

ExCl: On the (non-) exhaustivity of focus partitioning: A cross-linguistic investigation of exhaustivity in Hungarian focus and clefts

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In this talk, we report on the results of a large-scale cross-linguistic investigation of exhaustivity inferences in cleft constructions and in Hungarian pre-verbal focus, using the experimental paradigm of Incremental Information Retrieval, developed as part of the ExCl-project (2014-2017). We show that speakers' overall assessment of exhaustivity effects in clefts are parallel in German, English, French, and Russian, irrespective of morpho-syntactic differences in the structure of cleft constructions in the respective languages. In particular, the observable exhaustivity effects are neither robust nor systematic across speakers: whereas some speakers systematically derive exhaustivity inferences (on a par with the exclusive particle 'only'), others do not and interpret clefts on a par with non-exhaustive intonation focus. More importantly, participants consistently interpret cleft constructions on a par with definite pseudoclefts. Hungarian preverbal focus shows a slightly different behavior: Whereas the exhaustivity effect is not robust or systematic across participants and trials either – in contradiction to persistent claims in the literature from the last 30 years – it is indeed somewhat stronger than in the other languages under investigation.

Based on our findings, we propose to derive exhaustivity effects in focus/cleft constructions as a pragmatic inference from an underlying existence presupposition, *sensu* Pollard & Yasavul (2014), plus a certain amount of speaker reasoning on the cardinality of the presupposed (implicit) discourse antecedent: Since target sentences were presented without context, participants had the choice of accommodating either a maximal/unique or an indefinite discourse antecedent, which is but one of a potentially larger group of individuals with the clefted background property. We also propose to derive the more nuanced nature of the exhaustivity effect in Hungarian preverbal focus from the fact that Hungarian has SG and PL-marked *wh*-questions. The presence of a SG focus constituent may then lead speakers to accommodate an implicit SG *wh*-question, presupposing maximality/uniqueness of the individual in focus.

More generally, the observed cross-linguistic parallels in the interpretation of focus-partitioning constructions suggest that these constructions should receive a unified analysis at the level of discourse structure, rather than at the level of morpho-syntax: All partitioning structures are anaphoric and presuppose the existence of a backgrounded discourse antecedent to be identified with the focus pivot.