

On (the lack of) focus interpretation in French intervention effects

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The aim of this paper is to provide a pragmatic account of so-called ‘intervention effects’ exhibited in French wh-questions *in situ*. My claim is that the oddity (#) of the structure illustrated in (1a) compared to (1b) and (1c) follows from the fact that ‘interveners’ are associated with focus (Beck, 2006; Kim, 2002) but that its sources are related to Krifka’s (2007) ‘Common Ground management’. This approach is distinct from previous logico-syntactic accounts, that attribute the unacceptability of (1a) to the fact that the focus sensitive particle ‘interferes’ in the relation between the wh-phrase *in situ* and some element or position in the left-periphery.

- (1) a. #Même [le chat]_{Focus} a mangé quoi?
even the cat has eaten what
‘What did even the cat eat?’
b. Qu’est-ce que même [le chat]_{Focus} a mangé?
what-is-it that even the cat has eaten
‘What did even the cat eat?’
c. C’est quoi (ce) que même [le chat]_{Focus} a mangé?
It-is what (this) that even the cat has eaten
‘What is it that even the cat ate?’

My analysis makes use of both Structured Meaning (von Stechow, 1990; Krifka, 1992) and Alternative Semantics (Rooth, 1985, 1992) formal frameworks of semantic interpretation. In the first part of my talk, I show that there is a conflict between the focus sensitive particles and the wh-phrase *in situ*’s respective partition of the sentence. This is illustrated informally in (2a) and (2b): both the wh-phrase *in situ* and ‘même’ lead to a partition into a focus part and a background part, with the resulting effect that in both sentences in (2), a non-second occurrence focus (Beaver et al., 2002) is embedded in the background part of the sentence.

- (2) a. #Même [le chat]_{Focus} [a mangé [quoi]_{Focus}]_{Background}?
b. #[Même [le chat]_{Focus} a mangé]_{Background} [quoi]_{Focus}?

This conflict is absent in the constituent questions (1b) and (1c), where the focus associated with *even*, although part of the background of the sentence, is embedded in the focus of the wh-phrase. This is illustrated in (3a) and (3b).

- (3) a. [Qu'est-ce que [même [le chat]_F a mangé]_{Bgd}]_F?
 b. [C'est quoi [(ce) que même [le chat]_F a mangé]_{Bgd}]_F?

Second, I show that in wh-questions *in situ*, the phrase [focus sensitive particle + XP_{Focus}] is treated as a Topic in Reinhart's (1982) sense, namely that in (1a) the speaker wants to store information about 'even XP'. This amounts to depriving the XP of its set of alternatives, as the alternative meaning is reduced to a singleton set, and, as a consequence, to depriving the focus sensitive particle of an associated focus. This is particularly obvious in (4), where an appropriate answer to a question such as (1a) is considered.

- (4) A: #Même le chat a mangé quoi? (= (1a))
 even the cat has eaten what
 'What did even the cat eat?'
 B: #[Même le chat a mangé]_{Bgd} [du gâteau]_F, [du fromage]_F et [du
 even the cat has eaten some cake some cheese and some
 chocolat]_F.
 chocolate
 'Even the cat ate some cake, some cheese and some chocolate.'

In (4a), A presumes that the cat is an unexpected member of at least one set characterized by a property P but she does not know which property it is (exactly) and she asks B to tell her which property it is (or, they are, assuming that there are potentially several sets of which the cat can be an unexpected member). B's answer asserts that the cat is an unexpected member of three sets, the set characterized by the properties [$\lambda x.x$ ate some cake], [$\lambda x.x$ ate some cheese] and [$\lambda x.x$ ate some chocolate]. In the constituent questions in (1b) and (1c) the only interpretation available is one where 'the cat' is a second occurrence focus, and the question is 'what is the x such that the most salient property of x is 'even the cat ate x''. Such questions are felicitous in the context illustrated in (5).

- (5) *A and B are talking about yesterday's dinner:*
 A: Alors, ce gâteau, il était comment?
 so this cake he was how
 'So, how was the cake?'
 B: Très bon! Tellement bon que E, F et G en ont mangé de grosses parts.
 very good so good that E F and G some have eaten of big pieces
 Même [le chat]_F en a mangé!
 even the cat some has eaten
 'Very good! So good that E, F and G ate very big pieces. Even [the cat]_F ate some.'
H enters the room and only hears B's last sentence.
 H: [C'est quoi [(ce) que même [le chat]_F a mangé]_{Bgd}]_F?
 It-is what (this) that even the cat has eaten
 'What is it that even the cat ate?'
 H': [Qu'est-ce que [même [le chat]_F a mangé]_{Bgd}]_F?
 H''#[Même [le chat]_F a mangé]_{Bdg} [quoi]_F?

I argue that there is no ‘intervention effect’ in wh-questions *per se* (see Grohman 2006 for a similar claim on German multiple-wh questions) and that a less theory-internal and a more pragmatic account of ‘intervention effects’ data could allow us to reach a better understanding of the pragmatics of wh-questions and focus sensitive particles in French and across languages.

References

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