

Unalternative Semantics/Focal Antipodes

Daniel Büring (University of Vienna)
daniel.buring@univie.ac.at

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This talk explores a radically new way of formalizing focus semantics. Where classical alternative semantics derives, for a given F-marked structure, a set of potential *focal targets* (the Focus Alternative Set of Rooth), we calculate the set of meanings that *cannot* be focal targets, call them the *focal unalternatives*. For example, *Kim WON* is associated with the unalternative set **x won** (rather than e.g. the Alternative Set **Kim Q**), meaning that anything can be a focus antecedent to it, *except* propositions like ‘Sam won’, ‘Lee won’ etc.

Note that this characterization subsumes narrow focus on V (a focus antecedent like *Kim placed second*) as well as projected focus on S (‘What happened?’). In other words, the accent pattern is not taken to be ambiguous between two focus markings (each with its unique set of focus alternatives), but indicative of a single unalternative set, which allows for either ‘V antecedents’ or ‘S antecedents’. There is no F-marking and no focus ambiguity.

Unalternatives are introduced in two flavors. The weaker flavor, seen above, is introduced at every branching node whose internal metrical and prosodic makeup conforms to the default (e.g. weak*–strong for most branching nodes in English). The stronger flavor is introduced whenever we have marked prosody, particularly when the structurally strong daughter was ‘prosodically demoted’, as for example in *KIM won*. In that case, everything that is *not* of the form **x won** (as well as **Kim won** itself) is excluded; we write this as **x^{\Kim}won**. Descriptively, such prosodies are incompatible with ‘pure projected foci’; in the case at hand, there must be a focal target like ‘Sam won’.

Working with Unalternative Sets has several advantages in terms of parsimony: F-marking can be done away with, and, as I will show, we can put a lid on overfocussing without invoking transderivational comparison (of the sort ‘Maximize Background’ or ‘Avoid F’). Besides that it opens up new conceptual avenues for attacking notorious problems in the realms of second

occurrence focus, predicate integration, double focussing and the relation between backgrounding and givenness. A selection of these is discussed towards the end of the talk.