FOCUS PARTICLES AND INFORMATION STRUCTURE IN KOREAN

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SYNOPSIS This study examines the prosodic correlation between the focus particle ocik ‘only’ and focus/GIVENness in Korean. There is a continuing debate on the issue of whether there must be a prosodically prominent element when associated with a focus particle such as only. Rooth (1992) proposes two theories of focus: ‘weak’ and ‘strong’. A weak theory of focus interpretation stipulates a focused element in the domain of only. From the strong theory of focus point of view, it is assumed that the marking of focus is determined in context. In order to settle this debate, two competing sets of data are assessed, in which focus and GIVENness are elicited on the element associated with ocik (i.e. kichalul ‘the train’, tayhanhangkongul ‘Korean Air’). The results of this evaluation favor the strong theory of focus interpretation that focus/GIVENness is a discourse-regulating device (Kadmon 2001, Schwarzschild 1997).

EXPERIMENT: METHOD The pitch contours of the target sentences (e.g. Cenun ocik kichalul thapnita. ‘I only take the train.’) were manipulated using Praat. As shown in Figure 1, we provided three different prosody models: OcikH (the focus particle has prosodic prominence), ObjectH (the object has prosodic prominence), and DoubleH (both the focus particle and the object have prosodic prominence). The prosody models were provided in two contexts: one in which the element associated with ocik was designed to be focused (2a); the other in which the element associated with ocik was designed to be GIVEN (2b). In total, twenty-four sound files were used (3 prosody models × 2 target sentences × 2 discourses + 12 fillers). Twenty Korean native speakers rated the naturalness of the target sentences using a seven-point scale (1: very unnatural, 7: very natural). The responses were converted to z-scores to normalize the results across listeners.

EXPERIMENT: RESULTS The findings of this study shown in Figure 2 illustrate the following rankings, where A is significantly greater than B, and B is significantly greater than C.

(1) The rankings of the three prosody models
   a. DoubleH (A) > ObjectH (B) > OcikH (C) when the element associated with ocik is focused in discourse;
   b. OcikH (A) > DoubleH (B) > ObjectH (C) when the element associated with ocik is GIVEN in discourse.

DISCUSSION As shown in (1a), DoubleH (where the focus particle and the object have prominence) is shown to be most favored when the element associated ocik is focused in discourse. This is because ocik and the object (kichalul ‘the train’) have not been mentioned in the previous context. Therefore, they receive discourse-new focus simultaneously due to the nature of novelty. On the other hand, OcikH is most favored when the element associated ocik is GIVEN in discourse (1b). As noted before, the prosodic prominence on ocik indicates novelty, thus attracting prosodic prominence. In this context, it is obvious that the element associated with ocik is phonetically reduced since it was designed to be GIVEN in discourse. This study has tested the two theories of focus. In the weak theory of focus interpretation, there must be a prosodically prominent element when associated with ocik. However, in the strong theory of focus interpretation, the element associated with ocik does not have to be prosodically prominent since the marking of focus/GIVENness is determined in discourse. This study supports the strong theory of focus interpretation since OcikH (where the focus particle has prosodic prominence) is shown to be most favored when the element associated ocik is GIVEN in discourse. As a result, this finding casts doubts on the previous proposals that there must be a prosodically prominent element when associated with ocik (Beaver and Clark 2003, Jacobs 1984).

IMPLICATIONS This study allows us to untangle the different prosodic behaviors of focus particles and information structure in different contexts. In addition, this study demonstrates that listeners make use of prosody to decode appropriate focus particles and information structure.
Figure 1: The pitch contours indicate the sentence, *Cenun ocik kichalul thapnita*. ‘I only take the train’. FP and OBJ denote the focus particle (*ocik* ‘only’) and the object (*kichalul* ‘the train’), respectively.

(2) a. Discourse-new focus


I am attending Hannam University in Daejeon. However, my parents live in Seoul, my younger brother lives in Busan, and my older brother lives in Daegu. So, on major holidays, such as Christmas and New Year’s Day, I go to Seoul, Busan and Daegu to visit my family. When going to Seoul to see my parents, I only take [*the train*].

b. GIVENness


My father works for Korail. According to Korail regulations, my family gets free train tickets. I take business trips to Seoul. So, whenever I go to Seoul, I only take [*the train*]G.

Figure 2: Z-score of DISCOURSE effect on the three different prosody models

REFERENCES


