

Focus Sensitivity and Deontic Strength

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According to Dretske (1972), linguistic expressions are focus-sensitive if focus structure affects truth conditions (1). Dretske observed that predicates such as *advise* are focus sensitive (2). Villalta (2008) corroborates this observation, claiming that other DIRECTIVES (her term) such as *encourage*, *order* and *authorize* are also focus sensitive. However, this claim of focus sensitivity is not fully accompanied by empirical support. I provide new data and show that these predicates may be divided into two subclasses on the basis of their interaction with focus. SUGGESTIVES (my term) such as *advise* and *encourage* are focus sensitive: focus structure under these predicates determines whether sentences are judged true or false in context. However, MANDATIVES (my term) such as *order* and *authorize* are not focus sensitive; focus structure affects only pragmatic felicity, not whether the sentence is judged true or false. I provide a new characterization of focus sensitivity for attitude verbs which highlights this distinction (3). I propose an explanation for the focus differences between SUGGESTIVES and MANDATIVES by treating them as weak and strong necessity quantifiers, respectively. Weak necessity quantifiers have no presuppositions about commitment to all of the propositions that determine the ranking of their prejacent, but strong necessity quantifiers presuppose commitment to all of the ordering source propositions.

Data: As mentioned, the literature does not provide data to support the claim that a DIRECTIVE like *order* is focus sensitive just as *advise* is. Consider the scenario in (4). Here focus under *advise* may only fall on constituents that Mary believes to be better than the relevant alternatives to the focused item. (4a) is true but (4b) is false because Mary did not advise John to teach. However, focus is not restricted in the same way under *order* in the context of (4'). While (4c) is true, (4d) is only infelicitous. Although Mary thinks is better for John not to teach, focus can fall on *teach* in the complement of *order*. This focus structure is somewhat incongruent given the context, but it does not make the sentence false.

Diagnosis: The characterization of focus sensitivity for attitude verbs (3) captures this difference: only focused material under *advise* is grammatically specified as being advised, but both focused and backgrounded, *i.e.* non-focused, material in *order*'s complement is ordered. (5) illustrates this distinction clearly. It is grammatically coherent to stipulate that *advise* does not apply to the prejacent's backgrounded material (5a); it is incoherent to say that backgrounded material in the prejacent of *order* is not ordered (5b). Thus, when focus is used under *advise*, it indicates that the adviser is recommending the focused item over some relevant alternative(s), but makes no indication whether the adviser is making the same recommendation about the prejacent's backgrounded material. For this reason, changing the focus structure under *advise* may make the sentence false. But changing the focus structure under *order* can only result in pragmatic incongruence since all of the prejacent is part of the order.

Towards a Semantics for Advise and Order: Consider the intuitive difference between these two verbs. *Advise* is used to recommend an option which the attitude holder believes to be better than at least one other alternative. In this way, *advise* is comparative. Contrast this with *order*, which is used to mandate that some end is achieved. There is no implication that *order p* has ranked *p* above some other non-*p* alternative. I propose that the difference between these verbs can be captured by distinguishing them in terms of strength of quantification. SUGGESTIVES are weak necessity quantifiers: their prejacent is true only in a subset of compared worlds. MANDATIVES are strong necessity quantifiers because their prejacent is true in every accessible world. I argue for this classification by showing parallel behavior between DIRECTIVES and modal auxiliaries. I show that in relation to focus, weak necessity *ought* behaves like a SUGGESTIVE but strong necessity *must* behaves like a MANDATIVE (6). According to Rubinstein (2012), these modals differ in strength because weak necessity *ought* has no presupposition that there is collective commitment to the proposition(s) that rank *ought*'s prejacent. Strong necessity *must* presupposes collective commitment to the ordering source proposition(s). I argue that commitment can be correlated with DIRECTIVES' deontic strength and this ultimately ties into how these predicates interact with focus.

(1) **Criterion for focus sensitivity**, from Dretske 1972, repeated in Rooth 1985: If C(U) is a linguistic expression in which U can be embedded, and U can be given different contrastive foci (say U₁ and U₂), then it often makes a difference to the meaning of C(U) whether we embed U₁ or U₂.

(2) Abbreviated from Dretske 1972: Clyde has a vintage car in mint condition that he never drives. His neighbor Schultz has indicated that he is interested in buying it for \$30,000. Clyde thinks that it would be worth it to wait to sell the car when it had considerably appreciated in value, but he is not sure about this. He asks Alex for his advice, who says that it is unlikely that the car's value will increase significantly so Clyde should take Schultz up on his offer. Schultz buys the car from Clyde on a bad check. Clyde tries to track Schultz down but Schultz has left town with the car. Angry, Clyde confronts Alex and asked him why he gave him advice to sell to Schultz. Alex can defend himself by arguing that (2a) is true but (2b) is false.

(2a) Alex advised Clyde TO SELL HIS CAR to Schultz FOR \$30,000.

(2b) Alex advised Clyde to sell his car TO SCHULTZ for \$30,000.

(3) **Characterization of focus sensitivity for propositional attitude verbs**: When a predicate P takes a sentence as its complement, and that sentence has both focused and backgrounded, *i.e.* non-focused, material [_{S1}P[_{S2}F,B]], then only F, *i.e.* the complement's focused material, is P'ed; the backgrounded material, B, is not P'ed.

(4) John is a graduate student in the last stages of finishing his dissertation. He is spending all of his time on this but is worried about his finances. He wants to teach to earn some money. He talks with his friend Mary, who thinks that it is a bad idea for John to teach. She is concerned that teaching will make it harder for him to finish his dissertation. She advises him not to teach, but John remains firm that he wants to teach. Recognizing this, Mary informs John that since his focus has mainly been syntax, he should teach syntax.

(4a) Mary advises John to teach SYNTAX. (True)

(4b) Mary advises John to TEACH syntax. (False)

(4') John is a graduate student in the last stages of finishing his dissertation. He is spending all of his time on this but is worried about his finances. He wants to teach to earn some money. He talks with his mentor Mary, who thinks that it is a bad idea for John to teach. She is concerned that teaching will make it harder for him to finish his dissertation. She advises him not to teach, but John remains firm that he wants to teach. Recognizing this, Mary informs John that since his focus has mainly been syntax, he must teach syntax.

(4c) Mary orders John to teach SYNTAX. (True)

(4d) # Mary orders John to TEACH syntax. (True but Pragmatically Incongruent)

(5a) Given that John wants to teach, Mary advises John to teach SYNTAX, but she does not advise John to teach. (True)

(5b) Given that John wants to teach, Mary orders John to teach SYNTAX, but she does not order John to teach. (False & Odd)

(6a) Given that John wants to teach, John ought to teach SYNTAX, but he ought not to teach. (True)

(6b) Given that John wants to teach, John must teach SYNTAX, but he must not teach. (False & Odd)

Selected References:

Dretske, Fred. 1972. Contrastive Statements. *Philosophical Review* 81.4: 411-37.

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