Focus interpretation in Child Hungarian

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• Research questions
• Background
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• Results
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• Conclusion
Research questions

1. Regarding the exhaustive reading, what are the main differences between the acquisition processes of the following 3 sentence types:
   (i) sentences with csak ‘only’,
   (ii) sentences with structural focus,
   (iii) neutral SVO sentences?

2. How do these results contribute to the semantic discussion concerning the exhaustive interpretation of these constructions?
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Background – *csak* ‘only’

Horn (1969): sentences containing focus particles have two meaning components

(1) *Only Muriel voted for Hubert.* (Horn 1969: 98)

**Assertion:** ‘No one other than Muriel voted for Hubert’  
(negative contribution)

**Presupposition:** ‘Muriel voted for Hubert’  
(positive contribution, prejacent)

Hungarian *csak*: Kenesei (1986), Szabolcsi (1994)

(2) *Csak Péter alszik.* (Kenesei 1986: 134)
Background – structural focus

structural / pre-verbal / identificational focus

• syntactically and prosodically marked

(3) Péter meg-vette a ház-at. Ø focus
   Peter PRT-bought the house-ACC
   ‘Peter bought the house.’

(4) A HÁZ-AT vette meg Péter. Object focus
   the house-ACC bought PRT Peter
   ‘It was the house that Peter bought.’

• express exhaustive identification (É. Kiss 1998)
Background – structural focus

How does sentences containing structural focus express this exhaustive meaning?

1. [+exhaustive] semantic feature
   Szabolcsi 1981, É. Kiss 1998, among others

2. presupposition
   “The focus-containing utterance presupposes rather than asserts the uniqueness of its antecedent.”
   (van Leusen & Kálmán 1993: 12)
Background – structural focus

3. implicature

- conversational implicature
  Wedgwood 2003, 2005; Onea & Beaver 2011
  “The pragmatic tendency to interpret cooperative answers to questions as complete then explains the exhaustivity effects.”
  (Onea & Beaver 2011: 358)

- conventional implicature
  Gerőcs, Babarczy & Surányi 2014
Background – Previous experiments

Experiments with adult native speakers

• Onea & Beaver (2011) – yes, and.../yes, but.../no, ...
• Gerőcs, Babarczy & Surányi (2014)
  - Experiment 1 – online truth-value judgment task
  - Experiment 2 – offline, indirect task

Acquisition studies:

• Kas & Lukács (2013) – binary yes/no answers
  - Neither 6-year-olds nor 10-year-olds showed any sign of focus sensitivity as a group.
  - Responses of adults were inconsistent too.
• Balázs & Babarczy (2014) – 3-point-scale
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Experiment 1–3

Experiment 1. (sentences with csak ‘only’)
(1) Csak a nyuszi emelte fel a zászlót.
only the rabbit raised up the flag-ACC
‘Only the rabbit has raised the flag.’

Experiment 2. (sentences with structural focus)
(2) A NYUSZI emelte fel a zászlót.
the rabbit raised up the flag-ACC
‘It is the rabbit who has raised the flag.’

Experiment 3. (neutral SVO sentences)
(3) A nyuszi fel-emelte a zászlót.
the rabbit up-raised the flag-ACC
‘The rabbit has raised the flag.’
Conditions of Experiment 1–3

Control conditions:

(i) true / exhaustive condition

(ii) false condition

(iii) non-exhaustive condition

(iv) condition (i) with a distractor

Critical conditions:
Procedure

Sentence – picture verification task
3-point-scale 😞 😐 😊

cf. Katsos & Bishop (2011)
Balázs & Babarczy (2014)

4 conditions x 8 items = 32 test sentence-picture pairs
+ 24 filler sentence-picture pairs

• randomized order, SR Research Experiment Builder
• 2 occasions
Procedure

Participants:
4 age groups in each experiment (Experiment 1, 2, 3)
• 15 preschoolers (mean ages: 5;9, 6;2 and 6;4)
• 15 7-year-olds (mean ages: 7;2, 7;5 and 7;6)
• 15 9-year olds (mean ages: 9;3, 9;7 and 9;6)
• 15 adults (mean ages: 37;5, 42;7 and 22;10)
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Results of the adult control groups in the non-exhaustive conditions of Experiment 1–3
Results of the adult control groups in the non-exhaustive conditions of Experiment 1–3
Results of the *preschoolers* in the non-exhaustive conditions of Experiment 1–3
Results of the 7-year-olds in the non-exhaustive conditions of Experiment 1–3
Results of the 9-year-olds in the non-exhaustive conditions of Experiment 1–3
Proportion of responses of the non-exhaustive condition of Experiment 2 (structural focus)
Proportion of responses of the non-exhaustive condition of Experiment 2 (structural focus)

Kruskal-Wallis test

***: p < 0.001
Proportion of responses of true plus distractor condition of Experiment 2 (structural focus)
Reaction times of adult participants in Experiment 2 (structural focus)
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Discussion – Findings

• No difference between the age groups in the interpretation of csak ’only’.

• In the case of neutral SVO sentences, only 9-year-olds differed from other age groups.

• In the case of structural focus, there is an increase of exhaustive interpretation with age.
  → Exhaustivity encoded by a specific syntactic configuration is harder for children to process.
Discussion – The exhaustivity issue

What type of meaning is the exhaustive meaning of structural focus?

- **At-issue meanings** can be ruled out, because of the differences between Experiment 1 and 2. (structural focus vs. csak ‘only’)

- **Context dependent meanings** (conversational implicatures and conversationally-triggered presuppositions) can be excluded, because of the differences between Experiment 1 and 3. (structural focus vs. neutral SVO)
Discussion – The exhaustivity issue

• Conventional implicature or presupposition?

Potts (2005):
- CIs are speaker-oriented entailments which are independent of the at-issue entailments.
- CPs are speaker-oriented, backgrounded meanings that are not easily altered by contextual factors.

Exhaustivity of English cleft constructions was claimed to be a conventional presupposition. (Karttunen 1974, Gazdar 1979, Büring and Križ 2013)
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Conclusions

Experimental data support the view that there are 3 different kinds of exhaustivity in the 3 discussed constructions.

• Csak – assertion
• Structural focus – conventional presupposition
• Neutral SVO sentences can also be interpreted exhaustively, however, this is only a pragmatic implicature arising in certain contexts.


References


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