

The German response particle *doch* as a case of contrastive focus

The accented German response particle (henceforth, RP) *doch* has the function of refuting an immediately preceding negated sentence, thus asserting that the positive counterpart of the sentence is true. I argue in this paper that the RP *doch* is best analysed as a case of contrastive focus.

Intuitively, (1B) negates the preceding statement that Karl was not at the party and asserts that, on the contrary, he was at the party:

- (1) A: Karl war nicht auf meiner Party.
A: *Karl was not at my party.*
B: DOCH.¹ (= Karl WAR auf deiner Party.)
B: *He was INDEED.*

I consider two possibilities of interpreting the *doch*-utterance, motivated by the observation that the RP *doch* has a functional affinity to verum focus on the one hand and focused sentence negation on the other. As indicated in the example, (1B) is short for (2B) which is a case of verum focus (henceforth, VF) and can be paraphrased as ‘it is true that Karl was at your party’ (cf. Höhle (1992)).²

- (2) A: Karl war nicht auf meiner Party.
A: *Karl was not at my party.*
B: Karl WAR auf deiner Party.
B: *Karl WAS at your party.*

Höhle (1992) refers as VF to cases where the finite verb or a subordinating particle such as *dass* and *ob* carry the main accent in the sentence with the effect of emphasising the truth value of the sentence rather than the lexical content of the word. The main characteristics of cases of VF is that “the thought expressed [by the sentence] is known from the context” (Höhle 1992, 113).³ VF is found both in cases where a state of affairs under discussion is negated in the immediately preceding sentence and its truth is emphasised in the VF-sentence, as in (2B), and in cases where the VF-sentence emphasises the falsity of the preceding positive sentence, as in (3) below. Höhle calls the latter cases “negated VF”.

¹Small caps denote accent.

²The example is taken from Buring (2005).

³This does not exclude examples like (2) since according to Höhle the negation is not interpreted as part of the contextually given thought.

- (3) A: Karl war auf meiner Party.
 A: *Karl was at my party.*
 B: (Nein,) Karl WAR nicht auf deiner Party.
 B: (*No,*) *Karl WAS not at your party.*

Now, (1B) and (2B), as well as (3B) refute the preceding statement. In this sense they are corrections suggesting that the preceding speaker's attitude towards the truth of the state of affairs under discussion is not correct and that the sentence should not be added to the common ground. They furthermore suggest a replacement to be added to the common ground instead, namely a sentence with the reversed polarity of the refuted one.⁴

A similar corrective function can be observed for the focused sentence negation *nicht* (henceforth, *negation focus* after Höhle (1992)) in the example below:

- (4) A: Karl war auf meiner Party.
 A: *Karl was at my party.*
 B: (Nein,) Karl war NICHT auf deiner Party.
 B: (*No,*) *Karl was NOT at your party.*

Höhle argues that negated VF competes with negation focus when they occur in comparable contexts like the ones in (3) and (4). According to him, the difference between (3) and (4) is that negation focus does not emphasise the truth value (in this case, the falsity) of the sentence but merely its negation.⁵

Intuitively, the accented *doch* in (1B) may be interpreted as related to either negated VF or negation focus: on the one hand, it could be seen to emphasise the falsity of the preceding (negated) sentence, rather than the content of the particle which is abstract and underspecified anyway, i.e. it may be interpreted as 'it is not true that Karl was not at your party'. On the other hand, it can also be seen as merely negating the preceding negated sentence, turning it into its positive counterpart.

I first explore the former possibility. Höhle accounts for the effect of VF by assuming that the accented verb introduces a semantic element, the truth-predicate *VERUM*. In other words, (2B) is interpreted as *VERUM* p , where p is the proposition expressed by the sentence. In the case of negated VF, the truth-predicate is in the scope of the negation, i.e., the sentence is interpreted as \neg *VERUM* p . In a VF-approach, the RP *doch* would be interpreted as \neg *VERUM* $\neg p$, where $\neg p$ is the negated proposition expressed by the preceding sentence. There are however at least two objections to such an analysis of the RP *doch*.

First of all, taking *doch* to introduce \neg *VERUM* $\neg p$ would not account for the simple fact that in the dialogue in (5), the negation particle *nein* serves to signal that A_2 disagrees with B_1 . According to Romero (2005), negative bias questions with preposed negation

⁴Cf. also Steube (2003) who calls VF "the correction of sentence force".

⁵Unfortunately, Höhle does not go into detail with respect to this distinction. In the full paper, I will show that this intuitive difference is better understood when one tries to determine the focus sets of alternatives evoked by VF and negation focus which I claim are distinct from one another, contrary to Höhle.

introduce *VERUM*, and yes/no answers to such questions do not confirm or negate the *VERUM* proposition (which could be $\neg VERUM p$ or $VERUM \neg p$) but only the embedded proposition (p or $\neg p$). Analogously, the response *nein* to (5B₁) would be a response to the proposition $\neg p$ embedded under the negated *VERUM* operator. However in general, using *nein* as a response to an utterance containing sentence negation amounts to **agreeing** that the proposition in the scope of the sentence negation is false. In (5), however, *nein* conveys that the speaker **disagrees** with B.

- (5) A₁: Karl war nicht auf deiner Party. $\neg p$
 B₁: Doch. $\neg VERUM \neg p$
 A₂: Nein. $\neg p$

In order to be able to account for the fact that A₂ disagrees with B₁, B₁ should be interpreted as asserting either *VERUM p* or simply p . It will be argued in the full paper that the former possibility is not adequate either.

The second argument against the VF-approach is that it runs against an uniform account of *doch* since it does not apply for its other uses, e.g. the adverb and the adversative connector *doch* which simply assert the sentence they occur with. For instance, (6B) asserts the truth of $\neg p$ and not its falsity.

- (6) A: Karl war nicht auf meiner Party.
 A: *Karl was not at my party.*
 B: Er war (also) DOCH nicht auf deiner Party.
 B: *So he wasn't there after all.*

The considerations above force the conclusion that the VF-approach is not suitable for *doch*. The second of the two possibilities is to analyse *doch* as a special case of negation focus reserved for a purpose *nein* and *nicht* do not serve, namely negating negated sentences. In order to understand better the intuitive affinity between *doch* and negation focus, I examine the focus sets of alternatives that they evoke in the alternative semantics framework of Rooth (1992). As a starting point, I challenge Höhle's suggestion that negation focus, just like VF, constitutes a set of alternatives together with *VERUM* and expressions like *vielleicht* (*maybe*), *bestimmt* (*surely*) and *wahrscheinlich* (*probably*) by means of which the speaker "expresses his opinion with respect to the truth content of the contextually given thought". I argue instead that the set of alternatives evoked by negation focus contains only two elements: the negated proposition that is asserted and represents the ordinary semantic value $\llbracket \neg p \rrbracket^o$ of the sentence, and its positive counterpart: $\llbracket [nicht]_{FP} \rrbracket^f = \{\neg p, p\}$.

Based on a discussion of the occurrence constraints of the RP *doch*, I argue that just like negation focus, *doch* contrasts the preceding negated proposition with its positive counterpart. In other words, the focus semantic value of *doch* is the set containing its ordinary semantic value $\llbracket p \rrbracket^o$ and the alternative that contrasts with it, namely $\neg p$: $\llbracket [doch]_F \rrbracket^f = \{p, \neg p\}$, where p is the proposition negated in the immediately preceding sentence. The difference between DOCH and NICHT lies in the distinct ordinary semantic value which is an element of the focus set of alternatives: $\llbracket p \rrbracket^o$ in the case of *doch* and $\llbracket \neg p \rrbracket^o$ in the case of *nicht*.

Analysing *doch* in terms of negation focus does justice to the dialogue in (5), since on this account *doch* asserts p . However, what still must be accounted for, is the intuition that *doch* negates the preceding negated sentence. Following Umbach (2001), I argue that *doch* itself does not introduce a negation, i.e. it cannot be interpreted as $\neg\neg p$, but the (external) negation is a side effect of information structural contrast in terms of the exclusion of an alternative. In other words, the impression that *doch* introduces a negation is created by evoking and excluding the alternative $\neg p$.

Finally, I will argue that the kind of focus we are dealing with in the case of *doch* is contrastive focus, and suggest a similar view on VF and negation focus. The analysis of *doch*, VF and negation focus as cases of contrastive focus accounts for their dialogue function as corrections. Following Umbach (2004), I assume that correction is a special case of contrast where one element of the set of alternatives is excluded by substitution: the asserted element is presented as a replacement for the alternative, suggesting that the former should be added to the common ground and the latter removed from it. It will be shown in the full paper that analysing *doch*, VF and negation focus in terms of contrastive focus also accounts for a pattern I observe with respect to their function in dialogue: *doch*, VF and negation focus function as corrections in the cases where the preceding utterance contains an element of the respective set of alternatives they evoke. When the preceding utterance does not contain an element of the set of alternatives of *doch*, VF and negation focus respectively, the sentences are not infelicitous but are interpreted as confirmations. This is accounted for by suggesting that in these cases, the respective focus set of alternatives evoked by *doch*, VF and negation focus is accommodated.

References

- Büring, D. (2005), Intonation und Informationsstruktur, in ‘Akten der IDS Jahrestagung’, Mannheim.
- Höhle, T. N. (1992), Über Verum-Focus im Deutschen, in J. Jacobs, ed., ‘Informationsstruktur und Grammatik’, Linguistische Berichte, Sonderheft 4/1991-92, Westdeutscher Verlag, Opladen.
- Romero, M. (2005), Biased yes/no questions, really, and answers, Presented at the Workshop on Formal and Computational Approaches to Discourse and Other Particles, Barcelona.
- Rooth, M. (1992), ‘A theory of focus interpretation’, *Natural Language Semantics* (1), 75–116.
- Steube, A. (2003), ‘Correction by Contrastive Focus’, *Theoretical Linguistics* **2/3**(27), 215–249.
- Umbach, C. (2001), Contrast and contrastive topic, in ‘Proceedings of the ESSLLI 2001 Workshop on Information Structure, Discourse Structure and Discourse Semantics’.
- Umbach, C. (2004), ‘On the notion of contrast in information structure and discourse structure’, *Journal of Semantics* **21**(2), 155–175.