The interpretation of syntactic focus variation

Katharina Hartmann
Goethe Universität Frankfurt

k.hartmann@lingua.uni-frankfurt.de

In many West-African languages, non-subject focus in questions and answers is expressed in two varying syntactic forms, an *ex situ* form, and an *in situ* form. *Ex situ* focus is syntactically marked in one or several respects involving at least fronting of the focused constituent. *In situ* focus shows the canonical word order and usually no formal indication of focus. This asymmetry has been taken to indicate an information structural split between two types of focus relating *in situ* order to new information, and *ex situ* order to contrastive focus. Whether this semantic distinction is categorical or not, is a matter of controversial debate. Critics of the view that form and interpretation vary along the same coordinates have argued that the correlation between *ex situ* vs. *in situ* focus and contrastive vs. non-contrastive interpretation is only a tendency, and not a 1:1 correlation, e.g. Hartmann & Zimmermann (2007). Zimmermann (2008) and Zimmermann & Onea (2011) propose to derive the 'contrastive' effect of *ex situ* focus from a discourse-semantic strategy that allows the speaker to indicate unexpected discourse moves.

In this talk, I first discuss new data from Dagbani (Mabia), which support the claim in Titov (t.a.) on Akan that the alternative set represented by an *ex situ* focus is interpreted as discourse-salient but not exhaustively. *Ex situ* and *in situ* focus differ wrt. the discourse-salience of the elements from the focus alternative sets. *In situ* focus refers to an open set not expressing any expectation from the part of the speaker wrt. to the state of mind of the hearer. *Ex situ* focus on the other hand, refers to discourse-salient alternatives, which, according to Titov (t.a.), are D-linked. This interpretation is naturally compatible with a uniqueness interpretation of the focus constituent. Exhaustivity is syntactically coded by a cleft structure not regularly used in focus contexts.

Second, I will fathom the possibility of non-matching pairs of *ex situ* and *in situ* questions and answers in some Niger-Congo languages. I show that the sequence *Q in situ - A ex situ* is often blocked. Departing from the assumption that the alternative sets of *in situ* and *ex situ* focus differ in size, I claim that the set denoted by the question must be equal to or contained in the set denoted by the answer. This accounts for the unavailability of the mentioned sequence. I suggest that this may be derived from a presupposition failure.

References: • Hartmann, Katharina & Malte Zimmermann (2007): Place – Out of Place: Focus in Hausa. Kerstin Schwabe and Susanne Winkler (eds.) *On Information Structure: Meaning and Form*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. 365–403. • Titov, Elena (2018): Morphosyntactic Encoding of Information Structure in Akan. To appear in *Glossa.* • Zimmermann, Malte (2008): Contrastive Focus and Emphasis. *Acta Linguistica Hungarica* 55: 347–360. • Zimmermann, Malte and Edgar Onea (2011): Focus Marking und Focus Interpretation. *Lingua* 121: 1651–1670. doi:10.1016/j.lingua.2011.06.002