The Common Ground is not enough: Why Focus-sensitivity matters for Presupposition triggers

Introduction Presupposition triggers are notorious for being comprised of a heterogeneous set of expressions (e.g. Karttunen 2016), with a variety of different classifications that have been proposed over the years (e.g. Abusch 2010, Glanzberg 2005). This paper contributes to this issue by providing evidence for the need to take Focus-sensitivity into account and argues for a distinction in terms of the representations that presuppositions depend on. By hypothesis, presupposition triggers that lack Focus-sensitivity (-FOCUS) only require their presupposition to be entailed by the Common Ground (Stalnaker 1978), fitting the traditional picture of presuppositions. In contrast, Focus-sensitive triggers (+FOCUS) additionally access linguistic material in the discourse representation (cf. Focus as "anaphoric", Rooth 1992). We present two experiments as evidence for this view, the first on interference effects in discourse and the second on accommodation difficulty.

Exp1 The experiment tested the prediction that -FOCUS triggers by virtue of being Common Ground entailments should be indifferent to where their "antecedent" is located in the discourse. In contrast, +FOCUS triggers should depend on the salience or accessibility of the linguistic material that satisfies the presupposition. We used the discourse structure derived from the Question Under Discussion (QUD, Roberts 2012) as a proxy for accessibility, assuming that material within the same QUD is more accessible. The experiment used dialogues as in (1) to make QUDs explicit. The design was a 2x2, crossing TRIGGER TYPE (**also** [+FOCUS] vs **again** [-FOCUS] in the final sentence B_3) and QUD (intervening question-answer pair A_2-B_2 either present or absent). 36 Participants saw 16 items like (1) plus 12 fillers, presented sentence by sentence in a written self-paced reading fashion, and rated the final sentence according to its comprehension difficulty given the context. The prediction was that the intervening question-answer pair should make it

(1) A_1: When did Robert leave for school on Tuesday?
      B_1: He left the house around 8am.
      (*A_2: When did he leave on Thursday?*
      B_2: He got a stomach ache and stayed home.)
      A_3: When did he leave on Friday?
      B_{3a}: He **also** left the house around 8am on Friday.
      B_{3b}: He left the house around 8am **again** on Friday.

harder for *also* to access the content satisfying its presupposition in B_1, but not for *again*, resulting in an interaction. This prediction was borne out in ratings (Figure 1) as well as reading times of the final sentence (Figure 2).

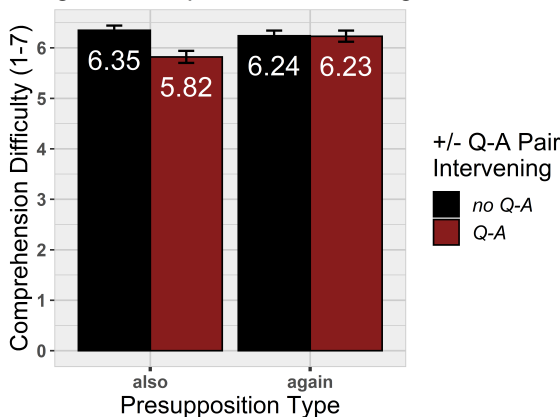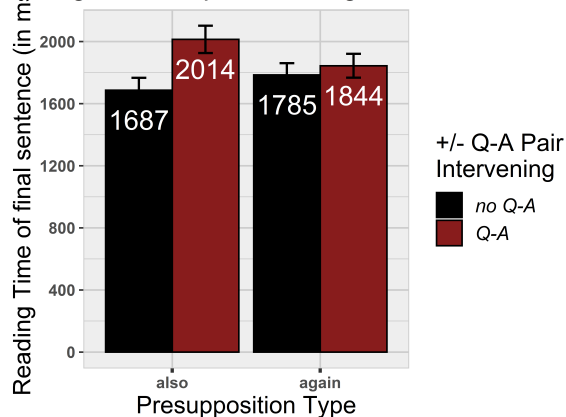
Figure 1: Experiment 1 Ratings

Figure 2: Exp 1 Reading Times

Exp2 It has been noted that presupposition triggers differ in the extent to which they can be accommodated, that is, used felicitously in a context in which their presupposition is not satisfied (e.g. Kripke 2009). Assuming a view of the Common Ground as being governed by Gricean principles (Stalnaker 2002), the hypothesis predicts that -FOCUS triggers should be relatively easy to accommodate since a cooperative hearer can accommodate it and adjust the Common Ground

accordingly. In contrast, the absence of a linguistic antecedent is not subject to those principles, predicting +FOCUS triggers to be harder to accommodate than -FOCUS triggers.

The study compared four pairs of triggers across 18 items (+ 62 fillers), with one trigger of each pair lacking (-FOCUS) or showing Focus-sensitivity (+FOCUS), relative to a CONTROL condition without any trigger. The pairs were *again* vs *too* [4 items], *still* vs *even* [5], *back* vs *at least* [4], and *continue* vs *only* [5]. The target sentences were preceded by a question to fix the position of focus and provide a minimal context, see (2) for a sample item. Dialogues were presented in a self-paced fashion as in Experiment 1 to 48 participants recruited through Prolific.ac. Both -FOCUS and +FOCUS were rated lower than the CONTROL, but crucially +FOCUS received lower ratings than

(2)   A: Who is having dinner in New York tomorrow?
    a.   B: Saul is having dinner in New York.   CONTROL
    b.   B: Saul is having dinner in New York again.   -FOCUS
    c.   B: Saul is having dinner in New York too.   +FOCUS

-FOCUS (Figure 3). This pattern was numerically present for all trigger pairs (Figure 4).
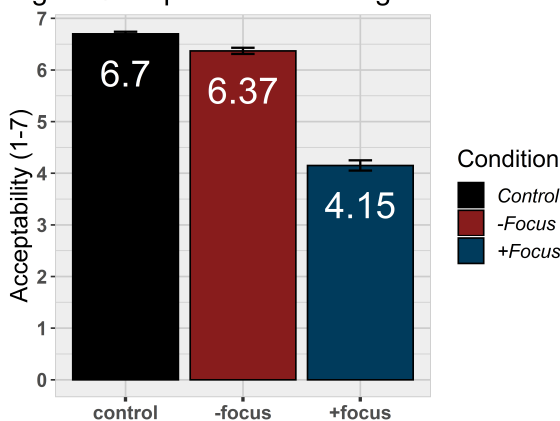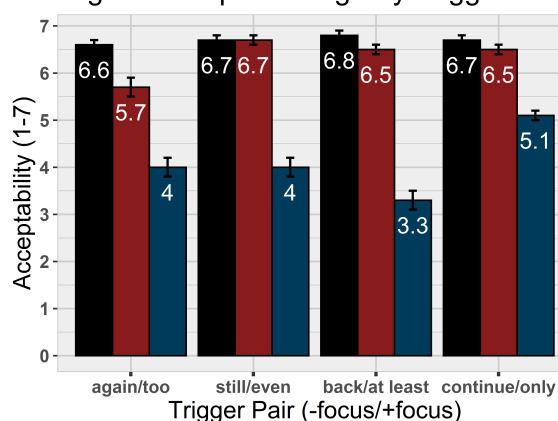

Figure 3: Experiment 2 Ratings Total

Figure 4: Exp 2 Ratings By Trigger Pair

Discussion The experimental results support the hypothesis that presupposition triggers access different representations depending on whether they are Focus-sensitive or not. Experiment 1 showed interference effects for *also* but not *again*, which supports the view that the presupposition of *again* needs to be entailed by the Common Ground and is therefore insensitive to the salience of its "antecedent", whereas *also* accesses linguistic material in the discourse structure, possibly in a search-like fashion (cf. Chen & Husband 2018). Additionally, the results provide evidence for the relevance of QUDs for discourse processing and its connection to Focus. Although the results are consistent with an account in terms of linear recency, the acceptability of examples like (3) suggests that this is not general enough and a structural notion is needed (cf. Kim 2015).

(3)   You know, before I came here, I had been in a cage. It was a nice cage; I can't complain. Being in Russia in the 1970s and 1980s was great. But of course I wanted to breathe the air of the free world. Everything I recorded up to Radio Silence was basically a bridge between Russia and the West. When I got to the West, I felt the need to build a bridge back. A lot of people are arguing right now that contemporary Russia is **also** a cage, comparing it to the Soviet times.

Experiment 2 provided further evidence for the hypothesis by showing increased accommodation difficulty for Focus-sensitive triggers. Furthermore, both experiments compared triggers that have often been grouped together (e.g. both *also* and *again* are "hard" according to Abusch 2010) and thus yield insights into a typology of presupposition triggers. However, there was also considerable variation within each class, which I will comment on further in the presentation.

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