Update Foregrounding: Verum Focus, Prosody, and Negative Polar Questions

Introduction. Verum focus is broadly associated with emphasis of propositional truth (Höhle, 1992). Although this has been formalized as contributing a specific semantic operator, its effect on discourse structures, such as the questions under discussion (QUD) or the common ground, still remains to be articulated. We argue that verum focus signals updates of propositions from the conversational background. This clarifies the contribution of prosody in discourse updates, as well as verum's relationship with Negative Polar Questions (NPQs).

Background. Verum focus is often associated with truth-value update of speaker or addressee beliefs (1). However, in (2) polarity focus does not indicate a change in truth value, but instead highlights evidence relevant to A's claim.

(1)   (Wow! / Believe me), John DID steal the files.

(2)   A: What have the Romans ever done for us?
       B: They DID_{H*L} build the $\text{AQUEDUCT}_{H*LH\%}$

Previous accounts have defined verum(p) as acting on the discourse in various ways: e.g. requesting additions to the common ground at the at-issue level (Romero and Han (2004), R&H), or downdate of the QUD via conventional implicature (Gutzmann and Castroviejo Miró, 2009). While many problems raised by R&H's approach are solved by the latter, the downdate approach remains problematic. For example, it does not capture the fact that p doesn't need to be under discussion (2) or, more generally, that in cases such as (3) the speaker does not seem to intend a downdate of the embedded clause.

(3)   Mary thinks John DID steal the money, but I just don't know.

Foregrounding with verum. We propose that verum(p) signals an update of p's discourse status. This reflects an increase in Gricean quality when p's polarity is in question (Davis et al., 2007), and an increase in relevance when polarity is uncontroversial. The notion of update presupposes p, or possibly ?p, to be in the conversational background, i.e. given (Schwarzschild, 1999). The effect of verum is, thus, to foreground p.

Updates and Prosody. The update type is then signalled by independent factors like prosody. For example, truly emphatic focus appears to signal polarity/quality update, possibly downdating ?p. However, (2) is naturally pronounced with a less emphatic *did* and a final rise. This meshes with Büring's (2003) analysis of contrastive topic/strategy: p positively answers a relevant subquestion, contrasting with negative answers to other implicit subquestions.

NPQs and verum We argue that the basic function of NPQs is to foreground assumptions which have been challenged by contextual evidence (4). This accounts for their positive epistemic bias, and the intuition that verum and NPQs have mirrored discourse function, without requiring the problematic presence of a verum operator in the question denotation (Reese, 2007).

(4)   a.   A: Let's have steak!
       b.   B: Aren't you vegan?

Implications. This approach folds verum into more general treatments of focus/prosody as discourse-regulating devices (Roberts, 1996). It also highlights the need for a more precise view of discourse status than simply membership in common ground.   [word count: 493]

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