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Focus: Interpretation?

Empirical Investigations on Focus Interpretation

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The study empirically examines the interpretation of focus accents in German. To this end, a methodology is developed, and it is discussed how experimental investigation can proceed at the current state of the focus theory. Methodologically, experiments directly measuring interpretation provide an alternative to the widespread practice of using only empirical preference and production data to investigate the interpretation of stimuli, and it is shown why such an alternative is necessary.

The empirical results show that one must extend and restrict theories assuming an association of free focus and scalar implicature (exhaustivity) or question – answer congruence as follows: On the one hand, situational factors in the interpretation must be taken into account to a greater extent than until now, especially their interaction with ‘physical’ properties of the speech signal (focus marking). On the other hand, a prototypical defini-

tion of Focus is called for which connects the major concepts of focus on the phonetic-phonological, semantic and information-structural levels and takes their prototypical coincidence to be the basis of focus interpretation and corresponding intuitions.

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