

A comparison of PVF and SUF: experimental insights

Our talk reports the results of two experiments we conducted to compare Hungarian preverbal or structural focus (PVF) and information or syntactically unmarked focus (SUF)¹ within the same experimental setting. From a semantic perspective, PVF was first considered to be exhaustive in nature, and its exhaustivity was described as an inherent semantic feature (É. Kiss 1998, Szabolcsi 1981). Recently several experimental studies have questioned the inherent exhaustivity of PVF (see for instance Kas and Lukács 2013, Babarczy and Balázs 2016) and argued that the exhaustivity of PVF should be treated as a pragmatic phenomenon. Regarding SUF, É. Kiss (1998) states that its function is to mark new, non-presupposed information. She also points out that “if the answer [to a *wh*-question] is exhaustive, [...] it must be put as a preverbal identification focus” (É. Kiss 1998: 250), and this implies that SUF cannot express exhaustive identification (see also Horváth 2006). However, Surányi (2011) raises the possibility that SUF might also receive an exhaustive interpretation.

When designing our experiment we wanted to compare the interpretation of PVF and SUF within the same experimental setting. The aim of the experiment was twofold: (i) to examine whether native speakers give higher ratings for PVF/SUF constructions in exhaustive contexts than in non-exhaustive ones, (ii) to investigate whether a marked structure (PVF/SUF) receives higher ratings when its use is motivated by the unexpectedness of the focused constituent. Using a sentence-picture verification task we assessed two factors; EXHAUSTIVITY: exhaustive vs. non-exhaustive settings were differentiated, depending on which entity or entities of the environment context are being acted upon as depicted in the accompanying picture; and EXPECTEDNESS: a patient is (un)expected in an event when its particular appearance is (in)compatible with our general assumptions about the event in question (based on our encyclopedic knowledge) (cf. Skopeteas and Fanselow 2011). We also had a between-subjects variable, FOCUS TYPE.

In the sentence-picture verification task pictures were accompanied by a short dialogue embedded in a context. Target sentences were always presented in a context after an introductory *wh*-question. Participants heard an auditory stimulus, a question-answer pair and had to rate the answer on a 6 point Likert scale. An exhaustive setting with an expected patient in focus is given below, illustrating both types of answers: PVF/SUF:

- Q: Mit fogott ki Bence?
what-ACC caught PRT Bence
“What did Bence catch?”
- A (PVF): Bence egy **hal-at** fogott ki.
Bence a fish-ACC caught PRT
“It was a **fish** that Bence caught.”
- A (SUF): Bence kifogott egy **hal-at**.
Bence caught a fish-ACC
“Bence caught a **fish**.”

66 university students participated in the experiment; they were all native speakers of Hungarian, the PVF and SUF groups involved 32 and 34 students, respectively.

We carried out a mixed design ANOVA in order to analyze the results. There was a main effect of EXHAUSTIVITY ($F(1, 64) = 406.9, p < .001$), i.e. mean ratings of both focus structures were significantly smaller in the case of non-exhaustive settings. There was no effect of EXPECTEDNESS.

¹ Since the aim of the experiments is to explore the interpretational properties of these focus structures, in our talk we use the labels PVF and SUF only as descriptive terms, and we do not intend to refer to the possible syntactic implementations of the results.

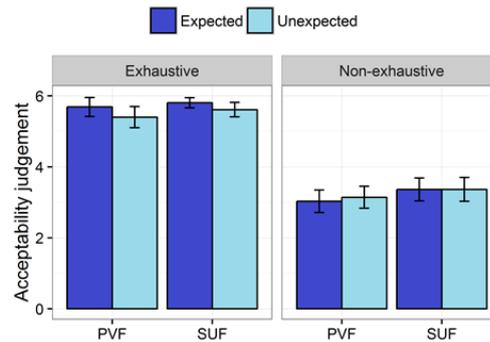


Figure 1: Overall results

As Figure 1 shows, there was no empirical difference detected between PVF and SUF across the two factors. These results are in line with that of Geröcs et al.'s (2014) first experiment, concerning the lack of empirical difference between PVF and SUF. Experimental evidence was also collected in favor of the claim that SUF might receive an exhaustive interpretation (cf. Surányi 2011). This also means that there is no clear-cut difference between the exhaustivity of PVF and SUF.

The results might be interpreted as a challenge to the standard view, i.e. if SUF is exhaustive (provided that there is an introductory *wh*-question), then it might be the case that the exhaustivity of PVF is not necessarily inherent in nature. At this point it is not clear whether the exhaustive interpretation is expressed as a presupposition, as Pintér (2016) claims, or as an implicature (cf. Geröcs et. al. 2014, Babarczy and Balázs 2016).

To reinforce the results of the first experiment, we carried out a follow-up experiment to see whether the exhaustive interpretation is still prominent enough when it is not primed by the *wh*-question. So participants only heard the answer, i.e. the *wh*-question was left out of the stimulus. Other conditions were unaltered. There were 42 participants. Again there was a main effect of EXHAUSTIVITY ($F(1, 40) = 9.043, p < .01$).

This means that the results of the first experiment are still valid when the exhaustive interpretation is not primed by the introductory *wh*-question. From a methodological point of view it is worth examining what happens if the auditory clues are also removed, i.e. two further experiments should be conducted using the same method, but with slightly altered stimuli: (i) written *wh*-question + target sentence (ii) written target sentence (the *wh*-question removed). If all these designs produce uniform results despite the varied nature of the stimuli, then strong experimental evidence might be provided against the pragmatic view on the exhaustivity of PVF. Moreover, from a methodological point of view we might get important insights about the necessity of using auditory clues when testing focus structures.

References:

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