Exhaustiveness of different focus types

- Morphologically marked focus, postverbal focus: exhaustivity is semantic.
  - Exhaustive interpretation is obligatory - based on question-answer congruence tests (sentences (1) and (3) cannot be given as partial answers to the question ‘Who saw Ravi?’)
  - Exhaustive inference is not cancelable - based on implication cancelation tests (e.g. Ravi-see daam-nee vetirekina Da. ‘Lata kanDa daam-nee vetirekJimindi. ‘Ravi was against that. Lata was against that, too.’)

- Preverbal focus: exhaustivity is pragmatic.
  - Exhaustive interpretation is optional (sentences (2) can be given as a partial answer to the question ‘Who saw Ravi?’)
  - Exhaustive inference is cancelable (e.g. Daam-nee Ravi vetirekina Da. ‘Lata kanDa daam-nee vetirekJimindi. ‘Ravi was against that. Lata was against that, too.’)

Pilot experiment

- Testing the status of the exhaustive inference for different focus types using ‘yes, but’ tasks.
- Hypothesis: Exhaustivity is not at issue in the case of preverbal focus and at issue for postverbal and morphologically marked focus.

Background

- ‘Yes, but’ tests: participants have to react to a statement (e.g. appellative: Paola, Peter’s sister, is expecting a baby) by choosing one of the following answers: (a) Yes, and the bird is also holding a flag. (b) No, but Peter’s sister is expecting a baby. (c) Yes, but the bird is also holding a flag.
- Only-exclusive for the sake of comparison

Evaluation

- Answer (a) suggests that the speaker is fully agreeing with the inference and is merely making an addition to it (e.g. neutral sentences with without focus).
- E.g.: ‘The elephant is holding a ball. Inference: ‘The elephant is holding a ball, which does not mean that others are not holding balls.
- Answer (b) indicates that the speaker is agreeing with whatever the main message is to be conveyed by the utterance, and is disagreeing with the exhaustive inference but considering it to be a side issue (e.g. English it-clefts or Hungarian preverbal focus).
- E.g.: ‘It is the elephant that is holding a ball. Inference: main issue
- Answer (c) indicates that the speaker is both agreeing with and disagreeing with the exhaustive inference (e.g. non-restrictive relatives).
- E.g.: ‘The elephant is holding a ball. Inference: side issue.‘

Results

- The results are the same in the case of subject as well as object focus.
- Preverbal focus: not at issue (answer (c) was chosen).
- Postverbal focus: not at issue (answer (b) was chosen).
- Postverbal focus at issue (answer (c) was chosen).

Conclusions

- Similarly to Hungarian preverbal focus, the exhaustivity of Telugu focus is non-at-issue (even though Hungarian preverbal focus in semantic and Telugu preverbal focus is pragmatic).
- The exhaustivity of postverbal and morphologically marked focus is at issue - similarly to only-exclusives.
- This is consistent with the crosslinguistic picture and provides further evidence that ‘yes, but’ tests are a good diagnostic of the status of exhaustive inferences.

Future research

- The experiment should be conducted with multiple participants to find out if there is some variation among native speakers of Telugu.
- Find more ways of testing whether the source of the inference is indeed different for Telugu preverbal focus from that of Hungarian preverbal focus.

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