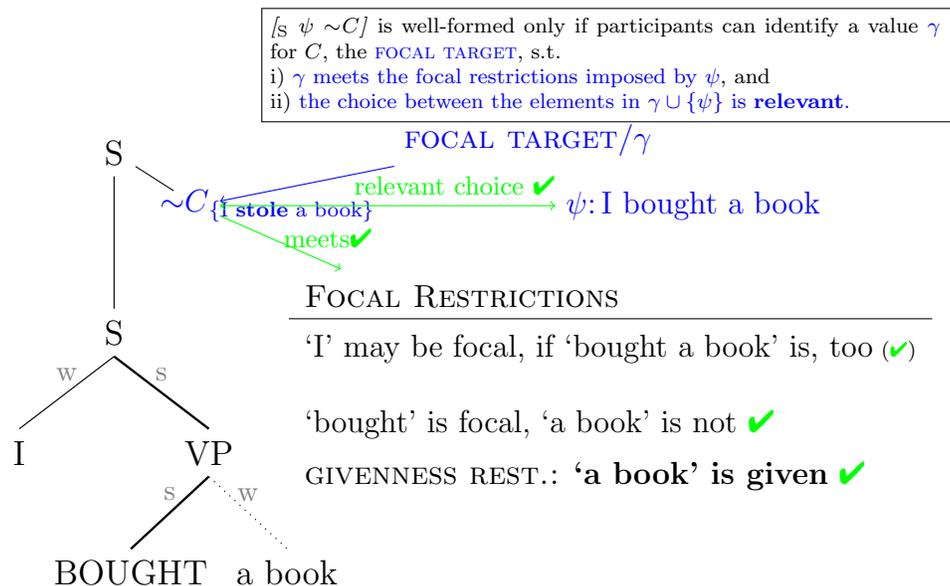
(3) FOCUS RETRIEVAL



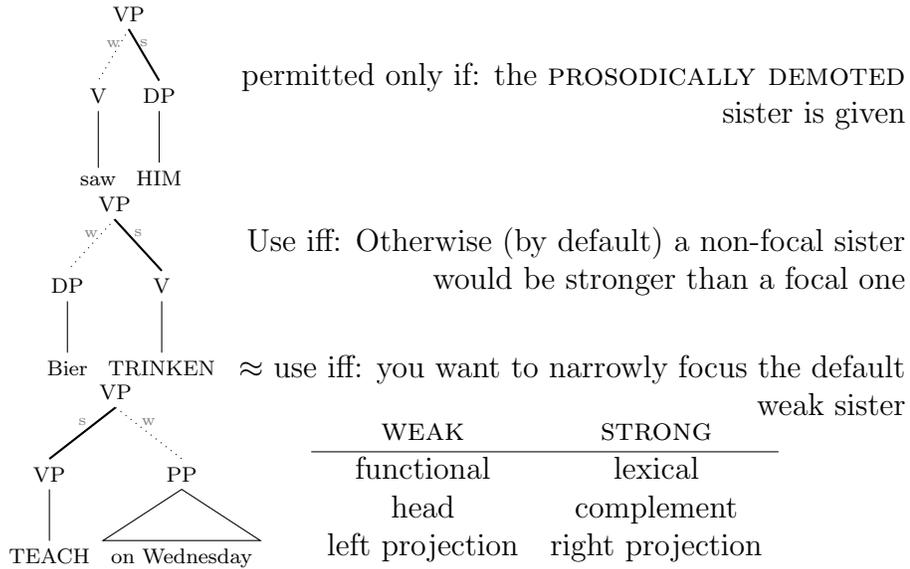
NB

- for the choice to be relevant, the sentence and its focal target(s) need to be excludable in the first place (I assume along the lines of Katzir, 2013)
- (3) should be understood as a strictly stronger condition however: not every choice between excludable meanings is also relevant (see below)

### 2.2 Illustration



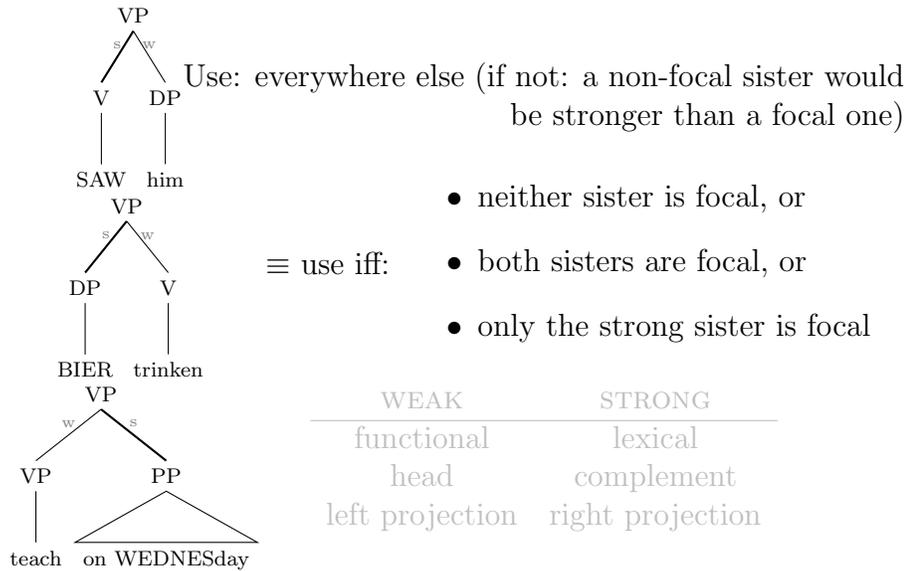
### 2.3 Focus semantics (& a little pragmatics): non-default stress



(4) **Strong Restriction** the prosodically promoted sister is focal, the demoted sister is not

(where focal='has non-trivial focus alternatives' )

## 2.4 Focus semantics II: default stress pattern



- (5) **Weak Restriction** if the weak sister is focal, then the strong sister is as well

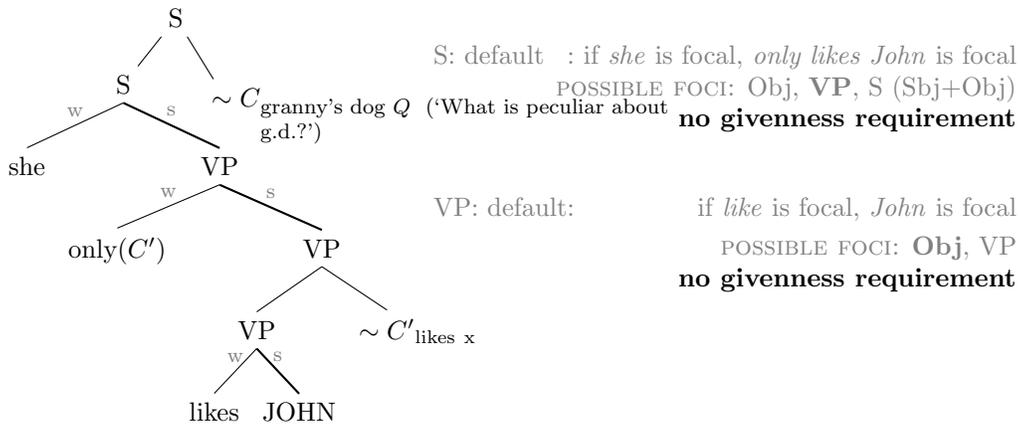
## 3 Non-given focal targets

### 3.1 Non-given alternatives for ‘only’

Kadmon and Sevi (2011):

- (6) (What’s peculiar about Granny’s dog?) She only likes JOHN.

NB: The argument here is stronger than with the *thief*-examples above, since *likes* is evidently not given, yet in the background of the focus. That means that the focal target, ‘she like (John and) *x*’, is not even made up of given parts.



### 3.2 Non-given targets for contrastive focus: Convertibles

Wagner (2006, 2012):

- (7) (Mary's uncle, who produces high-end convertibles, is coming to her wedding. I wonder what he brought as a present.)
- a. He brought a [CHEAP convertible].
  - b. #He brought a [RED convertible]
  - c. He brought a red CONVERTIBLE.

- (7) shows that a focal utterance and its focal target must be 'truly contrastive' (one must be excludable by the other)
- according to the position explored here, this is just part of a stricter condition that the choice between them must be relevant
- But what is the focal target?
  - Wagner's answer: 'high-end' or maybe 'high-end convertible'
  - answer argued for here: 'he brought a high-end convertible'

#### Katzir's (2013) argument for larger targets

- (8) (The people in this club are very particular about the cars they collect. Mary, for example, collects high-end convertibles.)
- a. And John collects CHEAP convertibles.
  - b. And John collects RED convertibles.
- Katzir (2013)

- focal targets can at least in principle be bigger, so as to be truly contrastive

**Parallel argument *against* small targets**

- (9) (Yesterday, I left my expensive convertible at home and took the bus. As luck would have it,...)
- #the bus was hit by a CHEAP convertible
  - the bus was hit by a cheap CONVERTIBLE
- (... and never got me where I needed to go).

- if the ‘expensive convertible’–‘cheap convertible’ contrast were in principle sufficient to license prosodic reversal, (9)-a should be fine (nothing should *force* us to look at the bigger domain)
- apparently, focal targets *need* to be bigger (maybe propositional), so as to qualify as truly contrastive
- therefore, the focal target in the *CHEAP convertible* case must be ‘he brought her a high-end convertible’
- ... which was not given

**But...!**

- if focal targets do not need to be given, what is to stop us to ‘make up’ a truly exclusive target in Wagner’s original example?

- (10) (Mary’s uncle, who produces high-end convertibles, is coming to her wedding. I wonder what he brought as a present.) # [He brought a RED convertible]~ $C_{\{\text{he brought a blue/orange/... non-red convertible}\}}$

- proposed answer: the choice between these options is not relevant
- prediction: given the right context, these types of examples, too, should allow for focal targets that even contain non-given parts

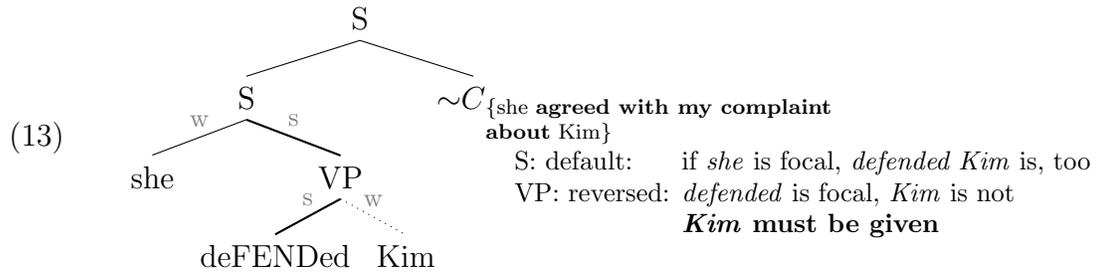
- (11) (Like most girls, Mary went through an ‘all pink’ phase, followed by an ‘I hate pink’ phase. Unfortunately, her godfather, who has a teddy bear factory, wasn’t aware of the change and. . .)

[he brought her a PINK teddy bear]~C<sub>{he brought a non-pink teddy}</sub>

### 3.3 Non-given targets for ‘Anaphoric Deaccenting’

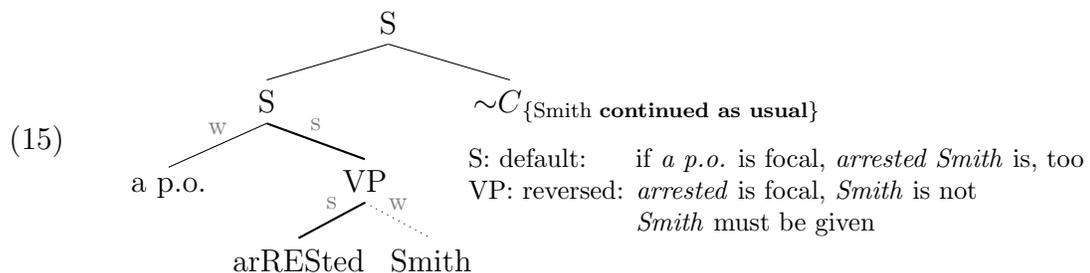
- (12) (What did KIM’s mother do when you complained about Kim’s behavior? —) She deFENDED Kim.

(modelled on Schwarzschild, 1999, ex. (9))



- (14) (Smith walked in. A minute later,) a police officer arRESted Smith.

- Wagner (2012): the focus here is *a police officer arrested*
- the focal target is ‘Smith walked in’
- problem: hardly truly contrastive
- other possibility: ‘Smith continued as usual’



## 4 Double Focus without Double Givenness

- (16) John cited Mary, but...  
 a. ...he DISSED SUE. (Schwarzschild, 1999)  
 b. ?...he dissed SUE.
- (17) Fred read the menu and then...  
 a. ...he ordered a HAMBurger.  
 b. #...he ORdered a HAMBurger. (Kehler, 2005; Buring, 2012)
- (18) (John quoted Mary at great length but) he only MENTioned SUE.
- (19) (John used insights from various scholars, but) he only QUOTed SUE.

### Two foci

- *he* DISSED *SUE*: rather than quoting her
- *he* DISSED SUE: whereas he quoted/did not diss Mary

- (20) 
$$\begin{array}{c} \text{VP} \\ \text{S} \quad \text{s} \\ \diagdown \quad \diagup \\ \text{DISSED} \quad \text{SUE} \Rightarrow (\text{he DISSED})_{\text{iP}}(\text{SUE})_{\text{iP}} \end{array}$$

- (21) a. strong is strong: default restriction  
 b. weak is strong: reversal restriction  
 c. strong is weak: givenness for weak
- (22) a. strong is strong: if *dissed* is focal, so is *Sue* → *Sue*, *dissed Sue*, *he dissed Sue* could be focus  
 b. weak is strong: *dissed* is focal, *Sue* is not (incompatible with (a))  
 c. strong is weak: not applicable → neither *Sue* nor *dissed* need to be given

### Summary

- We divorce focus/background from givenness.
- This allows us to have non-given focal targets (i.e. focus domains with non-given backgrounds), which in turn...

- gives us more options to choose a focal target that is truly contrastive/excludable (as urged by Wagner) while...
- still excluding that focussing licenses prosodic demotion (in particular: deaccenting) of non-given material (Katz and Selkirk, 2011, *pace* Neeleman and Szendrői, 2004)
- The specific environment in which the givenness requirement applies —prosodically demoted sisters— is not a natural (or even expressible) class in F-marking systems, as it is a proper subset of non-F-marked constituents, but...
- it is the same class used as input for focus semantics in Unalternative Semantics (Büring, 2015).
- Thank you!

## References

- Büring, Daniel (2012). “What’s New (and What’s Given) in the Theory of Focus?” In Sarah Berson, Alex Bratkievich, Daniel Bruhn, Ramon Escamilla Amy Campbell, Allegra Giovine, Lindsey Newbold, Marta Piqueras-Brunet Marilola Perez, and Russell Rhomieux, eds., *Proceedings of the Thirty-Fourth Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society, February 8–10 2008*, 403–424. Berkeley, CA: Berkeley Linguistics Society.
- Büring, Daniel (2015). “Unalternative Semantics.” In Sarah D’Antonio, Mary Moroney, and Carol Rose Little, eds., *Proceedings of SALT 25*, 550–575. Linguistic Society of America.
- Kadmon, Nirit and Aldo Sevi (2011). “Without Focus.” In Barbara H. Partee, Michael Ginzburg, and Jurgis Škilters, eds., *Formal Semantics and Pragmatics. Discourse, Context and Models. The Baltic International Yearbook of Cognition, Logic and Communication, Vol. 6 (2010)*, 1–50. Manhattan, KS: New Prairie Press.
- Katz, Jonah and Elisabeth Selkirk (2011). “Contrastive Focus vs. Discourse-New: Evidence from Prosodic Prominence in English.” *Language* 87(4):771–816.

- Katzir, Roni (2013). “A Note on Contrast.” *Natural Language Semantics* 21(4):333–343.
- Kehler, Andrew (2005). “Coherence-Driven Constraints on the Placement of Accent.” In Effi Georgala and Jonathan Howell, eds., *Proceedings from Semantics and Linguistic Theory XV*, 98–115. Ithaca: CLC Publications.
- Neeleman, Ad and Kriszta Szendrői (2004). “Superman sentences.” *Linguistic Inquiry* 35(1):140–159.
- Schwarzschild, Roger (1999). “GIVENness, AvoidF and Other Constraints on the Placement of Accent.” *Natural Language Semantics* 7(2):141–177.
- Wagner, Michael (2006). “Givenness and Locality.” *Semantics and Linguistic Theory (SALT)* 16:295–312.
- Wagner, Michael (2012). “Focus and Givenness: A Unified Approach.” In Ivona Kučerová and Ad Neeleman, eds., *Contrasts and Positions in Information Structure*, 102–147. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

University of Vienna Linguistics Department Sensengasse 3a 1090  
Vienna daniel.buring@univie.ac.at  
<http://homepage.univie.ac.at/daniel.buring>

papers on UAS:  
<http://homepage.univie.ac.at/daniel.buring/phpsite/index.php?lang=en&page=UAS>